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# To Win a Prize in Venice

*Don Ranvaud on the day the auteurs and critics came to blows...*

Venice, August 1983. The Biennale Cinema has been restored to its former glory and is ready to unspool a miraculously rich programme from some of the biggest names in the art cinema world: Fellini, Bergman, Resnais, Kluge, Altman, Wajda, Costa-Gavras, Woody Allen and, of course, Godard. The new festival director, critic Gian Luigi Rondi, has managed the impossible and completed the elaborate reconstruction of political and artistic alliances begun by his immediate predecessor, film-maker Carlo Lizzani. All the critics and cultural operators who eleven years earlier had brought the Biennale to its knees (and kept it there) are now fully behind the man who has put all his authorial eggs into one basket, scorning the mass of actors and actresses brought over only a few days earlier to celebrate Ingrid Bergman in Venice proper, and installing an illustrious jury of established film-makers: Agnès Varda, Bob Rafelson, Leon Hirszman, Jack Clayton, Mrinal Sen, Gleb Panfilov, Ousman Sembene, Márta Mészáros, Peter Handke, Alain Tanner, Nagisa Oshima, and the President, Bernardo Bertolucci.

The latter had been instrumental in whipping up good will for the Mostra, but even if in broad agreement with Rondi's uncompromising stance to keep Venice afloat, is frankly puzzled by some of the consequences of the 'authorial' perspective: "I think I know my 'authors', as it were, but what I find difficult is how you might establish who *isn't* an author. How can you say, yes, you're an author and so are you, but I'm not really sure about your friend?". Soon, a lot of critics realise that a name is not a guarantee of quality and that banana skins litter the paths of many cinematic wizards. Nevertheless, a measure of politeness informs most of the reviews while the second stringers ransack the other sections of the festival for discoveries and controversies, especially in the programme New Italian Cinema.

Then the unspeakable, the unwatchable, the unwritable happens: *Prénom Carmen* and Jean-Luc Godard arrive in Venice. The Italian critics snap and display a corporate disinclination to take the film at all seriously. Bleary-eyed and impetuously dismissive, all the major critics, from the Christian Democrat *Il Giorno* (Morando Morandini) to the Communist *l'Unità* (Sauro Borelli), from the establishment *Corriere della Sera* (Giovanni Grazzini) to the (not-so) young Turks of *La Repubblica* (Tullio Kezich), prefer to consign

Godard to the lunatic asylum in which he appears at the beginning of the film, and challenge the authors' jury to tell them what on earth they are supposed to make of *that*. The *Corriere della Sera* in fact goes well beyond any self-respecting critical standards by headlining the 'victory' of a truly appalling New Italian film (*Lontano da dove*, by newcomers Stefania Casini and Francesca Marciano) over the Godard. Its critic (who also happens to be the President of the Italian Film School and National Archive) boasts that if the jury has the gall to attribute anything but a sonorous fart to the Godard he will (have to) resign...

This is nothing to faze Godard, who at the press conference is as dazzling and irascible as ever, pouring forth eminently quotable metaphors and metonyms to protect a clearly 'painful' movie. Locked in official silence, the jury quietly observes what's happening and continues its marathon viewings, showing a few signs of fatigue. Rumour and speculation continue to grow, with the critics already predicting the verdicts in a daily chart printed in *La Repubblica*.

Seldom has there been so much tension before an announcement at the recent editions of the Biennale. All prizes are awarded unanimously, and with the Golden Lion (plus a technical award) going to *Prénom Carmen*, the authors' jury has clearly and loudly made a suggestion as to the future employment, *en masse*, of the Italian critics. Giovanni Grazzini appeals to the paying public as a very undignified last resort; Tullio Kezich sticks to his opinion that "The twelve apostles [on the jury] recognised their Messiah of twenty years ago and gave him a prize 'in fond remembrance'". Many, however, are still waiting for the resignations so readily offered...

For his part, Bertolucci calmly assesses the real value of the film: *Prénom Carmen* "reminded us that its maker has, in these very lean years, vigorously taken charge once again of the wonderful magic train set that Orson Welles called the cinema. This love story seemed to us full of despair and disquiet but imbued with an exquisitely delicate irony. He really has found the means to reinvent the cinema in a time of grave doubts and uncertainty. At fifty-three, Godard is so much younger than all these very old youngsters we have seen, and has made us realise one fundamental thing: that for those who make films in the violent and desperate world of an industry relentlessly in search of young audiences now able to blackmail it, it is still possible to take fascinating risks". ■