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Cannes 2009 Day Six Reviews: Football, Fascism, Death and Porn



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Another fun day of filmgoing at Cannes, as you can tell by the subjects tackled. (Actually, one of them is a genuine crowd-pleaser.) It remains a quiet fest in the market and late at night but definitely exciting and vibrant when it comes to the new films screening in and out of Competition. Thank you, Von Trier, for giving everyone something to argue about.

LOOKING FOR ERIC *** (out of four) -- You rarely see a heartfelt comic film in Competition and you certainly don't expect it from the harsh

realist school of Ken Loach (whose Palme d'Or winner "The Wind That Shakes The Barley" was one of my favorites of the year). I don't know famed football/soccer player Eric Cantona from Adam. (Pele, I know. Ronaldo, I know. Cantona? An Italian best known for his stellar work with Manchester United? Not a clue.) He's obviously an icon, first and foremost for his play of course but also for his elliptical sayings in interviews and press conferences. But this film isn't about Cantona. It's about Eric Bishop, an aging father of three kids (from, perhaps, two marriages and an affair -- that's a little murky) who realizes he panicked and blew it with the only woman he ever loved. His mates from the post office where he works help him out. And one, a self-help book enthusiast, begins the film with a hilarious scene where each man is asked to take on the persona of someone they admire and want to be like -- the middle aged men choose Frank Sinatra, Nelson Mandela and the like while Eric says immediately Eric Cantona and they all murmur approval. That plus a little pot smoking leads to the moment where Eric is sitting in his bedroom when the real Cantona suddenly appears to offer his manly, eccentric advice. Eric takes courage from Cantona's promptings and makes radical changes: getting rid of the surfeit of televisions in the house, doing a spot of exercise and trying to panic when his first and best wife is suddenly present daily because they must trade off watching their daughters baby while she studies for college finals. Now like most people in the US, Cantona means nothing to me. The US equivalent would be Mickey Mantle or (to choose a living person) maybe Dennis Rodman or Roger Clemens before he was exposed as a

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cheat. But you get it immediately. The movie shows numerous beautiful, legendary goals that Cantona scored and it doesn't take long to buy into his natural charisma, wacky sayings (often lifted directly from quotes Cantona has made in the past, apparently) and inspirational powers. It's like a comic spin on "Field of Dreams," with a lot more marijuana. Their scenes together are the heart of the film, which is also special because it combines such a typical feel-good comedy with the gritty realism Ken Loach is known for. The finale may be a tad too feel good for what could have been a great film, but it remains great fun. The US remake will be broader and less substantive than this comic drama, which is certain to become Loach's biggest box office hit of all time. That's not saying much since none of his films have grossed even \$2 million in the US. But that will change now.

IRENE * 1/2 -- It's easy to be moved (at moments) by director Alain Cavalier's meditative, 90 minute essay about the death of his wife. He spends minutes focusing on a table, say, with some personal items and relating what they meant to her and to him. Other times he'll point the camera into a mirror and film himself discussing the pain and loss he feels. It was obviously therapeutic for him but it's also quite obviously not cinematic for us. It's a lovely tribute to their love and the fact that you and I won't gain much by watching it is perhaps beside the point.

DANIEL Y ANA ** 1/2 -- This is a frustrating film because it came so close to being really great AND because it's almost impossible to discuss without revealing a crucial early plot twist. Even hinting at it, as the production notes did, was enough to let me guess what tragedy occurs early on in the film. Deeply sensationalistic (and based on true events in Mexico, where it's set), it's a credit to this strongly directed feature by Michel Franco that the film is devoted to what happens AFTER the event. Brother and sister Daniel and Ana are deeply traumatized and it's painful but fascinating to watch them almost literally NOT get on with their lives as they individually seek solace in therapy or just shutting down emotionally. While I wasn't waiting for any emotional breakthroughs a la "Ordinary People" or "Good Will Hunting," this film is a little too abrupt in coming to an end. Not only don't we see them begin to come to grips with what has happened, we don't know for sure that it will cripple them forever or perhaps that healing could some day be possible. The film is emotionally unsatisfying but Franco could give Warwick Thornton a run for his money when it comes to the best first feature award, the Camera d'Or. Was that an opaque enough review for you? Here's the spoiler of the event that takes place in the first 20 minutes:

SPOILER SPOILER SPOILER SPOILER SPOILER

In the first 20 minutes, wealthy siblings Daniel and Ana are kidnapped. (Ana is about to be married and Daniel is her handsome 16 year old brother.) But instead of being held for ransom, they are forced to have sex on video and then released. One notably upsetting detail is that the villains doing this don't even hide their faces: they know the events are so shameful and paralyzing that it doesn't even matter if the kids see their faces. The criminals know the kids will never go to the police. A scroll at the end of the film insists that horrible events like this are commonplace in Mexico (relatively speaking of course) and that the shame of the victims makes prosecution almost impossible.

END OF SPOILER END OF SPOILER END OF SPOILER

VINCERE * 1/2 -- This overwrought -- I mean "operatic" -- look at one of the famously randy Benito Mussolini's mistresses -- is pitched at a wildly dramatic level. No one declares war. They declare WAR! WAR! WAR! Men and women don't make love. They writhe in passionate, bed-shaking agony because it is all too much. Even picking up a leaflet can't be done simply, it must be SNATCHED up off the ground and READ with a flourish and then TOSSED aside immediately. The film begins rather confusingly -- it starts in 1914 then jumps back to 1907 then back again to 1914. The purpose is to show fate: a woman that Mussolini kisses to avoid riot police in 1907 reappears again in 1914 where she throws herself at Il Duce, eyes shining bright with adoration. Her name is Ida Dalsler (the lovely Giovanni Mezzogiorno) sells virtually every stick of furniture she has in order to support his radical newspaper. (I just read a bio of Mussolin by Denis Mack Smith and being a tabloid, rabble-raising journalist was about the only thing Il Duce was successful at, other than gaining and keeping power.) She bears his first-born son. Needless to say, she is less than pleased to discover Mussolini has another wife and children, all who came into his life AFTER her but only they are acknowledged in public. When she repeatedly and aggressively hounds him in public to accept her as his wife and dump the other one, Il Duce has her committed to an insane asylum and her son taken away. It's an unrevealing footnote to history except perhaps in this small way. This woman is ferociously strong and determined, very "fascistic" in the Mussolini sense. Nothing can

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stop her, surely the quality that attracted him in the first case. And perhaps she is like Italy. Even when he takes advantage of her, evne when he abuses her and destroys her world, makes her a laughingstock to the world, she cannot wholly reject him. If Mussolini walked in the room and said, "Come, be my wife," it's obvious she would say yes with all her heart. Why this idiocy? Why indeed did Italy fall under the sway of a buffoon like Mussolini, who perhaps made the trains run somewhat on time but accomplished very little else other than to frustrate Hitler and run his country into the ground to the point where Italy is still beleaguered by comically corrupt politicians like Berlusconi? Perhaps that will engage Italians and judging by the applause this film has some adherents. But even most people who liked the first half thought the film ground to a halt when the womn was thrown into jail. Literally nothing happens after that and all you can look forward to is newsreel footage of Il Duce. An over-the-top score blares out repeatedly and stridently, every actor is turned up to 11 and the quieter scenes involve only a little table-thumping and shouting. Mezzogiorno is good as Dalsler, especially given the material she works with. But hopefully there will be better women in better movies to honor before the festival is over.

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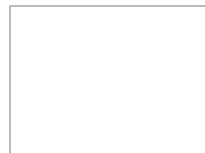
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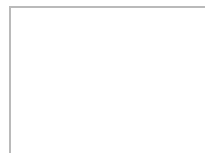
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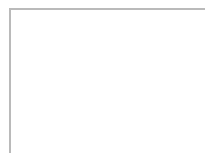
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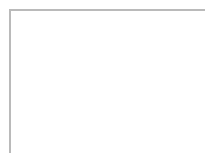
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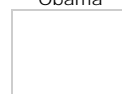
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