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HUFF POST ENTERTAINMENT

## Movies: NYFF 2013 #2 -- Lanzmann's Latest, Miyazaki's Farewell

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**THE LAST OF THE UNJUST** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**THE WIND RISES** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**STRANGER BY THE LAKE** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

Now the **New York Film Festival** kicks into high gear for critics. We've had a week of screenings in advance of the actual public opening on September 27 and some serious, challenging fare has emerged. Director Claude Lanzmann has returned with a fascinating, complex look at the moral dilemmas faced when trying to survive the Holocaust, director Hayao Miyazaki says goodbye with his last directorial effort and the gay flick *Stranger By The Lake* is the first movie to raise the question whenever you come across a really bad film at a festival: why? Why show it? Why not have one less film?

**THE LAST OF THE UNJUST** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

To the casual observer, the documentary film *The Last Of The Unjust* is very much of a piece with director Claude Lanzmann's masterpiece *Shoah* (1985). But for those intimately familiar with that movie's approach to discussing the Holocaust, this is a subtly radical departure. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann remained resolutely focused on the "how," as in how were people processed, where were they placed, what was done with their clothes, how many people would a barber shave in one day, what was done with their hair and on and on until this vague horror became ineradicable, fact upon fact upon fact building up and insisting, this happened, this is how, never forget. Not for him philosophical questions of "why" or "who could do such a thing?"

It was the work of a lifetime. But inevitably Lanzmann uncovered material that wouldn't fit into *Shoah*, even though it stretched to 9 hours. He's crafted other movies out of the hundreds of hours of material amassed during that endeavor and *The Last Of The Unjust* may be the most fascinating and revealing of them all.

It focuses on the story of Benjamin Murelstein. He was the last leader of the Jews at **Theresienstadt**, a grotesque "model ghetto" used in an attempt to dupe the International Red Cross and the world into believing that Nazi Germany was treating Jews humanely...or at least give those others some plausible deniability. Two previous leaders were executed but Murelstein survived until the war was over. Charged with collaboration, Murelstein was held for 18 months and cleared of all charges. But his actions are still questioned to this day and he spent the rest of his life in exile in Rome, though he yearned to live or at least visit Israel.



*The Last Of The Unjust* draws from extensive interviews Lanzmann conducted with Murmelstein in the 1970s while researching *Shoah*. They took place over a week and Lanzmann was the prodder and the prosecutor, questioning and cajoling and encouraging Murmelstein to talk and talk. The result is a fascinating look at his self-justifications, his rationalizations, the closing argument for the defense. What do you do in impossible situations? What is right or wrong amidst such horror? Murmelstein will be happy to tell you and his amusing, thoughtful, bitter and philosophical comments are endlessly nuanced and challenging, funny and frightening.

For Lanzmann, this is very different from the "rules" he followed for *Shoah*. That movie featured no archival footage. Here we see movie clips from a propaganda film where deeply unhappy Jews are seen at the model ghetto working and playing or attending lectures and performances, a ludicrous but perhaps effective stop gap to confuse and muddy the opinion of the world. We see drawings illustrating life in the ghetto from those long gone. And Lanzmann does ask why and not just how, searching for motivation and reasons and pushing Murmelstein on key moral issues.

The stories are endlessly fascinating and horrific. The hangings for the slightest infraction, the petty squabbles among Jewish leaders I found amusing and in a way heartening (even in the midst of the unthinkable, office politics rears its ugly head), the disease and despair -- it all stays with you. Inevitably, you wonder what you might have done in his place. Certainly Murmelstein makes a provocative, convincing case when talking to Lanzmann and without others to challenge his assumptions.

For example, a typhus outbreak occurred and if it wasn't eradicated, the Nazis threatened to shut down the camp, meaning the likely death of most of the thousands kept there. But the prisoners don't trust the inoculations and resist. What to do? I immediately thought, well everyone needs food. The next time they line up for food, have the doctors there; before you get your food you get a shot. Indeed, Murmelstein did much the same thing (his solution revolved around a stamp on ration cards; no stamp saying you were inoculated, no food). He says people accused him of being a monster, of starving people to death but the outbreak was halted and Theresienstadt survived.

It's a remarkable film, a worthy companion piece to *Shoah*. It's also poignant. Here is Lanzmann in present day footage, wandering a train station and other sites around the model ghetto. Now 87 years old, he's a sharp contrast to the younger, dark-haired Lanzmann grilling Murmelstein so long ago. Today, Lanzmann is reading selections from Murmelstein's memoir. Watching him in a crematorium, leaning for support on a trolley used to shove bodies into the burning flames is an unforgettable image: life and death intertwined as they have been throughout his career, his mission to document and tell these stories.

Murmelstein has a hell of a story to tell. He dealt with Adolf Eichmann and claims here to be an eyewitness to Eichmann's involvement with Kristallnacht among other events. I can't speak to the historical record and how much here is new, how much is backed up by other sources, what's shaky or clear. I can say it's a remarkable document, a gripping, moving and essential film. Clearly Murmelstein won over Lanzmann: the last shot shows them walking up a street, arm in arm. Others perhaps won't be swayed and the question of survivor's guilt and how to hold accountable those facing terrible dilemmas will

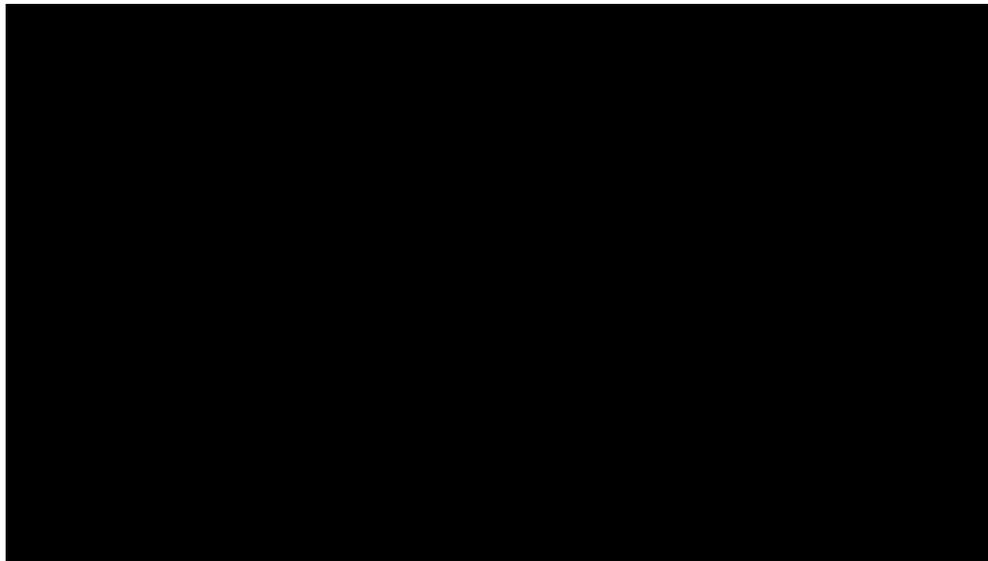
continue. When Marmelstein was being held after the war, the very first question posed to him by authorities was "Why are you still alive?" In typically feisty fashion, he shot back, "And you? Why are you still alive?"

### **THE WIND RISES** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

The final film from legendary Japanese animation director Hayao Miyazaki, *The Wind Rises* is a fitting caper to his extraordinary career. Miyazaki has always been entranced by the desire to fly and his movies are filled with flying castles and flying witches and fanciful flying machines. Indeed, this movie begins with a young boy dreaming of flight and taking off in a whimsical machine from his family's roof.

Miyazaki has also expanded our ideas of what an animated film can be about. Unlike Ralph Bakshi, whose movies invariably thought anything not Disney should be "naughty" and "adult," Miyazaki simply told the stories he wanted to tell. But here he ends with an apparently very fictionalized look at the life of aeronautical engineer Jiro Horikoshi, the man who came to prominence at Mitsubishi between the wars and helped design many of Japan's fighter planes for WW II.

Miyazaki is known for his film's gentle tones and deep ambivalence towards modern technology, so this might seem surprising. But this sweet, awkward tale is about Jiro's own ambivalence over his fate. With poor eyesight, he can never fly a plane himself so we spend most of our time on the ground, imagining flight and -- as he grows older -- imagining the stress on various struts and designs. Yes, this is a cartoon that includes fascinating lectures on design, impassioned looks at bolts that can be flush along the wing and other technical details that Miyazaki brings to life.



Alongside this tale of a young engineer's flowering as an artist in his chosen field, we have the sentimental tale of his falling in love with a young woman suffering from TB. In classic melodrama fashion, the more sickly she becomes, the more beautiful she appears. You shouldn't be surprised by a bittersweet ending.

*The Wind Rises* offers many opportunities for eye-popping spectacle: earthquakes, fires, spies, plane crashes, and the simple joy of flight. All of that is here, but it's not designed for movie trailer impact. Miyazaki creates subtle, beautiful images that are more hushed and striking than explosive -- the earth literally groans during the earthquake, for example. You're more likely to remember Jiro's hilariously gruff (and tiny) immediate superior at Mitsubishi or the way he gains inspiration from the bones of an animal.

It never reaches the level of masterpieces like *Spirited Away* or *My Neighbor Totoro*. But in its unexpected subject matter (the life of an aeronautical engineer!) and quiet dream of flight unencumbered by the ugly demands of the world, it's a lovely grace note on which to end a major career.

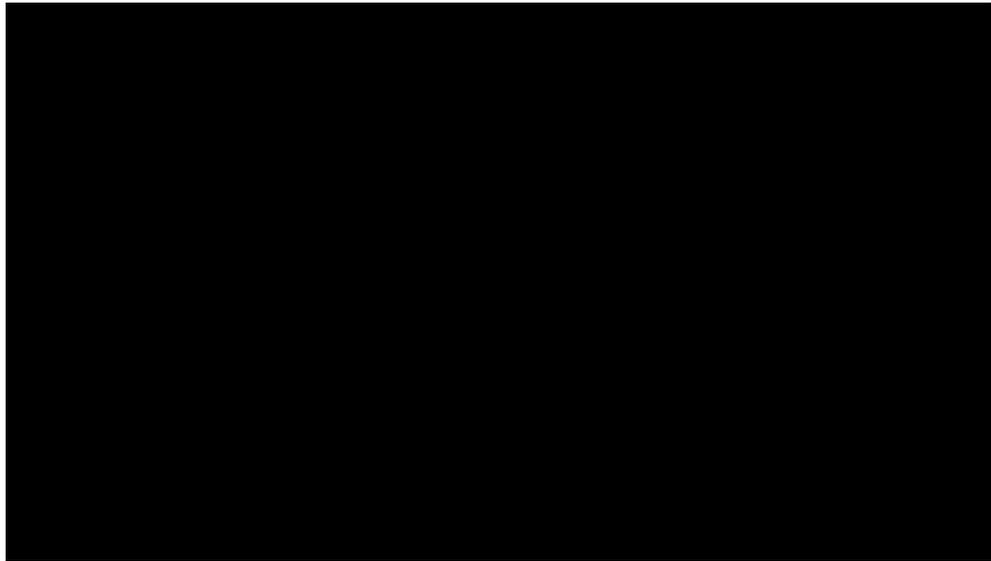
**STRANGER BY THE LAKE** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

It's not easy programming a film festival. Nonetheless at every one I've attended, you invariably sit through a handful of films and wonder exactly why the heck they were shown. Couldn't they have just featured one less movie?

*Stranger By The Lake* isn't as unendurable as many films I've seen at fests (the acting is solid throughout, for example) but it's pretty ludicrous and certainly a waste of time.

Our hero Franck (Pierre Deladonchamps) is a handsome young gay man who frequents an isolated beach on a lake, a cruising spot where men go off into the woods and have sex in between dips in the water. He's probably the best-looking man there (the location attracts an older, lonelier crowd of gay men) and he's soon befriended Henri (Patrick d'Assumcao), an odd duck of a man who sits off by himself and isn't there for sex but just the quiet.

But that's perhaps not the stranger of the title. The real stranger is Michel (Christophe Paou), a mustachioed man who is a great swimmer. Our hero is immediately drawn to him but the man has a very possessive younger boyfriend and nothing happens the first time they spot each other. Late one night our hero is in the woods and watches as Michel forcibly drowns his younger companion and then slips away. This spot is so isolated it's inevitable that the murderer will see that one other car still remains and therefore he might have been observed.



What does Franck do? Now, he's a well-adjusted, out gay man as far as we know. Does he run to the police or just call them on a mobile? Does he go down to see if the guy is actually dead or perhaps just dying? No, he simply leaves, and the next time he's at the lake has great sex with Michel and Franck decides he's in love. WTF? Exactly what's wrong with this guy? They start to have sex regularly and our hero wants more but the murderer refuses, all while teasing out what exactly our hero knows or doesn't know. An official from the police also starts poking around and asking uncomfortable questions.

That's about it until the risible finale I won't spoil. But it's always infuriating when people behave like complete idiots in movies and refuse to do the very first thing almost any sane person would do. If it's not bad enough our hero witnessed a murder, he is clearly aware that the killer **MUST** know he was there and probably saw it. Even if you didn't care that someone else was killed, wouldn't you at least want to save your own neck?

I can think of many reasons you might suggest why someone wouldn't call the cops -- none of them completely convincing but at least we'd have something to hang this inexplicable behavior on. Our hero could be closeted and afraid to admit he was at the cruising spot. He could be an undocumented worker. He could be a kid who was just coming out and maybe he left before the murder was over and convinced himself they were just playing rough... until the body turned up and police started asking questions. He

could be turned on by the idea of having sex with a killer (though this wasn't suggested in the least; in fact, Franck is a bit nervous when the murderer first suggests they take a swim). Any of these ideas might be enough to keep someone from calling the cops right away. But once it was clear a murder had been committed, none of them would explain why he'd keep returning to the one place where the killer is sure to be and put his own life at risk. Most of the people there don't even know each other's names so he'd be at little to no risk of being tracked down. Is our hero so desperate for some sex he'd risk his life just to return to this one spot?

It's telling that the movie doesn't even bother to offer up any of these wrinkles. All it does offer is some brief explicit sex and good actors struggling to make sense out of a ludicrous, unmotivated situation.

### **NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL 2013**

*Like Father, Like Son* \*\*\*

*A Touch Of Sin* \*\* 1/2

*The Last Of The Unjust* \*\*\* 1/2

*The Wind Rises* \*\*\*

*Stranger By The Lake* \* 1/2

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**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided a press pass to the early screenings of the NNYFF with the understanding that he will be reviewing them.

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