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The Year of the Actor at TIFF

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Sep 7, 2014

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By day 3 it's become clear that Toronto 2014 is the year of the actor, male and female. <http://www.pinterest.com/pin/create/button>

“The Clouds of Sils Maria,” the latest from Olivier Assayas – who can claim almost cult status among his fans – is a sumptuous, dark tone poem that is above all a cinematic paean to the mesmerizing screen presence and beauty of Juliette Binoche, now in the triumphant flush of early middle age. It's also about the interweave of art and life. The artistic values of the past versus today fetish for kick-ass superheroine aliens. The struggle to come to terms with aging. The grandeur of the Upper Engadine in Switzzlerand. And Assayas really “gets” women. In “Clouds” he unspools arguably the most layered portrait every committed to screen of the love-hate relationship, complete with power plays and erotic sparks, between two compelling women.

Assayas sets you down in media res on a lurching train headed for the Swiss Alps. As Maria Enders, a veteran stage star, Binoche is also in motion and unstable, juggling a divorce and an upcoming appearance to claim an award for the ailing playwright, based in Sils Maria, who cast her in a plum role at eighteen. And then, suddenly, she must contend with news of his death. Maria's accompanied by her sidedkick/ assistant Val (Kristen Stewart in nerdy glasses that only make her hotter), a trouble shooter who mans several digital devices and fields all the impossible demands on Maria.

Assays conducts a virtual master class in conveying his characters' inner turmoil through moving vehicles -- first a rushing train; later, car rides through snow country in which he captures mottled, fleeting effects by shooting from outside the windows. “Clouds” takes its time about clarifying all the facts and players, as if the viewer were first meeting these women in real life. The movie really finds its feet in the second act when exploring the love, dependence, and underlying friction between Maria and Val. Maria's been offered a part in the play that launched her career, but this

time, to her displeasure, she'll play "the older woman," while a hot new upstart (Chloe Moretz) plays Maria's former role as the girl who seduces her and triggers her suicide.

As Val and Maria run lines – often while hiking through the Alpine landscape – the characters in the play blur into the real life pair, as Maria and Val develop rifts they can't bridge. Forming a mystical backdrop, the clouds of Sils Maria snake through the valley in an eerie boil of fog, nature doing its part to bring the women's crisis to a head.

Much as been made of Kristen Stewart's portrayal of Val, as if people were still amazed she can pull out more than a vampire's gf. Her flat American affect makes the perfect foil for Binoche's emotionally expansive style – yet I've seen Stewart play that kind of cool before. Binoche, as a woman on the edge, goes deeper. Her laugh is almost an encyclopedia of emotions: girlish excitement, desperation, drunkenness, disbelief at life's cruel tricks, occasionally joy. Curiously, it's Binoche's body, her pale fleshiness, that the camera loves, while Stewart comes off as asexual.

As I toggle between one theater and the next, I discover yet another film that raises the bar on the art of screen performance. And I haven't even seen yet the touted turns of Eddie Redmayne as Stephen Hawking in "The Theory of Everything," widely rumored to be Oscar bait. What I did catch was the premiere of "The Drop" directed by the gifted Belgian Michael Roskam. It must be seen for the revelatory turn by Tom Hardy. The Brit thesp goes deep Brooklyn as Bob Saginowski, a bartender caught between the cops and a pod of Chechen gangsters. He works at Cousin Marv's, a neighborhood watering hole that doubles as a drop bar – a place for its Chechen owners to deposit and launder money. When the drop is stolen in a holdup, Marv (the late great James Gandolfini in his final role) and Bob are threatened not only by the Chechens, but also a canny cop with a nose for fishy business.

Bob's life gets further complicated when he rescues an abused puppy from the trash can of a local woman (Noomi Rapace) and becomes drawn into her troubled life. Both Bob and Marv sit on secrets that screenwriter Dennis Lehane dishes up in Act 3 with devilish timing, pulling the rug out from everything we've been led to believe.

At the premiere at the Princess of Wales theater its screenwriter Dennis Lehane came onstage to talk about the art of creating characters who viewers and readers fall in love with. Really, it's a mystery, half the time, even to the writer himself. We fall hard for Bob, partly because – well, who doesn't love a man who awkwardly lavishes tenderness on an abused pit bull puppy, claiming the breed has gotten a bad rap?

Hardy has mastered the Noo Yawk inflection, pulling out a slow-roll delayed reaction thing that echoes Marlon Brando in "On the Waterfront." He nails the character of Bob even down to the deliberate way he moves, sweet and dangerous, under his flannel checked shirt. To watch Hardy and Gandolfini play off each other is cinephile heaven.

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