

Egoyan: Challenging Industry Conventions

Speaking in the *Rotman Integrative Thinking Seminar Series* in January, celebrated Canadian independent filmmaker **Atom Egoyan** (BA '82 TRIN, D.Litt Sac Hon. '88) described his approach to both the art and business of filmmaking to a packed house in the Fleck Atrium.

Growing up as the son of visual artists in Victoria, B.C., Egoyan's sense of the power behind creative imagery was activated early on. He came to Toronto in 1978 to study international relations at U of T's Trinity College, but before long, his attention was diverted by the free filmmaking equipment offered at the Hart House Film Board. His first short film earned an award at the Canadian National Exhibition film festival, and he went on to make four more before he graduated.

In 1984, Egoyan's first feature-length film, *Next of Kin* won a prize at a small German film festival, marking the beginning of the 'European-ization' of his career. "I modelled myself after directors like **Bergman** and **Fellini** – whose films had a unique quality that could be described as 'esque'," he says. When his success in Germany led to a short run at Toronto's Carlton Cinema, Egoyan officially



Atom Egoyan at Rotman in January

decided to start taking his films to market. "From that point on, I have always kept funding and distribution opportunities in the back of my mind while I worked on the creative process."

In 1989, he joined forces with **Robert Lantos** of **Alliance Atlantis**, who took a major chance on the young filmmaker. "He said to me, 'If you can make a film for \$1 million, just provide me with the title, and the rest will be left up to you.'" Egoyan's first feature to gain wide release in the U.S. was *The Adjuster* in 1991. Then came *Exotica* – "a major breakthrough and the most commercial film I've made to date." At the 1994 **Cannes Film Festival**, it was not only the first Canadian film in ten years to take part in official competition, it received the International Critics' Prize.

Throughout it all, Egoyan has willfully maintained a Canadian context for his work. His films are as far removed from typical movie formulas as Toronto – his home base – is geographically removed from Hollywood. "My

vision is deeply engrained in each film," says the director known for giving the viewer bits and pieces of information that often only connect in the final scene. This ability to fracture a story like a jigsaw puzzle means that his films have a particular following: audiences who enjoy a challenge, who aren't looking for easy answers. "That's why it's so important to me to maintain copyright and have the final cut. Once it's no longer 'your voice' up there on the screen, you're in big trouble as an artist."

Last year, Egoyan released *Asarot*. Test screenings – where audiences get a chance to preview a film and provide feedback – were held in New York and New Jersey. While he is always interested in hearing

people's feedback, Egoyan refused to take the audience's advice and re-edit his film so it was easier to understand. "Commercial audiences prefer to get all the answers up front. The fact is, I like to infuse as much mystery as possible into my films."

Egoyan believes he would never have enjoyed the career he's had in Canada if he'd gone Hollywood. "In L.A., you can make one or two films 'outside' of the studio system, but then the pressure becomes enormous to work within it." Rather than play by Hollywood's rules, he has found a way to work the system in his own way. "My most satisfying experience came with *The Sweet Hereafter*, which was made in Canada, on my terms, but was re-injected into the American system and went on to great acclaim, including Oscar nominations for best picture and best director."

His next film is currently a book, in galley form. Only one thing is certain at this point: audiences will be in for another Egoyan-esque challenge.

-by *Karen Christensen*