

How do you save a hotel without killing it first? A new documentary about the Gladstone has a few ...

Reservations



SHINAN GOVANI
Scene

So, remember that old flick *Pacific Heights*?

The one where **Melanie Griffith** and **Matthew Modine** fight the good fight with a downstairs-renter from hell, ghoulishly played by **Michael Keaton**? At the time, in 1990, *The New York Times* dubbed it the first "tenant thriller."

Last Call at the Gladstone — a documentary premiering soon at the Hot Docs fest — ain't that. But it does fit into a certain strain of real-estate cinema, falling halfway between gentrification and evil.

The other day, I snuck a peek at the movie that's not bowing officially until April 22. The work of first-time filmmakers **Derreck Roemer** and **Neil Graham**, it's about the re-latte-fication that's occurred recently at the Gladstone Hotel on Queen Street West. (For years, it was nothing but a fleas-and-all flophouse.)

Caught between progress and habit, neo-yuppies and the Country Style brigade, between true believer-ism and water-splash-on-your-face reality, it's filled with lots of characters and is also a neat local chronicle. It also asks that old saw: How do you go about trying to save something without killing it first?

And, hey, who knew the evils of the Downward Dog?

Indeed, one of the movie's aha moments comes when one clearly-not-impressed gal — who's fronted the reception for too many years — complains about the changes happening at the place she calls work.

"They have *yoga* in here on Thursday nights," she says, sounding a bit like a possible love-interest for one of the

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Trailer Park Boys. She seasons the comment with a pinch of disgust and a distinct dash of reverse-snobbery.

Not long after, this old-timer "calls in sick" and never returns.

But as far as villains go, the Ashtanga instructor upstairs actually gets off pretty lightly. If this were indeed *Pacific Heights*, the villain would be developer **Michael Tippin**, who at one time co-owned the Gladstone and tried to usher it into the modern age (and who, incidentally, could easily be played by a young Michael Keaton).



The Gladstone Hotel is the subject of a new documentary that chronicles the human interactions that took place during its recent renovations.

Though the filmmakers are careful to give both sides in the film, few who see the movie will leave thinking, "Hey, let's do brunch soon with that Tippin guy!"

At first, the guy whose business is restoration — he did just that with Front Street's landmark Flatiron building — is all stars and eyes. "This is the future," is the mantra he repeats about the hotel. "This is the future."

To my ears, he sounds like many a corporate-type I've seen in my social travels. The kind who might have money and toys but is desperate, oh so desperate, to buy something a little more elusive: *cool*.

One of the bleaker moments in the doc comes when the cameras catch the dime-and-nickel crowd who live in the hotel being suddenly evicted. **Margaret Zeidler**, who is the other owner in the hotel — a famous name herself in development-with-heart circles — is present, but she, too, is evidently side-swept.

Tippin, who set the evictions in motion, later talks to the filmmakers. And the camera does what only the camera can do. We see our man spinning like Nixon, squirming like fish. He did it for insurance reasons, he argues. He did it because it wasn't safe for the residents.

He adds, throwing up his hands: "It

wasn't meant to be a cheap-chic boutique hotel — a kind of place not meant to change, for better or for worse."

For better or for worse? That's the question that still nags for the remainder of the film, when the hotel moves into the sole ownership of the Zeidler clan, with Jane's younger, artier sister **Christina**, taking lead on all things Gladstone.

While the spot has come a long way in recent years, and you can find both Internet access and **Isabella Rossellini** there (not to mention another recent boldface visitor — **Kelly Osbourne!**), the gale-force of change hasn't let the new owners off scot-free. By the end of the movie, everyone's idealism, to some extent, ends up eating itself.

Last we heard, by the way, the entrepreneurial Mr. Tippin had skipped off to eastern Europe to chase bigger ambitions. And Christina Zeidler? Recently, in *Toronto Life*, she topped a list of Torontonians we love.

For more on *Last Call at the Gladstone* and other films at the fest, see hotdocs.ca