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DECEMBER 7, 2014 by KEITH UHLICH

The Single Take

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□ ALAN RICKMAN, ALIX DELAPORTE, BENEDICT CUMBERBACTCH, CRISTIAN MUNGIU, ISABELLE HUPPERT, JEREMY IRONS, KEITH UHLICH, MARRAKECH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, MÉLANIE LAURENT, MOUMEN SMIHI, THE IMITATION GAME, THE LAST HAMMER BLOW

14th Marrakech International Film Festival, First Dispatch

“Spared no expense,” bragged John Hammond (Richard Attenborough) of his primordial carnival in *Jurassic Park*. The same might be said of Morocco’s Marrakech International Film Festival, currently in its 14th year, and doing its darndest to be the North African equivalent to Cannes. At that it doesn’t succeed, but the very visible (and very gaudy) effort at star-studded grandeur is consistently endearing and entertaining. This year’s celebration kicked off with the splashy introduction of the competition jury at the main theater (the Salle des Ministres) in the Palais des Congrès, a massive converted convention center quite conspicuously aping Cannes’ own Palais des Festivals et des Congrès. One by one, the international tribunal—headed by Isabelle Huppert, in heavy-lidded-glare default mode, and boasting Alan Rickman, Mélanie Laurent, Moroccan auteur Moumen Smihi, and Romanian director Cristian Mungiu among its members—emerged from behind a circular red panel onto a stage caught somewhere between a Bollywood spectacular and a globalized *Family Feud*. Adoring introductory speeches were given, and each jury member declared the festival “open” in the language of his or her home country (the towering Rickman gave a delightfully mischievous purr to his proclamation).

I stayed for the effusive tribute to the prolific and much-beloved Egyptian actor Adel Imam, who charmed the crowd with his every gesture. But I skipped out on the opening night film—*The Theory of Everything*, a reportedly romanticized biopic of physicist Stephen Hawking and one of those seemingly middlebrow awards contenders I tend to avoid—to battle some creeping jet lag. Including a five-hour layover in a Casablanca airport terminal where pan flute renditions of “Hotel California” and “Un-Break My Heart” were the muzak of choice, I’d been traveling, without sleep, for upwards of a full day. (Frankly, I’m still not entirely acclimated.) Such is the film festival life, though in all my travels, I don’t think I’ve ever witnessed quite the spread as I did at the opening night party, held at the five-star Sofitel, where the festival is housing most of us journalists. Imagine, if you will, freshly shucked oysters piled atop hills of ice, a sushi bar with regal displays of salmon over rice, trays of decadent pastries lined up against every wall, and Jeremy Irons, in full Moroccan dress, sipping at a cocktail in the sweeping courtyard. (Geekout aside: Both Hans *and* Simon Peter Gruber are here!)

Irons was there to receive a tribute the following evening, during which he and his inimitably anodyne voice gave a heartfelt speech about coming to the first Marrakech Film Festival in 2001, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, and finding kinship in a time of terrible division. It’s nice to know there’s room in all this glitz (and I haven’t even mentioned the obscenely lavish dinner hosted by Marrakech’s royal family) for some genuine introspection; the movies themselves, to be honest, seem like something of an afterthought—an excuse rather than the main attraction. You won’t get the cattle market sense of Cannes or Toronto here, but that’s liberating: Absent the constant search for the next big thing, you can concentrate that much more on the films and their individual merits or lack thereof.

With all the celebratory shuffling of days one and two, I managed only two movies—one to which I went totally in the dark, while the other (despite my stated tendency to shun middlebrow awards contenders) I attended as a card-carrying fan of the lead performer. Blind buy first: Alix Delaporte's *The Last Hammer Blow* (2014) is a muted coming-of-age story from France that sets up plenty of histrionic situations it promptly muzzles. Appealing newcomer Romain Paul plays Victor, a brooding teenager living in a seaside trailer park with his cancer-afflicted mother, Nadia (Clotilde Hesme). (The way Delaporte reveals her disease—Nadia's wig slips off after she and Victor jump into a cliffside watering hole, occasioning a tender, humorous glance between parent and child—is but one example of how Delaporte counteracts easy schmaltz.) Chance has it that the father Victor never knew, orchestra director Samuel Rovinski (Grégory Gadebois), is back in town to conduct Gustav Mahler's Sixth Symphony, which gives the boy the opportunity to make his acquaintance, much to his mother's chagrin.

The film's title is a reference to a moment in the symphony's fourth movement that, in some printings, expunges one of three "hammer blows"—often interpreted as Mahler's open defiance of fate. So there's your top-heavy metaphor, but the pleasant surprise of the film is how it gracefully sidesteps much of the heavy-handedness inherent to maturation mélos. Gadebois and Paul are especially well matched, the older man's bear-like demeanor complementing the disproportioned adolescent's silent, often seething inquisitiveness. Most movies cast parents and children based on superficial traits, but these two, despite their physical differences, seem very much related on a marrow-deep level. *Stranger by the Lake* cinematographer Claire Mathon photographs most of the proceedings in the close-quarters, hand-held style of the Dardennes brothers, occasionally stepping back to capture a poetic wide shot (Victor silhouetted against a seaside sunset as he spitefully bounces a soccer ball) that shakes up the overall sense of banal realism. Scene by scene *The Last Hammer Blow* is compellingly antidramatic, though it's very wispy on the whole, spending so much time carefully avoiding cliché that it feels, all told, insecure and unconfident.

THE IMITATION GAME

By comparison, *The Imitation Game* is *all* confidence, and that much more lousy because of it. This is such Weinstein Company awards-bait that you want to throttle the film for holding your attention as well as it does, even as it makes a simplified mockery of a very complicated man. To be blunt, I was craving a Cumberbatch fix, and that I certainly got: The divine Benedict (he of devastating Sherlock and desolating Smaug) plays Alan Turing, the socially maladapted English mathematician, logician and crossword enthusiast who helped crack Nazi Germany's Enigma code during WWII. He's clearly thought this character through from a surface perspective—a downcast fumbler-and-fidgeter, a Howard Hawksian quick-talker (his first scene with a military supervisor played by a typically glowering Charles Dance has the rapid tempo of an Old Hollywood romantic comedy), and a perpetual mouth breather, which gives Turing's every word an irritatingly throaty emphasis. Cumberbatch is giving it his all, and it's easy to get as transfixed by his misguided stylings as it is to be car-crash captivated by costar Keira Knightley, who plays Turing's cohort and stopgap fiancée Joan Clarke like gilded royalty slumming it at theater camp.

The real problem lies not in the performances, nor in how director Morten Tyldum, of 2011's enjoyably slick crime thriller *Headhunters*, treats every crisis with the kind of senses-dulling competence that passes for "adult" entertainment nowadays. (That's not to ignore several CGI interstitial sequences, detailing everything from U-boat attacks to the London blitz, which redefine *incompetence*.) No, it's in the way the film treats Turing's homosexuality—which, because of England's inhuman antigay laws, led to his postwar disgrace and chemical castration—as its own parallel (and impossible) problem to solve. Not once is Turing's torment over his same-sex attraction at all believable, in large part because Tyldum and screenwriter Graham Moore (adapting Andrew Hodges' 1983 book *Alan Turing: The Enigma*) approach the tale from a retroactively "enlightened" perspective.

We're meant to shed a tear at the way Turing is left to fiddle with his machines instead of

other men (thanks a lot, England!) and then be heartened at how his Enigma-cracking device paved the way for modern technology. “Today, we call them computers,” flashes a condescending closing title, the equivalent of a frazzled nursing home attendant telling an uncooperative patient to swallow their medicine...*or else*. I couldn’t help but think of the way director Tomas Alfredson married repressed homosexuality to the period espionage world in the great *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011)—also featuring Cumberbatch—bringing its particular era, the Cold-War-on-the-downswinging ’70s, to frightening and forbidding life. (We’re never so far removed from history as we think.) *The Imitation Game* is, by contrast, a mummified glance backward—as retrograde, in its own perfectly adequate way, as the times it purports to condemn.

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