

First-Class Festival

[Andrew Young](#) and [Emily Taylor](#) report on this year's London Film Festival

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KiKi Layne as Tish and Stephan James as Fonny star in Barry Jenkins' *IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK*, an Annapurna Pictures release.

This October, for the 62nd time, the BFI London Film Festival rolled around once more. As can be expected from a festival of such great variety and scope, laughs, tears and adoration followed. This year's festival programmers lined up new works from directing big-hitters such as Luca Guadagnino, alongside smaller, less-known talents.

Some small trends can be found amongst this year's films. Case in point: the family. The perils of trying to maintain happy, healthy relationships in testing circumstances were explored more than once this year. Among these was Ben Wheatley's latest, *Happy New Year, Colin Burstead*, set at a New Year's party-gone-wrong. It is magnificent work from Wheatley, who marshals a strong ensemble cast and uses handheld camera work to unsettle his viewer, ultimately crafting a viciously funny film with a sharp emotional edge.

The family is explored in a less explosive, shouty way in Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*. It is one of the best films from this year's festival, detailing the breakdown of a middle-class Mexican family and the society around it, as viewed through the eyes of quiet, observant maid Cleo. *Roma* starts slowly, allowing the audience to emotionally invest in its characters before Cuarón releases the big emotional blows. One particular sequence involving a protest turned violent is a masterclass in compelling, emotionally rich filmmaking. It is also worth mentioning that Cuarón served as his own cinematographer and that *Roma* is possibly one of the most beautiful films you will ever see. It's slated for a Netflix release, but please, please try to see *Roma* on the big screen.

Felix Van Groeningen's *Beautiful Boy* shows a strong father-son bond, but is primarily a film about addiction. Based on the memoirs of David Sheff and his former meth-addicted son Nic; this is an engaging tale that does not quite hit the heights it promises. Timothée Chalamet is fantastic as Nic, struggling to find a way to cope with his mental illness that is not merely drug abuse. Whilst it is a perfectly good film, *Beautiful Boy* doesn't add an awful lot to the conversation and isn't as shocking as it intended, leaving some audiences underwhelmed.

Another fascinating true story (do we have another trend here?) at this year's festival is sort-of biopic: *The Old Man and the Gun*. David Lowery's film is largely notable for giving Robert Redford his final acting role. This is a top-quality, wonderfully paced piece of storytelling about the later years of a remarkably polite, genial bank robber. The film's main flaw is the lack of development in its supporting characters, but this is the result of a keen focus on the magnificent Redford. Outrageously charismatic and suitably melancholic when needed, he bows out in fitting style.



Sissy Spacek and Robert Redford in the film *THE OLD MAN & THE GUN*. Photo by Eric Zachanowich © 2018 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation All Rights Reserved

Few biopics deserve to exist more than *A Private War*, that details the life of war correspondent Marie Colvin, who was killed in Syria in 2012. Rosamund Pike carries the film with an electrifying performance as Colvin, embodying her strength and conviction, but also the havoc her job wreaked on her mental health. Though it's a smart and sensitive portrayal of the horrors of war, it never shocks quite as you might expect. The documentary *Under the Wire*, about the same story, captures an intensity in the way this film unfortunately falls slightly short of doing.

Away from the many "true stories" on show was the return of Barry Jenkins. After the phenomenal *Moonlight*, all eyes were on his next film and, fortunately for all, *If Beale Street Could Talk* certainly delivers. Set in '70s Harlem, it follows the pregnant Tish attempting to prove her imprisoned fiancée's innocence. Kiki Layne gives a career-making performance in the lead role. *Beale Street* captures the tragic beauty that permeated *Moonlight*, but overall the two are very different movies. Crucially, Jenkins' new film is hilarious, as well as sweet and romantic, in a way that only goes to heighten the underlying tragedy, because first and foremost this is a film about love in all its forms.

Since *The Hunger Games* was a huge success, young adult fiction has been an attractive proposal for film studios, but recent results have been mixed to say the least. Now it's come full circle with Amandla Stenberg, who starred as Rue in *The Hunger Games*, taking the lead in *The Hate U Give*: a YA adaption that shows there is still life in the genre. It has many of the beats of a typical coming-of-age drama whilst

tackling incredibly pressing issues of institutional racism and police brutality – issues that this film treats with an intelligence and respect that most adult films lack. It's a film that can appeal to a wide audience and with such a ferocious message – it deserves to be heard by as many as possible.

Another interesting take on genre is the latest from Joel and Ethan Coen. The brothers have always loved their episodic storytelling, so an anthology film seems like a logical next step, which is exactly what *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* delivers. That being said, you might wish that you'd just seen a feature film of the titular Buster Scruggs – the all-singing, all-dancing cowboy psychopath. The stories vary in tone, but a sense of dark comedy runs through the whole film: from the jarring juxtaposition of the Coens' obvious love of Westerns to the senseless brutality of the real Wild West. The characters of these many stories may take different journeys, but there is usually bloodshed at the end of them.

Continuing the rich vein of comedy in London was *Benjamin*. If you ever wanted to watch a Woody Allen film but felt bad because it's, you know, a Woody Allen film, then fortunately Simon Amstell's new work provides a solution. *Benjamin* is thankfully better than Allen's recent work. Colin Morgan is hilarious in the leading role, an awkward man trying to find love in the big city. It's funny, touching and utterly relatable. Despite being fairly self-referential, it never feels self-indulgent, but rather, just an honest exploration of love. Like *If Beale Street Could Talk*, it searches for real truth without giving into a sense of grim despair. This one may not get a wide release but it's worth keeping a look out for.

The decision to split the programme into genre strands is a nice one, but this year was full of genre-crossing films. *Roma* is a heavy film, but has moments of real humour. The same could be said of many of the 2018 crop of films. If there is one thing to take from this year's LFF, it is to find humour amongst the pain.



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