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Cannes 2011: Sean Penn's Weirdly Wonderful New Performance

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THIS MUST BE THE PLACE *** out of ****

The 2011 Cannes Film Festival is winding down. Most buyers have left and many journalists have followed them. Sean Penn already had a rather small role in Terrence Malick's *The Tree Of Life*, one of the best reviewed movies of the fest and certainly the pick of many critics to snag the top prize. Now, at the last minute, Penn returns with one of the most eccentric, weirdly wonderful performances of his career. The Oscar race for Best Actor has just begun.

The movie by Italian director Paolo Sorrentino sounded like a train wreck: *This Must Be The Place* is the story of

an aging rocker who goes on a quest to hunt down the Nazi that tormented his father in Auschwitz. Out of this very unpromising description comes a gentle, nutty, offbeat comic drama. Penn's character is called Cheyenne, and he's a reclusive pop star living in Ireland. Cheyenne stopped performing after two fans committed suicide to his mopey music. Now he just wanders out of his mansion dragging a shopping cart behind him, hanging out with a teenage girl whose brother has gone missing and generally just gliding through his days.

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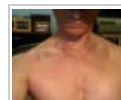
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Penn plays Cheyenne like some demented cross between Robert Smith of The Cure and Andy Warhol. He has a little boy demeanor, a wary fascination with the world and a giggly little laugh. And yet he's also wounded, smart and simmering with unresolved feelings for the Jewish father Penn hasn't spoken with for more than 30 years. Unlike Johnny Depp's oddball characterizations in movies like the *Pirates* franchise and *Alice in Wonderland*, Penn's work is actually grounded in a character and a movie of genuine if overbaked substance, which makes it all the more satisfying. It ranks with his turn in Woody Allen's *Sweet And Lowdown* and *Fast Times At Ridgemont High* as a comic highlight of Penn's career and makes you wish he'd tackle comedy more often. Here's a lowkey scene where Cheyenne says goodbye to his wife as he leaves for America to be by his father's bedside. It does contain one crude word so it's Not Suitable For Work, but it's the only clip I could find.

The movie is episodic and indeed quixotic as Cheyenne quietly hunts down the Nazi who -- if he's even still alive -- must be 95-years-old. Cheyenne visits relatives of the man, bumps into strangers and unexpectedly proves both savvy and determined at getting what he wants. The music is especially good, mixing in pop tunes with a traditional score that is very effective. Numerous set pieces work terrifically well (like a game of ping pong), though there's no question the story overreaches a bit and the finale is a tad confusing. Still, the supporting cast is very strong, from Frances McDormand as Cheyenne's understanding wife who works as a firewoman (I told you it was wacky) to Harry Dean Stanton as a guy Cheyenne befriends in a cafe.

What inspired Sorrentino (the director behind the excellent *Il Divo*) to come up with such a tale is beyond me, but he has expanded on the flowering of talent he showed in *Il Divo* by delivering a movie not just technically admirable but truly entertaining in a Hal Ashby, 1970s sort of way. It's flawed, and some will dismiss it. But he's provided a memorable role for one of the best actors of our time, a role that allows Penn to dig deep, but also giggle, and even offer a tip about how to keep lipstick fresh all day long.

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 **

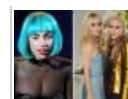
L'Apollonide/House Of Tolerance * 1/2

Le Havre ** 1/2

Martha Marcy May Marlene ***

Michael ***

Michel Petrucciani ** 1/2



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Polisse ** 1/2

Restless * 1/2

17 Filles/17 Girls **

Skoonheid/Beauty **

Sleeping Beauty * 1/2

The Slut **

Snowtown **

Take Shelter ***

This Must Be The Place ***

The Tree Of Life ****

We Need To Talk About Kevin ** 1/2

Wu Xia aka Dragon aka Swordsmen ** 1/2

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