



PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL JURY OLIVIER ASSAYAS

The French film critic, screenwriter and director Olivier Assayas was the President of the International Competition Jury of Locarno Festival this year. He is one of the most highly regarded contemporary filmmakers, and has made several full-length features, ranging across a variety of subjects, places and genres.

PARDO D'ONORE MANOR FOR TODD HAYNES

The U.S. director, screenwriter and producer Todd Haynes is known for shaping out an original universe in which his familiarity with U.S. and European cinema go hand in glove with a modern sensibility. His characters – often with extraordinary performances by the female leads – bring back the magic of great cinema, of art that achieves the sublimation of reality without lapsing into disenchantment.

You've been described throughout your whole career as an "independent" filmmaker. What does this label, and independence, mean to you?

Independence is really about the ways in which we keep on pushing against the boundaries of what the medium prescribes and hopefully, in doing so, keep the medium alive. When you're questioning conventions, things don't get stuck, and that's what keeps creative experiences vital, even in the best forms of popular entertainment. People used to attribute the "independent" label in regards of the way films were financed, not getting money from the studio. That very quickly became a very limited way to describe works, because many times this "independence" resembled studio filmmaking in style and sensibility. They just wanted to get in the club. Instead, I always wanted to question the club.

What kind of filmmakers inspired you and your style?

The kind of art, literature and film that formed me and always made me think was the one where you'd question society, and see things in a new way from a different angle. I was coming out from an experimental sensibility and ended up re-examining the formal traditions of classic Hollywood filmmaking in its heyday. A lot of filmmakers, who have attracted me, like Fassbinder, made the same journey. He started from a radical sensibility and then discovered Douglas Sirk, looking at the conventions of melodrama. It is the same kind of outsider's sensibility that you can see in the works of Alfred Hitchcock as well. He wanted the audience to be in his grip, and yet he was able to speak about the universal conflicts inside all of us, the danger and illicit. He could be radical and popular at the same time.

You made 7 feature films in 26 years. Would you have liked to make more different and larger films?

Definitely not larger, I wouldn't want to move towards a more commercial landscape. I am content with my level of fame. I would still want to be able to live my life otherwise I would lose contact from the world. I want to stay connected to what drives me, and not just turn into a product maker; check boxes of success and enter the award machine. Especially the process of award campaigning is a strange distortion; a marketing reality that I accept and understand, but that destroys something inside you every time you go through it. But festivals, I love.

Frequent collaborators throughout your career include producer Christine Vachon, cinematographer Ed Lachman and actors like Julianne Moore and Cate Blanchett. Did you consciously try to create a family to work with?

As a family, we are indeed a very dysfunctional one (laughs). But of course, we are a very functional one when it comes to work. They help me with their ongoing vitality, with their creativity, and also in bringing new things into the fold.

Reprinted shortened interview taken by Massimo Benvegnu for PardoLive, the Newsletter for the Locarno Film Festival

This year you have come to Locarno as President of the International Jury, playing an important role in the assignment of the final awards. What, if any, are the cinematic coordinates that the 2017 Pardo d'oro-winning film must have?

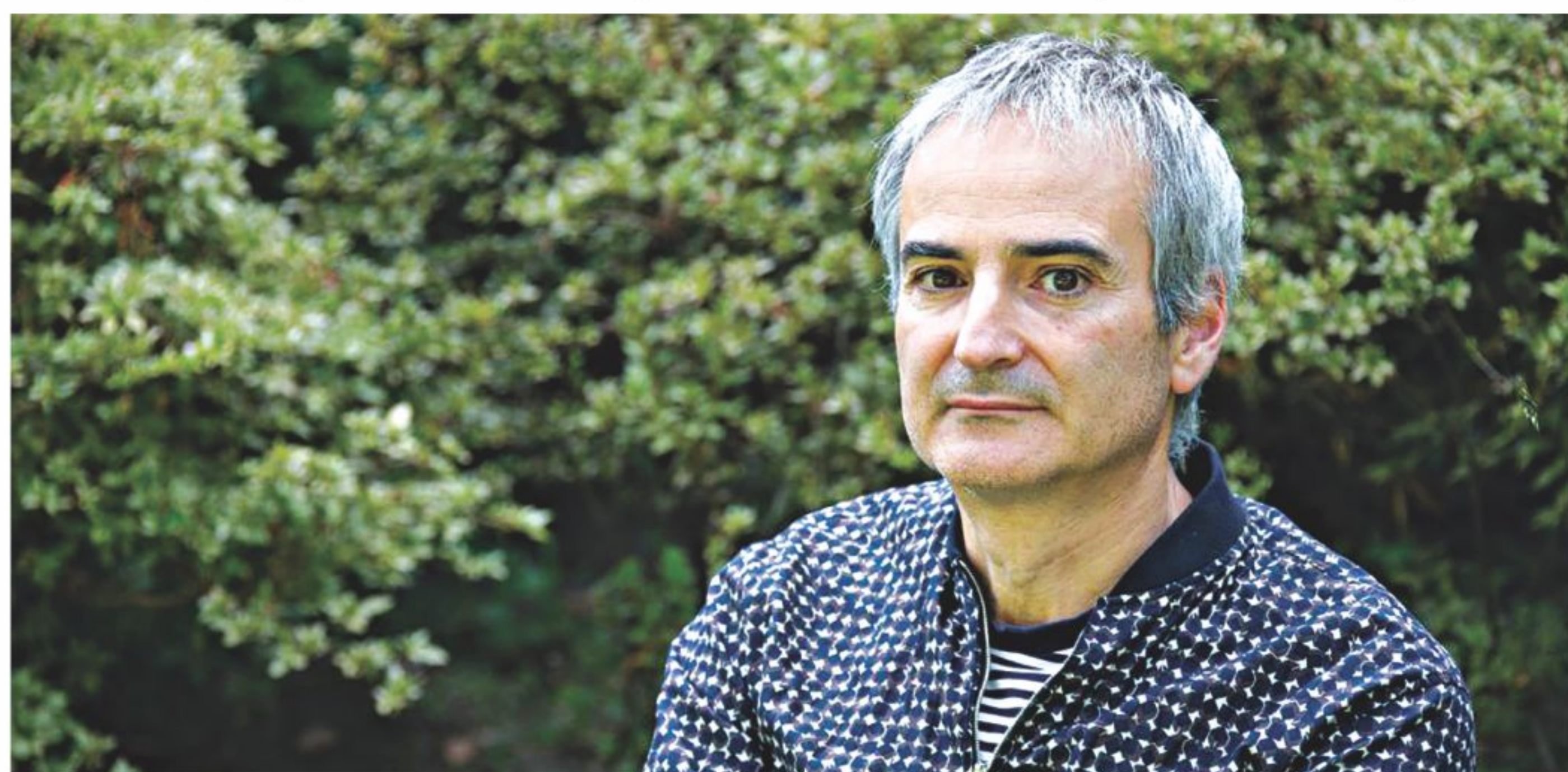
The rule is that there is no rule. I have neither preconceived idea nor dogma. The beauty of cinema is its diversity, along with its capacity at being both a high and a low art. At generating late masterpieces and early visionary works, I still think it is essential if we are talking film and not industrial fiction to constantly be in touch with cinema's experimental dimensions. I am convinced that the role of independent filmmaking is not to repeat ancient formulae and bow to old theories, old stories and conventional morals, but to explore the infinity of cinema's grammar, being either in search for the purity of its language, or the laboratory for the visual narratives to come. And in that sense, we have to be fiercely singular.

What memories do you have of the last time you sat on the Locarno jury?

Udo Kier blackmailing the festival director into having watches from a sponsor given to all the jury members. I am joking. It was 2004 and we gave

informed but I don't think so. I do not see the issues they generate as radically different from earlier debates about television-financed movies, like for instance *Elephant* by Gus Van Sant, and the HBO production that was awarded the Palme d'Or in Cannes. I have been involved in such a discussion when I made *Carlos*, almost fully financed by the French TV channel Canal+. What is TV, what is cinema? As far as I am concerned, the film may be 5 and 1/2 hours, I shot it the same way, with the same crew and the same freedom as my other films. The difference is I had more time, more budget and a material that was visually and dramatically more intense. So was it less of a movie, or more of a movie? Film financing would never have supported a movie as singular as *Carlos*, for many reasons; length, lack of stars, controversial political issues, multiplicity of languages. I see it as a movie that was made possible by TV financing. I am sure that's how Bong Joon-ho sees *Okja*. It is a mistake to mix up Netflix and Amazon. Amazon at this stage is another player in film financing. They produced works by Jim Jarmusch or Kenneth Lonergan, and movies had a completely normal film cycle. They premiered in film festivals and were shown in theatres all over the world.

What criteria do you want to see in your actors?



the Pardo d'oro to a film by Saverio Costanzo that I liked very much, which was named *Private*. It was the last time an Italian Film won that prize.

Your films have always been welcomed at many festivals. Given a film market that often grants little visibility to more marginal, off-the-beaten-path works, what significance do you think film festivals still have these days?

I'm not sure I agree with you. Compared to times not so far away, now there is more independent filmmaking visible, especially those coming from more diverse cultures. Thanks must be given to journalists and film festivals, but of course also the progresses in connectedness, and generally speaking, modern globalization. I am impressed by how fast we can become aware of challenging, bold and experimental filmmaking coming from the remotest outposts nowadays. The same would have been very much under the radar at older times. This is a vital dimension of film culture, and the role of festivals is to protect it, and build up on the job they have been doing fairly successfully.

Platforms like Netflix and Amazon have changed the landscape of film production, and particularly distribution. Do you see an opportunity or a treat for arthouse films?

Have they changed the landscape? I may be ill

have no criteria at all except I need to have sense that we speak the same language, in terms of how we relate to cinema as an art form. I also need to feel that a specific actor can bring to the part a dimension that was not necessarily present in my original view of the character. That additional dimension is to me the essence of how life irrigates cinema. In that sense I have filmed indifferently with major movie stars and non-professionals. I don't direct actors. I collaborate with them.

You have a solid grounding in film history. The retrospective dedicated to Jacques Tourner has an important place in the Locarno Festival this year. What contributions has Tourner made to the history of film?

I have always admired Jacques Tourner, who was an exceptional stylist with a deep understanding of the mystery and the poetry of genre filmmaking. His films that have had the most lasting influence on me are *Cat People*, *Out of the Past* and *Anne of the Indies*. On his best days the cartoonish clarity of his style was reminiscent of the genius of Fritz Lang. I must say I am extremely excited to be in Locarno this year and have an opportunity to fill in the blanks in my knowledge of his extraordinary body of work.

Reprinted shortened interview taken by Lorenzo Buccella for PardoLive, the Newsletter for the Locarno Film Festival