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Freelance writer

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Cannes 2011 Day Seven: Aki's Accomplishment, Closeted Afrikaners, Bonsai and More!

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It was a downhill day at Cannes. It began with the dependably engaging Finnish director Aki Kaurismaki. But each successive movie was less and less engaging. Oh well, not every day can boast *The Tree Of Life*. On the other hand, if the international press were voting, Aki's *Le Havre* would be a contender for the top prize.

LE HAVRE ** 1/2 out of ****

In this typically eccentric and charming comedy by Aki Kaurismaki, the people of a small port town come together to help an adorable illegal immigrant get from France to England. That hardly captures the oddball goofiness of Aki (I'm having trouble spelling his last

name, so I hope he'll forgive my informality). Our hero is a shoeshine salesman with a loving wife who takes care of him completely. He's always a dime short but full of good cheer. In Aki's deadpan way, we see our man interact with his friendly fellow neighbors, whether it's the woman with a bakery who lets him take bread on credit ("Your bill is as long as the Congo," she complains. "I'm your best customer," he blithely responds) to the grocer who hurriedly tries to close shop when he sees our hero coming. They all stand ready to help a teenage boy be reunited with his mother in London. No one seems terribly wound up by race or politics (it simply never comes up), not even the policeman assigned to track the kid

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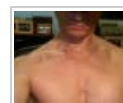
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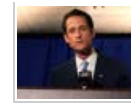
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down after the boy makes headline news. The warmth of the people in the town is palpable the Aki's goofy style is fully on display. Fans will be pleased. I'm fond of his style but this movie ranks a tad lower than his best. It was a little too slow at places; I certainly didn't need a complete song from the "trendy benefit concert" starring Little Bob. More crucially, the entire film is about seeing immigrants -- even illegal immigrants -- as people instead of criminals or just unwanted faces to be turned away. That makes the fact that the teenage boy has virtually no personality a major negative. Instead he's just a doe-eyed kid, which stereotypes him in another way by not letting this kid come to life in the same eccentric manner as everyone else. However, the film was very warmly received by Aki's fans and the international press. One can never predict what the jury will vote for, but if the Europeans were voting, they'd have Le Havre in a dead-heat with The Artist.

SKOONHEID/BEAUTY ** out of ****

This South African drama directed by Oliver Hermanus looks at the simmering racial resentment among white South Afrikaners through an unusual lens: the simmering frustration of a married and closeted male pillar of the community. The "beauty" in the film is Christian (ably performed by the handsome and masculine Charlie Keegan, who nicely underplays his few but crucial scenes). Christian is the nephew of Francois (Deon Lotz), a married man who works in lumber. Francois is pinned to the ground with desire for this young man who is in college studying for his law degree when he's not modeling on the side. Francois is not new to gay desire: he meets clandestinely with a group of middle-aged men who disdain fags and coloreds but then have group orgies. But Francois's obsession with Christian is something new. He follows his nephew around town when relatives are there for the wedding of Francois's daughter. Then he travels to Cape Town on a flimsy excuse so he can spy on the kid some more. What's truly enraging is that everyone keeps joking that Francois's other daughter and Christian would make a good couple and it might even be happening. Lotz and Keegan are good, though the film and script ultimately let them down. The movie suggests that Francois's behavior (he becomes a real bastard) is due to his repressed desire; if only he could have been open about his sexuality the way young people are today. While plenty of people have led repressed and sad lives, most of them don't become loathsome. Society forcing some people to live stunted lives is wrong. But so is Francois. It's unlikely anyone but LGBT festgoers will stumble across this one, I'm afraid.



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BONSAI ** out of ****

This romantic drama starts out promisingly but grew weaker and weaker as the film progressed. Writer-director Cristian Jimenez shows a light touch by opening his film with the line, "At the end of the movie, Emilia will die and Julio will remain alone." So, no spoiler alerts on this review because that's exactly what happens. Getting to that point is fun for awhile. Julio is a college student who had a romance with Emilia. Now he's dating another girl who believes he's working as a typist for a famed novelist. Julio jumped the gun on that job, so to keep the fiction going, he has to actually write a novel. That means telling his new girlfriend the story of his first love. It's a clever conceit and the movie is peppered with literary touches. Unfortunately, we are clearly supposed to believe that Emilia was Julio's great lost love. But the more we see of their relationship, the more believable it seems that their dating simply reached its natural conclusion. That makes it hard to feel poignant when the sad news reaches Julio that Elena is dead. (We, of course, knew it from the start.) The leads are able, especially Diego Noquera as the slightly hapless Julio. This screening was bedeviled with technical difficulties (including bad audio that brought the film to a halt at the half hour mark), but funnily enough the portions marred with those problems were the best of the film, so I don't think it kept me from getting a good sense of what Jimenez was going for.

HANEZU NO TSUKI * 1/2 out of ****

This turgid drama from writer-director Naomi Kawase is a complete disappointment, one of those movies that puzzles you. Why exactly was it accepted for Competition at Cannes? Some movies benefit not being in the white hot spotlight that brings and would do better in a sidebar. This movie would be received poorly in any context. We're told of a Japanese legend in which two mountains famously vied for the love of a third. This is compared to our main story in which two men compete for the love of a woman. One man is married to her but a bit prosaic, going on and on about the local produce of their town and how they should market it better and maybe open a restaurant. The other man is an artist, a sculptor who wanders about in the rain and takes his shoes off at an archeological dig because he's just that funky. She bounces back and forth between the men repeatedly. Then we're told in voice-overs about that legend about the mountains again. To drive the point home, the woman's story is contrasted with her grandmother, who apparently was in an arranged marriage but loved another man. Then we're told about the legend again, just in case we've forgotten about it. This movie is rather like Terrence Malick in its use

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of musing voice-over and "pretty" shots of nature. It just demonstrates that a pretty image is meaningless and actually quite dull if it doesn't somehow move the story forward or capture some essential emotion. It ain't as easy as it looks, in other words, something *Hanezu* proves in spades. This trailer is subtitled in French, not English, but there's very little dialogue anyway.

MOVIES AT CANNES FILM FESTIVAL 2011

Movies rated on a four star scale

Arirang no stars out of four

The Artist *** 1/2

Bonsai **

The Footnote/Hearat Shulayam *** 1/2

Habemus Papam/We Have A Pope ***

Hanezu No Tsuki * 1/2

Hors Satan/Outside Satan **

Jeane Captive/The Silence Of Joan ** 1/2

The Kid With A Bike/Le Gamin Au Velo *** 1/2

La Fee/The Fairy ***

La Fin Du Silence/The End Of Silence **

L'Apollonide/House Of Tolerance * 1/2

Le Havre ** 1/2

Martha Marcy May Marlene ***

Michael ***

Michel Petrucciani ** 1/2

Midnight In Paris **

Polisse ** 1/2

Restless * 1/2

17 Filles/17 Girls **

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Sleeping Beauty * 1/2

The Slut **

Snowtown **

Take Shelter ***

The Tree Of Life ****

We Need To Talk About Kevin ** 1/2

Wu Xia aka Dragon aka Swordsmen ** 1/2

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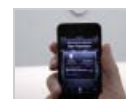
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