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Clooney, Sokurov to Star at Venice Film Festival

By Mike Collett-White

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George Clooney directs and stars in "The Ides of March," about a U.S. presidential race in the near future.

LONDON — The Venice Film Festival has rediscovered its movie mojo this year, putting high costs and growing competition from Toronto aside to provide a lineup full of hotly anticipated titles and big Hollywood stars.

George Clooney, a regular favorite on Lido Island, where the world's oldest film festival is held, kicks off the glamorous 11-day event on Wednesday with "The Ides of March," a political drama that he also directed.

His cast includes Ryan Gosling and Philip Seymour Hoffman, part of a roll-call of A-listers that includes Colin Firth, Keira Knightley, Matthew McConaughey, Kate Winslet, Matt Damon, Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow and pop superstar Madonna.

"I don't recall a time when so many people have been so excited by a lineup and that is across

the board," said Jay Weissberg, a film critic for Hollywood trade publication Variety who is a Venice festival regular.

"There's a nice Hollywood contingent that is composed of directors and stars like Clooney who appeal to a very broad range of both festival insiders and the general public," he said. "But it is more than just Hollywood."

Filmmakers from around the world will descend on the canal city from Aug. 31 to Sept. 10 to showcase their movies and attend a whirlwind of photocalls, news conferences, interviews and parties.

Blockbusters rarely feature, but a slot in Venice is coveted by lower-budget U.S. productions for the exposure it brings and because it acts as the unofficial launch of the annual awards season ending with the Oscars.

Venice overlaps with the Toronto Film Festival, regarded by Hollywood as a cheaper alternative and featuring many of the same movies, but Venice director Marco Mueller has put together a program that should eclipse 2010's worryingly low-key edition.

Among the most eagerly awaited titles is "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy," an adaptation of John Le Carre's spy novel starring recent Oscar winner Colin Firth as well as Gary Oldman and John Hurt.

The film, directed by Sweden's Tomas Alfredson, is one of 22 in the main Venice competition and has already won the blessing of the British author whose "The Constant Gardener" also made it to the big screen.

"It's not the film of the book," Le Carre said in remarks carried on his web site.

"It's the film of the film, and, to my eye, a work of art in its own right. I'm very proud to have provided Alfredson with the material, but what he made of it is wonderfully his own."

Other standout titles in competition include Briton Andrea Arnold's take on the Emily Bronte novel "Wuthering Heights," U.S. director Ami Canaan Mann's "Texas Killing Fields" and William Friedkin's "Killer Joe."

In "A Dangerous Method," Canadian David Cronenberg explores the rivalry between Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud as a young woman (Knightley) comes between them.

Roman Polanski worked on the screenplay for his latest movie "Carnage," featuring Winslet, Jodie Foster and Christoph Waltz, while under house arrest in Switzerland last year.

The 78-year-old was eventually freed after the Swiss authorities decided not to extradite him to the United States, where he is still wanted for sentencing for having sex with a 13-year-old girl in 1977 in Los Angeles.

One of the most-anticipated films comes from Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov who will debut "Faust." A favorite on the European festival circuit for movies like the single-take "Russian Ark" and his "power trilogy" based on the lives of Hitler, Lenin and Hirohito, Sokurov has called "Faust" the fourth installment in the series, adding: "The symbolic image

of Faust completes this series of great gamblers who lost the most important wagers of their lives."

Hong Kong's Johnnie To presents "Life Without Principle," a story touching on the economic crisis and its effect on ordinary people.

Outside the main lineup, Madonna makes her second foray into feature films with "W.E.," a drama loosely based on divorcee Wallis Simpson whose relationship with King Edward VIII led to his abdication in 1936.

Egyptian documentary "Tahrir 2011" covers the revolution and overthrow of the old regime, Philippe Faucon explores radical Islam in "La Desintegration" and Al Pacino plays himself and King Herod in "Wilde Salome."

Steven Soderbergh promises an all-star cast including Damon, Winslet, Marion Cotillard, Law and Paltrow in "Contagion," about a lethal airborne virus that spreads panic.

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