



JUDGMENT DAYS

Thoughtful debate or random selection? The secretive and elite Cannes Festival jury works in mysterious ways.

BY CHRIS KOSELUK

Those chosen come from around the globe — Australia, Japan, Mexico, South Africa, Sweden. Their ranks consist of directors, actors and authors, but at times have included cinematographers, critics and even an opera singer. Most have met their “leader,” but often not each other. Yet, after 12 days together on the French Riviera, they’ll know each other in some ways better than they know their friends. They are the Cannes jury. And they have the most important job at the festival — deciding who wins the awards, including the prestigious Palme d’Or.

The less than two dozen films vying for awards each year are chosen by a committee led by Gilles Jacob, the festival’s general delegate. As this “in competition” slate is determined, a jury president (this year, director Luc Besson) is named. The president, in turn, helps assemble an international panel of approximately 10 to 20 entertainment professionals. This group, after watching the films during the festival, determines the winners.

A new group is selected each year. Its decision is totally subject to its members’ particular tastes. The process has not been without controversy. When “Apocalypse Now” and “Tin Drum” shared the Palme d’Or in 1979, Françoise Sagan, that year’s jury president, complained publicly that there was pressure to give the award to the former when

the latter was the jury’s choice. Rumors abounded in 1991 when Samuel L. Jackson received a special supporting actor award (the only time it’s ever been awarded) for “Jungle Fever.” Some felt this was to appease director Spike Lee, who intimated that ignoring his film would be racist. Last year, an uproar ensued when two obscure films, “Rosetta” and “L’Humanité,” took home the top awards over such higher profile favorites as “Felicia’s Journey,” “The Straight Story” and “Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai.” As is the custom when the crowd disapproves of the jury’s decision, it hissed loudly when these two winners were announced.

Because of the controversy, and because the selection process is so subjective, the Cannes committee asks that jury members not talk about the voting or their choices. Some take this vow of silence very literally.

“I’m a great Cannes supporter and fan, and they do not want you to talk about being on the jury, and so I won’t,” says John Waters, when asked to recount his 1995 jury experience. “I remember reading that the only person who ever did was William Goldman in his book. And when I read that he was the only one, I certainly didn’t want to be the ‘other one.’”

The only comment the director, whose new film “Cecil B. DeMented” is screening this year, would make concerning the experience was his reaction to being asked to be on the jury. “I was incredibly

flattered," he remembers. "I felt like I'd won the Oscar. It was one of the high points of my life."

This feeling is echoed by other past jurists.

"In a funny way, I feel the jury members get to exploit everything that's fantastic about Cannes as a film festival," says Holly Hunter, 1999 jurist. "For me, walking into a theater every day — having heard absolutely nothing about what was going to come up on-screen — was an original experience. In fact, often I would not even know the name of the film or what country it was from. That was unprecedented for me in my adult life."

"I've never been part of a book club, but it was kind of like that," says Jeff Goldblum, another 1999 jurist. "You're seeing two to three movies a day — 22 movies in two weeks — and then getting together with nine other people who I really enjoyed and talking about [the films]. Viewing the movies with that responsibility and knowing that you're going to talk about them right away is a different kind of movie watching."

That their only task was to watch movies seemed to delight some jurists who oftentimes are so involved in the filmmaking process they have little time to actually see movies.

"For any cinephile, it's a dream come true," says Atom Egoyan, who served on the 1996 panel. "This was a wonderful working vacation. I didn't have to do anything but jury work. I saw way more films than I needed to."

Hunter, who previously had promoted movies such as "The Piano" and "Crash" at Cannes, saw the festival in an entirely new light.

"I got to see movies I wasn't in," says the actress, who'll be returning to the south of France again this year to promote the Coen Brothers' movie, "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" and "Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her" by director Rodrigo Garcia. "It's virtually impossible to see other films because you only have time to see one — your premiere. The rest of the time you are giving to the press, to the public, to photo sessions. Being a jury member, you do nothing but receive."

Egoyan agrees. "When you've a film in competition, you have little time to do anything but promote your movie," says Egoyan, who'll participate in a seminar at this year's Cannes before heading to Ireland to do a film version of Samuel Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape" starring John Hurt. "You're spending one day with international press, one with North American press, one with Canadian press. Any spare moment you just try and decompress. The last thing you want is to see another film."

The jury's unique international composition is also memorable.

"I found myself thriving in that environment with that jury," says Hunter. "I learned so much about how to look at certain movies because of the different perspectives in the room. Their perspectives could be radically different based on culture and politics. I think everybody was enlightened by it."

"No one exerted any leverage on the others, except to express their own personal opinions," adds Goldblum. "Without divulging anything — because they swear you to keep things secret — we agreed at the beginning that movie watching was subjective and that we could

happily agree to disagree. With that as our guide, we had a wonderful time saying, 'Oh, you like this? Oh, I didn't like it.'"

Goldblum, who has three movies soon to be released — "Chain of Fools," co-starring Salma Hayek, "Auggie Rose," with Anne Heche and "One of the Hollywood Ten" in which he plays blacklisted director Herbert Biberman — was impressed with the serious approach his panel took.

"We had a very effective scheduling process," says the actor, who is presently filming the romantic comedy "Perfume" in New York City. "David Cronenberg was the president and a great organizer. We wouldn't actually talk about the films too randomly. Every few days, we'd meet to talk about the last six movies we'd seen. Each person took a turn and talked about a movie and its prize-worthiness from their subjective point of view."

"In my case, it was an amazing opportunity to see how Francis Ford Coppola thinks and talks about movies," says Egoyan. "Francis was the jury head, and his approach was that we'd spend a

week getting to know each other. We really didn't talk that much about the films until that last session. It was a really smart way to conduct the jury since we all knew where we were coming from."

Being a jurist also sets you apart from the thousands of other festival attendees. Everyone knows who you are and the power you have. And it isn't unusual to get that feeling that, wherever you go, all eyes are upon you.

"You are the core of the 'crème de la crème' and wherever you go there's no mistaking that," says Hunter. "The red carpet just goes out whenever you walk on the Croisette. I got a huge kick out of that."

But does this special treatment also mean outside influences loom to persuade the final decisions?

"Besides the drugs people put into your drinks, the kidnapping attempts and the bamboo shoots under your fingernails?" jokes Egoyan.

Kidding aside, the director does believe jurists must be on their guard. "The only pressure you have as a jurist is keeping your mouth shut," he continues. "You know everyone is watching, and that any hint or message you send out is carefully analyzed. I'm aware of it from both ends, having been in competition. You hear rumors about jury members having yawned at certain points or squirmed in their seats. You must be on your absolute best behavior and very, very careful."

During his tenure, Goldblum felt it best to remain silent. "We avoided any influences that might want us to talk," says Goldblum. "We stayed away from press entirely and didn't do any interviews."

Hunter also enjoyed her respite from the press. But she took even greater pleasure in knowing that everyone was trying to figure out what she and her fellow jurists were thinking. "It's a fabulously privileged, secretive, little dramatic position," she says. "It's fascinating to listen to the word on the street as to how the jury is voting — that was entertaining. So much word! It was funny because the last movie we saw won the Palme d'Or. We didn't even know what was going to win, so it was odd that everybody else did!" □



JURY DUTY: (from left) Jeff Goldblum, Holly Hunter and jury president David Cronenberg (with his wife) at last year's festival