

the shortlist

YOUR WEEKEND STARTS HERE

+10
THINGS TO
HEAR, SEE
AND DO THIS
WEEKEND



JANUARY 27, 2017

CHILI PHILLY
He crochets his
edible headwear

VIOLA DAVIS
The actress who
upstaged Meryl Streep

JESS RIBEIRO
Ready for a show
at your place

EYES ON THE PRIZE

Mahershala Ali's bid for Oscars gold

On a tide of emotion

With its powerful dramatic performances, *Moonlight* is giving off a golden glow as the Oscars approach, writes **JENNY COONEY CARRILLO**.

Director Barry Jenkins describes making *Moonlight* as “the most intense experience of my life”. The film is based on a story by US playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney, but quickly became personal for Jenkins. “It was the kind of painful experience you don’t see coming,” he says. “It was like being on a plane and realising at some point you are already in the centre of the hurricane.”

In *Moonlight*, which won best drama at the Golden Globes, three actors, Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders and Trevante Rhodes, play one character, Chiron, in three phases of his life in a tough Miami ghetto, from age 10 to adulthood. As a boy he lives with his crack-addicted mother (Naomie Harris), and as he grows up, his unlikely mentors are local drug dealer Juan (Mahershala Ali) and girlfriend Teresa (singer Janelle Monae).

While Jenkins and McCraney did not know each other before collaborating on the film, they attended the same schools in the impoverished Liberty City neighbourhood of Miami a few years apart. Both went on to beat the odds and become successful artists, and both grew up with mothers grappling with drug addiction. Jenkins’ mother survived and has remained sober and HIV-positive for 24 years, while McCraney’s mother died of AIDS.

“I had toyed with the idea of making a movie about my mom but didn’t want to

go that personal,” Jenkins says. “So I thought I could make this playwright’s story about his mom instead and then on set, it hit me hard.

“It was almost like live theatre as therapy, but we weren’t on a stage, we were actually in the neighbourhood where these things took place.”

He now looks back on the healing that came out of that experience. “Being in the eye of the hurricane felt quite calm at first but when Naomie Harris showed up to film her scenes, it got very turbulent but in a good way. The story was dark but true, and watching someone show up to live that truth felt weirdly comforting in some way.”

Another of the film’s powerful performances comes from Ali as Juan, who nurtures Chiron through tough times, while selling drugs to his mother. The 42-year-old, previously best known as lobbyist Remy Danton in *House of Cards*, was best supporting actor nominee at the Golden Globes, and now the Oscars.

Growing up in a poor neighbourhood in Oakland, California, Ali was familiar with characters like Juan.

“Being in close proximity to that world growing up, it’s very difficult for me to look at those characters with the same judgment that people may have that don’t come from those circumstances,” he says.

“I think there’s this general perception that people who deal drugs want jewellery and cars and stuff, but if you are around them, they are usually the opposite and very quiet about it because it’s all about putting food on the table for them and they don’t want to bring attention to themselves.”

Ali escaped that life with a basketball scholarship to college and eventually got a master’s degree in acting from New York University. “I have people in my family that are pretty well-to-do and there are other people in my family who are incarcerated, as well as friends who became engineers and cops and friends who became drug dealers,” he says. “I realise I’m one of the fortunate ones.”

Jenkins has a similar story. He grew up in Liberty City with his single mother and three older siblings, then went to Florida State University, where he changed majors from English to creative

writing and eventually to film. He found his voice as a student filmmaker after discovering foreign films.

“One of the first films that I ever saw when I started college was this South Korean horror film called *301, 302* [the 1995 film directed by Park Chul-Soo] about two women who live in apartments next door. One is married to an abusive husband, the other is a struggling chef who lives alone,” he says. “Over the course of the film they conspire to kill the abusive husband, cook him and then eat this gourmet meal and here I was, a kid like the one you see in *Moonlight*, who had never remotely seen anything like this and I was hooked.

“I decided I didn’t want my voice to be like everyone else’s, so I watched only foreign films – Asian new wave and French new wave were my biggest influences. Going back to a world that is super-familiar to me in

Moonlight is interesting because I took the voice I developed elsewhere and framed it in a way that anyone anywhere in the world could watch and see themselves in it.”

Harris, best known as Miss Moneybags in the Bond films *Spectre* and *Skyfall*, found it tough immersing herself in the world of an addict. “Especially because I am Miss Clean Living,” the





■ Clockwise from main: Alex Hibbert as young Chiron and Mahershala Ali as Juan; director Barry Jenkins after winning the best motion picture Golden Globe for *Moonlight*; Naomie Harris as Chiron's mother, Paula.

Being in the eye of the hurricane felt quite calm at first.

Barry Jenkins

40-year-old English actor jokes. "I don't drink alcohol, I don't smoke, I don't even drink coffee, so to go from being a health nut to a crack addict was a massive jump."

Harris was also initially hesitant to take on the African-American female drug addict role. "The truth of my own personal experience of what women were like when I was growing up was very different to this and I felt there were already enough negative portrayals of women in film, so I wanted to redress the balance and portray positive images of women," she says. "But I do think while this character is not a positive image necessarily, it's a progressive image because she does find redemption in some way with her son."

Ali didn't have the same concerns as Harris about playing Juan. "I wasn't

thinking about the stereotype because this character is so complex," he says. "My only fear was that I was working on a few other projects at the same time and I wanted to make sure I could give this character everything he needed."

The softly spoken actor is enjoying his good fortune, including the upcoming season of *House of Cards* and a supporting role in another well-received movie, *Hidden Figures*. He is also expecting his first child in a few months with wife, Amatus Sami-Karim. "Something has definitely shifted and I am really appreciative of that," he says. "What's happening to me would be considered the pinnacle of anyone's career but it's now overshadowed by having a child on the way, so it's very humbling at the same time."

After its Golden Globe success, *Moonlight* looks closer to Oscar glory, with eight nominations, including best picture, best director and best supporting actors for Ali and Harris. But for Jenkins, there is only one person whose opinion really counts: his mother.

"She hasn't seen the movie yet, although the studio kindly set up a few screenings and then she backed out at the last minute," he says, but his mother was the first to ring to congratulate her son after his Golden Globe win, asking to be sent a photo of him backstage with his award.

"She knew I was making this film and was supportive every step of the way except actually watching it. I'm sure she will watch it at some point but it's not for me to rush her. I'm just happy she gave me her blessing to make the film."

Moonlight is out now.

Push and shove



■ Dimitris Papaioannou in *Still Life*. Photo: Julian Mommert

It's hard work bringing the myth of Sisyphus to life, writes ELISSA BLAKE.

The Greek artist-performer Dimitris Papaioannou is in Paris, propped up in bed having just eaten his breakfast.

Given he has spent much of the past two years manhandling what appears to be a gigantic lump of concrete across stages in his philosophically deep physical theatre work *Still Life*, you can forgive him for not being up and about early.

"It is a show loosely based on the myth of Sisyphus, who has to carry a stone upwards eternally, only to have it roll down again and start again," Papaioannou says. "This is my theme: the human struggle to create meaning in life through labour, through trying to elevate matter. It is about the irrational and ridiculous state of being where a person is experiencing the weight of matter yet craving for lightness and speed."

Sounds like hard work, and not just physically. "It is," Papaioannou says. "Like trying to find the balance between the down and the up."

A visual artist and choreographer, Papaioannou, 52, is best known for his adventurous direction and design of the 2004 Athens Olympic Games opening and closing ceremonies. Long before that, he was a leading light in the Greek theatre and art scenes.

"I trained as a painter," he says. "A very traditional painter. I can paint your portrait and it will look exactly like you."

Working in theatre and alternative magazines in Athens in the early 1980s, Papaioannou developed a parallel interest in contemporary dance, co-founding the Edafos Dance Theatre in 1986. He directed all the company's productions until it disbanded in 2002.

In 1989, he worked in Germany assisting the American designer-director Robert Wilson on the first production of the Tom Waits-scored opera *The Black Rider*. It left a lasting impression on his work on stage and in film.

"Wilson was a painter, too, and moving into performance and dance from visual art is not as difficult as you might think," Papaioannou says. "It makes a good road to slide on to the stage. As a painter, you learn how to see in ways non-painters cannot understand. This is a tool you have for life, it never goes away."

Still Life is often referred to as a work of contemporary dance. Papaioannou says it's too simplistic a description, but accepts the label, "because dance is the very broadest category there is".

It can also be seen as a work of silent theatre, he says. "But it does not have a

book now

INTERSECTION

Australian Theatre for Young People, February 1-18

From some of ATYP's best young writers, a portmanteau of stories set in the same town on the same night. \$25-\$35, atyp.com.au.

LOSING YOU (TWICE)

King Street Theatre, February 7-11

Writer Kate O'Keefe pays tribute to her late brother Daniel, whose disappearance in 2011 became a huge media story after his family launched a social media campaign to find him. \$20-\$30, kingstreettheatre.com.au.

THE MYSTERY OF LOVE AND SEX

Eternity Playhouse, February 10-March 12

In Bathsbeba Doran's play, Charlotte and Jonny have been best friends since they were kids. She's white and Jewish, he's Afro-American and Baptist Christian, and sexual desire is about to complicate things even more. \$38-\$54, darlinghursttheatre.com.

story. It has an energy, and a dramaturgy, but the notion of following a story from beginning to end is consciously being destroyed throughout the play. Instead, there are a variety of themes and the work circulates around them. I hope the audience will be encouraged to meditate upon them and that they will be entertained because there is a lot of awkward humour in this seemingly serious universe."

The art of Rene Magritte is an influence, and the plays of Samuel Beckett. "If you want, you can also see things from antiquity to the Renaissance. It is from these things I try to compose my visual language," says Papaioannou.

Still Life unfolds as a series of inhuman feats of effort and is performed by a cast of seven: Papaioannou with three dancers and three actors. It premiered in 2014 in Athens and has since toured to France, Italy, Sweden, Brazil and Singapore. Its short Sydney Festival season will be Papaioannou's first time in Australia.

"Never I am so excited!" he laughs, adding that arts festivals are the ideal showcase for his work. "A festival is a party for those interested in art and I like that. Every audience brings with it the character of that country. I try to achieve something universal to speak to everyone. I try for simplicity in that way. But that is a very complex thing to do."

Still Life

When January 27-29

Tickets \$60-\$70,
sydneyfestival.org.au

Director Dimitris Papaioannou

