



MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 8:30PM SUNDAY 19 JUNE 2016

THE 63rd SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL ANNOUNCES: OFFICIAL COMPETITION WINNER

Aquarius, directed by **Kleber Mendonça Filho**, was tonight awarded **Sydney Film Festival's** prestigious **Sydney Film Prize**, from a selection of **12 Official Competition** films, at the Festival's Closing Night Gala.

The \$63,000 cash prize, now in its ninth year, is awarded for a film's 'emotional power and resonance; audaciousness, cutting-edge, courageousness; and capacity to go beyond the usual treatment of the subject matter'.

"The jury was unanimous in its admiration of a strong competition this year, and wishes to award Kleber Mendonça Filho as the recipient of this year's Sydney Film Prize, for his film *Aquarius*," said **Jury President Simon Field**. "*Aquarius* is a compelling and relevant statement about contemporary Brazil, and the power of an individual standing up for what she believes," he said.

"Mendonça Filho has created a film that is both political and personal – witty, sexy and playful. A film of effortless verve and intelligence. At the heart of the film is Sonia Braga's astonishing and brave performance of a fearless character, resisting pressures from her family, and the corporate world," he said.

Selected to compete for the Palme d'Or at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, Mendonça Filho's magnificent second feature is about social justice, with an incredible role crafted for Sonia Braga, thirty years after *Kiss of the Spider Woman* first brought her international acclaim. The story unfolds across three chapters, and celebrates the prospect of growing stronger with age.

The Brazilian drama also engages with the paradox of a society so keen on building its future that it steamrolls the past. Mendonça Filho's meditative filmmaking will be familiar to audiences of his first narrative feature, *Neighboring Sounds*, which screened at Sydney Film Festival in 2012.

Accepting from Recife, Brazil; filmmaker Kleber Mendonça Filho was delighted to receive news of the decision. "Aquarius is still very young, Australia was only the second country to get to see it and no one has actually seen it in Brazil, its home country. To get this recognition from Sydney Film Festival means a lot to me and to the film, which is building up momentum for our Brazilian release. Sydney is also a festival of large audiences and cinephilia, and I could not feel prouder to accept this award. Thank you."

Four years after his first feature-length drama, *Neighboring Sounds* was chosen as Brazil's submission for Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars, and has won 120 awards in Brazil and abroad; his follow up feature continues to bring the Brazilian director accolades. Highly relevant, *Aquarius* comes at a poignant time when Brazil struggles with a real-life political crisis, and speaks to the bigger picture of power politics.

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The United Kingdom's international programmer and producer **Simon Field** presided over Sydney Film Festival's 2016 Official Competition Jury. Prolific Australian writer, director and producer **Robert Connolly**, Dublin International Film Festival Director **Grainne Humphreys**, acclaimed Australian producer **Bridget Ikin**, and Japan's innovative documentarian **Kazuhiro Soda** comprised the full Festival jury.

The Festival's Official Competition was established in 2008 and is endorsed by Fédération Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films; the regulating organisation for international film festivals.

Previous Sydney Film Prize winners are: *Arabian Nights* (2015); *Two Days, One Night* (2014); *Only God Forgives* (2013); *Alps* (2012); *A Separation* (2011), which went on to win an Academy Award; *Heartbeats* (2010); *Bronson* (2009); and *Hunger* (2008).

The selection of films in Competition for the SFF 2016 Sydney Film Prize were:

Apprentice

Singapore, Germany, France, Hong Kong, Qatar | 2016 | 96 mins | In English and Bahasa Malaysian with English subtitles | Australian Premiere

Director, Screenwriter: Boo Junfeng | Producer: Raymond Phathanavirangoon | Cast: Fir Rahman, Wan Hanafi Su, Mastura Ahmad | World Sales: Luxbox

Selected for Cannes Un Certain Regard, Boo Junfeng's second feature is an emotionally and psychologically astute film about a Singaporean correctional officer who serves as the apprentice to the chief executioner. Aiman is a 28-year-old prison guard who lives with his sister in modest circumstances. When he is transferred to a new prison, Aiman becomes fascinated by an older warden named Rahim, who turns out to be the long-serving chief executioner of the prison. Soon Rahim asks Aiman to serve as his apprentice. Aiman harbours a secret however; one that has had a profound effect on his family life, and will certainly impact on his new career path. Superb cinematography (partly shot at the decommissioned facilities of Maitland Gaol and Parramatta Correctional Centre in New South Wales) and clever sound design create an eerie sense of darkness and loss at the prison. *Apprentice* powerfully surveys the impact of capital punishment on death-row prisoners, their families, and the executioners themselves. Filled with conflict and tension, this is a complex and rewarding film.

Aquarius

France, Brazil | 2016 | 141 mins | In Portuguese with English subtitles | Australian Premiere

Director, Screenwriter: Kleber Mendonça Filho | Producers: Saïd Ben Saïd, Emilie Lesclaux, Michel Merkt | Cast: Sonia Braga, Maeve Jinkings, Irandhir Santos | World Sales: SBS International

Neighbouring Sounds, Kleber Mendonça Filho's extraordinary examination of race, class and fear in Recife, Brazil appeared in the SFF Official Competition in 2012. In *Aquarius*, selected for the Competition in Cannes, Mendonça returns to his native Recife, again telling a story of great ambition and scope. This time he hones in on an unforgettable protagonist Clara, played brilliantly by the

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incomparable Sonia Braga (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*). 65-year-old Clara is a fiercely independent and intelligent retired music critic and the last resident of the seaside Aquarius building. Every other apartment has been acquired by a development company with plans for the site. Clara politely refuses to sell, but the requests from the company become increasingly aggressive. So follows an escalating battle between Clara and the firm. In *Clara*, Mendonça has created a remarkable character for whom we feel great concern and affection. The film's strength is in the way her life is conveyed in its fullness – her intellectual, family and sex lives are all explored. Through Clara, Mendonça masterfully reflects on an entire society in this powerful and complex film.

Certain Women

USA | 2016 | 107 mins | In English | Australian Premiere

Director, Screenwriter: Kelly Reichardt | Producer: Neil Kopp | Cast: Kristen Stewart, Michelle Williams, Laura Dern | Distributor: Sony Pictures

Described by *Variety* as 'the quietest of great American filmmakers', Kelly Reichardt has distinguished herself as a director able to convey deep emotion and meaning through her concise, atmospheric storytelling. Her new film, based on Maile Meloy's short stories, tells three connected stories of independent Montana women trying to understand and shape the world around them. Attorney Laura (Laura Dern) is pestered by a client eager to have his case reopened and things quickly escalate to a hostage crisis. Meanwhile, on an elderly family friend's property, Gina (Michelle Williams) and her husband find the ideal sandstone for the dream home they're building on the outskirts of town. They convince him to part with the stone, but it's unclear that he's aware of what he's promising. In the third story, a young woman (Lily Gladstone) who works as a ranch hand becomes fascinated with Elizabeth (Kristen Stewart), a lawyer who runs legal workshops in the small town. Reichardt uses the landscape and its stillness as a spectacular backdrop to these melancholic, transcendent tales. Leaving much unsaid, she vividly creates a unique and mesmerising world that is a pleasure to enter.

The Childhood of a Leader

UK, Hungary, France | 2015 | 116 mins | In English and French with English subtitles | Australian Premiere

Director: Brady Corbet | Screenwriters: Brady Corbet, Mona Fastvold | Producers: Chris Coen, Ron Curtis, Antoine de Clermont-Tonnerre, Helena Daneilsson, Istvan Major | Cast: Liam Cunningham, Bérénice Bejo, Robert Pattinson | World Sales: Protagonist Pictures

Winner of Best Debut Feature and Best Director awards at Venice, this stylish and uncompromising historical drama stars Liam Cunningham, Bérénice Bejo, Robert Pattinson and Stacy Martin. As an actor, Brady Corbet has displayed a taste for working with audacious filmmakers like Michael Haneke, Olivier Assayas and Lars von Trier. So it comes as no surprise that his feature directorial debut is something this grand and ambitious. *The Childhood of a Leader* is a period piece that liberally plays with historical fact in detailing the journey of the fictional Prescott (Tom Sweet). His rise to power is chronicled in three chapters – or 'tantrums', as they're cheekily titled. At the end of WWI, the boy is living in France with his influential parents, when he begins to subvert the order of things, shifting the balance of power in the family. An enigmatic and challenging speculation about the beginnings of fascism conveyed with surrealism and operatic intensity, the film has a whirlwind

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impact on the senses and the mind. With a formidable ensemble cast, and an extraordinary head-trip of a music score from the legendary Scott Walker, this is historical drama as you've never seen before.

The Endless River

South Africa, France | 2015 | 110 mins | In English | Australian Premiere

Director, Screenwriter: Oliver Hermanus | Producers: Didier Costet, Marvin Saven, Genevieve Hofmeyr | Cast: Nicolas Duvauchelle, Crystal-Donna Roberts, Clayton Evertson | World Sales: Urban Distribution International

The Endless River opens with a series of stunning rural South African landscape shots, accompanied by a swelling orchestral score, as the film's credits appear in a classic Hollywood style typeface. It's a stirring intro that perfectly primes you for the film to follow, which is at once traditional and contemporary. Writer-director Oliver Hermanus's third feature is a western, albeit one that deals with racial prejudice and cyclical violence in post-apartheid South Africa – the small village town of Riviersonderend, specifically. Here, Percy (Clayton Evertson) returns home to his wife Tiny (Crystal-Donna Roberts) after a four-year prison stint for gang activity. Elsewhere, Gilles (Nicolas Duvauchelle) and his family are subjected to horrific violence. This leads to an investigation that exposes the corruption and prejudice of the local authorities, while also bringing Gilles and Tiny together in unexpected ways. With an intricate plot and stunning widescreen cinematography, *The Endless River* is at once brutal and beautiful, combining operatic storytelling and social commentary to distinctive and powerful effect.

Goldstone

Australia | 2016 | 109 mins | In English | World Premiere

Director, Screenwriter: Ivan Sen | Producers: Greer Simpkin, David Jowsey | Cast: Aaron Pedersen, Alex Russell, Jacki Weaver | Distributor: Transmission Films

Australian auteur Ivan Sen's new feature is a complex, stylish and intelligent western that reflects on Australia's history with a compelling tale of its present. *Goldstone* sees the excellent Aaron Pedersen (*Mystery Road*, SFF 2013) reprise his role as troubled Indigenous detective Jay Swan. On the trail of a missing person, Jay finds himself in the small mining town of Goldstone, where he is immediately arrested for drunk driving by young local cop Josh (Alex Russell). When Jay's motel room is blasted with gunfire, it becomes clear that something larger is at play in the district. Jay and Josh struggle to overcome their mutual distrust to uncover the unpleasant truth. Sen, who also shot the film, takes full advantage of the beauty of the outback without shying away from the scars it bears – both societal and environmental. With an all-star cast including Jacki Weaver, David Wenham, David Gulpilil, Cheng Pei-pei, Michelle Lim Davidson and Tom E. Lewis, *Goldstone* is a taut, intelligent thriller encompassing the environment, corruption, politics, corporate greed, tradition and mythology.

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It's Only the End of the World

France, Canada | 2016 | 97 mins | In French with English subtitles | Australian Premiere

Director, Screenwriter: Xavier Dolan | Producers: Xavier Dolan, Nancy Grant, Nathanaël Karmitz, Sylvain Corbeil | Cast: Gaspard Ulliel, Vincent Cassel, Marion Cotillard | Distributor: Transmission Films

Prodigiously talented Xavier Dolan, who at the age of 27 has already created a distinctive body of work, has made perhaps his most emotional and immersive film, the 2016 Cannes Competition contender *It's Only the End of the World*. Dolan, who won the Sydney Film Prize with *Heartbeats* (SFF 2010), and the Jury Prize at Cannes with *Mommy* (SFF 2014), is a superb chronicler of relationships, both romantic and familial. In his new film, he assembles a standout French cast for an intense family drama based on the eponymous play by Jean-Luc Lagarce. Successful writer Louis (Gaspard Ulliel) returns to his hometown after a twelve-year absence to break the news of his impending death. He is welcomed, with varying degrees of warmth, by his mother (Nathalie Baye), sister Suzanne (Léa Seydoux), brother Antoine (Vincent Cassel) and sister-in-law Catherine (Marion Cotillard). What should be a sincere reunion soon turns into an afternoon of bickering and recriminations, and Louis' mind wanders back to some pivotal memories. With extreme close-ups eliciting raw, expressive performances from the superb cast, the film draws you in close, as if you are yourself a member of this family of strangers.

Land of Mine

Denmark, Germany | 2015 | 101 mins | In English, German and Danish with English subtitles | Australian Premiere

Director, Screenwriter: Martin Zandvliet | Producers: Mikael Chr. Rieks, Malte Grunert | Cast: Roland Møller, Louis Hofmann, Joel Basman | Distributor: Palace Film

Winner of awards and audience prizes at several festivals, *Land of Mine*, based on extraordinary true events, is an edgy thriller about young German prisoners of war forced to disarm hidden weapons in the aftermath of World War II. Following the Nazi surrender, a group of teenaged Germans, conscripted at the tail end of the war, are put to work on the coast of Denmark. With minimal training, they are sent to disarm the landmines that lie hidden on Danish beaches. The Danish sergeant, Rasmussen (Roland Møller, *A Hijacking*, SFF 2013) supervises the young soldiers with an iron fist. Embittered by the brutal German occupation, he initially lacks sympathy for the young men. Gradually empathy develops, and Rasmussen grows to recognise the horror of the situation. Director Martin Zandvliet creates extraordinary tension but his humane concerns are very much the centre of the film, and he draws heartbreaking performances from his talented cast. *Land of Mine* is an unforgettable film about a little-known part of history that has great resonance all these years later.

Letters From War

Portugal | 2016 | 105 mins | In Portuguese with English subtitles | Australian Premier

Director: Ivo M. Ferreira | Screenwriters: Ivo M. Ferreira, Edgar Medina | Producers: Luís Urbano, Sandro Aguilar | Cast: Miguel Nunes, Margarida Vila-Nova, Ricardo Pereira | World Sales: The Match Factory

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Gorgeous images and passionate declarations come together in an enchanting wartime love story from the producers of Miguel Gomes' *Tabu* (SFF 2012) and *Arabian Nights* (2015 Sydney Film Prize winner). The stunning black and white film is based on the letters of one of Portugal's most acclaimed writers, António Lobo Antunes. In 1971, António (Miguel Nunes), also a medical doctor, was drafted into the Portuguese Army to serve in one of the most violent zones of the Colonial War: East Angola. In this desperate setting, he writes letters of love and desire to his pregnant wife Maria José (Margarida Vila-Nova) back in Portugal. As António is exposed to the reality of his government's brutal policies in Angola, he becomes increasingly critical and shares his political transformation in his letters home. A tremendous cinematographic achievement, *Letters from War* manages to find beauty in this war zone, conveying a strong anti-war message as it tells of a sensual romance interrupted by distance. The letters themselves, as read by Maria José, weave an intoxicating spell of their own in this singular, formally daring work.

Notes on Blindness

UK | 2016 | 87 mins | In English | Australian Premiere

Directors, Screenwriters: Peter Middleton, James Spinney | Producers: Mike Brett, Jo-Jo Ellison, Steve Jamison, Peter Middleton, James Spinney, Alex Usborne | Cast: Dan Skinner, Simone Kirby, | World Sales: Cinephil

In the early 1980s, writer and theologian John Hull lost his eyesight after decades of steady deterioration, documenting his experience on audio cassettes. Upon publication, author and neurologist Oliver Sacks described Hull's diaries as "The most extraordinary, precise, deep and beautiful account of blindness I have ever read. It is to my mind a masterpiece." In 2013, Spinney and Middleton made an award-winning short film based on Hull's experiences entitled *Notes on Blindness: Rainfall* (SFF 2014). Hull's profound life is now the inspiration for this breathtaking feature-length film. The filmmaking duo, with an approach akin to Clio Barnard's *The Arbor* (SFF 2011), cast actors Dan Skinner and Simone Kirby to lip sync to Hull's original recordings. The resulting film, and associated VR project (which can be viewed at the Festival Hub), is a remarkable re-creation of the author's thoughts and observations that unearths the interior world of blindness. Hull was closely involved with the process before his death, aged 80, in July last year.

Psycho Raman

India | 2016 | 128 mins | In Hindi with English subtitles | Australian Premiere

Director: Anurag Kashyap | Screenwriters: Vasan Bala, Anurag Kashyap | Producer: Madhu Mantena | Cast: Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Sobhita Dhulipala, Vicky Kaushal | World Sales: Stray Dogs

A leading figure of independent Indian cinema, Anurag Kashyap has directed landmark films such as *Dev D*, *Black Friday* and *Gangs of Wasseypur* (SFF 2012 Official Competition) and produced *Monsoon Shootout* (SFF 2013) and *The Lunchbox* (SFF 2014). His new film, selected for the Cannes Directors' Fortnight, is a highly stylish and suspenseful cat-and-mouse thriller. Set in contemporary Mumbai, it follows Ramanna (Nawazuddin Siddiqui), a deranged psychopath inspired by Raman Raghav, a real-life 1960s serial killer who terrorised the city. In hot pursuit is the young cop Raghavan (Vicky Kaushal), a drug addict who at one point has the killer in his grasp only to let him escape. What follows is an exhilarating chase, as the killer and cop circle each other, coming closer and closer to an explosive clash. Kashyap, a master of using genre conventions for greater purpose, uses his

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intriguing, damaged characters to raise issues of inequality, justice and aspiration in modern India. Kashyap expertly ratchets up the tension, and with perfect use of fantastic lead performances, makes a stylistically bold and provocative film.

Viva

Ireland | 2015 | 100 mins | In Spanish with English subtitles | Australian Premiere

Director: Paddy Breathnach | Screenwriter: Mark O'Halloran | Producers: Rebecca O'Flanagan, Robert Walpole | Cast: Jorge Perugorría, Luis Alberto García, Héctor Medina | Festivals: Pascale Ramonda

Paddy Breathnach uncovers authentic Cuba in this heartbreaking family drama about a troubled drag queen; an audience favourite at festivals all around the world. In the vibrant drag community of contemporary Havana, Jesus (Héctor Medina) waits for the courage to steal the spotlight from troublesome local divas. His initial steps towards stardom are complicated by the arrival of his charismatic jailbird father Angel (Jorge Perugorría), who he hasn't seen since he was a toddler. Realising a long-cherished passion project, Paddy Breathnach (*I Went Down*, 1997) has created a masterful and intimate portrayal of love and sacrifice, his camera capturing both the beauty of the Cuban capital and the pain beneath its alluring exterior. Breathnach became interested in the underground world of drag performers when he visited Havana in 1996. He captures the less touristy, grittier side of Havana in vividly detailed vignettes. Written by acclaimed screenwriter Mark O'Halloran (*Adam & Paul*, 2004; *Garage*, 2007), *Viva* continues his penchant for creating engaging stories that shine a light on hidden lives, and break your heart into a million pieces.

The Festival also presents a number of awards to recognise excellence in local filmmaking, including; the **Dendy Awards for Australian Short Films** (which are Academy Award eligible), **Documentary Australia Foundation Award for Australian Documentary**, **Event Cinemas Australian Short Screenplay Award**, and **Sydney UNESCO City of Film Prize**. The winners are announced at the Festival's Closing Night.

Winners of all Sydney Film Festival are presented with the Festival's signature mesmeric swirl award, designed and handmade in Sydney by the Festival's partners **Dinosaur Designs**.

MEDIA ENQUIRIES

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

ABOUT SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL

From **Wednesday 8 June to Sunday 19 June 2016**, the 63rd 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. Each year the Festival's programming team curates 12

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days of cinema sourced from world-famous film festivals, including Cannes, Sundance, Toronto and the Berlinale; as well as Australia's finest productions.

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 are: *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 takes place across greater Sydney: at the State Theatre, Event Cinemas George Street, Dendy Opera Quays, Dendy Newtown, Skyline Drive-In Blacktown, Art Gallery of NSW, Hayden Orpheum Picture Palace Cremorne, Casula Powerhouse, the Festival Hub at Sydney Town Hall and SFF Outdoor Screen.

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: www.sff.org.au.

The 63rd Sydney Film Festival is supported by the NSW Government through Screen NSW and Destination NSW, the Federal Government through Screen Australia and the City of Sydney. The Festival's Strategic Partner is the NSW Government through Destination NSW.

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