BERLINALE 2012

CAUTION: Here be spoilers

After winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1977 for *Padre Padrone* and the Grand Prix du Jury in 1982 for *La Notte Di San Lorenzo*, it's been a while since the Taviani brothers won a major award. And rightly so. Whether *Caesar Must Die* is the right one is another matter, but as a tribute to the power of cinema, with its cast of inmates from...
Rome’s Rebibbia prison finding a passion with which to fill the empty hours in their enactment of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, the festival jury found an eager winner. Filmed in both colour, for the final performance, and in black and white, for the courtyard and cell-bound rehearsals, *Cesare Deve Morire* is a stunning testament to the process of filmmaking, coaxing convicts through a stunning dramatisation and into incredible performances. The script may boil down too often and too simply to Shakespeare's text, but the prisoners’ passion and life-changing vocation is a minor miracle in itself.

The Competition section had its fair share of German films, with Christian Petzold's Silver Bear winning *Barbara*, starring Nina Hoss as a doctor in East Germany relocated to a hospital in the middle of socialist nowhere, prey to the prying eyes of the local police and an invisible network of informers. With her West German husband, Barbara lives a life in limbo, planning to escape into Denmark and yet, as her friendship with her colleague André blossoms into romance and her affection for neglected runaway Stella grows, her flight across the Baltic Sea comes under threat. A slick follow-up to his rather more introspective *Yella*, *Barbara* is an understated gem, neatly sidestepping cliché in its everyday depiction of fear and loathing in the GDR.

Along with Mathias Glasner’s *Gnade*, starring Jürgen Vogel and Birgit Minichmayr as a German couple living in Norway north of the Arctic Circle wrenched together after a hit-and-run accident, a typically German story of unintended crime, self-punishment and mercy, Germany found another prize winner in part-German, part-Hungarian director Benedek Fliegauf’s *Just The Wind*, a fly-on-the-wall fiction that follows three members of a roma family going about their daily business amidst a climate of fear and mistrust during a real-life series of hate attacks in 2009. Winner of the Jury Grand
Prix as well as the Peace and Amnesty International Film Prizes, *Csak a szél* is a harrowing slow-burner of lives ripped apart by a faceless hatred.

Other greats in the Competition strand were Nikolaj Arcel’s *A Royal Affair*, an intriguing cross between a Danish *The Madness Of King George* and *Danton*, in which Mads Mikkelsen’s court doctor becomes the socially-minded puppet master to a childlike King and embarks on an illicit affair with his bored Queen. Kim Nguyen’s *Rebelle* was a particular favourite, with a Silver Bear winning performance from Rachel Mwanza for her portrait of a kidnapped war child, gloried as a witch and yet haunted by the ghosts of her unburied parents. It’s a visually haunting and delicately moving film, lifting the lid on the human cost of war in Africa. Brillante Mendoza’s *Captive* is a fictionalised account of the experiences of the tourists taken hostage in 2001 by Muslim terrorist group Abu Sayyaf and while there’s a lot of story to get through and the occasional clumsiness, there are glimpses of a great performance by a woefully underused Isabelle Huppert, whose vulnerability as a Christian missionary is shockingly against-type.

Edwin’s *Postcards From The Zoo* is an interesting fantasy, focusing on a young woman brought up in Jakarta zoo and her dreamy romance with a cowboy illusionist. It veers off-course when it leaves the safety of the animal park, the naïve ingenue abandoned to her fate as an erotic masseuse and seeming not to care. Equally mind boggling is Spiros Stathoulopoulos’ *Metéora*, a visual symposium of blurred vistas of perched monasteries atop sandstone cliffs and iconic animations. Despite its sparse dialogue, it's entertaining enough to watch young nun Urania hoiked up a mountain in a net or to see monk Theodorus prepare a romantic picnic or organise a tryst by dazzling her window with the reflection from a religious icon, but as they plunge towards carnal
relations, the Orthodox Christians' wanton lack of restraint beggars both faith and belief.

Perhaps the guiltiest pleasure was Zhang Yimou's *The Flowers Of War*, based on the novel *13 Flowers of Nanjing* by Geling Yan, and starring Christian Bale as a drunken mortician caught up in a cathedral with a class of schoolgirls and a bevy of working girls during the bloody massacres of the Rape of Nanking. It's a visual feast, and a pyrotechnic thriller, but treads a precarious moral high wire when it sends off the women of the Qin Huai River to almost certain death in the innocents' stead. Ursula Meier's *L’Enfant d’En Haut* has a similarly murky ethical outlook, embroiled in a twilight zone of poverty and wealth, childhood and adulthood. Léa Seydoux though is the film's real light, as the petulant older sister only reluctantly accepting her maternal responsibilities. Winning a Silver Bear, it fared better than Frédéric Videau's *A Moi Seule*, the story of a young girl kept captive in a cellar by a reclusive loner, who after ten years seizes the opportunity to escape. It's rather simplistic in its fresh-start denouement, but an interesting look at the inescapable nature of trauma nevertheless.

The Panorama section contained an eclectic mix of some of the best films, Timo Vuorensola's Finnish Nazi sic-fi comedy *Iron Sky* drawing the crowds as much as Volker Schlöndorff's *La Mer A L’Aube*, a French-German monument to Guy Moquet, the teenage son of a communist who became one of the 150 executed victims in a German reprisal massacre. Sabine Timoteo's *Formentera* is a rather lacklustre look at modern womanhood and holiday guilt, while Pen-Ek Ratanaruang's assassin thriller *Headshot* is an amusing if chronology-challenging romp. One of the best was Malgorzata Szumowska's *Elles*, with both a great script and a fantastic performance from Juliette Binoche, whose blotched skin and neck muscles play a starring role in her most intimate moment in this story of a magazine journalist plunged into a journey of introspection when she befriends two female students who pay for their Parisian lifestyle with sex.
Another of the Berlinale's best was Ira Sachs' follow-up to *Forty Shades Of Blue*, *Keep The Lights On*. Starring Thure Lindhardt and Zachary Booth as long-term lovers trying to keep the romance burning over ten years, despite careers, drugs and infidelities, it's beautifully and intimately shot by Thimios Bakatakis, and an honest, heart-warming look at love – falling in and out of it, working hard at it, as well as the harm we might do and the boundaries we might cross because of it.

While Ira Sachs romped home with the Golden Teddy, gay films gave a great show, with documentaries such as Ringo Rössner and Markus Stein's rather disappointing *Unter Männern – Schwul in der DDR*. Filled with fascinating testimonies from men who lived gay lives underground in East Germany, it's a little short on historical facts or the specifics of DDR gay politics, but an interesting glimpse into the gay glasnost of the Eighties. Ngoc Dang Vu's *Hot Boy Noi Loan* veers into the absurd with its secondary tale of a simpleton's love for his duckling, but as Viet Nam's first gay film, it's an enormous step. And equally groundbreaking is Sally El Hosaini's *My Brother The Devil* in its depiction of a gay British Muslim. It shies away from its gay story, in favour of the ganglands of Hackney and a brother’s impossibly quick sprint from homophobia to acceptance, but carries with it a perestroika of its own.

It's unlikely this year's Golden Bear winner will be such a global Oscar-winning hit as Asghar Farhadi’s *A Separation*, but with so many great films on show like *Elles*, *Keep The Lights On*, *Rebelle*, *Barbara* and *A Royal Affair*, there are some fantastic films here we hopefully won't be separated from for long.
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