

Shines Light On The Best Of International Cinema

By David Harris

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Today's moviegoers often have limited choices, picking between the latest comic book adaptation, the sequel to that very same comic book adaptation, a reboot of a product based on an older product, or some combination thereof.

Fortunately for Angelinos, the AFI Fest has traditionally followed a doctrine lost on many studio executives -- a good story goes a long way.

The 26th iteration of the AFI Fest showcased soon-to-be-released mainstream films such as Steven Spielberg's "Lincoln," the directorial debut of actor Dustin Hoffman in "Quartet," the favorites of guest artistic director Bernardo Bertolucci, including F.W. Murnau's classic silent "Sunrise," and a robust world cinema section featuring some of the best storytelling from South Korea, Europe, South America and Africa.

What follows is a summary of some of the more compelling films from the 2012 AFI Film Fest, which ran recently in Hollywood: "Tey"

American slam poet star Saul Williams gives an unexpected turn as a Senegalese everyman embarking on the surrealist of journeys on the last day of his life. The reason for his demise is as mysterious as a traditional narrative in this stream-of-consciousness film, where the viewer is asked to let go of rationality. It's largely a visual poem peppered with stark imagery (director Alan Gomis and DP Christelle Fournier deserve immense props for their compositions). The meandering nature of the piece aside, there's angst lurking beneath each frame as one man searches for unanswerable questions.

"The Hunt"

One of the more harrowing films coming out of the Dogme 95 movement was Thomas Vinterberg's "The Celebration" in 1998. Along with fellow Danish filmmaker Lars Van Trier, these brazen auteurs created a template for stripped-down filmmaking (or video-making in most cases) that

emphasized character and confrontation. Vinterberg seems to have settled into the role of a more mature director who, while honoring his agitprop roots, has fully embraced the artifice



The Impossible

of drama. And drama is rife when an elementary school teacher (played here by the terrifically reticent Mads Mikkelsen) finds himself at the center of the gravest of accusations.



The Hunt

"The Sapphires"

Easily the feel-good movie of the festival, and a safe audience pleaser slated for theatrical release from the Weinstein Company, the story follows a 1960s girl group made up of Australian Aboriginal women (three sisters and a cousin) who bust through Australia's racial barriers and land a gig -- a goodwill tour in Vietnam to entertain the troops. The music is infectious, all classic soul hits, however a more streamlined screenplay about overcoming the odds could have made the journey feel more

earned. Comedic actor Chris O'Dowd shines as the hipster doofus manager eternally stuck in his own whiteness.

"The Central Park Five"

While documentaries by Ken Burns can seem relegated to America's past, this think-piece about the 1989 Central Park jogger rape case feels daring and immediate. Perhaps it's in Burns's examination of false confessions, or the way the film treats its subjects as living, breathing characters in the wrong place at the wrong time. Burns trademark style is on display but it never overrides the content. Instead, it deftly brings to surface a miscarriage of justice that should have audiences questioning the way hysteria and hype influence our flawed criminal justice system.

"Simon Killer"

Trying to get a beat on the character in Antonio Campos's new film is an exercise in slipperiness, especially considering lead Brady Corbet's snake-like performance as a recent American college grad who drifts to Paris and falls for a sympathetic hooker. This bristling character study of what is essentially a seductive sociopath keeps its cards close to its chest until a clever -- if not a little contrived -- Act III reveal.

"The Impossible"

One of the more buzz-friendly films in the Special Screening section (all of which have wider distribution); the story focuses on a family swept up in the turmoil of the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami. Stars Naomi Watts and Ewan McGregor anchor the action and perhaps spawn an entirely new genre -- The Emotionally Truthful Disaster Movie. Spain's relative newcomer Juan Antonio Bayona directs with a nuanced vision (and thankfully largely avoids the pitfalls of CGI), when it comes to both the large forces beyond the characters as well as the smallest of naturalistic tendencies of two people caught in life's storm.

Also worthy: "Pieta," "Amour," "Barbara," "In Another Country," "Holy Motors," "Rust and Bone," and "West of Memphis."