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Death and the Maiden actress Sigourney Weaver to get Venice's Lifetime Achievement Award

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The brilliant American actress Sigourney Weaver will be at the Venice Film Festival this August-September to receive a Lifetime Achievement Award, and although she has played many diverse characters, the one in Roman Polanski's *Death and the Maiden* is perhaps her career best. The movie, which opened two days before Christmas in 1994, still haunts my memory. Rivetingly performed by Weaver along with two other actors, Ben Kingsley and Stuart Wilson, she overshadowed just about everybody else—and in a drama that was set in a palatial bungalow on a dark, rainy night. Ordinarily, it would have given us a feel of creepy claustrophobia. But it did not, for its director Roman Polanski's expert handling of the shots and scenes elevated the movie to extraordinary heights.

Adapted from Ariel Dorfman's Broadway play (first staged in 1992), the work was inspired by his exile from Chile in 1973 during a coup in which President Salvador Allende was overthrown. We do not know where the entire story unfolds, but it appears to be some remote country in South America.

A plot of retribution and suffering, torture and turmoil, *Death and the Maiden* opens with a shot of Paulina Escobar (Weaver) waiting impatiently for her husband, Gerardo Escobar (Stuart Wilson), a lawyer by profession. With his car having broken down on that stormy evening, he gets a ride from Dr Roberto Miranda (Ben Kingsley). Gerardo invites Roberto into his home, little realising the mess this little gesture would lead to.

Paulina does not even have to see Roberto; his voice brings about dread in her. He was the physician who, during the earlier fascist regime, blindfolded her, raped and brutalised her again and again.

She manages to tie him to a chair and says that she will free him only if he confesses to his crime. She stuffs his mouth with her undergarments and threatens to kill him. His confession would give him his freedom, and he could walk away as a free man.

The last scene takes the three to a cliff, where Paulina is all set to push Roberto off. But well.... In 103 minutes, the film twists and turns from one incident to another, and the angst and agony she once endured are brought to us most vividly. She charges him with rape, which he denies vehemently. The tortured gets a reprieve and a vicarious sense of pleasure from seeing the brutaliser cry, rave, rant and plead.

There is never a dull moment, and the fantastic screenplay as well as the superb direction give the movie an edge that is provocative and tense. And I must say, Weaver carries the work on her shoulder. She is stylish. She is heroic. She is livid and snarls like a tigress in rage. She is vengeful, and she is at her fiery best.

Little wonder, then, that Alberto Barbera, who has been heading the festival since 2011, praised Weaver's "remarkable temperament as well as her ability to portray confident and determined women... She has created the image of a woman who is dynamic and resolute; at the same time, with endlessly different shadings, she allows her intensely magnetic, feminine sensitivity to filter through."

He described the Golden Lion Award as a recognition for a star who has "bridged the gap between sophisticated art-house cinema and movies that engage the public in a candid and original manner, all while remaining true to herself."

Last year, this Golden Lion went to director Liliana Cavani and actor Tony Leung Chiu-wai.

The Venice Film Festival—the world's oldest, which even predates Cannes by over a decade, having begun in 1932 primarily as fascist propaganda—will unroll this year on 28 August on the island of Lido, which is across the lagoon from mainland Venice.

The festival will announce the full list of titles on 23 July. Will *Death and the Maiden* be part of these?

The writer, a senior movie critic and author, has covered the Venice Film Festival for over 20 years



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