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Cannes 2009 Day Ten: One Bad Movie After Another

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I wanted to see six films today, but the Gasper Noe extravaganza Enter The Void was not the estimated 150 minutes but almost 180 minutes (without credits, no less), so I only saw five. Too bad they were all bad, to one degree or another. On the plus side, one of my picks of the fest -- Xavier Dolan's I Killed My Mother -- won three out of the four available prizes at the Directors Fortnight. I had already requested an interview so hopefully we'll be chatting Saturday or Sunday. And now, sigh, the five movies.

THE IMAGINARIUM OF DR. PARNASSUS * 1/2 (out of four) -- This modest fantasy feels like a mishmash of the usual Terry Gilliam obsessions, but less so. A traveling troupe led by Christopher Plummer as Dr. Parnassus scurries around central London of today hoping to lure people into their magical mirror. On the other side? A fantastical world of the imagination where you are tempted with a choice between your basest desires (a one night stand with Johnny Depp; a drink at the bar for an alcoholic on the wagon) and a more challenging journey towards true and earned happiness. People usually choose the base desires. Tom Waits is lingering around in bohemian mode as Ole Scratch himself waiting for the lovely daughter of Dr. Parnassus to turn 16 so he can claim her. (They made a deal: immortal life in exchange for his first born child.) The appealing Andrew Garfield is a founding they took in that is hopelessly in love with her. Heath Ledger is a disgraced public figure/con man hiding out from the Russian mob. When he travels into the imaginary world, he transforms into Depp or Jude Law or Colin Farrell -- a seamless way of making up for Ledger's tragic death that doesn't seem awkward or affect the film in the least creatively. The story is slight and uninspiring; you know you're in trouble right from the start because virtually every actor other than the leads is broadly cartoonish. But for me the biggest letdown of this mild movie is the special effects. Gilliam has been a standard bearer of sorts for old-fashioned special effects. You can feel the handmade complexity and detailed modeling that make Baron Munchausen, Brazil, Time Bandits and others so delightful. But almost all the effects

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in the Imaginarium are poorly detailed digital affect. You could call them dream-like but they're really just lazy and uninteresting. Ledger is fine in an unmemorable role with little resonance. We'll remember his final triumph as *The Dark Knight* and celebrate the comradeship of the industry illustrated by the actors who stepped in to make this film happen.

THE SILENT ARMY * -- The road to cinematic hell is often paved with good intentions. This noble, purposeful film highlights the horrific trend of child soldiers throughout Africa: kids kidnapped by rebels/terrorists and forced to commit atrocities while being shamed/frightened into denying your past life. Numerous other films have been made and more are in the works but none yet have been artistically satisfying in the least. This one is typical: little black boy is best friends with little white boy. Black boy's family is slaughtered and he's taken to be a child soldier. White boy shames dad into idiotic journey into jungle to get the boy back. (I've reduced the characters to their racial identity because the film is so simple-minded. That's how it plays; no one comes alive as an actual living and breathing character.) Virtually all the actors are weak. An NGO worker spends all her time making a bemused/frustrated/admiring expression on her face when it comes to the dad. In perhaps the most bizarre plot twist, the dad reaches the rebels, gets the boy, and is allowed to leave with two armed guards accompanying them. Cut to them walking through the jungle and the dad jumps the guards and tries to knock them out, figuring he won't be let out alive. But then they pull back the camera and instead of waiting till he was a mile or two away from the armed camp filled with trigger happy rebels, the dad has made his big move literally feet away from the cruel and vicious leader and all his minions. Because why wait till you're out of sight of the enemy before jumping your armed guards? Laughable doesn't begin to cover it.

ENTER THE VOID * 1/2 -- Gasper Noe's follow-up to his terrific *Irreversible* is a nearly three hour glimpse at a young man who is shot by the police, arguably has his life flash before his eyes and then gets reincarnated as his sister's baby. It's technically proficient, but once you've seen a fly-over shot of Tokyo or rather once you've seen it eight or ten times the point of seeing it yet again begins to pale. Two orphaned siblings are at the heart of the story: a sister who strips at a Tokyo bar and a brother who is dealing drugs. At the very beginning of the film, overly aggressive police trying to bust him shoot the brother in the chest. We soon get loads of flashbacks showing how he became a dealer, seeing their parents die in a car crash, watching the brother sleep with a friend's mom to get money, getting drugs from a dealer and on and on, all while our hero refers endlessly to *The Tibetan Book Of The Dead* in order to prepare us for the reincarnation. The show-stopper here is certainly the shot of a penis entering a vagina...from the perspective of *inside the vagina*. That brought roars of laughter from the assembled press, which at the end broke into divisive camps of loud hooting and strong applause. To me, the movie is so simple-minded that no camerawork can save it. Certainly the acting is affectless and flat, except for the brother and sister played as little children -- those young actors are very nuanced and good. It literally begins with death and ends with birth and I wanted to break out into "The Circle Of Life." A blank screen is thrown in towards the end for no apparent purpose other than to trick people into thinking the world is over. It began with a giant ENTER filling the screen and ended with a giant THE and then VOID. Surprising, it ain't. It's conceivable that the film could be more effective at half the length and it would certainly be easy to do since there is endless repetition here that doesn't give it any cumulative power. On the other hand, I stayed awake throughout the entire three hours and never felt antsy except on an intellectual level. It's certainly well-crafted; it's just not well-thought out.

MAPS OF THE SOUNDS OF TOKYO No stars -- *Enter The Void* immediately looked better when I had to tackle this inert drama. The entire story is set up in the first 20 minutes and after that virtually nothing happens. A Spanish man in Tokyo has been dating the daughter of a business executive; she commits suicide and writes in blood on her bathroom mirror the plea "Why couldn't you love me the way I love you?" Her father has a breakdown and tells an associate he can't bear the thought of a world in which his daughter is dead and the Spanish man is alive. The businessman also blames his young associate, insisting that man should also have told the daughter he loved her. Meanwhile, the Spanish man is having great sex with a female fish monger/highly trained assassin (you read that right) but insists on telling her repeatedly that when he sleeps with her he is thinking of the dead girl. Which kind of spoils the mood. Extremely reserved, the fish monger/trained assassin is friends with an old man who specializes in making sound recordings of daily life for the use of TV, radio and other media. That's it. The Spanish man ultimately leaves his wine shop in Tokyo to open a saki store in Spain. The old man gives us ponderous narration undercut somewhat by the sight of a Night Ranger LP in his apartment looming over the old man's head. Not good.

TO DIE LIKE A MAN * -- The latest in a long line of tragic transvestites movies, this somber



Children'

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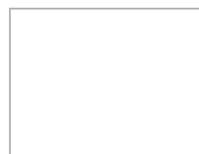


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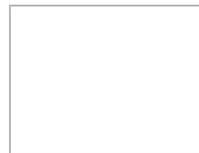
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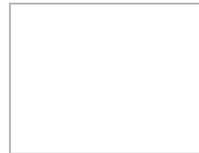
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flick has a plot worthy of Almodovar. In the first 20 minutes, we have a drag queen feeling the heat from newer and sexier talent. Her drug addict boyfriend cleans her out whenever he needs a fix and is in the gutter somewhere. Meanwhile, her alienated son pops in. He's in the military and we see him on a nighttime training mission where the son has sex with another male soldier and then immediately kills the guy out of self-loathing. He's gone AWOL and demands to be hidden while the drug addict boyfriend trying to get past withdrawal is in the next room hanging himself. Did I mention her breasts are leaking blood and she's probably dying? None of this is played at the level of farce. It's just somber, slow and uninvolved, with a side trip to another home where transvestites hold sway in the countryside. One strange touch had several scenes tinted blue or red a la a silent film, with the actors coming to a standstill while a song is performed off camera. Strange. But, again, not good.

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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.



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What I want to show in my film is the abuse of power; the police are like god. They can butcher people. I don't expect people to like the film, but I want them to think about it after they go to bed.

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I never liked Gaspar Noe's work. Irreversible is an overrated, shallow piece of filmmaking. Once you get past the shock value (and it has tons of shock value), it's a simplistic movie that covers up its emptiness with sledgehammer cinema tactics.

I am not going to see his next work.

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