



## festivals/toronto

### Labors of Love

*The search for kind hearts and true feelings continues*

BY NICOLE ARMOUR

IN KELLY REICHARDT'S BEAUTIFULLY OBSERVED *Wendy and Lucy*, politics is personal. Young and poor, Wendy (Michelle Williams) is driving to Alaska with her beloved dog Lucy to find work. During a stopover in Oregon, she's arrested for shoplifting a can of dog food, during which time Lucy goes missing. Wendy's panic, distress, and frustration are palpable, but Reichardt encourages us to take heart. Social structures may fail us, but there's power in being kind. Wendy befriends a Walgreen's security

guard who gives advice and lends money he can barely spare. Reichardt's just as generous. Rather than preach, she presents her story openly, filling it with examples of people who choose to do good.

A structural film shot in 16mm, James Benning's *RR* features rigorous, stationary shots of moving trains hauling shipping containers. They traverse desolate, often harsh American landscapes, and each image lasts as long as it takes the train to enter and exit the frame—the longer the train, the longer the shot, translating mass into duration. By covering so much ground, *RR* amounts to a portrait of America—one in which its people are mostly absent. We see agricultural land and crops, but no family farms. Once vital to the settling of America, the prairies are portrayed here as territory to be passed through. Mountainous landscapes leave you marveling that track was laid in such rugged settings, provoking thoughts of laborers who worked entirely by hand. The railway emerges as a living relic of a distant American past when we sought to link enterprising people and developing places, rather than merely depend on conveniences that

infantilize us. It is Benning's presence behind the camera that supplies the film's essential human element. Modern life leads us further away from self-sufficiency and connection, while Benning remains an engaged, independent chronicler of the juncture between nature and human endeavor.

People are also absent from Jennifer Reeves's dense 16mm double-projection tour de force *When It Was Blue*. This heady mix of optically printed and hand-painted original and found footage was painstakingly edited on parallel filmstrips to blend on screen. The film begins in spring and progresses through the seasons with imagery of animals in lush, natural habitats. The soundtrack bristles with whistles and cries, crashing waves, wind through trees, and myriad birdsongs, all effectively combined with a live score composed by Reeves's collaborator Skúli Sverrisson. Sound seldom corresponds with image: everything is mixed so that the film's locations and time frames are condensed. Reeves describes her work as "an undoing," a fantasy about moving backwards in time to an era before human beings inhabited the planet and messed it up.

*When It Was Blue* is challenging to watch due to its elaborate construction. It pushes the limits of what our eyes and ears can absorb via multiple layers of imagery and sound. It's also emotionally charged. But if emotion and conceptual, analytical thinking are unique to human beings, it's strange that Reeves invokes them in a film that implicitly excludes human agency—the film itself is evidence of the worth of uniquely human capacities like moral evaluation and creative expression. *When It Was Blue* owes its complexity in part to the obvious difficulty of its making. Reeves worked over a number of years, collecting material whenever possible. The result is a document of her devotion. But it's also a performance-based work with live music that spontaneously creates itself before your eyes. As such, it's vital, passionate, and utterly human.

ADDED BY DOMESTIC WOES, Kanao (Japanese artist and writer Lily Franky), the central character of Ryosuke Hashiguchi's *All Around Us*, wearily gazes down at the crowds from a high window in the courthouse where he works. They teem through the city streets—individuals moving like a single organism. The film follows a seemingly mismatched couple over a nine-year period. Quiet, easygoing Kanao's eyes wander toward other women, while pragmatic Shoko (Tae Kimura) tries to strengthen their ties by routinizing their lives, especially when it comes to sex. Around the same time that their infant child dies, Kanao lucks into a job as a courtroom illustrator, whereas Shoko's rigid self-control fails her and she falls into a deep depression. The turmoil in the couple's private life is contrasted beautifully with the courtroom scenes, which restage a number of notable real-life cases—including several child murders and the sarin gas subway attack—in