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'Transformers' Opener Not All There Is to Film Fest

By Kevin O'Flynn

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"The Debt," a thriller starring Helen Mirren, closes the festival on July 2.

The Moscow International Film Festival opened Thursday with the world premiere of "Transformers: Dark of the Moon," the blockbuster whose predecessor was described by one critic as "like watching paint dry while getting hit over the head with a frying pan," but the probable awfulness of the Michael Bay movie should not put off anyone from going to a festival that has a strong selection of festival favorites and intriguing new movies.

The festival, in its 33rd incarnation, has hundreds of movies all showing in their original language with Russian subtitles. Films on show range from Hollywood greats ("Sunset Boulevard") in the director's choice program to Italian classics (Fellini's "Dolce Vita" in the "1,675 kilometers of Italian cinema" program) and the experimental, with "Tape End," which was made in one take with director Ludwig Wust saying he did not actually take part in any of the filming.

Many of the top films from the recent Cannes Film Festival — including the Palme d'Or winner "The Tree of Life," currently on release in Moscow — can be seen over the next nine days. There is Michel Hazanavicius' "The Artist," a silent film set in 1920s Hollywood that was called "a lovely film with a sublime and soothingly romantic story" by The Guardian; Lars von Trier's "Melancholia," which won Kirsten Dunst a best actress award at Cannes; and the impressive Turkish crime drama, "Once Upon a Time in Anatolia."

Seventeen films will vie for the Best Film prize in the competition, including Japanese director Kaneto Shindo's "Postcard" about a soldier's return from the war to a family who thought he had died. Shindo, 99, is a three-time winner of the competition. The competition will also see the debut of former Czech President and playwright Vaclav Havel, whose debut film "Leaving" is a semi-autobiographical look at the last days of a politician as he prepares to leave his official residence.

The Russian entry, "Chapiteau Show" directed by Sergei Loban, a musical about love and tribulation by the seaside that runs to almost 3 1/2 hours, looks like being the most unusual entry in the competition.

One of the strongest parts of the festival is the two documentary programs. The competition section has "Senna," the much-acclaimed documentary about Brazilian Formula One racing driver Ayrton Senna; Dmitry Vasyukov and Werner Herzog look at life in the Russian regions in "Happy People: A Year in the Taiga"; while "Marathon Boy" follows a 4-year-old Indian marathon runner.

Outside the competition, the festival has Morgan Spurlock's "Pom Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold," where the director of "Fast Food Nation" uses product placement to finance his movie about the same subject.

There is also the new doc, "Bobby Fischer Against the World," about the bizarre life of the chess great. "The Redemption of General Butt Naked" follows the brutal Liberian warlord-turned-preacher who was responsible for thousands of deaths and who was so named because he used to go on rampages wearing only a pair of shoes.

Lucy Walker's "Countdown to Zero" looks at the increasing possibility that terrorists will get access to nuclear weapons and has interviews with Mikhail Gorbachev, Jimmy Carter and Robert McNamara, among others.

The 2011 Academy Award winner of the best shot doc, "Strangers No More" — about a unique school in Tel Aviv where often deprived children from 48 different countries study — is also being shown.

Hailed as one of Russia's brightest directors, Andrei Zvyagintsev's much-awaited film "Yelena," which won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes, will play Friday.

The film, which has been seen as a critical look at the divide between the haves and have-nots in Russian society, will be shown at Dom Kino in a program of Russian films. As if to underline Zvyagintsev's point, the film and all the other features at Dom Kino will unfortunately only be open to accredited press and guests. Organizers said they may let the non-accredited in if there are free places, but didn't seem too sure about it.

Also notable is a retrospective of the great German director Werner Herzog and U.S. director Sam Peckinpah, which will include "Straw Dogs" and "The Wild Bunch."

The festival's head, Nikita Mikhalkov, was questioned on the choice of "Transformers 3" as the opening movie, with one journalist wondering about the American military propaganda inherent in the movie that pits the Autobots against the evil Decepticons in a battle to an explosive death, which she was convinced represented a return to Cold War rhetoric.

If that is true, then presumably Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is the dreaded Megatron with the mystical talisman AllSpark — representing Gazprom or Rosneft — which the two groups of oversized toys are fighting over. With the film not finishing before this paper went to print, the accuracy of such an analysis remains unanswered.

Mikhalkov answered by saying, "If Hollywood wants to have a world premiere in Moscow and bring 80 representatives over, I can't really say no, can I?"

The festival will close on July 2 with John Madden's "The Debt," a thriller about three Mossad agents trying to find out whether the Nazi criminal they believe they had killed is still alive. One of the stars, Helen Mirren will be in attendance. The festival is also showing three of her films, "The Queen," "The Tempest" and "The Last Station," which is a likely sign that she will be awarded the Stanislavsky Prize for outstanding contribution to cinema in the closing ceremony — although Mikhalkov refused to be drawn on who would be given the award Thursday.

For a full list of films and show times, see www.moscowfilmfestival.ru.

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