



ADVOCATE *insider*

May 22, 2008

Cannes Day Nine: Suicidal Love, Trains, Italian Politics and A Girl and Her Dog

The Frontier of Dawn -- I'm a little shaky on the English language title of this French film, which is properly called "La Frontiere De L'aube." It's directed by Philippe Garrel and stars his son Louis Garrel in the gloriously disastrous, deeply French story of a photographer, the doomed starlet he falls in love with and the romance that haunts him -- literally -- for the rest of his life. The starlet is married, but her husband is away and this is France so of course she and the aspiring photographer make sweet love -- in glorious black and white; if nothing else the film does look beautiful, in a New Wave sort of way. Her husband returns; they break up. Her husband leaves; she begs him to return. But she drinks and takes drugs and is mad, I tell you, mad. Would he still love her if she were mad? He doesn't answer but she forces the question by going really mad and burning down her apartment and being institutionalized where electro-shock therapy is quickly resorted to. (It has made a comeback, but I doubt it's the first step for beautiful young actresses with substance abuse problems.) She tries to escape with him and is eventually released...only to commit suicide in the most glamorous way imaginable. One year later, he is about to get serious with another girl when the actress starts haunting him, literally popping up in mirrors to the sound of a bong-ing death knell that sent the critics over the edge with derisive laughter. It only got worse, for the most booed film since "Serbis." This one is even more lamentable since it has such talent involved. And a moment of praise for Louis Garrel, the current It Boy of French cinema. With his mop of curly hair and craggy, awkwardly beautiful looks, he is a magnetic movie star. I'm not quite convinced he's an actor yet, because every role seems a variation on the same verbal, wounded, dangerously charming young man. But how else would you cast him at this young stage of his career?

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O'Horten -- After a Che press conference and rushing home to write up my manifesto -- I mean my article -- I move on to "O'Horten," a charming trifle by the director of "Kitchen Stories." I'd missed the first screening and while no one claimed greatness for this tale of a train engineer who retires and is immediately thrown for a loop by the lack of structure in his life, most everyone said it was welcome light entertainment. They were right. Baard Owe is a stone-faced delight as Odd Horten, the retiring train engineer. The scene where his fellow workers give Odd a goodbye party sets the tone nicely. They stand up, move their arms in a "chugging train" motion, make train noises and then all toot their horns in unison. Then they sit around and identify trains by audio recordings of them or guess the number of bridges between such and such a city. (372? I could have sworn it was 371!) Who said train spotters weren't fun? Odd's odd adventures soon include stumbling into an apartment where a little boy holds Odd hostage for the night by threatening to wake up his parents, falling asleep in a sauna and having to leave in high heels, and spending time with an eccentric ambassador who insists he can drive around town blindfolded and never hit anything. Sweet, gentle, with notes of melancholy (did I mention it's Norwegian?), this film by Bent Hamer is straightforward, unassuming entertainment.

Il Divo -- One of the most admirable traits of Cannes is loyalty and patience. Sure, that means having to sit through the latest Wim Wenders movie, even if he hasn't made a truly good film in 20 years (obviously, I'm referring to his masterpiece "Wings of Desire" from 1987). But it also means sticking with young talent like James Gray and Kelly Reichardt (who will both come through some day with great films, I'm sure of it) and Italian director Paolo Sorrentino, who has come through right now with both guns blazing. Between this and Gomorrah, Italy sure seems like a corrupt, violent place -- but as long as the movies are this entertaining, it can't be all bad. I first heard about Sorrentino when he made "The Consequences of Love," a film that was technically beautiful and had a strong central performance by Toni Servillo but was basically inert emotionally. "Friend of the Family," a film about a stingy money lender that also impressed, also played the fest. But neither prepared me for this ballsy, hyper-confident drama about Italian politics, a world so complicated the movie actually begins with a glossary of terms like "Red Brigade." But then the fun begins. Like "GoodFellas," Sorrentino is on fire here, using every trick in the book -- freeze frame, slow motion, wacky camera angles, graphics -- to introduce a seemingly endless stream of characters. The use of pop music is also stunning,

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from familiar Western songs to a goofy whistled refrain that introduces some of the corrupt politicians heading in for a meeting in between glimpses of assassinations of businessmen and the like. At the heart of it all is real life politico Giulio Andreotti, a master player in Italian politics since the 40s whose party suffered major defeats during one of countless waves of scandals. With his hands folded over his chest almost as in prayer, Andreotti glides through rooms like Nosferatu and delivers droll one-liners like Oscar Wilde. We're seeing Andreotti as his power fades and the courts close in (though never in for the kill -- he always survives). But despite the profusion of names -- the movie literally never stops introducing people -- it's all crystal clear: these people are deeply corrupt, playing one off the other and all of them in it to save themselves for as long as possible. And the acting is so vivid, I may not remember their names but I know them all by sight: the fleshy toady who complains Andreotti never shows him affection, not even once; the fast-talking baldy who is a master at building coalitions, the Cardinal who represents Rome; the Shark who abandons ship when he sees Andreotti's number is up and so on. "Pulp Fiction," "GoodFellas," "Three Kings" -- those are all supremely entertaining movies whose directors seemed to have an endless supply of "tricks" on those films to deliver their stories in fresh, exciting ways. That's what "Il Divo" feels like to me, crowned with Servillo's brilliantly still performance at the center. And when he's given an explosive five minute monologue to defend himself (or confess), it's shatteringly good. Even people who like it seem to think it'll never play outside of Italy. But I don't know a damn thing about Italian politics and I thought it was a blast. This is everything "Che" failed to be: a biopic that used a slice of a controversial figure's story to bring him to life. Bursting with memorable characters and incident, you get a complete feel for the man and his world and want to learn more. I defy most people who saw "Che" to even describe some of the fighters who stood by Che's side in Bolivia. I read an 800 page biography and still had trouble telling them apart. Not so, here. Usually the best films at Cannes have screened by now and late Thursday and Friday are saved for the dregs. Thank goodness in a weak year we got the pleasure of a really great movie. Too bad so many critics have already left.

Wendy and Lucy -- The night ends with a new movie by Kelly Reichardt, the auteur behind the indie darling "Old Joy." I wasn't as excited by "Old Joy" as others, but I certainly thought it revealed a talent worth watching. Reichardt here delivers another modest tale -- this one slightly more accessible and

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thus I imagine slightly less thrilling to her previous supporters. But I'll eagerly look forward to her next film. This one stars Michelle Williams as a young loner who is traveling to Alaska with her dog Lucy and hoping to work in a fishery and basically escape her life. Quiet and withdrawn, Wendy sometimes forgets to even say thank you or offer up the other niceties that "normal" people depend on. Disaster strikes quickly: her car breaks down, she's caught shop-lifting and taken to jail and Lucy has disappeared when Wendy returns. Dealing with all these crises when you only have about \$500 to your name and no family to speak of (a sister Wendy calls immediately and suspiciously wonders what Wendy wants) is not easy. Nothing remarkable here, but it's compelling on a scene to scene basis. And I really do love Williams -- she is truly devoted to acting and consistently appears in independent films by promising talent. If I were a young filmmaker, she'd be the first actor I'd want to read any script I wrote. If it were good, she seems almost certain to say yes to appearing in it. Williams showed up for the debut, her first major public appearance since Heath Ledger died. (She also has a role in "Synecdoche, New York," which debuts on Friday.) She looks lovely in a vintage cream dress and pocket purse and why am I suddenly delivering a fashion report when I know nothing about fashion? But I do know a serious artist when I see one and that describes director Kelly Reichardt and actress Michelle Williams. I hope the Martin Scorsese movie she's filming ("Shutter Island," based on the crime novel by Dennis Lehane of "Mystic River") gives her even more juice. We'll all be better off the more movies she can get made.

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