



Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted: May 24, 2009 05:21 PM



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Cannes 2009 Day Twelve: Haneke Triumphs With Top Prize

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While the critics agreed overwhelmingly that Un Prophete was the best film in Cannes, the 2009 Palme d'or went to Michael Haneke's The White Ribbon, amid strong applause from the French and German contingent in the press. Since the head of the jury was Isabelle Hubert and she scored one of her major triumphs by starring in Haneke's brilliant, corrosive The Piano Teacher (for which she won Best Actress at Cannes), it perhaps shouldn't have been a surprise.

Un Prophete received the Grand Jury Prize, ie. the runner-up award. Charlotte Gainsbourg deservedly nabbed the Best Actress award for her primal turn in Lars Von Trier's Anti-Christ while Christoph Waltz got Best Actor for his star-making turn in Quentin Tarantino's WW II flick Inglourious Basterds. The Best Screenplay award went to China's Spring Fever, Best Director went to the Phillipine's Brillante Mendoza for Kinatay and a tip of the hat -- the Prix Exceptionnel du Jury -- went to the great Alain Resnais who had his first film in decades appear in Competition. The third runner-up award -- the Prix du Jury -- was split between UK's Fish Tank and Korea's vampire flick Thirst. And the Camera d'or for best first feature went to the highly accomplished Warwick Thornton for his Aussie drama Samson & Delilah.

The Oscars have nothing on Cannes for brevity and wit and fun. The remaining press corps tumbles into a side theater while the black tie audience numbering in the thousands fills the main theater, the Lumiere. In about 50 minutes, all the awards are handed out, with the press corps hooting and booing the choices it disapproves of and clapping loudly for its favorites. Strong boos greeted Thirst, but they were drowned out moments later by even stronger boos for Mendoza as the Best Director of the fest. While some agreed his film Kinatay was a step forward from Serbis, it was widely panned nonetheless. The muddled Chinese gay flick Spring Fever might have deserved recognition for daring (the director bended the rules just to get the film made and it broaches the taboo topic of homosexuality with frankness) or acting or cinematography but the one area it

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probably didn't deserve notice was its weak and cliched screenplay.

Terry Gilliam had fun when he was brought out to hand over the Best Director award: he pretended he had won and started making all his thank yous and then broke down in tears when the truth was told. But probably the most popular award of all among the journalists was to Waltz for his mesmerizing turn as the "Jew hunter" in Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*. Tarantino says he came to believe he'd written a role impossible to cast and despaired of finding an actor who could speak five languages with aplomb until Waltz strolled in right before they were going to pull the plug on the film. Fittingly, he gave his thanks in English, French and German.

Perhaps the best-reviewed film of the fest was Romania's *Police, Adjective*, which was in Un Certain Regard. But it didn't even win that category, whose top prize went to *Dogtooth*, another admired film. The Critics' Week winner was *Farewell, Gary*. And Xavier Dolan's *I Killed My Mother* dominated the Directors Fortnight, winning three top prizes.

I also saw four movies on the final day of the fest:

SPRING FEVER ** (out of four) -- I stayed with this gay drama longer than most of my fellow critics did, I believe. It was interesting just to see drag bars and punk bars in China and fascinating to see how a gay person might stand out while walking down the street but still not be pegged as "gay" because such a concept is so thoroughly stifled in that country. Unfortunately, what's not stifled is melodrama. A married man has a passionate romance with a boyfriend who is clearly gay because he wears a jaunty scarf everywhere and walks with a certain elan. The suspicious wife has them followed by a straight guy, who promptly falls for the gay lover after the wife confronts the man at work and drives him out of their lives. Then the private eye's girlfriend (or wife, it's not quite clear) gets wind of THEIR romance and takes matters into her own hands. It's just a plot twist too much, with a subplot about an off the books factory that's raided by the police adding to the confusion. I was thrilled that -- while people died for love -- they didn't die because they hated being gay. But only gay audiences and Asian cinema specialists will find this worth slogging through. Director Lou Ye's films remain more interesting for their political daring than their substance.

IN THE BEGINNING ** -- Based on a true story, it follows a con man let out of prison who starts tracking down construction sites and then -- posing as a rep for the site -- bilking local stores out of equipment rentals and selling the machinery off for a quick buck. Quite unexpectedly, he stumbles on a really big site that hasn't happened. A small town still hasn't recovered from the day construction on Highway 61 was abruptly halted two years earlier. Just the presence of our anti-hero as a rep of the construction firm sends everyone from the beautiful female mayor down to the maid in the local hotel into nervous hope. Slowly but surely, the con man switches from building up a pile of kickback money for an easy getaway into a man determined to get the highway finished and everyone paid off so at least he can claim he did something with his life. It unfolds just as you'd expect, with no surprises and no revelation that might win your sympathy. Decently done, but unabsorbing.

VISAGES ** -- Tsai Ming-Liang delivers his latest series of mournful vignettes, this time devoted to a movie shoot. A director is filming *Salome* in a Paris museum and along the way we see parents of crew members breathe their last, romances blossom, actors trudge behind the scenes with laborious costumes or lugging a deer's head and so on. Some of them work beautifully, such as the personal assistant who walks into his kitchen to get a glass of water and suddenly faces a burst pipe that grows worse and worse and worse with hilarious results. But the set-up of the film is unnecessarily vague: I knew that it was about a director filming *Salome* on location because I glanced at the press notes; otherwise I might still be scratching my head. Tsai undeniably has a vivid eye but this one is very hard going.

COCO CHANEL AND IGOR STRAVINSKY * 1/2 -- Respectably muted, this film is based on a novel about Coco Chanel's affair with composer Igor Stravinsky. It begins with a riot at the premiere of Stravinsky's "Le sacre du Printemps," which should provide solace to all the Cannes directors like Von Trier and Gasper Noe who got booed at THEIR premieres. Their movies weren't bad: they're just misunderstood geniuses. It's all downhill from there: with nary a word spoken between them, Coco and Igor are suddenly making love non-stop at her country villa, never mind that the house is bursting with Igor's ailing wife and four children. Why should that stop them from mounting each other in the middle of the day in the study, which has gigantic bay windows looking out onto the gardens where the children play? Don't be bourgeois and suggest this is unrealistic. Igor's wife asks Coco at one point if she ever feels shame. "No," says Coco and that about sums it up. It would be nice to say this amoral indifference to others was fun, but it isn't.

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Coco merely slinks through rooms with all the panache of the model that actress Anna Mouglalis was for years (for Chanel, actually). He composes great music, she creates Chanel No 5 and history is made! Just not cinematic history.

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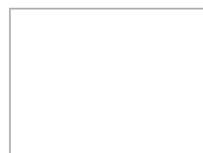
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