Nip and Tuck B.O. Battle Between *Safe House*, *Vow*

*By Pamela McClintock*

**The Presidents Day** weekend race at the domestic box office won’t be officially called until later today, but Denzel Washington-Ryan Reynolds action pic *Safe House* is currently looking like the victor.

Still, *Safe House* remains in a relatively close battle with Rachel McAdams-Channing Tatum romantic drama *The Vow*, grossing $24 million for the three-day weekend, compared to $23.6 million for *Vow*.

Universal is estimating that *Safe House* will earn $28.5 million for the four-day holiday weekend, while Screen Gems and parent company Sony are estimating that *Vow* will gross $27.4 million. Box-office observers cautioned that when today’s actual grosses come in, the gap could narrow between the two pics.

Overseas, *Safe House* grossed $6 million from 35 markets in its second outing, bringing its foreign cume to $19.6 million and worldwide total to $97.9 million.

*Vow*, co-produced and
CO-FINANCED by Spyglass, has earned $85.5 million in its first five days domestically, becoming the highest-grossing Screen Gems title ever at the domestic box office. Dear John, also starring Tatum, was the previous best, cuming $80.1 million domestically.

Overseas, Vow grossed $6.8 million in its second weekend from 24 markets for an international cume of $22.8 million and worldwide total of $108.3 million.

Sony’s Ghost Rider sequel, returning Nicolas Cage in the lead role, grossed $22 million for the three-day weekend to come in No. 3. The pic is expected to post a four-day holiday gross of $25.5 million, less than expected but still a solid number. Pre-release tracking had suggested the comicbook adaptation would open closer to $35 million.

Spirit of Vengeance, which received a tepid C+ CinemaScore, was fueled by males, who made up 61 percent of the audience; moviegoers under the age of 25 comprised 48 percent. Sony and Hyde Park Entertainment co-produced and co-financed the pic, which cost $57 million to produce.

War opened at No. 5 over the weekend, grossing an estimated $17.6 million. (Including $1.6 million in Valentine’s Day previews, the pic’s domestic cume through Sunday was $19.2 million.) Fox estimated that the film, which received an A- CinemaScore, will gross $20.5 million for the four-day holiday frame. The production budget was $65 million.

War was edged out for the No. 4 spot by Warner Bros. and New Line/Walden Media family adventure starring Josh Hutcherson and Dwayne Johnson reached an estimated $26 million — just $4 million shy of last weekend’s number — drawn from 8,700 locations in 43 markets. Its overseas gross stands at $128 million.

Journey 2’s No. 2 France debut generated $3.4 million (including previews) at 436 locations, which Warners said was 51 percent larger than the take generated in the market by the film’s 2008 predecessor, Journey to the Center of the Earth.

The pic’s second round in China delivered an estimated $7.9 million from 3,361 sites for a market cume of $36.2 million. Russia came through with $4.7 million from 1,001 sites in its second frame for a market cume of $13.5 million.

Thanks largely to No. 1 premieres in Russia ($3.5 million from 1,049 screens) and Australia ($3.1 million from 338 sites), Fox’s This Means War opened with $11 million overseas drawn from 1,903 spots in 16 territories. (It ranked second on the weekend overall.)

That was “a very promising beginning, considering only two of the top 10 international markets released this past weekend,” according to Fox. The romantic comedy starring Reese Witherspoon, Chris Pine and Thomas Hardy also opened No. 1 in Hong Kong, averaging more than $6,000 per-screen there.

Opening softly in 10 markets was Warners’ Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, which drew $2.6 million from 909 screens. The best-picture Oscar contender bowed at No. 4 in Japan ($1.2 million from 309 screens) but at No. 12 in the U.K. ($646,000 from 301 spots).

No. 3 was Fox’s reissue in 3D of 1999’s Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace, which grossed $10 million on the weekend at 4,571 venues in 63 territories, lifting its offshore cume to $37.1 million.

Boosted by half-term school-holiday business in the U.K., Disney’s The Muppets scored $5.8 million on the weekend at some 550 spots, warranting a No. 2 market ranking. Its market cume over 10 days comes to $17.4 million. Overall, the live-action/animated family comedy grossed $7.6 million from 42 territories including the U.K. on the weekend, lifting its overseas gross to $59.1 million. It took the weekend’s No. 4 spot.

Fifth was Fox release The Descendants, starring George Clooney, which opened at
No. 3 in Italy ($1.28 million drawn from 280 screens), and wound up grossing $7.5 million on the weekend overall from 3,014 sites in 50 markets. As a result, the best-picture Oscar candidate hoisted its overseas cume to $68.4 million.

Sony’s release of *The Vow* held the No. 1 spot in New Zealand, yielding $6.8 million on the weekend overall at 1,550 screens in 24 markets. The foreign cume for the romantic comedy starring Rachel McAdams and Channing Tatum stands at $22.8 million.

Making its debut in 10 mostly smaller offshore markets, Universal’s *Safe House* drew $6 million overseas from 1,932 locations in 35 markets, pushing the early foreign gross for the CIA crime thriller starring Denzel Washington and Ryan Reynolds to $19.6 million. Openings in 11 additional markets including the U.K., France and Germany are due this week.

Columbia Pictures coproduction *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* — the weekend’s No. 3 title in the U.S. and Canada — opened at No. 3 via local distribs in the U.K. and France, and took the No. 7 spot in South Korea. The Nicolas Cage-as-Marvel comics superhero vehicle grossed an estimated $4 million from the three markets.

Paramount’s *Mission: Impossible — Ghost Protocol* starring Tom Cruise propelled its foreign gross to $461.9 million (of which $85.6 million comes from China), thanks to a $3.8 million weekend at 4,160 venues in 65 territories. Sony’s Adam Sandler comedy *Jack and Jill* has grossed $60.8 million since opening overseas on Nov. 9. Its weekend tally was $5.5 million derived from 2,670 screens in 30 territories.

Steven Spielberg’s *War Horse* has grossed $54.7 million overseas so far, thanks in part to a $4.7 million weekend playing in 41 markets.

*Hugo*, director Martin Scorsese’s best-picture Oscar contender, grossed $4.3 million at 1,452 situations in 27 markets being handled by Paramount. A Brazil bow yielded $1.1 million from 257 sites. Paramount’s cume for the pic stands at $27 million.

Sony’s *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* is nearing the $120 million mark in overseas gross ($119.7 million), due to a $4 million weekend at 2,530 locations in 50 markets. The same distributor’s *Underworld: Awakening* the Kate Beckinsale werewolf-versus-vampire sequel, grossed $3.2 million over the weekend at 1,975 locations in 49 markets, boosting its overseas cume to $69.5 million.

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By Tina Daunt

China has agreed to allow “significantly more job-supporting U.S. film exports” in an effort to provide fairer compensation to Hollywood film producers, the White House announced Friday evening.

After spending the day with Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping in Los Angeles, Vice President Joe Biden said the U.S. and China have reached an agreement that will “make it easier than ever before for U.S. studios and independent filmmakers to reach the fast-growing Chinese audience.”

The deal was immediately applauded by the MPAA and its member studios.

“This landmark agreement will return a much better share of the box-office revenues to U.S studios, revising a two-decade-old formula that kept those revenues woefully under normal commercial terms, and it will put into place a mechanism that will allow over 50 percent more U.S. films into the Chinese market,” according to the MPAA.

Walt Disney Co. president and CEO Robert Iger said in a statement: “China is one of the most populous countries in the world, and this agreement represents a significant opportunity to provide Chinese audiences increased access to our films.”

Under the agreement, the U.S. will be allowed to import an increased number of 3D and Imax movies to China, where box-office revenue was up to $2.1 billion last year. The measure also ensures fairer compensation levels for U.S. blockbuster films distributed by Chinese state-owned enterprises.

The Independent Film & Television Alliance said the pact would offer “unprecedented opportunities” for the U.S. independent film industry in China.

“For independents, this agreement is momentous,” said IFTA president-CEO Jean Prewitt. “Our sector has been unable to benefit fully from the existing revenue-sharing importation quotas and has had limited avenues through which to distribute. For the first time, through this agreement, there is a promise of creating a commercial foundation that will allow independent producers to participate more fully in the Chinese marketplace.”

The agreement — which resolves a long-simmering dispute between the U.S. and China — will be reviewed in five years to make sure it’s working. If necessary, the United States can return to the World Trade Organization to seek relief.

Last year, the WTO instructed China — to no avail — to loosen state controls on foreign media. The Obama administration went to work behind the scenes to encourage the Chinese government to comply.

“U.S. studios and independent filmmakers cite China as one of their most important world markets, but barriers imposed by China and challenged by the United States in the WTO have artificially reduced the revenue U.S. film producers received from their movies in the Chinese market,” said U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk. “This agreement will help to change that, boosting one of America’s strongest export sectors in one of our largest export markets.”

By Jonathan Handel

The proposed SAG/AFTRA merger plan “solves almost nothing and adds too many inherent problems,” according to the final draft of a merger opposition statement, a copy of which was obtained by The Hollywood Reporter. The statement will be included in ballot packets to be sent to paid up members of SAG and AFTRA.

Almost half of the four-page, thousand-word document focuses on a key issue that opponents have stressed, the impact of merger on pension and health benefits. Other issues addressed include dues structure, background actors and bargaining power.

If not delayed by a potential lawsuit, merger ballots are scheduled to go out on or about Feb. 27, with a return date of March 30. The ballot packets will include:

- the unions’ statement in favor of merger;
- the opposition statement;
- a rebuttal from the unions;
- the merger agreement;
- a proposed constitution;
- and a feasibility study regarding merger of the two unions’ pension and health plans.

The opposition statement is signed by Scott Bakula, Joe d’Angelo, Elliott Gould, Valerie Harper, Ed Harris, Anne-Marie Johnson, David Jolliffe and Martin Sheen.
Writers Guild Honors
Paris, Descendants

By Jay A. Fernandez

Alexander Payne, Jim Rash and Nat Faxon and Woody Allen took home the top screenplay prizes Sunday at the WGA Awards, for writing The Descendants and Midnight in Paris, respectively. Winners on the TV side included the writing staff of Modern Family for comedy series and Breaking Bad for drama series.

Homeland won for writing on a new series and The Colbert Report took the award for comedy/variety series. Katie Galloway and Kelly Duane de la Vega won the documentary screenplay award for Better This World.

The awards ceremony, honoring TV, film, video-games, news, radio and new-media writing during 2011 took place at the Hollywood Palladium.

"Hi, and welcome to nerd prom," said Zooey Deschanel, the show’s co-host with Joel McHale, to kick off the ceremony. "Male writers: You are all hot because of your minds," she added as part of a facetious litany of come-ons. "Enough," said McHale to cut her off. "You had them at eye contact."

The TV personalities — Deschanel stars on New Girl, McHale on Community — shepherded a fairly subdued event, which nonetheless featured a provocatively funny presentation of the Morgan Cox award to former guild president Patric Verrone by Simpsons colleague Mike Reiss and a videotaped introduction of the Laurel Award for Screen to Eric Roth by his Curious Case of Benjamin Button helmer David Fincher.

Other adapted screenplay nominees included Tate Taylor’s The Help, Aaron Sorkin and Steven Zaillian’s Moneyball (story by Stan Chervin), John Logan’s Hugo and Zaillian’s The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo. Descendants, Hugo and Moneyball screenplays are also up for adapted screenplay Oscars, along with Bridget O’Connor and Peter Straughan’s Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy and George Clooney, Grant Heslov and Beau Willimon’s The Ides of March.

While Rash and Faxon are first-time screenwriters, Payne has been nominated for three previous adapted screenplay awards, winning for Election in 1999 and Sideways in 2004.

Additional original screenplay nominees included Will Reiser’s debut screenplay 50/50, Diablo Cody’s Young Adult, Annie Mumolo and Kristen Wiig’s debut screenplay Bridesmaids and Thomas McCarthy’s Win Win (story by Joe Tiboni). Only the Bridesmaids and Paris scripts are also up for the original screenplay Oscar, along with Asghar Farhadi’s A Separation, J.C. Chandor’s Margin Call and Michel Hazanavicius’ The Artist.

Allen had been nominated 19 previous times for WGA awards, winning for Annie Hall in 1977, Broadway Danny Rose in 1984, Hannah and Her Sisters in 1986 and Crimes and Misdemeanors in 1989.
on, won the 24th annual USC Libraries Scripter Award. The Scripters, which recognize the author and scribes of a produced literary work-to-film adaptation, were held Saturday night at a gala ceremony at USC.

The Descendants team beat out the writers behind A Dangerous Method (screenwriter Christopher Hampton and author John Kerr), Jane Eyre (scribe Moira Buffini and author Charlotte Bronte), Moneyball (screenwriters Steven Zaillian, Aaron Sorkin and Stan Chervin and author Michael Lewis), and Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy (screenwriters Bridget O’Connor and Peter Straughan, and author John le Carré.)

Descendants has been in the mix for most major awards this season and the screenwriting trio has already won the Satellite Award and the National Board of Review. Payne, who also directed the movie, Faxon and Rash won a WGA Award on Sunday and are also up for an Indie Spirit and an Academy Award. Descendants is the first novel from Hemmings, who lives and writes in Hawaii. Accepting were Rash and Naxon along with Hemmings (Payne was not present).

Paul Haggis, who earlier received the Scripter Literary Achievement award, paraphrased Albert Camus by saying, “All great things have ridiculous beginnings,” and talked of how despite parents’ desires to have their children live safe lives and safe careers, he believed it was important “to encourage children to be ridiculous,” since that is from where greatness springs.

Taylor Hackford, who was the dinner co-chair with Helen Mirren, spoke about the challenges of making adaptations, whom many consider easier to make than original movies since one is working from a novel that already provides plot and characters, and talked of his experiences filming Dolores Claiborne, the translation of a Stephen King book. “It’s a real art form, and it’s fragile,” he said.

Hugo, Boardwalk Top CAS Awards

By Gregg Kilday

The sounding mixing team behind Martin Scorsese’s Hugo nabbed top honors at the 48th annual Cinema Audio Society Awards, held Saturday night at the Millennium Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles.

The award for outstanding achievement in sound mixing for a motion picture went to Hugo’s production mixer John Midgley, re-recording mixer Tom Fleischman and scoring mixer Simon Rhodes. Midgley, a first-time CAS winner, and Fleischman, who previously received a CAS Award in the category for The Aviator, are also nominated for an Oscar for sound mixing. It also was a first CAS Award for Rhodes as well as the first year scoring mixers have been included in the awards.

Scott Millan, a four-time Oscar winner, was honored at the event with the CAS Career Achievement Award, presented to him by previous winner Walter Murch and composer Thomas Newman, with whom Millan has been working on upcoming James Bond pic Skyfall.

Director Rob Marshall (Chicago) was presented with the CAS Filmmaker Award, the highest honor bestowed upon a non-CAS member. Penelope Cruz, who starred in Marshall’s Nine, Oscar winners Michael Minkler and Lee Orloff and Oscar nominee Paul Massey presented the award.

Speaking to more than 400 attendees, CAS president David E. Fluhar said of the legacy of sound: “The future is built on the actions of today, and the achievements of yesterday. Throughout the last year, sound mixers everywhere have elevated our craft.”

Other winners on the evening included:
- Outstanding achievement in sound mixing for a television movie or mini-series: Too Big to Fail and the sound mixing team of production mixer James J. Sabat, CAS, and re-recording
mixers Chris Jenkins, Bob Beemer, CAS, and scoring mixer Chris Vogel; ■ Outstanding achievement in sound mixing for television series: Boardwalk Empire (“To the Lost” — Episode 2.12) and the sound mixing team of production sound mixer Franklin D. Stetner, CAS, and re-recording mixer Tom Fleischman, CAS; and ■ Outstanding achievement in sound mixing for television non-fiction, variety or music — series or specials: Deadliest Catch, “New Blood,” and re-recording mixer Bob Bronow, CAS.

Desendants, Artist, Rango Win ACE Eddies

By Carolyn Giardina

The editors of best picture Oscar nominees The Descendants and The Artist won best edited dramatic feature film and best edited feature-comedy or musical, respectively, at the 62nd annual ACE Eddie Awards on Saturday at the Beverly Hilton.

Since 2000, an ACE Eddie recipient has gone on to win the Oscar for best picture eight times, with seven of those winners collecting the Eddie for dramatic feature.

No film has won best picture at the Oscars without also having received at least a best editing Eddie nomination since Ordinary People in 1981.

In addition to Artist and Descendants, best picture Oscar nominees Hugo, Midnight in Paris, Moneyball and War Horse were also nominated for Eddies.

Descendants was edited by Kevin Tent, and Artist was cut by Anne-Sophie Bion and the film’s director, Michel Hazanavicius.

Rango won the category for best edited animated feature; the film was cut by Craig Wood.

Freedom Riders, edited by Lewis Erskine and Aljernon Tunsil, was selected best edited documentary.

TV winners included an episode of Curb Your Enthusiasm, edited by Steven Rasch, for best edited half-hour TV series; an episode of Breaking Bad, cut by Skip MacDonald, for best edited one-hour series for commercial television; and the pilot of Homeland, edited by Jordan Goldman and David Latham, for best edited one-hour series for non-commercial television. Cinema Verite, edited by Sarah Flack and Robert Pulcini, topped the category for best edited miniseries or motion picture for TV, and an episode of Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations, cut by Eric Lasby, was recognized as best edited reality series.

Alexander Payne received the ACE Golden Eddie Filmmaker of the Year honor, presented to him by Reese Witherspoon and Descendants’ editor Kevin Tent.

Career achievement awards were bestowed on Joel Cox and Doug Ibold, presented by Clint Eastwood and Dick Wolf, respectively.

Click here for a complete list of winners.

Hugo, Muppets, Tintin Garner MPSE Honors

By Carolyn Giardina

Sound editing teams from Hugo, The Muppets, Super 8, The Adventures of Tintin and War Horse were honored on Sunday during the Motion Picture Sound Editors’ 59th Golden Reel Awards at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel.

In feature competitions, War Horse won the category for sound effects and Foley, Hugo was cited for music, Super 8 topped the category for dialogue and automated dialogue replacement, Muppets was recognized for music in a musical film, and Tintin was honored for sound editing in an animated feature.

The teams behind Hugo and War Horse are nominated for this year’s Oscar for sound editing, along with the sound editors of Drive, The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo and Transformers: Dark of the Moon.

In addition to Hugo, Martin Scorsese-helmed George Harrison: Living in the Material World was recognized with a Golden Reel Award, in the feature documentary category. The Flowers of War was honored in the foreign-language competition.

Game of Thrones won a pair of awards in television. Additional TV winners included Homeland, Grey’s Anatomy, The Penguins of Madagascar and Gettysburg.

Click here for a complete list of winners.

Help Cleans Up at NAACP Awards

Staff report

The Help stars Octavia Spencer and Viola Davis can add two more trophies on their shelves, as the awards-season darlings took home NAACP Image Awards on Friday for their work in the night’s most nominated film, which also took home outstanding motion picture honors.

Other film winners included Mike Epps and Laz Alonso for Jumping the Broom. The pic’s Salim Akil also won for directing, while writing honors went to Ann Peacock for NatGeo’s The First Grader.

In the TV categories, Late & Order: SVU and Tyler Perry’s House of Payne took the dramatic and comedic prizes, respectively, and Malcolm-Jamal Warner, Tracee Ellis Ross, LL Cool J and Regina King led in the acting categories.

Despite the recent death of Whitney Houston, the night maintained a celebratory tone, saving a tribute to her for later in the show.

When time came to honor works in music, which saw Jennifer Hudson nab two awards, the late Don Cornelius also was given a special moment for his contribution to black music.

Click here for a complete list of winners.
Lohan Set to Host SNL on March 3

By Jane Kellogg

While she doesn’t have any film, TV or music projects to promote, Lindsay Lohan will be hosting the next episode of NBC’s Saturday Night Live in two weeks on March 3.

“SNL! I love @NBC !!!!!!!!” Lohan tweeted on Saturday after the NBC show revealed in an on-air promo and Twitter posting that she would host its March 3 episode.

This will be Lohan’s first time back on the sketch-comedy show since 2006, but the actress hosted a total of three times in the mid-2000s. At the time, Tina Fey was head writer for SNL, and she seemed to support Lohan after co-starring with her in 2004’s Mean Girls.

Lohan has maintained a good relationship with the show throughout her career, and has also publicly referred to show executive producer Lorne Michaels as a mentor and father figure. Yet, nearly a year ago, Lohan sent Michaels a letter stating she was upset by the show repeatedly taking digs at her expense. That Saturday night’s show was hosted by Miley Cyrus, Cyrus, who herself had been in the tabloids lately for wearing a revealing outfit and smoking salvia, poked fun at Lohan during a song.

“I never stole a necklace or got a DUI / Never cheated on my wife like that golfer guy / So what if you can see a little boob from the side? / I’m sorry that I’m not perfect,” Cyrus sang during her opening monologue.

Lohan is set to finish her community service assignment after pleading guilty in May to stealing a necklace from a Venice, Calif., jewelry store. She served five weeks of home confinement over the summer for that misdemeanor theft and violation of another probation. Lohan predicted she would finish her community service and counseling requirements well ahead of the March 29 deadline set by Judge Stephanie Sautner, who is overseeing her case, CNN reported.

While all seems to be positive lately for the actress in her personal life, her career has been mostly on hold while she rebuilds herself. The most recent work Lohan has had was a nude spread in Playboy magazine in December, for which she reportedly was paid nearly $1 million.

As The Hollywood Reporter reported last month, Lohan is in talks to play Elizabeth Taylor for a Lifetime project. The most recent work Lohan has had was a nude spread in Playboy magazine in December, for which she reportedly was paid nearly $1 million.

NO GLEE CONCERT TOUR THIS YEAR

By Lesley Goldberg

There will not be a Glee concert tour in 2012.

After spending its past two summers on the road as part of Glee Live! In Concert!, the cast will instead receive a two-and-a-half-month hiatus, The Hollywood Reporter has learned exclusively.

“We currently have no plans of touring the cast this summer,” a spokesman for Glee studio 20th Television told THR. Considering the show has yet to officially garner a fourth-season renewal, plans for future tours are unclear as the series takes things one year at a time.

In lieu of a full tour, Glee producers are eyeing a one-off benefit concert event that likely would take place in the fall at the Hollywood Bowl and serve as a fundraiser for its arts education charity Glee Give a Note. The goal is to raise $10 million this year. But negotiations for such an event have not begun, so nothing is set in stone.

Sources said Glee co-creator Ryan Murphy was instrumental in getting the cast — which often works 16-hour days filming scenes, recording songs and in dance rehearsals for the musical dramedy — the summer off.

Last year’s tour — which stopped in arenas across the U.S., Canada, England and Ireland — was the 10th most-successful concert of 2011, grossing more than $40 million and finishing just behind Justin Bieber. All 40 dates sold out with total attendance topping 485,000, according to Billboard.

The news comes as the concert business remains strong, with Cirque du Soleil’s Michael Jackson: Immortal tour delivering healthy returns.

Heading into last year’s sophomore season, 14 Glee cast members were under contract to participate in the 2011 world tour with rehearsals beginning almost immediately after production wrapped on the show’s 22 episodes. Following the 40-stop effort, the cast had a small window of time before kicking off production on its third season.

Glee Live began as a four-city tour following season one and expanded following the quick sellouts and limited engagement.

Glee: The 3D Concert Movie, which was filmed during last summer’s tour and produced for an estimated $9 million, opened to a disappointing $57 million at the domestic box office in August, ranking 11th for the weekend on its way to a stateside total of $11.9 million.

The news of the scrapped tour comes at a busy time for Murphy, who in addition to Glee is readying the second season of FX’s horror anthology American Horror Story as well as prepping a comedy pilot, The New Normal, for NBC and executive producing Oxygen’s The Glee Project.
Caesar Praised at Berlin Film Festival

By Scott Roxborough
Berlin — In a major upset, Italian docudrama Caesar Must Die from directors Paolo and Vittorio Taviani won the Golden Bear for best film on Saturday at the 62nd Berlin International Film Festival.

The brothers are known for their literary costume dramas, such as The Night of Shooting Stars (1982), but in Caesar, the Italian directing veterans explore the porous boundaries between art and life.

Caesar was not a front-runner in any of the pre-awards tip sheets, but it evidently won over the Berlinale jury, headed its president, helmer Mike Leigh.

The film looks at a staging and performance of William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar at Rome’s maximum security prison Rebibbia, with the inmates playing all the roles.

“Reading Shakespeare, the actors, these prisoners, are talking about freedom, about political power and corruption, about violence and murder,” the Italian directors explained. “They saw the lines were not just lines, they were part and parcel of their lives inside.”

While Caesar is designed as a drama, all the inmates use their real names and recite their real-life stories when they are introduced at the beginning of the film.

“We said they could use any name they like and make up biographical details but none did, they all told their real stories,” said Paolo Taviani. “They realized this film would be seen in theaters, maybe by people, by friends, who had forgotten them. This was their way of crying out: We’re here! We’re alive!”

In addition to Berlin’s top honor, Caesar also won the best film honor presented by the independent ecumenical jury at the festival. Adopt Films has picked up the film for U.S. release.

Danish costume drama A Royal Affair from director Nikolaj Arcel was the only multiple winner at this year’s Berlinale, scooping the best actor Silver Bear for Mikkel Boe Folsgaard as the slightly mad Danish king Christian VII. Writers Arcel and Rasmus Heisterberg won the Silver Bear for best screenplay for their true-life tale of a royal physician, played by Mads Mikkelsen, who starts an affair with the Danish queen (Alicia Vikander). Magnolia will release Royal Affair stateside.

Folsgaard, who is still in acting school in Copenhagen, joked that next week he would be back home “taking tap dancing lessons.”

Leigh and his jury — which included actors Jake Gyllenhaal, Charlotte Gainsbourg and Barbara Sukowa; directors Francois Ozon, Asghar Farhadi and Anton Corbijn; and writer Boualem Sansal — handed Berlin’s jury prize to Hungarian film Just the Wind from director Bence Fliegauf.

The pic uses the real-life story of a murderous campaign against a Roma family in Hungary to spin a touching drama about human rights. The film also won the Amnesty International film prize and the Peace Film award presented in Berlin.

German helmer Christian Petzold won best directing honors for Barbara, a movie most had thought would claim the top prize. The period drama, set in communist East Germany, stars Nina Hoss as a doctor who is banned to the countryside as punishment after requesting a visa to leave to the West.

Newcomer Rachel Mwanza took the best actress Silver Bear for her wrenching performance as a child soldier forced to fight and kill in Kim Nguyen’s African civil-war drama War Witch.

The 14-year-old Mwanza, who was discovered by Nguyen on the streets of Kinshasa and cast in the film, provided the emotional highlight of the awards show, bouncing up and down in obvious delight when her name was called.

Swiss filmmaker Ursula Meier’s Sister, the story of two poor kids who steal skis from a luxury Alpine resort, won a special Silver Bear for the film.

German cameraman Lutz Reitmeier won a Silver Bear for extraordinary artistic contribution for his lensing of Wang Quan’an’s Chinese period drama White Deer Plain.

The Alfred Bauer Prize, given in honor of the Berlinale’s founder for a work of particular innovation, went to Portuguese black-and-white drama Tabu from director Miguel Gomes, the most stylistically adventurous of the Berlin competition titles. Tabu also won the FIPRESCI award presented by the European association of film critics.

Outside the main competition, two of the big winners at this year’s Berlinale were Dutch film Kawaboy from Boudewijn Koole, which took the best first feature award; and Serbian farce The Parade, the story of an unusual friendship between a macho Mafioso and a gay veterinarian, which won the audience award for films screening in Berlin’s Panorama section.
BEL AMI

By David Rooney

BERLIN — There are countless brooding shots of Robert Pattinson in Bel Ami, occasionally of him shirtless and invariably drenched in overwrought music. That might titillate the swooning legions of Team Edward Twilight fans, but for the grown-ups, there’s not much here to bite into. Neophyte film directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, with help from Rachel Bennet’s shallow screenplay, have reduced Guy de Maupassant’s portrait of corrupting ambition to a risible bodice-ripper.

Published in 1885, as Maupassant was slowly succumbing to syphilis, the novel centers on Georges Duroy, a handsome young social climber from the provinces, fresh out of the cavalry in Algeria and hungry to make his fortune in belle epoque Paris. Broke and blessed with no discernible talents, he quickly learns that the path to power is not through important men but their influential wives.

We get Georges’ number in early glimpses of Pattinson glowering at the shabby walls of his cramped apartment and enviously watching the Paris swells. He’s at his most expressive when clobbering a cockroach to death. But there’s no inner life in the miscast actor’s one-dimensional characterization. He lacks the fundamental guile for the role, played in one of the best-known previous versions (1947’s The Private Affairs of Bel Ami) by George Sanders.

When Georges shows his true colors, one of his key stepping stones, Madeleine (Uma Thurman), says, “I had no conception of the depths of your emptiness.” As so often happens in Bennet’s adaptation, she’s stating the obvious. The assessment is aimed at the venal character but applies equally to the charisma-free performance, in which there’s nobody home.

That’s a big problem when we are expected to buy the beguiling magnetism of this dullard, who is short on conversation skills, social graces and virility but leaves every woman he meets spellbound. Georges’ entree into high society comes via old regiment buddy Charles Forester (Philip Glenister), now the well-connected political editor of national daily La Vie Francaise. Charles gives him cash to buy formalwear and invites him to a dinner at which he instantly mesmerizes his friend’s wife, Madeleine; flirty Clotilde (Christina Ricci); and more composed Virginie (Kristin Scott Thomas), wife of the paper’s editor, Monsieur Rousset (Colm Meaney).

He begins an affair with the married Clotilde, portrayed here as a lightweight on the same wavelength as Georges, and the woman he comes closest to loving. Her husband is often away, so she sets Georges up in an apartment for their trysts. With Madeleine’s help, he gets a job at La Vie Francaise but develops no skill as a writer. When Charles loses patience with him, Georges turns to Madame Rousset to secure his position.

A convenient death, a strategic marriage and much bed-hopping later, Georges has landed a scoop thanks to Madeleine’s political savvy. But when he is shut out of a lucrative scheme to make a fortune off the government’s secret plan to invade Morocco, Georges trounces his affair with the infatuated Virginie and makes an enemy of her husband, meanwhile setting his sights on their clueless daughter (Holliday Grainger).

In Maupassant’s book, detailed descriptions of the women’s clothing, their skin and hair, their jewelry, helped convey that Georges’ intoxicating effect on them is mutual. The film’s gaze focuses chiefly on him and not through his eyes, so his behavior seems even more calculating. That would make sense if he didn’t also come across as a dolt.

Bennet’s screenplay is woefully short on connective tissue among characters and incident, lurching through eventful passages without sufficient narrative grounding. She fails to make much of the political backdrop or to engage in the novel’s sharp social analysis of a bourgeois Paris full of whores, opportunists and frauds.

In their theater work with the company they co-founded, Cheek by Jowl, Donnellan and Ormerod are known for pared-down design and dynamic approach to performance, enabling them to claw out vigorous new life in classic texts. Here the co-directors seem hampered by the weight of period production design and uncertain about how best to frame the action for maximum effect. Other than frequently favoring a chiaroscuro palette, Stefano Fafivene’s cinematography lacks distinction. Most crucially, this is a film about sex that’s without sensuality.

More disappointing still is the evident absence of communication among the cast. Dialogue is often stilted and awkward, and the actors too rarely appear to inhabit the same world.

Pattinson is without gravitas, and while the women are generally more watchable, he has little chemistry with any of them. Thurman maintains a strained poise...
**GHOST RIDER: SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE**

By John Defore

A water-treading sequel offering just enough kooky color to keep less-discerning funnybook fans occupied, *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* nudges its obscure hero’s mythology forward a bit without seeming to care much how it gets there. Its modest box-office prospects are helped by the absence of other superhero competitors during the next couple of weeks.

Returning as the eponymous not-quite-hero, Nicolas Cage spends stretches of the film on autopilot while waiting for scenes he deems worthy of his particular brand of crazy. They’re not frequent enough to please the Cage aficionado, but sequences in which the twitchy, inappropriately giddy actor tries to choke back transformations into a bloodthirsty skeleton-on-fire are welcome in a film where often-charismatic co-stars Ciaran Hinds and Idris Elba are singing off-key.

Cage’s Johnny Blaze hates being saddled with his super-powered alter ego, and *Vengeance* gives him a chance, a la *Superman II*, to unburden himself: A French motorcycle-riding monk (Elba, wearing unfortunate green contact lenses) offers to lift the curse if only Blaze will rescue a boy being pursued by the devil. It seems the boy, Danny (Fergus Riordan), is actually the spawn of the dark lord’s Earthly incarnation (Hinds’ Roarke, the trickster responsible for Blaze’s curse), and is now meant to be possessed by Daddy for good.

Directors Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor enjoy some of the oddball moments in *Ghost Rider’s* battles with various villainous evildoers have a quirky fun-house quality, and somebody in a digital FX house should get a bonus for the bubbling tar on Ghost Rider’s motorcycle jacket. But the actual action surrounding these moments is sometimes incoherent, especially an extravagantly murky show-down involving a mammoth piece of construction equipment, and the plot tying one confrontation to the next is anything but on fire.

If the screenplay is stale and contrived (Elba’s monk knows everything about everything but can’t guess the one twist no viewer will fail to foresee), the picture benefits from some eye-candy settings in Turkey and Romania — which is not to say that this scenery is well served by Brandon Trost’s photography or the limp 3D effects.

**Openings**

Feb. 17 (Sony).

**Production**

Columbia Pictures, Hyde Park Entertainment, Imagination Abu Dhabi FZ, Marvel Knights.

**Cast**

Nicolas Cage, Ciaran Hinds, Violante Placido, Idris Elba, Johnny Whitworth, Fergus Riordan.

**Directors**

Mark Neveldine, Brian Taylor.

**Screenwriters**

Scott M. Gimple, Seth Hoffman, David S. Goyer.

**Producers**

Ari Arad, Avi Arad, Michael De Luca, Steven Paul.

**Executive producers**

Gary Foster, David S. Goyer, Mark Steven Johnson, E. Bennett Walsh.

**Director of photography**

Brandon Trost.

**Production designer**

Kevin Phipps.

**Music**

David Sardy.

**Costume designer**

Bojana Nikitovic.

**Editor**

Brian Berdan.

Rated PG-13, 95 minutes.

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...and haughty superiority even when Madeleine is humiliated. Ricci isn’t the most natural fit for a late-19th century European, though her vulnerability is a welcome note, and Scott Thomas deserves better than the undignified treatment her character receives.

As is often the case when the dramatic and emotional fabric is thin, the false solution is to drown every scene in blustery music, in this case by Lakshman Joseph de Saram and Rachel Portman. But it would take more than an agitated string section to lend substance to this vapid melodrama.

**Venue:** Berlin International Film Festival (out of competition).

**Production:** Red Wave Films, in association with XIX Film, Protagonist Pictures, Rai Cinema.

**Cast:** Robert Pattinson, Uma Thurman, Kristin Scott Thomas, Christina Ricci, Colm Meany, Philip Glenister, Holliday Grainger, Natalia Tena, James Lance, Anthony Higgins.

**Directors:** Declan Donnellan, Anthony Higgins.

**Screenwriters:** Rachel Bennette, Nick Ormerod.

**Producer:** Uberto Pasolini.

**Executive producer:** Simon Fuller.

**Director of photography:** Stefano F. Kovacs.

**Production designer:** Attila F. Kovacs.

**Music:** Lakshman Joseph de Saram, Rachel Portman.

**Costume designer:** Odile Dicks-Mireaux.

**Editor:** Masahiro Hirakubo.

**Sales:** Protagonist Pictures.

No MPAA rating, 107 minutes.