

Critic's Notebook

## New York Film Festival Revives Its Offerings

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Melinda Sue Gordon/Tempest Production

Tom Conti, Helen Mirren, David Strathairn, Alan Cumming and Chris Cooper in Julie Taymor's "Tempest," the festival's official centerpiece.

The quickest way to measure the breadth of this year's revitalized New York Film Festival is to compare its two "social" movies. David Fincher's sensational, hyperkinetic "Social Network," which opened the festival, feels like a once-in-a-generation movie that could affect Hollywood, much as the Facebook phenomenon whose creation it chronicles has rocked modern communications. "Film Socialisme" is the latest cryptic essay on language, semiotics and film technology by Jean-Luc Godard, the French New Wave prophet who turns 80 in December. Avaricious young hotshots and a grumpy old master: that the festival accords them equal respect is a sign of its renewed vigor.

Between these extremes, in the festival's second week, are films like Julie Taymor's feminist take on Shakespeare's "Tempest"; Olivier Assayas's "Carlos"; and Charles Ferguson's Wall Street exposé, "Inside Job." They strengthen the connections between quality movies and the real world that were frayed by last year's overly solemn and misanthropic lineup.

On a conceptually loftier plane are "Certified Copy," by the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami; the austere three-hour "Aurora," from Cristi Puiu of Romania; and "The Strange Case of

Angelica,” a whimsical, supernatural fable from Manoel de Oliveira, the 101-year-old Portuguese master.

“The Social Network,” which opens commercially on Friday, is an up-to-the-minute Darwinian fable about the survival of the brainiest that rushes headlong on a tsunami of snapping verbiage. This tour de force of directing (Mr. Fincher), screenwriting (Aaron Sorkin) and acting (Jesse Eisenberg, Rooney Mara, Andrew Garfield and Justin Timberlake) is so confident that its shadow extends over the entire festival; it is the first time in years that an American selection has loomed so imposingly.

“Film Socialisme,” the most esoteric entry in the second week, is anti-Hollywood and (despite fleeting appearances by Patti Smith) anti-star. A three-part collage of sounds and images with a tragic view of history, it is a pointed exercise in word and image association whose first and best section takes place aboard a cruise ship.

If its covert editorializing about any number of hot political and social topics were more explicit, “Film Socialisme” would probably generate howls of outrage from many corners. But it leaves you to fill in the blanks between what is implied in its abbreviated subtitles and what is actually shown and said. At the very least, it has many indelible images: a llama leashed to a gas pump; a young boy painting a reproduction of a Renoir canvas; and arresting shots of churning seas as a ship of fools plows Mediterranean waters.

The festival’s official centerpiece, Ms. Taymor’s version of “The Tempest,” is a steady-handed personal reading of Shakespeare’s late masterpiece, starring Helen Mirren as Prospero, renamed Prospera. The change of gender sends seismic reverberations through the play, altering its power dynamics. Ariel (Ben Whishaw) is an androgynous, semi-transparent sprite who leaves digitized afterimages as he flits about, and Caliban (Djimon Hounsou) is a proud, surly African.

With an all-star cast that also includes David Strathairn, Alfred Molina, Alan Cumming, Chris Cooper, Tom Conti, Russell Brand and Reeve Carney, it displays an acute eye for class differences among the shipwrecked visitors to Prospera’s island. Ms. Mirren’s sorceress, for all her imperiousness, is a more benign and vulnerable figure than the typical male iteration of the character; she makes you all the more aware of the treacherous power games that took place before the play. Throughout, “The Tempest” maintains a deliberately theatrical ambience.

It is one of two “event” films in the festival’s second week. The other, the 319-minute “Carlos,” is an absorbing, semi-fictionalized portrait of the Venezuelan-born Marxist terrorist Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, aka Carlos the Jackal (the charismatic Venezuelan actor Édgar Ramírez). The movie, made for French television, barely addresses the inner life of its grandiose protagonist and glosses over the political evolution of a man, still alive in a French prison, who joined the cause of radical Palestinians in the early 1970s and branched out from there.

In following this rise and fall, “Carlos” contrasts the romanticism of post-’60s political terrorism in Europe and South America with the nihilism of today’s Islamists. It suggests a reason that one style of fundamentalist terrorism (Marxist) has given way to another (religious): once the Berlin Wall fell, Carlos’s particular brand of political violence quickly lost its mystique. The most brilliant set piece reconstructs one of his most spectacular stunts, carried out in December 1975, when he raided an OPEC conference in Vienna and took oil ministers hostage.

While the film grants him a certain glamour and sexual magnetism, he emerges as a sloppy, narcissistic misogynist: a dangerous fool.

“Carlos” is being released in New York on Oct. 15 in both its three-part version (at the IFC Center) and in a 2 ½-hour abridgement (at Lincoln Plaza). The three-part version will appear before that, starting on Oct. 11, on the Sundance Channel.

The recent financial crisis has been so raked over that you might well wonder if there is anything left to say. But “Inside Job,” an infuriating documentary by Mr. Ferguson, whose “No End in Sight” is a critically acclaimed documentary about the events leading up to the Iraq war, assembles the pieces of the Wall Street debacle into a persuasive and damning portrait of 30 years of self-enriching, public-be-damned collusion within the financial sector.

Mr. Ferguson’s view is identical to that of the economist William K. Black, who in an interview on “Bill Moyers Journal” in April described Wall Street ideology as “criminogenic,” financial chief executives as “literal sociopaths” and business schools as “fraud factories.” The film devotes special attention to the covert financial ties between academia and the banking industry. The evasive, disingenuous responses to questions given by several shifty-eyed interviewees make you shudder.

The diabolically self-reflexive comedy “Certified Copy,” Mr. Kiarostami’s first feature made outside Iran, is a meditation on art reproductions that “copies” elements of Roberto Rossellini’s 1954 film, “Journey to Italy,” with Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders. Juliette Binoche and the British baritone William Shimell play an antiques dealer and an author, who after meeting in Tuscany pretend to be a bickering couple, married for 15 years, who have returned to the site of their wedding. As the game intensifies, you wonder if they are actually married. Ms. Binoche, whose performance won her a best-actress award at this year’s Cannes Film Festival, warms up a film that is almost too smart for its own good.

Riding the wave of Romanian cinematic miserabilism, the intimidating and elliptical “Aurora” stars Mr. Puiu as a tightly wound industrial worker in Bucharest who snaps and goes on a murderous spree. “Aurora” is much less accessible than Mr. Puiu’s last film, the social realist masterpiece “The Death of Mr. Lazarescu,” which followed a dying man through the Bucharest hospital system. Instead of being explosively melodramatic, its acts of violence are incidental blips of rage against a bleak social environment.

An even more extreme miserabilist exercise is “My Joy,” the grim fictional feature debut of the documentarian Sergei Loznitsa. The story follows a Russian truck driver on a perilous route that lands him in an impoverished rural hell. The story soon fragments into a sequence of disconnected vignettes (both past and present) that portray the human condition as a Hobbesian nightmare in which gratuitous cruelty is the dominant behavior. You will not forget a scene in which the camera studies the mean, soulless faces of villagers milling in a town square.

On a somewhat lighter note, “Oki’s Movie,” the 11th film by Hong Sang-soo, from South Korea, is a small, self-referential comedy in four chapters that explores the relationships of an attractive young woman who discreetly juggles two lovers: a middle-aged film teacher and his star pupil. This blurred mixture of autobiography and fiction is a wickedly observant study of male insecurity, jealousy and vanity.

A special event on Wednesday and Thursday will be a rare showing of the black-and-white Mexican Revolution trilogy by Fernando de Fuentes. “Prisoner 13” (1933), “El Compadre Mendoza” (1934) and “Let’s Go With Pancho Villa” (1936) are classic stories of wartime folly in which credulously loyal soldiers are tossed to the wolves by greedy, vainglorious officers.

“The Strange Case of Angelica” seems to look down from above on the turbulence in the rest of the festival’s selections. From Mr. de Oliveira’s perspective, even Mr. Godard must seem like a youngster. The movie, steeped in sounds of church bells and Chopin piano music, observes a photographer hired to take pictures of the corpse of a beautiful young woman. He falls in love with her image, which comes alive in his imagination and beckons him to a better world where angels dwell. Like its ghostly namesake, the movie gazes from on high with a Mona Lisa smile.

**The 48th New York Film Festival, presented by the Film Society of Lincoln Center, continues through Oct. 10. All films are at Alice Tully Hall and the Walter Reade Theater, 165 West 65th Street; (212) 721-6500, [filmlinc.com](http://filmlinc.com).**