

Venice Film Festival report 2008 – TIMEOUT LONDON

Dave Calhoun

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It was a strange year for Venice, which sent one message to the rest of the planet while reserving a very different one for those actually sitting in the cinemas of the oldest film festival in the world. Is it possible that those watching from a distance got the better deal?

At least they didn't have to watch Emmanuelle Béart, dressed in rags that look more like haute couture, in the laughable, horror-tinged 'Vinyan'. In the company of Rufus Sewell, she runs through a 'Burmese' jungle in search of a child before being pawed sleazily by a gaggle of feral kids. That was the final, laughable image to be etched on my brain after six days at the festival. I wonder what the censors will make of the young fiddlers when this Film4 production from Belgian Fabrice Du Welz ('Calvaire') makes it to our screens?

Even the most reluctant observers of celebrity froth won't have missed the presence of George Clooney and Brad Pitt on the Lido for opening night: the pair pitched up to plug their latest film together, the Coen brothers' 'Burn after Reading'. The film is a delicious knockabout comedy that unfolds in a Washington of inept security agents with egos that are as inflated as their talents are limited. The Coens play with the trappings of the paranoid thriller, while the actors go to town – Pitt is a dumb gym instructor, Clooney a philandering CIA pen-pusher. These spooks are a joke: they couldn't locate an Afghan in Kabul.

In retrospect, the George-and-Brad roadshow looks like a nifty game of smoke-and-mirrors on the part of the organisers. Before arriving on the Lido, we already knew this year's programme would be more surprising and less reliant on the sort of American Oscar-seeking titles that formed the spine of last year's event. But we hoped this was a blessing. There was talk of programmers scouring the world to find fresh work: maybe the festival had some novelties up its sleeve?

As it turned out, there was very little to shout about. Most of the interesting films weren't even contenders for the Golden Lion, the nominees for which ranged from the adequate, such as Guillermo Arriaga's 'The Burning Plain' to the awful, such as Barbet Schroeder's 'Inju' and Yu Lik-Wai's 'Plastic City', via the missable, like the Roman melodrama 'A Perfect Day' from Turkish-Italian director Ferzan Ozpetek.

Arriaga, the Mexican writer of three films for Alejandro González Iñárritu ('Amores Perros', '21 Grams', 'Babel'), steps behind the camera for the first time for 'The Burning Plain', but his script is familiar: frenetic, chopped up and verging on hysterical. Thankfully less slick and over-reaching than 'Babel', 'The Burning Plain' tells of a woman (Charlize Theron) on the east coast of the US whose New Mexico childhood catches up with her. It's hard not to feel déjà vu in the presence of Arriaga's concerns – division, borders, communication, all wrapped up in events, events, events – but this film is focused in a compelling way even if its ideas about sexuality aren't convincing.

Meanwhile, 67-year-old Schroeder, one-time producer of Eric Rohmer and director of documentaries ('Terror's Advocate') and dramas ('Single White Female') comes a cropper with 'Inju', a risible thriller with no thrills about a novelist (Benôit Magimel) travelling to Tokyo and squaring up to a literary hero. There were several films from globetrotters – Schroeder in Japan, Arriaga in the US – and another was 'Plastic City', shot in Brazil by Hong Kong director Yu, who

tries and fails to make consumer piracy run by a Chinese big shot in São Paulo look and feel sexy. Yu's visuals have panache, but his characters and story are cartoons. Surely the reality is more believable?

Turkish-born Ozpetek has been working in Italy since the 1980s. His 'A Perfect Day' is a sentimental tale of a crazed husband who confronts his estranged wife and children when he cracks from the pressure of separation. It feels like Haneke's chilly 'The Seventh Continent' remade by Spielberg, and has too many superfluous storylines.

The best film I saw by the time I left at the midway point was Claire Denis's '35 Rhums'. This Paris-set film is the quietest of realist tales about a French-African train driver and his adult daughter living together in a flat in close proximity to an old flame of the father and a young man with wanderlust. It's a lovely sketch of familial and social ties that deals lightly but movingly with themes of belonging.

Unfolding in a sidebar was Abbas Kiarostami's fascinating 'Shirin', which was tough going even by the standards of the director who made 'Five' (which involved pondering a twig bobbing about in the sea). 'Shirin' is an experiment in a similar vein. We watch a series of faces of Iranian women, plus Juliette Binoche, watching a weepy film epic. It's a blank canvas on which to project... well, whatever you want – but it's a gallery piece really.

The best film I saw in the competition (from which Claire Denis was excluded for some reason) was 'Birdwatchers' from Marco Bechis, whose background is both European and South American. A drama about a small Brazilian tribe trying to reclaim their ancestral land but rubbing against landowners and their prejudices, it explores rather than parades its liberal agenda, raises questions in an arresting fashion and offers strong performances.

If only there was more of the same.
Author: Dave Calhoun