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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

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Cannes 2009 Day Three: A Romantic Poet, A Troubled Cop and a Closeted Jew at Woodstock



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A very confusing, wet and rainy day at Cannes. Here are my initial impressions of three more films that screened today. And don't miss my exclusive video on **how clever Mariah Carey can be!**

Bright Star** -- The title of John Keats' final poem is also the title of director Jane Campion's best film since *The Piano*. (Low bar, that.) The story of the doomed love between Romantic Poet Keats and Fanny Brawne, it is well directed, well-acted, beautifully shot...and has almost no

emotional pull. Even if you know nothing about Keats -- and I've been reading the acclaimed biography by Andrew Motion to prepare for the film -- it's hard to imagine anything here will surprise. Handsome young poet meets fiery, clever young woman. They like each other almost immediately while she can't stand his boorish best friend, Brown. He is poor and can't properly make a match. They love each other, delicately. He declaims poetry. They kiss again. But they cannot marry; no one wants them to marry; they don't marry. And then he dies.

The film is slightly less dramatic than that, but you get the idea. Their love blossoms when Keats is writing some of his greatest poems, but you'd hardly know that here. Except for one brief reference to his flourishing work ("I'm writing again," he says to Brown) and some remarks on poetry fluidly lifted from his actual letters, Keats might as well be the apothecary he trained for rather than a poet. Ben Whishaw (a very good stage actor; I saw his compelling *Hamlet* in London) is good as Keats, though again I didn't walk away thinking I'd seen a genius. Abbie Cornish is also good as the prickly Fanny. And Paul Schneider (so good in *The Assassination of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford* and *Lars And The Real Girl*) is better still as the Scottish poet Charles Brown. Perhaps what's missing is that elusive element of chemistry? Cornish and Schneider spark more

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strikes together -- especially after Keats has died -- than either of them with Wishaw. A worthy effort that improves mightily on most of Campion's work of the last 15 years but ultimately not one to embrace.

P.S. Poor Joseph Severn. This real person cherished his friendship with Keats to the end of his days. It was the great achievement of his life. Severn nursed Keats' brother Tom when John was away and accompanied Keats to Italy at the end of his brief life. But in the film he's dismissed by Fanny as a nobody who barely knows John. Not fair! Why do I care? Because he's played by **Samuel Barnett, a very good actor** I've enjoyed for years seen here in an all too brief turn. Ah well. History is merely fodder for film and gave up long ago on the dream of respect.

Police, Adjective *** 1/2 -- Director Corneliu Porumboiu's last film was the droll but dagger sharp *12:08 East Of Bucharest*. His art-house reputation should solidify further with *Politist, Adjectiv*. In it, a Romanian detective is investigating three teenagers (two guys and a girl) who smoke pot once a day in a courtyard. One kid has turned into a narc and reported his friend but not the girl. Though it's officially a case of "drug dealing," the one boy seems to get pot from his brother and he and his friends just smoke a joint. He doesn't sell it to them or anyone else and their lives are thoroughly unremarkable otherwise. They're just kids and the detective is aware that possessing such a small amount of pot is illegal in many European countries and probably will be soon in Romania. But if he launches a "raid" (a grand word for arresting three kids), it's likely the kid targeted won't want to turn in his brother for providing the drug and could be sentenced to seven years.

Quietly dismayed, the detective drags his feet and doesn't want to go any further with the case. Why destroy this kid's life for such a minor transgression? This is a post-Bela Tarr film, which means if someone walks down the hall to get a soda, you're almost certain to have the camera follow them out the door, down the hall, wait while they fish for change, put the coins in the machine, make a selection, get the soda, open it, take a sip, turn around and walk back up the hall to their office, walk in, shut the door, sit down and take another sip. Seriously. Only fest goers and art house *cineastes* will get past this style to the heart of the film. And the heart of the film is language, funnily enough. Our hero's wife is a schoolteacher and she's been playing a pop song over and over until they get into a lengthy debate about the lyrics and the difference between an image and a symbol. A co-worker wants to join the detective's "foot-tennis" team -- and in a further twist, I assumed this was some sort of bizarre mistranslation, but in fact they do play "foot tennis," which involves a soccer ball and four guys on a tennis court, strangely enough.

Finally, after much delaying, the hero is dragged into the chief's office for a bravura scene where he refuses to lead the raid, citing his "conscience." The chief demands he define "conscience," gets a coworker to write that definition on a chalkboard, calls for a dictionary and soon they are looking up word after word while quietly battling over exactly what it is they do as police officers in Romania. Slowly, subtly, the film evolves from this specific story to a universal struggle over personal responsibility versus fealty to the state. It's fascinating, compelling, and quietly funny, though certainly not mainstream fare. I'll certainly remember the chief for a long, long time.

Taking Woodstock ** 1/2 -- I'm such a big fan of Ang Lee that I can't help being rather disappointed in this film. When he makes a movie, it usually ranks among my favorites of the year. So anything less than great is a letdown. This shaggy comic tale is far from great, though it's so amiable you feel bad being too hard on it. Demetri Martin of *The Daily Show* plays Elliot Tiber, a nice closeted boy who is spending the summer in the Catskills struggling to keep his parent's very rundown motel from going bankrupt.

He's also the head of the Chamber of Commerce and desperately trying to bring attention to their town when he reads about a music festival planned for Woodstock that is suddenly homeless. Hmm. It's a simple story (and the truth is even stranger, frankly), with Tiber calling up the festival promoters, finding out the lead guy is a kid who lived down the street from him in New York and suddenly they're overwhelmed by hippies and free love. Uptight Elliot smokes pot before a press conference, drops acid with a groovy guy and girl (and spends the day in their van trying every possible combination of love), befriends Liev Schreiber as an exceptionally unconvincing former Marine turned transvestite, bonds with his dad, flirts with a construction worker and generally becomes comfortable with himself.

Call it three days of peace, love and (almost) coming out. Jonathan Groff is perfectly cast as Eliot's old chum Michael Lang, an almost preternaturally calm dude. He's a vivid person in the classic documentary film *Woodstock* and it probably doesn't help that I saw that film just a few weeks ago

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at EbertFest. That film captures the era so brilliantly that *Taking Woodstock* can't help but pale in comparison, especially when it apes scenes from the documentary, like the mud slide. I could have also done without the returning Vietnam vet (the generally good Emile Hirsch in a badly written role) which puts too heavy a weight on the film. The result is a little safe and sanitized, but diverting enough. Martin isn't a trained actor but he's well cast, as is most everyone, such as Eugene Levy as the friendly but savvy Max Yasgur. But is it too much to ask that if the film is going to be a sweet, idealized story of a young guy coming out of his shell during Woodstock that he at least come out to his folks?

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Believe it, b**ches. And don't forget the apostrophe. As far as I'm concerned, Mo'Nique could take Meryl Streep in an Oscar bar fight one-handed - and clean the floor with her.

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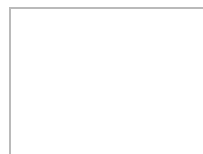
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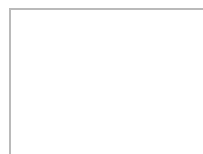
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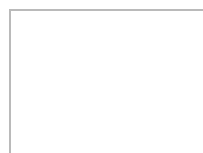
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