

Cannes comes alive with George Clooney and Ken Loach

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INDICTMENT: I, Daniel Blake presents a moving portrait of what a stubborn bureaucracy can do to men and women as they struggle through joblessness and poverty.



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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Can the Cannes Film Festival ever be without its controversies. No, never, and we have seen this since its inception in 1946. In its early years, Hollywood starlets dropped their tops to rush into the arms of Hollywood hunks hoping against hope that the cameras would capture these scandal stories, which in turn will get them all the publicity in the world.

Later, Cannes would see movies from forbidden lands being smuggled in pen drives tucked into cakes that would finally appear on the screen.

And in recent years, celebrated auteurs would make statements in their press conferences that would upset half the world!

This year, in what may be somewhat discomfoting to some, Hollywood star George Clooney — whose work, Jodie Foster-helmed Money Monster played at the Festival last week — told a crowded press conference soon after the screening that Donald Trump would not win the US presidential election.

"There's not going to be a President Donald Trump," he said in a voice that appeared so confident. He was answering a question about the possible scenario following a Trump win. "Fear is not going to drive our country. We're not afraid of Muslims or immigrants or women. We're not going to be afraid of anything."

Money Monster is a gripping hostage drama, satirically set in the America that was reeling under the financial meltdown. The work also stars Pretty Woman's Julia Roberts and Skins star

Jack O'Connell, and narrates the story of a financial 'pundit' Lee Gates (Clooney), who along with his TV show director (Roberts), is held hostage by a man (O'Connell), who was devastated after losing his entire savings that he invested on a tip given by Gates.

At the extremely lively press conference, Clooney also lambasted cable news networks for letting their content slip into "infotainment" — a move which he felt helped Trump to reach where he was today.

"There's a great disaster in the way we inform ourselves now," Clooney remarked. "Trump is actually a result in many ways of many of the news programmes that didn't follow up and ask tough questions. Their ratings go up because they can just show an empty podium and a caption saying 'Donald Trump is about to speak'."

Clooney — credited with a superb film that he himself directed and acted in, *Good Night, and Good Luck* (about Edward R Murrow's analytical takedown of McCarthyism) — said television broadcasters had forgotten that "news was never designed to be immensely profitable, but was meant to inform".

"*Money Monster* talks about the evolution of what has become the cross between news and entertainment. It's become a big problem," quipped Clooney. "News stopped being a loss leader — you were never going to make money on news, you were actually going to just inform people. There was other programming that would make money."

Jodie Foster, who was also at the press conference, had come to Cannes five years ago with *The Beaver*, a romantic tale starring Mel Gibson — a man who learns to express himself with the help of a beaver hand puppet after he has had a breakdown. Foster first appeared at Cannes as a 12-year-old to promote Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* — which won the Palm d'Or. In *Money Monster*, Julia Roberts essays an edgy TV producer who has to keep controlling her star, Gates — a man in a show called *Money Monster* who gives stock picks and pep talk, even dances a bit, but often goes off the script.

During one such show Gates pushes a company whose shares plummet causing a loss of \$800 million to investors. One of them is a truck driver, Kyle Budwell (O'Connell) — who slips into the studio and takes Gates hostage at gun point. Budwell even forces Gates to wear a suicide bomber vest. Budwell wants Gates to apologise for messing up the lives of ordinary people, and the nerve-wracking drama unfolds live on television that is watched by millions all over the world.

Another movie that gripped me was acclaimed British director Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* — a moving portrait of what a stubborn bureaucracy can do to men and women as they struggle through joblessness and poverty.

Based on extensive research and interviews by the screenwriter, Paul Laverty, Loach's work focuses on a fictional story, that of Daniel Blake. He is a middle aged widower in North East England, who finds after a heart attack that he cannot work or get State benefits. And his painful experiences are narrated with ruthless starkness in a film that is a strong indictment of all that is wrong with the UK today.

Though *I, Daniel Blake* may seem somewhat exaggerated and one can predict how it would end, there is no denying that it is a work which causes pain. With stand-up comic Dave Johns as Daniel Blake and Hayley Squires as Katie, the single mother of two children who is relocated to a government flat in Newcastle with its cheaper standards of living, Loach's movie takes us right into the storm of bureaucratic obstinacy and unfeeling attitude.

The film is filled with scenes where we see the helplessness of the man who after his illness is asked by his doctor not to do to carpentry, which is his profession. Asked to sustain with the help of a job seeker's allowance that he can hope to get only by filling up an endless number of forms on the net, Blake just cannot do that. He has no computer and no smartphone, and every time he tries filling his form on a computer in a public library, he fails.

Life does become a little cheerful after he meets Katie, and he is perfectly happy playing grandfather to her two children, helping them with their chores and fixing up things in their

modest flat. Katie is suffering as well, trying to find a job, and in desperation she takes up something that is certainly not a dignified way of living but will put food on the table. Loach paints the grimness of a working class life in England with all its pain and pathos. There is one mortifying scene where a hungry Katie faces utter humiliation as she is caught shoplifting. This is what hunger can do, and one is reminded of what Charles Dickens wrote in Bleak House: "...what the poor are to the poor is little known, excepting to themselves and God".

The movie tells us that such degrading poverty can happen even in a wealthy nation like Britain.

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