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Cannes 2011 Day Five: Can Cannes Handle A Truly Fun Film? "The Artist" Debuts

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Okay, one more day until Malick's *The Tree Of Life*. Should this really be seen as the only hope for the fest? I've already seen several movies that were good to very good and some fare from Sundance that proved worthy of their praise. The one thing no one expected was a light, frothy ode to classic Hollywood. Can Cannes even handle a comedy? The last one to win the Palme d'Or was maybe the darkly black Coen Brothers movie *Barton Fink* or before that Robert Altman's *MASH* all the way back in the 1970s. So let's just assume that the very warm applause *The Artist* received was due more to relief after a string of grim movies and not a sign of things to come.

THE ARTIST *** 1/2 out of ****

Not since Bob Clark made up for his *Porky's* movies with *A Christmas Story* have we seen a director make such a leap. Director Michel Hazanavicius is best known in France for the *077* spy comedies (more akin to Matt Helm than Austin Powers in style). Out of nowhere he's delivered an essentially silent film complete with intertitles that is a delightful ode to classic Hollywood. Shot in black and white and hitting

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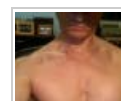
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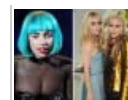
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just the right tone throughout. *The Artist* is great fun. The two leads are completely unknown to me, but winning and dead-on when it comes to capturing the style of silent film acting and broad but appealing manner of Hollywood flicks from the 20s and 30s. It's 1927 and Jean Dujardin is George Valentin, the biggest star around. Berenice Bejo is Peppy, the ardent fan swept out of anonymity and into overnight success. She can handle the wrenching change to sound movies but George is set adrift, pouring his heart and soul into a directing effort that is the pinnacle of silent film success but hopelessly out of date as far as audiences are concerned. The stock market crash doesn't help in the least. Her star rises, his falls and she can't even help him out without hurting his feelings.

Again, this is essentially a silent film, not counting a clever nightmare sequence where sound overwhelms George at every turn. The tone is playful but romantic as well and the two leads have chemistry and charm to burn. They're surrounded by excellent support, including John Goodman as a softie of a studio tycoon and James Cromwell as a chauffeur first for George and then for Peppy. The score (which at one key moment uses Bernard Herrmann) is marvelous and the scenes of Hollywood filmmaking almost as much fun as the scenes of stars being stars on and off the set. It sounded like a lame spin on *Singin' In The Rain*. It turns out to be a true delight that movie buffs should embrace. The only thing pedestrian about the film is its title. Maybe like Clark's *A Christmas Story*, this will remain Hazanavicius's only notable legacy. Maybe he'll go on to deliver more original and worthwhile fare. But for one moment at least, Hazanavicius has proven he's an artist.

TAKE SHELTER *** out of ****

Shotgun Stories was one of my favorite films of 2007. *Take Shelter* may not make my final list in 2011 (though I certainly want to see it again), but it unquestionably proves that writer-director Jeff Nichols is the real deal and that actor Michael Shannon is his De Niro. *Take Shelter* is about a man who works in construction and is happily married with a wife and a young daughter who is deaf. A quiet, stable man, he (Shannon) is suddenly plagued with horrifying nightmares in which his dog attacks him, people try and grab his daughter or -- again and again -- a storm of terrifying proportions is coming. These panic attacks get worse and worse but our hero won't confide in his wife. He's worried that this is a sign of mental illness, the same thing that drove his mother into a home in her mid-30s and scarred his childhood permanently. He both reaches out to a therapist and risks his financial situation by expanding their backyard storm shelter, just in case. As the visions or nightmares get worse and worse, he becomes more and more unhinged, desperate to find out whether he's losing his mind or getting a sign of the apocalypse. It's a bold tale that reminded me somewhat of the otherwise dissimilar movie *The Rapture*. It's quiet and understated, even as it shows a man unraveling or receiving the sort of prophetic signs that used to be more commonplace in our preindustrial world. It's intelligent, engaging filmmaking and though it's taken four years for Nichols to follow his excellent debut, I'm already eager to see his next work. Here's Nichols talking about his movie.



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MARTHA MARCY MAY MARELENE *** out of ****

Here's another movie that came to Cannes with deserved good buzz from earlier festivals. Writer-director Sean Durkin makes an impressively assured feature debut and Elizabeth Olsen (who physically resembles Maggie Gyllenhaal but is of the Olsen acting family) is definitely a talent to watch. Together, they tell the story of Martha, a young woman whose parents died young and went to live with her aunt since an older sister (Sarah Paulson) was already in college. That has kept them apart emotionally and quite literally for the past two years when Martha dropped out of sight. A panicked, desperate phone call brings Martha back into her sister's life, though she won't say where she's been or what she's been doing except for vague lies. Turns out Martha was in a cult, drawn in by the charismatic leader (John Hawkes of Deadwood) who preyed on her vulnerability and lack of trust. In flashbacks we see him rename her Marcy May as the acceptance and support of Martha's new "family" makes her feel wanted and special for the first time in her life, even as the leader takes her in a sexual act that's brutally unromantic and leads her down a path towards Manson-like behavior. (The Marlene, by the way, is the name the women in the cult must use when answering the telephone.)

Truth be told, the flashbacks to the cult are far more interesting than the present scenes of Martha's awkward inability to relate to her sister or her sister's husband (Hugh Dancy, nicely prickly). But the sense of unease she feels -- greatly enhanced by a marvelously creepy and unusual score by Daniel Bensi and Saunder Juriaans -- keeps us on edge wondering if Martha will collapse mentally or just as likely be tracked down by the cult that is only a few hours away. It's a mature, striking and ultimately haunting movie that allows you to understand how someone can get trapped into such a bizarre and unlikely world. All it takes is pain and vulnerability and the bad luck to run into someone who will take advantage of it.

L'APOLLONIDE/HOUSE OF TOLERANCE * 1/2 out of ****



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It's quite depressing when a movie makes sex dull or at least conventional. Perhaps that's inevitable when making a movie in a brothel, where sex is just commerce. This film written and directed by Bertrand Bonello is set almost entirely in a brothel at the turn of the 20th century. We get to superficially know the women who work there, the madam who feels pressured by rising rents, the clients who have their favorite girls as well as their favorite perversions and so on. It's all quite unremarkable, despite a decent cast that does their best. Odd touches include the classic soul music that appears at brief jarring moments, as echoed in this trailer which includes some brief topless women and therefore is not suitable for work.

If the movie had anything remotely interesting to say about prostitution, it escaped me. Bonello might have been saying "pity the poor prostitute" (the film ends with a flash forward to the present when we see the same actresses playing streetwalkers) or it might just as easily have been comparing the camaraderie found in a brothel compared to the shameful degradation of the streets and calling for a return to legalized bordellos. I don't know or care what Bonello thinks, since he barely created any characters I could care about or a story that did more than meander along. It's pointless and dull, much like prostitution, and at the end of it no one handed me \$50.

MOVIES AT CANNES FILM FESTIVAL 2011

movies rated on a four star scale

Arirang no stars out of four

The Artist *** 1/2

The Footnote/Hearat Shulayam *** 1/2

Habemus Papam/We Have A Pope ***

Jeane Captive/The Silence Of Joan ** 1/2

Michael ***

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L'Apollonide/House Of Tolerance * 1/2

Martha Marcy May Marlene ***

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Midnight In Paris **

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Restless * 1/2

17 Filles/17 Girls **

Sleeping Beauty * 1/2

The Slut **

Take Shelter ***

We Need To Talk About Kevin ** 1/2

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