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THE SUNDAY TIMES



Cannes: halfway point

The Sunday Times

21 May 2012 17:46

It's the halfway point in Cannes. Time for a reality check – the Competition films have, on the whole, been strong; the weather, absolutely rubbish, *writes Matt Mueller*.

The latter has meant a brisk trade for the street vendors. Each time the skies open for another torrential downpour, they're suddenly everywhere flogging cheaply produced umbrellas that usually don't last longer than 24 hours. But arthouse auteurs dream of making far more lasting impressions than these tatty rain shields, and the first five days have thrown up convincing contenders for the festival's grand prizes.

While it's been greeted with a few brickbats, Jacques Audiard's *Rust And Bone* will be a challenger, particularly for Marion Cotillard's bruised and bruising performance as Stephanie, a killer-whale trainer who loses her legs in a tragic marine-park mishap but regains her appetite for life thanks to the brusque attentions of streetfighting brute Ali (Matthias Schoenaerts), who goes from friendly helper to sex-on-demand companion.

There's an element of the preposterous to Audiard's melding of genre and melodrama (not least adding Ali's neglected young son into an already febrile mix), but those who succumbed to its proficient tearjerking – whale-blubbers, as it were, like me – were in puddles by the end.

Michael Haneke's *Amour* was a further demonstration of the Austrian's talents for spare, austere storytelling that still wields a mighty emotional wallop. His tale of Georges and Anne (Jean-Louis Trintignant and Emmanuelle Riva), lifetime companions subjected to the shaming indignities of ageing after the latter has a stroke, unfolds like the ultimate nightmare of what lies in store.

But for all its unsparing depiction of the couple's struggles and despair, Haneke strikes a balance with his compassionate clarity for this married couple's bond. Eighty-one-year-old Trintignant and 85-year-old Riva are both superb and likely contenders for actor prizes, while Haneke's always in with a shout for the Palme d'Or.

Thomas Vinterberg's *The Hunt* was a potently communicated tale about the ease with which suspicion and the pack mentality can unleash persecution in any community. The film is set in a small Danish town, where Mads Mikkelsen's kindergarten teacher finds himself falsely accused of

paedophilia, then watches as his community turns against him with abrupt and overt viciousness.

Mikkelsen is outstanding, and Vinterberg's direction is sinewy, taut and chilling. The same can't be said John Hillcoat's bootlegging-brothers epic *Lawless*, which unravels as a solidly entertaining if unspectacular tale of outlaw brothers (Tom Hardy, Shia LaBeouf), the women they fall for (Jessica Chastain, Mia Wasikowska), and the creepy eyebrowless lawman (Guy Pearce) determined to be their undoing.

Besides appearing a very odd fit for the Competition, *Lawless* seems primarily designed to show that Hillcoat can play in a more commercial playing field after *The Proposition* and *The Road*. It's doubtful it will go away with any Cannes baubles, but it might just be good enough to keep Hillcoat's career on an upward trajectory.