

# Movie buff put Hollywood back on Cannes screens

**NEW films by Woody Allen, Oliver Stone and Britons Mike Leigh and Stephen Frears will be among those shown at Cannes this year - we caught up with the man who selected their films**

THIERRY FRÉMAUX is the man with the final say on which films are shown at this month's Cannes Film Festival. As both director of the Institut Lumière and general delegate of the festival, he is one of the leading figures in the world of cinema courted as much as envied. His position as "selector" of the films is much debated. Whatever the controversies, this canny film-lover follows his own path, that of a cinema open to the world. We caught up with him before the 63rd festival.

**What makes for a good festival?**  
A good selection and a good line-up of winners, and for the festival to be happy; but what is a good selection and a good line-up? Each person has their own criteria. The critics discover fine films, the film professionals do business and the festival-goers to be dazzled by the atmosphere. It's not possible in any case to satisfy everyone and if you tried you would end up pleasing no-one. The Cannes film festival is so popular that in a way it belongs to everyone.

**You say some people come to do business...**  
Don't forget, Cannes is a workplace. It's a meeting place for professionals, which brings together not just critics and film buffs but also producers, distributors, buyers and sellers from all over the world.

Each person is working on something different - a finished film being presented in the official selection, a film that is being written or which is in production and which needs grabbing before anyone else. Away from that. From dawn to the early hours everyone talks about films; and if you don't see a film for 24 hours you dry out - the films water you, energise you, enable you to exist and make you want to see more of them.

**What are the differences between the world's main film festivals - Cannes, Berlin and Venice?**  
In principle there is no difference, they're the same kind of event: they are about cinema, film-makers, business, stars. However Cannes has become the most iconic, at the same time more focused on film-makers and the most glamorous. It is also the world's biggest market for cinema and the media market par excellence - one of the four great ones, along with Frankfurt, World Cup, the Tour de France and the Olympic Games.

**Would you say the festival is about more than just films?**  
Someone said to me: "There is so much activity on the Croisette that one day we could do a festival with

Thierry Frémaux was interviewed by Oliver Rowland in French, with translation and supplementary research by Oliver Rowland



out any films." It was a way of denouncing the sort of circus that Cannes can become.

But we need to put this clichéd image to rights - the heart of the festival is cinema, films. Whatever people say, people come to Cannes for that. From dawn to the early hours everyone talks about films; and if you don't see a film for 24 hours you dry out - the films water you, energise you, enable you to exist and make you want to see more of them.

**What is your role as general delegate?**  
The key job is to come up with a selection of 50 films, of which 20 will be in competition for the *Palme d'Or*. Other events are then grafted on. It's also about defending a certain idea of the cinema



and - sorry if this doesn't sound very modest - embodying a certain image of France and the way in which it has been supporting arthouse cinema for 50 years and the educational role of the arts, informing the public, helping them discover distant lands.

My job is not just about sitting in a cinema with thumb up or down "I like it" or "I don't like it". It's about maintaining a dialogue, often invisible, but real and permanent, with film-makers, producers, American or Asian studios, other festivals.

For small film-producing countries, having a film selected at Cannes is a shot in the arm which stimulates their industry for several years.

**How do you deal with that on a daily basis?**  
You have to be sincere and modest - forget Cannes is the world's greatest film festival and always see the cinema through its creators. A lot of decisions are hard to take and then hard to get other people to understand. We refuse so many films, including a lot we like

This job involves saying "no" more often than "yes". More than 1,500 films are submitted to us each year. It's not possible to accept them all. Cannes is about making a choice.

**How is the selection made?**  
It's a job that starts right from the summer, making the first contacts, drawing up lists. Then there are trips during the autumn. Finally, screenings start in December and build up to become very intensive from February. The selection is made mid-April.

I have a lot of people on the team, because I like to work collaboratively - correspondents pretty much everywhere around the world, an assistant who helps me a lot with my relations with other countries, and three committees in Paris. One for French films, one for foreign films and a third whose job is to watch films that come in as on spec - videos, DVDs etc.

We are like a publishing house which has to check everything that is being done. Think how many great

novels have just turned up in the post. You can't relax. One of our jobs is to travel and to let people know that Cannes is open to all countries and all film.

**Critics accuse Cannes of being just a get-together for the same regulars**  
It is a criticism often made in the past - Bergman, Fellini and Antonioni were film fixtures - but less so today. Cannes has to welcome established film-makers as well as discovering new talents. The first group do play a major role, because they are famous and are great artists - and who would complain about that?

We make sure there is a balance. We refuse famous film-makers more often than people realise, but we don't publicise it. So do it themselves to express their indignation (such as Francis Ford Coppola last year when *Tetso* was offered an out-of-competition slot rather in the *Palme d'Or*).



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*Bowling for Columbine* (Michael Moore) and *Etre et avoir* (Tibbe and To Have, Nicolas Philibert) paved the way for other documentary-makers.

The documentary, with great artists like [French documentary-maker] Chris Marker or [German] Marcel Ophüls, is totally a part of cinema and must not be sidelined. It has its place in a great festival.

We are also continuing to broaden our horizons by seizing the emergence of Korea, Thailand and Mexico, symbolic of the globalisation of the industry and cinema going. They have compensated for the decline in European countries that supplied films in the 60s and 70s; but eastern Europe is making a high-speed comeback - Romania, Hungary, Poland, Russia.

**Have you regretted not selecting any films?**  
Loads. You work with conviction, but without forgetting it's possible to make a mistake which happens. A selection is not a list of certainties, it's more a list of suggestions. We are in

the realms of art, not on the athletics track where you can measure talent in seconds.

**Is it your ambition to cover all kinds of cinema?**  
I am wary of making generalisations and self-serving statements. To start, a selection is made from films which are presented to us. When it comes to appreciating films, I have what I would call the "genius" approach.

You know this equation: Woody Allen likes Ingmar Bergman, who loves westerns. A love for cinema should welcome the unexpected and banish all preconceived certainties. My favourite critics are the unpredictable ones and I love hearing about film-makers' passions - [arty French director] Alain Resnais never stops going on about Bob Hope comedies, [New Wave director] Claude Chabrol is the same in total 1930s French films.

Scoreless on English films and Bertrand Tavernier [French

## Father's cinema passion passed to son who loved VO

BORN in Isère, Thierry Frémaux grew up in the suburbs of Lyon where his father was an engineer with EDF. But his father passed on his passion for cinema as he spent his spare time running a film club. Thierry discovered VO films in the cinemas of Lyon - and was realising cinema was a way to learn about and know the world. In 1982 the film critic Bernard Chaudre persuaded him to join the Institut Lumière in Lyon [a cultural organisation as a volunteer and he got to know the likes of director Bertrand Tavernier. He organised an event on the centenary of cinema - with

carre blanche to invite whoever he could persuade. Later, he turned down the job of director of the *Cinéma-thèque Française* (Paris body to promote French films) before being named artistic delegate of the Cannes Film Festival and being made a *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur*. Describing himself as having a "joyous film-mania", he says he is open to all forms of cinema - from [late 20th Century directors] Jean-Marie Straub [noted for artistic, austere films, often with political overtones] to Claude Sautet [traditional, well-written films, focussed on the inner lives of middle class characters].



### CANNES HISTORY

This year's event is on May 12 - 23, and jury president is American director Tim Burton. Some key dates in the festival's history:  
**1939** Shocked by Nazi meddling in the Venice film festival, the French started an alternative in a casino on the site of today's venue with Louis Lumière as president. War broke out the following day and halted the plans - Russia was to show a film called *What If War Breaks Out Tomorrow?*  
**1946** The Festival International du Film started properly in the casino with seven countries.  
**1949** A purpose-built venue, the

Palais Croisette, was inaugurated  
**1955** The first *Palme d'Or* awarded for *Marty*, by Delbert Mann  
**1959** The *Murich du Film* trade fair became part of the festival. Last year it saw 10,000 participants from 140 countries  
**1961** *Palme d'Or* winner *Viridiana* by Buñuel, was banned in its own country, Franco's Spain  
**1982** Yo! wins *Palme d'Or*; Yilmaz Guney directed this film by letter while a political prisoner in Turkey  
**1983** *The Banker* - the current *Palme d'Or* festival - was built  
**1993** A woman wins the *Palme d'Or* for the first time, Jane Campion, for *The Piano*

film-maker and Institut Lumière president) on everything else. When they are film buffs, which is not always the case, film-makers are often the most enthusiastic about others' work. When Jim Jarmusch was given the Grand Prix at Cannes in 2005 he said on stage, very modestly: "Mr Ho, Hsiao-Hsien [Chinese director, who lost out in the competition], I'm your student."

**Today cinema is as much an art as a business...**  
That has always been debated, has never been resolved and never will be. Cinema takes more financing than other arts. Certain films are pure commercial products, others are works of art comparable to the great works of literature, music or painting.



**With DVDs, home cinema and video-on-demand, has our relationship to cinema changed?**  
The way people watch films has changed in an unprecedented way. For today's child, when it comes to the moving image, it's not the cinema screen that takes precedence, but the television, the computer or the Playstation; but take an adolescent to the cinema and he'll see it as a treat.

He knows it's a different journey, something exciting, incomparable. Even if you cook good meals at home, you like to go to a restaurant. It's the same with cinema. Going to the cinema is like going to a concert by an artist when you've got all their CDs. The cinema screen, it's the concert hall, the opera house, the football stadium. It's the thing in its pure state. What's more, in France there are fine cinema and plenty of them.

**With digital technology and high-performance software anyone can claim to be a film-maker, isn't that a danger?**  
No. There are Sunday afternoon painters, amateur actors, closed writers. The Super 8 [camera] was invented in the 1950s so everyone could make films. Digital changes nothing, apart from being user-friendly; word processing did not turn all computer users into writers. Even with a computer, Proust would still have started in *Search for Lost Time* with "For a long time I went to bed early."

**For commercial reasons and release strategies the studios had been tending to stay away from Cannes: so we welcomed *Moulin Rouge*, *The Matrix* and *Star Wars* - Hollywood, but good films**