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## Transcending the "complet" complex and other *contes dramatiques* from Cannes

46<sup>e</sup> edition of the Cannes international Film festival, May 13-24 1993

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## TRANSCENDING THE "COMPLET" COMPLEX AND OTHER *CONTES DRAMATIQUES* FROM CANNES

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At Cannes, as on every street corner where junkies stand on line, there is a code, an etiquette that must be learned. The longer you have to wait, the less important you are. The longer you can keep someone else waiting, the more important you are. And if you can keep someone waiting for a long time and then not even give them what they are waiting for, that's the icing on the cake. Since I have never been a junkie, these lessons were definitely hammered home during my first visit to Cannes as a press representative of *ETC Montréal* to cover the 46<sup>e</sup> Festival International du Film.

I was almost half an hour late for the *Much Ado About Nothing* press conference, which by Cannes Standard Time meant it had barely begun. Because while press screenings at Cannes start right on time, the conferences are almost always delayed as the stars exercise their privilege: assembling in the green room, schmoozing, sipping that last cup of cappuccino, and readying themselves for the imminent explosion of flashbulbs that will greet their descent into the conference chamber. *Much Ado About Nothing*, a very pleasant and charming adaptation from Shakespeare, was a film in competition, and while few expected it to win a Golden Palm, the promised panelists — Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson, Denzel Washington and Keanu Reeves — indicated a semi-glamorous event that would be heavily attended by the press. To guarantee admission, I should have arrived at least twenty minutes in advance of the announced starting time and been ready to wait these designated twenty minutes plus the *de rigueur* delay. If I had the audacity to arrive at the actual announced time (knowing full well that the conference is always delayed), let alone a half hour late, well, good luck. One of those nice Palais guards in their light blue blazers would undoubtedly stop me and intone their favorite phrase, "Complet, monsieur."

"Complet" officially translates into English as "full" or "complete" and should therefore indicate that there is no more room inside. But I knew better, since just the day before I was barred from a complet screening, only to find out later from friends who did make it inside that there were plenty of empty seats. So "complet", I decided, is obviously one of those tricky words that depend heavily on context, on who is saying it and, even more important, to whom it is being said. Vincent Canby and Roger Ebert, often accompanied by Festival representatives who facilitate their every move, never get to hear "complet". Nor do pretty girls from French TV with camera crews in tow. I soon developed a new, empirical, and more useful definition for

"complet". It goes something like this: "You want to come in ? Silly American. You're nobody important, and you haven't been waiting for twenty minutes. Let's hear your story. It better be good."

So as I approached the press conference door, I was ready for the expected confrontation. As soon as the guard said "complet", I looked him right in the eye, lowered my voice to a Jean Gabin growl, and intoned in fractured French but with the total assurance of the damned: "J'étais déjà ici. Je suis parti. Maintenant je retourne. J'ai une place réservée."

I not sure if the guard actually believed me or if he just liked my performance. Perhaps it was the Armani jacket I was wearing. In any case, I was ushered in, took one of the half dozen seats still vacant in the "complet" room, and heard Emma Thompson dish Francis Ford Coppola and Henrik Ibsen and explain her affinity for good wine, as her bespectacled hubby Kenneth Branagh listened on.

I was not always so lucky, at least partly due to the color of my press card. At Cannes, I enjoyed the dubious pleasure of a yellow *carte d'identité* labelled "F. I. F. Media", which is inferior to the various white, pink and blue press cards, and reduces you to the essential status of a boil on the buttocks of the film business. It was rare moment when I was not made conscious of how little my poor yellow card could command: no press mailbox, no entry to market screenings, no entry to many other screenings until all white, pink and blue cardholders had been accommodated.

But why dwell on the negative ? Despite the pernicious caste system of the Festival, its old boy (and old girl) network of connections, and the arbitrariness of its security staff, there was still plenty to see and do at Cannes. Despite the idiot masses of tourists craning for a peek at celebrities or any other passing oddity, which often made passage on the Croisette impossible, there was still the Croisette itself, a glorious palm-lined boulevard skirting the beach and the Rade de Cannes on one side and the wedding cake hotels, cafes and other buildings on the reverse. There was the Old Port behind the Palais des Festivals, and long, winding stairs that climbed up the sides of hills and brought you to the ruins of an old monastery, giving onto spectacular vistas of the city, the bay and the Iles de Lerins. There was the local fast food speciality, the *pain bagnat*, essentially a tuna fish sandwich with lettuce, tomato and onion on fresh bread, but somehow delicious and different here. It made me somewhat resentful of the Festival, which kept me so busy that I could not take the





PHOTO : BART HEIDSEK

*Croisette in Cannes.*

time to enjoy the city at its own, naturally slower pace, when views of the sea would not be obscured by film billboards rented by the square foot, when the Croisette could be traversed with nary a crowd in sight, when you could almost hear the tide gently rocking yachts anchored in the bay off the Carlton Hotel pier.

During the 46<sup>e</sup> festival, a very different beast rocked in the waves off the Carlton: a huge, inflatable Schwarzenegger brandishing his gun skyward, his pneumatic legs striding a barge. Talk about pumped up commodities! This colossus was towed nightly to a safe haven, then reinflated each morning and reestablished at his watchful post. Why all this fuss? Was The Arnold afraid of the dark, or did he merely need to be pumped up once a day? Were the proprietors worried about low flying aircraft? Graffiti vandals? Sea monsters? Limpet mines placed by frogmen under hire by other film companies? We may never know. The Arnold was there to promote *Last Action Hero*, and although the film was not screened publicly at Cannes, perhaps there were private showings, parties, and European distribution deals to be finalized.

All else pales in comparison to a 75 ft. Arnold, even the new Sylvester Stallone film, *Cliffhanger*, which actually did screen at Cannes, out of competition, as part of an AIDS benefit. Directed by Renny Harlin, *Cliffhanger* is the expected action thriller: long on visceral jolts, short on

character, with the exception of John Lithgow's scenery chewing villain. But despite the varied presences of The Arnold and Stallone, Cannes '93 was not at all a Hollywood festival. Only one major studio film, Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (starring Michael Douglas), was in the official competition, but it had already been commercially released in America several months before. Abel Ferrara's *Body Snatchers* and Steven Soderbergh's *King of the Hill*, each inhabiting the middle ground of mini-major/co-production, were also in competition. John McNaughton's *Mad Dog and Glory* (starring Robert DeNiro, Bill Murray and Uma Thurman) had a special screening, out of competition, again following its American release earlier this year. Jim McBride's neo-noir, *The Wrong Man*, starring John Lithgow as a scenery chewing villain (do we detect a trend here?), Rosanna Arquette as his trashy and mostly naked companion, and a sweetly bemused Kevin Anderson on the run for a crime he didn't commit, was screened as part of *Un Certain Regard*. Serving up border town atmospherics, *The Wrong Man* tried in vain to capture the squalid splendor of several of McBride's earlier films, notably *Breathless* and *The Big Easy*. Also at *Un certain regard* was Philip Haas' *The Music of Chance*, based on the Paul Auster book and starring Mandy Patinkin and James Spader. *Music* was in competition for the Camera d'Or, the prize awarded for first features.



But aside from these and the Hughes Brothers' neo-blaxploitation film *Menace II Society*, an exercise in L. A. ultraviolence that screened at a concurrent event, the *Quinzaine des réalisateurs*, this was not an American festival, let alone a Hollywood one. The big studios were obviously unready or unwilling to preview their summer and fall releases — films like Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* — at Cannes. Either the films were still in post production or the major studios had chosen other festivals in which to preview their films, other strategies of promotion that precluded Cannes.

The vacuum left by Hollywood was amply filled by films from Asia and Great Britain, as well as films by women directors, and the prizes awarded at the end of the Cannes Festival reflected this geopolitical shift. Jane Campion's *The Piano*, shot in New Zealand, and starring Holly Hunter, Harvey Keitel and Sam Neill, shared the Golden Palm for Best Film with Chinese director Chen Kaige's *Adieu ma concubine* starring Gong Li, Leslie Cheung and Zhang Fengyi. Britisher Mike Leigh took the best director's prize for *Naked*. *Piano*'s Hunter won best actress, while *Naked*'s David Thewlis took the best actor award. Special jury prizes were awarded to Taiwan's Hou Hsiao Hsien for *The Puppet Master* and to Britain's Ken Loach for *Raining Stones*. The *Caméra d'Or* for best first feature went to Tran Anh Hung for *The Smell of the Green Papaya*, a Vietnamese/French co-production. The only American prizewinner was independent Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes*, a mordantly hilarious cafe dialogue between Iggy Pop and Tom Waits that won for best short film. And Jim didn't even show up at Cannes this year to claim his prize.

I arrived in Cannes on the third day of the Festival, one day too late to see *Naked*, but there was already a buzz up and down the Croisette that this was a film to watch, a strong contender for a prize. However, once Jane Campion's *The Piano* screened, the smart money started to line up behind this quirky, feminist period piece, featuring a remarkable performance by Holly Hunter as a mute Scottish bride who is sent off, lock, stock and piano, for an arranged marriage in the 19th century New Zealand wilderness. With nary a word of dialogue, Hunter manages to imbue her character with fierce determination, sensuality and ultimate transcendence. She communicates through her piano, and touches the heart of a local, illiterate Anglo gone native, played with compelling tenderness by Harvey Keitel, in a marked departure from his usual casting as good cop/bad cop/mean streets dude.

For two days, *Piano* seemed to hold sway over a host of competitors for the *Palme d'Or*. Over the Taviani brothers *Fiorile*, a sumptuous, romantic but slowly unfolding

historical drama that examines the cursed legacy of a proud Tuscan family from the French Revolution to the present. Over another Italian entry, *Magnificat* by Pupi Avanti, set in a 10th century town over Easter Week, and following the coarse rituals of medieval Christianity as a number of inhabitants set forth on a religious pilgrimage. And certainly over the disappointment of Wim Wenders' *Far Away, So Close*, the two hour 45 minute non-sequel to *Wings of Desire* (1987) which, for the first hour I was able to sit through, recapitulated Wenders' pensive, dour, sick man of Europe point of view. *Far Away, So Close* received generally negative, if not hostile, notices in the local press. Perhaps it is because we expect so much from Wenders that we feel betrayed if his work is dense, obscure and unapproachable. I was not happy with the part of the film I saw in Cannes, but I plan to give it another look when it is released in America.

But *Piano*'s seemingly undisputed reign came to an abrupt end with the screening of Chen Kaige's *Adieu Ma Concubine*. A three hour epic that presides over 50 years of China's tumultuous history — the warlords, the Japanese occupation, the civil war and Mao's Cultural Revolution — as a backdrop for the sexual triangle among two actors in the Beijing Opera and a concubine, the film masterfully mixes the personal with the historical, the theatrical with real life. Taking its title from an 18th century opera that ends in the suicide of an emperor and his concubine, but based more directly on the 1985 best seller by Hong Kong author Lillian Lee, *Concubine* stunningly recreates the exquisite spectacle of Beijing Opera song, dance and acrobatics, contains brilliantly orchestrated crowd scenes, and delicately treats a homosexual love affair, a subject that until recently could not be presented in Chinese cinema.

The eventual sharing of the *Palme d'Or* by *Adieu Ma Concubine* and *The Piano* indicates that the Cannes jury, if not actually swayed by local press and public opinion, at least shares some of the same aesthetic criteria. This year, the jury included director Louis Malle (as jury president), actors Gary Oldman and Claudia Cardinale, and Yugoslav director Emir Kusturica.

I only saw one Canadian film at Cannes, Alliance Communication's production of *I Love A Man In Uniform*, directed by David Wellington, and starring Tom McCamus in an eerie psychological study of a banker who gets a small part in a TV cop drama but takes his role a bit too seriously. He brings the uniform home and starts to play cop in the city streets, eventually killing someone. The streets are very clean, so it must be Toronto. The film is morbidly obsessional, clinical, and a little dry. Luckily, the party that Alliance threw on the Carlton beach was not dry at all.

Speaking of parties, I attended another one on the Carlton beach for *Much Ado About Nothing*, but by the time



Michael Douglas and Barbara Hershey in *Falling Down*.

I arrived all the stars had come and gone, with the exception of Denzel Washington, who was beating a hasty retreat. So I was not able to discuss wines and Henrik Ibsen with Emma Thompson.

Other notable parties at Cannes (notable in that they invited me and then let me in): a barbecue for Philip Haas, director of *The Music Of Chance*, at a villa in Cagnes-sur-mer; the five year anniversary bash for EFDO, The European Film Distribution Organization, at the Royal Bar on the Croisette; the Moving Pictures party down the coast at La Napoule, held in an old seaside castle with a cast of thousands; the Scandanavian Producers' *fish fête* at their headquarters on the Croisette; and the buffet at the American Pavilion which followed a panel discussion on filmmaking in New York presided over by Richard Brick, Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre & Broadcasting.

Before leaving for Cannes, I was advised that the cream of Europe's pickpockets and cat burglars descend upon the Festival for twelve days of easy pickings, and each year someone you know is robbed. So I took special care to lock the doors and windows before leaving my Cannes

apartment, and was always on my guard in crowded situations. Commissioner Brick, a New York native like myself, was possibly not as careful. Commenting on New York's reputation as a high crime area, which is sometimes cited by European producers as a reason for not shooting in New York locations, Brick noted that he has never been robbed in all his years in the city, but that on his first night in Cannes his hotel room was ripped off.

I was lucky, I guess. On my last day in Cannes, depressed that I would soon be leaving the adventure, the screenings, the parties, the glorious Mediterranean sunshine, and a number of new friends, I was cheered by one fact. As I packed my bags, I noticed that everything was "complet". And when I say complet, dear reader, I mean "complet".

STEVEN KAPLAN