

## EUROFILE CINEMA

## JASON SOLOMONS

reports from the Venice Film Festival on an event that is critical to the industry's recovery from the pandemic, and details the new releases that will lead the fightback



**W**ell, that was a surprise. Yes, there were plenty of films showing at the 77th Venice Film Festival, and there was a competition for the Golden Lion, but the biggest thing is that there was an event of such size and international reputation.

There was a red carpet and people on it, front page pictures, plenty of journalists and TV crews and photographers from all over Europe, big stars, Aperol Spritzes in the bars, spaghetti vongole in the busy restaurants and packed (or half-packed), double-spaced, pre-booked screenings in the famous old 1,000+-seater cinemas, morning, afternoon and night. For 11 days.

Whisper it, but it felt a bit like normal. Even if you couldn't air kiss actresses or shake hands with film makers, or recognise old friends in their mask-and-sunglasses ensembles. And so what if I saw several films from behind steamed-up specs until I worked out how to breathe a bit easier behind the mask?

The films, let's face it, weren't the best selection Venice has ever offered. In recent years, the Lido has kicked off the Oscar race and awards season buzz with opening films such as *La La Land* and *Gravity* and *Birdman*, and hosted winners such as *The Shape of Water*, *Brokeback Mountain* and *Roma*, and premiered performances by Helen Mirren in *The Queen*, or Frances McDormand in *Three Billboards...*, or Joaquin Phoenix in *Joker*.

But this year, 2020, Venice wasn't about the films. It was about film. About the art form and the industry itself, its very survival, existence and continued possibility as a public event and shared experience. And I think Venice, like every relieved person with their mask at the end of the day, just about pulled it off and began to gulp fresh air again.

Cate Blanchett was a spirited and inspirational choice for president of the jury and she was a starry presence every night. She was even dining in my favourite little Lido fish restaurant one evening. Couldn't get rid of her, to be honest with you. Tilda Swinton was typically rousing in her rallying cry for cinema when receiving her Lifetime Achievement Golden Lion at the opening night ceremony, although she was unusually off-key in a rather strange 30-minute short, written and directed by Pedro Almodovar called *The Human Voice* (with a nod to Cocteau's *La Voix humaine*) which was basically Tilda in a stage-style set reconstruction of a very Almodovarian flat having a fraught, break-up phone conversation on her ear pods with a lover we couldn't neither see nor hear.

# THE FILMS THAT WILL HELP KEEP MOVIE INDUSTRY AFLOAT



## THRILLER:

**1** Pierre Niney and Stacy Martin in *Amants*

Photo: Roger Arpajou

**2** Luke Holland's *Final Account*

Photo: Mary Cybulski

**3** Director Luca Guadagnino Dana Thomas and Roberto Cicutto at the Venice screening of *Salvatore Ferragamo: Shoemaker of Dreams*

Photo: Andrea Avezzi





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CHARMING:  
4 Helen Mirren and Jim Broadbent in *The Duke*

Photo: Andrea Avezzi

5 Romola Garai and Patrick Kennedy in *Miss Marx*

Photo: Vivo film, Tarantula

6. Star Vanessa Kirby and director Kornél Mundruczó on the Venice red carpet for *Pieces of a Woman*

Photo: Jacopo Salvi

If the stars couldn't all be there in person, they sent messages via the increasingly familiar screens of iPhone or Zoom, footage that was shown on the Sala Grande big screen as a montage about "what cinema means", according to Samuel L Jackson, Todd Haynes, George Clooney, Jodie Foster, Isabelle Huppert, Ang Lee and many more, some of them a bit embarrassing but obviously all well-intentioned. They Zoomed in their press conferences too, which mostly worked but lacked any crackle of excitement.

As was the sight of the eight European film festival directors on the opening night stage, reading out why festivals matter in the future as places for debate and exploration and all that idealistic, poetic rhetoric. The guy from San Sebastian was there and his event is up next, with Spain still on the quarantine list. London, however, which 'opens' next month with some screenings around BFI Southbank but mostly virtual, streaming online, could learn a thing or two from this festival, which was some kind of minor miracle given the circumstances.

Because, on the island in the Venetian lagoon, the very place the original quarantine was invented, the stars kept coming. I spoke to Stacy Martin, Pierre Niney and Benoit Magimel from French love triangle thriller *Amants*, which featured bilingual fashion and film muse Martin in her best role yet, torn between her wealthy husband and an ex-lover she bumps into years after he broke her heart. It's a stylish, sexy, well-made film with shades of classic film noir and one that I'm sure will travel well and be in your cinemas or on demand services soon.

The opening film was an Italian one, for the first time in 11 years at Venice. Which felt right, in the absence of Hollywood and ballyhoo. *Lacci* means (shoe)laces in Italian but was translated as *The Ties*, and you can see why, as it's about a family recovering from a husband's infidelity years before.

It was rather lovely to look at, a handsome, melodramatic soap opera, nicely performed by Alba Rohrwacher, who turns into Laura Morante for the scenes set in the later years.

Britain was represented by Jim Broadbent, who gives one of his best performances in *The Duke*, probably Venice's most mainstream success.

I did like it: charming and funny and Ealing-like, about the little man against the system and sweetly eccentric in a very British way. It's presence was a balm and gave Venice a laugh and a lift and brought to light a forgotten story from the British headlines of 1961.

Broadbent plays ridiculously-named Kempton Bunton, an odd, amusing, decent sort of a man from the terraced houses of Newcastle who campaigned for free BBC TV licences for pensioners, worked in a bakery (until sacked for 'agitation') and who then, in protest at its cost to the nation, stole the newly-squired Goya's *Duke of Wellington* from the National Gallery and hid it in his cupboard.

In an unusually low-key supporting role, Helen Mirren plays his long-suffering wife, forever bringing in cups of tea and rolling her eyes.

The Goya theft was a huge story at the time and one of the great mysteries of



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the early 1960s, even featuring as a gag in James Bond's *Dr No*, hanging in the titular villain's lair and as Sean Connery goes past it he says "Oh, there you are". I'd never noticed – or, I guess, understood – that gag before but it features in this movie and both director Roger Michell and Jim Broadbent admitted to me they'd never heard of Kempton or the Goya theft before.

In the end credits, they put up a photo of the real Kempton and, crikey, he couldn't possibly be played by anyone else than Jim Broadbent.

The film, very playfully put together, has echoes of the Ealings and some of the social realist movies such as *Saturday Night*, *Sunday Morning* or *This Sporting Life*, as well as some more jaunty 60s-style split screens and New Wave cuts. It's great fun, *The Duke*.

There was more British history in *Miss Marx*, which starred Romola Garai as Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor who took on her father's legacy, fought for the workers and female equality, kept friendly with uncle Engels but married a philandering scoundrel of a playwright called Edward, who no one seemed to like but poor Eleanor.

It's a period piece (1890s) set in dim, airless parlours and factories and which plays with the traditional costume drama/biopic genre with bursts of to-camera confessions, painterly compositions, fantasy sequences, some black and white photos of the miner's strike and documentary archive of New York factory workers, with a bit of opium smoking and the sounds of punk LA band Downtown Boys.

Directed, in English, by Italian Susanna Nicchiarelli and shot in Italy and Belgium (even the Highgate Cemetery bit), it's a heady mix and a good subject but not entirely successful in getting a clear through-line on its emotional story, as the determined and admirably gutsy Eleanor suddenly veers toward tragedy. Still, it's always good to see Garai getting such a meaty role which she carries off with gusto and customary intelligence.

The stars figured heavily in *Salvatore Ferragamo: Shoemaker of Dreams*, a documentary from the ever-stylish Italian director Luca Guadagnino, of *Call Me by Your Name* and *I Am Love*. I was sceptical about watching a two-hour doc about shoes, but it glides along as if on high heels, tracing Ferragamo's rags to riches rise from a peasant village near Naples to adorning the feet of the greats of silent-era Hollywood. I never knew that. He made shoes for Gloria Swanson, Mary Pickford, Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks, Lillian Gish. He designed cowboy boots and footwear for *The Ten Commandments* and a pair for Cecil B DeMille to stride about in as he directed. "The West would have been won a lot quicker if they'd had boots like these," said De Mille.

Martin Scorsese is in it, looking very happy talking about the Italian immigrant experience and early silent films. Deborah Landis (John's wife and a leading costume consultant) extols the genius of Ferragamo's designs of Valentino's brogues, Paulette Goddard's ankle straps and Fairbank's Arabian slippers in *The Thief of Baghdad*. Michael Stuhlbarg has a ripe old time reading out Ferragamo's autobiography like a fine audiobook narration and

## HANDSOME:

1 Luigi Lo Cascio, Alba Rohrwacher, Giulia De Luca and Joshua Cerciello in *Lacci*

Photo: Gianni Florito

2 *The World To Come*

3 *The Disciple*

Photo: Zoo Entertainment 2020



there are seemingly dozens of relatives and grandchildren chiming in with stories.

And then Ferragamo goes back to Italy and opens up in Florence, and we get the story of his wife and family and Italy in the grip of Mussolini's fascism and the Depression and then the Italian boom, all through the story of shoes. It's definitely not a load of cobbles.

A film from India – unbelievably the first one in competition at Venice since Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* charmed its way to victory in 2001 – called *The Disciple* really stuck with me. It's about a rather dull man trying very hard to become a revered classical music singer despite very little encouragement from his guru. There's a lot of singing and sitar-playing, not all of it very good (intentionally), but of course some if it is extraordinary, even transcendent. I didn't know this director, Chaitanya Tamhane, before but he's clearly got something special – it's a real feat to make the creeping disappointment of failure somehow dramatic and not dreary, and







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there are terrific scenes and really memorable shots here.

There were films starring Vanessa Kirby, whose film star status the festival seemed to confirm. I admit I didn't really know who she was until last weekend, never having watched *The Crown* (she's Princess Margaret, I'm told.) But she was remarkable as a woman grieving the loss of a baby in *Pieces of a Woman* and shone in the highly-touted Western love story *The World to Come*. If there was a film star rising out of Venice 77, Vanessa Kirby was it.

There was a slick documentary about Greta Thunberg as she goes from lonely, shy schoolgirl to one of the most famous and important people in the world and, indeed, figurehead for the future of it. It is quite some role to take on and, through director Nathan Grossman's remarkably intimate footage, we watch Greta grow and step up and berate politicians and inspire billions, while still pulling the occasional teenage strop with her often-exasperated dad.

The most moving occasion, for me, was

in a documentary called *Final Account*, about the last surviving everyday perpetrators of Nazism and the Holocaust. It was made by Luke Holland over a number of years and finally put together as a gripping movie made up of interviews with these ordinary Germans and Austrians in their lounges and kitchens, as Holland probes them about how they let so many Jews be moved into camps and killed. Some of them were secretaries, but some were ex-SS. It's powerful stuff in the banality of how ordinary citizens become monsters, and then bury the memories, or deny them.

The film received ovations here but sadly Holland, whom I had the pleasure of knowing quite well over the years, died a couple of months ago, aged 71, and wasn't here to see his film shown. It would have been the high point of his career and at least his wife and sons were there, crying and shaking at the sound of his great project being cheered. Luke was endlessly trying to get this film off the ground to the point of obsession, amassing hours (more than 300 hours) of

interviews with old Nazis as he travelled around with his camera, trying to work out how the Holocaust had happened.

I'm sure his tendency to get mired in it, and the fact that no-one ever seemed willing to fund it, had deleterious affects on his health. But here it was, the *Final Account*, finally getting the audience it and he deserved. That will stay with me for a long time because, after all the heartache and the setback, it had been utterly worth it.

The truth shall set you free, don't they say? And an extraordinary edition of the Venice Film Festival proved that cinema can do the same to an art form and a business that looked moribund. I thought it would be going through the motions, clinging to the past, that we would come to bury cinema, not to praise it, a last gasp.

But it wasn't death in Venice after all and the movies started to breathe again, the rubbing of hand gel bringing life. But, outside the bubble of the Lido, it is now up to the rest of the film world to try and forge a future that may not always find such big, and safe, screens.

EVER-STYLISH:

4 Salvatore Ferragamo: Shoemaker of Dreams

Photo: Salvatore Ferragamo

5 *Final Account*

6 *Pieces of a woman*

7 *Final Account* director Luke Holland died earlier this year

Photo: Contributed



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