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Cannes 2010 Day Two and Three: Wall Street 2 Stock Down, The Housemaid Burns Up

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CANNES DAY TWO

Everyone speaks the language of film at the Cannes Film Festival. I've had conversations with people who didn't speak a dollop of English simply by trading the names of films or directors back and forth, with each of us grunting in disapproval or smiling our appreciation to show our opinion. But there's still a cultural divide.

Take the excellent French actor Mathieu Amalric, who deserved an Oscar for his work in *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly* and who stars in about a dozen French films a year, or so it seems. His fourth film as a

director is *Tournee/On Tour*, the story of a seedy manager/producer shepherding a troupe of New Burlesque American artists (ie. women who strip with style) around the port cities of France. I've yet to meet a single American or Brit who had anything nicer to say than "It wasn't awful." If you'd asked me about the buzz, I would have said, oh, everyone hated it.

But then standing in line I'd overhear Europeans and especially the French say they liked it, even that they loved it. At first, I thought it was just an exception. But it happened again and again. Then I noticed the roundup of top European critics in Le Film Francaise had given it strong support, with almost half giving it three stars (out of four) and two even the top award of four stars. Plus, I remembered that Tim Burton is the head of the jury and he surely loves the New Burlesque. So *Tournee* has morphed from a forgettable Day Two flop into a contender for perhaps a top prize like Runner Up or Best Actor. It's a good reminder that critics from Europe vs the US (and the UK) often have wildly different takes on films.

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And it doesn't matter what anyone thinks when it comes to the prizes: all that matters are the nine members of the jury.

TOURNEE * out of **** -- A year or two ago, a film at Cannes was built around the simple idea of how transformative a moustache can be. Indeed. Actor Mathieu Amalric simply dons a scraggly little moustache and we immediately know everything we need about his character. This down on his luck manager/producer (who used to be big in TV) is a hapless loser. Not a bad guy, perhaps (the moustache isn't sleazy so much as sad) but not trustworthy either. We meander along with Amalric and his troupe, genuine US New Burlesque performers who provide the film's only moments of interest by performing or rehearsing their acts. Offstage, they bitch and moan and improvise to an exhausting degree, while Amalric constantly juggles to keep their threadbare tour on the road. Details accrue of course: Amalric is divorced and has two kids, his girlfriend (or ex-girlfriend) has breast cancer, and he seems to have built up bad debt and bad will with virtually everyone of any use in the entertainment world. Drinks are drunk, passes are passed and either accepted or declined. And attention wanders.

BENDA BILILI *** out of **** -- Last year one of the breakout world music albums was by the band Staff Benda Bilili. Their story was so improbable that I understood why so many media outlets wrote about them. A group of Congolese street people -- most of them handicapped -- who rehearsed in a zoo and lived on cardboard had recorded an album? Sure it was fun to talk about but was it fun to listen to? In fact, their album *Tres Tres Forte (Very Very Strong)* was well-reviewed. It didn't quite make my list of the best of the year, but it was a solid work. Someone had made a documentary film about them and it was the opening night film of the Directors' Fortnight. Plus of course the band would presumably be there, so this was on my don't-miss list. Imagine my surprised when I realized the filmmakers had been following the men for years, long before they'd recorded their album. In short, they focused on some street musicians with every conceivable roadblock to success, only to see them performing around the world. It wasn't just dumb luck. In a gesture that goes against traditional documentary film distance (don't get involved with the people you're filming) but goes for every sign of decency, the filmmakers actually believed in the band so much they helped them record the album. They also stumbled across a boy who became the spine of the film. Just a kid with a tin can and some string for his instrument, but quite accomplished. He'd never met Benda Bilili but the producers brought the boy to them and the film follows the kid's maturity as we watch to see if he can become a member of the band and stick with his practicing and rehearsals and staying out of trouble for literally years until their big chance strikes. It's a crowd-pleasing, heart-warming sort of film and one that actually should play commercially around the world. You'll come out of it smiling and then [head online to buy their music](#).

CHATROOM * out of **** -- *Chatroom* began as a short play, one of three commissioned for teen audiences. I almost saw it in London (though reviews were mixed) and regret missing it ever since because the very talented Andrew Garfield (*Boy A, The Red Riding Trilogy*) was in the cast of the stage production. So that's what drew me to the film. For most others, it was the film's director Hideo Nakata of horror film *Ring* fame. I at least hoped he'd add some visual flair to the story of teens who meet in a chat room, only to have one of them urge another to commit suicide. I can buy the idea of chatrooms as hotel rooms off a dingy hallway crammed with people, escape pods where you can be alone with a chosen few and others must knock to get in. But the entire film had a cheap, unappealing look to me. On stage, it must have been dead easy: to show the kids talking in a chatroom, they just sat them in a circle on stage. Done. In film, we get lots of cutting back and forth between the chats and the kids in their own lives, usually seen in washed out grays with tiresome parents in the background. One or two of the kids is good (notably Aaron Johnson of *Kick-Ass*) but for the most part they can't overcome cliched writing and the old John Hughes trope of blaming the parents. For all the aura of sex and violence, it's a pretty dull affair.

CANNES DAY THREE

A typical day at Cannes: Everyone not being lazy is up and at the Lumiere by about 8 am for the first screening of the day, grabbing a croissant and the trade papers along the way. That first film is always one of the major films in Competition (this morning it's *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*) and this crack of dawn screening is your best chance to see it. Then you scurry to the next movie, especially if it's an in-demand film that the 1,500 other journalists will also want to see. Assuming you get in, that takes you to 1 or 2 p.m. Maybe you've got time to grab a panini on the Croisette and stare at the gigantic yachts dotting the bay before getting back in line for a movie at 3 or 4. Then another major film usually screens at 7, another at 10 and sometimes a midnight movie on the weekend can take you to 2 am. Head back to your place, file something, grab four hours of sleep. Rinse. repeat. It's not just money that never sleeps. At Cannes, journalists never sleep either.

WALL STREET: MONEY NEVER SLEEPS * 1/2 out of **** -- A sequel to Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*

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seems both inevitable (surely finance dominates our imagination -- and our economy -- like never before) and unnecessary. Do we really need to revisit Gordon Gekko? Certainly, Michael Douglas's turn as the just-released crook is the best thing about the film. It's neither fish nor fowl, unfortunately: the stinging indictments of the financial world are few and far between while the personal drama at its heart is never engaging. Shia LaBeouf stars in the Charlie Sheen spot as a callow youth looking to get ahead on the Street. We know he's a good guy because his specialty is alternative energy. And we know he's a schmuck because he's overwhelmed by a bonus check for \$1.45 million from his boss and mentor Frank Langella. In 2008, that sort of money is chump change. LaBeouf is also the good guy cause he's got the girl, in this case Gekko's estranged daughter, Carey Mulligan (so good in *An Education*, but here all she gets to do is look wounded). Langella's firm is torpedoed by Josh Brolin so LaBeouf wants add that to his to-do list: he wants revenge on Brolin, \$100 million to keep his energy company solvent while it's on the verge of a fusion breakthrough, Mulligan to say yes to marriage and she and her dad to reunite. From the get-go, the film was leaden and plodding to me. When LaBeouf gets his check, he gives Langella a kiss on the top of the head and murmurs "thanks." I suppose it's possible this might have happened at some point on Wall Street, but it's so unlikely -- however much they might have bonded -- that it threw me off. Plus, for whatever reason the music by David Byrne and Brian Eno used throughout (from their terrific collaborations) sounded out of place. It didn't help that the lyrics about wanting a home were repeated over and over. (We get it!) When Gekko delivers a speech at Fordham, it has the caustic, insider-y take on the (coming) meltdown we long to hear, but instead of being corrosive, it plays too much to the gallery and is interrupted with lame laugh lines and poor edits. On the personal side, LaBeouf and Mulligan's lovers are unhappy from the first minute we see them, so there's not much to root for. (Plus, he behaves like a schmuck with her repeatedly.) And then there's the godawful, timidly optimistic finale that is not as rosy as some think (Gekko is still a slime ball and we're not supposed to think differently) but is far from earned. This is exactly what studios fear about bringing a fall film to Cannes. All you get is bad buzz months before the movie is released. On the other hand, many American critics thought the movie was commercial and would play well in the US, so don't sell it short yet. At least not at the box office.


AURORA * 1/2 out of **** -- Oh dear. The first few days can be very rough, especially when a film is as slow and obtuse as *Aurora*. It's from Cristi Puiu, the director of *The Death Of Mr. Lazarescu*, one of the major films in the new wave of Romanian cinema that has swept critics along. That movie had a driving narrative and mordant black humor. This film features all the daunting aspects of the Romanian style (long takes, unexplained characters, plot and details that take literally hours to emerge) without any of the rewards for your effort. The director stars as an emotionally stunted man who goes about his day rather furtively. Even when he's standing in plain sight, I felt somehow this man was...lurking. Three hours long, it's quite a while before we begin to piece together his life. This isn't unusual in festival fare. The Dumont brothers make brilliant movies where the viewer can be at sea for quite a while. But there's usually a driving momentum or a magnetic character to keep you engaged. Not so here. Our protagonist buys a shotgun in the first hour, plots and slaughters two people at about the 90 minute mark and it's well into the second hour before I even had a clue who he had killed and why. That's not suspense; that's in fact, the opposite of suspense, as Hitchcock would have gladly pointed out. A mildly amusing coda (very mild) at a police station sends you off on a note of humor but it's far too little too late. So little is even said in the film that for minutes at a time you feel nothing but impatience. Contrast that with a scene (about two-thirds of the way in, I think) in which the protagonist is forced to actually talk to people. He's trying to find a woman who he thought worked at a clothing store. The women there let him in before they've opened, tell him she's not there and then get increasingly amused/annoyed/frightened by his accusatory, paranoid comments. He believes no one and imagines they are hiding something when a casual reference to the woman not having worked there in weeks turns out to be months (or vice versa). The slightest discrepancy sets him off. This is the scene where we realize how unhinged he actually is, though they just find him creepy. See what dialogue and interaction can actually do? It can reveal character! I will say this: despite the movie's tiresome obliqueness, in the lead role, Puiu creates a genuinely unnerving fellow. He has a habit of staring, turning away and then staring again that makes your skin crawl. And not just people. He even eyes his car suspiciously after he locks it and begins to walk away. Does he think it might move on him? And when he's at a school picking up his little girl and stares and re-stares at another student the same way, it's as unsettling as anything I'll likely see at Cannes. He's a contender for Best Actor, but it's not worth slogging your way through this three hour film to see it.

UN POISON VIOLENT/LOVE LIKE POISON ** 1/2 out of **** -- Hundreds if not thousands of films screen at Cannes. Besides the roughly 20 films in Competition, there are other curated categories like the Un Certain Regard, Out Of Competition, Seance Speciales, Cannes Classics, the market, movies on the beach and two officially unrelated events: the Directors' Fortnight and Critics Week. Since the best first film award (the Camera d'Or) can come from them and because they always contain a gem or two that becomes the talk of the fest (like *Control* and *XXY* from previous years), I go to them as much as


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possible. I've already seen the fun music documentary *Benda Bilili* and now I'm two for two at DF with this fine debut by Katell Quillevere. I was immediately struck by it in comparison to *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. Whereas I felt Oliver Stone's music cues were distracting and pulled me out of the film, Quillevere's were inspired and sucked me right in, especially folk singer Barbara Dane's rendition of "Greensleeves," which somehow immediately set the right, melancholic tone for this coming of age tale. Anna (a very good Clara Augarde) is a 14 year old Catholic school girl facing Confirmation troubled by the fact that she has doubts and also by the fact that she doesn't doubt her attraction to Pierre, the boy next door. (In good casting, Pierre is physically much less developed because that's how it is in your early teens when the girls gallop pass the boys to maturity.) Also, Anna's father has taken off and her mother Jeanne turns increasingly to the local priest, who is struggling with his own temptations towards Jeanne. Upstairs is the positive life force of the dying grandfather (Michele Galabru) whom they're caring for: he farts and laughs and eats and drinks and plays music and in an odd moment that somehow isn't creepy tells Anna he'd like to see where he came from one last time. Your village, wonders the budding young woman? Uh, no, not exactly. Perhaps too many plot strands tangle the film and keep it from greatness, but it's a confident, visually strong, nicely acted debut.

THE HOUSEMAID * out of **** -- This Korean film begins in a nice fashion, although it's trodding very familiar territory. A wealthy woman well along into her pregnancy hires a new housemaid. The maid, of course, is pretty and a bit overwhelmed by the extremely privileged world she's entered. There's an adorable little girl who behaves with perfect propriety at all times that is her central concern. Oh, there's also a remarkably handsome husband, who must spend most of his work day at the gym based on the fantastic shape he's in. Accustomed to having whatever he wants, we're not surprised when he eyes the maid appreciatively. Perhaps the only twist here is that when he comes on to her, after looking demure and oh so shocked, the maid launches her face into his crotch with abandon and exclaims how much she loves the smell of it. Not exactly a blushing flower. To this point, the film is nicely shot and subtly acted. It soon descends into gothic/soap opera territory that lost me completely with scheming relatives and absurd twists. But nothing, nothing, prepared me -- or anyone -- for the absolute bonkers finale. From a truly over-the-top scene of spontaneous combustion to an avant garde, theatrical coda on an open-air set in a field where the Korean cast spoke in English and one of them reenacted Marilyn Monroe's rendition of "Happy Birthday" for her little girl, it was a jaw-dropper of such epic proportions that *The Housemaid* immediately became exhibit number one in why you should never leave a film early.

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