



The Main Feature

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Empire of Light

UK 2023

119 mins Cert 15

Director	Sam Mendes
Screenplay	Sam Mendes
Cinematographer	Roger Deakins
Original music	Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross
Production design	Mark Tildesley

Cast

Olivia Coleman	Hilary
Micheal Ward	Stephen
Colin Firth	Donald Ellis
Toby Jones	Norman
Tom Brooke	Neil
Tanya Moodie	Delia
Hannah Onslow	Janine
Crystal Clarke	Ruby
Monica Dolan	Rosemary Bates



Empire of Light is the latest film from the English director Sam Mendes. First screened in December 2022, a date chosen, some thought, in the hope of influencing the upcoming Oscars. The ploy, if that is what it was, failed. The nearest the film got to the Oscars was the deserved nomination of Roger Deakins for Best Cinematographer. No surprise to Mendes I imagine. He was awarded the Best Director Oscar for *American Beauty* in 1999, was Oscar nominated for *1917* in 2017 and has a number of other major films to his credit. He would have known that *Empire of Light*, the first of his films for which he wrote the script, is not in that category. It is a rather intimate, touching study of relationships in a small group of people who work together in running a local cinema. The cast does not rely on any major filmic names; the film is very evocative of the year - 1980 - in which it is set and the whole thing is lit up by the wonderful playing of the central character.

She is the no longer very young duty manager of the slightly faded old style cinema in an unnamed South coast town. The staff are a harmonious bunch united in their poor view of the general manager and the way he takes advantage of the duty manager. She is a needy, lonely



soul who strikes up a relationship with a new member of staff, a handsome West Indian considerably younger than herself, a relationship which she knows cannot last. Hilary, the duty manager, is portrayed by Olivia Coleman, whose subtle virtuosity takes us convincingly through the many mood swings of her character. Her apparent age even seems to change before our eyes. The other members of the cast, the best-known being Colin Firth, are

uniformly excellent, this being especially true of Micheal Ward, who plays the young West Indian. It is simply that less is required of them.

There were critics who thought that Mendes, having touched on the subjects of racism and mental illness, should have taken those issues further. I feel they mistook the nature of the film, which would have been altered had Mendes done what they suggested.

The film was originally to have been set on the South coast but was switched to Margate on the North Kent coast when Mendes found there an abandoned cinema eminently suited for transformation to the set he had in mind for his film. Indeed, the newly created Empire, complete with curtains that open and close before the screen, is almost the second star of the

film. The period in which the film is set is evoked by the invasion of the town by a horde of motor scooterists (the Mods) while the National Front are getting into their nasty stride; and the NHS, to judge from the almost empty local hospital, is well funded in a way today's equivalent can only dream of. For myself, the film had an extra charm in the memories brought back by the scenes of the sandy beach and the esplanade and



glimpses of the Dreamland Amusement Park so familiar from many holidays I spent there as a small boy in the 1930's. The film seems to me to have all the qualities needed to make it enjoyable even to those with no previous acquaintance with Margate. I hope I am right.

John Dance



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Club website: www.wncc.org.uk. Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to reactions@wncc.org.uk by Wednesday 20 March 2024
Discs of previous shows are available to hire for a modest fee.

César Awards 2024



The 2024 César awards ceremony took place on 24 February. The main winner was *Anatomy of a Fall* which won best film, best director (Justine Triet), best actress (Sandra Hüller), best supporting actor (Swann Arlaud), best original screenplay and best editing.

Anatomy of a Fall is a courtroom drama mystery in which woman is suspected of murder after her husband's death at their Alpine chalet,

and their partially sighted son faces a moral dilemma as the main witness. It was described by the Guardian as a psycho-thriller characterised by a 'bracing and chilly highmindedness'. The Guardian concluded: 'It's a lowkey, almost downbeat drama, but with something invigoratingly cerebral.'

The other big winner was *The Animal Kingdom* (*Le règne animal*), a fantasy adventure between a father (Romain Duris – the club has shown two of the films he starred in: *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* and *Molière*) and his son, in a world where some humans have started mutating into other animal species. It won in the technical categories of best cinematography, best sound, best music, best costume design and best visual effects. Described by Little White Lies as 'a highly original sci-fi film that serves as an empathetic parable for real life intolerance of physical and neurological otherness', the film shows how those humans who have started mutating into animals have been summarily locked up in recovery centres designed to reverse their transformations.



There were honorary Césars for the actor and director Agnès Jaoui, and for Christopher Nolan.

The award ceremony was dominated by an address from Judith Godrèche who announced on French radio in December 2023 she was groomed and raped as a teenager by an acclaimed director. She urged the French film industry to break its omertà on sexual abuse. According to a report in the Guardian¹, 'The #MeToo movement that began in 2017 when Hollywood director Harvey Weinstein was accused – and later convicted – of sexual abuse and rape has made slow progress in France. Women coming forward with stories of sexual abuse from the past, including rape, have often faced a pushback. In December, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, defended the actor Gérard Depardieu, who faces multiple allegations of sexual assault and one of rape, suggesting he was the victim of what amounted to a "witch-hunt". Depardieu has denied the allegations. Godrèche has accused directors Benoît Jacquot and Jacques Doillon, the former partner of the late singer and actor Jane Birkin, of rape and sexual assault when she was a teenager.'

Michael Hipkins

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/23/actor-judith-godrèche-urges-french-film-industry-to-face-up-to-sexual-abuse>

Comments and reactions to: **Vagabond**

No of reaction slips received = 25

Average score = 5.88

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	2	3	7	4	6	1	~	2

Excellent - real art house stuff. An excellent choice *Gritty and upsetting demise of a homeless*
I had low expectations but [they] were not met ***Unusual theme – good camera. Bit pointless overall***
Well-acted. Music very strident but was very atmospheric. Sandrine Bonnaire was excellent
Wonderful shots of France, but such a sad story ***Dismal! I prefer uplifting films***
Very well acted by the lead character. A sad story *Not my type of film – left at the break*
Profoundly depressing but remarkable in its commentary ***Very disjointed – strange film***
Interesting concept which worked well although the girl didn't really help herself
A remarkable and upsetting portrait of a thoroughly unsympathetic and enigmatic character. Strong
on showing people's reactions to someone who rejects conventional society and is hard to help
The main character, Mona, was completely convincing, a great piece of acting & direction.
Not my tasse du thé - and very difficult to feel sympathy for such an unlikeable anti-heroine who seems
determined to spurn every chance/kindness that comes her way. Flashback style reminded me of An
Inspector Calls but just didn't work here. ***Too grim a film for me***

Position	Film	Average score
1	Where the Crawdads Sing	7.83
2	Living	7.62
3=	Mrs Harris Goes to Paris	7.58
3=	Downton Abbey – A New Era	7.58
5	The Lost King	7.38
6	Dog Day Afternoon	7.15
7	The Banshees of Inisherin	7.06
8	Rams	6.40
9	Three Colours: Blue	6.18
10	Vagabond	5.88
11	Decision to Leave	4.59

Forthcoming attraction: 28 March 2024 – **Parallel Mothers (Madres paralelas)**



Two women, Janis (Penélope Cruz) and Ana (Milena Smit), coincide in a hospital room where they are going to give birth. Both are single and became pregnant by accident. Janis, middle-aged, doesn't regret it and she is exultant. The other, Ana, an adolescent, is scared, repentant and traumatized. Janis tries to encourage her while they move like sleepwalkers along the hospital corridors. The few words they exchange in these hours will create a very close link between the two, which by chance develops and complicates, and changes their lives in a decisive way. Imdb

Most of all, it's Cruz who sets the tone, with a performance that radiates warmth and is refreshingly forgiving of her character's flaws. She has never been better. Observer