



PHOTOCALL: US actress Christina Hendricks poses for photographers during the shoot for *Lost River* at the 67th annual Cannes Film Festival, in Cannes. The movie is presented in the section A Certain Regard of the festival which runs till May 25.

Cinema and crime keep Cannes Fest on thrilling edge

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

One of the most interesting aspects of the Cannes Film Festival is the way cinema plays out on the streets of this picturesque Riviera. As movies on crime and romance unspool in the plush auditoriums, love and passion, robberies and raids keep the city on a thrilling edge.

Mobile phones vanish in the wink of an eye, wallets are picked with daring precision and precious jewellery disappears from the securely locked rooms of big hotels. Till one asks, does cinema copy life? Or, does life imitate films? We would never now, would we?

Last year, as the Cannes Festival screened its slate of films, thieves broke into star hotels in the city and escaped with the prized jewellery that some of the world's top actresses had hired to wear during the Red Carpet galas. Oh, but have we not seen this innumerable times on the screen?

Again, it was last year, when gun shots were heard on the Cannes Croisette as the French Riviera was celebrating cinema. It was not clear who had pulled the trigger, but

the incident was reminiscent of one of those Allan Dillon thriller movies set in Cannes.

This time, as the 67th edition of the world's most renowned Film Festival was about to kick off with Oliver Dahan's biopic of Grace Kelly, *Grace of Monaco*, two masked men – in truly filmi style – shot an heiress, Helene Pastor (77), in her head and heart as she stepped out of a hospital. The spot was a crowded public road in Monaco, the tiny principality 30 minutes away from Cannes and whose war with France's De Gaulle administration in the late 1960s was the core plot of the opening film.

The heiress is a close friend of Monaco's reigning Prince Albert, whose mother, Grace (that ravishingly beautiful actress from Hollywood who married Prince Rainier III), had spent her lifetime trying to burnish Monaco's image. This effort continues: On Monday evening, movie-makers and mediamen assembled at Monaco, where a dinner sponsored by several organisations tried to push Kelly's dream of a better, a more respectable Monaco.

But hidden beneath Kelly's passionate desire has been a notoriously seamy side. The *Hollywood Reporter* ran a story in one of its Cannes dailies that said: "But Monaco's opulent surface has for decades hidden a

darker side with sinister elements – money laundering, an Italian (and now Russian) mafia presence and residents who include international arms dealers.

Not surprisingly, given the silence that long has surrounded criminal activities in the South of France, nobody has been arrested yet for the Pastor shooting, no one even is talking, and residents have been left shaken.

Says one Monaco resident who lives in the fabled seafront principality for six months out of every year for tax purposes, "It's a huge shock for everybody here, but at the same time people aren't saying much. It's like we don't want to look at the reality that one of us almost got their face blown off."

Joel Stratte-McClure, who covered Monaco for *People* magazine in the late '70s and early '80s when Grace and her daughters, Caroline and Stephanie, were tabloid staples, adds, "As usual, the fantasy about Monaco has gotten all the press. It's always the underside of paradise that's hidden from view."

There are yet no firm clues to the brazen daylight murder, but in a truly cinematic style a 43-year-old man was arrested when he tried extorting millions from the Pastor family in exchange for leads.

The question now is, was the Italian mafia behind the murder or was it Russian. But, the Pastors, who have a firm grip over Monaco's real estate dealings, have many enemies. And Prince Albert is a weak ruler, unable to stem the rise of the Russian mafia.

Monaco, of course, remains silent over the gruesome attack on the heiress, and journalists asking inconvenient questions find themselves in hostile environment. British writer Robert Lacey, whose 1994 biography, *Grace*, is about to be reissued, stayed in Monaco for only a week when trying to uncover information about Kelly for his book. "People were terrified when I

started asking questions," he says. "The fear was palpable. Monaco is not what you see in the films."

Poor Grace Kelly, who died in a road accident close to her palace in 1982, would be so unhappy if the Monaco she made her home was always veering towards debauchery and crime that the rich perpetrated. Her own children have often been embroiled in shame and scandal.

Away from Monaco and its palace intrigues, one heard the tragic story of 300 Nigerian schoolgirls being kidnapped by a radical group called Boko Haram. Incredible as it may sound, a first feature by the Mauritanian director, Abderrahmane Sissako, *Timbuktu*, screened as part of Cannes Competition, is all about fundamentalism. It is a collage of people living in one corner of Mali who face escalating violence committed by Islamic rebels.

Women are asked to not just cover their heads, but also their hands. "But how am I going to sell fish with my gloves on," asks a distraught vendor of sea food. A couple is stoned to death. Music is banned, and people are not encouraged to walk on the streets. And like the opening and closing shots of a frightened deer running for its dear life and a young girl chased similarly, the citizens of Mali lead tortured lives.

The story of *Timbuktu* is based on a real incident which took place some years ago, when Muslim extremists brandishing guns made life hell. But such horrors continue – as we have seen in the kidnap of schoolgirls. Intelligent cinema often holds a mirror to such barbarity, evoking debates and discussions. And Cannes has plenty of such pictures to offer.

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