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# VARIETY

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2022

## EXCLUSIVE

### Cohen Media Drives Off With 'Madeleine'

BY ELSA KESLASSY

Cohen Media Group has acquired U.S. distribution rights to "Driving Madeleine," a new drama directed Oscar-nominated filmmaker Christian Carion ("Joyeux Noel") and starring Dany Boon.

The film is playing in the Toronto film festival.

"Driving Madeleine" stars Boon as Charles, a taxi driver in Paris who is struggling under mounting stress. His debts are coming due, his driver's license is in danger of being suspended because of numerous fines and his marriage is falling apart. He has no way of knowing his life is about to be transformed when he picks up Madeleine, a 92-year-old woman who is soon to move into a care facility. She asks Charles to make certain stops during what may be her last ride through the city. Charles grumbles but is slowly charmed by Madeleine stories of her life.

Madeleine is played by renowned actor and singer Line Renaud, who has starred opposite Boon in many hit movies, including blockbuster comedy "Welcome to the Sticks."

"Driving Madeleine" is another brilliant film from one of world cinema's most engaging filmmakers," said Cohen Media Group senior VP Robert Aaronson. "We are thrilled to be working with Christian Carion again. Fans will be touched by this universal story of pain, struggle and resilience."

Carion said he was "happy and

MADELEINE CONTINUED P.12

## TIFF'S TOP LOCAL SLATE

### Diverse Voices Rise in Canada

BY JENNIE PUNTER

The Toronto film festival has programmed one of its strongest Canadian feature slates in recent years — films with head-turning performances, eye-catching artistry, and global market and audience appeal, from filmmakers who are subverting stereotypes,

challenging or bypassing power structures, or transforming the industry ecosystem from the grassroots on up.

"Right now in our industry, tons of high-paying service work lets people pay their bills, but the quality work is coming through the Canadian independents," says Conquering

Lions Pictures' Damon D'Oliveira, who has produced the Canadian work of director Clement Virgo, from his 1995 Cannes-premiering feature "Rude" to the series "The Book of Negroes" to their latest, "Brother."

The adaptation of David Chariandy's novel tells the story of two Jamaican Canadian brothers in 1990s Scarborough. "We see this as a bookend to 'Rude,' which is set in the same period and is an adrenaline rush," says

CANADA CONTINUED P.12

## READY TO RULE

### Viola Davis and Her Court



"The Woman King's" Sheila Atim, Viola Davis, Thuso Mbedu, and John Boyega attend the photocall for their film on Friday in Toronto.

## INDIE FORCE

### Schwartzman Builds on Utopia

BY MANORI RAVINDRAN

Robert Schwartzman is part of a Hollywood's filmmaking dynasty, but when he ventured into directing himself, he discovered that the world of distribution for up-and-coming filmmakers was broken.

The multihyphenate, who

is Francis Ford Coppola's nephew, has acted in movies and has fronted the rock band Rooney since 1999. In recent years, however, Schwartzman has become more ensconced in the family business, directing indie features such as "The Unicorn," "Dreamland" and "The Argument."

"I felt a frustration that certain films were being overlooked in the market, like when you don't get into a film festival, and the movie doesn't make the cut sometimes," Schwartzman tells *Variety*.

Schwartzman co-founded distribution banner Utopia with business partner Cole

## BIG PIVOT

### Indie Pics Shake Sales Strategies

BY MATT DONNELLY

No feature film has it easy in the modern theatrical and digital landscape, but 2022 has been particularly fraught. Warner Bros. is outright shelving pricey titles like "Batgirl." Netflix has gone back to the drawing board thanks to its stock stumble and Amazon is focusing its resources on the almost-billion-dollar rollout of its "Lord of the Rings" TV series.

For fledgling indie movies that come to film markets, like the one currently underway in Toronto, the streamers used to be a safe and lucrative bet for distribution. As these now-legacy companies scramble to cut costs and boost subscriptions to please stockholders, the indie film industrial complex has once again been forced to pivot.

"It feels like we're at the tail end of a wait-and-see period," said John Sloss, founder and CEO of the sales agency Cinetic. "I think there was a reset this summer, and we're all waiting for the fall season to see what the future looks like."

Roeg Sutherland, CAA Media

INDIE CONTINUED P.12

Harper in 2018 to offer a more artist-focused approach for filmmakers, and provide "another home" for acquiring independently produced and financed movies.

The company has so far made a number of big swings on the film festival circuit

UTOPIA CONTINUED P.12

## FAN ENGAGEMENT

# Harrington Brings New Game to Fest



"Baby Ruby" star Kit Harrington wields a fan's phone for a selfie at the film's premiere on Friday at Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto.

## TIFF PLATFORM

## Iran's Haghighi Seeks More With 'Subtraction'

BY ALISSA SIMON

Set to world premiere in TIFF's Platform competition, "Subtraction," from idiosyncratic Iranian helmer-writer Mani Haghighi ("Men at Work," "Modest Reception," "A Dragon Arrives!") is a tense Hitchcockian thriller set in Tehran, where a heavy, non-stop rainfall signals a lingering malaise. There, a young couple come across their doppelgängers.

The idea for the plot came when the helmer came across a picture of a badly wounded soldier that looked just like him.

"As one of the characters says in 'Subtraction,' 'It's not like he looked like me, he was my absolute clone!' I was so confused that I asked others to verify what I was seeing, and everybody was sure it was a picture of me, except that, at the time of the war, I was much younger than the man in the picture, I was just a

10-year-old kid. It was dreadful and completely uncanny, and it was a very familiar kind of dread: it reminded me of how it feels to live in Tehran, where you are constantly coming face-to-face with events that seem completely unreasonable to you, and yet you are supposed to live with them and tolerate them and pretend they are normal."

The plot centers on two actors, each playing two parts. Haghighi cast Taraneh Alidoosti and Navid Mohammadzadeh, two of Iran's biggest stars.

Although all of Haghighi's films take place in Iran, his Iranian-Canadian identity is very important to him. "I went to high school and university in Ontario, I married and divorced there, and some of my closest friends live and work there and I'm in daily contact with them," he says.

Films Boutique has closed sales on the film to France and Benelux. 📍

## SPECIAL PRESENTATIONS

## Lindholm Explains 'Nurse'

BY BRENT LANGE

The "Good Nurse" director Tobias Lindholm wasn't interested in making a why-dunnit.

The Netflix drama, which premieres at Toronto, tells the true story of Charles Cullen, the serial killer who used his position as a nurse to murder up to 40 patients. But the film, which stars Eddie Redmayne and Jessica Chastain, isn't a psychological study.

"I'm not that fascinated with the reasons that Charlie did this," says Lindholm. "I was more interested in why we didn't stop him sooner, because we could have."

Indeed, "The Good Nurse" is as much an indictment of the way that Cullen was able to maneuver through hospital systems, with administrators covering his tracks as a way of skirting liability.

"My work has always been about systems," says Lindholm. "The Good Nurse" became a portrayal of yet another system that is dehumanizing. All over the world we build institutions because they're a way to organize our lives, but they ultimately become so removed from daily life that they forget who they are supposed to serve. And that is fascinating." 📍

## GALA PRESENTATIONS

## Mary Nighy Goes Behind the Camera

BY GREGG GOLDSTEIN

Plenty of us have experienced helicopter parenting, but how many have had their dad's film premiere hovering over their own?

First-time feature director Mary Nighy, for one. On Sept. 11, she'll attend the Toronto Gala world premiere of her psychological thriller "Alice, Darling" just hours after her dad, Bill Nighy's, drama "Living" has its Canadian debut.

"He was joking that I've got the 'cool' time slot — we were laughing about that," she says. "Living" is beautiful, and I'm so proud of his work. He watched

"Alice" and is really excited for me. I think it will be lovely to do this together."

But that's where the synergy ends. Nighy's parentage (her mom is actor Diana Quick) had nothing to do with Lionsgate financing "Alice" at the script stage. Their confidence stemmed from her early shorts, episodes of the U.K. crime dramas "Silent Witness" and "Traces" and the HBO/BBC hit drama "Industry," plus the support of "Alice" star/exec producer Anna Kendrick.

And Nighy shot the story of a nervous woman (Kendrick) whose friends suspect she's in an abusive relationship

in 20 days. "Once we ran to four locations in a day. But there was such trust between [DP] Mike McLaughlin and Anna and I that we found time to shoot scenes which weren't scripted."

Initially Nighy followed in her parents' footsteps, making her screen acting debut as a teen in her dad's 2003 TV movie "The Lost Prince."

After a career change, she met with Elevation Pictures' Christina Piovesan, who introduced her to Babe Nation Films' Katie Bird Nolan and Lindsay Tapscott, and they decided to make Alanna Francis' "Alice" script. 📍



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## STARRING ROLE

# Latif Finds 'Love' on the Big Screen

BY GREGG GOLDSTEIN



Shazad Latif and Lily James star in "What's Love Got to Do With It," which is directed by Shekhar Kapur.

If you've seen the British satire "Toast of London," chances are that voiceover engineer Clem Fandango's name still rings in your ears. Now Shazad Latif, the man behind Fandango, Ash Tyler on "Star Trek: Discovery" and Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde on "Penny Dreadful," has nabbed his first romantic lead in "What's Love Got to Do With It?"

The Shekhar Kapur-helmed acquisition title, which has a

Gala world premiere today in Toronto, "has slightly more depth than a normal rom-com because it tackles arranged marriage," Latif said. Lily James plays his character's childhood friend, and complications ensue when she decides to make a documentary about the nuptials.

"Lily is one of my closest friends," Latif said. "She's like a sister to me." They met when she did a play with his

old roommate, and co-starred in the 2021 BBC miniseries "The Pursuit of Love." "I read ["What's Love"] a while back, then it disappeared, then it suddenly started racing towards being made because Lily wanted to be involved. I keep telling Lily I owe her my whole career now, 'cause she's done a movie with me," he laughed.

This is a pivotal moment for Latif, who'll soon be seen

as Captain Nemo in "Nautilus," the Disney+ series that tells the origin story of the hero from "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea." He's about two-thirds through the 11-month shoot in Australia. "Every day there's a new set being built that's something you never expected. It's a wild, wild job."

Latif's Pakistani immigrant father changed film reels in the cinema, and his English/Scottish mother's obsession with film rubbed off on him. "I remember shoving on the tights in 'Romeo and Juliet' when I was 8," the London native recalled. "I knew it was a way out of my circumstances. My mother was a single parent and we were very, very poor. It gave me a drive, and since I didn't really have other options, it meant that I couldn't fail."

Latif got into the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School about a year before support for low-income students dried up. He left a year early when he got a role in the BBC One spy drama "Spooks" in 2009. "I thought that was gonna be it, but then I kept having to try to break through." In 2015, he had his first big-screen roles in "The Man Who Knew Infinity" and "The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel," then a larger part in the little-seen 2018 ISIS drama "Profile."

After experiencing these ups and downs, "I want to create my own work," he said. "I'm working on four or five writing projects." 📝

## TIFF DOCS

## Hudlin on 'Poitier' and the Actor's Influence

BY ADDIE MORFOOT

In 2018, Network Entertainment founder Derik Murray met with Sidney Poitier to discuss making a documentary about the star's life and career. Over the next two years, Murray established a foundation of trust with Poitier and his family, who all eventually agreed to the film. The result is "Sidney," an Apple TV+ doc that examines the legacy of Poitier, who died earlier this year at 94. Directed by Reginald Hudlin, the doc was produced by Oprah Winfrey.

*Variety* spoke with Murray and Hudlin about Poitier's influence on Hollywood and packing his life story into a 106-minute film. "Sidney" premieres today at TIFF.

● **What made Poitier say yes to this project?** MURRAY: I believe the most important reason that Sidney, (his wife) Joanna and the family said yes to me was the trust we built in our meetings with them, as well as the pedigree of our past work. ... We were also blessed that both Sidney and Joanna had seen our Academy Award-shortlisted film on Muhammad Ali, "Facing Ali," and loved it.

● **Did he or his family have a say in the final cut?** MURRAY: The family did not have a say in the final cut of the film.

● **When were the interviews with Poitier filmed?** HUDLIN: By the time we started production, Mr. Poitier was not available for filming. Fortunately, producer Oprah Winfrey had a wonderful relationship with him and had shot extensive footage of Mr. Poitier telling his life story. It was invaluable, and it formed the spine of the film. 📝

## EXCLUSIVE

## Screen Media Plays Crowe's 'Poker' Game

BY REBECCA RUBIN

Screen Media, a division of Chicken Soup for the Soul Entertainment, has acquired North American rights to "Poker Face," a thriller

starring Russell Crowe and Liam Hemsworth.

Crowe also directed the film, which is scheduled to release in theaters on Nov. 16. It'll land on digital platforms on Nov. 22.

Set in the world of high-stakes betting, "Poker Face" stars Crowe as tech billionaire and gambler Jake Foley, who offers his best friends a chance to win more money

than they've ever dreamed of. But to play, they'll have to give up the one thing they spend their lives trying to keep...their secrets. As the game unfolds, the long-time pals will discover what is really at stake.

Along with Crowe and Hemsworth, the cast includes RZA of Wu-Tang Clan fame and "Fast and Furious" star Elsa Pataky. Stephen M. Coates wrote the screenplay

with Crowe.

Arclight Films handled worldwide rights for the film.

"Poker Face" is produced by Arclight Films' chairman Gary Hamilton and Keith Rodger of Fear of God Films, along with Arclight Films' Ying Ye and Ryan Hamilton. Additional producers include Addam Bramich, Matt Williams and Catchlight Studios' Jeanette Volturno and Jason Clark. 📝

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FACETIME

# Malou Reymann

“Standing there was really emotional.”

BY ALISSA SIMON



Premiering in the TIFF Platform competition, “Unruly,” Danish director-writer Malou Reymann’s sophomore feature, is an affecting drama set in the 1930s about a rebellious teen forced into an institution, the real-life Sprogø Women’s Home.

● **At a time when women’s control of their bodies is under attack, your film carries a special resonance. Is what took place at the Kellersk Institute on Sprogø island widely known in Denmark?** Among young people, very few know about the Sprogø Women’s Home and

the whole historical context. And they are angry that this wasn’t something taught in school. The whole political aspect of the sterilization laws is not something people know about. Denmark was actually the first European country to make eugenic-based sterilization laws, so when Nazi

Germany made their laws they looked to the Danish laws. It all came from trying to control the gene pool of society. And it was developed at the same time as the welfare system, so the concept was that if the state needs to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves, then we need to reduce the number of people who can’t take care of themselves.

● **Everything looks quite historically accurate. What kind of research did you do?**

There’s an amazing book by Birgit Kirkebæk about the Sprogø Women’s Home, where she analyses the journals of the first 18 women admitted to Sprogø. This book was really our bible while Sara Jønsson and I wrote the script. But we also went to the national archives to read letters from the doctor and head mistress and some from the women. We didn’t shoot on the actual island of Sprogø, but I went there a few times. There’s one room that still remains: the “reflection” room. It has scratch marks on the walls and on the door. Standing there was really emotional and it made me feel very connected to all the women who had been there.

● **There are a number of scenes that could leave a young actor feeling vulnerable. Did you use an intimacy coordinator?** I didn’t use an intimacy coordinator for the sex scenes, because I wanted the actors to feel safe with me; I didn’t want the

communication to go through another person. I used to work as an actor and I did some intimate scenes when I was very young, so I know what it is like both to work with directors who take responsibility and directors that don’t. It was important for me to create a work space that felt safe and where I was in charge and where we could talk about what we were doing and rehearse with just the three of us in the room. I think it’s super important for a director to take responsibility for these situations and take it very seriously, but also to somehow embrace the awkwardness of it all.

● **Please talk a little about your lead Emilie Kroyer Koppel.** Emilie is amazing. She’s so young but she understands everything and isn’t afraid of anything. She wants to be a filmmaker and in a way, she is more of a filmmaker than an actress. She absolutely loves filmmaking so everything is exciting to her. She had that energy that I wanted Maren to have, but also the emotional depth to go as deep as the character does.

● **What’s next for you?** I’m working on two new projects. One is a TV series about the prosecutions of witches in Denmark in the 1600s that I’m working on with Danish writer Olga Ravn. The other one is a lighthearted rom-com about a 50-something woman torn between her marriage and a flirtation. 🌀

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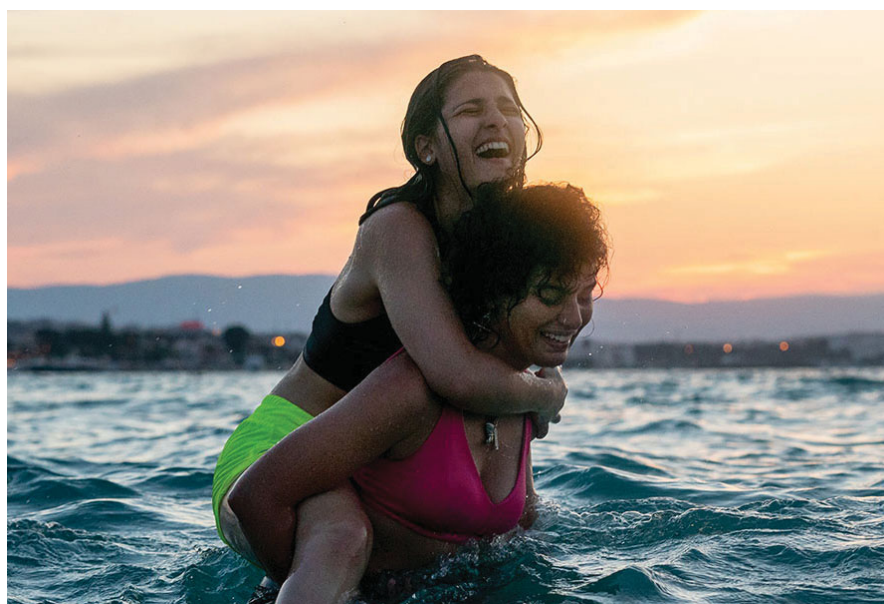
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# REVIEWS

TIFF GALA

## The Swimmers

BY PETER DEBRUGE



At the end of “The Swimmers,” you could be excused for thinking that Syrian refugee Yusra Mardini won an Olympic gold medal. She didn’t. That’s not to detract from everything she and her older sister, Sara, went through to escape the Syrian civil war and reclaim their dreams of competitive swimming. It just means that director Sally El Hosaini and co-writer Jack Thorne didn’t know how else to wrap this inspirational true story, which is ideally suited for one of those 40-minute Oscar-grubbing documentary shorts, in their feel-good Toronto fest opener.

At a bloated 134 minutes, however, your brain may well start to prune, the way fingers do when they spend too much time in water. It’s not enough

that co-leads (and real-life sisters) Nathalie and Manal Issa have great chemistry on-screen, or that the plot packs some of the same oomph as last year’s “Flee.” The gratuitous running time suggests that “The Swimmers” — a human-interest story in sports movie drag — might have been stronger without the trip to the 2016 Rio Olympics, where Yusra placed 41st out of 45 in the 100-meter butterfly.

What El Hosaini shows happening there in the film’s climactic moments is the result of Mardini’s first heat, which qualified her — as one of the inaugural members of the special Refugee Olympic Team — to compete. None of this is anywhere near as engaging as how Yusra, who had

always dreamed of swimming for Syria, wound up on a completely different continent, training with a German coach.

The good news is that most of the movie focuses on that part of her story, starting back on Yusra’s 13th birthday in Damascus, five years before the Olympic Games. It’s March 2011, the same month that the Arab Spring reaches Syria and protests against President Bashar Assad demand a democratic alternative to their ruler, who had assumed control after the death of his dictator dad a decade earlier. On this happy day (which involves frolicking in the local pool), no one in Yusra’s family can believe what’s to come. To stanch the rebellion, Assad takes to attacking his

own people with bombs and chemical weapons.

A few years pass in a flash, and El Hosaini (directing her first feature in the decade since “My Brother the Devil”) picks up at another party, this one at a rooftop nightclub, where Sara (the more dominant sister) and Yusra dance to “Titanium” while Assad’s rockets light up the sky in the background (at least it wasn’t Katy Perry’s “Firework”). The song serves as a kind of anthem for the girls, who will hear it again while swimming alongside a sinking vessel in their Aegean Sea crossing.

Such choices suggest that El Hosaini didn’t trust the material enough to let it move us on its own merits, though she needn’t have resorted to such easy uplift. Stories about refugees are inherently compelling, as decent people are torn from the lives they know and forced to start over, and this one is made all the more effective by its two leading ladies, the French Lebanese Issa sisters. Nathalie, who plays Yusra, is soulful and soft-spoken, still girlish and relatably uncertain in such circumstances, while Manal is the more proactive and protective sibling. Their characters need each other to make the crossing from Syria to Turkey and so on, until they reach Germany.

**CREDITS:** (U.K.) A Netflix release of a Working Title Films production. **Producers:** Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Tim Cole, Ali Jaafar. **Executive producers:** Stephen Daldry, Katherine Pomfret, Tilly Coulson. **Director:** Sally El Hosaini. **Screenplay:** Sally El Hosaini, Jack Thorne. **Camera:** Christopher Ross. **Editor:** Iain Kitching. Reviewed at Toronto Film Festival (Gala Presentations — opener), Sept. 8, 2022. **Running time:** 134 MIN. **With:** Manal Issa, Nathalie Issa, Matthias Schweighöfer, Ahmed Malek, James Krishna Floyd, Kinda Alloush, Ali Suliman. (English, Arabic dialogue)


If this is the first time you’ve seen such a trek, “The Swimmers” will surely sweep you up in each leg of the journey. Using money given by their father, Ezzat (Ali Suliman), the sisters buy passage on an overloaded dinghy, taped together by shady-looking smugglers and put to sea with a malfunctioning motor. Of the passengers on board, Yusra and Sara are practically the only ones who can swim. When the refugees arrive on the island of Lesbos, El Hosaini has DP Christopher Ross pan out to reveal a sea of abandoned life jackets. Thousands have made this trek — and these were just the survivors.

Eventually, the sisters find their way to Berlin. Ross shoots most of this footage handheld, exaggerating the amount of unsteadiness to his framing, lest it seem any less dramatic or believable without the need for motion sickness medication. In Berlin, the pair head to the nearest pool and persuade sympathetic coach Sven (Matthias Schweighöfer) to train them. How can we be sure more interesting material was left off-screen? Just wait for the end credits, when Chyrons reveal what happened next with Sara Mardini. Potentially as exciting as a Paul Greengrass thriller, that feels like the story “The Swimmers” should tell. **T**

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## TIFF DOCS

# The Grab

BY PETER DEBRUGE

You've heard the expression, "There are only nine meals between mankind and anarchy." Well, "The Grab" makes the case that society had best brace itself for disorder, since certain parties are gobbling up the world's food and water resources while the rest of us are distracted by other things. Produced in association with the Center for Investigative Reporting, "Blackfish" director Gabriela Cowperthwaite's astonishing, eye-opening doc hits us with the idea that the next world war won't be fought over ideology, oil or border disputes, but basic resources like meat, wheat and water, none of which should be taken for granted.

Experts call this field "food security," and the entire system is more fragile than it looks. World populations are climbing while water resources are dwindling, which has led countries such as Saudi Arabia and China to seek farmland on other continents. Among its myriad examples, "The Grab" focuses on a 15-square-mile expanse in La Paz, Ariz., an arid locale where there's no limit to the amount of water landowners can pump from the aquifers. Arizona's policy of unrestricted access means Saudi investors can legally tap into the water table to grow fields of hay, which will be shipped home to feed their cattle, even if it means draining the wells of local farmers.

It's the same principle described at the end of "There

Will Be Blood," when a triumphant Daniel Day-Lewis crows, "I drink your milkshake!" Only now, it's H<sub>2</sub>O, not oil, that's at stake. Versions of the same thing are already happening all over the world (not that Americans should pretend for a second that they're not among the culprits of the global resource snatch). A good part of what makes "The Grab" so alarming is the reminder of what's being done to satisfy your own consumer comfort.

For years, the West had a virtual monopoly on this phenomenon: Colonialism has historically been less about taking care of foreign peoples

than about taking control of their resources. And now, other countries are looking for a piece of the proverbial pie. "The Grab" points to the Great Chinese Famine and the Arab Spring as examples of shortfalls that reshaped nations, and suggests that world leaders must anticipate their people's food and water needs if they hope to stay in power.


Want to understand the reason Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine? Look no further than the besieged country's status as supplier of 29% of the global wheat trade. Russia already took a big bite of the country in 2014, to which Ukraine responded by cutting off water to Crimea.

Simply repeating the film's points makes one sound like some kind of conspiracy nut, and yet, the truth is outrageous — like the way Blackwater founder Erik Prince turned his attention to a new venture, Frontier Resources Group. Operating like mercenaries, FRG reps have been gobbling up fields and forests in Zambia, driving poor villagers out of their homes, so their land can be used to feed distant regions.

The big picture here is so elusive and vast that it helps Cowperthwaite to have a few intrepid investigators to follow, letting their research drive the shape of the film (which, when you unpack it, must have been one hell of a task to structure). Her main character is CIR sleuth Nate Halverson, a tenacious journalist who broke enough of these stories that he now understands how they connect.

Halverson explains how looking into the acquisition of Smithfield Foods (a livestock company responsible for one in four American pigs) by a state-funded Chinese company led straight back to President Xi Jinping's national strategy. All these revelations sound sinister, playing on audiences' fears of the other without seriously challenging the degree to which their own governments do the same. It's not fair, but those with money have always been in a position to buy mines, fields and whatever means they need to transport those resources away from where they're harvested. On one hand, all this harvesting is being done in plain sight;

on the other, there's enormous secrecy about how companies (many of them private-looking fronts for government interests, deceptively hidden behind layers of offshore accounts) are going about the actual pillaging — and the public deserves to know. Untangling those arrangements is what Halverson and fellow investigators Mallory Newman and Emma C. Schwartz have been focused on, playing cloak and dagger as the paranoia mounts (as when they disable the camera and internet functions on a computer terminal before accessing "the trove," a massive leak of damning insider data).

"The Grab" unspools like a thriller in one sense and a dystopian science fiction movie in another. The entire situation might be incredibly depressing were it not for a few heroes Halverson identifies along the way, like Brigadier Siachitema, a Zambian human rights lawyer who takes the case of those displaced by FRG. Accountability is the first step, and to that end, "The Grab" doesn't entirely let its audience off the hook. We are what we eat, after all. 



**CREDITS:** (Documentary) An Impact Partners presentation of a Center for Investigative Reporting Studios, Rocklin/Faust production. (**World sales:** WME, Los Angeles.) **Producers:** Nathan Halverson, Amanda Pike, Blye Pagon Faust, Nicole Rocklin, Gabriela Cowperthwaite. **Executive producers:** Dan Cogan, GERALYN White Dreyfous, Jenny Raskin, Maiken Baird, Nina Fialkow, David Fialkow, the Betsy & Jesse Fink Family Foundation, Caldwell Fisher Family Foundation, Doree Friedman, Anil Godhwani, Jan McAdoo, Debbie L. McLeod, Meadow Fund, the Rogovoy Foundation, Christa Scharfenberg, Nancy Stephens, Rick Rosenthal Lessing, Babbie Stern, Jeff Ubben, Laurie Ubben. **Co-executive producers:** Lauren Driscoll, John Driscoll, Lauren Haber, Kelsey Koenig. **Director, writer:** Gabriela Cowperthwaite. **Camera:** Jonathan Ingalls. **Editor:** Davis Coombe. **Music:** Jeff Beal. Reviewed at William Morris Endeavor screening room, Aug. 17, 2022. **Running time:** 104 MIN. **With:** Nathan Halverson, Amanda Pike, Holly Irwin, Edward Hargroves, Brigadier "Brig" Siachitema. (English, Russian, Ukrainian, Lala dialogue)

SPECIAL PRESENTATION/  
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# On the Come Up

BY ANDREW BARKER

There has been no shortage of hip-hop star-is-born narratives hitting screens in recent years, but much like hip-hop itself for most of its history, there hasn't always been a whole lot of space for women. Sanaa Lathan's "On the Come Up," which tracks a teenage girl's complicated rise through the battle rap circuit to the even more complicated heights of viral stardom, provides a welcome exception to this rule, but fortunately it has a lot more going for it than just that. As frank and tough-minded and as it is warm and sweet, "On the Come Up" is a hugely promising debut from the actor-turned-director.

Sixteen-year-old Bri (Jamila C. Gray) is already a talented rapper when we first meet her in her fictitious neighborhood of Garden Heights, and she's already been through a whole lifetime's worth of upheaval. Her father was a legendary local MC named Lawless, who was murdered just as his career was beginning to take off. She spent part of her childhood away from her mother (Lathan) while she battled drug addiction, and though she's now clean, their mother-daughter bond has yet to fully mend. And what's more, as part of the small contingent of Black students at her school, she's forced to deal with unsympathetic administrators and suspicious campus cops, one of whom body-slams her to the ground after he spots her



selling Skittles to a classmate.

Yet there's nothing tragic or self-pitying about Bri, who has some big ambitions of her own to worry about. She wants to follow in her father's footsteps under the rap name Lil Law, and as managed by her boisterous, drug-dealing Aunt Pooh (a tremendous Da'Vine Joy Randolph), she first sets her sights on Garden Heights' cut-throat amateur scene. After a few false starts, her rhymes catch the attention of her father's old manager, a now-wealthy impresario named Supreme (Cliff "Method Man" Smith), who recently scored a major record deal for another neighborhood up-and-comer (Lil Yachty, clearly enjoying himself). Against Aunt Pooh's strongly worded advice, Bri decides to hear him out.

Meanwhile, Bri navigates the remaining horrors of high school with her childhood friend Malik (Michael Cooper Jr.), who is brutally honest about everything except for

the fact that he clearly has a crush on her. And when her mother's precarious employment situation starts to lead to "final notice" utility bills, Bri's rap battle winnings make her the family's temporary breadwinner, introducing yet another uncomfortable dose of tension into their already tenuous relationship.

Adapted from "The Hate U Give" author Angie Thomas' second novel, the screenplay sometimes struggles to keep all of its various threads woven together—Bri's battles with her school district tend to recede from view for long stretches, only to surprise you when they reemerge with force—but Lathan imbues the film with a certain looseness that gives these ebbs and flows the feeling of real life. Subtler moments are given space to breathe, characters are allowed to make mistakes without those mistakes defining their characters, and Lathan's emphasis on the grey shades within the

film's broader conflicts helps elevate the story above its more formulaic elements. As often happens in these sorts of narratives, Bri is eventually forced to choose between careerism and artistic integrity, but even here the film is well attuned to how fine the line can be between selling out and playing the game, and how unpredictable the consequences can be.

But what really ties "On the Come Up" together is Bri, who always feels like a fully-fleshed character even as she braves these familiar narrative hurdles. She's neither an uber-confident force-of-nature, nor a "who, me?" wallflower. At times she's grounded and wise beyond her years, at others she's naïve and even thoughtless. In other words, she's definitely 16 years old, and the film is smart about the ways that precocious talent and age-appropriate immaturity can easily coexist. Newcomer Gray does wonderfully in the

role, keeping the character's prickly edges and underlying vulnerability in delicate balance throughout, while tackling the performance scenes like a pro.

The acting is inspired all around, from Cooper's shy, marble-mouthed charm, to Method Man's surprisingly nuanced take on a music-industry hustler—he may be cynical and untrustworthy, but he lets you see exactly where his cold calculation comes from. And yet Lathan saves one of the film's trickiest roles for herself, bringing both flintiness and sensitivity to a character forced to walk a tightrope between asserting parental authority over her daughter, and winning back her affection. Lathan has assembled an admirable body of work since her breakout in "Love & Basketball," but between her dual roles here and her first Emmy nomination for "Succession," it feels like the industry might recognize her talents. **B**

**CREDITS:** A Paramount+ presentation in association with Paramount Players of a State Street Pictures and Temple Hill production. Produced by George Tillman Jr., Robert Teitel, Wyck Godfrey, Marty Bowen, Isaac Klausner, Angie Thomas, Timothy M. Bourne. **Executive producer:** John Fischer. **Directed by** Sanaa Lathan. **Screenplay:** Kay Oyegun, based on the novel by Angie Thomas. **Camera:** Eric Branco. **Editor:** Steven Rosenblum. **Music:** Daniel Wohl. Reviewed at Paramount Studios, September 6, 2022. (In Toronto International Film Festival.) **MPA rating:** PG-13. **Running time:** 115 MIN. **With:** Jamila C. Gray, Da'Vine Joy Randolph, Sanaa Lathan, Cliff "Method Man" Smith, Lil Yachty, Mike Epps, Miles Gutierrez-Riley, Justin Martin, Titus Makin, Michael Cooper Jr., GaTa, Lady London.

# Continued from P. 1

## UTOPIA CONTINUED FROM P.1

following its breakout success in 2020 with dark comedy "Shiva Baby." At Sundance, it won the U.S. rights to Lena Dunham's buzzy sophomore movie "Sharp Stick." At Cannes, it picked up Iranian crime thriller "Holy Spider," for which Zahra Amir Ebrahimi won the festival's lead actress prize.

"I'm really excited to see us

going to bigger film festivals and being in those conversations," says Schwartzman.

The company has, in a relatively short period of time, carved out a clear identity in the U.S. distribution landscape, where its offbeat tastes and keen eye for non-English-language cinema have put it in the orbit of A24 and Neon. Schwartzman credits colleagues such as head

of acquisitions Danielle DiGiacomo, formerly of the Orchard, and head of sales Marie Zeniter, an ex-Magnolia exec, for helping cultivate the brand and landing some of the splashier deals.

Being an indie distributor in the theatrical market is like "swimming upstream," says Schwartzman. "You have to really fight for your place and for your slot." 🍷



Clement Virgo's "Brother," produced by Conquering Lion's Damon D'Oliveira is among a slate of films by emerging Canadian filmmakers.

## CANADA CONTINUED FROM P.1

D'Oliveira. "We're returning to this era with a polished approach, telling a mature coming-of-age story—which we're dedicating to our immigrant mothers!"

"This is the biggest step up we've taken on the features side," he says. "The industry has been on a bit of a buying spree; we hope that continues."

Like many of her festival peers, Colombian Canadian

director Lina Rodríguez draws on personal emotional truths for her latest feature, "So Much Tenderness" in order to shift the narrative line away from tropes.

"A few years ago, my father-in-law asked why I don't make films in Canada. I hadn't thought about making a film here because I felt in between Canada and Colombia. I started writing [this film] to deal more directly with the

anxiety, uncertainty, and displacement I feel as an immigrant.

"Something You Said Last Night" — about an aspiring writer who reluctantly agrees to join her younger sister and wildly happy parents on a summer resort vacation — is aligned with the adage "make what you want to see," says director Luis De Filippis.

"Content about trans women and their familial relationships is almost non-existent. Stories

that do exist are centered on coming-out narratives or the family coming to accept their child. I wanted to tell a story that simply saw a trans woman as an intrinsic member of her family."

In the spirit of giving back, the director created the Trans Film Mentorship, which took place during production. "[The film] couldn't capture all the realities and experiences of trans people. But by sharing the opportunity, we could ensure other trans creators were gaining skills and work experience so they could one day tell their own stories."

For her debut feature "Until Branches Bend," writer-director Sophie Jarvis was informed by her background as a production designer. "Working in different departments gave me an intimate understanding of what a team needs from the director," says Jarvis. "Artistically, production design made me think more about the world that the characters move through."

Set in B.C.'s bucolic Okanagan region, "Branches" follows a cannery worker who discovers an invasive insect that could threaten the town.

For long-time Toronto fest attendees, you can't get more relatable than "I Like Movies," the debut feature of reformed film critic and Canadian Film Centre Screenwriters Lab alum Chandler Levack. Set in early 2000s suburban Toronto, the coming-of-age comedy follows a charmingly egocentric teenage cinephile who starts a part-time job to pay for NYU film school.

Lawrence, played by newcomer Isaiah Lehtinen, sits in a car with his mom and utters the meme-worthy line "I don't want to be, like, a Canadian filmmaker."

That was then, this is now. "There's been this real sea change of voices that have been allowed to make work that they probably never would get to — and I totally count myself as one of those," says Levack. 🍷

## MADELEINE CONTINUED FROM P.1

proud to work once again with the Cohen Media Group team."

"After 'Come What May' and 'My Son,' it's time for Madeleine to be driven all around the U.S.," Carion added.

The agreement negotiated by Aaronson and Pathé Films' Marie-Laure Montironi, executive VP of international sales. Pathé will release the film in France on Sept. 21. 🍷

## INDIE CONTINUED FROM P.1

Finance co-head, said the market "consistently changes. What we saw in Cannes was the foreign sales market showed up in a huge way. We sold two movies to streamers, otherwise every other movie — close to 25 — was set up with international financing and some equity. There's no lack of money out there. Owning IP is the way to success."

Indeed, the old guard has stepped up in the form of territory sales to help finance incomplete movies as well as bolster finished product. Completed films looking for distribution at TIFF this year include the Venice hit "Other People's Children," "Saint Omer" and "Aristotle & Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe."

"It's so easy to fall into the negativity of what could be. I think the weather in Los Angeles is much more worrisome than what's going on with the indie film market right now," said Sutherland, referring to the heat.

In addition to foreign territory sales, equity financiers are still opening their wallets to help make smaller movies.

Sloss said, however, some are "skittish because that's tied to theatrical" — meaning the ongoing pandemic and threats of recession may hurt movies in cineplexes (mostly ones not made by Marvel).

The eternal silver lining, said CAA Media Finance co-head Benjamin Kramer, is that the right film can be transformative. 🍷

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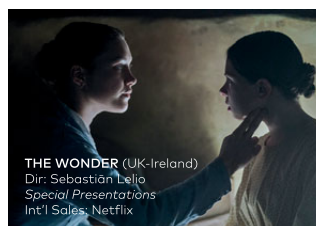
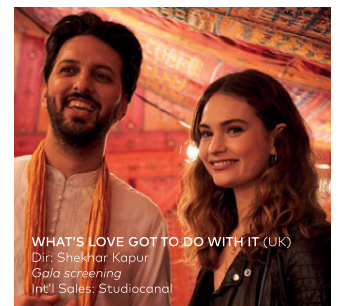
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