

Sharp focus on past, present, and future at Cannes



FESTIVAL DE CANNES

Ruben Ostland’s “The Square” was a Cannes Film Festival highlight.

By Harlan Jacobson GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 02, 2017

CANNES — In the end, it was less about films deemed worthy of Palme D’Or consideration by a jury led by Pedro Almodovar. The 70th edition of the recent Cannes Film Festival will be remembered as a cinematic scrum between the past, present, and future tenses of storytelling. The real competition was over format: theaters (plus bomb scares) versus Netflix and streaming. And the future knocked on the door in the form of virtual reality.

From wunderkind Yorgos (“The Lobster”) Lanthimos there was “The Killing of a Sacred Deer,” a vaguely voodoo biblical eye-for-an-eye family drama with Colin Farrell and Nicole Kidman as a surgeon and his wife pursued by Bob, the teenage son of a patient who died in Farrell’s care who now demands blood sacrifice.

Robin Campillo's "120 Beats Per Minute" tells the story of Paris Act-Up in the Mitterand 1990s, which plays out in tiresome Meet the Characters fashion.

Todd Haynes's "Wonderstruck" toggles back and forth between New York and Gunflint, Minn., and three generations connected in part by deafness and in part by enormous spirit. Adapted by Brian Selznick from his novel "Wonderstruck," it is a fresh, tamer take on Haynes's outsider characters. Anchored by Julianne Moore, it switches back and forth between a little too "Super-Fly" New York of the '70s and the black-and-white 1927 New York story Haynes tells as a silent film, consonant with the young girl hero's deafness.



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Robert Pattinson in "Good time."

Seen in four films here, Kidman leads the cast of Sofia Coppola's "The Beguiled," set in Virginia in 1864. As Miss Martha, the head mistress of a girl's school, she lets a wounded Yankee (Farrell again) into the house. Coppola won best director at the festival (but curiously skipped the ceremony); her script gives more agency to the women in Miss Farnsworth's School for Girls than did the original 1971 Don Siegel film.

More adventurous is Ruben Ostland's "The Square." His 2014 "Force Majeure," about social codes buried in a ski resort avalanche, showed that Ostland, 43, is skilled at constructing stories of drop-down social disintegration. "The Square" won this year's

Palme D'Or. It's a complex story about a modern art museum curator (Claes Bang) mounting a show meant to underline social responsibility even as he stumbles over dating mores with art reporter Elisabeth Moss. Note to Boston museums: Unleashing an "ape" man to pop up at a gala dinner for patrons might not be a good idea.

"Happy End," Michael Haneke's re-pairing of his 2012 Palme D'Or-winning "Amour" costars Jean-Louis Trintignant and Isabelle Huppert, is a superbly crafted melodrama with Huppert as head of a family dynasty trying to prop up her son and hold her homicidal and suicidal relatives at bay. It was shrugged off in Cannes, but will get another chance when Sony Classics releases it later in the year.

Diane Kruger won best actress for her role in Fatih Akin's "In the Fade," as a German mother avenging the death of her Turkish-born husband and son. And Joaquin Phoenix took best actor, also as a New York City lone wolf vigilante in Lynne Ramsay's "You Were Never Here." While avenging angels may have clicked with the jury, they played ho-hum on screen.



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"The Beguiled."

A24, which rode the improbable “Moonlight” to Oscar gold last year, brought “Good Time” into the main competition for a Palme. It’s by the Safdie brothers, Josh and Benny, and is a furiously paced bank robbers on the lam story set in New York with an obvious appreciation for William Friedkin’s chase sequencing. The film is a comic pairing of a wise-guy played by Robert Pattinson, in a performance that many felt should have won him best actor, and Benny Safdie as his mentally challenged brother. Think of it as “Criminal Rain Man” with pants on fire.

The Boston University graduates — Josh in ’07, Benny a year later — came home empty-handed, prize-wise. But the film’s relentless, driving narrative to escape at all costs arrived in Cannes just when critics themselves needed an escape. Which could mean money in the bank back home.

“When I was at BU in [Professor] Ray Carney’s film class,” Benny Safdie said in a chance chat on a Cannes street corner, “storytelling was more important than technique. That meant you had to learn, you had to go outside the film department into other parts of the university. And that meant before you picked up a camera, you had to understand the world. That was a very big deal.”

Finally, in an airport hangar away from all the glamour, Alejandro G. Innaritu and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki premiered “Carne Y Arena” (“Flesh and Sand”), a 6.5-minute virtual reality encounter on the US-Mexico border. Barefoot in sand, the viewer is dropped into the Southwestern desert to silently watch a passel of immigrants — some men, a grandmother, a young girl — making their way at dawn across the frontier when border patrol pulls up out of a gully and hovers overhead in a helicopter. The exhibition moves on to LA and Mexico City, but leaves a compelling question: Is VR the future of narrative?

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