

American: The Bill Hicks Story

Dir: Matt Harlock, Paul Thomas USA 2010 107 mins Cert: CLUB

Language: English

Available: September

Format: Digital only

Libertarian, outlaw, shaman, philosopher, romantic, preacher, genius...Bill Hicks was always something other than a comedian. His death from cancer in 1994 deprived the world of arguably the most iconic and probing voice in American culture of the period, and it's hard to find the words to do him justice.

Given the fact Hicks was much more celebrated in the UK than he was at home, it is perhaps fitting that it's British filmmakers Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas who step up to pay him his dues. Cleverly shunning a conventional talking-heads approach, *American: The Bill Hicks Story* uses an innovative animation technique, some rare and previously unseen performance footage, and testimonies only from the people who knew him best, his family and close friends, to create a deeply perceptive, fittingly honest celebration of the man occasionally known as Goatboy.

From his teenage years, when he would have to sneak out of his parents home to appear at the Austin comedy club where he first attracted attention, through to being infamously censored on The Late Show with David Letterman, this is as complete and definitive a biography as there is available. The frequent stand-up clips serve to illustrate why Hicks remains so revered and relevant: he was so funny, so fearless and always right. - *Michael Hayden / BFI Times London Film Festival 2010*

Father of my Children, The

Le père de mes enfants

Dir: Mia Hansen-Løve France 2009 111 mins Cert: 12A

Dir: Louis-Do de Lencquesaing, Chiara Caselli, Alice de Lencquesaing, Eric Elmosnino

Language: French

Available: September

Format: Digital only

Balancing a successful professional career with a full and happy private life is a familiar challenge for most. In *Le Père de mes enfants*, Mia Hansen-Løve takes this commonplace dilemma and turns it into a loving but bittersweet portrait of a family whose world comes apart under these conflicting strains.

Grégoire (Louis-Do de Lencquesaing) is a happily wedded father of three young girls, an independent film producer who somehow manages to juggle the never-ending demands of his company with his domestic responsibilities. Married to his cellphone and chain-smoking his way through endless rounds of meetings and crises, he maintains his sense of humour despite incessant demands from the difficult Swedish auteur he has always wanted to produce and the arrival of a group from Korea doing preproduction work on a new film. In addition to massaging artistic egos, his job involves trying to keep one step ahead of his bank – and financing is always an interminable headache. When his wife, Sylvia (Chiara Caselli), insists that he join the family on an Italian holiday, Grégoire finds he can no longer maintain any sane balance. Returning to Paris, he confronts the biggest challenge of his career – with unexpected consequences.

Forced into making a tragic and irrevocable decision, Grégoire leaves his family and friends to pick up the pieces. This is where the film, under Hansen-Løve's firm guiding hand, accelerates in resonance and emotive power. Her world shattered, Sylvia struggles to both hold her family together and manage the artistic legacy that her husband fought so hard to carve out for himself. Drawing inspiration from the life of the well-known French producer Humbert Balsan, Hansen-Løve, a former actor, elicits powerful performances not just from de Lencquesaing and Caselli as the married couple, but also from those playing their three children and their extended family of friends and colleagues.

Neatly divided into two halves, each centred respectively on husband and wife, *Le Père de mes enfants* confirms Hansen-Løve as a superb portraitist of family, and she adeptly illustrates the complex web of emotions and dependencies that come into daily play. - *Piers Handling / Toronto International Film Festival 2009*

Winner - Special Jury Prize, Un Certain Regard, Cannes Film Festival 2009

Lourdes

Dir: Jessica Hausner **Austria, France** **2009** **96 mins** **Cert: G**

Starring: Sylvie Testud, Lea Seydoux, Bruno Todeschini, Elina Lowensohn, Gerhard Liebmann, Linde Prelog

Language: French

Available: September

Format: Digital only

A cool and firmly ambitious film from Austria's Jessica Hausner, *Lourdes* is an accomplished work which radiates intelligence. Setting her story on a religious pilgrimage to the French Catholic shrine sets many expectations, but Hausner neither belittles nor reveres her subjects, and as a result *Lourdes* could be looking at a wider commercial reach. After *Hotel* and *Lovely Rita*, Hausner certainly confirms herself here as an original voice.

While its tone, slowish pacing and general approach is art-house, there is much in here to attract a wider, even religious crowd, and *Lourdes* will have screenings at Lourdes itself, where it was shot, and a place Hausner approaches, crab-like, from the safety of the formica-table-topped, marble-floored hotel where her pilgrims are staying.

Opening slowly and formally as waitresses set the canteen tables to the strains of a distant Ave Maria, *Lourdes* shows the pilgrims slowly entering the room to eat, some on wheelchairs, accompanied by officers and volunteers of the Order of Malta. (Around 1.5 million people visit the Marian shrine every year, many disabled, nearly all looking for a miracle).

But wheelchair-bound Christine (Testud), a rigid MS sufferer, is here "because it's the only way I get out," she confesses to young volunteer Maria (Lea Seydoux). They both notice Order of Malta officer Kuno (Bruno Todeschini), and are in turn all noticed by strict, otherworldly head nun Cecile (Elina Lowensohn).

Christine shares a room with the solitary, devoted Catholic Madame Hartl (Linde Prelog),

who comes to view the young girl as her own mission, as, to a certain extent, does Sister Cecile.

As they approach Lourdes, which Hausner films in a straightforward, restrained, manner, the film begins to circle more and more directly the subject of miracles and faith. Hausner tackles a heavy subject in a delicate manner, and there's a comic vein running through Lourdes which is rewarding, adding greatly to the overall experience. Ultimately, the obvious questions – what is a miracle? Why him and not me? – are tackled unexpectedly with all Hausner's characters performing an intricate dance.

The performances here are uniformly good, led by Testud but extending to smaller cameos from two gossiping women, the priest, the volunteers and the little cabal of team leaders who meet every evening to play cards and drink wine and joke about Jesus.

Hausner with DoP Martin Gschlacht (also producing) displays a sure visual sensibility, with sparse framing and a pared-back, restrained approach. Nothing in *Lourdes*, from the souvenir shop to the stations of the cross and the candlelit Masses, is presented as you might expect. There is no real soundtrack, apart from the odd devotional hymn, a small jolt of Bach and the final, unforgettable, pilgrims farewell dance.

- *Fionnuala Halligan / Screen International*

Winner – FIPRESCI Prize, Venice Film Festival 2009

Milk of Sorrow

La teta asustada

Dir: Claudia Llosa Spain, Peru **2009** **94 mins** **Cert: CLUB**

Starring: Magaly Solier, Susi Sánchez, Efraín Solís, Marino Ballón, Delci Heredia

Language: Spanish

Available: September

Format: Digital only

Fausta is ill with a disease contracted from her mother's breast milk known as "the milk of sorrow". However, this is not a sickness caused by bacteria or infection: it is a condition that only affects those women in Peru who were abused or raped during the years of terrorist struggle.

Although this horrific period is now history, Fausta is nonetheless a living reminder of this time. Her sickness is called fear – and it has robbed her of her soul. But then, when her mother suddenly dies, Fausta is forced to face her fears. The overpowering nature of these fears, and the desperate lengths to which Fausta will go to assuage them is revealed by her biggest secret: in order to bar loathsome intruders from entering her body she has inserted a potato into her vagina as a kind of antibacterial 'defence shield'. However, her mother's death unleashes unexpected events that change Fausta's life dramatically, as well as the lives of others involved. Fausta now sets out on a journey – a journey that will lead her out of her fear and into freedom.

Peruvian director Claudia Llosa's film addresses a dark era of her country's history. Established in 2001, the Peruvian 'commission for truth and reconciliation' (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, CVR) has registered almost 70,000 murder cases, as well as countless rapes, abductions and other human rights abuses in the period from 1980 to the year 2000. - *Berlin Film Festival Programme 2009*

Winner - Golden Bear, Berlin Film Festival 2009

Mother

Madeo

Dir: Bong Joon-ho South Korea 2009 128 mins Cert: CLUB

Starring: Kim Hye-ja, Weon Bin, Jin Gu

Language: Korean

Available: November

Format: Digital only

Maternal instinct exerts fearsome force in *Mother*, when a woman finds that no one but herself can clear her son of murder. Bong Joon-ho's top opus zooms in on one character with smothering intensity to examine the primal quality of motherhood. At the same time, it is a superb murder mystery, with twists coming thick and fast yet always at the right moments.

Mother confirms Bong's prodigious talent in bending any genre to serve his own idiosyncratic vision. Made with less commercial considerations than the monster movie *The Host*, his boxoffice smash in Korea, this more personal work may alienate some popular audiences, but critical accolades will give it a boost. Overseas marketing aiming beyond the art house may emphasize the script's cleverly plotted detective yarn, which is paced like a Hitchcock suspense thriller.

Hye-ja (Kim Hye-ja) runs a herbal apothecary, and performs unlicensed acupuncture to make ends meet. She is constantly on the look out for her son Do-joon (Won Bin), who easily gets in trouble because of his mentally challenged condition. When high school girl Ah-jung is found dead and dangling halfway from a rooftop, incriminating evidence points to Do-joon as the killer.

Neither the district police whom Hye-ja routinely grovels to, nor the lawyer whom Hye-ja must pay through the nose for, show any sympathy or patience to Do-joon's case. Frustrated, Hye-ja decides to find the killer herself. Her biggest suspect is Do-joon's hoodlum buddy Jin-tae. However, she soon learns that there is no one she can trust in her close-knit village.

Although the small town setting and sex crime plot suggests Bong is revisiting his own *Memories of Murder* territory, *Mother* is less concerned with capturing the mindset of a milieu or community, or to criticize ineffective social systems than *Memories*. Bong is more fascinated with the glory and misery of Hye-ja -- initially as an embodiment of the indomitable human spirit as she refuses to surrender to circumstances, then gradually as an elemental force of nature, as inhuman and destructive as the monster in *The Host* (which, incidentally, dwells in dark waters like a Grendel figure).

This is expressed with a stylized film language that he forges with more confidence than ever before. Looming close-ups of Hye-ja stretched across the screen both mesmerize and unnerve. Other times, wide shots of endless fields or misty mountains frame her as a speck in the landscape -- implying both her insignificance, and her affiliation with nature.

TV actress Kim Hye-ja, long-accustomed to playing overbearing Korean mothers,

commands the screen, though she sometimes goes overboard with too many mannerisms in a larger-than-life performance. Won Bin exudes guileless charm as the dim-witted son, and is almost unrecognizable from his usual heartthrob image.

The film's use of sound, from the ominous rustling of leaves to the menacing sounds of Hye-ja's herb chopper, is more effective than any music score. The appearance of not more than two persons in most frames, and the stark palette of primary colors of doleful smoky blue and petulant rusty red create a sustained mood of claustrophobia and discomfort. – *Maggie Lee, The Hollywood Reporter*

No Greater Love

Dir: Michael Whyte **UK** **2009** **100 mins** **Cert: G**

Available: September

Format: Digital only

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" – so states John 15:13. The lifestyle depicted here, however, has rather more to do with laying down one's friends for one's life: sacrificing ordinary comforts and social stimulations in the name of an austere, restricted and fully contemplative existence.

Michael Whyte's unique and quietly inspiring documentary is the product of a labour of love: he campaigned for ten years for permission to film in the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity in Notting Hill. This monastery is home to a cloistered order of Carmelite nuns, into whose distinct and distant world Whyte's film respectfully dips. What is revealed is not so much a group of people hiding from the world, but rather a lifestyle that engages with the problems of existence in a radically different way. In place of intimate relationships, there is an intense and often turbulent connection with God – characterised not necessarily by serene constancy, as one nun explains, but by inner tussles and painful periods of doubt. In place of the manic hustle and bustle of outside life, there is the challenge of facing oneself, all the time, soberly and in silence. The nuns are silent for most of each day, speaking among themselves for only one hour in the morning and one in the evening; these brief social occasions, as we glimpse, are fairly noisy affairs.

Yet Whyte's style is not necessarily to bask in the strange glamour of silence, or the nuns' exotic removal from the world, in the manner of Philip Groening's mesmerising study of French Carthusian monks, *Into Great Silence*. Nor is he hellbent on uncovering uncomfortable secrets or hypocrisies behind the habit. Rather, Whyte approaches the monastery as a busy, industrious place, and the nuns' work on the spirit as almost a practical matter; as one sister points out, it is the nuns' function to use their time in praying for those whose lives are too busy to allow it. Consequently his camera is often quick and reactive, emphasising the constant activity inside the monastery as well as his own somewhat furtive presence within its walls. The result is an unexpectedly lively and intellectually challenging approach to an alternative way of life, the details of which are customarily shrouded by either awed mystique or easy assumptions.

- *Edinburgh International Film Festival 2009*

Revanche

Dir: Götz Spielmann Germany 2008 122 mins Cert: CLUB
Johannes Krisch, Irina Potapenko, Andreas Lust and Ursula Strauss
Language: German
Available: September
Format: Digital only

Anyone who's seen director Götz Spielmann's *Antares* knows he's a director with a style that foregrounds analytical precision, both visually and in the way his plots unfold. *Revanche* ("revenge"), which garnered Spielmann the Best European Film award in the Panorama sidebar at Berlin, is a perfect vehicle for his unique talents--a suspense-filled thriller, full of jarring angularities, perfectly composed scenes and dollops of steamy sex.

Alex (a stellar Johannes Krisch) is a disgruntled, tightly wound ex-con working in a Viennese brothel. His only respite is his love for Ukrainian prostitute Tamara (Irina Potapenko) who reluctantly plies her trade in the same brothel. Out in the sun-dappled countryside, couple Susanne (Ursula Strauss) and inexperienced cop Robert (Andreas Lust) have just moved into their new home. Two couples in seemingly diametrical opposition are brought into one another's spheres after a deadly botched robbery sets Spielmann's taut tale in motion...

The pleasures here are threefold: the intelligently constructed screenplay that never tips its hand to the viewer; the gorgeous compositions and rural locations filmed by Spielmann and cinematographer Martin Gschlacht; and, above all, the performances of Krisch et al., who ground their characters in the milieux they have found themselves in, make them human and believable, and then demonstrate that insurmountable differences are not necessarily so.

- *Vancouver International Film Festival 2008*

Winner - Europa Cinemas Label, Berlin Film Festival 2008

Vincere

Dir: Marco Bellocchio Italy 2009 128 mins Cert: 15A
Starring: Giovanna Mezzogiorno, Filippo Timi, Fausto Russo Alesi, Michela Cescon, Piergiorgio Bellocchio,
Language: Italian
Available: September
Format: Digital only

Mussolini's early life provides the grist for a major examination of the dictator in Marco Bellocchio's tough-edged but brilliantly directed film. With decades of cinematic experience behind him, as well as a filmography that includes some of the most important post-war Italian films ever made, Bellocchio is well prepared for this challenge. *Vincere* stands as a model for anyone setting out to capture the flavour and essence of a famed historical figure.

Choosing to focus on Mussolini as a young man, before he became Il Duce, allows Bellocchio to grapple with some little-known details about the dictator's life, indeed the great secret of his past: early on, he had a wife and a son, both written out of the historical record and denied recognition. She was the fiery, erotic Ida Dalsler, a woman

Mussolini met in 1907 when he was a young socialist provocateur. Seven years later, they became lovers, and her overwhelming passion for the young journalist helped him start his own newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. She sold her possessions to provide the financing for the paper, thereby launching the career of the aspiring politician. In 1915, she bore him a son, also named Benito, and the couple married. But within a very short time, she discovered to her shock that her husband had married another woman, Rachele Guidi. Henceforth, Ida was kept at a distance, eventually held under house arrest and finally thrown into an insane asylum, where she petitioned Mussolini and the pope, demanding that her marriage be recognized.

Bellocchio superbly dramatizes this story while skilfully weaving astounding archival footage into his narrative, moving from the intimate, hot-blooded relationship between Ida and Mussolini to the stirring newsreels of the period as their relationship disintegrates. The film has been a revelation for Italians, not only confronting them with the image of the Duce – seen strutting in full-screen bravado – but also provoking comparisons, vigorously denied by Bellocchio, between Mussolini and Italy's current prime minister, Berlusconi. Even if inadvertent, this juxtaposition gives one pause for thought, but Bellocchio is far from a sensationalist grabbing the moment. This is serious, intelligent filmmaking of the highest order. - *Piers Handling / Toronto International Film Festival*

White Material

Dir: Claire Denis **France** **2009** **102 mins** **Cert: 15A**
Starring: Isabelle Huppert, Isaach De Bankolé, Christophe Lambert, Nicolas Duvauchelle and William Nadyam
Language: French
Available: October
Format: Digital only

Claire Denis' films aspire to a crystalline purity. Even when packed with the stuff of social and political unrest – war, murder, racial tension, unemployment, refugees, families in crisis – they give the sense of having dropped, in the course of their elaboration, whatever 'message' they may have intended at the outset. What remains, in the end, is a cryptic diagram of bodies and desires, environments and landscapes, confrontations and evasions, things said and unsaid. At its best (*Beau travail*, *Vendredi soir*, *35 Shots of Rum*), Denis' cinema is compelling in its skeletal purity, beckoning viewers to enter the work and fill the gaps with their own imaginations. When less successful (as in *Nenette and Boni*), the films can seem thin and strained.

White Material is at once an extremely physical and utterly abstract political melodrama. Working for the first time with novelist Marie N'Diaye rather than her usual script collaborator Jean-Pol Fargeau, Denis deliberately leaves obscure the exact year in which the action unfolds, or even the precise location in Africa. The situation that is so vividly sketched here – rebels versus militia, as workaday citizens flee for their lives and are often caught in the crossfire – would appear to be an amalgam of many moments in contemporary history: Rwanda, Angola, Indonesia... The conflict is, to use a much-abused word, universal; Denis aims for a level of generalised metaphor, but always through very precise, concrete details. She is careful, too, not to take sides, at least on the most obvious level of the dramatisation; only in fleeting moments like the final shot

(when a soldier secretes the red beret which is the memoir-token of the rebel leader known as 'the Boxer') do we feel her natural sympathy for the rebels emerge.

Of course, Africa has special and specific significance for Denis, as announced by her debut feature *Chocolat* (1988), which took off from autobiographical experience. The continent's culture and its transnational mutations form a constant presence and reference in her work. In *White Material*, as always, Denis takes an oblique rather than frontal angle; she truly puts the 'post' into post-colonial, as the primal scene of colonial encounter and trauma is never quite as intriguing to her as the often subtle aftershocks of a faded imperial expansion. Hence the story here – and certainly the power-play of white dominating black – is virtually over as soon as it begins, the 'white material' (the title refers to a cigarette lighter) already in tatters. We first see Maria (Isabelle Huppert) alone on a road, already divested of whatever colonial aura she once may have possessed, and from that point the action (such as it is) is a bleak body-countdown to total devastation. Yet the actual depiction of violence is restrained, unspectacular, almost Bressonian; blood doesn't burst from sudden wounds, but seeps slowly through clothes, or is listlessly bathed in by children.

Maria might seem to be a distant relative of Bette Davis in any number of 1930s and '40s melodramas, or of the heroine of Doris Lessing's classic 1950 novel *The Grass Is Singing*, which Huppert initially wanted Denis to adapt. (It was filmed by Michael Raeburn in 1981, with Karen Black.) *White Material* focuses on Maria's determination and perseverance, but it never romanticises her. Maria's stubborn wilfulness and her blindness to the social situation around her – not to mention its horrible effects on everyone close to her – create a bubble around this character; instead of empathising with her, we are invited to take up a critical distance.

Curiously, the ultimate tone of the piece, at least on an intellectual plane, is closer to Richard Fleischer's much-derided slavery epic *Mandingo* (1975) than it is to most melodramas centred on plucky women; in a Denis diagram, typically, we watch all the figures flail around inside the contradictions of their personal and social positions. An emblematic character, in this respect, is Maria's father-in-law Henri (Michel Subor), who, while representing the imperial patriarch taking up space in a foreign land, is an oddly passive, even benign presence (frequently seen near-naked) who speaks of Africa as the only true home he has ever known; indeed, all references to France in the film conjure it as some ghostly, unimaginable, lost point of origin for these 'white materials'.

Ultimately, Denis presents a 'history of violence' that has more in common with *Lord of the Flies* (novel or films) or Philippe Grandrieux's paroxysmic *La Vie nouvelle* (2002) than with any Hollywood melodrama past or present. Here violence is a contagious, dehumanising force that sweeps everybody up in its psychotic madness, especially the troubled young Manuel (Nicolas Duvauchelle incarnating a character who in the 1990s would have been played for Denis by Grégoire Colin). At the symbolic centre of this maelstrom is the fascinating, mostly silent, largely inactive, brooding figure of the Boxer (Isaach De Bankolé), who – like Ben Gazzara in one of Denis' favourite films, John Cassavetes' *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* – seems to be virtually a dead man from the first moment we glimpse him, his life draining away. He is in the process of passing over into the realm of myth, as a similarly wounded Johnny Depp did in Jarmusch's *Dead Man*.

Confident but somehow never completely satisfying, *White Material* seems to suffer from a tension between its status as a star vehicle (though Huppert is superb) and Denis' usual ensemble-driven proclivities. Some of the film's most powerful scenes – such as Manuel's brutalisation at the hands of two kids – come when the plot wanders away from Maria's point-of-view; Denis' relief at being able to stage her usual explorations off the linear track of the story is palpable. Yet these divagations never quite weave the sort of polyphony (in both image and sound) that – at its height (eg in *Beau travail*) – brings Denis close in artistry to Terrence Malick; the fuller pattern that might have emerged from a freer treatment feels shrunken, truncated. An early scene is indicative of both the promise and the problems inherent in the project: Maria on a motorbike joins a long line of such movement images in Denis' work, but the depiction of the character's exhilaration (hands thrust in the air, wind in her face) tends to rather weary cliché.

Although *White Material* achieves the director's trademark dreamy fluidity – coaxing even the worst sticklers for narrative clarity to go with the flow and ignore strict demarcations between past and present, reality and fantasy – its structure isn't half as daring as, say, that of her 2004 film *The Intruder* (*L'intrus*), where (as Raúl Ruiz would put it) the images created the narrative, rather than vice versa. Denis does employ the casual, even brutal form of exposition that suits her best: crucial information is conveyed on the fly, in glimpsed details (the survival kits strewn on the ground after a helicopter passes) or mysteriously brief, unanchored insertions of voiceover commentary (as when two unidentified locals discuss the white population).

However, like all her films, *White Material* repays repeat viewings, and grows with them. Not only do the more obscure or offhand pieces of the plot make more sense a second or third time around, but the already thick mood deepens and expands. Denis is a master of rhythm – here, an oceanic, slow throb that's remarkably sustained over feature length – and of the fusion of image and music. The score by her frequent collaborators Tindersticks is reminiscent of Nick Cave and Warren Ellis' music for John Hillcoat's savage Australian Western *The Proposition*: violin, harmonium and plucked strings pursue a hypnotic, cyclical succession of chords.

Both in its overall structure and its incidental details, *White Material* admirably conveys the vision of a society in disarray, flying apart at every seam. In Denis' Africa, there really is no place like home. – *Adrian Martin, Sight & Sound*