

Miniature men in Downsizing to herald Venice Film Fest

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A scene from Downsizing. The film imagines what might happen if, as a solution to over-population, Norwegian scientists discover how to shrink humans to five inches tall and propose a 200-year global transition from big to small.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The 74th edition of the Venice Film Festival opens today, August 30, with Alexander Payne's *Downsizing*. Set to roll 11 days of cinema from many many countries, the Festival is the oldest in the world, predating its more illustrious compatriot at Cannes, and is located on the quaint little island of Lido, which overlooks mainland Venice's stunning San Marco Square with its tall spire and churches rising majestically from the ground.

The Italian Fascist leader, Benito Mussolini, who founded the Festival, had two reasons to get cinema going in Venice. One, the medium would serve as an excellent platform for his politically-charged documentaries that propagated his ideology and also that of his ally, Adolf Hitler. Two, the Festival coming at the end of the summer holiday season would boost falling tourism and hotel occupancy.

The Festival for many years managed to fulfil both of Mussolini's aspirations – in fact, angering, at one point, the French, who left the Festival midway in a huff because of its brazen leaning towards Italian political fare. The French later opened their own festival at Cannes.

However, today with 3,000 journalists and many more thousands of others thronging Venice, hotels find patronage all right. But this is normally confined to Lido, with the tourist flow to main Venice already on a shutdown mode. So, it is easy to get inexpensive accommodation on the mainland with almost round the clock boat service between a couple of points there and the Lido. The boats in fact arrive just behind the Palazzo del Cinema, the main venue where all the action happens – the Red Carpet galas, the stars in attendance and the movies, invariably a delightful selection.

Downsizing is also a science fiction like *Gravity* – which heralded the Festival a few years ago and which spoke about two astronauts (George Clooney and Sandra Bullock) getting lost in the dark, dark space.

Here is what the Festival says about *Downsizing* in its brochure: "Downsizing imagines what might happen if, as a solution to over-population, Norwegian scientists discover how to shrink humans to five inches tall and propose a 200-year global transition from big to small. People soon realise how much further money goes in a miniaturised world, and with the promise of a better life, everyman Paul Safranek and wife Audrey decide to abandon their stressed lives in Omaha in order to get small and move to a new downsized community—a choice that triggers life-changing adventures."

In a note Payne writes: "The last thing I want to write is a 'director's statement. Antonioni used to protest, 'Don't you realise that anything I say will diminish, rather than enhance, your experience of the film?' So I'll keep it brief. I make comedies, and this idea came from my co-writer Jim Taylor and his brother musing about how much better people could live if they were able to shrink – how big their houses could be in such little space, how cheap food would be, and so on. When I proposed to Jim that we treat the idea as a panacea for over-population and climate change, the premise soon revealed itself as a marvellous prism through which we could look at many things that interest, amuse and disgust us about the modern world. Now I've said too much!"

Sounds fascinating and with Payne's drama having on its cast such fabulous actors as Matt Damon, Christoph Waltz, Hong Chau and Kristen Wiig, the movie is bound to grip us.

And, it is quite, quite possible that *Downsizing* would be part of next year's Oscars race. In fact, it is not the Cannes Film Festival, but Venice which has in recent years become the most important launchpad for every Oscar aspirant. This year, George Clooney with his *Suburbicon*, Darren Aronofsky with *Mother* and Payne are some who are tipped to get into the Academy Awards.

In fact, Damon has scored a double whammy this year by also appearing in Clooney's *Suburbicon* – which is written by brothers Ethan and Joel Coen, who gave us gems like *Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men* and *Inside Llewn Davis*. *Suburbicon* is a period piece set in the 1950s and talks about a peaceful suburban community which is shattered by a home invasion.

Aronofsky's (who chaired the Venice Competition jury in 2011) *Mother* has Jennifer Lawrence in a psychological thriller. The work created a scandal of sorts when it released a terrifying poster – on Mother's Day – of Lawrence holding her "bloodied heart".

Also to be taken note of will be Guillermo del Toro – whose movie on the Cold War, *The Shape of Water* (with Sally Hawkins), will compete with 20 others for the prestigious Golden Lion.

Britain's *Lean on Pete* (adapted from Willy Vlautin's novel) will also vie for the Golden Lion – narrating a story about a young boy and his affection for an incapacitated race horse. Some of the others in this top category will be the Japanese helmer, Hirokazu Koreeda, with his crime adventure, *The Third Murder*, French auteur Abdellatif Kechiche's (who gave us *Blue is the Warmest Colour*) *Mektoub My Love*, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (Frances McDormand and directed by Martin McDonagh), and Paulo Virzi's comedy, *The Leisure Seeker*, starring Helen Mirren and Donald Sutherland.

Outside the Competition, the Festival will offer films like *The Lunchbox*, Ritesh Batra's *Our Souls at Night* (with Robert Redford and Jane Fonda), Stephen Frears' *Victoria and Abdul* (which will have Judi Dench reprising her role as Queen Victoria two decades after starring as the monarch in *Mrs Brown* along with Ali Fazal) and *Loving Pablo*, a biopic of Pablo Escobar starring Javier Bardem as a drug kingpin. The Festival will close with Takeshi Kitano's *Outrage Coda*, a Yakuza thriller from Japan.

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