



"The Great Vazquez"

Reign in Spain

San Sebastian's popular fest director is departing, but his swan song puts Spanish-language fare front and center

By Pamela Rolfe

AFTER NINE YEARS of experimentation and expansion that helped keep the San Sebastian International Film Festival relevant in an increasingly crowded fest circuit, Mikel Olaciregui knew it was time to pass the torch.

"It's important to know when a cycle comes to a close," says Olaciregui, who has been San Sebastian's fest director since 2001. "The technological revolution makes me dizzy and we have to rethink everything related to this business."

Even so, Olaciregui is widely credited with carving out a niche in the global fest landscape by providing the event with a distinctively Spanish-language character. Under his guidance, a number of popular new sidebars emerged, including the Latin Horizons, Made in Spain and Films in Progress, all of which showcase Spanish and Latin American fare.

Olaciregui also pioneered the search for young directors — buttressed by the handsome \$120,000 Kutxa-New Director Award — and created the popular Films in Progress and Cinema in Motion sidebars to aid unfinished films from third-world regions and give buyers a first glimpse of promising projects.

"Mikel is a great man of cinema who has known how to maintain and strengthen the position of the San Sebastian Film Festival," says Fabia Buenaventura, GM of the Spanish Producers Federation. "He's always willing to seek inclusive solutions that benefit the festival and the Spanish industry. I would emphasize that during the nine years with him as director, the festival has particularly opened to Latin American territories."

AT A GLANCE

San Sebastian International Film Festival

DATES: Sept. 17-25

OPENING-NIGHT FILM:

"Chicogrande"

CLOSING-NIGHT FILM:

"Sarah's Key"





"Amigo"

Olaciregui says one of the keys to his success has been the consistent support of the local government, which supplies a healthy budget of \$8.5 million. The support has helped the event average an impressive 86% theater occupancy, with last year's edition selling about 116,000 tickets.

"I come from a marketing background," he says. "So my guiding principle has always been to make the festival useful for the industry. Of course, as a festival director, it's important to see cinema as art and culture, but it's very difficult if there's little or no

industry backing the festival."

For his swan song, Olaciregui has woven together a program that offers a mix of art-house fare, fresh directorial talent, mainstream releases and, of course, a wide range of Latin American films.

The Official Competition boasts nine world premieres, one international premiere outside of Mexico and seven European premieres. John Sayles' fictional account of the Philippine-American War, "Amigo," and South Korean Kim Jee-Woon's follow-up to the 2008 hit "The Good, the Bad and the Weird" — "I Saw the Devil" — are among those that will debut in Europe at San Sebastian.

All five Spanish films in the main competition for the Golden Shell award are world premieres, including Oscar Aibar's biopic "The Great Vazquez," starring Santiago Segura, and Agusti Villaronga's coming-of-age tale "Black Bread."

Julia Roberts will pick up the Donostia Award for lifetime achievement, as she and Spanish co-star Javier Bardem present "Eat Pray Love," which runs out of competition in the Official Section.

As every year, the festival offers the Zabaltegi-Pearls section, allowing festivalgoers to catch any films from previous festivals they may have missed, along with 16 titles in the Zabaltegi-New Directors section.

This year's crop includes several representatives from Eastern Europe, Western Europe and Latin America, as well as productions from Iran, China and the U.S. Two Spanish films will also screen: Elena Trape's teen drama "Blog" and Basque director Mikel Rueda's "Stars to Wish Upon," which looks at the plight of women during the Spanish Civil War.

"Dirty Harry" director Don Siegel will be the subject of a cycle honoring his work, while this year's thematic retrospective — New Paths of Nonfiction — will showcase the wealth of documentaries from around the world in the past decade.

"I'm very proud of the wide variety this year's program contains," Olaciregui says. "There are a lot of ways to see movies. You can't make a festival for one kind of audience." **THR**

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SANTIAGO SEGURA IS **EL GRAN VAZQUEZ**

A FILM BY **ÓSCAR AIBAR**

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