

Yet again, a Woody Allen works opens Cannes today

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A scene from *Cafe Society*, which will open the Cannes Film Festival.



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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

When Woody Allen's *Cafe Society* unrolls the 69th edition of the Cannes Film Festival today, it will be a coup of sorts for the New York based auteur, whose two earlier movies have opened the French Riviera event. His *Hollywood Ending* got the opening night honours in 2002, and his *Midnight in Paris* in 2011.

Cafe Society, which will play Out of Competition, tells the delightful story of a young man who arrives in Hollywood in the 1930s to work in films. He falls in love and finds himself swept off his feet by the vibrant cafe culture that France today is well-known for. Not quite America, not any longer.

Cafe Society will have two rising stars from Hollywood's new generation, Kristen Stewart and Jesse Eisenberg along with acclaimed actors like Blake Lively, Parker Posey and Steve Carell. Both Stewart and Eisenberg have been at Cannes before. We saw him in the 2012 *On the Road* by Walter Salles and again in the 2014 *Clouds of Sils Maria* by Olivier Assayas. She starred in Joachim Trier's *Louder than Bombs*, which was part of the 2015 Competition.

Apart from inaugurating the Festival twice, Allen has had a long association with Cannes that dates back to 1979, when his *Manhattan* played there. His last work, *Irrational Man*, was part of the Festival's official line-up in 2015. Between these two, Allen had contributed as many as 12 movies to the Festival basket.

Wearing several caps — writer, comedian, actor, director and producer — Allen was born in New York on December 1 1935 to a Jewish family of Russian-Austrian descent. A prolific

creator of cinema for the past four decades since the 1960s with at least one film a year, Allen is also a renowned jazz clarinetist.

Allen's directorial debut came in 1966 with *What's Up Tiger Lily?* Soon after, he started to act in his own movies — winning four Oscars (for works like *Annie Hall* in 1978 and *Midnight in Paris* in 2012) out of the 20 occasions he was nominated.

Manhattan, *Match Point*, *Take the Money and Run*, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Deconstructing Harry* are among Allen's other successes.

As the 12-day Festival rolls on along the shimmering blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea, film title after film title will flash across a multitude of screens. One of them which is part of the prestigious 21-strong Competition vying for the Palm d'Or will be the renowned Iranian auteur, Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman*.

The Salesman revolves around a couple whose relationship turns violent because of societal pressures. Long-time Farhadi collaborators, Taraneh Alidoosti — who played the eponymous role in *About Elly* — and Shahab Hosseini — who appeared in Farhadi's Berlin Golden Bear and Oscar-winning *A Separation* — co-star as the warring couple.

Farhadi, who last came to Cannes in 2013 with his *The Past*, seems to be specialising in marital rift. I saw *A Separation* thrice, and seemed never to get tired of it, primarily for two reasons. It is brilliant cinematically — profound performances, an unobtrusive camera and splendid editing that made one just sink into the lives of the characters. Two, Farhadi is so damn critical of Iranian society, but in such a covert way that the mullahs could not just figure it out. This is what one calls a punch that lands on your face, and you do not even see it coming or even perhaps feel the hurt. That is what masterful cinema is all about, saying all you want to, but in a controlled and dignified manner.

And Farhadi does this through a neat story whose dramatis personae seem to be tearing apart age-old beliefs and tradition without anybody even realising it. They appear to be writing with invisible ink, the letters waiting to emerge after a hot iron passes over them.

Farhadi's tale of marital discord slips into the private chambers of a married couple, squabbling over their own future and that of their only daughter. In the movie, the wife wants to divorce her husband, because he refuses to immigrate with her and their daughter to America. She says the little girl will have a bright future there, far away from Iran's suffocating conservatism and religious animosity. He does not want to go, because his Alzheimer's afflicted father needs his son, and more than him, his daughter-in-law. The couple's daughter, aged 11 or 12, wants all of them, certainly her parents. And, when the wife leaves, the husband hires a maid, piously religiously and with a husband whose debtors are hounding him. Finally, when they all meet in court, they try taking refuge in lies and deceit.

Farhadi's *The Past* is also beautifully written, crafted and acted out film. *The Past*, much like *A Separation*, is about family and children. Both paint wonderful portraits of how relationships among screwed-up adults affect children — and deeply.

Although *The Past* is not as intense or gripping as *A Separation*, Farhadi's Cannes player is nonetheless a disturbing picture of how modern families grow dysfunctional. What is also missing in *The Past* are the rather convoluted Iranian judicial, political and religious systems, for the movie is set in Paris, unlike *A Separation* whose story unfolds in Tehran.

Sean Penn's *The Last Face* will also be a contender for the Palm, and Charlize Theron, who stars in the movie, will return to the Festival for the second consecutive year. Last May, Theron proved to be a darling of the Cannes crowds and one of the lovelies for lensmen as she walked the raging Red Carpet in her dazzling evening gown to attend her *Mad Max: Fury Road*, a work that got a rousing reception. Yes, indeed in a festival that some disdainfully call highbrow art and a platform for a kind of cinema that cares two hoots for the lowest common denominator.

The Last Face is very, very different from *Mad Max*, and obviously so, for it comes from a heavyweight like Sean Penn — who is not just an intensely brilliant actor, but also an auteur

par excellence. Celebrated for films like *The Thin Red Line*, *Mystic River*, *Dead Man Walking*, *The Pledge*, *21 Grams* and *Into the Wild*, Penn's latest drama, *The Last Face* is set in a war-torn country and was shot extensively in some of the most splendid spots in South Africa.

The plot follows the director of an international aid agency (Theron) as she embarks on a conflicting-controversial love affair with a relief-aid doctor, essayed by Javier Bardem (Seen in movies like *No Country for Old Men*, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, *Beautiful* and in *Skyfall* — as the villain, and what a magnificent performance that was!).

British auteur Andrea Arnold's *American Honey* will be another Competition entry. Arnold said in a recent interview that much of the feature is "most me". "It felt like a nice thing. There are times you're trying to trust yourself but you're second guessing as well. This time I was really trying to trust myself, and it's the most I've ever done."

Arnold is no stranger to Cannes Competition. Her 2006 *Read Road* was a fascinating psychological study of a CCTV security officer and her dilemma as she watches on her monitor a man from her past, a man who brings back distasteful memories.

Arnold's 2009 *Fish Tank* — which also vied for the Palm d'Or — traces the miserable plight of a rebellious teenage girl, who is about to be kicked out of school and her selfish mother. The film had some incredible things to say about such delinquency in British society, and one remembers, the former *Guardian* film critic Derek Malcolm, saying that much of what was in *Fish Tank* was "very true... British society is like this".

Arnold's latest, *American Honey*, is also a story of intractability and defiance, and it follows some teenagers who sell magazines across America's Midwest, and it stars newcomer Sasha Lane, along with Shia Labeouf (seen in Lars Von Trier's *Nymphomaniac*) and Riley Keough.

Arnold, who for the first time went to the US to shoot, said, "I was inspired to make the film after reading a *New York Times* article on the subject... I went on six or seven road trips by myself, to make an emotional connection with America. Some of the poverty shocked me. It seemed more intense than in Britain. I did a lot of driving in the South, I was quite upset by what I saw, closed factories and shops and loads of drugs".

Part of the Special Screenings will be the Robert Di Nero starrer, *Hands of Stone* (helmed by Venezuela's Jonathan Jakubowicz). The *Raging Bull* star, who presided over the Festival jury in 2011, has once again stepped into the boxing ring for *Hands of Stone*, based on the true story of the Panamanian fighter, Roberto Duran (played in the movie by Edgar Ramirez). De Niro essays Duran's manager and coach, Ray Arcel — who helped Duran win legendary fights against Sugar Ray among others.

Ramirez told the media in April that "Duran embodies the identity of an entire country. He's been able to unite his country at some of its most difficult times and that's something we explore in the movie. The country has been dealing with an identity crisis because of its history — it's been invaded or crunched by bigger powers from its origins... Duran has always been a source of pride; you need to be here in Panama to understand the devotion. The adoration of athletes is something you understand in Europe and the US, but here it transcends the sport."

Hands of Stone is one among the 49 titles in various sections like Competition, Out of Competition, A Certain Regard and Special Screenings.

Jeff Nichols' inner-racial romance *Loving* will be part of Competition, along with along with Park Chan Wook's *The Handmaid and I*, Daniel Blake from the British veteran, Ken Loach, who has given us gems like *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, *The Angel's Share* and *Jimmy's Hall*.

Some of the other Competition entries are Nicholas Winding Refn's *The Neon Demon*, a feature made for Amazon, *Family Photos* from Palme d'Or winner Cristian Mungiu (who gave that brilliant *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*), *Sieranevada* from fellow Romanian director Cristi Puiu, Paul Verhoven's *Elle* and two works from the Philippines: *Aquarius* from Kleber Mendonça Filho, and *Ma' Rosa* from Brillante Mendoza.

Also in Competition for the top Palm d'Or will be Xavier Dolan's *It's Only the End of the World*,

starring Léa Seydoux and Marion Cotillard, and Jim Jarmusch, another Cannes regular, returns with his latest, *Paterson*, featuring Adam Driver.

Pedro Almodovar's *Julieta*, *The Unknown Girl* from Belgium's Dardenne Brothers and Olivier Assayas' *Personal Shopper* will also be vying for the Golden Palm as too *Slack Bay* from French director Bruno Dumond, *Staying Vertical* from Alain Guiraudie and Nicole Garcia's *From the Land of the Moon* (the first German title in Competition in many years).

Sadly, there is no movie from India this year among Cannes' official selections — though Anurag Kashyap's *Psycho Raman* will be part of the Director's Fortnight, a sidebar which runs alongside the Festival.

* Gautaman Bhaskaran, who has covered the Cannes Film Festival for 26 years, is back again at the French Riviera, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com