

## FILM ROUNDUP

KEITH UHLICH



*Peterloo.*

**High Life** (Dir. Claire Denis). Starring: Robert Pattinson, Juliette Binoche, Mia Goth. The French filmmaker Claire Denis specializes in a uniquely ethereal kind of cinema, so she would seem to be well-matched to a tale that literally traverses the heavens. Why, then, does this time-jumping, spaceship-set melodrama feel so stiff? So many of the elements are perfect, particularly an alternately haunted and paternal Robert Pattinson, now more than atoned for his broody vamping in the *Twilight* series, as one of several prisoners aboard a craft headed into the furthest reaches of the galaxy. Juliette Binoche, as the ship's horned-up physician, is equally sublime, as are the evocative effects, particularly in the scenes set in and around a black hole, by the great French VFX company BUF. Yet those ineffably undulating rhythms that mark Denis' best work (where, in a film like 2013's superb *Bastards*, you feel as if she's tapped into a taboo subconscious) are absent. [R] ★★★

**Peterloo** (Dir. Mike Leigh). Starring: Rory Kinnear, Maxine Peake, Neil Bell. A passion project for British writer-director Mike Leigh, *Peterloo* tells the sprawling story of the events leading up to, and just immediately after, the 1819 massacre at a Manchester pro-democracy rally, during which British forces attacked, and murdered many among, the peaceably assembled citizenry. Leigh has never worked on such a scale, even in period pieces like *Topsy-Turvy* (1999) and *Mr. Turner* (2014). Yet this is unmistakably and quite stirring his work, from the unabashed em-

brace of grotesquerie, on the sides of both monarchs and reformers, to the vivid imagery by usual collaborator Dick Pope, his Vermeer-esque shafts of light adding a paradoxical layer of beauty to all the toil and terror. The irony is not lost on Leigh that this tale of the masses pushing back against their oppressors was funded in large part by Amazon, courtesy of our overlord Jeff Bezos. Yet this is far from a one-sided anti-capitalist screed. Leigh instead shows, with much complexity and sympathy, how acts of evil and of good can leave a bloody trail of victims behind them. [PG-13] ★★★★★

**Shadow** (Dir. Zhang Yimou). Starring: Chao Deng, Li Sun, Ryan Zheng. The latest martial-arts phantasmagoria from China's Zhang Yimou initially plays like a companion piece to his 2006 palace intrigue drama *Curse of the Golden Flower*. Chao Deng stars in two roles: He's both a wounded military commander pulling the strings on a vain monarch, as well as the look-a-like who represents his, ahem, shadowy interests in the public sphere. (This is something of a loose retelling of a part of the *Three Kingdoms* epic, a staple of Chinese literature.) There's romance and betrayal, whispered plots and clandestine machinations. Then the bladed umbrellas come out. In its back half the film morphs into a rain-slicked action movie that's best experienced first-hand, beyond noting that your jaw is likely to drop a few times over. Par for the course for a Zhang production, the visuals are astounding, with the color near-completely, but not

entirely, drained away so that each scene is a stunning mix of black and white, emphasizing the struggles of duality at the narrative's heart. [N/R] ★★★★★

**Sunset** (Dir. László Nemes). Starring: Juli Jakab. Vlad Ivanov, Levente Molnár. Hungarian writer-director László Nemes made a splash with his intense and, to these eyes, odious Holocaust drama *Son of Saul* (2015). His follow-up, *Sunset*, utilizes a similar aesthetic template: The camera always sticks shoulder-height close to the heroine, Írisz Leiter (Juli Jakab), as she navigates the hustle and bustle of belle époque Budapest. Her goal is to claim her rightful stake in a hat store once run by her family (so she says) and to avenge herself on the supercilious current owner (Vlad Ivanov). Like the dead child fussed over by the main character through the entirety of *Son of Saul*, the reality of Írisz's intentions matter less than her ephemerally dogged principles. Come hell or high water she will complete her task, even as the world comes crashing down. There's something cringingly shallow about the way Nemes juxtaposes one person's likely frivolous steadfastness against real-life societal collapse. It's less offensive here than in *Son of Saul* because the scope is much wider (a city instead of a concentration camp), the camerawork and sound design admittedly compelling in an open-world video game sort of way, and the punchline—in which Írisz's actions are implied to have some way led to World War I—so laughable that it mitigates the overall affront. [R] ★★ ■