Why the Venice Film Fest Matters More to Oscar (Sorry, Toronto)

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

By Ariston Anderson

After premiering three major Academy Award winners in a row, the worldâ??s oldest film fest is once again Hollywoodâ??s awards-season launchpad.

Courtesy of Dale Robinette/Lionsgate

The past few years, while Toronto bickered with Telluride over which festival could screen which premiere when and where, Venice â?? after some decidedly lackluster editions â?? took the high road and worked on improving. The result? Itâ??s back on top after a scorecard that saw successful Oscar wins for Venice premieres three years in a row: *Gravity*, *Birdman* and, last year, *Spotlight*. Hollywood has taken notice. The festival is filled with studio titles this year, which means the red carpet will be

filled with A-list talent. The four premieres that already are garnering awards buzz:

La La Landâ??s Oscar Launch

Courtesy of Toronto International Film Festival

With Venice proving to be a good luck charm at the Oscars, one young contender seems to be taking the hint. Damien Chazelle is following up his 2014 best picture nominee *Whiplash* with festival opener *La La Land*. The musical stars Ryan Gosling as a jazz pianist who falls in love with an aspiring actress (Emma Stone). The Venice committee, after watching the film, immediately offered Lionsgate the opening slot. â??I was so honored to get the invitation to open Venice,â?• says Chazelle. â??Itâ??s the kind of place that seems to belong in a dream. Thatâ??s the feeling I wanted to capture with this movie: the way things look and sound in a dream, the magic and the romance of it all.â?•

Chazelle adds that it was a natural choice to follow up his critically acclaimed *Whiplash* with the challenging genre of the musical. â??The thing I love about musicals is that everything is possible. You can combine all the arts â?? music, dance, painting, theater â?? to collectively produce an emotion that canâ??t be conveyed by words,â?• he says. â??I wanted to try and make a film that told an honest, intimate story but also allowed for that kind of big-screen moviemaking.â?•

Festival director Alberto Barbera believes that the film, a tribute to old Hollywood musicals, is a natural candidate for the Oscars. â??It has all the elements,â?• he says. â??Itâ??s a wonderful story, a classic film. Itâ??s extremely well done with two outstanding lead performances. You have to go back to the â??60s and â??70s to see something that is similar to those performances. It has beautiful music, beautiful dance performances. Everything in the film is definitely outstanding.â?•

While Lionsgate is planning a big launch at the festival, unfortunately Gosling will not be present, as he couldnâ??t escape filming duties for *Blade Runner 2*. Stone will be back in Venice after her 2014 success with *Birdman* led her to an Oscar nomination.

Melâ??s Big Comeback

After a public meltdown of epic proportions, Mel Gibson retreated from the spotlight, putting his work behind the camera on hold. Now Venice is premiering his first directorial effort since *Apocalypto* (2006). Never one to retreat from challenging topics, Gibson explores the true story of Desmond Doss (Andrew Garfield), the first conscientious objector awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, in the World War II drama *Hacksaw Ridge*.

â??The movie is special,â?• says Stuart Ford, CEO of IM Global, which co-financed the film, putting up approximately half of the budget. â??Audiences can look forward to a picture that is both an old-school, action-packed wartime epic and also an intelligent and very moving present day statement on the nature of conflict and forgiveness.â?•

Barbera firmly believes the film marks Gibsonâ??s comeback. â??There is a high expectation of course after the previous films and all the issues around his bizarre attitude. I didnâ??t know what I was going to say when I saw the film,â?• he says. â??I was quite surprised because it is a beautiful, classic war film about a courageous hero and the capability to put oneâ??s own life before others. I think itâ??s proved that heâ??s a really great director and I hope that it will forgive some mistakes that he did and some unacceptable behaviors in the past.â?•

Paolo Sorrentinoâ??s TV Debut

Courtesy of Gianni Fiorito

Itâ??s not just films that are having their moment in Venice. HBOâ??s launch of *Olive Kitteridge* in Venice led it to pick up eight Emmy awards last year. As more and more acclaimed cinema directors make the leap into longform TV, all eyes will be on Oscar winner Paolo Sorrentinoâ??s TV debut *The Young Pope*, starring Jude Law as a fictional American pope who is conservative, politically conniving, and incredibly self-reflective. The production is a joint effort of HBO, Sky and Canal Plus.

â??*The Young Pope* is a 10-part series but at the same time is a collection of 10 movies, each of them with Sorrentinoâ??s unique flair and enthusiasm in innovating visual storytelling, featuring an inimitable top-notch technical and quality style and starring an outstanding international cast,â?• says Andrea Scrosati, executive vp programming of Sky Italia says. â??So there could not be a more suitable venue than the Venice Film Festival to premiere the first two episodes of this show, and this choice confirms, if any additional proof were needed, that the distinction between cinema and television no longer exists: It all comes down to storytelling.â?•

FremantleMedia International, which is handling sales, has, not surprisingly, already begun closing deals ahead of the Venice launch. â??Jude Law plays a hyper-contemporary and conservative pope, revolutionary, a fundamentalist who goes through life with an absolute faith and devotion to God,â?• says Lorenzo Mieli, CEO of FremantleMedia Italy. â??And all the while he continuously poses to himself and to us the question we are all compelled to ask at least once in our lives: What do we mean exactly when we talk about faith and God? Stories and themes like these inevitably involve a wide audience from each country.â?•

Sorrentino agrees with the potential wide appeal of the series. â??Beyond the interest for the Vatican, a closed and mysterious place, the series turns its attention to the Vaticanâ??s inhabitants,â?• he says. â??I think that the audience, regardless of where theyâ??re from, will be captivated by the human and spiritual lives of these people.â?•

And with the American election coming up, Sorrentino believes that the candidates could also heed the advice of *The Young Pope*. â??There is always danger around the corner,â?• he says. â??The private biography of a leader can influence his choices for the collective interest of the people and that these choices could be dangerous and ineffective.â?•

Focus Featuresâ?? $20 Million Gamble

Last year, Focus Features paid a reported $20 million for *Nocturnal Animals*, Tom Fordâ??s sophomore directorial effort.

Now, Focus is planning on betting a big chunk of their Oscar-campaign money on the dark romance based on Austin Wrightâ??s novel *Tony and Susan* and starring Amy Adams and Jake Gyllenhaal. Adams plays an art gallery owner who receives her ex-husbandâ??s violent manuscript in the mail, which she interprets as a threatening tale of revenge and regret. It plays out as a story within a story as Isla Fisher plays Adams in novel form.

Could the L.A.-set noir finally deliver Amy Adams and/or Jake Gyllenhaal their long-awaited Oscars? Focus hopes so, with many more categories to push for. â??The film will be one of the highlights of Venice,â?• says Barbera. â??Both Amy Adams and Jake Gyllenhaal could start an Oscar campaign from Venice, definitely.â?•

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