

All CCS and Cross-sectoral Festivals Audiovisual - Film, TV & Radio Organisations and initiatives Italy News

Danish drama of shame and survival wins Venice's Golden Lion

May el-Toukhy's postwar drama Woman Unknown took the festival's top prize on Saturday night, in a year that also saw a documentary about Israel's systematic killing of civilians in Gaza divide critics and win a jury award

Woman Unknown, a chilly psychological drama set amid the score-settling that followed Denmark's liberation from Nazi occupation, won the Golden Lion for best film at the 83rd Venice International Film Festival on Saturday night. It beat a field that included a three-hour Korean drama of class and desire, a black comedy starring John Malkovich as an ageing CIA assassin, and a bombshell documentary alleging that Israel's military used artificial intelligence to select civilian targets in Gaza.

The prizes were decided by an international jury chaired by the American actress and director Maggie Gyllenhaal, whose fellow judges included the Tunisian film-maker Kaouther Ben Hania, the British composer Daniel Blumberg, the French director Xavier Giannoli, the Afghan-born director Shahrbanoo Sadat, the Italian academic Francesco Casetti and the Hong Kong film-maker Johnnie To. The jury viewed 21 films in the main competition over ten days before announcing its verdicts at Saturday's ceremony, hosted by the actress Greta Scarano and the actor Nicolas Maupas. The festival, directed by Alberto Barbera, ran from September 2 to 12 on the Venice Lido.

Woman Unknown is the third feature by the Danish-Egyptian director May el-Toukhy, whose previous film Queen of Hearts (2019) was remade in France as Last Summer. It was the only film in this year's competition directed solely by a woman.

The winners

Golden Lion for Best Film: Woman Unknown (Kvinde Ukendt),

directed by May el-Toukhy (Denmark, Sweden, Latvia)

Silver Lion – Grand Jury Prize: Possible Love, directed by Lee Chang-dong (South Korea)

Silver Lion for Best Director: Ilya Khrzhanovsky, for DAU (Germany, France, Sweden)

Special Jury Prize: NAZA, directed by Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor

Award for Best Screenplay: Stéphane Brizé, Coralie Amédéo and Olivier Gorce, for A Good Little Soldier (Un bon petit soldat), directed by Brizé (France)

Volpi Cup for Best Actress: Mathilde Arcel, in Woman Unknown

Volpi Cup for Best Actor: John Malkovich, in Wild Horse Nine, directed by Martin McDonagh (UK, US, Chile)

Elsewhere, the Marcello Mastroianni award for a promising young performer went to Malou Khebizi for A Place to Heal, and the Lion of the Future for best debut feature was awarded to Auguste Bernard Kouemo Yanghu's House of the Wind. Honorary Golden Lions for lifetime achievement, announced before the competition results, went to George Clooney and Ellen Burstyn.



Woman Unknown: a Cinderella story with teeth

Set in Copenhagen in the summer of 1945, days after liberation, the film follows Marie (Mathilde Arcel), a maid and nanny about to marry Christian (Carsten Bjørnlund), the wealthy, widowed glove manufacturer she has served for years. Her rise from servant to lady of the house is jeopardised when a man from her past, Karl (Thorbjørn Hedegaard), resurfaces and threatens to

expose her wartime relationship with a German soldier — at a moment when Danish society, in its first anarchic weeks of freedom, is publicly shaming and shearing the hair of women suspected of having "fraternised" with the occupiers. The film is a co-production between Denmark, Sweden and Latvia.

Possible Love: Lee Chang-dong's first film in eight years

Lee's return to the screen after 2018's Burning follows two married couples on opposite sides of South Korea's wealth divide. Mi-ok (Jeon Do-yeon), a factory worker, and her husband Ho-seok (Sul Kyung-gu), a welder still reeling two years after being laid off amid a strike, meet Ye-ji (Cho Yeo-jeong), a documentary film-maker chronicling displaced workers, and her wealthy husband Sang-woo (Zo In-sung). As the two couples grow close, the friendship exposes both the exploitation built into Ye-ji's project and the buried desires it stirs up. Lee has said the story was inspired by mass lay-offs at a real South Korean conglomerate. The nearly three-hour film has been selected as South Korea's submission for best international feature at the next Academy Awards. After screenings at the Toronto and New York festivals, it opens in select cinemas on October 23 before streaming on Netflix from November 6.

NAZA: a bombshell documentary and an angry rebuttal

The festival's only documentary in competition, NAZA is built from interviews with 24 Israeli soldiers and intelligence officers, filmed anonymously and at night on rooftops in Tel Aviv, in which they describe the surveillance and AI-assisted targeting systems used to select strikes in Gaza and the toll of civilian deaths that resulted. The directors, Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor — two of the four film-makers behind the Oscar-winning No Other Land — say the interviews were gathered in secret over three years, with subjects' voices and appearances digitally altered. The title refers to a Hebrew military acronym for anticipated civilian casualties. The film received what organisers and critics described as the longest standing ovation in the festival's history, timed by different outlets at between roughly 24 and 25 minutes.

Israel's military has rejected the film's central allegations, saying they rest on anonymous testimony whose sources cannot be verified and which, in some cases, describe matters "beyond the knowledge" of the ranks the speakers are said to have held. The Israel Defense Forces did not respond to Reuters' initial request for comment on the documentary.



Wild Horse Nine: Malkovich's Oscar-tipped CIA man

Martin McDonagh's fifth feature stars John Malkovich as Chris, a veteran CIA officer, and Sam Rockwell as his younger colleague Lee, both stationed in Santiago in 1973 as the agency works to undermine the elected government of Chile's president, Salvador Allende. When the pair are dispatched to Easter Island on an ostensible rest posting, an ageing, morphine-numbed Chris begins to reckon with a career built on coups and assassinations. The film, distributed by Searchlight Pictures, opens in Britain and the United States on November 6. Malkovich's performance has been widely tipped for awards-season attention.

A Good Little Soldier: corporate satire with real teeth

Stéphane Brizé's eleventh feature, and his first with a female lead, follows Carla Moretti (Alba Rohrwacher), a 43-year-old newly appointed human resources manager at a large French insurance company, who is tasked with promoting staff wellbeing while enforcing her employer's performance targets. When she uncovers a case of toxic management within the company, the compromises required of her mount until they threaten to break her. Vincent Lindon co-stars. The film, backed by Gaumont, is due for French cinema release on November 25.

Recent Golden Lion winners

2025: Father Mother Sister Brother — Jim Jarmusch

2024: The Room Next Door — Pedro Almodóvar

An LLM was used for the production of this report. It was edited by Creatives Unite