

## CANNES: Parties, Pirates, And Fireworks

By PETE HAMMOND | Saturday May 14, 2011 @ 6:20pm PDT

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Cannes experienced a huge dose of stardom on its prime Saturday night as the Film Festival hosted the latest premiere following big events at Disneyland and in Moscow for Disney's summer juggernaut *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*. For the out-of-competition event, stars Johnny Depp, Penelope Cruz, Geoffrey Rush, Ian McShane, Astrid Berges-Frisbey, Sam Claflin, plus producer Jerry



Bruckheimer and Director Rob Marshall, all hit the red carpet. You literally could not navigate the massive crowd scene in front of and surrounding the Palais as this group worked the paparazzi. It drew the biggest throng of fans so far at the Fest, all trying to position themselves to get a glimpse of the stars. Cannes loves photo opps like this and has been actively courting studios to bring their big summer behemoths to the Cote d'Azur in order to guarantee some celeb glitz. With Depp and Cruz tonight, and Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie making their entrance Monday night for Brad's *Tree of Life* premiere, the photogs are having a field day. I also heard Leonardo DiCaprio hit town this weekend as well.

The first Saturday night of Cannes is always back-to-back parties, and streets were lined with revelers up and down the Croisette. Kanye West performed at the Red Granite party which looked like a mob scene on my way to the post-premiere party for *Return*, the only American film selected for the Directors Fortnight section of the fest this year. The powerful indie from director Liza Johnson stars Linda Cardellini as a war vet who becomes unhinged when she returns home to put her life back together. It co-stars Michael Shannon and *Mad Men's* John Slattery who steals the picture with a performance that pops off the screen as a drug and alcohol addicted vet. *Return* represents the first film venture for Meredith Vieira Productions and partners Meredith Vieira and Amy Rapp who told me they hope to secure a U.S distribution deal before the Fest closes on May 22.



Vieira, who just announced she is leaving *The Today Show* in June, told me this is an exciting new direction for her but that the whole experience of this Cannes premiere was "surreal". She said, "When the lights went down tonight, I thought 'Wow, we're really doing this'." She was genuinely excited to bring the film to Cannes after Johnson just finished it four days ago. It seems like such a natural for Sundance but the producing pair told me they didn't want to wait and thought Cannes was the perfect launching pad. When I asked Vieira if indie moviemaking was going to be her post-*Today* career path, she said it would be included "with other projects, too" -- but that if she and Rapp can find films as important and promising as *Return*, they will continue to dive into this perilous world. It might be a good sign that, just as guests departed the film's premiere, ear-blasting fireworks were filling the skies over Cannes making for a memorable exit to say the least. A film with this small a budget could never afford *that* kind of show-stopping stunt, so maybe it's charmed.

Meanwhile, right next door at the Carlton Hotel, Cannes President Gilles Jacob threw a black-tie dinner honoring this year's jury President Robert De Niro following a special screening of De Niro's 1993 directorial debut, *A Bronx Tale*. De Niro has been getting the royal treatment in between seeing the required two films a day as part of his jury duty.

One of the great things about Cannes is it is a multi-platform fest. Today I managed to see three films in three distinct sections of the fest. For the official competition I caught two-time Palme d'Or winners (Rosetta, L'enfant) The Dardenne Brothers latest *The Kid With A Bike*, and it's one of their best but not likely to cause a three-peat for the talented siblings. In the Un Certain Regard section there was a terrific new French film from director Robert Guediguian, *Les Neiges Du Kilimandjara (The Snows Of Kilimanjaro)* NOT to be confused with the 1950's Gregory Peck pic. And then there was the aforementioned *Return* in the Director's Fortnight.

Finally, lots of producers and sales agents are hustling around what seems to be a promising and bustling market. Among those here showing their wares are *Soul Surfer* Executive Producers David Tice and Dominic Ianno selling the remaining international territories for their inspirational picture, the true story of Hawaiian surfing teen Bethany Hamilton who lost her arm to a shark 7 years ago but has gone on to be a world champion surfer and motivational speaker. She joined the pair and co-star Kevin Sorbo on an Industry Focus panel I moderated at the American Pavillion this afternoon. Tice, a CPA who had never been involved in movies before, financed the entire film almost by himself but when I asked if he planned to do any others he was noncommittal. With the modestly budgeted film nearing \$40 million domestically, he and Ianno seem convinced they will ultimately come out very nicely on the project which was distributed by Sony and marketed through Bob Berney's new Film District. One powerful weapon they have in trying to generate healthy new sales in Cannes is its real life star Hamilton, who wrote the book and was very hands-on during the production of the film including performing all the one-armed stunt surfing sequences for star Anna-Sophia Robb. When I asked about her experiences here at the Fest she got the biggest laugh of the day replying, "Actually, to tell you the truth, I had never *heard* of the Cannes Film Festival before."



Perhaps that is just as well. The sharks in this town can be just as scary.

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