

Culture

MOVIES FESTIVAL



VENICE FILM FESTIVAL



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SKOPIA FILMS



IMAGES FROM THE VENICE FILM FESTIVAL

Clockwise from top left, a scene from Tsui Hark's "Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame"; Jung Woo Sung in "Reign of Assassins," by Su Chao-Pin and John Woo; Paz Vega in Michele Placido's "Vallanzasca"; Kim Rossi Stuart, at right, stars as Renato Vallanzasca; and Vincent Gallo as an Afghan on the run in Jerzy Skolimowski's "Essential Killing."

Venice rolls out some big guns

VENICE

Films on Afghanistan and Italy intrigue, as does a Chinese assassin

BY RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

The 67th Venice film festival continued to unveil a good international spread of movies worthy of attention, both in competition and in the other categories. But one or two on which high expectations were riding failed to deliver. The festival closes Saturday evening with the presentation of the Golden Lion and other prizes.

SOMEWHERE Sofia Coppola's in-competition "Somewhere" opens with an overlong sequence of an expensive black motor car going round and round in circles and this, alas, turned out to be a fair summary of the rest of the film.

Spoiled and in a rut, the Hollywood film star Johnny Marco (Stephen Dorff) starts to reconnect, up to a point, with his visiting 11-year-old daughter Cleo (Elle Fanning) and comes to realize his life is utterly meaningless, if very well provided for. There are some amusing moments, but the film lacks the comedy of "Lost in Translation"

and the verve and risk-taking of "Marie Antoinette." And the one-dimensional Marco's "problems" will surely leave most viewers cold.

ATTENBERG Athina Rachel Tsangari's in-competition "Attenberg" also features a father-daughter relationship, between Marina (Ariane Labed) and her dying architect father, Spyros (Vangelis Mourikis), set in a new Greek seaside factory town, which Spyros had a large hand in building.

Although not entirely successful as a film, Ms. Tsangari does manage to explore the sense of alienation between father and daughter as a reflection of a wider angst in a Mediterranean society that is plugged-in and high-tech but emotionally disconnected from its past.

VENUS NOIRE Abdellatif Kechiche's "Couscous" was pipped at the post for the Golden Lion in 2007 by Ang Lee's unpleasant "Lust, Caution," and the French director's in-competition "Venus Noire" seemed to offer the chance for him to vindicate himself at Venice. But the nearly three-hour film about Saartjie Baartman (Yahima Torres), the so-called Hottentot Venus who was exhibited in public halls in London and theaters and salons in Paris in the early 19th century, was repetitive and disappointing.

The whole spectacle was degrading

at the time, and even if Saartjie received a share of the profits, as it seems she did, herself denying that she was being exploited, she was consistently abused and bullied by her "partners." Mr. Kechiche's taciturn and long-suffering Saartjie gives us little insight into her personality, and while the film makes for profoundly uncomfortable viewing, it fails to convey the imaginative understanding of, for example, Truffaut's "L'Enfant Sauvage."

ESSENTIAL KILLING Jerzy Skolimowski's film opens with the capture of a solitary, unnamed Afghan by U.S. Special Forces soldiers in a remote desert area. He is carried off to a secret facility, tortured and bundled onto a rendition flight, which lands at night in some wintry, snow-bound East European country. But his vehicle then skids off the icy road and the Afghan makes his escape into the forest.

A hunted man, with soldiers and dog teams on the ground and choppers whirring overhead, the Afghan's sheer physical toughness and resourcefulness enable him to keep one step ahead of them in this freezing and hostile environment. Vincent Gallo puts in a superb performance as the Afghan and we are drawn into his desperate plight.

The Polish director has said this is not a political film, and it is all the stronger for its starkness and reserve. But this

brilliantly directed and shot, compelling chase movie is by no means lacking in political and human implications.

VALLANZASCA The Italian bank robber and kidnapper Renato Vallanzasca spent the best part of a decade on the run, being arrested several times but repeatedly escaping detention.

He was finally captured in 1987 and has been in prison ever since, serving four life sentences. Michele Placido's out-of-competition "Vallanzasca" re-

"Essential Killing" is not a political film, says its director, and it is all the stronger for its starkness and reserve.

creates his career, which was nasty, brutish and short.

Born in Milan, Mr. Vallanzasca first drew attention to himself as a kid by freeing circus tigers from their cages. In the 1970s, Mr. Vallanzasca, with a little help from his friends, launched a crime wave in Lombardy and turned himself into a legend for his sheer recklessness and effrontery. The title role is played by the charismatic Kim Rossi Stuart, who also was a co-author of the script.

The movie comes from the school of "La Piovra: Power of the Mafia" to which Ms. Placido has made a major

contribution. These topical, well-scripted and researched, slickly-made and suspenseful television movies have been a huge hit at home and have been successfully exported.

The production values of "Vallanzasca" are equally high, but the film has been accused of glorifying its subject, who was no Robin Hood and was directly and indirectly responsible for a number of killings. Nor does the film give enough sense of the society of those times outside this criminal gang, and the violence, though no doubt reflecting reality, is not for the squeamish.

REIGN OF ASSASSINS Set in fifth-century A.D. China and with dazzling swordplay, balletic acrobatics and a romantic story line, "Reign of Assassins," directed by Su Chao-Pin with John Woo, which had its premiere out of competition, stars the mesmerizing Michelle Yeoh and the handsome and engaging Korean Jung Woo Sung.

Ms. Yeoh plays the former top assassin of the Dark Stone gang, which has been terrorizing the mandarins and ruling the empire from behind the scenes. In a scenario reminiscent of some of the classic film noirs of old, she changes her appearance and with a new identity as Zeng Jing, she retires to Beijing and marries Jiang Ah-Sheng (Jung Woo Sung), an apparently simple, good-hearted fellow who runs a one-man

courier company.

But before long Zeng Jing's past catches up with her and an exciting drama unfolds with some nice twists in the plot, enhanced by exquisite costumes, beautiful settings and cinematography, in the stylish tradition of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" but with witty, inventive new angles and additions.

DETECTIVE DEE Tsui Hark's "Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame" had its premiere, rather surprisingly, in-competition.

Set in the Tang Dynasty at the end of the seventh century A.D., the action takes place on the eve of the coronation of the Empress Wu, the only woman ever to ascend the Chinese throne. The event is to be marked by the completion of a colossal statue of the Buddha, but a mysterious series of deaths, seemingly by spontaneous combustion, is threatening to disrupt the whole affair.

Locked up by the empress eight years before, Detective Dee is rehabilitated and dusted off to investigate. In "Detective Dee" Cecil B. DeMille meets the latest in special effects, with spectacular visual results, but the ancient Chinese sleuth is too busy displaying his martial arts skills to apply much of his vaunted cerebral powers to the case, and the absence of better-rounded characters ultimately leaves a sense of dissatisfaction.

A record-setting flop tries Broadway again, two decades later



Joanna Lumley, Mark Rylance and David Hyde Pierce in this summer's London production of "La Bête," now bound for New York. It closed there after only 40 performances in 1991.

LONDON

"La Bête," a cult satire, is being restaged after a long, checkered history

BY PATRICK HEALY

The actor Mark Rylance, who won a Tony Award in 2008 for the farce "Boeing-Boeing" in large part for his masterly way with words, was at a loss for them this summer as he mulled the incongruous history of another verbally idiosyncratic play, "La Bête."

A satire of high art versus low culture set in 17th-century France, "La Bête" was a record-setting flop on Broadway in 1991 — then went on to win Britain's top theater award for best new comedy the following year. The play soon built a following across the United States, receiv-

ing 25 productions from regional theaters over the years, and became a favorite on college campuses. This summer a revival enjoyed yet another successful run in London, starring Mr. Rylance; that production is heading to Broadway this month, in hopes of proving that New York got it wrong the first time around.

"I don't know what to make of the strange journey this play has had, I really don't," Mr. Rylance said, sitting in the green room of the Comedy Theater here before a matinee. Dressed in the long white smock of his character, Valere, a fantastically lowbrow playwright, Mr. Rylance continued: "Actually, though, I didn't understand the play when I first read it. But in time we found ways into it that excited me. Our audiences seem to get it. And so I'm very curious to see what Broadway makes of it anew."

Written by David Hirson, an American who studied literature at Yale and

Oxford and was making his Broadway debut, "La Bête" (or "the beast," a reference to the egomaniacal Valere) has two distinguishing features: The dialogue is in rhyming couplets, and the play veers early into a self-congratulatory monologue by Valere that lasts 25 minutes (about one-quarter of this revival's running time). The plot centers on an artistic showdown between Valere and the high-minded writer Elomire (played by David Hyde Pierce, of NBC's "Frasier") that is refereed by the royal patron of Elomire and his troupe of actors. Originally that patron was named Prince Conti, but in the revival he is a she, called the Princess, played by Joanna Lumley (Patsy in the British television series "Absolutely Fabulous").

While many shows have died in New York and then developed subsequent cult followings — like the musicals "Anyone Can Whistle" and "Chess" —

"La Bête" is rare among them for now having a shot at transcending its own history on Broadway. The new run begins on Sept. 23.

The 1991 production, in hindsight, was troubled from the start. One of the lead producers, Stuart Ostrow, cast the Tony-winning actor Ron Silver in the central role of Valere in spite of grave doubts that Mr. Silver could pull off the part — something Mr. Ostrow disclosed in a memoir in 2006. Mr. Ostrow ended up firing Mr. Silver during the pre-Broadway run in Boston, and the show came to New York starring the understudy, Tom McGowan, and hampered by a flood of "troubled show" newspaper articles.

Fueling the news media's interest was that the play, for its time, was the most expensive in Broadway history, at \$2 million, and had Andrew Lloyd Webber (of "Cats" and "Phantom of the LA BÊTE, PAGE 15