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Cannes 2010 Day Eight and Nine: Carlos Is Caught

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Carlos the Jackal loomed over Day Eight. For some, the Olivier Assayas film was a daunting roadblock they detoured around. A 5 1/2 hour miniseries smack dab in the middle of the day from noon to 5:30 p.m.? How many stories could they file, how many movies could they see if they didn't go to *Carlos*? For me, that was never an issue. Every year at Cannes, I scan the running times of ALL the movies at the fest in one category or another, whether it's in Competition or the Directors' Fortnight or wherever. I find the longest movie of them all and commit to it right then and there. I figure, if it's that long, there must be some reason they said yes to it. This policy has stood me

well, most notably when I was one of the lucky few to be among the first to see the Italian masterpiece *The Best Of Youth* back in 2003. Three hundred and thirty minutes with a fifteen minute break? Bring it on!

DAY EIGHT

CARLOS *** 1/2 out of **** -- I initially gave *Carlos* a more subdued three stars out of four. But it's remained with me and the central performance by Edgar Ramirez is so subtly accomplished that it deserves more. The life of the terrorist and self-styled revolutionary Carlos is shrouded in mystery. The only biographies I could find focused mostly on the efforts to track him down. So it's no surprise that director Olivier Assayas plunges right into the action. Within ten minutes, Carlos has passed a job interview with people fighting for the Palestinians and is quickly tossing bombs around with aplomb. Convincing in period detail, the movie hurtles through his public career, from assassinations to hijackings, from clumsy early efforts to more sustained operations. The film is broken into three parts and will benefit from being seen over two or three nights. I can't imagine watching the shorter, theatrical

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version and suggest you avoid it for the whole experience. If you don't, you'll miss Ramirez (this year's Christoph Waltz) age from a callow youth to a paunchy middle-aged man with remarkable nuance. The final half hour may slow down -- Carlos In Retirement isn't terribly thrilling. But the overall arc is compelling. I love how the film shows so much without making a big fuss over it. Yes, Carlos savors the media attention but it's never shoved in our face as a sign of him becoming too hubristic; it's merely an almost inevitable result of his highly public attacks. He wasn't exactly a shrinking wallflower even at the start. Some objected to a "TV movie" being at Cannes, but they're foolishly narrow-minded. A compelling story is a compelling story, no matter who funded it or where it will be seen.

STONES IN EXILE ** 1/2 out of **** -- I really just wanted to see this documentary about the Rolling Stones recording their masterpiece, *Exile On Main Street*. But because Mick Jagger was there, the scene at the Directors' Fortnight was a madhouse. Even worse, we were on rock and roll time, with the screening beginning a good 50 minutes later than expected, which is highly unusual for this disciplined fest. Oh well, it was fun to hear Mick read off some comments in quite good French and then serve as his own translator in English. The film by Steven Kijak was fine if not revelatory, despite hours and hours of footage from the time (much of it from the aborted *Cocksucker Blues* film project). Thankfully, the talking heads (Martin Scorsese, Sheryl Crow, Benicio Del Toro (?) and Jack White) are kept to a minimum at the beginning and the end. It captures the crazy time of the early Seventies and to a degree the recording process for the album, chaotic as it was. You're still better off buying the remastered album but hardcore fans will enjoy seeing the band in all its Dionysian glory.

LA NOSTRA VITA ** 1/2 out of **** -- You just know something bad is going to happen. Life is too idyllic for Claudio (Elio Germano): he's got a great wife, a job he's good at overseeing construction, adorable kids he teases and loves enormously, friends, and another child on the way. But it's too nice, as any regular filmgoer will realize. The longer characters are seen coasting along happily the more we tense up before the expected impact. Will it be the mafia? (Corruption is an inescapable fact of Italian life.) Will it be blowback from the accidental death of a night watchman they hushed up? Will it be his kids? Suddenly his wife goes into labor and we fear the worst. The baby is healthy but the wife simply dies. For the rest of the film, Claudio will try to cobble together some sort of new existence, first by pushing his boss into giving him a building project of his own to fund and then by reaching out in desperation to family and friends as the project overwhelms him. I enjoyed this movie much more than most of the critics here. If nothing else, I'll keep with me the haunting, searing funeral scene where Claudio howls out the lyrics to his wife's favorite pop song. Germano is definitely one to watch.

DAY NINE

FAIR GAME ** out of **** -- Sometimes, events are so compelling in real life that trying to recapture them in a fictional film is fruitless. That's certainly the case here. Naomi Watts and Sean Penn are good as Valerie Plame Wilson and Joe Wilson, the couple raked over the coals by the Bush White House after Wilson accurately called them out for lying in the State Of The Union when making its case for invading Iraq. That State of the Union had two key points about Iraq: UK evidence that it had tried to purchase enriched uranium in Niger and that it attempted to purchase aluminum tubes suitable for nuclear weapons production. Both statements were demonstrably false, with overwhelming evidence from multiple sources that the Niger purchase never took place and overwhelming scientific analysis that demonstrated the aluminum tubes were in no way suited for nuclear weapons production. The White House knew this and included them anyway. When Joe Wilson wrote an op-ed calling them out on the facts he knew to be untrue (about Niger), the White House immediately retracted the statement and admitted it should not have been made. It then spent the next months and years attacking Wilson, breaking the law by outing his wife as a CIA agent and did everything it could to change the topic from why the White House included information it knew was a lie to who is Joe Wilson and did his wife get him a "junket" to beautiful downtown Niger, one of the poorest countries in the world. This Doug Liman film does a fine job of reminding us of the key facts and showing the pressure on the private lives of these two. What it doesn't do is dramatize in any compelling new manner the story that we know so well.

POETRY ** 1/2 out of **** -- Director Lee Chang-dong has a penchant for female roles and he delivers again for actress Yun Junghee. She gives a fluttery, sweet performance as a lonely grandmother raising her sullen grandson, providing daily care for an elderly stroke victim and facing the onset of Alzheimer's. Overshadowing it all is an unidentified scandal involving her son, other boys at his school and the dead body of a girl who committed suicide. Typically for the film, we never discover exactly what the boys did but it's bad enough for the school to be eager to hush it up and the parents involved to offer a huge cash payment to the girl's mother not to press charges. Throughout this muted drama, Yun is taking a poetry writing class and occasionally attending poetry readings. She struggles to write one decent poem herself, a tricky proposition when even simple words like "wallet" suddenly become slippery as eels to her. What little narrative drive there is fades when we realize most events will remain unexplained or off camera.

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Still, Yun creates such a specific character, we stay with it all the way through the end. Yes, the ending features a poem by the woman, though a promising start that asks questions of the girl who committed suicide fades into vague nothingness. Much like the film.

BOXING GYM ** 1/2 out of **** -- I never want to take a filmmaker like Frederick Wiseman for granted nor will I be confused into thinking what he does is easy simply because he's done it so many times. I thought last year's *La Danse -- The Paris Opera Ballet* was solid and enjoyable, but far from great. *Boxing Gym* -- at 90 minutes it practically constitutes a short film for Wiseman -- is not quite in that class. He examines an institution -- in this case a boxing gym that includes men and women, young and old, amateur and pro -- from his usual remove. But the workings of the gym aren't complex enough to reward long-term observation, I think, and the result is indeed more like a light workout than his usual intense engagement.

LUNG BOONMEE RAULEK CHAT/UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES ** 1/2 out of **** -- I haven't been on the bandwagon for acclaimed Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Sometimes you can relish being in the minority; other times you keep an open mind and give someone a second and a third and a fourth try, hoping at some point you can either key into what people love about a talent or decide for yourself that the emperor does indeed have no clothes. Nicknamed Joe (thanks, Apichatpong), his movies are typically so opaque and rooted in Thai culture that reading the production notes beforehand is a must, just to get an idea of what the heck is going on. Imagine my surprise when *Uncle Boonmee* is so relatively bursting with identifiable plot and action that by Joe's standards it felt like an action film. I enjoyed it on first watch far more than any of his others and actually expected there might be a backlash from his fans about being too accessible. (Believe me, this is all relative; most people would find this fest fare utterly impenetrable.) No fears on that count: his passionate followers declared it brilliant. The story is simple: Uncle Boonmee is dying and his sister and nephew show up...followed shortly by the ghost of his dead wife and the hairy, monkey-like visage of his son. They say the house is surrounded by spirits and Joe begins to recall past lives, in a way, assuming images of an ox in the fields and other animals reflect the past lives he might have lived. Joe feels compelled to head to a cave, where apparently he was born in his first incarnation thousands of years ago. Tossed in there somewhere is a flashback to an earlier life where we see a princess emotionally drawn to a commoner but then seduced by a talking catfish which magically transmutes her into another fish (though not before an unexpected and hitherto unimaginable moment of human-fish sexual congress as it flops between her leg). Whether Uncle Boonmee was the princess, the commoner or the catfish, I can't say. But I did follow all of it, until a finale with more ghosts (I think) and a nod to Thailand's current political woes that set me adrift for good. At this rate, Joe's next film will be a comedy and I'll love it.

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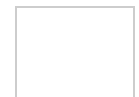
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