

Cannes 2014 review: Welcome to New York - Depardieu's grunting triumph exposes more than just himself

Abel Ferrara's film inspired by the case of Dominique Strauss-Kahn is a sordid, graphic marvel which would surely bag Gerard Depardieu a best actor prize - were it not being discreetly screened out of competition

Do you know who I am?" grunts Gérard Depardieu, stepping naked from the shower during the pivotal scene from Abel Ferrara's startling account of sex, power and the withering flesh. His belly is swaying and his eyes are aflame. Ostensibly Welcome to New York casts Depardieu in the role of rutting, strutting "George Devereaux", at the mercy of his appetites and quickly riding for a fall. But his question is rhetorical: we know exactly who he's meant to be.

In May 2011, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the head of the IMF and presumptive French presidential candidate, was arrested at JFK airport following an alleged assault on a hotel housemaid. Strauss-Kahn denied violence but admitted "inappropriate" behaviour and the civil suit was later settled out of court. Now Ferrara has taken hold of the scandal and whisked it into a lurid, filthy pantomime; a film so brazen and foolhardy that it had sections of the Cannes audience hooting in astonishment. I watched the whole thing with my jaw on the floor.

Here comes Devereaux, a brutish sex addict and master of the universe. He's slapping buttocks with abandon and climaxing like a tomcat. He operates a revolving door of prostitutes and yet still finds the time to force himself on any passing female, be it a Guinean maid or a young journalist sent to interview him. "He's destroyed everything I've worked for," seethes his Lady Macbeth-ish wife (Jacqueline Bisset) once the crime has been committed (and Ferrara's version leaves us in no doubt that a crime has been committed). But Devereaux himself is unrepentant. "I don't have no feeling," he confides to a shrink. "I don't give a shit about the people." In this way, Depardieu plays the IMF boss as an outright sociopath, without empathy or self-knowledge; unable to distinguish between consensual sex and rape. Devereaux cannot see the difference and doesn't care much either way.

Let's take it as read that Welcome to New York is at least referencing Strauss-Kahn. Might it also, obliquely, be about Depardieu as well? The actor, after all, brings some baggage of his own, whether it be our memory of him as the rangy, virile star of

1970s French cinema or his his current, more dubious status as a newly-minted Russian citizen, railing against what he regards as the evils of westernised big government. Tellingly, Ferrara chooses to open his film with a brief semi-staged Depardieu interview, further blurring the lines between the subject and the pseudonym, the performer and the drama.

But what a mighty performance the actor gives us here; it's the best he's been in years. His Devereaux at once venal and bemused, monstrous and vulnerable, not least during the extended strip search inside the US prison. Ferrara's camera has him literally exposed, like an old bull being weighed and examined ahead of the slaughter.

All being well, Depardieu would surely have been nominated for the Cannes best actor prize. Instead, *Welcome to New York* premieres out of competition, in a pavilion on the beach, before bypassing cinemas to head straight to VoD. Ferrara, it seems, remains too disreputable a director to be introduced to polite society, and his film altogether too drunken, shrill and volatile to be paraded on the carpet. Fair enough; you can see the logic. And yet *Welcome to New York* proves thoroughly engrossing. Here is a work of ragged glory; dirty and galvanic; the rot-gut antidote to the refined official line-up. And the competition's loss is now the general public's gain.

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