

Hot Docs Unveils Edgy, Enchanting, Muppet-Filled 2011 Lineup

By [John Semley](#) on March 22, 2011 1:00 PM

http://torontoist.com/2011/03/hot_docs_unveils_edgy_enchanting_muppet-filled_2011_lineup.php



Still from Matt Gallagher's Grinders, a look at backroom gambling that makes its world premiere at Hot Docs 2011.

Putting your parka into storage, seeing the flowers begin to blossom, or noticing that Canada Post employees have wiggled back into the pleated short-pants they wear nine months of the year may be good tip-offs, but in Toronto, nothing marks the start of spring like the [Hot Docs](#) kickoff press conference. For nearly two decades—from its humble origins as a scrappy fest screening non-fiction films in bars and coffee shops, to its current status as the largest film festival of its kind in North America—Hot Docs has marked the unofficial kickoff to the spring/summer film festival season that keeps local cinephiles busy straight through to TIFF in September. And, this morning, as perennial as the spring thaw, Hot Docs drew back the curtain on their eighteenth instalment.

Anyone who's been following Hot Docs (or, properly, Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival) over the past decade has noticed how the event seems to get bigger and bigger each year. The 2011 fest is no exception. Indeed, this year's instalment sees the number of film presentations increasing by one third. Hot Docs 2011 boasts a whopping 199 films, culled down from more than two thousand submissions. And, this year, films will be screened outside of the Annex/Yorkville/Little Italy triangle, with presentations also happening in the Beach, Roncesvalles, and across four screens at everyone's favourite lightbox, the [TIFF Bell Lightbox](#).

While Hot Docs is bigger than ever, executive director Chris McDonald assured those in attendance the festival would follow through with its guiding imperative to “bring our world and other worlds to life in a creative way.” Programmer Sean Farnel managed to upstage McDonald's management-grade Newspeak, stating that this year's fest exhibits a “real, discernible edge,” albeit one tempered by

“plenty of delight and enchantment.” How does all this edgy enchantment play out across the actual program? Glad you asked.

This year’s festival (which, by the way, runs from April 28 to May 8) opens with the Canadian premiere of the new film by Morgan Spurlock (*Super Size Me*), *Pom Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*, a film financed entirely through product placement and advertising. So there’s a little “edge,” from Morgan Spurlock, the kooky guy who does things and films them because he’s concerned about something other than his own pranksterish celebrity. There’s also Matt Gallagher’s *Grinders*, a look at underground gambling clubs in Toronto, which seems totally interesting and is something we’re actually, unsarcastically, excited for.

In the “delight and enchantment” category, Hot Docs 2011 offers a look behind *Sesame Street*’s most obnoxious furball (and the shy man hiding behind him) with *Being Elmo: A Puppeteer’s Journey*, which actually looks pretty great, not least of all because it has a bunch of Jim Henson archival footage. There’s also *Conan O’Brien Can’t Stop*, which follows the ginger-haired comic’s exile from late night and reinvention as stand-up comic/guy with beard. And all you chess-heads out there in chess-land might be interested in *Bobby Fischer Against the World*, a film about America’s first “chess rock star” (McDonald’s words) and notorious racist, Bobby Fischer.



Searching for Bobby Fisch– Oh, there he is! Still from Liz Garbus’s *Bobby Fischer Against the World*.

And cross-listed in both the “Holy crap, Michael Rapaport is still alive?” and “Holy crap, Michael Rapaport made a movie?!” programmes is Michael Rapaport’s film about rap group A Tribe Called Quest, *Beats, Rhymes & Life: The Travels of a Tribe Called Quest*, which will likely be referred to internally as “The Michael Rapaport Movie.”

All these bigger films are nice, but it wouldn’t be Hot Docs without plenty of indies, short films, and social-justice docs. Beyond all the films about chess and Muppets and what Morgan Spurlock did with

his summer vacation, there's plenty of docs that delve into more intimate subject matter, like the life of Québécois lumberjacks (Stéphanie Lanthier's *The Lumberfros*), music in Haiti (Whitney Dow's *When the Drum is Beating*), and an account of that scalding coffee lawsuit we all vaguely remember (Susan Saladoff's *Hot Coffee*). There's also a [National Spotlight programme](#) focusing on Italy, a retrospective of Toronto filmmaker Alan Zweig (who Farnel crowned "the very first hipster"), lots of films about labour (part of the uninspiringly named "Workers of the World" programme), and plenty of genre-bending docs that blur the lines between fiction, actuality, re-enactment, and animation.

Michael Rapaport jokes aside, Hot Docs 2011 really does boast an impressive lineup. But don't take our word for it. The [Hot Docs International Documentary Festival website](#) is now live and has plenty of info about all the other films.

The Hot Docs box office is now open! Check out [their website](#) for film and ticketing information. Hot Docs 2011 runs from April 28 to May 8, 2011, across the city. Stay tuned to Torontoist for plenty of coverage.