

Preview: 47th Chicago International Film Festival, Part One

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 5, 2011 - 8:55pm

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CHICAGO – This year’s line-up for the 47th Annual Chicago International Film Festival is an eclectic mix of major Oscar contenders (“My Week With Marilyn,” “The Artist,” “The Descendants”) along with a number of interesting smaller films. It is a nice blend of films that have made waves at other fests like Venice or Toronto along with a healthy number of debuts. It’s one of the fest’s strongest slates in years. And so, after weeks of screeners and advance screenings, we’ve broken down the highlights into three chunks, starting with an incredible amount of quality unspooling just this weekend (come back on Monday for next week and then next Friday for the final installment).

After a red-carpet opening for the Chicago production “The Last Rites of Joe May” with star Dennis Farina in attendance, the best films of the opening act of the 2011 fest include a major work by a controversial filmmaker, two stellar breakthrough female performances of the year, a frontrunner for the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, a documentary about a true shame for this country, and a trio of foreign films that couldn’t be more dissimilar other than that they deserve your attention. From the end of the world to young love to the magnetic power of a cult to what is billed as Israel’s first horror film, this is an incredibly strong opening weekend and it doesn’t even include several films that might be worth your interest but we didn’t have time to get to them (we’ll include un-screened, potential highlights on the final page, below our recommendations). It may not have a lot of the instant recognition factor of later-fest film stars like Michelle Williams, Ed Helms, or George Clooney, but you could have an amazing movie experience this weekend.

The top tier of film’s in the first four days of the 47th Chicago International Film Festival includes “Melancholia,” “Martha Marcy May Marlene,” “The Kid with a Bike,” “Rabies,” “Like Crazy,” “Miss Bala,” “On the Bridge,” and “The King of Devil’s Island.” In order of quality, although all eight of these films are worth a look. Go buy tickets [at the official site](#) [15].



“**Melancholia**”
October 7th, 8:30pm

Lars Von Trier made waves at the Chicago International Film Festival before with his “Antichrist” and he returns this year with another daring work that also can clearly be seen as a product of the controversial filmmaker cinematically dealing with his own crippling depression. While “Antichrist” was a loud, violent, apocalyptic mess (that never came together for this critic despite Charlotte Gainsbourg’s best efforts), “Melancholia” is a brilliant and riveting meditation on the world-shattering impact of the mental illness known as depression, something that derailed Von Trier in his own life. It may be a rather underlined metaphor to name a planet Melancholia and have it set on a collision course with Earth, but it completely, 100% works in this mesmerizing film, easily one of the filmmaker’s best. Kirsten Dunst gives her career-best performance as a young lady who thinks she’s put depression past her enough to enjoy her wedding day but discovers in the first half of this

evenly-split-into-two-chapters film that she absolutely has not. The second half consists of the rest of her family fearing that the planet Melancholia will crash into their lives as well. We will write a lot more about this film for its theatrical release and, in all likelihood, in year-end features here on the site. It's that good.



Martha Marcy May Marlene

Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival

“Martha Marcy May Marlene”

October 8th, 5pm

It would be too easy to describe Sean Durkin's highly-acclaimed debut as the “Winter's Bone of 2011.” Like that Oscar nominee, “Martha Marcy May Marlene” started its buzz at Sundance, features a striking debut female lead, and both even have the great John Hawkes delivering stellar supporting performances. But “MMMM” stands completely on its own as one of the most memorable dramas of the year. I'll admit to a bit of trepidation after first seeing it, thinking perhaps it was a bit too purposefully vague in its storytelling, but I think it's the question marks left by the film that really allow it to linger in the memory. Well, that and what is easily one of the best performances of the year in any category from the great Elizabeth Olsen (who we were lucky enough to interview...watch for it in a few weeks). This talented young lady perfectly embodies a woman who runs away from one fractured family in the form of a deadly-dangerous cult to return to another fractured family with her sister and brother-in-law. As she tries to remember what happened to her at the cult, the narrative twists and turns like a Moebius strip blending mysterious flashbacks with her confusing present until the tension reaches a peak in the final act.



The Kid with a Bike

Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival

“The Kid with a Bike”

October 8th, 5:15pm

October 9th, 5pm

The Dardenne brothers have returned with another cautionary tale about the impact of letting a child fall through the cracks and the result may be a relatively-standard drama for fans of the filmmakers but that doesn't mean it's not one of the more emotionally powerful tales that will be projected this opening weekend of CIFF. In a remarkably-genuine performance, Thomas Doret plays Cyril Catoul, a young man who learns in the very first scene of the film that his father is not only not coming to pick him up from boarding school but he's moved away. And he's sold his bike. The headstrong Cyril runs away and takes a bus home where he meets a sweet salon owner (Cecile de France) who agrees to foster the wayward child on the weekends. After a heartbreaking encounter with his father, “Kid with a Bike” becomes a fascinating tale about how a young man can be set adrift without the right role models to keep him from drowning. Will he grab the right life vest or the wrong one? Once

again, the Dardennes create tension out of human drama and draw believable, excellent performances from their entire cast. For the right audience (especially Francophiles), this could be your favorite film of the entire fest.



Rabies

Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival

“Rabies”

October 7th, 11:15pm

October 15th, 10:15pm

Billing a film as Israel’s first horror movie could easily be a turn off for as many viewers as it grabs. The first one is never that great, right? Well, much to my surprise, “Rabies” is actually pretty interesting stuff, certainly more so than some of the late-night horror fare at this year’s event. It’s hard to even describe “Rabies” without spoiling some of its enjoyment for this is one of those unusual horror entries that is so unique in the way that it unfolds that it’s one of its greatest achievements. It’s a film that opens with a young lady trapped in a box in the ground, clearly having just fallen in there, much to the dismay of her brother/boyfriend (yes, you read that right). When he screams off-camera, one might assume that what will follow is a pretty standard “slasher in the woods” piece and that’s certainly one element of the film but the poor souls who follow the incestuous pair into the trees don’t get dispatched in ways you will EVER see coming. “Rabies” is one of those fascinating horror movies that never gets too weird to lose its footing but also stays completely unpredictable. An unpredictable horror movie in 2011? I don’t care what country it comes from — that’s sort of a miracle.



Like Crazy

Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival

“Like Crazy”

October 9th, 6pm

Another buzzed-about Sundance film (like “Martha Marcy May Marlene”), Drake Doremus’ drama is a fresh take on the potentially-doomed romance with a breakthrough performance from the lovely Felicity Jones and yet another strong turn from Anton Yelchin (who is having a career year when one adds this to “The Beaver” and “Fright Night”). Jones and Yelchin play a lovestruck pair torn apart by one crucial decision. As they try to get back together and keep their relationship going long distance they also continue to live their own lives. Doremus and his very-talented leads have created a drama of little moments, the small things that pull us further away from loved ones or make us think about them at the most unusual times. Built with largely non-melodramatic scenes, this is not your typical romantic drama but that makes it a film that’s even more successful at tugging the heartstrings. We get to know these characters. We root for them. We want them to be happy. And, like them, we start to wonder if it’s with each other. Rarely has the way we change in our 20s and how that changes the way we look at

love been more deftly realized.



Miss Bala
Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival

“Miss Bala”

October 8th, 8pm
October 10th, 8:35pm

I’ve seen a number of brutal films in my many years of covering the Chicago International Film Festival but “Miss Bala” will be one of the first to spring to mind if anyone asks me about the darkest films I’ve seen in the Windy City. The word “brutal” doesn’t even do this dark, violent, horrific drama justice. It’s a film that becomes almost numbing in its tone (and I think that’s a bit of a problem but will get into that more in a full-length review) but it’s incredibly well-made and performed. The story of a young lady caught in a VERY bad situation in the middle of the drug war that has ravaged the border between Mexico and California may seem familiar (we’ve seen films like this before at CIFF) but “Miss Bala” carves its own harrowing personality by sheer force. Viewers should be warned that this is an incredibly bloody, violent story about a woman who is essentially kidnapped and turned into a criminal by a disgusting drug lord. It’s a rewarding journey with some of the most technically-accomplished filmmaking at the fest but it’s a journey into a part of the world that has essentially become a living Hell.



On the Bridge
Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival

“On the Bridge”

October 8th, 1:15pm
October 16th, 6:30pm

There is little more shameful than the way this country treats returning war veterans. “On the Bridge” is certainly not the first documentary to address the issues of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or the failure of our system to care for those who fight for this country but it is a uniquely personal series of stories. Told with long interviews cut together with shots of landscapes and city skylines, “On the Bridge” is mesmerizing not due to anything flashy (and a reminder of how SO many modern documentary filmmakers have started to rely on flashy techniques) but due to the power of the stories being told by the interview subjects. “On the Bridge” will make you cry and will almost certainly make you angry at the same time. With powerful honesty, these men reveal the demons that have haunted them since the day they returned home to a world they no longer recognized and that, by and large, didn’t care enough about them to make them well.





The King of Devil's Island

*Photo credit: The Chicago International Film Festival***“The King of Devil’s Island”**

October 7th, 5:45pm

October 14th, 5pm

Our final recommendation for the first weekend (and it’s playing next weekend as well) is an award-winning film about an uprising at a torturous boy’s school. This Norwegian film has echoes of “Lord of the Flies” in the way it depicts a society of troubled young men who rise up and take down the powers that have abused them. Based on a true story of a dark chapter in Norway’s history, “Devil’s Island” may be formulaic (and has the least-accurate title of the year) but it’s a well-done piece of formula filmmaking with yet-another strong performance from the great Stellan Skarsgard (who bookends this list with his appearance in “Melancholia”) and some very good work from a young cast of unknowns. Expertly made without being overly memorable, “The King of Devil’s Island” is an old-fashioned drama about the will of good young men triumphing over the weakness of evil old ones. We’ve seen it before, but when it’s done this well that doesn’t seem to matter.

Move to the final page for potential first-weekend highlights that weren’t screened.

Here’s another eight films this weekend that we’d LOVE to have seen (and will probably try to at the actual fest) that could also be worth your time with the official descriptions courtesy of the festival.

“Cooley High”

October 9th, 5:15pm

In light of the demolition of the last building at the Cabrini Green public housing complex, we revisit a crucial period in the history of local Black cinema. Heartfelt and moving, this teen pic follows best friends Leroy “Preach” Jackson and Richard “Cochise” Morris, high school seniors at Cooley Vocational School near the housing complex, as they begin to consider their future. They contend with girl trouble, difficult teachers, a couple of neighborhood thugs, and the police. Directed by Michael Schultz (Car Wash, Krush Groove) and written by Eric Monte, the creator of the smash hit TV series Good Times.

“Corrode”

October 8th, 8:25pm

October 9th, 12pm

October 11th, 2:30pm

Chhaya, a woman of limited means, leads a good, decent life alongside her husband Arvind - until she becomes obsessed with a sculpture of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth. Chhaya will stop at nothing to bring home this statue, and soon her past weaknesses and disappointments (including a miscarriage) bubble to the surface, consuming and corroding her soul. Corrode is the latest example of an exciting new wave of independent Indian cinema.

“His Mother’s Eyes”

October 9th, 3pm

October 10th, 5:30pm

October 16th, 2pm

With ambition and charm matched equally by a complete lack of remorse, best-selling author Mathieu will do anything for a good story. To write the unauthorized biography of celebrity news anchor Lena Weber (Catherine Deneuve in a career-topping performance), not only does he secure a job as her assistant but also seduces Lena, her estranged daughter who is searching for her own son, and anyone who gets in his way, regardless of gender.

“Land of Oblivion”

October 8th, 7:45pm

October 9th, 12:40pm

To the citizens of Prypiat, April 26, 1986 began just like any other day. Anya (Olga Kurylenko, Quantum of Solace) and Piotr celebrate their marriage while young Valery spends time with his physicist father, oblivious to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster that is irrevocably changing their lives. What follows is a lyrical, pathos-filled portrait of the next ten years of those powerless to separate themselves from the town and its defining tragedy.

“Le Havre”

October 8th, 5:30pm
October 9th, 3:30pm

Humanity and dead-pan wit triumph in Aki Kaurismäki’s magical tale of an aging Bohemian shoeshine and a young African refugee. When fate lands Idrissa at Marcel Marx’s doorstep in the French port city of Le Havre, Marcel knows what has to be done. Enlisting the help of the whole neighbourhood of eccentrics and in defiance of all authority, he embarks on a risky plan to reconnect the boy with his mother.

“Sacrifice”

October 9, 8pm
October 15, 5:30pm

What are the limits of loyalty, family, and justice? Driven by jealousy and power, General Tu-Angu frames an entire clan for the murder of their king and wipes out all 300 members. All but one - a baby boy and dynastic heir, secretly rescued by the family doctor. But when Tu-Angu orders the Herod-like murder of every male infant, the doctor makes an inconceivable sacrifice in Kaige Chen’s (Farewell My Concubine) breathtaking adaptation of a classical Chinese opera.

“Tyrannosaur”

October 9, 8pm
October 10, 5:45pm

Actor Paddy Considine (In America) delivers a gritty tale of self-destruction and redemption in his feature-length directorial debut. Expanded from his award-winning short film, Dog Altogether, Tyrannosaur follows the unlikely friendship between rage-filled Joseph (Peter Mullan) and Christian Goodwill store worker, Hannah (Olivia Colman). Mullan’s electrifying performance finds a perfect counterpoint in Colman’s measured portrayal.

“Without”

October 8, 3:45pm
October 9, 1:15pm
October 12, 3:30pm

On remote Whidbey Island, Joslyn is in charge of caring for an old man in a vegetative state while his family is on vacation. Totally isolated from the world - no Internet, no cell phone signal - her fragile mental state slowly begins to crumble. In a chilling and nuanced debut, Joslyn Jensen delivers an outstanding performance as a young woman struggling with her sexuality, loneliness, and frail mind in this haunting film.

Come back on October 10th, 2011 for a look at week two including “Coriolanus” and “My Week With Marilyn” and stay tuned to HollywoodChicago.com for consistent CIFF coverage, including red carpet photos from tonight’s premiere, and interviews with fest stars Dennis Farina, Elizabeth Olsen, Wim Wenders, Simon Curtis, Anton Yelchin & Felicity Jones, and more.



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