

VIFF



2015

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***This** year's line-up for the Vancouver International Film Festival provided a rich selection to choose from in relation to our topic of stardom. Upon tabbing through the program, I was overwhelmed by the number of films featuring stars from the distant past such as the short film *Charlie* (Werner, Willard-Stepan, Fox 2015), that gave fresh insight to the famed silent film star, Charlie Chaplin, alongside the highly anticipated feature-length documentary *Ingrid Bergman: In Her Own Words* (Björkman 2015) detailing the stars' biography. Their stories retold and refashioned decades later proves stardom has a lasting effect and box-office draw on an international scale. In addition to the iconic stars reappearing, newcomers like the young Jacob Tremblay who played Jack in *Room* (Abrahamson 2015) and Saoirse Ronan in *Brooklyn* (Crowley 2015) entered into what the fictitious starlet Lina Lamont in *Singin' in the Rain* (Donen & Kelly 1952) describes as "the celestial firmament," where their fresh performances are nothing short of memorable. Of course, the range of material to review might have covered any one of the films featuring a seasoned veteran of the screen or an up-and-coming starlet from each of the 70 countries represented, but I was faced with the unfortunate task of narrowing my choices down to a handful of films. The following group of films featured performances steeped in star quality.*



The Lobster

The Lobster (Lanthimos, 2015) follows a middle-aged man, David (Colin Farrell), who checks into a hotel with a quirky requirement: to find love within the next 45 days or live the remainder of your life as an animal. David chooses a lobster because of the duration of their life, fertility, and also because he “like(s) the sea very much,” which is where the film receives its title. Through a satirical series of events, his character navigates the complications of new relationships (both romantic and platonic) and attempts to avoid the fate of this idyllic society that frowns upon and strives to omit singleness. Guests of the hotel are encouraged to hunt a secluded group of “loners” in the woods in order to extend their stay by a single day. The film takes a humorous turn when David escapes the hotel and joins the loners, only to find their rules and regulations are just as difficult to follow. Their sole purpose is survival and solitude. And, unlike the hotel, love is strictly forbidden. Naturally, David takes interest in a loner, played adeptly by Rachel Weisz, and the narrative confronts the obstacles of their survival for the remainder of the film.

Throughout the screening of *The Lobster*, I was reminded of the themes present in Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) that call into question the societal pressures placed upon individuals to find “true” romance. The dry, dark humour paired with the bland (and oftentimes dingy) colour palette proficiently depicted the uninteresting aspects of a culture caught up in regulating something as colourful and spontaneous as the concept of love. Though Joaquin Phoenix’s moustache in *Her* may have surpassed Farrell’s facial hair, I was deeply impressed with his performance as it is reminiscent of his excellence in the 2008 cult film *In Bruges*. For this role, Farrell appears to have gained weight and lost his iconic temper, but the comedic delivery and timing prove his undeniable talent and star quality. In addition to Farrell’s performance, the actress portraying “Nosebleed Woman,” Jessica Barden, stole the spotlight in several early scenes. I anticipate her star to rise into mainstream films in coming years. *The Lobster* won Prix du Jury at Cannes Film Festival in 2015 and was included in the VIFF Repeats series due to its popularity, which is, no doubt, due in part to its remarkable casting.

Into the Forest

Canadian filmmaker Patricia Rozema adds another captivating film featuring strong female leads to her filmography with *Into the Forest* (2015). Two sisters, Nell (Ellen Page) and Eva (Evan Rachel Wood) live with their father (Callum Keith Rennie) on the edge of the woods. After their house loses electricity, they

venture into town to retrieve goods and gasoline but soon discover the situation has become dire. Without electricity or access to technology, their family learns the necessary means for survival in an apocalyptic environment. At first, it seems they are merely inconvenienced; Nell is unable to use her stereo to practice dancing and Eva cannot utilize a computer system to study for school. The untimely death of their father in a woodcutting accident places the circumstances into perspective and the sisters learn to lean on one another for both strength and sanity when intimate relationships and intruders attempt to tear them apart. At the climax of the film, the sisters solidify their inherent need for one another as they abandon their home, with Nell's newborn baby in tow, and set out into the forest.



With Ellen Page's personal life constantly in the headlines, her role in this film certainly adds to the star quality of the film, overall. However, I found myself thoroughly impressed with Evan Rachel Wood. Her performance was nuanced and more powerful than I had ever seen in her career thus far. She handled a violent rape scene in a single take—according to Rozema in an interview at TIFF—along with a scene depicting childbirth in the span of one film with an emotionality that held the attention of the entire audience at the International Village, even when the temptation to look away was nearly unbearable. It is not my intention to spoil the film or its plot twists (and, truthfully, the atmosphere created by Rozema is more important than the narrative details), but I must commend Wood for her artistic vision and talent. Page, too, delivered a strong performance, but their chemistry together made this film unforgettable.

The Falling

As a mysterious and ethereal coming-of-age film, *The Falling* (Morely, 2015) addresses the pangs of loss, change, and emotional misunderstandings of youth. Set in 1960s Britain, two friends Lydia (Maisie Williams) and Abby (Florence Pugh) share a remarkable closeness and delight in rebellion. From the beginning of the narrative, however, it is apparent Abby's health is failing and she collapses at school and passes away. Her death instigates a wave of fainting spells, beginning with Lydia, and the rest of the students (and even a select few members of the school staff) follow in suit. The fainting spells have no medical grounding and the audience remains unaware of their validity: are the girls fainting in protest? Are they hysterical or simply immature? Nevertheless, the film addresses emotional complexities of moving beyond the illusions of childhood and through the threshold of puberty that inevitably blurs the lines of reality.



Without the talented starlet, Maisie Williams (*Game of Thrones*) at the fore of this feature, the film would not hold the same level of accomplishment. The fractured narrative structure paired with the unusual editing style (and breathtaking cinematography) require an actress capable of carrying the audience's attention to the final scenes and Williams does this skillfully. Her attention to the subtle nuances of emotion in her body language contribute to the enigmatic storyline; from the rigidity in her shoulders due to frustration with her mother, whose personality is lifeless, to the repeated rubbery fainting, Williams conveys a deep understanding of her character and the diegetic world in which she belongs.



Eadweard

A must-see for fanatics of film history, *Eadweard* (*Rideout*, 2015) tells the triumphs and downfalls of a genius obsessed with capturing motion. This psychological drama set in the 19th century details the life of Eadweard Muybridge, who is most often associated with photographing a horse at full gallop to settle an old bet. Deemed the “godfather of cinema,” Muybridge worked persistently on a number of subjects: nude men and women, the physically disabled, and animals. The film also focuses on his unusual personality, the conflicts of his marriage, and family life. At the film's unusual conclusion, Muybridge murders his wife's lover and undergoes a trial whereby he is the last American to receive acquittal for justifiable homicide.

Anyone familiar with Vancouver and the surrounding area will appreciate the staggeringly beautiful cinematography of its landscapes and locations disguised cleverly within this story world. Additionally, Saskatchewan native Michael Eklund made his mark at VIFF this year for his roles in *Into the Forest* (Stan) and *Eadweard*. The diversity in both performances reveal his technical proficiency as an actor, but I am inclined to believe his leading role as Muybridge in *Eadweard* places his talents at star status. Since there is no documentation of Muybridge's tics or speech inflections, it was clear Eklund dove into understanding the all-consuming and obsessive aspects of his personality to give an accurate portrayal of the perplexing man.