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FESTIVALS

James Christopher on this week's highlights from the London Film Festival



Chalize Theron and Tobey Maguire play the young lovers in Lasse Hallström's *Cider House Rules*: one of several artistically satisfying American movies in this year's festival



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Declarations from the independents

The message for the London Film Festival from America is simple. For all its rampant capitalism, Hollywood can still produce great movies. Movies that might slump at the box office, get crippled in Kansas and lynched in Missouri, yet prove there are still artists, craftsmen, and mavericks for whom money isn't quite everything, and films are. It cuts right across the grain: from a glittering historical piece about the plight of Broadway in the 1930s - Tim Robbins's *Cradle Will Rock* - to Harmony Korine's cheap and experimental *julien donkey-boy*.

There's a sense of New Mood, rather than New Wave about these films; an emphasis on issues and atmospherics, rather than films which perform triple somersaults before exploding in your face. Even a literary potboiler like Lasse Hallström's *Cider House Rules*, based on John Irving's middlebrow best-seller, rises to the occasion. Dickensian in flavour, and brown in colour, this sprawling story of an orphan, Homer Wells, growing up in Maine during the 1930s and 1940s manages to digest racism, incest, abortion, betrayal and dodgy medical ethics - much of it before breakfast.

Homer's mentor is that well-known New Englander, Michael Caine, a gifted surgeon with a giant heart for the winsome Oliver Twists abandoned at his remote orphanage. Caine gets routinely stoned on his own ether, and rails against bureaucracy. But it's his protégé, Tobey Maguire, discreet and naive as the eldest orphan, Homer, who steals the film. Maguire might be an old head at the grisly end of an operating table, but he's an astonishing innocent when he leaves the orphanage for the first time. A working knowledge of gynaecology proves little use when he lands a job at a cider farm and falls for Chalize Theron's local beauty. Life is fleetingly rosy. The itinerant black apple pickers are beguiled by his principles. Theron is beguiled by his modesty. All sorts of pitfalls duly loom; not least, Theron's absent fiancé, and the intimacy of the pickers' sleeping quarters. Worms of doubt, shame and jealousy gnaw away at Maguire's conscience. That they trouble us as much as they do Maguire is a measure of his performance and director Hallström's ability to steer the film away from grand statements and mushy melodrama.

The mood is reciprocated in the French camp by Patrice Leconte's cracking psychological fable, **The Girl on the Bridge**. Exquisitely shot in glossy black and white, it stars Daniel Auteuil as a less-than-accurate, middle-aged knife thrower, and Vanessa Paradis as a suicidal gap-toothed nympho. "Burnt-out women are my stock in trade," explains the grizzled Auteuil on first meeting Paradis dangling over a bridge. With Paradis installed as Auteuil's new target, their luck inexplicably changes. A fierce comedy is turned into a reckless, terrifying relationship as they ride their luck through variety nights across Europe. The Russian roulette between thrower and target is as brutal as it is almost sexual. They

gamble wildly with their lives. In the casinos they gamble their livelihoods. Paradis continues to take strangers apart in public toilets. Auteuil pretends not to mind, but his famously rumpled features speak otherwise.

In terms of sheer invention, **Being John Malkovich** is the most original comedy of the festival. Spike Jonze, a veteran of music videos, and the scriptwriter, Charlie Kaufman, catapult John Cusack's creepy filing clerk and his neurotic wife, Cameron Diaz, straight into the cranium of the famously wonky Malkovich. There is no easy way of explaining this. Behind a cabinet in Cusack's weird doll-sized office, he discovers a magic portal that sucks people into Malkovich's head and then spits them out 15 minutes later next to the New Jersey Turnpike. They stare through Malkovich's eyes as if through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars.

Unaware of the intruders, Malkovich mopes around his flat, buys towels, and moans to his chum Charlie Sheen that he's having some very strange inclinations.

It's an unholy, hysterical mix of *Alice in Wonderland*, Woody Allen and *Jekyll and Hyde*. The touch of genius is that the actors play it as straight as the plot possibly allows. It gets deliciously madder. Diaz loves the feeling of having a penis, falls madly in lust with Catherine Keener's brassy secretary, and arranges to have sex with her while she's in Malkovich's head.

Cusack's psychotically jealous nerd locks his wife in a cage and takes her place. And so it goes. It sounds odd but Malkovich himself is inspired casting for this brilliant onslaught on career pretensions and celebrity exploitation.

Almost as unhinged, but far more unsettling, is Harmony Korine's **Julien donkey-boy**, the first American movie shot under the Dogme 95 vow of stripped-down film-making. Like Korine's first feature, *Gummo*, it pokes around the innards of white-trash Americans: here it is a family cursed and hectorated by Werner Herzog's batty father. Ewen Bremner is outstanding as the unlovely, barely comprehensible schizophrenic son, Julien. Chloë Sevigny is the dumb pregnant daughter/mother figure. Youngest son, Evan Neuman, trains fanatically to become a professional wrestler by practising his moves on plastic dustbins. But it's Bremner and Herzog who thrive on the potty improvising, drinking medicine from slippers or ranting about Adolf Hitler. Korine stitches his film together like a grainy tapestry - by turns bizarre, irritating, and hilarious - to create a drama as fractured as Bremner's mind.

Kimberly Peirce's striking debut, **Boys Don't Cry**, is yet another film that eats its way into the mind with large bloody bites. Hilary Swank is compelling as a trailer-park delinquent who passes herself off as a regular, beer-swilling, redneck boy. Chloë Sevigny makes her second festival appearance by falling in love with her. It would seem a fruitless task, but her dull-eyed dreamer and Swank's spunky Brandon are mesmerising as the teen lovers who booze and sniff glue with the local louts.

I can't see the Indian tourist board being overwhelmed by Dev Benegal's provocative film, **Split Wide Open**, about the mean streets of Bombay. Laila Rouass is the foxy English host of a new muckraking tabloid TV chat show that exposes the secret, kinky lives of Bombay's populace. Rahul Bose is a streetwise hustler who falls foul of the local Mafia. Their lives converge when Bose's ten-year-old sister disappears into the large black hole of child prostitution. There's real wit and imagination here. But the corny melodrama about Rouass finding her roots fudges a savage satire on moral lawlessness. Perversely entertaining, nonetheless.

- *The film festival continues until Nov 18*

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