

Blacklisted in the US, Woody Allen, Roman Polanski receive standing ovations at Venice Film Festival

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In what was clearly meant as a declaration of solidarity with filmmakers Woody Allen, Roman Polanski and Luc Besson and a firm rebuff to the #MeToo campaign, which has relentlessly persecuted the trio, critics and the public at this year's Venice Film Festival gave all three standing ovations on the occasion of the respective showings of their new films.

With their films effectively blocked from distribution in the US by the pressure of the #MeToo witch-hunt, both Allen and Polanski are currently blacklisted as thoroughly as the victims of the McCarthyite "Red Scare" in the 1940s and 1950s. There are no protests against this shameful state of affairs in the cowardly, intimidated US media generally or the film industry press in particular.

On Monday Allen, now 87, was cheered by admirers as he walked the festival's red carpet and was greeted with a lengthy ovation before and after the screening of his new film *Coup de chance* (*Stroke of Luck*). Visibly moved by the reaction, Allen left the Lido cinema, thereby cutting short what would have undoubtedly been even longer applause. The cheering crowd vastly outnumbered a group of around 15 who, in a side show on the red carpet, bared their chests to protest against what they claimed was the presence of "rapists" at the festival.

Disgracefully, Allen has been driven out of the American film industry, on the basis of decades-old claims, which were thoroughly investigated and found to be without the slightest merit. *Coup de chance* is Allen's first French-language film.

Owen Gleiberman in *Variety* commented that in "recent years, the drama of Allen's career has all been offscreen, related to the refusal of companies to

distribute his movies in the U.S., all due to the accusations of sexual abuse made against him by his daughter, Dylan. He has not had a film released in America since *Wonder Wheel*, in 2017."

The limit of Gleiberman's protest against this shameful business is to ask mildly whether *Coup de chance* should "be released in America? As a culture, I wouldn't be too surprised if we found ourselves debating whether the time has come to give Woody Allen, as a filmmaker, another coup de chance." Hardly a "militant" stance, but probably one that will nonetheless bring wrath down upon the critic's head.

The world premiere of Roman Polanski's film *The Palace*, a drama set on New Year's Eve 1999 in a luxurious Swiss hotel, received a three-minute ovation from the audience at its screening. French director Besson's new film *Dogman* was also applauded after its showing at the festival.

In regard to Polanski's work, Reuters cites the comment of the film's producer Luca Barbareschi that "he had sold distribution rights across continental Europe, but not in France, Britain or the United States, despite the fact well-known actors from all three countries appeared in the film." The 90-year-old Polanski's last film, *J'accuse* [*An Officer and a Spy*], a major work about the Dreyfus Affair, has never been seen in the US, Britain, Australia or New Zealand.

Predictably, the Venice event was preceded by a host of articles in the media referring to the "controversial" choice by the festival and its artistic director Alberto Barbera to include films by the three directors.

In a principled reply to such critics, Barbera told the *Guardian*: "I'm not a judge who is asked to make a judgment about the bad behaviour of someone. I'm a

film critic, my job is judging the quality of his films.” (Another article in the *Guardian* on Friday about Allen’s situation referred to the “fog of accusation that won’t lift.” It won’t “lift” as long as publications like the *Guardian* continue to keep alive discredited and reckless allegations.)

Referring to Polanski, Barbera noted that three years previously the director had won the Grand Jury Prize for *J’accuse*. Barbera commented to *Deadline*: “Why would we have any doubt about inviting his new one if his last one just a few years ago did so well? ... We’re stuck in this useless situation that doesn’t make any sense from my point of view. Roman has admitted his behaviour and accepted it was wrong. The victim has forgiven him multiple times. Why do we need to continue to attack an 89-year-old master of cinema?” Barbera added that no one on his entire team, including its female members, objected to Polanski’s inclusion in the festival.

Regarding Allen and Besson, Barbera rejected the main argument put forward by #MeToo that the claims and opinions of alleged victims should outweigh all considerations of democratic process and declared: “For which reason should we ban a film from [either of them] when they’re not guilty in the face of justice? Why should we be more strict against them? We need to have faith in the justice system.” He added that Allen had “been completely absolved” of any criminal offence, and he found the continuing hostility against the veteran director “absolutely incomprehensible.”

Barbera also noted that Besson had been cleared of all charges, adding that “We’re discussing things that don’t exist. As a festival, my position is that we need to make a distinction between the behaviour of the artist and the art itself. Otherwise we need to reevaluate art throughout all of history.”

Polanski continues to suffer from the attacks and sanctions. Based on an extradition treaty agreed between Italy and the US, the acclaimed filmmaker could not attend the festival, fearing if he did so he could be shipped off to the US in regard to events that happened nearly a half-century ago. Polanski is effectively barred from travelling to any country which has an extradition agreement with the US.

In addition, a recent documentary film by Mateusz Kudla and Anna Kokoszka-Romer, *Polanski, Horowitz. Hometown* (2021), dealing in part with Polanski’s

experiences as a child at the hands of the Nazis in the Jewish ghetto of Krakow, has only had a limited release in France and internationally. According to the individual in charge of the film’s distribution, Michèle Halberstadt, cinema operators have told her they were not prepared to include the film in their programmes due to the climate of hostility against Polanski.

Polanski’s mother was deported from the Krakow ghetto to the Auschwitz concentration camp, where she was murdered in 1943. Roman Polanski was 10 at that time. His father was imprisoned in the Mauthausen concentration camp but managed to escape death.

As a result of the unrelenting campaign by the #MeToo crowd, cinema-goers are being deprived of the right to see important films by some of the world’s leading directors.

The applause and the positive reaction to the three directors in Venice indicate that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the privileged middle class layers behind the #MeToo movement to maintain their campaign of slanders and misrepresentations. A series of court cases against prominent actors and cultural personalities accused of sexual abuse have collapsed ignominiously, most notably the cases against Johnny Depp and Kevin Spacey.

At the same time, masses of actors, writers and filmmakers confront existential issues in terms of their working conditions and incomes, a circumstance that has also served to push the #MeToo campaign into the background. Significantly, the Venice festival commenced with a boycott of the red carpet by a number of leading actors and filmmakers who expressed their full support for the demands raised by striking actors and writers in the US.



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