

Another view from Venice: Of love, war and the Pope

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Jude Law in The Young Pope.



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By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The three most important European film festivals have always something unique to offer. In my long years at Cannes and in Venice — a few at Berlin — I have always found a certain magical spark in the movies they presented. This year, Venice was no exception, and I conclude the column I began last week by talking about a few more of the films I loved.

The highly anticipated Jude Law work, *The Young Pope*, certainly left me thirsting for more. The Italian helmer, Paolo Sorrentino, who has often been described as a modern-day Fellini, presented two of the 10 episodes from a series he made for television. I wish he had given us more. The two parts were scintillating and just did not look like something made for the small screen — an area the director (known for *The Great Beauty* and *Youth*) was stepping into for the first time.

To begin with, who would have thought that Jude Law, that British actor, would someday play an American Pope in an Italian-directed movie. As Pius XIII, Law is an American Pope, the youngest in the history of the Vatican, the first American ever there, in *The Young Pope*. From a cafe-keeper in Wong Kar-wai's 2007 hauntingly romantic *My Blueberry Nights* to Sherlock Holmes' questioning companion, Dr Watson, Jude Law's performance graph has been quite amazing. One also saw Law rubbing shoulders with Michael Caine in *Sleuth* — as an unemployed actor who runs off with the wife of a rich novelist.

Law's Pope seemed no less scandalous. In the opening sequence, the Pope walks to the balcony at the Vatican and addresses a mammoth crowd waiting to hear him. And he advocates freedom, sexual freedom. He advocates masturbation and abortion. But it turns out

he was dreaming!

Sorrentino's film while purporting to be satire on the Vatican, very cleverly talks about all those issues which the Papal power has been soundly criticised. Sorrentino is known to be as controversial as Fellini once was, and his *The Young Pope* may well be intensely disliked by many.

In direct contrast to a recent Nanni Moretti movie, *We Have A Pope* — where a nervous, self-doubting Michel Piccoli refuses to take office and runs away, Sorrentino's work has the Pope as arrogant and destructive. He is just 47 on the screen, and probably a lot more immature than what the Vatican would have expected out of a Pope. One awaits the other eight episodes.

The Festival's range of cinema was just lovely, and I was transported from The Vatican to Japan, from the tranquil environs of the Papal State to the battlegrounds of World War II. Mel Gibson's film, *Hacksaw Ridge*, is a conventional, old-world story about a war hero that one has seen in a work like *Von Ryan's Express* — where Ryan is played by that great actor we called Frank Sinatra. There have been other war movies like *The Dirty Dozen*, *Battle of the Bulge* and *Where Eagle's Dare*, which spoke about the heroic exploits of the Allied forces during World War II.

Gibson — after his rough times that included his anti-semitic outbursts — made a comeback after 10 years with *Hacksaw Ridge* — which describes the fierce battle that American troops fought post-Pearl Harbour — a do-or-die push to capture Okinawa which would have ensured their victory over Japan.

In the kind of troubled times which America is passing through, *Hacksaw Ridge* tells us how easy it once was to be defined as a patriot. During the war, the Pacific region was a scene of devastation and destruction that saw hundreds of thousands of men dead in bloody battles. The fight for Okinawa alone in 1945 saw 82,000 men killed. And Gibson's work captures this conflict as no other film has. John Woo's *Windtalkers* in 2002 and Terrance Malick's *The Thin Red Line* earlier in 1998 pale in comparison to *Hacksaw Ridge*. The battle scenes here are mind-blowing, and look so eerily real that one felt one was watching the actual war from a stand high above.

Andrew Garfield — who plays the hero, Desmond Doss — is brilliant in a role that is gripped by a moral question. He is poorly educated, a Seventh-Day Adventist, who will not work on a Sunday even if the enemy were to be peering into his bunker. Hailing from rural Virginia, his principle is clear — he is okay with war, but not killing, and so he would not so much as touch a rifle. That would go against his faith. But he is prepared to go into the war zone as a medic — never mind the humiliation and the prejudice he has to endure from his regiment.

But Gibson shows us how Doss even while refusing to handle a gun, goes into the field, saving 75 men single-handedly in what became a heroic record. Doss was extraordinarily brave — belying his regiment's dig of him being a coward.

And, then there was a love story — set against the backdrop of World War I. The immensely popular French auteur, Francois Ozon, came to Venice this year with *Frantz* — told through black and white images.

The Yves Saint Laurent star, Pierre Niney, plays a disturbed French soldier, Adrien — who journeys to a provincial German town — which is still extremely hostile to the Allies — to lay flowers on the grave of a 24-year-old soldier, Frantz. A German, he had died in the trenches fighting French forces. Adrien's presence perplexes Frantz's grieving fiancée, Anna, (German newcomer Paula Beer) and also gets the whole town, unable to get over German defeat and casualties in the war, angered. Franz turns out to be a sentimental love story about Adrien and Anna, and how they pass through a set of lies and deceits.

One of the high points of the movie is Ozon's effortless way of keeping melodrama out of his narrative, and he tells us how political and personal questions can be effectively examined within a moral framework.

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