

SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL

05-16 JUNE 2019

MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01am WEDNESDAY 3 APRIL 2019

SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL ANNOUNCES FIRST FILMS FOR 2019

The 66th Sydney Film Festival today announced a sneak peek of 25 new films to be featured in this year's 5-16 June event. The announcement is in advance of the full program launch on Wednesday 8 May.

"This sneak peek of the 2019 program invites us to come together and hear from a wonderful kaleidoscope of voices, like the inspiringly sensational powerhouse talent of gospel queen Aretha Franklin, or Adam Goodes courageously standing up against racism and facing severe repercussions as a consequence," **Sydney Film Festival Director Nashen Moodley** said.

"These first 25 films are a mere taster of the incredible program in store, from the devastating human impact on the world around us, to captivating stories from unique communities, and spotlights on the most accomplished artists of our generation."

Leading the pack...

Leading the titles announced today is ***The Final Quarter***, documenting AFL champion footballer and Indigenous leader Adam Goodes' divisive public call-out of racism, and Australia's heated response. Renowned Australian documentarian Ian Darling (*Suzy and the Simple Man* – SFF 2016) chronicles the final years of the Sydney Swans player's career, as the cheers turned to boos.

40 years in the making, ***Amazing Grace*** captures a never-before-seen, Sydney Pollack's spine-tingling 1972 performance by iconic diva **Aretha Franklin**. The legendary live show was recorded for her Grammy Award-winning album *Amazing Grace* – to this day, the highest selling live gospel album of all time.

Robert Pattinson (*Good Time* – SFF 2017, *The Rover* – SFF 2014), **Juliette Binoche** (*The English Patient*) and hip hop icon **André 3000** star in sexually charged sci-fi thriller ***High Life***, from acclaimed French director Claire Denis (*Chocolat*); **Dev Patel** (*Lion*) is a compelling presence in **Michael Winterbottom's** (*On the Road* – SFF 2017) thrilling, modern film noir ***The Wedding Guest***; and ***Papi Chulo*** features Golden Globe winner **Matt Bomer** (*In Time*) as a gay TV weatherman who strikes up an unlikely friendship with a straight Latino migrant worker.

In Fabric brings more star power with **Gwendoline Christie** (*Game of Thrones*) and **Marianne Jean-Baptiste** (*Without a Trace*) in British visionary **Peter Strickland's** (*The Field Guide to Evil* – SFF 2018) mesmerising tale of a demonic red dress.

Also featuring on the list is winner of the Berlinale Silver Bear for Best Screenplay ***Piranhas***, about a group of 15-year-olds in Naples going from petty thieves to gun-toting gangsters virtually overnight.



New works from Australian storytellers

Closer to home, ***She Who Must Be Obeyed*** *Loved* is a celebration of the life of the trailblazing Indigenous filmmaker Alfreda Glynn, by her own daughter Erica Glynn (*In My Own Words* – SFF 2017) and granddaughter Tanith Glynn-Maloney; and Adelaide filmmaker Sophie Hyde's hilarious ***Animals*** features **Alia Shawkat** (*Arrested Development*) and **Holliday Grainger** (*The Borgias*) as best friends who live in a haze of drink, drugs and one-night stands, cutting a swathe through Dublin until their friendship is tested when one of them falls in love.

International festival winners and nominees

Choice cuts from the international festival circuit include: the double Oscar-nominated epic ***Never Look Away***, a beautiful and tragic love story inspired – controversially – by the life of German artist Gerhard Richter, from Oscar-winning filmmaker Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (*The Lives of Others*); and winner of the Horizon Prize at Venice, as well as Best Director prizes at the Cairo and Thessaloniki film festivals, ***Manta Ray***, a visually unforgettable story about the unusual friendship between a Thai fisherman and a Rohingya refugee.

Winner of the NETPAC Award at Toronto International Film Festival, Ash Mayfair's exquisite debut ***The Third Wife*** focusses on a teenager in an arranged marriage in 19th century Vietnam who learns quickly about her world's suffocating patriarchy; and winner of the Youth Jury Award at San Sebastian International Film Festival, ***Journey to a Mother's Room***, an intimate and funny portrait of a tight mother-daughter bond that's tested by separation.

Outstanding documentaries

Sydney Film Festival's documentary program continues to bring the most fascinating stories about people, places, enterprises and phenomena from around the world.

The Kleptocrats is a jaw-dropping exposé on Malaysia's 1MDB wealth fund scandal, playing out like a Hollywood movie complete with stars, villains and billions of dollars at stake; and ***Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*** is a visually stunning essay on the human race's devastating impact on the Earth, from the trio behind multi-award-winners *Manufactured Landscapes* and *Watermark* (SFF 2014)

The Festival also shines a light on renowned contemporary artists. British rock star PJ Harvey's restless, probing genius shines in ***A Dog Called Money***, documenting the performance-art process behind the recording of her 2016 album *The Hope Six Demolition Project*; and ***Yuli*** is a moving biography of Cuban ballet luminary Carlos Acosta, the first black principal dancer of the prestigious Royal Ballet.

Stories from communities across the world include: ***Midnight Family***, following a family in Mexico City operating one of many private ambulances hustling for work in the megapolis; ***Up the Mountain***, a meditative work about an artist and his community in a Chinese mountain village, evoking a fast-disappearing way of life; and ***School of Seduction – Three Stories from Russia***, about workshops in Putin's Russia where you can learn 'skills for seducing wealthy men', and the women who attend them.

Quirky hits

This year's Festival has its share of the wonderfully quirky, such as delightfully deadpan Cuban sci-fi ***The Extraordinary Journey of Celeste Garcia***, about a 60-year-old who signs up to visit an alien planet alongside a motley crew; Hiroshi Okuyama's strikingly original debut ***Jesus***, presenting Jesus Christ as the tiny friend of a young boy; and ***Minuscule 2: Mandibles from Far Away***, a dive into the delightful world of animated insects, and follow-up to the award-winning French TV series and debut *Minuscule* feature.



Screen Day Out

Also returning is **Screen Day Out**, the Festival's program for high school students supported by Australian Teachers of Media Inc. The program will screen ***Eternity***, a brand-new National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) digital restoration of Lawrence Johnston's 1994 film about Arthur Stace, a Sydneysider who famously chalked the word 'Eternity' on his hometown's streets; and ***The Miracle of the Little Prince***, exploring the nature of language and culture, particularly disappearing Indigenous languages, through Antoine Saint-Exupéry's classic *The Little Prince*.

Retrospective

Just announced is **Essential Australian Women Directors – 10 Trailblazers Selected by David Stratton**, a program of 10 essential films directed by pioneering Australian women filmmakers. Each film marks a milestone in Australian film history, from influential silent masterpiece ***The Cheaters***, to the only feature film by Indigenous artist Tracey Moffatt, ***Bedeevil***.

The State Theatre, Event Cinemas George Street, Dendy Opera Quays, Dendy Newtown, Randwick Ritz, Hayden Orpheum Picture Palace Cremorne, Hoyts Entertainment Quarter, Art Gallery of NSW, and Casula Powerhouse return as official Festival screening venues.

The full Sydney Film Festival program is announced on Wednesday 8 May 2019.

Flexipasses and subscriptions to Sydney Film Festival 2019 are on sale now.
Call 1300 733 733 or visit sff.org.au for more information.

MEDIA ENQUIRIES

Amber Forrest-Bisley, Publicity Manager

E: amber@originalspin.com.au P: 02 8065 7363 M: 0405 363 817

Amy Owen, Communications Project Manager

E: amy@originalspin.com.au M: 0404 977 338

Genvin In, Communications Advisor

E: genvin@originalspin.com.au M: 0449 939 864

*****Sydney Film Festival Press Pack and Images Available [HERE](#)**

EDITOR'S NOTES

ABOUT SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL

From Wednesday 5 June to Sunday 16 June 2019, the 66th Sydney Film Festival offers Sydneysiders another exciting season of cinema amidst a whirlwind of premieres, red-carpet openings, in-depth discussions, international guests and more.

Sydney Film Festival also presents an Official Competition of 12 films that vie for the Sydney Film Prize, a highly respected honour that awards a \$60,000 cash prize based on the decision of a jury of international and Australian filmmakers and industry professionals. Previous Sydney Film Prize winners: *The Heiresses* (2018), *On Body and Soul* (2017); *Aquarius* (2016); *Arabian Nights* (2015); *Two Days, One Night* (2014); *Only God Forgives* (2013); *Alps* (2012); *A Separation* (2011); *Heartbeats* (2010); *Bronson* (2009); and *Hunger* (2008).

The Festival is a major event on the New South Wales cultural calendar and is one of the world's longest-running film festivals. For more information visit: sff.org.au.



The 66th Sydney Film Festival is supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW and Destination NSW, the Federal Government through Screen Australia and the City of Sydney. The Festival's Strategic Partner is the NSW Government via its tourism and major events agency, Destination NSW.

DOCUMENTARIES

A DOG CALLED MONEY

British rock star PJ Harvey's restless, probing creative genius shines in this beautifully impressionistic documentary that combines travelogue and multimedia performance art.

A Dog Called Money documents the unusual process behind the recording of Harvey's 2016 album *The Hope Six Demolition Project*. Director and Irish war reporter Seamus Murphy, who previously collaborated with Harvey on her award-winning 2011 album *Let England Shake*, accompanies her on a tour of forsaken places: Afghanistan, Kosovo and a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Washington, DC. Finding hope and humanity as well as devastation, Harvey meets people, writes poetry and gathers inspiration for new songs. Back in London, she and her band record the album in a specially built studio that doubles as a live performance-art space, for the public to peer in at them as they work. The resulting film is a rich tapestry of stunning location footage, wrenching on-the-ground experiences and unusually intense and personal music.

AMAZING GRACE

"Spine-tinging", "sensational", "rousing" - just a few of the words used to describe Aretha Franklin's show-stopping performance in this previously unreleased film of her 1972 concert.

The legendary singer and daughter of a Detroit preacher was raised on gospel music. After a string of hits, at age 29 she returned briefly to her roots. Over two days at L.A.'s New Temple Missionary Baptist Church, accompanied by the Southern Californian Community Choir, Aretha sang from the heart and her astounding performance was captured by filmmaker Sydney Pollack. The resulting recording, *Amazing Grace*, became her most successful album, but the film of her performance – for multiple reasons – was never released...until now. In the audience her father, legendary gospel singers and Mick Jagger are squished alongside camera crew and sound technicians. But all eyes and ears are on the Queen of Soul herself – and she's never been more mesmerising.

ANTHROPOCENE: THE HUMAN EPOCH

A visually stunning cinematic essay on the human race's devastating impact on the earth by the trio behind multi-award-winners *Manufactured Landscapes* and *Watermark*.

The third collaboration between photographer-turned-filmmaker Edward Burtynsky and co-directors Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier is astonishing in scale and perspective. It traverses the globe from Kenya, where mounds of illegal elephant tusks are set alight, to colossal mining operations in Russia and Germany, and gaudy evaporation pools in Chile's Atacama Desert. The striking images demonstrate how humans are shaping our planet at an ever-increasing rate – hence the title, for this is the age in which human activity is the dominant influence on the environment. De Pencier's epic cinematography and Alicia Vikander's narration capture the immense power and terrible beauty of our endeavours: this really is a film for the big screen.

MIDNIGHT FAMILY

This award-winning doco takes a frenetic night ride through Mexico City with one of the many rough-as-guts private ambulances hustling for trade in the dysfunctional megalopolis.

The Mexican capital is home to over nine million people and is serviced by just 45 government ambulances. The gap is filled by private, untrained paramedics, who race to accident scenes and scrabble for business. It's a cut-throat environment, ethically problematic, and subject to much bribery and corruption. The Ochoa family are struggling to keep their ambulance on the road and make a living. Lacking medical skills and equipment but basically good-hearted (and always ready with a hug), the family are forced to negotiate fees with the sick, stressed and insolvent. Director Luke Lorentzen



expertly captures their chaotic world, watching scenes unfold with a tough yet affectionate eye. Winner of Best Feature and Best Director at Guadalajara International Film Festival.

SCHOOL OF SEDUCTION - THREE STORIES FROM RUSSIA

In Putin's Russia, women invest in workshops that purport to teach the skills necessary to seduce wealthy men. Award-winning filmmaker Alina Rudnitskaya follows three graduates.

Each of these 30-something Russian women is desperately seeking a better life. Lida, who is dating a married man, hates living with her mum. Vika is riddled with anxiety about her situation. A lonely single mother, Diana, wants a relationship – but the guy must have money. A sleazy middle-aged man runs the workshop; “what a nightmare,” says one pupil, as he hip-grinds with the class. Rudnitskaya follows the women for seven years as they chase their dreams of success. In a society where money and prestige are everything, it's not surprising that happiness means designer clothes and a nice apartment. This absorbing documentary delivers outrage and comedy, while providing a sharp insight into the gender gap in 21st century Russia.

SHE WHO MUST BE OBEYED LOVED

A celebration of the life and work of the trailblazing Alfreda Glynn, a history-maker, mother, and a central figure in Indigenous filmmaking from the heart of the country.

'Freda' Glynn was born on a remote cattle station north of Alice Springs in 1939. As a child she lived under the Aboriginal Protection policies; as a young mother of five she carved out a career as a stills photographer. In the early 1970s she channelled her formidable energy into establishing the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) and later Imparja TV. Not just a bio-pic, it's part social history and part detective story, as the mystery behind her grandmother's death is tracked down. Three Indigenous women representing three generations were involved in the making of this splendid documentary: behind the camera is Freda's daughter, director Erica Glynn; and her granddaughter is producer Tanith Glynn-Maloney. *She Who Must Be Loved* is a Since 1788 Productions production that received principal production investment from Screen Australia, in association with NITV and was financed with support from the Adelaide Film Festival.

THE FINAL QUARTER

Cheers turned to boos in the final years of AFL champion footballer Adam Goodes' career when he publicly called out racism. This impassioned film tracks Australia's heated response

The Indigenous leader and Sydney Swans player became a lightning rod for an intense public debate and widespread media commentary that divided the country. In the last three years of his career, Goodes was named Australian of the Year, accused of staging for free kicks, and performed an on-field war dance celebration. When the football crowds turned on him, the Brownlow medallist left his beloved game. Director Ian Darling's (*Suzy and the Simple Man*, SFF 2016) film is crafted using only archival footage aired at the time, which has been expertly edited: a technique seen most recently in documentaries such as *Amy* and *Senna*. The result is a powerful film that holds a mirror to Australia and suggests we reconsider what happened on and off the football field.

THE KLEPTOCRATS

A true-life political scam that plays out like a Hollywood movie, complete with stars, villains and billions of dollars! A jaw-dropping documentary on Malaysia's 1MDB scandal.

In full-on investigative mode, reporters from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Hollywood Reporter* doggedly pursue the story of US \$3.5 billion missing from a Malaysian wealth fund. They trace the dirty money, via real estate deals and movie financing, back to the top tiers of the Malaysian government. Incredibly (but oh, how fitting!), the audacious swindlers chose to back the 2014 blockbuster *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Hollywood A-listers, including Leonardo DiCaprio, attended lavish parties hosted to launch the film. The embezzlement was orchestrated by a flamboyant fancier, Jho Low, and Riza Aziz, the stepson of the then-Malaysian Prime Minister. As the truth finally comes to light, assets are frozen and the fall-out begins.



UP THE MOUNTAIN

Exquisitely framed like the paintings it features, this meditative work about an artist, his community and mountain village in China, evokes a fast-disappearing way of life.

Master painter and teacher Shen Jianhua moved from Shanghai to a mountaintop Yunnan village years ago. He offers drawing lessons to numerous guests, including elderly village ladies who produce colourful folk canvases. The women are delightful, chattering as they paint and cook, revealing much about their calm approach to the ups and downs – the very rhythms – of life. One of Shen's pupils is less serene: newly married, he's torn between staying and leaving for the big city. His story exemplifies the clash between modernity and tradition in today's China. Using an aspect ratio similar to a painting, director Zhang Yang (Festival favourite *Shower*, SFF 1999) has crafted an exquisite, unhurried portrait of a community and the joy of creating.

YULI

Cuban ballet luminary Carlos Acosta is both star and subject of this moving and unusual fusion of biography and dazzling dance, by Spanish director Icíar Bollaín.

A visual treat for ballet fans, *Yuli* is the inspiring true story of the UK Royal Ballet's first black dancer, combining a loving account of Acosta's upbringing in his native Havana with glorious dance sequences that flesh out his life story. Framed by present-day rehearsals for an autobiographical production, *Yuli* explores Acosta's impoverished childhood, his early struggles with his monumental talent and his stormy relationship with his father, who was as abusive as he was proud of his son's career. With his legendary grace and power, lovingly depicted here by Bollaín (*Take My Eyes*), Acosta became world-famous and a longtime principal dancer at the Royal Ballet but never forgot his roots – as demonstrated by the film's unflinching commentary on racism, classism and politics.

FEATURES

ANIMALS

Holliday Grainger and Alia Shawkat shine as best friends who live in a haze of drink, drugs and one-night stands, in the hilarious new film by Australian Sophie Hyde (*52 Tuesdays*).

Laura (Grainger, *The Borgias*, *Patrick Melrose*) and Tyler (Shawkat, *Arrested Development*, *Blaze*) are entering their 30s but are intent on keeping up the hedonistic lifestyle they've become accustomed to. Utterly confident and fearless, the two friends cut a swathe through Dublin, never letting a responsibility get in the way of a good time. When Laura falls in love with the handsome, and extremely disciplined, classical pianist Jim (Fa Fee), she begins to question her choices, placing strain on the tight bond with Tyler. Adapted from the popular novel by Emma Jane Unsworth, *Animals* convincingly captures the affection, irritations and nuances of a long and firm friendship as it is forced to change. *Animals* is an Official Australian/Irish Co-production by Closer Productions. Principal production investment from Screen Australia and the Irish Film Board. Financed with support from Adelaide Film Festival and South Australian Film Corporation.

HIGH LIFE

Robert Pattinson, Juliette Binoche and André Benjamin (OutKast's André 3000) star in this bold, sexually charged sci-fi thriller from acclaimed French director Claire Denis.

Reminiscent of visionary sci-fi classics like Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Ridley Scott's *Alien* – while assuredly exploring her own sensual twists on genre conventions – Claire Denis's latest work takes us on an extraordinary, unsettling and sometimes shocking journey into deep space. Pattinson plays an introverted convict on a penal starship who comes to grips with convict-doctor Binoche's bizarre, controlling sex games and her mad-scientist experiments with human reproduction. As the ship approaches a black hole and time begins to warp and lose meaning, the convicts and crew abandon any semblance of discipline or social norms, and the bodily fluids – and blood – start to flow.



IN FABRIC

British visionary Peter Strickland (*The Duke of Burgundy*, SFF 2015) delivers mesmerising mystery, ravishing horror and deathly dark comedy with the tale of a demonic red dress.

Peter Strickland's reputation as a brilliantly idiosyncratic auteur is further enhanced by this giddy excursion into fashion, fantasy, consumerism and human frailty. *In Fabric* exudes luscious menace from the moment lonely middle-aged bank teller Sheila buys a fetching red frock from a particularly peculiar saleslady at fancy London clothes shop Dentley & Sopers. But Sheila isn't the first owner of this cursed garment, nor will she be the last. Soaked in the spirit of European arthouse thrillers of the '70s and '80s, *In Fabric* is a fashion-horror statement of rare and intoxicating distinction.

JESUS

In Hiroshi Okuyama's strikingly original and playful debut, *Jesus* is the tiny imaginary friend of a young Japanese boy. Winner of the New Directors competition at San Sebastian.

Nine-year-old Yura moves with his parents from Tokyo to a countryside town to join the boy's grandmother. A shy boy, Yura must adapt to a new school, complicated by the fact that it's a Christian institution. At first Yura struggles with the religious enthusiasm of his classmates but when, in the midst of prayer, a very small Jesus (played energetically by Australian comedian Chad Mullane) manifests himself, the boy quickly comes to the faith. Jesus becomes his entertaining playmate with the added advantage of making Yura's every wish come true. Behind the gentle, humorous and playful veneer, the talented 23-year-old Okuyama (who made his first music video at age 13) makes a pointed commentary on faith and religion.

JOURNEY TO A MOTHER'S ROOM

An intimate yet funny portrait of a close mother-daughter bond unexpectedly transformed when one moves away, from Spanish director Celia Rico Clavellino.

Lola Dueñas and Anna Castillo are wonderful as Estrella and Leonor, a retired mother and her introverted 20-something daughter. They live together, sharing everything from meals to TV series, and the mother dotes on her daughter. When Leonor decides to try her luck as an au pair in London, Estrella is left behind, struggling to occupy her time and remain cheerful in a heartbreakingly empty apartment. Unexpectedly, Estrella soon finds her time fruitfully occupied by an unusual new hobby and even an awkward romantic prospect – both of which spawn much hilarity. As it turns out, new-found independence is a blessing more for the mother than the daughter in this beautiful, touching film.

MANTA RAY

Winner of the Horizon Prize at Venice, *Manta Ray* is a visually unforgettable and mystical story about the unusual friendship between a Thai fisherman and a Rohingya refugee.

On the coast of Thailand, a site of great misfortune and cruelty for the Rohingya, a local fisherman finds an injured man and nurses him back to health. The stranger does not speak, but that doesn't stop the fisherman from befriending him, naming him Thongchai and involving him in every element of his life. In one lovely scene, not easily forgotten, the two men dance in a makeshift disco. When the fisherman disappears, Thongchai gradually begins to take over his friend's life: his house, his job and even his ex-wife. A striking and relevant meditation on identity, *Manta Ray* is a film of exquisite beauty that finds moments of transcendence amidst a time of brutality. *Manta Ray* won Best Director and Artistic Achievement awards at Cairo and Thessaloniki film festivals.

MINUSCULE 2: MANDIBLES FROM FAR AWAY

Be transported into the hilarious and delightful world of animated insects with the second *Minuscule* feature; hugely popular tales of bug derring-do with millions of fans.

An adventurous young ladybird is accidentally shipped around the world to an unspoilt tropical island a long way from his snowy forest home. His dad sets out to bring him home, with a little help from some googly-eyed insects and a music-loving spider. Beautifully animated and dialogue-free, *Minuscule: Mandibles from Far Away* is crafted with love by the same duo (French animators Thomas Szabo and Hélène Giraud) that brought you the award-winning television series and debut *Minuscule* feature. Be guided by the smallest of creatures including ants, spiders, praying mantis and ladybirds as they take you on an adventure into a great, big, wilder world. Brimming with gentle humour, this enchanting animation will delight adults and kids aged three and up.

NEVER LOOK AWAY

Inspired – controversially – by the life of German artist Gerhard Richter, this Oscar-nominated epic, from the director of *The Lives of Others*, recounts a remarkable love story.

With some of Germany's finest actors and an incredibly dramatic story, filmmaker Henckel von Donnersmarck does a fascinating job of carefully intertwining the romance with three key eras of pre- and post-WWII German history. At the story's centre is a beautiful and tragic love story beginning when Kurt (Tom Schilling, *Oh Boy*, SFF 2013) falls for fellow student Ellie (Paula Beer, *Transit*, SFF 2018; *Frantz*). Though the pair are very much in love, Ellie's father Professor Seeband (Sebastian Koch, *The Lives of Others*) objects to the relationship and is determined to break them up. What Seeband doesn't realise, though, is that their lives are already inextricably connected through history. This great love, and Germany's seismic upheavals, together guide Kurt to his illustrious artistic path.

PAPI CHULO

A twist on the 'buddy comedy': after an on-air meltdown, a gay TV weatherman (Matt Bomer) hires a straight Latino migrant (Alejandro Patiño) to do odd jobs and be his friend in this charming buddy movie.

Following his very public breakdown during a live broadcast, Sean is forced to take leave from work. Scarred from the end of a long-term relationship, lonely and aimless, Sean decides to do some home repairs. Outside a hardware store, he hires Ernesto to carry out the work. Though they have no shared language and can barely communicate, Sean and Ernesto form an unusual friendship, and Sean is soon paying Ernesto to go boating, hiking and attend parties with him – causing much amusement for Ernesto's wife. Gradually the source of Sean's unusual behaviour becomes clear, making the profound bond between the two men all the more poignant, in this funny, empathetic film by John Butler (*Handsome Devil*).

PIRANHAS

Italian director Claudio Giovannesi's riveting drama, winner of the Silver Bear for best screenplay at Berlinale, is both a gangster flick and a vibrant tale of adolescence.

Set in Naples, *Piranhas* is based on a book by *Gomorrah* writer and investigative reporter Roberto Saviani. Ambitious, charismatic 15-year-old Nicola and his mates go from being petty thieves to gun-toting gangsters virtually overnight. As the gangs' older generations are locked away in prison, the gangsters become younger and younger. The baby-faced protagonists struggle with family, peer pressure and romance, all while swaggering haplessly into a bloody war to control their streets. With almost anthropological detail about the boys' lives, fashions and tragically macho rituals, the film nods at genre classics like *City of God* and Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets*, while staking out its own complex, thrilling territory.

THE EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY OF CELESTE GARCIA

Aliens descend to offer Earthlings a chance to visit their planet, and 60-year-old Celeste signs up for the adventure alongside a motley crew, in this delightfully deadpan Cuban sci-fi.

Celeste (Maria Isabel Diaz, *Volver*) takes her job as a Havana Planetarium guide very seriously, sharing the wonders of the universe with visiting children. Like everyone, she is rather surprised to discover that aliens have been living amongst the Cuban people and have now decided to reciprocate by inviting a select few people to visit their planet. Celeste is given a special invitation and along with a ragtag bunch – those escaping crimes, or pursuing impossible romances – prepares to leave Earth. For Celeste, a painful past could give way to a future of happiness and love. With deadpan humour, the film also makes gentle political commentary: the visitors from the planet Gryok, for instance, were just thought to be Russians!

THE THIRD WIFE

Set in late 19th century Vietnam, Ash Mayfair's exquisite feature debut focuses on a teenager in an arranged marriage, who learns quickly about her world's suffocating patriarchy.

Mayfair's dreamlike feminist tale of repressed desire is filled with passion, beauty and melancholy. May (Nguyen Phuong Tranh My) is a teenager who, through an arranged marriage, becomes the third wife of prosperous rural landowner Hung. She quickly comes of age, learning what she can about sex, and also about the strict patriarchal hierarchy of her society: a world in which women are scarcely more than property and fulfilment of any kind is fleeting. May soon pins all her hopes on becoming the first of Hung's wives to bear him a son. Writer/director Mayfair based the tale in part on her own family history, recruiting a splendid cast including the great Tran Nu Yen Khe (*The Scent of Green Papaya*). *The Third Wife's* ravishing cinematography brings the pastoral setting to life with a mix of lyricism and bracing immediacy.

THE WEDDING GUEST

Dev Patel (*Lion, Slumdog Millionaire*) is a mysterious and compelling presence in Michael Winterbottom's thrilling, modern film noir about a wedding guest with ulterior motives.

British man Jay (Patel) travels to Pakistan ostensibly to attend a wedding, but his multiple passports and proficiency with weapons suggest that he has something very different in mind. After a daring raid, he spirits away the bride-to-be, Samira (Radhika Apte, *Sacred Games, Lust Stories*) and flees across the border to India. Winterbottom (*The Killer Inside Me*, SFF 2010; *The Trip*, SFF 2011; *On The Road*, SFF 2017), a prolific director with an astonishing range of films traversing countries and genres, proves himself an expert at thrillers too. He ratchets up the tension as the two characters play a potentially deadly game of deception with each other – and their mutual attraction simmers.