

CULTURE

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Arrivederci Tinseltown

Who needs Hollywood when you can have Chilean politics, kung fu, ballet thrillers and weird sex at the Venice Film Festival?

BY JASON SOLOMONS
THE OBSERVER, VENICE



Sophia Coppola was awarded the Venice Film Festival's Golden Lion for best film on Saturday for *Somewhere*, an insider's look at the life of an actor.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG AND EPA



Left: Actress Helen Mirren walks the red carpet at the world premiere of *The Tempest* on Saturday at the 67th Venice Film Festival.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Spanish director Alex de La Iglesia poses with the Venice Film Festival's Silver Lion award for best director, which he won for his film *A Sad Trumpet Ballad*.

PHOTO: AFP



Winners at 67th Venice Film Festival

Sofia Coppola's *Somewhere*, the tale of an actor who sees the emptiness of his existence through the eyes of his child, walked away with the top Golden Lion prize at the Venice Film Festival. The jury, headed by director Quentin Tarantino, unanimously chose Coppola's film as the best movie at the 11-day annual festival. In *Somewhere*, Stephen Dorff plays a Hollywood star whose somewhat empty life is enriched by the arrival of his daughter, played by Elle Fanning. The film takes place nearly entirely in hotels, mostly the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles.

- ★ Golden Lion for best film: *Somewhere* by Sofia Coppola (US)
- ★ Silver Lion for best director: Alex de la Iglesia for *A Sad Trumpet Ballad* (Spain-France)
- ★ Special Lion for overall work: Monte Hellman (US)
- ★ Special jury prize: *Essential Killing* by Jerzy Skolimowski (Poland-Norway-Hungary-Ireland)
- ★ Coppa Volpi for best actor: Vincent Gallo in *Essential Killing* by Jerzy Skolimowski (Poland-Norway-Hungary-Ireland)
- ★ Coppa Volpi for best actress: Ariane Labed in *Attenberg* by Athina Rachel Tsigari (Greece)
- ★ Osella for best cinematography: Mikhail Krichman for *Silent Souls* by Aleksei Fedorchenko (Russia)
- ★ Osella prize for best screenplay: Alex de la Iglesia for *A Sad Trumpet Ballad* (Spain-France)
- ★ Marcello Mastroianni award for best young actor or actress: Mila Kunis, 27, in *Black Swan* by Darren Aronofsky (US)

SOURCE: AFP

Fact and fiction and the blurring between the two emerged as a central theme at the 67th Venice Film Festival, which ended on Saturday. The biggest question here on the Lido — other than when the sun would shine on us again — hung over Joaquin Phoenix and the film *I'm Still Here*, directed by his brother-in-law Casey Affleck, chronicling Phoenix's attempts to become a rapper. I asked Casey, directly — was it a hoax? "There is no hoax," he replied.

But, to my eyes, the whole thing clearly has been and it's impressive how they kept us guessing — and caring — for so long. But it's now safe to say that, contrary to the brilliantly propagated rumors, Phoenix did not quit acting to take up hip-hop. Rather he immersed himself fully in the role of an intense Hollywood actor who quit acting for a disastrous rap career and the result is easily Phoenix's best performance and a very decent, often very funny, Hollywood meltdown movie, shot in the faux-doc manner of Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat* and *Bruno*.

The game for audiences is to work out which of the celebs in it know what's going on. Bruce Willis and Sean Penn? Ben Stiller, who remarks at the Oscars that the bearded and disheveled Phoenix looks like he works in a "Hasidic meth lab"? P Diddy, who agrees to listen to the

terrible rap songs? Or David Letterman, on whose show Phoenix first went public with his meltdown?

Phoenix certainly looked all right stepping off his boat, all clean shaven and slimmed down, smiling for the cameras, a grin that either said "Aha, gotcha," or "Thank God I don't have to be that character any more," or both.

Believe what you want to believe. This Venice was open to anything, even the films of Vincent Gallo. In the absence of George Clooney — why his film *The American*, shot in Abruzzo and co-starring the beautiful Italian actress Violante Placido wasn't here, I don't know — it was left to Gallo to take the festival's poster boy role. He directed and starred in *Promises Written in Water* and played a fugitive Taliban terrorist in *Essential Killing*, as well as presenting a short film, *The Agent*.

He, too, was going for some kind of postmodern joke. Having earned, with his last feature *The Brown Bunny* (2003), the dubious honor of the worst film ever to appear at Cannes, Gallo has now done the double, with the worst film ever shown in competition at Venice. *Promises Written in Water* is a studenty lo-fi love story with Gallo as an undertaker preparing the body of a beautiful woman who knows she's about to die. To be fair, it has its moments of tenderness, but

mostly it's flatulent and indulgent and so, so boring.

Gallo refused to attend his press conference or do any interviews. So did Phoenix. I thought a couple of times that maybe they were one and the same person, especially as Gallo had a beard and long hair for his role in *Essential Killing*, a deeply silly film in which he utters not a word as he goes on the run from US troops in the Ukrainian forests, playing a Taliban terrorist escaping rendition. Starving and thirsty, he's so desperate that at one point he attacks a peasant woman as she's breastfeeding her baby and sucks her milk.

There were some really good films here in a competition that responded to a lack of Hollywood product — Ben Affleck's sentimental Boston crime thriller, *The Town*, was a flashy though not unenjoyable sideshow — by opening its reach across all genres and borders. Chilean director Pablo Larraín, whose last film, *Tony Manero*, wowed at Cannes' directors' fortnight, was now promoted to the big stage with *Post Mortem*, a film of remarkable poise and poison, set in Santiago during the 1973 coup.

Also set in 1973, in Spain, is Alex de la Iglesia's *The Last Circus*, a bonkers film about a sad clown who goes berserk and bites the hand of General Franco. Normally, I would run a mile from a movie

with oddball stiltwalkers, flying midgets and comedy human cannonballs, but this had a wildness, sexiness and daring insanity that is weirdly compelling. Who wouldn't want to see two rampaging, disfigured clowns with machetes and machine guns dueling over a large-breasted trapeze artist on top of a 60m-high cross?

More considered but also set in a freak show was Abdellatif Kechiche's *Black Venus*, a superb, weighty film about colonial exploitation and sex and morality. Only at the end does it confirm itself as a true story, about Sarah Baartman aka the Hottentot Venus, a black woman paraded as a savage in early-19th-century London. It's a long film, grueling at times, but utterly spellbinding. This director, who showed *Couscous* here three years ago, is officially confirmed as one of the world's finest.

The 67th Venice Film Festival displayed and questioned the nature and role of modern art cinema in all its forms. Samurai films, such as Takashi Miike's *13 Assassins* and kung fu movies such as Tsui Hark's (*徐克*) *Detective Dee* and *The Mystery of Phantom Flame* did battle with Darren Aronofsky's ballet thriller *Black Swan*, Sofia Coppola's Hollywood bubble essay *Somewhere* and Tom Tykwer's upscale Berlin sex comedy, *Drei*.

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

SEPT. 3 TO SEPT. 9



1 Hebe Tian (田馥甄) and *To Hebe* (信者得愛) with **15.3 percent** of sales

2 Jolin Tsai (蔡依林) and *Myself* (2010概念專輯) with **9.07%**

3 Kuo Shu-yao (鄒書瑤, aka Yaoyao) and *Honey* with **5.42%**

4 Will Tan Vui Chuan (陳威全) and *Goodbye, Single* (再見, 單身) with **3.71%**

5 Wang Lee-hom (王力宏) and *The 18 Martial Arts* (十八般武藝) with **3.39%**

ALBUM CHART COMPILED FROM G-MUSIC (WWW.G-MUSIC.COM.TW), BASED ON RETAIL SALES

PLANET POP

Female figures in the public eye have been keeping the media busy over the past week.

Britain's Duchess of York is to make a six-part documentary show for US television about her struggle to rebuild her life after a scandal over selling access to the British royal family.

The Oprah Winfrey Network — a new cable channel due to launch in January — said on Friday the documentary would be called *Finding Sarah* and would debut in the first three months of 2011.

"Sarah Ferguson, The Duchess of York, will share with our viewers her personal struggle to rebuild her life," Lisa Erspamer, chief creative officer of the network said in a statement.

"With the help of experts Dr Phil McGraw, Suze Orman, Martha Beck and others, the Duchess will open up about her recent public troubles and explore her lifelong battles with weight, relationships and finances. She will look to put the past behind her and move forward to a positive future," Erspamer said.

Ferguson, 50, is the ex-wife of Britain's Prince Andrew, the second son of Queen Elizabeth II. She was caught in an embarrassing British newspaper sting in May in which she was filmed

appearing to ask for, and accept, US\$40,000 in cash in exchange for access to Prince Andrew, who is also a British trade envoy.

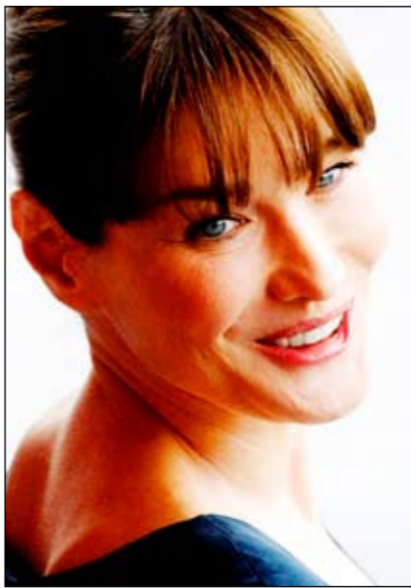
The couple divorced amicably in 1996 after 10 years of marriage, and have two grown children.

Also in the spotlight is French first lady Carla Bruni. A new unauthorized biography of the Italian ex-supermodel paints an unflattering picture claiming she lives a solitary life, neglects her charitable works and forces her husband to socialize with her former lovers.

Carla, a Secret Life by former journalist Besma Lahouri discloses that following her marriage to French President Nicolas Sarkozy, a presidential adviser was assigned to help rebrand Bruni, whose former lovers include Mick Jagger and Eric Clapton, as a demure political wife.

It also alleges that Bruni, 43, has had extensive plastic surgery despite denials, and had a 20-year relationship with a Paris surgeon.

The disclosures appeared in a report published on Saturday in British newspaper the *Times*, which has, along with the French weekly *Marianne*, been given the book ahead of publication. Describing Bruni as a "female Don



Carla Bruni: solitary man-eater or demure dame?

PHOTO: AP

Juan," the book, which the author says the Elysee Palace tried to discourage, says she has maintained contact with former paramours.

"Since he married the woman that some called a 'man-eater,' [Sarkozy] has to put up every day with this burdensome tribe. Singers, philosophers, lawyers, bosses, men of

the press or politics."

No less than three such men were house guests at Bruni's Riviera villa last year during Sarkozy's first holiday there.

Bruni had finally met her match in her marriage to Sarkozy with a "man even more unpredictable than her," Lahouri said.

After their whirlwind romance and 2008 marriage, the Elysee Palace embarked on a carefully managed image makeover of the new first lady led by presidential aide Pierre Charon.

"Carla had warned me 'they are going to say a lot of things about me, about my past life. Things, photographs are going to come out' ... So we had to help give her a new image. That of a shy young woman," he told Lahouri.

Behind the scenes, however, the book says she lives a solitary life and Lahouri describes her foundation to fight AIDS as "an empty shell."

In other celebrity news, Britney Spears has denied a bodyguard's accusations that she sexually harassed him and abused her children, saying Thursday in a statement on her Web site that authorities looked into his claims but found no reason to act.

The statement said the pop singer and her attorney expect Fernando Flores' sexual harassment and

intentional infliction of emotional distress lawsuit to be dismissed.

"This lawsuit is another unfortunate situation where someone is trying to take advantage of the Spears family and make a name for himself," the statement read. "The Department of Children and Family Services conducted a proper investigation surrounding Mr Flores' accusations and have closed the case without further action."

Spears did not say when the investigation was conducted and the department doesn't release details of its inquiries.

Flores claimed in his lawsuit that Spears repeatedly exposed herself to him and made other unwanted sexual advances. He also claimed she used his belt to discipline her young sons, Sean Preston and Jayden James, and acted inappropriately in front of them.

The bodyguard's employment with Spears appeared to be brief — his court filings state he started working for her in February, and by June he was no longer on her security detail.

Flores is reportedly seeking unspecified damages.

Spears' ex-husband, Kevin Federline, has also denied through his attorney that any abuse occurred and called Flores' accusations "baseless." — AGENCIES