

Air of excitement is missing from Cannes lineup

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Mother Nature has not been kind to the 63rd Festival de Cannes, and it remains to be seen whether or not the films will follow suit.

Gloom and rain have overtaken this proverbially sunny city; that cloud of Icelandic ash continues to wreak havoc with travel plans (no names, please) and Cannes' celebrated beach restaurants, which stockpile champagne by the carload, have barely recovered from damage done by a major storm last week.

The festival begins Wednesday night with the Cannes equivalent of a sure thing, Ridley Scott's "Robin Hood" starring Russell Crowe and Cate Blanchett. But although the rest of the program is hard to fault film by film, the selection overall does not have a palpable air of excitement about it.

This lassitude has extended to the French film magazines, which feel the lack of star power so acutely that they've gone to their default positions and given their covers to either director Tim Burton, this year's jury president, or mega-producer Luc Besson, the French equivalent of Jerry Bruckheimer.

And although the festival's prime billboard space, the front of the Carlton Hotel, is chockablock with ads for forthcoming 3-D movies, including Jack Black, of all people, for "Gulliver's Travels," it was less exciting than a temporary exhibit down the street put up by the French Foreign Legion. The legion is in town promoting its new line of Esprit de Corps wines (I'm not making this up) and handing out recruiting brochures that tout the advantages of "Seeing life differently."

Aside from Burton, Americans have little to do with the main event, as only one U.S. film, Doug Liman's "Fair Game," which stars Naomi Watts and Sean Penn as the CIA-involved Valerie Plame and Joe Wilson, is in the official competition. Still, Americans have their uses as window dressing, and films such as Woody Allen's London-set "You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger" and the Oliver Stone/Michael Douglas "Wall Street" sequel, accurately subtitled "Money Never Sleeps," will be showing out of competition.

For those who look closely, other American films can be found scattered through Cannes' various sections. Critics' Week has its first U.S. film in years, David Robert Mitchell's surprisingly gentle teen pic "The Myth of the American Sleepover," Un Certain Regard has Lodge Kerrigan's Grace Slick-inspired "Rebecca H." as well as the Sundance-screened "Blue Valentine," while the U.S. films in Directors' Fortnight include a pair of top documentaries showing as special screenings.

"Boxing Gym" is exceptional documentarian Frederick Wiseman's 39th film, and it focuses, like many of his others, on a particular institution, in this case Lord's Gym in Austin, Texas. Also an institution, but of a very different kind, are the Rolling Stones, the subject of Stephen Kijack's potent "Stones in Exile."

Focusing, as the title indicates, on the turbulent backdrop to the recording of their 1972 "Exile on Main Street," initially done at the Villa Nellcote in nearby Villefranche-sur-Mer, "Stones" expertly blends new interviews with previously unseen footage from the band's capacious vaults to provide a window not only into that album but into the entire Rolling Stones experience as well.

As has been the case in recent years, this Cannes looks to be especially strong in documentaries. Some, such as Lucy Walker's Sundance hit "Countdown to Zero," have played elsewhere, but most are new. They include "Inside Job," an examination of the financial crisis by "No End in Sight's" Charles Ferguson, and a trio of movie-related items: "Cameraman: The Life and Work of Jack Cardiff"; "Toscan," a tribute to legendary French producer Daniel Toscan du Plantier; and "Hollywood Don't Surf," a look at a half-century of Hollywood surf movies.

On the dramatic side of Cannes this year, it is once more into the breach by a group of canny veterans such as Japan's Takeshi Kitano ("Outrage") and Russia's Nikita Mikhalkov ("Burnt by the Sun 2"). The late addition of a new film by Ken Loach (the Iraq-themed "Route Irish") makes a strong U.K. presence (including Mike Leigh's "Another Year" and Stephen

Frears' "Tamara Drewe") even stronger.

Stronger still is the showing by French filmmakers. In the mix this year will be new work by Jean-Luc Godard (whose "Socialism" will also go out via video on demand), Bertrand Tavernier ("The Princess of Montpensier"), Olivier Assayas (his portrait of the terrorist "Carlos" runs to 5 1/2 hours), plus "Outside the Law" by "Day's of Glory's" Rachid Bouchareb. Even Iran's Abbas Kiarostami is using France's Juliette Binoche to star in his "Certified Copy."

Increasing a strength of the festival is the Cannes Classics sidebar, devoted to bringing back the greats of the past. Among this year's most awaited items are a restoration of Luchino Visconti's rare 3-hour, 5-minute "The Leopard," a never-before-seen version of Jean Renoir's "Boudu Saved From Drowning," and a print of Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho" that has been enhanced by HD surround sound. Only the brave need apply.

Also not for the faint of heart is Le Marche, the international marketplace where the emphasis is not on what will impress but what will sell. Here you can find "Occam's Razor," perhaps the first thriller to be named after a medieval philosophical concept, "Spider in 3D" ("8 Legs, 3 Dimensions, 1 Disaster"), at least two zombie films ("Zombie Women of Satan" and "Zombies of Mass Destruction") and some films that are almost beyond categorization.

What can one say, finally, about "Hollow Chocolate Bunnies of the Apocalypse" or "Nude Nuns With Big Guns." Even the French Foreign Legion is starting to sound appealing.