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Cannes and queers

With news of new projects on the way from Stephen Fry and Paul Rudnick, the Cannes film festival promised future fun as well as some milder moments of gay and lesbian desire for the here and now. Then there's *Irreversible*, a French *Memento* with a scene in a gay bar that's both hard to take and a must-see.

By Michael Giltz

An Advocate.com exclusive posted June 7, 2002

In London, Madonna was onstage snogging a girl nightly. In Slovenia, the gay transvestite pop group Sestre (Sisters) was creating a controversy—and looking great in their spangly airline stewardess outfits—around the Eurovision Song Contest. But in Cannes, at the much hyped annual film festival, there were queer films but precious few queer artists to trumpet them.

The best news was about future projects. Writer-actor Stephen Fry (*Peter's Friends*, *Gosford Park*) made a splash with the announcement of his directorial debut, *Bright Young Things*. It will be based on the Evelyn Waugh novel *Vile Bodies*, and while



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the bright young things have yet to be cast, Judi Dench and Peter O'Toole have signed on for supporting roles.

Fellow out Brit Isaac Julien (*Young Soul Rebels*) announced his first feature film in more than a decade: *Tula* is a biopic about the transsexual Caroline Cossey, a successful model and Bond girl. Gay fave and native Frenchman François Ozon (*Criminal Minds*) will be shooting in English when he helms *The Swimming Pool*, even as stateside cineasts still await his campy musical *8 Femmes*. And writer Paul Rudnick (*Jeffrey*, *In & Out*) redoing *The Stepford Wives*? Scarily perfect.

The market at Cannes always provides gay fodder, with the deliriously titled *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* unexpectedly involving lesbian vamps. *Nine Dead Gay Guys* had a well-placed billboard to highlight its funny title, and the producers even managed to convince one British paper that the movie was the scandal of the fest. (Sadly, the best thing about it is the title.) Local cinemas were screening Brian De Palma's latest, *Femme Fatale*, which stars Rebecca Romijn-Stamos as a jewel thief at Cannes who happily makes out with the striking Rie Rasmussen in order to fondle away her jewels. (Well worth the cost, I'd say.)

Finally, Cannes itself began turning pink. Director Lisa Cholodenko followed up her brilliant *High Art* with the far more conventional *Laurel Canyon*. Christian Bale plays the uptight son of rock and roll producer Frances McDormand (wonderful as always), and he's forced to live with her while he and his fiancée settle in. The plot is thoroughly unsurprising except for McDormand's casual references to bisexuality—that seems like a throwaway detail (bi is cool!) until she has a threesome with her boy-toy rock star boyfriend and Bale's very willing fiancée (Kate Beckinsale).

Far more enjoyable was *Madame Sata*, a Brazilian film about the turbulent, violent life of the three-time Queen of Carnaval whose offstage name was João Francisco dos Santos. Before finding his calling, João (Lazaro Ramos) carves out a life in 1930s Rio with a prostitute friend, her child, and a fey buddy not resistant to the occasional trick himself. The film is a little lumpy, but *Variety* caught the tenor of Ramos's lean, magnetic star turn when it described his performance as "fiercely proud."

On the mild side was *Blue Gate Crossing*, a Taiwanese film about high school students and sexual confusion. Since one of the leads is a pretty boy on the swimming team, it threw us for a loop when the same-sex desire sprang from his girlfriend, who'd rather hold hands with her best pal than with her dreamy beau.

An even more unexpected love triangle came in *The Embalmer*, an Italian film about a middle-aged dwarf and taxidermist who shyly vies with a pretty girl for the attention of his very tall and handsome new assistant. The film is strong enough to make the competition real (you don't actually know who will triumph) but it chickens out at showing anything other than sublimated tension between the men.

Equally timid was the translator of one French film's title: A literal rendering would be *The Pussy With Two Heads*, but the festival officially designated its English title as the bland, meaningless *Glowing Eyes*. Strange, since the film itself is so very explicit—it's set entirely in an adult theater showing straight porn, where male clients and transvestites (who wouldn't pass for female in the darkest of alleys) have sex. With full frontal nudity and actors apparently performing sex acts on camera, it's the latest film to blur the distinction between art and pornography. But you can be certain director Jacques Nolot had art in mind: The actors are generally middle-aged and quite unshapely, so titillation isn't the order of the day. (When one strapping

young man appears, it's a miracle he isn't mobbed.)

A true oddball was *17 Times Cecile Cassard*, another French film. In this one, a widow bereft after the death of her husband finds solace in her gay friends and a new zest for life after watching men have casual sex by a river. It's good to know cruising can be beneficial for others and not just the people directly involved.

Finally, there's *Irreversible*, by writer-director Gaspar Noé, the movie that really was the scandal of the festival. Technically brilliant and surely the most audacious film since *Pulp Fiction*, Noé's provocative piece has an almost unbearable rape scene and an equally horrific murder. The murder, unfortunately, takes place at a gay bar called the Rectum during one of the first scenes of the film. It's a red-lighted descent into hell, complete with heaving, panting grotesqueries and a crowd so jaded that when the protagonist begins to crush the skull of a man, instead of running for their lives like any sane person they stand around "awed" by the beauty of the killing and practically applaud at the end. The lurid and ludicrous aspects of the Rectum come in a film that simply can't be ignored. It's told backward à la *Memento* and has a visceral, overwhelming power (and in the end a true beauty) that means this movie will be seen and those sleazy, absurd moments will have to be discussed and dissected. Like the movie, they can't just be dismissed.

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