

Venice film festival: Hollywood looks to Italy for Oscars launchpad

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

By Andrew Pulver

The last two best picture Oscar-winners have premiered at Venice, part of a concerted bid to woo Hollywood that has revitalised the festival. LA-set musical La La Land, opening proceedings this year, is looking for the hat-trick.



Final preparations for the red carpet at Lido. (Photo credit: Claudio Onorati/EPA)

As the summer ends, so begins the autumn film-festival season, more than ever inextricably linked with the end-of-year scrabble for awards that culminates in the Oscars in February 2017. The first shots have been fired, pundits are already talking up potential contenders, and the slow rollout of the actual films has begun. However, no single showcase has proved more talismanic in recent years than the

Venice film festival, which has hosted the world premiere of the best picture Oscar winner for the last two years in succession â?? Spotlight and Birdman â?? and the biggest winner, numerically speaking, the year before that, with Gravity.

This year, Veniceâ??s big pitch for Oscar augury is La La Land, a Los Angeles-set musical starring Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone, and directed by Damien Chazelle as a follow-up to his remarkable jazz-class drama Whiplash; La La Land has been given the prestigious opening-gala slot. Described by the Venice film festivalâ??s director Alberto Barbera as â??a wonderful film, a classical musical, and a marvellous tribute to American cinema from a contemporary perspectiveâ?•, La La Land would appear to have instantly surged into the front rank of awards season contenders. Barbera is diffident as to Veniceâ??s ability to confer automatic Oscar-statuette potential on to his picks â?? â??Iâ??ve been lucky for the last three years; I couldnâ??t have imagined when I first saw Gravity or Birdman they would win all those Oscarsâ?• â?? but admits he has put considerable effort into attracting major Hollywood players in recent years.



Ryan Gossling and Emma Stone in La La Land. (Photo Credit: Dale Robinette/AP)

â??We want Venice to be an important launching pad, the opening of the season, the real beginning of the race for the Oscar.â?• As well as making regular trips to New York and Los Angeles to chat up studio executives and preview material, Barbera says â??we have invested a lot: we renovated the theatres, improved the quality of the screenings, as well as the general location and the services we are able to offer industry visitors.â?• By the latter, he means such initiatives as a fully fledged film market, which has been operating since 2012, and which has morphed into a production and development programme called Venice Production Bridge, or a â??gap-financingâ?• platform for film-makers looking for extra investment.

Barberaâ??s prescience has also proved crucial in Veniceâ??s increasingly effective ability to fight its corner against its direct competitors in the film festival calendar: the boutique event in Telluride, Colorado, which begins on 2 September, and the giant-scale Toronto film festival, which kicks off on 8 September. As recently as 2012, industry observers considered that Venice appeared to be lagging

well behind, trading on its reputation as the worldâ??s oldest festival (having been founded in 1932) but struggling to attract the best films. But now the position is almost completely reversed, with Barbera making the case successfully to Hollywood producers that the extra expense of sending a film to Italy is worth it.

â??Five years ago, the competition with Toronto and Telluride was very strong. For the American majors it was clear that it was easier, and cheaper, to take their films to Toronto. They could make the promotion for their domestic campaign for their films, and start their campaign for the Oscar.â• Veniceâ??s old-world glamour has been transformed into a potent weapon â?? â??all the talent are happy to come to Venice, they like Ciprianiâ??s, the hotels, the food and so on, the red carpet here you cannot get with our competitorsâ• â?? as well as its more selective programme based around the competition for the Golden Lion. â??Itâ??s very different,â• says Barbera, â??from arriving in Toronto in the middle of 300 films, where you risk getting lost in a huge lineup.â•



Michael Fassbender and Alicia Vikander in The Light Between Oceans (Photo credit: Allstar/Touchst

Perhaps even more important than the intra-festival politicking over world premieres is the current wealth of American cinema in general, which means Veniceâ??s wooing of Hollywood is paying off. In Barberaâ??s words: â??This is a very strong period for American cinema â?? [there] are lot of big, big films around.â• La La Land will be joined on the Lido by the likes of The Light Between Oceans, the heartrending weepie starring Michael Fassbender and Alicia Vikander, Terrence Malickâ??s documentary Voyage of Time, Nocturnal Animals, the second film from fashion designer Tom Ford, and Arrival, a first-contact alien sci-fi thriller directed by Denis Villeneuve.

Inevitably, other areas of the film-making universe appear relatively neglected, with Venice unable to command quite the same level of participation from the elite of international auteur directors as Cannes â?? though Barbera is emphatic he is not competing with the venerable French festival staged each May. â??Cannes comes before us in the year. The studios donâ??t like to show a film too far ahead of its release, so Venice is better for the American films that want to come out in the autumn. The films that are ready in the first half of the year go to Cannes: it is a matter of timing.â•

Perhaps more surprising is Veniceâ??s difficult relationship with its domestic industry. Not only do the most venerated contemporary Italian directors â?? Paolo Sorrentino, Nanni Moretti, Matteo Garrone â?? reserve their work primarily for Cannes, but those that do venture to Venice, such as Luca Guadagnino, can receive distinctly chilly receptions: Guadagninoâ??s A Bigger Splash was booed at its premiere last year. Barbera is resigned to what he calls a â??prejudiceâ?• on the part of the Italian film industry who are unwilling, he suggests, to grapple with a hostile press corps. On the other hand, he says he rejects numerous home films for â??not being strong enoughâ?•. A special screening of the first two episodes of Sorrentinoâ??s new TV drama The Young Pope, featuring Jude Law, may go some way to healing the breach.

Barbera may also be playing with fire by programming Hacksaw Ridge, Mel Gibsonâ??s first film as director since a series of public controversies â?? including an anit-semitic outburst during a DUI arrest in 2006 and accusations of abuse against his then-partner Oksana Grigorieva. Hacksaw Ridge is the story of Medal of Honor-winning conscientious objector Desmond T Doss, and Barbera says its inclusion is â??a quality issueâ?•. â??I was worried, of course, for all the reasons you expect, but when I saw the full film, I didnâ??t have any doubts.â?•

- The Venice film festival runs from 31 August-10 September.

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