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Cannes: What the Heck Is the Ecumenical Jury?

“The primary criteria for judging the films is first the quality of the movie, its overall storytelling and technical excellence,” says Douglas Fahleson, president of Cannes’ Ecumenical Jury in 2021. “Then there’s the second criteria.”

BY **SCOTT ROXBOROUGH** MAY 21, 2022 9:30PM



'Drive My Car' (Toko Miura landed the role of the chauffeur only after learning to drive a stick shift) COURTESY OF SIDESHOW AND JANUS FILMS

Amid the forest of laurels presented at the **Cannes** Film Festival — alongside the main “Palme” handed out by the competition jury, you’ve got prizes from the juries of the Un Certain Regard, Directors’ Fortnight and Critics’ Week sidebar, the Camera d’Or for the best first feature film and the Fipresci prize chosen by the **international** film critics association — one sticks out: the Ecumenical film prize.



dimension. Since the award began in Cannes in 1974, members of the Ecumenical jury are asked to pick the movie from the festival's competition that best "touches the spiritual dimension of our existence."

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And they mean it. The Ecumenical jury is a Christian club. With a capital C. Christian film organizations Interfilm (for Protestants) and Signis (for Catholics) select the jury members. The six members of this year's group includes French film journalist and theologian Waltraud Verlauguet and German pastor Dietmar Adler alongside four with more secular professions: Dutch journalist Praxedis Bouwman, Polish journalism professor Mariola Marczak, French executive assistant Monique Beguin and Irina Margareta Nistor, a translator and film critic from Romania.

For American audiences, accustomed to yoking together the words "christian" and "right wing," the idea of a Christian jury handing out an award at Europe's premium art house festival is a tough one to fathom. Especially when examining the award winners. Overtly religious movies occasionally win — Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* in 1989, Xavier Beauvois' *Of Gods and Men* in 2010 — but the list of Ecumenical jury best film honorees also includes Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum*, a look at lost children in Lebanon who are sold into homes where they are abused and mistreated; Thomas Vinterberg's *The Hunt*, about a school teacher falsely accused of pedophilia; and *Babel*, a multi-narrative drama that plays out across Morocco, Japan, Mexico and the United States.

"The primary criteria for judging the films is first the quality of the movie, its overall storytelling and technical excellence," says Douglas Fahleson, president of Cannes' Ecumenical Jury in 2021. "Then there's the second criteria, which is how well the film expresses the spiritual component of existence."

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This “spiritual component,” Fahleson says, is what links films from otherwise diverse directors, such as 2019 winner *A Hidden Life* from Terrence Malick — “a director who has spent the last decade or two reflecting on humanity’s connection with the spiritual world” — and last year’s winner *Drive My Car* from Japanese filmmaker Ryûsuke Hamaguchi, which also won the best screenplay honor in Cannes’ main awards. “I think you can see that the films the Ecumenical jury picks tend to be the same ones Cannes’ main jury singles out and the ones that tend to do the best at awards elsewhere,” says Fahleson.

Ecumenical honors — there are Ecumenical juries for festivals as far afield as Locarno, Berlin, Warsaw and Karlovy Vary — can also help distribution, with the winners often enjoying a second life as selections for Christian film clubs around the world.

When it comes to content, nothing directly disqualifies a film for the Ecumenical honor, though Fahleson says “gratuitous sex and gratuitous violence” in a movie could hurt its chances. Which could explain why frequent Cannes guest Lars von Trier (*Antichrist*, *Nymphomaniac*) has never come close to a Ecumenical award win. But sexuality, or other hot-button topics for the Christian right, are not taboo. In 2016, the Ecumenical jury awarded its top prize to Xavier Dolan’s *It’s Only the End of the World*, the story of a gay playwright dealing with a terminal illness, who flies home to reunite with his family.

The jury explained its decision in spiritual, not political terms. “What cannot be said by words can be communicated by the face, rendered transcendental by Xavier Dolan’s filming,” they wrote. “The prodigal son who came to announce his impending death, chooses instead to inspire love and hope to his relatives.”

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