

FALLEN LEAVES

Monday, February 12, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Carlos Aguilar | Los Angeles Times | Not Rated | 81 mins.

Two middle-aged women, Ansa (Alma Pöysti) and Liisa (Nuppu Koivu), have just been abruptly fired from their supermarket jobs. Walking out with their heads held high, the friends clasp hands for a brief instant while looking warmly at each other. That wordless gesture of solidarity is among the many muted wonders of “Fallen Leaves,” an affirmation of the hope we can find in the company of others, laced with a flesh-and-blood romanticism.

Harnessing Nordic melancholia to laugh at the misery of capitalist malaise, Finnish master Aki Kaurismäki makes movies about people who don’t say much but feel plenty. For decades, he’s tapped into the souls of working-class outcasts, the lonely hearts unwilling to let their unfavorable position in a somber world rob them of an innate right to joy.

The manual labor that many of his characters do is of little importance. They lose jobs and quickly find others to make a living. Work doesn’t define them. It’s their quiet inner vastness that concerns Kaurismäki, which he crystallizes into an unassuming humanism, unmistakably his.

Often his protagonists operate with an enviable matter-of-factness about their feelings. They act on impulse with immediate conviction, unafraid to commit to another person they have just met. That’s perhaps because Kaurismäki conceives these sturdy people to be wiser than most about how rare it is to come across someone with matching wounds.

Such is the case in “Fallen Leaves,” which plays like a spiritual continuation to the director’s so-called Proletariat Trilogy from the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. His newest set of downbeat lovers, Ansa and Holappa (Jussi Vatanen), a welder with a serious alcohol problem, first meet in a crowded bar where karaoke enthusiasts belt out melodramatic pop ballads. Their affinity for each other intensifies in the darkness of a movie theater to the strains of a zombie movie (Jim Jarmusch’s similarly deadpan “The Dead Don’t Die”).

There’s a timelessness that Kaurismäki bestows on his tight but unhurried narratives that adds to the fable-like atmosphere. The modesty of his frames — subdued primary colors, static compositions, purposefully dimmed lighting — brings a slightly heightened mood to his peculiar take on social realism. If it weren’t for brief sightings of modern technology, one could easily assume “Fallen Leaves” came from a bygone era.

Despite cinema’s compassionate illusions, time does move us forward, demanding its pound of flesh. “I won’t live to be that old,” Holappa tells a teasing best bud, Huotari (Janne Hyytiäinen, part of

Kaurismäki’s troupe since 2002’s “The Man Without a Past”). Conscious of the vices that plague him, Holappa’s quip resonates since several actors who starred in Kaurismäki’s early films have met with untimely deaths.

Kaurismäki constantly flirts with despair, only to find pockets of absurdist humor in everyday cruelty. In 1988’s “Ariel,” about an average man who becomes a criminal, a gag about a convertible lands with hysterical timing just moments from a shootout. “Fallen Leaves” contains its share of finely tuned comedy: a security guard’s accusing stare, an off-camera arrest revealed in a sharp edit.

All of this underlying dramatic texture is possible because Kaurismäki uses actors capable of developing salt-of-the-earth types beyond mere simple-minded objects of pity. Pöysti’s inquisitive gaze and faint smile tell us more about Ansa’s strong-willed persona than any speechified backstory could. In Vatanen’s charmingly self-important Holappa, we see a man wholeheartedly disarmed by her qualities. It’s in the unencumbered sincerity of their exchanges, even in silence, that the movie proves they’re better together.

Even Chaplin, Ansa’s pointy-eared pup (continuing the veteran filmmaker’s fondness for enlightening day-to-day existence with pets), gets a moving close-up.

Ansa and Holappa, whose loving essence defies their circumstances, join the many beaten but undefeated people Kaurismäki has envisioned over a prolific career. (They’re his “fallen leaves” from the tree of a lengthy filmography.) The auteur’s humbleness, as well as his proclivity to deploy vibrant music to verbalize what his reserved characters can’t articulate, remain the signatures of his masterful body of work. This time, there’s some bar-band synth pop.

Fiercely political, Kaurismäki famously refused to attend the Academy Awards when “The Man Without a Past” earned Finland its first ever nomination, his absence a protest against the war in Iraq. Global tragedies are never far from mind in his films. Every time Ansa turns on the radio, news of today’s onslaught in Ukraine enters her home. In 1990’s “The Match Factory Girl,” reports on the Tiananmen Square massacre appear daily on TV. More recently, in 2017’s “The Other Side of Hope,” he tackled the refugee crisis.

These invasions of real-world pain serve as a counterpoint to Kaurismäki’s overall strategy, which is to extract gentleness from hardship and, ultimately, demonstrate how much we need one another. The year’s most succinctly perfect film, “Fallen Leaves” aims to do for us what companionship does for its couple: make this treacherous life a bit more bearable.

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Monday, February 26, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Joey Moser | AwardsDaily

The short films categories can elude many fans of the Oscars. Most films do not get a wide, theatrical release, and, for a lot of awards season fans, the titles don't become familiar until the shortlists are announced. Over the next few days, I will be taking a look at Animated Short Film, Live Action Short Film, and Documentary Short Subject to explore the themes and the individual races. Are there clear frontrunners, or should we prepare for a perplexing race?

Live Action Short Film is my favorite of the three categories, especially since the Academy tends to honor stories from all over the world. Death and grief are a prevalent theme through this year's shortlisted films, but never fear! Each one is different than the last one, and it's not a sobfest—there is a lot of joy in these stories. 187 films qualified for this year's award, and there was a change in the voting that should change how this race shakes out, but more on that later. Let's look at the predicted winners!

The After: Misan Harriman's film has not left me since I saw the it back in August during HollyShorts, and I don't want its message to ever leave my psyche. Anchored by a beautiful, vulnerable performance from David Oyelowo, it teaches or reminds us that we can all pick up the pieces, no matter how much has been destroyed.

The Anne Frank Gift Shop: It's alarming that some young people might be unaware of the legacy of Anne Frank, and it's increasingly distressing how many people denounce that the Holocaust ever happened. I don't think I've seen anything quite like Mickey Rapkin's comedy, "The Anne Frank Gift Shop." I've said the title to several friends, and they have chuckled, but then immediately threw their hands over their mouths or looked at me with a sheepish expression. The film poses a simple question: Is Anne Frank having a moment?

Red, White and Blue: I was not ready for the emotion that came from Nazrin Choudhury's "Red, White and Blue," a tightly-directed drama about one mother desperate to cross state lines to receive an abortion. There were numerous films about the hot-button topic that qualified through various film festivals, but Choudhury's film will hit you like a ton of bricks.

The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar: Wes Anderson's Roald Dahl adaptation is a confection unto itself. With a dependable legion of Anderson collaborators (Benedict Cumberbatch, Ben Kingsley, Dev Patel, and more) it is certainly the most star-studded entry on the shortlist. The story (wonderful story, that is) is almost irrelevant, because Anderson makes this sucker move like crazy. Much like how

Asteroid City had a lot of performers enacting stories, Henry Sugar's set pieces move in and out as Cumberbatch and company tell the story of a wealthy bachelor who uses his vast inherited fortune to back his gambling habits.

Yellow: There is a lot of history and political circumstance surrounding the Chadari shop in Elham Ehsas' "Yellow." On the surface, this is a film about one woman's ordinary transaction in a clothing shop, but there is so much going on just beyond the frame.

Who Makes the Cut?

Things are a bit tricky right from the get-go. For the first time, the Academy is allowing everyone to vote in the nomination round when the members of the Short Films and Feature Animation, Directors, Producers and Writers Branches narrowed down the nominations previously. Would Almodóvar's The Human Voice have landed a slot in the final five if voting was determined by everybody a few years ago? Normally, I would've said that Strange Way and Henry Sugar should consider their shortlist mentions as their prize since the Live Action Short category doesn't always cater to big names or big stars.

This year, I would reconsider that with Henry Sugar having the edge. When I attended the In Conversation with... series and Almodóvar's film screened, some people mentioned to me that they were more thrilled by the Q&A than the film itself, despite loving the chemistry between Hawk and Pascal and loving the visuals. Is that the general consensus? If Anderson's film wins the "battle of the super-famous directors," that could mean that Netflix has two films in the race for the first time. Harriman's "The After" is one of the most high-profile shorts of the entire year, so I have a hard time seeing that film miss.

Ehsas' "Yellow" feels perfect for a nomination here. If you follow the Live Action Short Film race every year, there is something about it that feels like it will resonate with voters. There is a running, not-so-serious-joke-but-kind-of-serious-joke that sometimes voters will vote based just on the title? If we apply that to this first round (a lot of people say that in reference to selecting a winner), people might vote for "Red, White and Blue" when they see it on the ballot. That's not to be reductive—they will also vote for it, because of Choudhury's construction and emotional wallop of a story.

With Live Action Short Film particularly, the Academy likes a good story, so it will be interesting to see how the group as a whole selects their five with such a strong list. Will multiple films about death make it in? Will they gravitate to humor?

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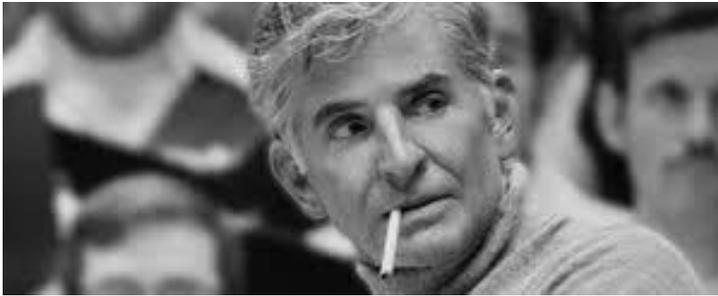
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MAESTRO

Monday, March 4, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Ann Hornaday | The Washington Post | Rated R | 129 Mins.

When Bradley Cooper made yet another iteration of “A Star Is Born” in 2018, more than a few skeptics smelled a dilettante — a typical pretty-boy actor with clichéd, “ultimately I want to direct” aspirations. Cooper dispelled those reservations immediately in that movie, with an exciting, utterly authentic set piece at a rock concert, in which he not only believably played a burned-out star, but staged and sequenced the scene with urgency and grit.



With “Maestro,” Cooper gets things going with similar electric verve, proving not only that he’s no dilettante, but he’s no one-hit wonder, either. In this lively, sometimes deliriously scattershot biopic about the conductor Leonard Bernstein, Cooper doesn’t educate the audience by way of a dutiful Wiki-ography as much as tell us what he thinks matters most about Bernstein’s life: in this case, his relationship with his wife, Felicia, the bisexuality he largely hid, his compulsive curiosity about people and the ecstatic bursts of creativity that sustained him. Viewers hoping to enjoy a visual index of Lenny’s greatest hits might need to manage their expectations, although there are wonderful recreations of some of his most beloved performances. Instead, “Maestro” is a movie of moments, all of which accrue into a vivid, if incomplete, whole.

All of those values come to bear on “Maestro’s” exquisite opening chapter, a balletic, kaleidoscopic representation of Bernstein’s meteoric rise, which started in 1943, when he was called at the last minute to conduct the New York Philharmonic after Bruno Walter fell ill. Deftly moving Bernstein — played by Cooper with an uncanny physical resemblance to his subject — from the bed he shares with clarinetist David Oppenheim (Matt Bomer) to the aisles of Carnegie Hall, Cooper does a dazzling job of compressing time and space, not only economizing on narrative fat, but capturing the headlong zeal with which Bernstein savored art, ambition and life.

Cooper, working with cinematographer Matthew Libatique to signal time periods with shifting frames and moving from black-and-white to color, evinces similar skill in later scenes, when Bernstein meets the actress Felicia Montealegre (Carey Mulligan) and the two embark on an epic affair. The contradictions of a gay man falling in genuine love with a woman — while retaining his attraction to men — are captured in a lovely passage using Bernstein’s score for the ballet “Fancy Free” (which would morph into the Broadway musical “On the Town”), turning the dance into a metaphorical pas de deux. (Or is it trois?)

These are the grace notes that make “Maestro” not just prose, but poetry; if some audiences might miss the more workmanlike details of

Bernstein’s career, they would be missing what turns out to be a piece of exhilarating, inspired visual storytelling as well as a profound portrait of a marriage. Lenny is the free-spirited, wildly charismatic star of his and Felicia’s lives, but it’s Felicia who grounds him, and the movie: Mulligan’s portrayal of this paragon of cosmopolitan elegance is restrained, tasteful, and quietly crackling with repressed anger and confusion. When tensions in their relationship reach their apotheosis, Cooper stages the showdown in their bedroom at the Dakota apartment building while the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade tootles by outside. Just as Felicia is hurling the most hurtful, damaging things she can say — warning her husband that if he isn’t careful, he’ll end up “a lonely old queen” — a giant inflatable Snoopy floats by the window, a sad, whimsically surreal rebuke.

“Maestro,” which Cooper co-wrote with Josh Singer, is full of such vivid moments, many of them featuring a superlative cast of supporting players: Sarah Silverman plays Bernstein’s matter-of-fact sister, Shirley, with snappy mid-century flair; Maya Hawke plays Bernstein’s eldest daughter, Jamie, with wary sensitivity; Bomer, whose character, like Bernstein, winds up getting married, infuses his brief scenes with impressive pathos. (Another great scene: when Bernstein bumps into Oppenheim and his wife and baby in Central Park and happily tells the infant, “I slept with both your parents!”)

Although Cooper doesn’t depict Bernstein as a tortured soul (he’s far too self-involved for that), he’s attuned to the costs of reconciling the truth of one’s deepest desires with the equally powerful pull of love, loyalty and trust. Is Felicia an avatar of classic denial or wifely duty? Neither. She’s trying to accept the man she loves for who he is, while trying to make it all fit into society’s most oppressive and pointless expectations. “Maestro” doesn’t have a happy ending — how could it? — but its honesty and tenderness are inescapable.

Happily for music fans, there are riches to be found in “Maestro” beyond its drama of the heart, chiefly an astonishing reenactment of Bernstein conducting Mahler’s Symphony No. 2 (“Resurrection”) with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1973. It’s a stirring moment — muscular, lyrical, theatrical and subtle all at the same time. It’s also one more fractal within a movie that bursts with moments of clarity about a man who, despite Cooper’s all-in performance, somehow remains an enigma. That’s probably as it should be. “Maestro” isn’t a Great Man tale — if anything, it’s an ode to a Great Woman. Instead, it’s something deeper, messier and more unresolved. It’s a love story as unruly, passionate and expansive as the flawed and fascinating people at its center. Bravi.



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FALLEN LEAVES

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Monday, February 12 at 7:30 pm

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Monday, February 26 at 7:30 pm



MAESTRO

"An absolute marvel. One of the finest films of the year."

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Monday, March 4 at 7:30 pm