

FILM SYDNEY

snow place like home

A love-hate relationship with his Canadian home town is the subject of Guy Maddin's acclaimed *My Winnipeg*, an Official Competition entrant at this year's Sydney Film Festival.

WORDS **CLAIRE SCOBIE**

GROWING UP IN Winnipeg, on the edge of the bleak Canadian prairies, filmmaker Guy Maddin found his escape in darkened cinema halls. His favourite shows were travelogues, silent films about distant lands with live narration and music. It's since been his "ardent desire" to narrate one of his films. When *My Winnipeg* screens at the Official Competition at this month's Sydney Film Festival, the 52-year-old will narrate the 80-minute feature in person.

Part-fantasy, part-documentary, weaving family memories and urban myths, Maddin's poetic travelogue, shot in black-and-white, captures the ambivalence home can evoke.

"There is no one Sydney or one New York, there's one for every person," says Maddin in a gravelly baritone. "Home is inseparable from your family. That's where Winnipeg is like everyone else's home town."

Except much chillier. In midwinter, the mercury plunges to -40 degrees and a blanket of snow buries the burg. This explains the city's oddness and why Winnipeg is the sleep-walking capital of the world, Maddin says.

Winnipeg, in the Canadian province of Manitoba, is shaped by its isolation. Located at

the geographical centre of North America, at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers (The Forks), its name comes from the Cree word meaning "muddy water".

For centuries, the area has been a gathering place for indigenous tribes. "This has made it mystically powerful," Maddin says. "It's a place that [also] supported the labour movement and, in 1919, [Canada's] biggest general strike was held here."

This "strange intersection of aboriginal, communist and supernatural" happenings is captured in the film, together with a (probably mythical) bison stampede that destroyed Happyland, Winnipeg's only amusement park, in 1923. "This feels very lyrical. The fact there's a Happyland here, but it's in tatters."

The city is known for its labyrinthine back alleys. "Some taxi companies only traverse the backstreets. Winnipeggers are modest Canadians. We live a back-lane culture."

So how would you know a Winnipegger? "At the airport, if you see anyone picking up a cardboard box instead of a suitcase, it's a pretty good chance they're from Winnipeg."


At times disparaging about Winnipeg's parochial, stifled-by-nostalgia outlook, the

director has never been able to disown his home town. While others escaped to Toronto – where he is feted as a surreal auteur in the lineage of Louis Buñuel and his film won 2007 Best Canadian Feature in the international film festival – Maddin was content to stay.

My Winnipeg, which was commissioned by the Documentary Channel with a budget of around \$US600,000, is yet to be screened in Winnipeg. When it does, he's "counting on the reaction to help me get the hell out of here." He'd miss his cottage by the lake and teaching film at the University of Manitoba, but says, "I'm ready to go".

In the 1960s, Winnipeggers booed Neil Young out of town. The rock legend had formed his first band, The Jades, there.

"He couldn't be a more timeless performer, but they're still sceptical about him here," Maddin says. "Me included. I'm a Winnipegger, too. They're the toughest audience, with that American midwestern temperament burnished through."

But will tourists now flock to Winnipeg? "A number of people who've seen the film in Berlin and Toronto said: 'I'll have to come now.' I said: 'You've missed the point.'" 

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

BIG SCREEN Sydney Film Festival, June 4-22. The inaugural Official Competition is judged by an international jury (two Australian, three international judges). The 12 films compete for a prize of \$60,000, and all have red carpet premieres at the State Theatre (June 4-15). Awards night is at Sydney Opera House on June 16. For further information go to www.sydneyfilmfestival.org

