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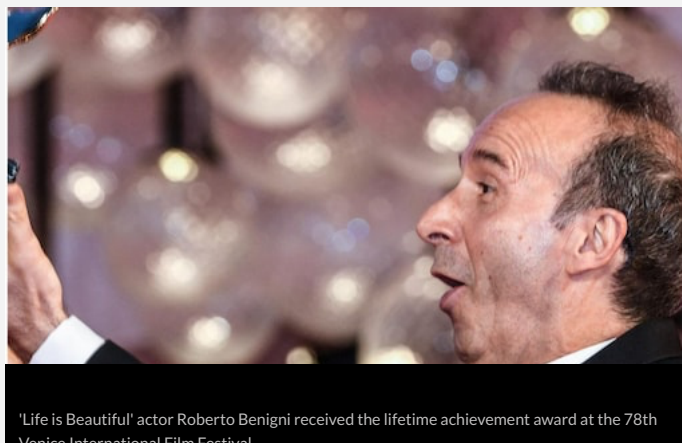
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Roberto Benigni Steals the Show as Venice Film Festival Begins




Roberto Benigni was honoured with the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 78th edition of the Venice Film Festival.

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GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN



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The 78th edition of the Venice Film Festival began on Wednesday, the second in the time of the Coronavirus pandemic, with Spanish Master Pedro Almodovar's Parallel Mothers, starring his long-term favourite and often termed "muse", Penelope Cruz.

Cruz plays Janis, a 40-something photographer, who is bent on raising her new born daughter as a single parent. Her mother did that, her grandmother as well. So, why not me, Janis psyches herself into a state of exuberance. But in the hospital as she is all set to give birth, she meets a young Ana, whose pregnancy is, just like Janis', an accident. However, unlike Janis, Ana is full of trepidation. She is not sure how she would bring up her child. Months later, in a strange twist of destiny a biological test will reveal an explosive result that will link the two women!

Parallel Mothers (in Spanish) was preceded by the opening ceremony, which began on a sombre note, given the never-ending pandemic and the Afghan crisis. It was a poignant start with the host, Italian actor Serena Rossi, dedicating the Festival to Afghan mothers who separated from their children as a desperate move to save them from the new rulers, Taliban. "We want to say to them: you are not alone," said Rossi.

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Obviously, the mood at the Sala Grande was sombre. The hall was half-empty, given the Covid restrictions which allowed only 50 per cent occupancy. The masked faces did not help either; the celebrities seemed to be hiding. Even the usually garrulous Almodovar and Cruz appeared solemn.

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But, the mood made an unbelievable u-turn when Italian director-actor Roberto Benigni came on. Earlier described by Jane Campion (the first woman director to win the Palm d'Or at Cannes with *The Piano*) as “an exploding bottle of Prosecco”, Benigni, who in Venice to receive his Lifetime Achievement Award, literally filled the auditorium with bubbles of joy.

I remember him at Cannes 1997, when his movie, *Life is Beautiful*, won the Grand Prix, second only to the Palm d'Or. The man jumped in joy as soon as his name was announced, and bounded towards the podium, jumping over several celebrity seats!. It was a spectacle all right. His film too was that.

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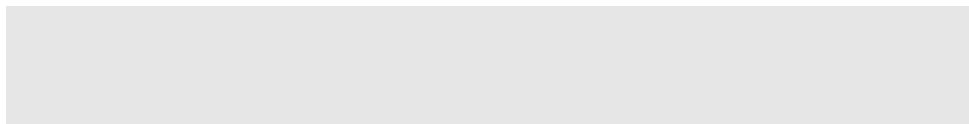
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Though set in one of the bleakest periods in history, in the midst of the holocaust, *Life is Beautiful* conveyed just that, precisely that. *Life is beautiful*, come what may. Benigni plays Guido Orefice, a Jewish Italian bookshop owner, who employs his fertile imagination to shield his son from the horrors of internment in a Nazi concentration camp. The work was partially inspired by the book *In the End, I Beat Hitler* by Rubino Romeo Salmoni and by Benigni's father, who spent two years in a German labour camp during World War II.

To me, the movie was the last word in how one can help end years of distrust and hatred, which Orefice manages to do by making sure that his young son does not harbour any ill feeling towards his Nazi tormentors.

And then years later, when Benigni took the stage at Venice yesterday, he had not lost any of his exuberance, which infected just about every member in the audience. As Campion had quipped earlier, the bottle of Prosecco went boom, boom. In a breathless, non-stop speech, Benigni thanked everybody, all his directors, before he finally averred “I deserved a kitten, a kitten. Not a lion (Golden Lion). He saved his most effusive praise for his wife, muse, and artistic and business partner of many decades: actor and producer Nicoletta Braschi.



“I can't dedicate this award to you because this award is already yours,” he said. “We have done everything together for 40 years. If you were to measure time, it would be with you and without you. We can share it: I take the tail (of the Lion), and the rest is yours. The wings (of the Golden Lion) are yours. If anything I've ever done has taken off, it's thanks to you, your talent as an actress, your femininity. The light you give off.”

Benigni's words were emotional all right, romantic too, but was laced with brilliant humour that lifted the spirit of the opening night of the world's oldest Film Festival. Well done Roberto!

(Author, movie critic has covered the Venice Film Festival for 20 years)



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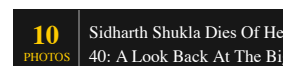


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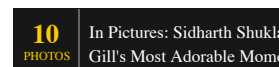


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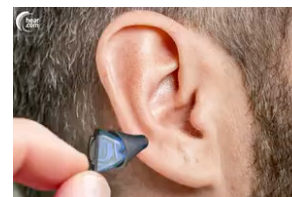
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