

DIOP MAKES HISTORY AS FIRST BLACK WOMAN TO WIN BIG AT CANNES

The first black woman director ever to compete for the top prize at Cannes in its 72-year history took its second prize Grand Prix Saturday for her haunting ghost story about African migrants. Mati Diop, 36, grew up in France and belongs to a Senegalese artistic dynasty that includes her uncle, acclaimed director Djibril Diop Mambety, and her father, musician Wasis Diop. She told AFP after the red-carpet premiere of "Atlantics" that it was while she was making a short film in Senegal a decade ago that she began to wrestle with the tragic push-and-pull factors leading Africans to flee the continent. "I was spending time in Dakar at the time and was struck by the complex and sensitive realities of the phenomenon we called at the time 'illegal emigration'," she said.

"Once I had finished my (short) film, I felt I still had a lot of dimensions and issues to explore. I had the desire and the idea to tell the story of youth disappearing into the sea, through the perspective of a young woman." She chose a Romeo and Juliet story of star-crossed young lovers, but with a supernatural twist. Critics adored her poetic approach, with the BBC calling the film "dreamy yet sensual, fantastical yet rooted in uncomfortable facts. Diop's beguiling film may even have reinvented a genre." The heroine of the film is Ada, growing up in a poor district of Dakar.

Although her parents have arranged her marriage to a wealthy young man, Ada has already fallen in love with Souleiman, a builder who's been cheated out of his salary by a corrupt developer. He and a group of fellow workers decide their only future lies in Europe and set off in a



French actress and film director Mati Diop poses during a photocall with her trophy after she won the Grand Prix for her film "Atlantics (Atlantique)". — AFP photos



French actress and film director Mati Diop (right) poses on stage with US actor Sylvester Stallone after she was awarded with the Grand Prix for her film "Atlantics (Atlantique)".

motorized boat known as a pirogue for the Atlantic.

African trailblazer

News of the boat's sinking and the death of its passengers reaches home but Ada can't quite believe Souleiman is gone. Suddenly her friends start seeing him everywhere around town and Ada receives mysterious text messages on her mobile, while more and more people come down with an inexplicable fever. Their affliction, which also leads victims' irises to turn white, turns out to be a visitation of

the souls of the dead, with Souleiman entering the body of a policeman. The supernatural tale of love beyond death, which garnered strong reviews, drew comparisons to "Personal Shopper", the arthouse hit starring Kristen Stewart, and even the 1990 blockbuster "Ghost".

But the migrant crisis, in which nearly 2,300 people died trying to reach the shores of European countries last year according to the UN, adds political heft and moral urgency to the film. Diop said that while the weight of the tragic situation was difficult to bear, she seized on the

'Black people in the room'

Just four of the 21 directors who had been vying for the Palme d'Or were women. She said she had had an "urgent need" to feel more represented on screen and see more people who look like her behind the camera, telling fresh stories. "As a black woman I really missed black figures and black characters cruelly. And that's also why I made this film: I needed to see black people on screen-huge, everywhere," she laughed. "It's also something new. I can't believe when I go to see a Jordan Peele movie... I can't even believe what I'm feeling," she said, referring to the Oscar-winning African-American film-maker behind "Get Out" and "Us".

"I'm so excited, I'm looking at how many black people are in the room-I almost count them... it's a little hysterical." Diop said Cannes as the world's biggest film festival had the power to help transform the industry by knocking down barriers for previously excluded groups. "Hopefully it will be more and more common that black people are in front of characters of the same color. Inshallah (God willing)," she said.—AFP



Spanish actor Antonio Banderas poses during a photocall with his trophy after he won the Best Actor Prize for his part in "Dolor Y Gloria (Pain and Glory)".

Who's who on the Cannes film festival jury

After a female-majority jury last year when the festival was dominated by the #MeToo movement, five men and four women decided this year's winner of Cannes' top Palme d'Or prize on Saturday.

Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu

He may now have five Oscars under his belt for the likes of "Birdman" and "The Revenant", but it all began for the Mexican director at Cannes way back in 2000 with "Amores Perros". A regular on the Croisette since that staggering debut-although he has never picked up the Palme — this year he returns as the head of the jury.

Now 55, Inarritu is one of the "three amigos" of Mexican auteurs with Alfonso Cuaron of "Roma" fame and Guillermo del Toro ("The Shape of Water") who have been lording it over arthouse cinema lately. Like them, he is a director with a strong social conscience, bringing a virtual reality installation on the migrant crisis to Cannes in 2017 that went on to win a special Oscar.

Elle Fanning

At 21 the American actress may be the baby of the jury, but the sometime model has a long career behind her. She made her Cannes debut at just eight in Inarritu's "Babel", six years after making her screen debut as a toddler in the Oscar-nominated "I Am Sam" alongside Sean Penn and her older sister, Dakota Fanning.

A regular for Cannes favorite Sofia Coppola, appearing in "Somewhere" and "The Beguiled" in 2017, she turned up on the Riviera again the following year in Nicolas Winding Refn's "The Neon Demon" as a teenage model whose beauty sparks not just jealousy among her peers but a veritable bloodbath. Despite her status as a screen and catwalk queen, the young star has been spotted queuing up with the hoi-polloi for an ice cream at Cannes when not on red carpet duty.

Maimouna N'Diaye

Best known to millions of children as the voice of the mother of the heroic little boy from the animated classic "Kirikou and the Sorceress", N'Diaye is one of west Africa's biggest stars. A documentary maker and activist as well as actress, she grew up in Guinea, but her parents hail from Senegal and Nigeria. She has also spent large parts of her life working in neighboring Ivory Coast and in Burkina Faso after studying in France.

She first came to notice in Georgian Otar Iosseliani's "Chasing Butterflies" in 1992 and won the African Academy best actress award in 2015 for "Eye of the Storm", where she played a lawyer defending a former child soldier on war crimes charges.

Kelly Reichardt

The queen of US indie "slow cinema" made a big critical splash-ever so quietly-with her last film, "Certain Women", a restrained but heartfelt portrait of women in small-town Montana with Michelle Williams, Laura Dern and Kristen Stewart. It won the top prize at the London film festival with The Guardian's Peter Bradshaw marveling at how even an opening hostage drama never ruffled its quiet force.

"It's directed so calmly it feels as if we're watching a mild disagreement at a church coffee morning," he wrote. Williams was also the lead in Reichardt's first film at

Cannes, "Wendy and Lucy", which was also widely acclaimed, and her next movies, "Meek's Cutoff" and "Night Moves" were both premiered at the rival Venice film festival. Many had predicted that her latest film, "First Cow", might make the Cannes' line-up this year, but it is still in post-production.

Yorgos Lanthimos

The Greek director who scored a huge hit this year with his Oscar-winning "The Favorite", scored his first big international success with "Dogtooth" at Cannes in 2009. He was back to win the jury prize in 2015 with another original off-kilter look at the world in "The Lobster", his first film with Rachel Weisz and Colin Farrell.

He teamed the Irish actor with Nicole Kidman in his even freakier "The Killing of a Sacred Deer", which also made its bow at the festival, where he explored family and

and which made a star of actress Joanna Kulig.

Alice Rohrwacher

The great female hope of Italian arthouse cinema won best screenplay at Cannes last year for "Happy as Lazzaro" having won the grand prix (second prize) three years earlier for "The Wonders" starring her sister Alba Rohrwacher and Monica Bellucci. The 36-year-old philosophy graduate made her Cannes debut in 2011 with "Heavenly Body" about a teenage girl going through a religious crisis.

Robin Campillo

The writer of the Oscar-nominated "The Class", which also won the Palme d'Or in 2008, created something of a sensation at the festival two years ago with "120 BPM (Beats per Minute)", his sweeping portrayal of AIDS



French director and screenwriter Celine Sciamma poses with her trophy during a photocall after she won the Best Screenplay prize for the film 'Portrait Of A Lady On Fire (Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu)'.



Palestinian film director and actor Elia Suleiman poses during a photocall after he won the Special Jury Prize for his film "It Must Be Heaven".



Guatemalan director Cesar Diaz poses during a photocall with his trophy after he won the Camera d'Or for his film 'Our Mothers (Nuestra Madres)'.



Mexican director and President of the Jury of the Cannes Film Festival Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu (Bottom left) speaks on stage during the closing ceremony of the 72nd edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France. — AFP photos

power relationships with an unforgettable twist.

Pawel Pawlikowski

The passionate Polish director, who won best director last year for his black-and-white love story "Cold War" which went on to get three Oscar nominations, made his name with a string of brilliant documentaries for the BBC about post-Soviet Russia and the war in the former Yugoslavia. He switched to fiction in 2001 with the acclaimed "Last Resort" which he followed up with "My Summer of Love".

He made his dark masterpiece "Ida" after moving back from Britain to his native Poland. His story of a nun who discovers she was born Jewish during World War II won him the best foreign language film Oscar but the wrath of some conservative Catholics at home. But few-even hardened hearts-could resist the romantic force of "Cold War", which was based on his own parent's stormy relationship,

activism during the darkest years of the crisis in Paris.

It was a huge hit and France and proved a big international break-out for the screenwriter, who came to directing rather late. Campillo, 56, also wrote and directed "Les Revenants" which was later turned into an acclaimed television series, "The Returned".

Enki Bilal

The Belgrade-born author of futuristic and apocalyptic graphic novels is something of a legend in his adopted home of France, where his books are often instant best-sellers. At 67, he has also directed three feature films including "Bunker Palace Hotel" (1989) with Jean-Louis Trintignant and Carole Bouquet and "Tykko Moon" (1996). — AFP



(From left) Polish director and member of the jury of the Cannes Film Festival Pawel Pawlikowski, US actress and member of the jury of the Cannes Film Festival Elle Fanning, Mexican director and President of the Jury of the Cannes Film Festival Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, Burkinabe director and member of the jury of the Cannes Film Festival Maimouna N'Diaye, Greek director and member of the jury of the Cannes Film Festival Yorgos Lanthimos, US director and member of the jury of the Cannes Film Festival Kelly Reichardt, French director and member of the jury of the Cannes Film Festival Robin Campillo, Italian director and member of the jury of the Cannes Film Festival Alice Rohrwacher and French director and member of the jury of the Cannes Film Festival Enki Bilal pose as they arrive for the screening of the film 'The Specials (Hors Normes)' at the 72nd edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France.