

**35 Shots of Rum***35 rhums***Dir: Claire Denis      France, Germany      2008      100 minutes      Cert: CLUB****Starring: Alex Descas, Mati Diop, Gregoire Colin, Nicole Dogue****Language: French, German****Available: January**

A small, subtle film whose very simplicity makes it a winner, *35 Shots of Rum* describes a father and daughter's love for each other, as the time for the girl to leave the parental nest grows near. Claire Denis, not always an easy director, is in top form here directing an almost all-black cast with grace and delicacy. This is French art house cinema at its unpretentious best; one can only ponder why it was screened out of competition in Venice.

The story takes its time opening on a long, wordless train sequence as Lionel (Alex Descas) and Jo (Mati Diop) make their separate ways home after work. Their tender relationship is evident as they share a meal in their cramped apartment on the far outskirts of Paris. They are on close terms with neighbours Gabrielle (Nicole Dogué), a taxi driver with a long-standing crush on widower Lionel, and Noé (Gregoire Colin), a cool-looking guy with a cat who is often away on business. The love story between Jo and Noe is so understated it's barely visible, until the whole gang heads off to a concert together and, while they dance in a bar, their feelings are revealed in front of Jo's father.

An excellent cast fills in the blanks of the slight storyline, making more narrative superfluous. It is almost a shock when, toward the end, something out of the ordinary happens: Jo and Lionel take a trip to Germany to visit the grave of the dead mother and stop by to see Jo's self-centered aunt (Ingrid Caven.) The scene comes late to delve into the past, but it does make an original bridge to the film's typically understated conclusion.

Descas is a monument to paternal dignity as he gently, and against his feelings, pushes the reluctant Jo out of their comfortable life together. At the same time he confronts his own aging as he sees his life as a train conductor reflected in the unhappy retirement of his friend René (Julieth Mars.) Colin, flaunting the impish charm of a French Johnny Depp, makes a fine pair with Diop, the soap-and-water girl next door with the serious eyes. A modern soundtrack performed by the Tindersticks matches Agnès Godard's stylish cinematography. - *Deborah Young, The Hollywood Reporter*

**Anything For Her***Pour Elle***Dir: Fred Cavayé      France      2008      96 minutes      Cert: 15A****Starring: Olivier Marchal, Vincent Lindon, Diane Kruger****Language: French****Available: January**

The things a man will do for a beautiful woman. Take Diane Kruger's Lisa. She's the kind of ravisher most men would commit murder to stay married to. Not only is she stunning, but she happily jumps on her husband in the lift, just before they relieve the babysitter of their toddler Oscar (Lancelot Roch).

Little wonder then, her middle-class teacher husband Julien (Vincent Lindon) will do anything to bust her out of jail when she is suddenly yanked out of her family life for a

murder she does not commit.

Lindon, with his crinkled head and heavy-lidded eyes, looks like a lizard in a leather jacket with heat-stroke. Perhaps he doesn't fancy his chances of improving on Lisa, so he puts the prison under surveillance and concocts a plan to get her out.

Director Fred Cavayé's debut is a reasonably taut thriller with shades of Hitchcock. Some of the plot's cause-effect is on the side of forced and the French police are able to draw connections at bizarre speed. Cavayé keeps things interesting though by thickening the moral stew. Julien is warned by an ex-con he will "be burned" by going down the path towards criminality. In his desperation — time is ticking before Lisa is moved to another prison — he becomes a robber and a murderer. It's a rugged looking film, low on frills but gets the job done. - *Paul Lynch, The Sunday Tribune*

### **Black Balloon, The**

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**Dir: Elissa Down      2008      Australia      97 minutes      Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Rhys Wakefield, Luke Ford, Toni Colette, Erik Thomson, Nathin Butler, Lisa Kowalski**  
**Language: English**  
**Available: January**

Thomas is about to turn sixteen and start yet another new school but his problems are a little more complex than just being the new boy. His older brother Charlie is autistic and suffers from ADHD, so Thomas is often forced to be more keeper than playmate to him. And with their Mother under doctor's orders to rest in her final months of pregnancy, Thomas' responsibilities to look after his brother are only increasing.

*The Black Balloon* handles Thomas' resentment of his helpless elder brother, a selfish but very human reaction, with no little skill and sympathy, thanks to a sensitive script and a great performance by Rhys Wakefield. Toni Collette, meanwhile, turns in a fine measured performance as the boy's mother, Maggie, struggling to cope with the vicissitudes of life in suburbia as the conflict between the two sons threatens to tear her family apart. Playing Thomas' first love Jackie, Gemma Ward- whom director Elissa Downs cast in her first role in 2001's *Pink Pyjamas*, and who is far better known as a model than actress - brings a sweetness to proceedings which balances the harsh realities elsewhere in the film.

So often films featuring characters with learning disabilities are either over-sentimental or overly tragic but here, there is an irrepressible joy for this family, who just get on with life. Charlie's physical strength and wilful determination are both challenging and potentially threatening (scenes between Charlie and Thomas' girlfriend are deliberately tense) but this is essentially a hopeful and optimistic story where love and kindness can tame, or at least restrain. - *Edinburgh Film Festival 2008*

**Blue Eyelids***Párpados azules*

**Dir: Ernesto Contreras Mexico 2007 98 minutes Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Cecilia Suárez, Enrique Arreola, Ana Ofelia Murguía, Tiaré Scanda, Luisa Huertas**  
**Language: Spanish**  
**Available: January**

Boy-meets-girl is the oldest story in the cinema, and yet this gem of a film from Mexico shows that it can always be made to live again. Ernesto Contreras's debut feature finds its own kind of heightened, dreamy realism, a kind that skirts the frontier of reverie and hallucination in one direction, and that of gloomy disillusion in another; but it is always down to earth on the most down-to-earth of subjects: love, sex, loneliness and the dating game. The tone is seductively elusive: mysterious and serio-comic and yet with a robust kind of frankness about what is at stake for each party on beginning a relationship

Cecilia Suárez gives a tremendous performance as Marina, who works at a garment factory making uniforms for maids, nurses, air stewards, etc; owned by Lulita (Ana Ofelia Murguía), a somewhat autocratic old lady with a penchant for tiny caged birds. Contreras brings these creatures into metaphorical alignment with timid Marina, emphatically enough to let us suspect, for a moment, that Marina is a dream the old woman is having about her younger self. Marina wins a prize in an office competition rather grandly sponsored by Lulita: a luxury beach holiday for two. But she has no one to go with, and it is at this moment that she is accosted in a cafe by Victor, played by Enrique Arreola, who claims to be an old school friend. For the life of her, Marina cannot remember Victor at all - and yet he seems pleasant and personable, and Marina's prize has brought to a crisis the question of her own loneliness. Might Victor be a candidate for her holiday? Tentatively, they begin going out.

*Blue Eyelids* is great at showing the pure awkwardness of the first date. Happy and excited, Marina and Victor go dancing at a nightclub, but there is a mix-up over their table and some drinks they ordered, and the atmosphere suddenly goes sour and even desolate, like a mysterious chemical reaction. On such tiny things turns the mood of a fledgling romance: it is so delicate and vulnerable, and yet it is precisely this volatility and insubstantiality that makes it liable to alchemise into something blissful. Victor and Marina are two people who know next to nothing about each other, and perhaps not much more about themselves, and they are on the verge of a great risk. What a humane treat this lovely little film is: a pinsharp cine-poem of romance.

- Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*

*Winner - Special Jury Prize, Sundance Film Festival 2008*

**Broken Embraces***Los abrazos rotos*

**Dir: Pedro Almodóvar Spain 2009 127 minutes Cert: 15A**  
**Starring: Penelope Cruz, Lluís Homar, Blanca Portillo, Jose Luis Gomez, Ruben Ochandiano, Tamar Novas**  
**Language: Spanish**  
**Available: January**

A man writes, lives and loves in darkness. Fourteen years before, he was in a brutal car crash on the island of Lanzarote. In the accident, he didn't lose only his sight, he also

lost Lena, the love of his life. This man uses two names: Harry Caine, a playful pseudonym with which he signs his literary works, stories and scripts, and Mateo Blanco, his real name, but a name he has tried hard to forget.

Today, Harry lives thanks to the scripts he writes and to the help he gets from his faithful former production manager, Judit García, and from Diego, her son. One night Diego has an accident and Harry takes care of him (when his mother is out of town). During the first nights of his convalescence, Diego asks him about his time as Mateo Blanco. Harry finds that he can't refuse and he tells Diego what happened fourteen years before with the idea of entertaining him, just as a father tells his child a story so that he'll fall asleep.

Almodavar's story is dominated by jealousy, the abuse of power, treachery and a guilt complex. A moving and terrible tale, the most expressive image of which is the photo of two lovers embracing, torn into a thousand pieces. -*Galway Film Fleadh 2009*

### **Burma VJ : Reporting From a Closed Country**

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**Dir: Anders Østergaard    Denmark    2008    85 mins    Cert: CLUB**  
**Language: Burmese / English**  
**Available: Now**

Director Anders Østergaard brings us close to Burma's video journalists in this remarkable documentary. Filming covertly, and risking their lives in the process, the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) smuggle their footage out of the country and have it broadcast back into Burma via satellite, providing free images to international media outlets. When, in September 2007, Buddhist monks lead a massive uprising, VJ Joshua is thrown into the role of tactician, coordinating a group of undercover reporters. With foreign TV crews banned from entering the country, it is left to Joshua and his crew to document the events, keeping the revolution alive on TV screens all over the world. – *Irish Film Institute Brochure*

### **Chéri**

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**Dir: Stephen Frears    UK    2008    100 minutes    Cert: 15A**  
**Starring: Michelle Pfeiffer, Kathy Bates, Rupert Friend, Felicity Jones, Frances Tomelty, Anita Pallenberg, Harriet Walter,**  
**Language: English**  
**Available: January**

Stephen Frears has followed *The Queen* with *Chéri*, a period adaptation of a Colette novel that reunites him with writer Christopher Hampton and actress Michelle Pfeiffer exactly twenty years since the release of *Dangerous Liaisons*. With this sober evocation of belle époque Paris, Frears and Hampton walk a difficult line between seriousness and amusement, suitable décor and mere decoration, but they emerge with a satisfying, if disposable, portrait of love bought, found and lost among the rarefied courtesan circle of early-twentieth-century France.

The 'Cheri' of the title is Fred Peloux (Rupert Friend), a pretty, vain young man of hollow cheekbones and exquisite dress and the son of wealthy former courtesan Madame Peloux (Kathy Bates), a woman who long ago accepted that age brings with it changes to both body and beauty – the twin assets of her trade. It's through his mother's social

circle – a fun bunch who celebrate the finer things in life but endlessly fear the loss of looks and wealth – that he meets Lea (Pfeiffer), another courtesan, whose beauty is far from diminished, despite Madame Peloux’s constant comments about her wrinkles and the increasing elasticity of her skin.

Defying the difference in age, Fred and Lea fall in love and enjoy a six-year affair but part when Madame Peloux arranges a marriage for her son – partly out of spite, partly out of avarice – with Edmee (Felicity Jones), a 20-year-old innocent who comes with a significant dowry. Each struggles to put the relationship behind them: she decamps to a Biarritz hotel and woos a chinless bit of fluff; he shirks marriage and dabbles in opium. But a final stab at reconciliation throws their essential differences into relief.

There’s a playful tone to Frears’s film – helped, surprisingly, by the sound of Frears’s own, deep, knowing voice on the film’s narration – and some of the scenes of the wider cast, especially those involving Bates, have an air of Oscar Wilde to them: characters trade in polite put-downs and subtle one-upmanship while maintaining an air of respectability. The frisson between Bates and Pfeiffer is entertaining, as is the aloof bitchiness with which Fred regularly addresses his mother. Friend turns out to be perfect as a vapid, beautiful wastrel, although he struggles in the film’s more heavy, more demanding scenes, especially towards the end when tragedy truly kicks in. Alexandre Desplat’s score is a little too evident and overbearing, but the costumes and sets tastefully reflect the colour and wealth of this social circle without dominating the eye or drowning the characters in frippery.

It’s Pfeiffer who is the star and delivers the emotional core of *Chéri*, a film which threatens to float on the surface of emotions rather than fully ride them: she offers a brittle beauty and masks the vulnerability of her character with an outward strength that’s on the verge of crumbling. She brings a welcome tenderness and reality to the relationship between Lea and Fred – a relationship that begins by operating entirely on a superficial level and only later becomes deeper before either of them is even aware of it. The closing voiceover tells of the end of the belle époque and the coming of the Great War, somehow suggesting that the intimacy of what we have just witnessed somehow mirrors at a personal level the passing of an entire age. *Chéri* never feels so significant, but neither is it solely a vapid confection: it’s a cake with a heart.

- Dave Calhoun, *Time Out London*

### **Cloud 9**

*Wolke Neun*

**Dir: Andreas Dresen      Germany      2008      98 minutes      Cert: CLUB**

**Starring: Ursula Werner, Horst Rehberg, Horst Westphal, Steffi Kühnert**

**Language: German**

**Available: March**

Love hurts - even when you’re over sixty. That’s the message of German indie director Andreas Dresen’s tough new drama, which follows with stark handheld directness the confusion, joy and suffering of apparently happy-married Inge, a woman in her mid-sixties who begins an affair with an older man. The camera does not shy away even when things get steamy, but this film draws its strength from its tight dramatic focus rather than any shock value.

This is easily Dresen’s most austere film, though the talent for unforced humour that

came through most strongly in 2005's *Summer In Berlin* breaks the surface tension more than once. There are times when the script is a little too raw and pared-back - things sometimes drag, and it comes as a relief when the script's relentless focus on the senior triangle is broken by a couple of scenes between Inge (Werner) and her daughter Petra (Kuhnert).

The action kicks in quickly: within the first two minutes, home-based seamstress Inge is making out on the couch with Karl (Westphal), a gentlemanly 76-year-old whose trousers she has altered. It's only later that we realise Inge has a husband - gruff-but-decent Werner (Rehlberg), also in his sixties, who likes to watch videos about diesel engines in the evenings. The catch is that Inge is still attached to her sprightly, still virile husband of thirty years, and leaving him for another man is not going to be easy.

Though the film is all about relationships, there are long passages of silence: Inge doesn't need to say much to Karl, and after thirty years there's not much she hasn't said to Werner. When Inge's decision to reveal her affair forces them to speak, they sound like twenty-year-olds rowing. The dialogue is spot on, and Werner's performance as a woman surprised by passion when she thought there were no surprises left, is outstanding.

Dresen finds a new visual calm here, and even a touch of Vermeer in a recurring shot down a corridor into a sunlight-filled kitchen, which is a long way from the jerky, grainy aesthetic of the director's award-winning *Grill Point* (2001). A couple of recurring motifs are neatly and sparingly used and include trains, which play a role - we infer - in the film's devastating denouement. - *Lee Marshall, Screen International*

*Winner - Un Certain Regard / Jury Coup de Coeur Award, Cannes Film Festival 2008*

### **Coco Before Chanel**

*Coco avant Chanel*

**Dir: Anne Fontaine** France 2009 105 minutes Cert: 12A

**Starring: Audrey Tautou, Benoît Poelvoorde, Alessandro Nivola, Marie Gillain, Emmanuelle Devos, Régis Royer, Etienne Bartholomeus, Yan Duffas**

**Language: French**

**Available: February**

Spectacle, a love triangle, heritage settings, bravura acting, witty dialogue, a bittersweet finale: There's something for everyone in Anne Fontaine's *Coco Before Chanel*. There also is -- not the least of the movie's pleasures -- the sense of a keen intelligence marshaling and shaping the material, shunning cliché and sentimentality and creating meaning out of what for once is not the standard biopic procedure of ticking off the boxes in a celebrity CV.

Fontaine's focus is on Chanel's formative years just before World War I, the transition from the modest, virtually peasant background of her childhood to the world of fashion and haute couture that she came to revolutionize. The young Gabrielle (Audrey Tautou), or Coco as she soon became known, meets and moves in with the wealthy racehorse owner Etienne Balsan (Benoit Poelvoorde), leading the life of a courtesan, resenting her dependence, keeping a tight rein on her emotions and all the time observing and learning from the elevated circles in which she finds herself.

She is befriended by another of Balsan's many mistresses, the actress Emilienne (Emmanuelle Devos), who encourages her to develop her talents and strike out on her own. She then finds love in the shape of Arthur "Boy" Capel (the U.S.-born Alessandro Nivola), an English businessman who steals her from under Balsan's nose and finally sets her up in business.

The love story is engagingly done, but Fontaine's core interest is in showing how Coco becomes Chanel, in pointing out the markers along the path that led a penniless young woman, with no resources other than her inner strength, to become a key figure in shaping contemporary tastes in style and design.

Tautou fully inhabits the role of Coco, her face a mask as if her character has yet to determine which identity she is to assume, sexually as much as socially. The flamboyant Balsan, by contrast, appears to be all of a piece -- Poelvoorde is excellent, stealing many of the scenes he appears in -- but Fontaine shows that his force-of-nature persona too is a mask, concealing deeper vulnerabilities.

Coco is Fontaine's first venture into costume drama, but her portrayal of a woman making her way in a perilous prefeminist world is wholly convincing. Alexandre Desplat's score is tasteful and unobtrusive and the period detail impeccable.

- *Bernard Besserglik, Hollywood Reporter*

## **Delta**

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**Dir: Kornél Mundruczó    Hungary, Germany 2008    92 minutes    Cert: CLUB**

**Starring: Felix Lajko, Orsi Toth, Lili Monori, Sandor Gaspar**

**Language: Hungarian**

**Available: January**

Muted and very dark, this isn't an easy film to like, as it continually evades our glance, telling the story as if out of the corner of an eye. But it's a startlingly gripping tale, beautifully shot and edited.

Mihail (Lajko) is a young man who returns to his hometown in an isolated Danube delta and sets about building a home on the river near his late father's cabin. His mother (Monori) is happy to see him and introduces him to Fauna (Toth), the sister he's never met. But his new stepdad (Gaspar) is immediately suspicious and stirs local mistrust until everyone is sure brother and sister are up to no good, shacking up together down on the river.

The man-vs-nature theme is extremely strong from the beginning, as the camera positions the characters against the elements. The film has a rough, earthy, rain-soaked tone similar to *There Will Be Blood*, and just like that film, we're pretty sure this one isn't going to end happily. It also clearly shows the influence of Hungarian filmmaking guru Bela Tarr (an advisor on this film) with its long tracking shots and virtually wordless scenes. Meanwhile, director Mundruczo keeps the imagery lush and textured, with deep colours and heavy shadows.

All of this echoes the suppressed emotions in this community, which is so small that everyone is involved in each others' lives. Most of the neighbours rally round to help Mihail and Fauna as they build a house on stilts in the middle of the river. But in this

place, we can understand why it might be unsettling for a brother and sister to cohabit, as well as why their mother doesn't really mind. At the same time, the stepdad's jealousy is much darker stuff, and even as it is expressed in startlingly nasty ways, we know much worse is to come.

Through all of this, Mundruczo's direction is insinuating and subtle, carefully catching important perspectives while also keeping us at arm's length, like outsiders. Through our eyes, these people look oddly primitive, living in such close contact with their surroundings, eating and often interacting in ways that seem eerily animalistic. So of course we would never want to cross them. No wonder this has been called Hungary's *Deliverance*.- *Rich Cline, Shadows on the Wall*

*Winner - FIPRESCI Best Director award, Cannes Film Festival 2008*

*Winner – FICC Don Quixote Prize, Cottbus Film Festival of Young East European Cinema 2008*

### **Diary For My Children**

*Napló gyermekeimnek*

**Dir: Márta Mészáros Hungary 1984 102 minutes Cert: CLUB**

**Starring: Zsuzsa Czinkóczi, Anna Polony, Jan Nowicki, Mari Szemes, Pál Zsolnay, Tamás Tóth, Éva Szabó**

**Language: Hungarian**

**Available: January**

*Diary for My Children* by Marta Meszaros, the highly regarded Hungarian director who's best known for *Adoption*, *Women* and *Just Like Home*, was her most politically explicit film on its release. That Miss Meszaros was able to make the film at all was some kind of political statement, but the film contains much more.

Like Juli (Zsuzsa Czinkoczi), the film's solemn, skeptical teen-age heroine of *Diary for My Children*, Miss Meszaros, at the age of 5 migrated to the Soviet Union in 1936 with her father, a sculptor, who was later arrested and then officially disappeared. This film begins with Juli's return to Hungary in 1947, in the company of her fearful grandparents, to live with her politically committed, Stalinist aunt, Magda (Anna Polony).

Though Juli, played with a kind of independent stoicism by Miss Czinkoczi, is the heart of the film, as well as its eyes and ears, it's Magda who is the most complex and interesting character.

Once a young, fiery revolutionary who endured prison and torture, Magda survived to see her revolution triumph, after which, for what she considered the greater good, she shaped her principles to fit monolithic Stalinism. It is this stern Magda, the faithful party hack, against whom Juli rebels, at first in minor ways, such as cutting classes to spend hours at the movies, and then by making an irrevocable break. Though the movie never sentimentalizes Magda by suggesting that she would ever deny her life's work, as other Stalinists later did, the character, as written and directed by Miss Meszaros and played by Miss Polony, provides the film with its sorrowful tone.

Magda is not a stupid woman. It's one of the better ways in which the film works that it is through the reminiscences of one of Magda's former comrades, who becomes a victim of the Stalinist purges she supports in the late 1940's, that Juli comes to understand

something of Magda's sacrifices in the name of the Communist Party and its revolution. To understand Magda, however, is not necessarily to like her. She is a fact of history.

Miss Meszaros makes use of a lot of newsreel footage of the period, which is blended with her new material to create an unusually graphic picture of Hungarian political, cultural and social life in the late 40's. One of the funniest, most poignant scenes is a dreary birthday party for the spoiled young son of a party leader. Not so effective, if only because they are redundant, are a series of flashbacks that describe Juli's relations with her father and mother in the Soviet Union and the trauma she experienced on losing them.

All of the performances are good, including that of Jan Nowicki, who plays the disillusioned party worker whose imprisonment brings the film to its conclusion. Also good is the black-and-white photography of Miklos Jansco Jr., the son of the talented, extremely independent Hungarian director.

The film is also illuminated by everything we know to have happened after *Diary for My Children* ends, including the aborted Hungarian uprising of 1956, the Soviet invasion and then the gradual thaw that, among other things, has allowed Miss Meszaros to make this movie. - *New York Times*

*Winner – Grand Prize of the Jury, Cannes Film Festival 1984*

**Everlasting Moments** *Maria Larssons eviga ögonblick*

**Dir: Jan Troell** Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Germany 2008

**131 minutes** Cert: 15A

**Starring: Maria Heiskanen, Mikael Persbrandt, Jesper Christensen, Callin Ohrvall**

**Language: Swedish**

**Available: January**

Discreet, old fashioned, traditional and altogether admirable, this is Jan Troell in what he does best, a period drama about a woman photographer living in Sweden at the turn of the last century. Paying minute attention to the smallest details, taking its time but never appearing to drag its feet, immensely sympathetic to its heroes and villains alike, this is an intimate family portrait and at the same time a rich canvass of working class life at that particular time.

Agneta Ulstater Troell, the director's wife, based the novel she wrote and its subsequent screen adaptation on the life of her own ancestor, Maria Larsson, a simple woman married to a charming but hopeless redneck, who became a photographer at a time when no woman would have dreamt of embracing such a profession and no man, certainly not the kind of working class lout she had for a husband, would condone it.

Emerging behind the story of the married couple and their seven children, there is the image of Sweden itself in the early 1900's assuming its capitalistic identity, while labour unrest is erupting all over the place, socialism and anarchism are blossoming in the shadow of strikes and public demonstrations and strict protestant traditions still overrule any thoughts of women's rights or common sense. Over it all, there is Jan Troell eye behind the camera, wrapping it all up in splendid monochromatic images, a perfect choice to portray working class life of that time, also allowing some stunning visual

effects, such as showing a girl walking away into the frozen wintry mist and disappearing in front of one's eyes.

Maria (Heiskanen), who got her camera in a lottery, ignored it for years, far too busy working her fingers to the bone, first as a cleaning woman and then as a seamstress. Married to Sigfrid (Persbrandt), a former sailor fond of drink and women, frustrated by his own inadequacies and often venting his temper on his wife, she had far too much on her plate to think about photography at all. One day she tries to sell the camera to the local photographer (Christensen), who insists she should try it first before getting rid of it and offers her some useful tips. This is the beginning of a beautiful, platonic friendship which Sigfrid hates and distrusts, his wife's hobby pointing out his own limitations, which went unmentioned before, for fear of his wrath. But Maria is a tough woman, with every new crisis she stands up to him a bit more, though to the bewilderment of her oldest daughter, Maja (Ohrvall), who narrates the story, never does she muster the courage to leave him. Even for such a strong person as Maria, flaunting traditions to the wind beyond a certain point, was not an option.

Told in a precise, authoritative manner, the dense fabric of the plot and all its various ingredients are put together in an exemplarily clear narrative, accompanied by a spectacularly homogenous visual style. Heiskanen's Maria is a striking character, a small, determined, courageous woman, who dares her husband and her fate, fiercely defends her brood and almost gives up her natural talent for images, only for their benefit. Sigfrid, as played by Persbrandt, is a cheerful brute who has trouble controlling either his thirst or his temper. The two, pitted against each other, are the driving force behind a plot which, despite its considerable length, never overstays its welcome.

- *Screen International*

### **Fermat's Room**

*La habitación de Fermat*

**Dir: Luis Piedrahita & Rodrigo Sopeña Spain 2007 88 minutes Cert: CLUB**

**Starring: Federico Luppi, Lluís Homar, Alejo Sauras, Santi Millán, Elena**

**Ballesteros**

**Language: Spanish**

**Available: January**

It can't be easy to make such a twisty and clever a thriller based on mathematical theories. But Spanish filmmakers Piedrahita and Sopeña do a terrific job keeping things tense and brainy. And thoroughly entertaining.

Sexy young Galois (Sauras) wows the girls at university with his maths prowess. Is this a fantasy sequence dreamed up by a computer geek? No, he's one of four experts invited to an isolated location, given mathematician names and told they'll be solving the biggest enigma ever. The others are Hilbert (Homar), a 64-year-old gentleman; Pascal (Millan), a bearded quick-thinker; and Oliva (Ballesteros), a scooter-riding babe with brains. Their host, Fermat (Luppi), is called away suddenly, leaving the foursome with a riddle. And the walls are closing in.

Fortunately, instead of obscure formulas, the puzzles are tricky brainteasers, which means we can play along with the characters without feeling left too far out in the cold. And with the room shrinking, things start getting extremely tense, especially when the furniture starts splintering around them. As this is happening, they're also trying to solve

the bigger question of why they're here in the first place, including an attempt to unravel the connections between them and Fermat's true identity.

And as the room squeezes in and conundrums keep coming, there are a remarkable number of revelations. The four characters react very differently to all of this; some use brains to figure out alternatives, others try brute force and at one point Galois combines the two with an engineering solution. But the walls relentlessly keep moving, and the biggest enigma may turn out to be how to survive this crazy day.

This is played coolly by the cast, with likeable wit that's realistically grounded. And the filmmakers establish a brilliant visual style with unusual, telling angles that make great use of lines, proportions and numbers. There are also scenes outside the room, as we follow Fermat on his own journey. One convenient plot point provides the only false note; otherwise the film keeps us gasping or laughing at this playful bundle of mystery, hints, innuendo and lots of red herrings. And it's great fun to figure out what's what.

- Rich Cline, *Shadows on the Wall*

### **Frozen River**

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**Dir:** Courtney Hunt                      **USA**                      **2008**                      **96 minutes**                      **12A**  
**Starring:** Melissa Leo, Misty Upham, Charlie McDermott, Michael O'Keefe, Mark Boone Junior, James Reilly, Jay Klaitz, John Canoe  
**Language:** English  
**Available:** January

*Frozen River* is an odd, compelling mix - a thriller about human trafficking and the unfolding of an unlikely friendship between two desperate women in a desperate place in the dark chill of winter. Courtney Hunt's drama brings us the intrigues of the 'other border' with America - the St. Lawrence River, across which a smuggling trade from Canada has thrived for centuries.

At the centre of Hunt's smuggling story is Ray Eddy (Melissa Leo of the TV series *Homicide*), a minimum-wage store clerk with two young sons in a crumbling trailer whose husband has just left town to gamble away the family's down payment on a new trailer. Ray finds her abandoned car being driven by the sullen Lila (Misty Upham), a young mother from the Mohawk Reservation nearby who drives across the frozen St. Lawrence with illegal immigrants in the trunk. The women form a mistrustful bond to shuttle illegals between Indian reservations on both sides of the border.

This odd partnership continues uneasily as the money trickles in and Ray's bills start getting paid, but a Christmas Eve trip across the ice ends with the car and its human cargo in a hole in the frozen river. Ray and Lila must make a choice about who will pay when they are caught.

Hunt's direction shows impressive composure for a first feature (expanded from an earlier short). The film's visual and narrative complexity give it a gripping reality, while avoiding the 'trailer-trash' cliches that tend to be all over such stories.

Hunt's own lean script (with its deft sociology) and Reed Morano's camera also guide the audience through life on minimum wage in a place where, for want of jobs, most people seem to work either in crime or law enforcement. Scenes that tumble through

cars and trailers with handheld close-ups begin and end with bleak wide shots of the river and the distant horizon which frame the characters' fatalism.

As Ray, a mother raising two sons hand-to-mouth, Melissa Leo creates a chillingly vivid mix of pain and desperate practicality. Lila, played by Misty Upham, is beyond deadpan, a wounded child whose own child is taken away by her in-laws for a crime that is never disclosed.

Charlie McDermott, as Ray's teenage son, finds plenty of nuance as a young man witnessing his mother's dilemma, while James Reilly is charming as his cheerful younger brother who doesn't quite understand what's going on. We'll be hearing from these actors and this director again. - *David D'Arcy / Screen International*

### **Fugitive Pieces**

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**Dir: Jeremy Podeswa      Canada, Greece      2007    105 minutes    Cert: 15A**  
**Starring: Stephen Dillane, Rade Serbedzija, Rosamund Pike, Ayelet Zurer, Robbie Kay, Ed Stoppard**  
**Language: English, Greek, Yiddish, German**  
**Available: January**

This adaptation of Anne Michaels's 1996 poetic novel about survival, death, memory, inheritance and the role of art and learning is far more than honourable. Director Jeremy Podeswa's Holocaust movie plays, pleasingly, more like a meditative mood piece than the usual literary memorial. In many ways, it is the film's suffusion of genuine emotion and lack of histrionics which win a victory over the director's conventional style – the warm but trite honey and mahogany tones of old remembered interiors, even the holiday-ad picaresque of the film's more buoyant, Greece-set later stages.

In a film of multiple flashbacks and flash-forwards, Podeswa focuses more on the first of the novel's two protagonists: Jakob is a man 'living with ghosts' since the rest of his family were rounded up by the Nazis, never to be seen again. He's played by two actors: Robert Kay as the traumatised Polish-Jewish boy of the 1940s and Stephen Dillane as the abstracted adult Toronto writer from the '60s to the '80s. Both performances, man and boy, are highly internalised but still sympathetic and engaging. Both, too, are upstaged by the fine Serbian actor Rade Serbedzija, who is highly moving as the stoic archaeologist who saves the boy in Poland and takes him to safety in Greece and later Canada.

Podeswa is to be congratulated, too, for his restraint in the film's (many) moments of pathos, as is composer Nikos Kypourgos for his nurturing, understated score, which helps make this 'conversation with the past' one of the most delicate, approachable and rewarding Holocaust movies of recent years. - *Wally Hammond, Time Out London*

*Winner - Audience Award, Sarasota Film Festival 2008*

*Winner - Best Actor, Rome Film Festival 2007*

**Girl Cut in Two, The** *Fille coupée en deux, La*

**Dir: Claude Chabrol** Germany, France 2008 115 minutes Cert: CLUB  
**Starring: Ludivine Sagnier, Francois Berleand, Benoit Magimel, Mathilda May, Caroline Sihol, Etienne Chicot, Marie Bunel, Valeria Cavalli, Thomas Chabrol, Jeremie Chaplain, Jean-Marie Winling, Didier Benureau, Edouard Baer**  
**Language: French**  
**Available: January**

The old master's touch is certainly evident in this latest missile elegantly lobbed in the direction of the French class system, which, as the title suggests, follows the travails of an innocent young woman torn between two powerfully different lovers.

Ludivine Sagnier, a seductive screen presence in François Ozon's *Swimming Pool*, here shows another facet of her talent, ambitious yet also tragically naïve as a wannabe social climber with terrible taste in men. Firstly, she finds herself falling for famed author François Berléand, a greying roué who exploits his literary-celebrity status while using her as a plaything, and only later does Benoît Magimel enter the frame as the petulant heir to a pharmaceuticals fortune. She thinks she's manipulating them, but, alas, it soon becomes apparent that the reverse is true.

Of course, there's exquisitely skewed comedy of manners here, since we can see disaster looming a mile off, yet also an undertow of suspense as Chabrol carefully controls the string of revelations which agonisingly morph romantic misapprehensions into the stuff of tragedy. The central trio are note-perfect in their roles, yet, arguably, the film's main pleasure is its fuss-free storytelling, which sketches in characters and situations with unflinching, utterly assured economy. When you're this good, you just don't need to show off. — *Trevor Johnston, Irish Film Institute programme*

**Good, The Bad, The Weird, The** *Joheunnom nabbeunnom isanghannom*

**Dir: Ji-woon Kim** South Korea 2008 130 minutes Cert: 15A  
**Starring: Song Kang-ho, Lee Byung-hun, Jung Woo-sung, Kim Pan-joo, Ryu Seung-soo, Ryu Chang-sook, Deligeer, Yoon Jae-moon, Sohn Byung-ho, Kim Gwang-il, Ma Dong-suk, Lee Chung-ah**  
**Language: Korean, Mandarin, Japanese**  
**Available: January**

These words open the latest offering from versatile Korean director Kim Ji-woon (*The Quiet Family, A Tale Of Two Sisters, A Bittersweet Life*), as a hand is seen slamming down hard onto an old map. It is an arresting beginning to a film that never releases its grip on the viewer's attention, and rewards it with a pioneering foray into genre's wildest frontiers – and while you might well need a map to find your way through all the double-crossing subplots ("Any guesses what's going on here? No clue, huh?", as one character succinctly puts it), essentially they are, like the map itself, a MacGuffin around which are arranged some stunningly spectacular scenes of hyperkinetic chaos. Despite its lengthy duration, this film gallops along.

*The Good, The Bad, The Weird* represents, along with Takashi Miike's Suki-yaki Western *Django* (2007), Shashank Ghosh's *Quick Gun Murugan* (2008) and Sadik Ahmed's *The Last Thakur* (2008), a new kind of genre: the "eastern", or Asian western. Where Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns may have borrowed a few ideas, or sometimes even an



years ago but is forced to go back to the French mountain town of his birth when his father (Daniel Duval) has a heart attack and the family's grocery shop and only livelihood would otherwise need to close. After having quit his umpteenth job as a waiter in the city and upon his brother François's (Stéphan Guérin-Tillié) insistence he finally give the family a hand, Antoine arrives at home, where his mother (Jeanne Goupil) is the only one who seems remotely happy to have him back in town.

Travelling with Antoine is Claire (Clothilde Hesme), a bubbly and pretty girl from the city who feels she could use some peace and quiet in the country to prepare for her upcoming exams. Like many of the story's elements, Guirado and co-screenwriter Florence Vignon take a slightly different route with this boy-girl set-up than the expected bucolic love story (though through some shrewd plotting they get some of that, too). Antoine in fact has feelings for Claire, but she is a free spirit who is glad to help him out on his rounds of the mountain villages with the shop's smaller cousin, a shop on wheels, but she remains non-committal. The fact that they don't know each other all that well also offers some opportunities for unexpected humour, such as a dinner table conversation during which Antoine discovers that despite her young age, Claire was once married. "Shit happens," is her laconic comment.

Guirado hit on the subject of his second film after making a series of documentaries for television about people who hit the road for their jobs. Without making a point of it, *The Grocer's Son* clearly shows that even in the age of the internet and mobile phones isolated villages and especially the older inhabitants still rely on something as simple as a grocer coming by regularly for their daily needs. As Antoine discovers, this does not only mean selling them bread, butter and eggs but also helping them out in all kinds of other ways, which incidentally gives Guirado some more opportunities for some gently comic scenes.

Despite some small plot contrivances -- notably one involving an envelope containing Claire's mock exams and the fact that the state of Antoine's father's health conveniently runs parallel to the demands of the plot -- and the somewhat obvious combination of landscapes with rolling hills and pretty guitar music, the overall effect is one of a small and optimistic film that is somehow never unrealistic. Credit the screenplay and the luminous actors for making *The Grocer's Son* a small but nevertheless delicious summer treat. - *Boyd Van Hoelj, European Films*

### **Heart of Fire**

*Feuerherz*

**Dir: Luigi Falorni    Germany, Italy, Austria, France    2008    92 mins    Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Letekidan Micael, Solomie Micael, Seble Tilahun, Daniel Seyoum, Mekdes Wegene, Samuel Semere.**

**Language: Tigrigna**

**Available: March**

Inspired by the memoir of the same name by Senait G Mehari, Luigi Falorni's *Heart Of Fire* is valuable as a document illustrating the absurdity of using child soldiers in any conflict as well as a glimpse into the specific struggle for liberation in Eritrea.

If Falorni, making his solo feature debut here after co-directing docudrama *The Story Of The Weeping Camel* in 2003, falls into traps of heavy-handed symbolism and war-is-bad cliché, the film is saved by his naturalistic style and the glorious child performance he

gets from Eritrean-born Letekidan Micael in the lead role of Awet.

Awet is a bright young girl being raised lovingly by Italian nuns (Eritrea was formerly an Italian colony) in an orphanage in the Ethiopian-occupied city of Asmara. She gets a Catholic education, but is a spirited girl with fantasies of her freedom fighter father, and rankles at the nuns' suggestion that one should turn the other cheek.

One day, her older sister Freweyni (Solomie Micael) arrives to take her to her father who has finally summoned her. She excitedly leaves the orphanage and travels by bus with her sister into liberated territory, only to find out that her father is a fraud and a drunk. She lives in squalor with her numerous siblings and is forced to perform hard labour while her father sits around and drinks.

Having answered back to her father one too many times – and indeed turned the other cheek when he hits her – Awet is taken with Freweyni to a nearby outpost of one of the liberation armies which is more at war with a rival faction than it is with the Ethiopians.

There she becomes in awe of Ma'aza, a female freedom fighter (Tilahun), whose rousing speeches and striking afro hairstyle inspire Awet. She unties her hair out of its prohibiting cornrows, works hard and makes friend at the camp; she is even angry when her sister is given a gun and she is deemed too young to carry one.

But once she has been exposed to a few dead bodies and wounded comrades, her outlook changes. When she herself is armed, she starts to question the sense of the killing and becomes an outcast when she removes all the bullets from her child comrades' guns.

The title refers to a Virgin Mary icon with a heart of fire which inspires Awet throughout, and although the use of Christian doctrine here is not proselytising, Falorni indulges in a few too many biblical turnings-of-other-cheeks and thou-shalt-not-kills.

Awet's insistent questioning – why do we kill the other faction when they wear the same shoes as us? Why do they want to kill us? – is incongruously obvious in a story which doesn't need to hammer home the point. Bold, brazen and big-haired, Letekidan Micael gives one of those memorable child performances which transcends the familiar material. We can only hope to see her on screen again.

- *Mike Goodridge, Screen International*

## **Helen**

**Dir: Christine Molloy & Joe Lawlor UK, Ireland 2008 79 minutes Cert:CLUB**

**Starring: Annie Townsend, Sandie Malia, Dennis Jobling, Sonia Saville, Danny Groenland, Sheila Hamilton**

**Language: English**

**Available: January**

*Helen* is a subtly drawn story of a young woman poised on the brink of adult life, and an auspicious feature debut for its writer-directors. Dubliners Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor (also known as 'Desperate Optimists') adopt the same approach as in their series of nine short films, the Civic Life Series – shooting in 35mm scope in mainly long takes, featuring local non professional actors – but here add an all-important element of

storytelling. When a young woman, Joy, disappears, the police ask for help in staging a reconstruction. Helen volunteers and is chosen, and does bear an uncanny resemblance to the missing girl.

But whilst Joy had loving parents, a boyfriend and a wide circle of friends, Helen has been raised in care and is very much an outsider. The complexities and impact of 'playing' another on Helen's life are fascinating and skillfully drawn, and newcomer Annie Townsend impresses with her understated performance in the title role. Where naturalism meets a controlled and beautifully composed aesthetic, *Helen* is a gentle, distinctive discovery. - *Sandra Hebron, London Film Festival Programme*

*Winner – Grand Jury Prize, European Jury Award, Angers European First Film Festival 2009*

### **Ireland: The Tear and the Smile**

**Dir: Willard Van Dyke and Peter Bryan    USA, UK    1961    74 minutes    Cert: CLUB**

**Language: English**

**Available: Now**

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#### **Ireland : The Tear and The Smile (1961, 2 x 27 mins)**

Designed to introduce American television audiences to contemporary Irish society, *Ireland The Tear and the Smile* aimed to provide an accurate picture of everyday life in Ireland in 1960. Presented by TV luminary, Walter Cronkite and written by Irish novelist, Elizabeth Bowen the programme featured contributions from leading political and literary figures - President, Eamon de Valera, Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, Seán O Faolain, Siobhan McKenna, Brendan Behan, Nora Connolly O'Brien, and Sybil Connolly. The interviews were punctuated with images of urban and rural life, Dublin pub scenes, gambling, hardship in the west of Ireland, and harrowing scenes of emigration.

Upon broadcast in early 1961, the programmes were met with disapproval by Irish diplomats in the US who argued that they presented Ireland as a "a poverty- stricken country riddled with backwardness, unemployment and emigration".

A misleading distortion of a modern, progressive nation or a valuable, critical reflection on an economically and politically challenged society? We invite you to judge.

#### **O Hara's Holiday (1961, 20 mins)**

In this vividly shamrock-tinted Hammer Film Production's short, designed to attract American tourists to Ireland, vacationing New York cop, O'Hara (Herbert Mulhoun) is delighted to find not only his roots but the beautiful young Kitty (Antoinette Lawlor) in Ireland. Along with his "American" friends Bill, (Tom Irwin) and Ann (Anna Manahan), they enjoy the beauty spots of the Irish countryside and the hotspots of Dublin nightlife.

### **Just Another Love Story**

*Kærlighed på film*

**Dir: Ole Bornedal                      Denmark                      2007    100mins                      Cert: 18**  
**Starring: Anders W. Berthelsen, Rebecka Hemse, Nikolaj Lie Kaas, Charlotte Fich, Dejan Cukic, Ewa Frohling**  
**Language: Danish**  
**Available: January**

If the first order of business for any self-respecting film noir is a dead body with a story to tell, Ole Bornedal is quick to oblige. But rest assured that this twisted, visually energized genre bender has no further use for "custom," and *Just Another Love Story* is anything but.

Jonas is a crime photographer, a family man, and a generally beleaguered resident of suburban malaise until he's involved in a car accident that leaves a stranger, Julia, unconscious in the hospital. Curiosity compels Jonas to visit her, but when Julia's family mistakes him for her boyfriend, Sebastian (whom they've never met), Jonas readily steps into the role. His pretense would be short lived, but Julia awakens with amnesia and, enlivened by the new identity he's inherited, Jonas maintains the deception. Of course, memories return. And so do boyfriends.

Playing with flashbacks, employing a linearly fractured narrative, and freely manipulating noir's standard devices and archetypes, Bornedal's dexterity with genre conventions is on full display here. Constantly aware of what's predictable, he heads in the opposite direction. Moreover, he latches onto a completely universal impulse--the desire to reinvent ourselves. But fatalism rules in noir, and the cruel irony--tailor made for that dead body--is that living a life that isn't yours is a dangerous game, an illusory freedom. The truth always comes knocking at your door. - *Sundance Film Festival Programme 2009*

### **Kamikaze Girls**

*Shimotsuma monoogatari*

**Dir: Tetsuya Nakashima    Japan    2004    102 minutes                      Cert:12A**  
**Starring: Kyôko Fukada, Anna Tsuchiya, Hiroyuki Miyasako, Ryoko Shinohara, Sadawo Abe, Yoshinori Okada, Eiko Koike, Shin Yazawa, Yoshiyoshi Arakawa, Katsuhisa Namase, Hirotaro Honda and Kirin Kiki.**  
**Language: Japanese**  
**Available: January**

As exciting for its beautifully specific and honest portrayal of teenage girls and their friendships as it is for its dazzling visual and narrative style, *Kamikaze Girls* is a glorious blend of kitsch, grit, humor and uplift that borrows freely from various Japanese subcultures and films such as *The Outsiders* and *Kill Bill* to tell the picaresque story of an emotionally repressed teenager with an active fantasy life who learns to open herself up to friendship.

Momoko is the daughter of a failed Yakuza who trafficked in illegal merchandise. Run out of town when the studio threatens to sue, Momoko's father takes her to live in the country with her senile grandmother, where she dedicates herself completely to needlepoint and amassing little-girl dresses. Momoko needs money to support her shopping habit (she's one of the best customers of "Baby, the Stars Shine Bright," a Tokyo store catering to Gothic Lolitas), so she decides to advertise her father's old

merchandise in a biker magazine.

Soon she is paid a visit by Ichigo, a tough biker girl, who expresses herself mostly via grunts and head-butts. Momoko is horrified by Ichigo, a "Yanki" biker on a tricked-out scooter who dresses like a cross between Pat Benatar and David Bowie circa 1984. But Ichigo is oddly attracted to Momoko, and obstinately pursues her friendship.

Gorgeously visual and energetic, *Kamikaze Girls* captures the appeal of the fashion subcultures of aesthetes and misfits, re-creating a rarefied atmosphere in which identity creation is a thoughtful, idealistic art. – *Los Angeles Times*

### **Liberties, The**

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**Dir: Shane Hogan and Tom Burke      Ireland      2009      90 minutes      Cert: CLUB**  
**Language: English**  
**Available: January**

*The Liberties* is the film equivalent of a portrait gallery. A series of 15 beautifully crafted short films, each focuses on a different character within Dublin's Liberties community. For example, we meet the man who raised seven daughters in a two bedroom flat; the stone sculptor set to retire after sixty years of work; the evangelical church reaching out with bingo and the Oscar winning actress who would live nowhere else in the world. In honouring each individual *The Liberties* becomes a wonderful celebration of this unique community. – *Stranger Than Fiction Festival 2009*

### **Katyn**

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**Dir: Andrzej Wajda      Poland      2007      121 minutes      Cert: 15A**  
**Starring: Maja Ostaszewska, Artur Zmijewski, Andrzej Chyra, Danuta Stenka, Jan Englert**  
**Language: Polish**  
**Available: January**

A towering presence in the world of post-World War II cinema, Andrzej Wajda has spent his career analysing in great detail Poland's gradual social and political evolution with a considerable amount of sensitivity while maintaining an uncompromising attitude towards his complex subjects. Famous for drawing inspiration from Poland's history, he has created a magnificent oeuvre of work that devastates even as it informs. Presented with an honorary Oscar in 2000 for his contributions to world cinema, Wajda himself is the son of a Polish cavalry officer who was murdered by the Soviets in what is known as the Katyn massacre – the subject of *Katyn* his latest and typically unflinching work.

After Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland and following Joseph Stalin's order, on September 17, 1939, all Polish Officers found themselves in Soviet slavery. Anna, the wife of an Uhlan Regiment captain is waiting for her man, and receives with disbelief all obvious evidence of his having been murdered by the Russians. The wife of a general, in April 1943, learns of her husband's death after the Germans discovered mass graves of Polish officers in the Katyn Forest. Silence and lies about the crime break the heart of Agnieszka (Magdalena Cielecka), a sister of a pilot, who shared the lot of the other Polish soldiers. The only survivor is the captain's friend Jerzy, who entered the ranks of the Polish People's Army.

What is the life of women, waiting for their beloved in the Polish state after the war going to look like, they being still dependent on Soviet Russia? Will homeland and freedom still retain the same meaning for those who have accepted the new system? This latest offering from one of Europe's greatest directors is a powerful work, forcing audiences to acknowledge the sheer scale of brutality meted out and the grievous consequences for the families affected. - *Colm McAuliffe, Jameson Dublin International Film Festival 2008*

### **Last Thakur, The**

**Dir: Sadik Ahmed**    **UK, Bangladesh**    **2008**    **81 minutes**    **Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Tariq Anam Khan, Ahmed Rubel, TanveerHassan, Anisur Rahman Milon, Tanju Miah**  
**Language: Bengali**  
**Available: January**

UK film-maker Sadik Ahmed directs this intense contemporary Western, which takes place in a remote town in the marshlands of Bangladesh. A mysterious young man, Kala, arrives armed with a rifle. He immediately creates a stir in the small town and especially attracts the attention of two rival leaders: the ruthless and powerful Chairman who runs the place and purports to represent his people and the one man that stands in his way: the local Thakur, one of the last Hindu landlords, who is manically re-claiming all the surrounding land for which loans remain un-paid in order to build a temple.

Walking into the middle of this bitter feud, Kala soon finds himself approached by both men to take their side. Broke and hungry, Kala begins to bargain with them, but he is here on his own mission, to find the man that raped and killed his mother and take his revenge. Some of Bangladesh's finest theatre performers offer great performances. Ahmed's training as a cinematographer is clearly evident in the bold picturisation of haunting landscapes and hollow-face-men with murder on their minds.

- *Cary Rajinder Sawhney, The BFI London Film Festival*

### **Let's talk About the Rain**

**Dir: Agnes Jaoui**    **France**    **2008**    **98 minutes**    **Cert: 15A**  
**Starring: Jamel Debbouze, Agnes Jaoui, Jean-Pierre Bacri, Frederic Pierrot**  
**Language: French**  
**Available: January**

Agnes Jaoui and Jean-Pierre Bacri cast a typically perceptive eye over the discreet charms of the bourgeoisie in *Let's talk about the Rain (Parlez Moi De La Pluie)*. This ambitious ensemble piece is not as instantly appealing as their previous collaboration on 2004's *Comme Une Image (Look At Me)*, but blossoms into a rueful examination of human foibles and failings. The film's mixture of smart dialogue, rounded characters and shrewd observation make it a civilised pleasure.

Sharing common themes with *Comme Une Image*, the new film is equally focused on family tensions and the kind of lingering grievances and callous acts that leave permanent scars. The scope is wider this time as the lives of individual characters lend themselves to an examination of class conflict, prejudice and the daily lies and deceptions that allow people to look at themselves in the mirror without feeling ashamed.

Jaoui plays Agathe Villanova, a feminist author who has decided to enter politics. She will announce her candidacy at a rally in her home town in the South of France. Her ten-day visit is also a chance to spend time with her sister Florence (Arbillot) and her family. The visit is seen as an opportunity by Karim (Debbouze), the son of Algerian housekeeper Mimouna who has spent a lifetime with Agathe's family. Karim is a hotel receptionist with aspirations to become a filmmaker and uses his personal connection to persuade Agathe to participate in a succession of interviews for a documentary in a series on successful women. His collaborator is Michael Ronsard (Bacri) and the filming unfolds with a mixture of incompetence and unexpected aggression.

In its initial stages, *Let's talk about the Rain* feels top-heavy with plot, especially once we start to discover some of the complex connections between the main characters. It gradually finds its rhythm and focus, building into a thoughtful reflection on human nature, the sorry state of contemporary politics and the casual racism of the privileged elite.

Everyone in the film is a product of their imperfections. They are all guilty of deluding themselves and deceiving the ones that are closest to them. The appeal of the film lies in the way that it neither judges them nor treats their problems with undue sentimentality. Instead, there is an understanding of the way life is and a recognition that we simply have to make the most of it, come rain or shine.

*Let's talk about the Rain* appears to be quite casual but it is a quality that only emerges from a deft sense of construction, cause and effect. Subtle, good-looking and very agreeable, it is also well-acted, especially by Jean-Pierre Bacri whose Michel is a small masterclass in self-absorption and blithe indifference to the world around him. *Alan Hunter / Screen International*

### **Let The Right One In**

*Låt den rätte komma in*

**Dir: Tomas Alfredson      Sweden      2008      114 minutes      Cert: 16**

**Starring: Kare Hedebrant, Lina Leandersson, Per Ragnar and Henrik Dahl**

**Language: Swedish**

**Available: January**

*Let the Right One In* borrows its title from a Morrissey song, but don't let that put you off. It's an angular and lusty teen horror movie based on John Ajvide Lindqvist's bestseller in which lonesome, whey-faced 12-year-old Oskar (Kåre Hedebrant) becomes smitten by a young, female vampire named Eli (Lina Leandersson). After initiating an adorable romance in the snow-coated forecourt of their glum housing complex, they soon realise that both of them are baying for blood. He's privately fantasising about stabbing up his schoolyard tormentors with a pocket knife and she needs to sate an appetite for the red stuff that keeps her from dropping dead... again.

It might sound a little like recent coffee-table vamp style exercise *Twilight*, but this is a more sinister and ambiguous work. It runs on similar rails to something like Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* in that it retools the themes and metaphors that stem from the vampire myth – craving, hostility, impulsiveness, eroticism – and neatly dovetails them with a cool, sort-of-realist examination of the horrors of adolescence and poverty that triumphantly ditches cliché and overstatement.

Tomas Alfredson's light, subtle direction, combined with DoP Hoyte Van Hoytema's crepuscular visuals, makes the courtship elements all the more tender and the staccato scenes of extreme violence all the more disturbing. The bashful, impassive hue of the central performances also gives the film an anything-could-happen edge: feelings of anger and desire don't provoke hysterical outbursts but remain bewildering within the minds of the juvenile cast.

Where the film falters is in its (arguably) reactionary final scenes. There's an eye-wateringly vicious romantic gesture that celebrates Oskar's new-found fondness for violent revenge without ever allowing him to step back and survey the absurd amount of damage that he and the young bullies have wreaked. But these are mere quibbles as this bruised and brilliant fairy tale is one of the year's true originals.

- *David Jenkins, Time Out London*

*Winner – Dublin Film Critic's Circle Best Film, Jameson Dublin International Film Festival 2009*

### **Mesrine: Killer Instinct**

*Mesrine: L'instinct de mort*

**Dir: Jean-François Richet France, Canada, Italy 2008 113 minutes Cert: 16**

**Starring: Vincent Cassel, Cecile De France, Gerard Depardieu, Gilles Lellouche,**

**Language: French, English, Arabic, Spanish**

**Available: February**

The first installment of the two-part biopic devoted to Jacques Mesrine (1936–1979) is a whirlwind introduction to the charismatic career criminal who became a household name in France. Despite an abrupt narrative approach, formative episodes in Mesrine's larger-than-life reign flow together well enough to yield a frequently gripping whole. Vincent Cassel's performance, which entailed gaining and losing over 40 pounds to resemble Mesrine over the span of two decades, is excellent in the service of a tale marbled with action, violence and brass ballschutzpah.

During tense opening credits a man and woman load items into the boot of a car and head off into Paris traffic circa 1979. Moments after driver Mesrine (Cassel) remarks to his passenger that he was born not far from that very spot, the couple are fatally ambushed by police. The split second border between ordinary activities and explosive violence characterizes the entire film to come.

The action cuts straight to Algeria in 1959 where young Mesrine, a soldier in the French army, takes part in a brutal interrogation. Discharged and back in the Paris suburb of Clichy, he doesn't stay long in his parents' comfortable bourgeois home. His dad has a job lined up for Jacques in a lace factory, a prospect the viewer knows is risible even if his ineffectual father doesn't.

With childhood buddy Paul (Lellouche) who works for crime boss Guido (Depardieu), Jacques meets Pigalle prostitute Sarah (Thomassin) whose honour he later recklessly defends. Initiated by Paul in the ways of burglary and robbery, Jacques' knack for quick thinking is swiftly revealed.

Jacques falls for Spanish beauty Sofia (Anaya) in 1960. After doing time in a French prison, he lives with her and their three children but when legit work dries up, Mesrine

again takes up arms for Guido and never looks back.

An already lively, if episodic, narrative really picks up in Paris in 1966 when Jacques meets Jeanne (De France), who's as violent and fearless as he is. Two years later, with police and rivals literally gunning for him, Jacques escapes to Montreal with Jeanne. An escapade with their wealthy employer lands the couple in prison. After surviving the spectacular indignities of solitary confinement in a Canadian penitentiary – a harrowing primer on why crime does not pay and rehabilitation doesn't work -- Mesrine ingeniously busts out with buddy Mercier (Dupuis).

While Mesrine's exploits make for good theater, the film-makers don't judge their subject or attempt to spell out his motivations. Mesrine is never glorified. He may be despicable, but he's a man of his word, right down to returning to a prison from which he's escaped to spring others.

In limited screen time, De France radiates love and passion. Filmed in close-up during a covert phonecall, she nails the heartbreaking complexity of being emotionally committed to a homicidal hothead.

Boldly employing mosaic screen effects, the film is stylish but not ostentatiously so. -  
*Lisa Nesselson, Screen International*

*Winner - Best Actor, Cesar Awards 2008*

*Winner - Best Director, Cesar Awards 2008*

**Mesrine: Public Enemy no. 1**

*Mesrine: L'ennemi public n°1*

**Dir: Jean-François Richet France, Canada 2008 133 minutes Cert: 16**

**Starring: Vincent Cassel, Ludivine Sagnier, Mathieu Amalric, Samuel Le Bihan, Gerard Lanvin, Olivier Gourmet, Georges Wilson, Anne Consigny**

**Language: French, English**

**Available: February**

*Public Enemy Number One: Part 2* is a relentless portrait of Mesrine in his Scarface-like prime as he tips over into half-baked political motivations and continues his tightrope act between living life to the full and catapulting toward his inexorable fate. Bloody shoot-outs, daring escapes - from a courtroom in mid-trial, from prison, from an impressive manhunt - and grandstanding for the press illustrate Mesrine's assurance and arrogance with expedient strokes.

Anyone still wondering why they should care about this guy after Part 1 will get a rousing reply in the highlights of Mesrine's final six years of sangfroid and bravado. Even when cornered or captured, as he is by police nemesis Broussard (Gourmet) long before he gets his man for good, Mesrine takes his temporary defeat in stride. In custody in March of 1973, Mesrine strenuously denies knowing gangster Michel Ardouin (Le Bihan). They know each other alright, as a breathless escape and shooting spree energetically demonstrate.

In a long sequence shot and edited for maximum suspense, Mesrine later breaks out of prison with fellow convict François Besse (Amalric). Besse preferred to keep a low profile. Mesrine, conversely, was something of a pioneer in media manipulation, admitting to

over 40 murders is an autobiography he published from prison before going on trial. Throughout Part 2 Mesrine willingly feeds his own legend.

Mesrine rarely resorted to disguise in the period covered in Part 1, robbing banks unmasked. In Part 2, now dubbed 'the man of a thousand faces,' he repeatedly walks into the lion's den – posing as a doctor to visit his dying father or disguised as a police inspector to make a few pointed inquiries at the Deauville police station before knocking off the local casino.

Because criminals commit crimes, there's a certain degree of repetition here. Bored with his own prowess and ever the provocateur, Mesrine takes superficial inspiration from the Red Brigades, the Palestinian struggle and the Baader Meinhof gang to beef up his rhetoric. There's a whiff of *Pretty Woman* in the sequences where Mesrine and new girlfriend Sylvia (Sagnier) buy a BMW off the showroom floor and pay cash for costly baubles in Paris's Place Vendome. The nominally fun side of being public enemy number one does, however, underline the extraordinary fact that Mesrine was able to hide in plain sight for so long.

Part 2 ends as Part 1 began, with Mesrine shot down in very cold blood without a hint of legal preliminaries.

As played by Amalric, Besse's compact intensity makes him an unlikely but interesting partner-in-crime for the flamboyant Mesrine. Gerard Lanvin as extreme left-wing activist Charlie Bauer exudes all-or-nothing conviction on a wavelength that seems almost quaint three decades later. Sagnier is fun-loving, game and vulnerable. After four hours in his presence it's difficult to imagine anyone but Cassel as the many faces of Mesrine. - *Lisa Nesselson, Screen International*

*Winner - Best Actor, Cesar Awards 2008*  
*Winner - Best Director, Cesar Awards 2008*

### **Modern Life**

*La vie moderne*

**Dir: Raymond Depardon**                      **France**                      **2008**   **86 minutes**   **Cert: PG**  
**Language: French**  
**Available: January**

John Ford is said to have claimed that the most compelling image in cinema is that of the human face. The old master would, I suspect, have relished the craggy, creviced physiognomical landscapes on display in this wonderful documentary.

*Modern Life*, the third film in a series following the struggles of dairy farmers in a mountainous, pebble-strewn area of southern France, does spend a little time examining what has happened to its subjects since 2005's *Le Quotidien*.

Marcel and Raymond Privat, two elderly brothers, are failing to make friends with their nephew's suspiciously metropolitan bride. Daniel Jean Roy, a man of indeterminate age with indescribable teeth, continues to work his family's farm, but freely admits – before smiling parents and an ill-tempered dog – that he would happily do almost anything else for a living. An amiable young couple discuss the death of the earlier films' oldest cast member.

There are stories worth attending to here, but nobody could mistake *Modern Life* for a vérité soap opera. Director Raymond Depardon, a distinguished still photographer, listens to his subjects, but his main concern is to gaze, gaze and gaze again. Each episode begins with a lengthy single take, in which, to the accompaniment of tunes by Gabriel Fauré, the camera moves along a country road towards the unprepossessing home of the next farmer.

The odd question is then asked. But, as often as not, Depardon will allow these eccentric folk to mutter their unaccompanied way from one silence to the next. In one bizarre sequence he points his camera at the hypnotically strange Paul Argaud – a hairy protestant with the features of a medieval hermit – as he, for no good reason, watches the televised funeral of a French cleric. Elsewhere, during his discussions with Marcel and Germaine Challaye, a charming elderly couple, we smile as the old lady offers a biscuit to a crew member over the director's right shoulder.

If you were feeling mean- spirited, you might accuse Depardon of exploiting the farmers' apparent strangeness for comic effect. It is certainly true that the older subjects of *Modern Life* have as much in common with the average urban filmgoer as they do with bacteria on the outer moons of Neptune.

But, to my mind, the static camera conveys a reverence for these brave folk – and an interest in their extraordinary faces – that repels any accusations of condescension. The film is a marvel. - *Donald Clarke, The Irish Times*

### **NaPoIA**

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**Dir: Dennis Gansel**                      **Germany**                      **2004**    **110 minutes**    **Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Max Riemelt, Tom Schilling, Michael Schenk, Justus von Dohnányi, Devid Striesow**  
**Language: German**  
**Available: January**

Berlin, 1942. Friedrich Weimer is 17 and has just finished school. He comes from a poor background, but still dreams of making something of his life. The one thing he has a passion for is amateur boxing. He gets his chance when he meets the appreciative Vogler who shares his enthusiasm for boxing and teaches at the elite Nazi school Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalt (Napola). When Friedrich is accepted into the school, Vogler becomes his mentor.

Friedrich finds a new friend in the son of the highly placed Nazi chief Albrecht Stein – a sensitive boy who voices his doubts about the ideology which the other pupils have had banged into them without a passing thought. In daily confrontation with the tough inexorable drill dictated by the school, Albrecht increasingly finds himself in conflict with those around him. Friedrich realises that his friend has chosen his fate, even at the price of self-destruction. He decides to use the remains of what freedom he has left to try to live an honourable life. – *Karlovy Vary Film Festival 2004*

*Winner – Best Actor, Karlovy Vary Film Festival 2004*

## **O' Horton**

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**Dir: Bent Hamer**    **Norway, Germany, France**    **2007**    **89 minutes**    **Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Bård Owe, Espen Skjønberg, Ghita Nørby, Henny Moan, Bjørn Floberg**  
**Language: Norwegian**  
**Available: January**

Retirement is a difficult stage in life, especially for somebody who has spent a lifetime dedicated to the same profession. The early scenes in this film, where we see a train gliding in and out of tunnels through a beautiful snow-covered landscape, illustrate something of how much Odd Horten (Bård Owe) loves being an engine driver, so it's easy to anticipate that this will be a story of sadness and loss. In fact, it's almost the opposite, as Odd embarks upon a series of adventures which reveal how many strange and wonderful things there are to be found in the world all around us.

Although he meets a number of remarkable people along the way, there's nothing in Odd's experiences that lies outside the possible - rather, it's the combination of events, the unlikeliness of them and the unblinking way they are observed that lends this film its magical atmosphere.

Its gentle, absurdist humour is perfectly complemented by a charmingly understated performance from Owe, who merely has to widen his eyes or raise an eyebrow to achieve what other comedy actors routinely feel the need to flap their arms and shriek for. Odd's willingness to open himself up to possibility is all that is needed to set the story in motion. Whether he's accepting a tour of the city at night from a blindfolded driver or watching confused businessmen slide down an icy road, he shows a spirit and tenacity more often associated with the very young than with the old. But at this stage in his life, what does he have to lose?

Bent Hamer's dry humour is as evident here as always, but *O'Horten* has a warmth and generosity of spirit almost entirely absent from his last work, the cynical *Factotum*. It's a delightful film which (provided you're not too sensitive about a bit of nudity) will appeal to the whole family.

It's also beautifully shot, produced with an evident care and attention to detail one rarely sees these days. The cinematography is glorious and the most intimate scenes are handled with a confidence that brings out every nuance in the superb performances. It's a real return to form, so let's hope it presages more such work from Hamer in the future.  
- *Jennie Kermode, Eye For Film*

*Winner - Best Director, Flanders International Film Festival 2008*

## **Private Lives of Pippa Lee, The**

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**Dir: Rebecca Miller**    **USA**    **2009**    **98 minutes**    **Cert: 16**  
**Starring: Robin Wright Penn, Alan Arkin, Maria Bello, Monica Bellucci, Blake Lively, Julianne Moore, Keanu Reeves, Winona Ryder, Mike Binder**  
**Language: English**  
**Available: February**

Pippa Lee is a woman in the prime of life. A happily married mother of two grown-up children, she is also a generous hostess and an excellent cook. Her marriage to

legendary publisher Herb Lee, who is thirty years her senior, is a relationship based on partnership, and it goes without saying that she will accompany her husband during the next phase of his life. When Herb turns 80 the couple moves out of their luxury home in New York and into a formidable retirement village in Connecticut. This is an idyllic world that promises to allow the pair to spend their remaining years together in quiet comfort.

But inside, Pippa Lee, is anything but happy about this prospect and, deep within her subconscious, old reflexes are awakened. Pippa Lee was not always the poised and elegant woman she is now. Her younger days were quite different, turbulent times, full of experiments with drugs and erotic escapades, times that also included a tablet-addicted mother and a rival's suicide. Up to now it had looked as though she had been able to come to terms with her past. But here in the sterile world of this third age paradise the sins of her youth begin to look more and more attractive to her. Pippa takes up smoking again and, when she meets a good-looking man, her romantic desires are rekindled. If she is to get to the bottom of her own personality Pippa Lee must face up to her past – instead of avoiding it. Director Rebecca Miller comments: "Pippa's real freedom lies in her ability to acquire a deeper understanding of her own life." - *Berlin Film Festival Programme, 2009*

### **Rang de Basanti**

**Dir: Rakesh Omprakash Mehra    India                    2006    157 minutes    Cert: CLUB**

**Starring: Alice Patten, Aamir Khan, Om Puri, Steven Mackintosh**

**Language: English / Hindi**

**Available: January**

Every so often Bollywood produces a rare gem like *Rang De Basanti*, a film that breaks the mould by offering something more sophisticated than the standard musical melodrama. Directed by Rakeysh Mehra and featuring Brit Alice Patten opposite Indian superstar Aamir Khan, it tells the story of an English filmmaker who travels to the sub-continent to make a documentary about the freedom fighters mentioned in her grandfather's memoirs. An entertaining mix of romance, history and social commentary, this quality production takes Hindi cinema in a fresh direction.

When helmer Sue McKinley (Alice Patten) recruits Delhi student DJ (Khan) and his pals to play the roles of revolutionaries whom her grandfather encountered as a police officer during India's pre-independence era, she's perplexed by their lack of interest. Beer, babes and US visas seem to be more important to the MTV generation than their country's colonial past. It's only when the status quo is shaken by an unfortunate incident that patriotic feelings and angst begin to stir within the group, leaving the audience to draw parallels between the struggle against yesteryear's Raj and the fight with today's corrupt rulers.

Successfully weaving historical facts with contemporary themes and characters, it's thanks to Mehra's smart writing and direction that you are instantly drawn into *Rang De Basanti's* absorbing plot, which flits smoothly from past to present. While Khan is on usual form, it's Patten who earns top points as the amiable foreigner who amuses the locals with her excellent command of Hindi. But it's the strong performances from the ensemble cast that impress foremost, all of whom are totally convincing as disillusioned youngsters learning the importance of personal sacrifice. Accomplished and universally appealing, this is the way Bollywood films should be made. – *BBC Films*

## **Red Cliff**

*Chi bi*

**Dir: John Woo      China      2008      147 minutes      Cert: 15A**

**Starring: Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Hu Jun, Chang Chen, Zhao Wei, Zhang Fengyi, Lin Chiling, Shidou Nakamura, You Yong, Hou Yong**

**Language: Mandarin**

**Available: February**

Violent and vast, *Red Cliff* yanks John Woo back from the career precipice of 2003's *Paycheck*, the last (and least) of his Hollywood forays. The Asian auteur's first native venture in over a decade and a half, it's no cap-in-hand homecoming; rather, the priciest Chinese-language picture ever, tackling an oft-retold (novels, comics, videogames) chunk of military history.

Amping the pressure further, Woo wades into an arena thronged with super-sized, CGI-assisted spat-taculars, from *Two Towers* to *Golden Flower*. Do we really need another set-to involving zillions of zinging arrows?

Yeah, we do. Woo takes all the tropes – armadas, ant-like extras and yes, arrows – and showers them with fresh blood. The action is stylised to the nth degree, without caving to shopworn floaty-fu or sheeny pixel-perfectionism. It's hyper and real.

Its long, too – albeit not as long as the original two-part, five-hour Chinese cut. Concertinaed into a relatively rangy 150 minutes, the story (rebel kingdoms unite against an aggressively ambitious Prime Minister, circa 208 AD) can't help but seem like a skipping record at times.

Whether it's the ruthlessness of the edit or a glitch in the script, the epic outweighs the intimate here. Save for a soft-centred epilogue, the starchy chemistry between Tony Leung's viceroy and tactician Takeshi Kaneshiro means this isn't a vintage workout for Woo's male-friendship fetish.

*Red Cliff* is a monument to brawling, not bonding. It's also a strapping ode to giant-scale filmmaking, its widescreen wonders staged by land (horseback battle, fortress siege, soccer match), by sea (a 1,000-strong fleet of ships on fire) and by air (the camera taking extended flight on the wings of a dove over the entire human chessboard). And the arrows? Part of a fiendishly sly fake-out devised to nick the enemy's ammunition. Big and clever. - *Matthew Leyland, Total Film*

## **Rudo y Cursi**

**Dir: Carlos Cuarón      USA, Mexico 2009      103 minutes      Cert: 16**

**Starring: Gael García Bernal, Diego Luna, Guillermo Francella, Dolores Heredia, Jessica Mas, Adriana Paz.**

**Language: Spanish**

**Available: February**

Considering it is a Spanish-language film, *Rudo And Cursi* hasn't wanted for English-language hype. Helmed by Alfonso Cuarón's brother Carlos, it sees *Y Tu Mama Tambien*'s Gael Garcia Bernal and Diego Luna reunited and although Carlos co-wrote *Y Tu Mama* with Alfonso, *Rudo And Cursi* is in a different ball park altogether.

Where the former relied on a sultry and sexy subtext to move its narrative along, with moments of humour and something of a preoccupation with death, *Rudo And Cursi* is a much broadly comedic affair. Bernal and Luna are Tato and Beto - two football-playing working-class brothers, each constantly trying to put one over the other. Beto is nicknamed Rudo (Spanish slang for tough or loutish) thanks to his confrontational style both on and off the football pitch, while his softer sibling Tato has picked up the moniker Cursi (Spanish slang for cheesy or tacky) because of his over-the-top ball play and lack of social finesse.

The pair work side by side at a banana plantation, while playing for their local footy team. Tato dreams of a pop career every bit as cheesy as his nickname, while Beto has aspirations to become a top footballer. The pinnacle they are both aiming for, however, is to build their mum (Dolores Heredia) a big house on the beach. A chance encounter with a football scout further fuels their rivalry when they are told he will only select one of them for the big time. To Beto's consternation, it is wannabe Pop Idol Tato who is plucked from obscurity and who soon becomes the top scorer for his club. It isn't long, however, before fortune smiles on Beto, too, and he is catapulted to stardom as a goalkeeper who lets nothing past him. The cash that comes with the football fame threatens to derail them both, however, as Tato can't resist the call of the WAGs, while Beto has a love affair with something even more threatening to his family - gambling.

Bernal and Luna bring the same casual and endearing spontaneity they showed in *Y Tu Mama Tambien* to the fore again here. Even when at their most obnoxious or ridiculous - such as in a particularly hilarious music video segment which sees Bernal sing *I Want You To Want Me* - they are never less than human and their brotherly rough and tumble is also convincing. The action on the pitch is entertaining and convincing, and although you sense there will be an inevitable 'big game' showdown, Cuarón has plenty of tricks up his sleeve to stop this falling into a predictable rut.

Ultimately, it is the personal lives - and the actors - that really shine through. And it is the performances of Bernal and Luna that stick in the memory, even as the adrenaline rush of the romp begins to fade. - *Amber Wilkinson, Eye For Film*

## **Rumba**

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**Dir: Dominique Abel & Fiona Gordon      France, Belgium      2008      77 minutes**

**Cert: CLUB**

**Starring: Dominique Abel, Fiona Gordon, Philippe Martz, Clément Morel, Bruno Romy**

**Language: French**

**Available: January**

It's Jacques Tati meets Mr Bean in this wonderful Belgo-French slaptick comedy that has seduced film festival audiences around the world directed by and starring Dominique Abel, Fiona Gordon and Bruno Romy. The film opened in France in September 2008 and has had over 100,000 admissions in 4 weeks.

Fiona and Dom are teachers at a rural school. They share a passion for Latin dance and they're deeply in love. On weekends, they enter dance competitions around the country. Their house is crammed with trophies.

One night, as they are coming back from a competition, they encounter a man on a clumsy suicide mission, standing in the middle of the road. They swerve to avoid him, crash into a wall and their life is thrown into turmoil...

Far from being a bleak drama, *Rumba* has a resolutely optimistic feel, which has characterized this directorial trio since their first feature, *Iceberg*.

In keeping with the great silent comics, Abel, Gordon and Romy depict a stylized and colourful world – for this story of thwarted love punctuated by flashes of musical comedy.

### **Sleep Furiously**

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**Dir: Gideon Koppel**      **UK**      **2008**      **94 minutes**      **Cert: CLUB**  
**Language: English, Welsh**  
**Available: February**

At the close of his recent and superb collection of essays, *Gray's Anatomy*, the political philosopher John Gray urges upon humanity a new quietism. "Other animals," he writes, "do not need a purpose in life. A contradiction to itself, the human animal cannot do without one. Can we not think of the aim of life as being simply to see?" It may seem an overly simplified exhortation given the dire predicament we have got ourselves into, yet would it not make at least a good start on the road to recovery from our present soul-sickness if we were to stand back and just look?

Gideon Koppel would surely agree that it would, if we take as evidence of his life philosophy his profound and utterly beguiling film *sleep furiously*. Not that it is a 'philosophical' film in any earnest or tendentious sense. On the contrary, on the surface it seems no more than a series of carefully chosen moments from a year in the life of a small rural community, Trefeurig in mid Wales, where Koppel's parents, German Jewish refugees, settled after the war, and where the film-maker grew up.

The title *sleep furiously* is a reference to Noam Chomsky, who in support of his linguistic theories famously offered "Colourless green ideas sleep furiously" as an example of a sentence that is nonsensical even though the grammar is perfectly correct. It is not clear what we are to take from this nudge in the ribs that Koppel delivers us; indeed the title, with its portentous lack of capitals, may put off some viewers, who might be forgiven for expecting yet another gnomic exercise in postmodernism. This would be a pity, for the film is blessedly free of pretentiousness and fashionable posing. It is simply - and it is simple in its sly way - a mutedly gorgeous, moving and deeply poetic work of art.

Koppel must be the unfussiest film-maker since Robert Bresson. He sets up his camera and lets the scene unfold before it, holding the lens steady through long takes and allowing his subjects to wander offscreen and back on again as their actions dictate. Frequently his people are at work - teaching a class of small children, shearing sheep, arranging a church altar, rehearsing a choir - so absorbed in their tasks that they seem oblivious to the camera's eye fixed intently on them. Surely miles of 16mm film stock - shot in colour at once bleached and sumptuous - was consumed in the project. Or perhaps the Welsh are 'naturals', effortlessly capable of acting the part of themselves.

It is Koppel's remarkable achievement to present the community of Trefeurig in such a

straightforward manner, without heroics of spurious, piled-on 'emotion', while avoiding the usual clichés - eg Welsh people being 'natural singers' - and although he pays obeisance to *Under Milk Wood*, his film is less indulgent, and far less self-indulgent, than Dylan Thomas' play. These are real people, not 'characters' moulded in the maker's mind. The editing by the masterly Mario Battistel was done in Paris, a deliberate choice according to Koppel, taken in order to put an extra distance between himself and his material so that he might, as he writes: "engage with the material more freely. That is to say, I could be less influenced by my relationship with what lay beyond the screen and could respond to the authenticity of the moment, in terms of what was evoked rather than what was illustrated." The result is a film immediate in its human moments and yet austere to the point of abstraction in what is communicated "beyond the screen".

If there is a central thread to the narrative it is the monthly visit by the mobile library van, driven by the librarian John Jones. Jones is a wonderful figure, and wonderfully representative in his vivid ordinariness of the time and the place. Man and van have their own signature tune, a jaunty little piano piece by the electronic composer Richard James, who calls himself Aphex Twin, which the viewer comes to greet with an exalted smile each time it returns - Koppel has written that music was a vital component from the outset, "not as an accompaniment, but as the different 'voices' of the key characters" - while the sight of the yellow van, frequently seen in long-shot creeping like a yellow bug through vast and lovely landscapes, is an emblem both of continuity and of the frailty of our human arrangements.

If Jones is, so to speak, the male lead, then the female star is Koppel's mother Pip. And what a star she is: tiny, crop-haired, drolly humorous, an elfin figure picking her way deftly through the film accompanied by her dog Daisy and Daisy's son Jack. She is the settled and accepted outsider, a reminder of the great and fearful world that broods beyond the confines of this little valley. In what Koppel tells us was the first sequence he shot, Pip climbs with Daisy to the grave of her husband and lays a stone there for remembrance - one thinks immediately of Beckett's great late text, *III Seen III Said* - then walks home, a distant, diminutive figure against a great stand of sunlit trees thrashing slowly, enormously, in the wind; the same trees are seen again towards the close of the film from the same distant perspective, but this time bare and motionless in a snow-covered landscape. These are two of the most beautiful and moving sequences in *sleep furiously*.

Indeed trees figure throughout; the very last, unforgettable image, after the credits have rolled, is of a single, leafing tree set seething by a passing breeze, as if a god were visiting there. The gods haunt this film, for we are in a kind of classic pastoral, where the nymphs are portly and wear aprons and make sponge cakes filled with jam, and the shepherds do not play pan pipes but tend their flocks with no less rough tenderness than did their Attic forebears. One of the most beautiful and mysteriously affecting sequences is shot from a high mountainside down into a rain-swept valley into which two lines of sheep straggle slowly from different directions to form a kind of ragged magic square. It is the inexplicable beauty of these images that one remembers long after the screen has gone dark.

The film-maker Alex Cox described *sleep furiously* as "the least anthropocentric film I have ever seen", and surely it is. Koppel's vision sets man in his true context, as a part of creation and not lord over it. He has spoken of his admiration for W.G. Sebald, and *sleep furiously* is in the line of that new kind of post-humanist but entirely humane art of

which Sebald was a leading practitioner before his untimely death in 2001. Now more than ever we need films such as this: grave, measured, subtly comic and beautifully wrought, free of polemic and yet offering a new way of seeing that is as old as *Arcady*. *sleep furiously* is, simply, a masterpiece. - *John Banville / Sight & Sound*

### **Sugar**

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**Dir: Anna Boden & Ryan Fleck    USA    2008    114 minutes    Cert: 12A**  
**Starring: Rayniel Rufino, Andre Holland, Michael Gaston, Jaime Tirelli, Jose Rijo, Ann Whitney, Richard Bull, Ellary Porterfield, Alina Vargas, Kelvin Leonardo Garcia, Joendy Pena.**  
**Language: English, Spanish**  
**Available: January**

Sporting dramas are two a penny, while sporting dramas about plucky, talented minority kids are arguably cheaper still. And yet *Sugar* is a revelation, not least in the way it ducks an onrush of cliché to expose the whole rags-to-riches mantra as a bright and shining lie.

Miguel "Sugar" Santos (a superb performance from Algenis Perez Soto) is a teenage Dominican baseball pitcher who finds himself courted by a gringo talent scout and set down in the minor leagues of smalltown Iowa. He funnels his \$562 paycheque back home, while his Ivy League teammate is sitting pretty on a \$1m sweetener.

Written and directed by *Half Nelson* creators Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, *Sugar* is that rarest of beasts: a baseball tale that does not hinge on home runs and top-of-the-ninth heroics. For all that, this remains a powerful tale of grace under fire; of triumph in the face of a wider, institutionalised adversity.

Santos is respectful and hard-working, and exploited top to tail. At one stage, the camera trails him as he wanders out of his hotel room and becomes lost in a garish, neon-bright America of bowling alleys and video arcades. His field of dreams looks a lot like purgatory. - *Xan Brooks, The Guardian*

### **Sunshine Cleaning**

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**Dir: Christine Jeffs                    USA    2009                    91 minutes                    Club:15A**  
**Starring: Amy Adams, Emily Blunt, Alan Arkin, Steve Zahn**  
**Language: English**  
**Available: January**

Don't be scammed by the "sunshine" in the title. More than a few dark clouds roll through this tale of two sisters, played with comic zest and quiet desperation by Amy Adams and Emily Blunt, who decide to make a living by cleaning up crime scenes in their native New Mexico. Need to wipe guts and viscera off your walls? Call Rose (Adams) and Norah (Blunt). Former high school prom queen Rose, a single mom raising a precocious seven-year-old (Jason Spevack), is stuck in life and in a shabby affair with a married cop (Steve Zahn, reliably excellent). Norah lives with their cranky widower dad (Alan Arkin, reliably Arkin) and yells out her frustrations in screaming contests with trains. Why not earn money by wiping blood off walls? It may be a ticket out.

*Sunshine Cleaning* (the name Rose puts on their truck) comes from the producers who struck gold with *Little Miss Sunshine*. So the title and the presence of the Oscar-winning Arkin playing another lovable geezer opposite a cute little Mr. might seem like a premature return to the well. Hang on. New Zealand's Christine Jeffs, who directed Gwyneth Paltrow in *Sylvia*, shapes the script, by newcomer Megan Holly, into something with its own scrappy integrity. Rose and Norah are damaged goods, scarred by their mother's suicide, though they rarely speak of it. This funny and touching movie depends on two can-do actresses to scrub past the biohazard of noxious clichés that threaten to intrude. Adams and Blunt get the job done. They come highly recommended. - *Peter Travers / Rolling Stone Magazine*

### **Synecdoche, New York**

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**Dir:** Charlie Kaufman      **USA**      **2008**      **123 minutes**      **Cert: 15A**  
**Starring:** Philip Seymour Hoffman, Samantha Morton, Michelle Williams, Catherine Keener, Emily Watson, Dianne Wiest, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Hope Davis  
**Language:** English  
**Available:** February

Unsung theatre director Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is living his artistically unfulfilling life in Schenectady, New York when his wife Adele (Catherine Keener) leaves him to follow her flourishing painting career to Berlin. A rebound relationship with his comely receptionist Hazel (Samantha Morton) never seems to get off the ground, and he finds himself struck by a mysterious illness that is systematically shutting down his autonomic functions. Then, news of a MacArthur Grant allows Caden to happily abandon both regional theater and his personal woes to begin an epic production which he envisions will become a great American masterpiece. But in striving to achieve universality and timelessness, his work is instead at every turn brought back to the mundane details of his inescapable life. Bearing Kaufman's signature narrative and temporal acrobatics, Caden's project becomes an everexpanding replica of his real world, and he begins to disappear into his creation.

With this film, Kaufman brings his unique style to the big issues of life, love, death, and art, shedding contrivances and conventional metaphors in favor of a magical realism that only he could make feel so true. - *Jameson Dublin International Film Festival*

### **Tony Manero**

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**Dir:** Pablo Larrain      **Chile**      **2008**      **98 minutes**      **Cert: 16**  
**Starring:** Alfredo Castro, Amparo Noguera, Hector Morales, Paola Lattus, Elsa Poblete.  
**Language:** Spanish  
**Available:** January

Santiago, Chile, 1978: with the country in the grip of Pinochet's oppressive dictatorship, Raúl Peralta (Alfredo Castro), a man in his 50s, indulges in the fantasy that he is disco king Tony Manero, John Travolta's white-suited, fleet-footed ladies' man in *Saturday Night Fever*. Inspired by repeated viewing of the film at his local fleapit, he forms and choreographs a low-rent dance troupe, performing at a rundown bar on the outskirts of the city. His fantasy is already becoming a sinister fixation, as he seems incapable of keeping nefarious activities in check, when national television announces a Tony

Manero impersonating competition.

Raúl cannot be distracted from the prize he feels pre-destined to win, even when the murderous secret police start to pay interest in the inhabitants of the bar and his fellow dancers. *Tony Manero* is at once an absurd black comedy; an unsettling thriller with surprising twists; a confrontation of dark days in Chile's recent history; and a horribly believable, realist portrait of obsession. Castro's brilliant, suitably dense lead performance as the misanthropic, misguided anti-hero and the inspired handheld filming ensure that director Pablo Larraín, with only his second feature, has created a multi-textured, striking work of some distinction. - *Light House Cinema programme*

**Turtles Can Fly**

*Lakposhtha hâ m parvaz mikonand*

**Dir: Bahman Ghobadi**                      **Iran**    **2004**                      **95 minutes**    **Cert: CLUB**

**Starring: Soran Ebrahim, Hirsh Feysal, Avaz Latif**

**Language: Kurdish**

**Formats: 35mm**

**Available: January**

Soran, better known as Kak Satellite, is a 13-year-old who twists everyone around his finger, installing antennae and dishes for villagers anxious to hear of Saddam's disposal. He is the undisputed leader of the youngsters around him, ordering them about and trading the fruits of their labours for whatever he considers to be necessary.

A benign little tyrant who is adored by his followers, he eventually falls for the gloomy unsmiling countenance of Agrin, a girl with the face of a sad Madonna. At the same time he is profoundly disturbed by her brother Henkov, who was left armless after he stepped onto a landmine and who appears to have the capacity to look into the future. With the pair are Risa, not yet three, whose role is not evident at first but whose role becomes relevant further on.

Whatever plot there is here doesn't really matter. Rather, what counts is how these people live and the matter-of-fact manner in which they accept their unbearable conditions.

Using the bare, forbidding, spectacular Kurdish mountains as a suitable backdrop, Ghobadi depicts a primitive society, barely out of the Stone Age and dragged by its heels into the 21st Century, although its head is still far away in the past.

As bleak as the tale is, touches of humour still appear, and there is a sense of vitality that prevails despite the tragedy. Ghobadi may say that the past is bad, the present is worse and the future doesn't look any better - but he still seems to believe that not everything is lost. - *Screen International*

## **Wonderful Town**

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**Dir: Aditya Assarat Thailand 2007 92 minutes Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Anchalee Saisoontorn, Supphasit Kansen and Dul Yaambunying**  
**Language: Thai**  
**Available: January**

An elegant combo of slow-burn romance and social realism set in a Thai village devastated by the 2004 tsunami, *Wonderful Town* reaches deeply into the hearts and minds of people struggling to rebuild themselves long after the physical shockwaves have subsided.

Filmed in the southern Thai town of Pakua Pak, which bore the tsunami's brunt at the cost of 8,000 lives, the film signals its gentle intentions with a long opening shot of small waves peacefully rolling into a shoreline. Meditative tone informs all that follows, beginning with the arrival of Ton (Supphasit Kansen), a Bangkok architect sent to oversee the building of a new resort. In a land where belief in spirits is high, construction is pointedly taking place adjacent to an apartment block left untouched since the disaster and rumored to be haunted.

The only guest at a spartan hotel, Ton is instantly attracted to its Thai-Chinese owner Na (Anchalee Saisoontorn). A reserved woman with a city education, Na appears unresponsive to Ton's polite overtures at first. But via a beautiful series of snapshots showing Na touching Ton's clothing and listening to him sing in the shower, she is able to externalize her true feelings. Progression from hand-holding innocence to tender lovemaking is affecting and tastefully done.

Virtually a two-hander for the first half, the film expands its horizons by perfectly measured steps as the couple's flowering romance gets local tongues wagging. Leading the voices of disapproval is Na's brother Wit (Dul Yaambunying), who heads a gang of motorbike-riding no-goods and calmly tells his sister he's a hopeless case for reform. Maintaining firm tonal control, Assarat confidently streams in thriller elements as the relationship becomes an extremely dangerous one.

With minimal dialogue and assured performances from its well-matched leads, the film registers powerfully as a pure romance and as a haunting portrait of a place that has rid itself of the physical reminders of trauma, but where the population remains largely in a state of suspended animation, emotionally.

Subdued palette employed by cinematographer Umpornpol Yugala plays a crucial role in reflecting the drained spirits of Pakua Pak townsfolk. Classical compositions and subtle lighting enhance the reflective mood, with sudden bursts of color toward the finale bringing the promise of hope out of tragedy. - *Richard Kuipers, Variety*