

New York film critics name 'Drive My Car' best film of 2021

NEW YORK, Dec 4, (AP) — The New York Film Critics Circle on Friday named "Drive My Car," Ryusuke Hamaguchi's intimate three-hour epic and Haruki Murakami's short story adaptation, the best film of the year.

Hamaguchi's film, about a widowed actor played by Hidetoshi Nishijima, has been widely hailed since its debut earlier in the year at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won for best screenplay. "Drive My Car," which recently opened in limited theatrical release, is Japan's submission to the Academy Awards. It's only the second time in the last four decades that the critics' top honor went to a non-English-language film. (The other was Alfonso Cuarón's "Roma" three years ago.)

Jane Campion's Montana gothic drama "The Power of the Dog" led all films with three awards. Campion took best director, Benedict Cumberbatch won best actor and best supporting actor went to Kodi Smit-McPhee.

The New York critics, as it typically does, otherwise spread its honors around. Best actress went to Lady Gaga for her performance as Patrizia Reggiani in Ridley Scott's "House of Gucci." Kathryn Hunter won for her ghostly witch in Joel Coen's upcoming Shakespeare adaptation "The Tragedy of Macbeth." Paul Thomas Anderson took best screenplay for his coming-of-age comedy "Licorice Pizza."

Michael Rianda's robot apocalypse-family road trip comedy

"The Mitchells vs. the Machines" won best animated film. Best cinematography went to Janusz Kaminski for Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story" revival. Maggie Gyllenhaal's Elena Ferrante adaptation "The Lost Daughter" took best first film. Best documentary went to Jonas Poher Rasmussen's animated refugee tale "Flee." And Joachim Trier's "The Worst Person in the World," a chronicle of youth and love in Oslo, Norway, won for best foreign language film.

The group also announced several special awards: Maya Cade, for creating the Black Film Archive, a catalogue of Black films from 1915 to 1979 that are available online; the late Diane Weyermann, a film executive who helped produce social-issue documentaries like "An Inconvenient Truth" and "Citizenfour"; and Marshall Fine, the film critic and general manager of the NYFCC.

The New York Film Critics Circle, founded in 1935, will hand out its 89th awards during a ceremony on Jan. 10. Last year, the group picked Kelly Reichardt's "First Cow" as its best film. The year before that, it selected Martin Scorsese's "The Irishman."

Also:

NEW YORK: Paul Thomas Anderson's "Licorice Pizza" has been named the best film of the year by the National Board of Review.

Anderson also won best director honors and the film's stars Ala-

na Haim and Cooper Hoffman were picked for their breakthrough performances in the coming-of-age comedy. The National Board of Review is an organization comprised of film enthusiasts, academics and film professionals that dates back to 1909.

Both Will Smith (best actor) and Aunjanue Ellis (best supporting actress) won for their performances in the Richard Williams drama "King Richard." The title of best actress went to newcomer Rachel Zegler for her performance in Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story."

Other picks included Ciarán Hinds as best supporting actor for "Belfast"; Asghar Farhadi for the script to "A Hero"; and best adapted screenplay to Joel Coen for "The Tragedy of Macbeth," which was also chosen for Bruno Delbonnel's cinematography.

Disney's "Encanto" took best animated feature; "A Hero" won for best foreign language film; Questlove's "Summer of Soul (... Or When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)" took best documentary honors; and Jaymes Samuel's "The Harder They Fall" won for best ensemble. A freedom of expression honor will go to the animated refugee documentary "Flee."

The awards will be handed out in a gala dinner on Jan. 11, with Willie Geist hosting. Last year, the National Board of Review chose Spike Lee's "Da 5 Bloods" as the best film of 2020.

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This image released by Neon shows a scene from the film 'Flee.' (AP)

Film

Animation vividly captures Rasmussen's friend's journey

An Afghan refugee's tale in 'Flee'

By Jake Coyle

Jonas Poher Rasmussen was 15 when a boy his same age arrived alone in his small Danish town.

"He arrived all by himself and stayed with a family just around the corner from where I lived," says Rasmussen. "We met at the bus stop every morning going to high school and we became very good friends. Even then I was curious how he and why he had gotten to the village, but he didn't want to talk about it."

It would be a long time before Rasmussen's friend was prepared to tell his story to him, or anyone else. About 15 years ago, Rasmussen, who by then was in radio, asked about making an audio documentary of his story. He wasn't ready. But eight years ago, when Rasmussen was in a program that paired documentary filmmakers with animators, he asked again. This time, his friend was finally ready to talk about his family fleeing war-torn Kabul, Afghanistan, in the 1980s.

"What you see in the film, what you hear in the film, is the first time he's shared the story," says Rasmussen. "It's really difficult for him to talk about."

"Flee," which opened in select theaters Friday and expands in coming weeks, uses animation to vividly capture Rasmussen's friend's story. Speaking anonymously under the name Amin, he relates to Rasmussen a five-year odyssey that stretches from Afghanistan to the Soviet Union to Scandinavia. It's a documentary that gives vivid shape to Amin's life and to the harrowing plight of migrants. And it's a film about sharing a secret — a past that Amin doesn't want to be defined by (in present day, he's a successful academic in a loving relationship with his fiancé Jasper) but that he feels reluctantly compelled to share. It's a testimony.

In pairing a painful true tale with colorful ani-

mation, "Flee" follows in the recent tradition of films like Israeli filmmaker Ari Folman's "Waltz With Bashir" and "Tower," about a 1966 campus shooting, to intimately render a kind of story usually only filtered through blunter mediums like journalism and traditional documentary. And it's made "Flee" one of the most acclaimed films of the year. After first premiering at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won best documentary, "Flee" has picked up honors from the Gotham Awards, the New York Film Critics Circle and the National Board of Review. It's Denmark's submission to the Academy Awards, where it will potentially vie for best animated film, best documentary and best international film.

Rasmussen originally set out to make a 20 minute short. But what began hesitantly as a small project of therapy has grown into a global arthouse sensation.

Evocative

"I'm certain Amin didn't expect to share it with this many people," Rasmussen said smiling, in an interview during a recent trip to New York. "I didn't either."

Rasmussen, 40, was learning the movie's hybrid craft as he went, with animation director Kenneth Ladekjaer. The animation includes scenes of him and Amin talking. It's filled with moments where Amin, often lying down with his eyes closed, slows to summon the courage to psychologically retrace his steps. While the animation can be dazzlingly evocative, to Rasmussen, it's most significant in how it helps you listen, without distraction, to Amin's experience.

"We're exposed to so many stories in the news and in our feeds of people struggling. You have to block things out because if you didn't, you'd lay in bed all day. But because you have the animation in between, it kind of frees you up to listen to what's

actually being said and you take it in more," says Rasmussen. "There's something about hearing a real voice, a real human voice, with animation on top. Maybe it also has to do with animation being something you're used to as a child."

"Flee" also took on larger significance. When a wave of migrants from Syria and other countries came to Europe in 2015, a crisis seized Europe. Denmark sometimes took a hard line with refugees and tightened immigration policies. Earlier this year, it became the first European country to revoke asylum status for some Syrian refugees, telling them Syria was safe enough to return to now.

"I started out wanting to do a story about my friend," says Rasmussen. "Then the refugee crisis hit in Denmark and Europe in 2015. I felt the need to give refugees a human face."

Still, that face — Amin — remains only a general cartoon. Amin is happy to preserve his anonymity, Rasmussen says, even while he's gratified by the film and how it's resonated for others. Amin, the director says, can't this way go about his life and have control over when he talks about his past.

But "Flee" has wide echoes beyond the individual story it tells. For Rasmussen, it taps into a profound and universal human experience, including that of his own ancestors. His grandmother's family, Russian-Jewish refugees, took much of the same route taken by Amin's family.

"They fled from Russia through the Baltic Sea to Denmark, where she was born in a hotel. Then they applied for asylum, but they got rejected. They moved on to Germany. My grandmother grew up in Berlin. In school, she had to stand up with a yellow star on her chest, and then she had to flee again," says Rasmussen. "This is something that can happen to anyone, anywhere around the world." (AP)

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif.: A 29-year-old man has been arrested in the death of philanthropist Jacqueline Avant, who was fatally shot this week at the Beverly Hills home she shared with her husband, legendary music executive Clarence Avant, police said Thursday.

Aariel Maynor is currently on parole and was taken into custody early Wednesday by Los Angeles police at a separate residence after a burglary there, Beverly Hills Police Chief Mark Stainbrook said.

Police recovered an AR-15 rifle at that home that was believed to have been used in the shooting of Jacqueline Avant. Maynor accidentally shot himself in the foot with the gun, police said, and is being treated before he can be booked into jail.

Authorities do not believe there are any other suspects in the Avant case, and Stainbrook said there are no outstanding threats to public safety.

Police have not yet determined Maynor's motive or whether he targeted the Avant home or it was a random attack. It was not immediately known if he had an attorney.

Maynor has previous felony convictions for assault, robbery and grand theft.

Police were called to the Avants' home early Wednesday after a 2:23 am call reporting a shooting. Officers found Jacqueline Avant, 81, with a gunshot wound. She was taken to the hospital but did not survive.

Clarence Avant and a security guard at their home were not hurt during the shooting.

Surveillance camera footage showed the suspect's vehicle driving east out of Beverly Hills after the shooting, police said. (AP)

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark.: A computer used by Josh Duggar at work contained child pornography behind a partition that allowed the user to circumvent an application that monitors internet use, and metadata indicates the images were downloaded when the former reality TV star was working, computer forensics experts testified.

Duggar, 33, is charged with receiving and possessing pornography and faces up to 20 years in prison on each count if convicted.

His federal trial began this week in northwest Arkansas.

Defense attorneys for Duggar have argued that someone else downloaded onto the work computer, noting that nothing was found on Duggar's phone or laptop.

But federal prosecutors have detailed logs showing, minute by



Duggar



Avant

minute, the activity on Duggar's computer that alternated between him sending personal messages, downloading and saving pictures of notes.

On Thursday, Justice Department computer expert James Fottrell testified that a Linux open-source operating system and a browser capable of encryption

were installed behind a partition on the used-car dealership's desktop computer.

The partition essentially split the computer's hard drive into a public-facing side that was business-related and included the tracking program, and a secret second side that used Linux and the browser, experts said.

On Friday, Fottrell provided details obtained from a backup of Duggar's iPhone, made on a MacBook Pro laptop, that placed the phone at the car lot on the exact dates and times that the illegal material was downloaded, accessed and shared on the dealership's desktop computer, KNWA-TV in Fayetteville reported. (AP)