

'The Games Maker': Hong Kong Review | Hollywood Reporter

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Courtesy of Sundance International Film Festival

THE BOTTOM LINE

Imaginative 3D kid-fare has high production values and dark edges □

Tom Cavanagh, Ed Asner and Joseph Fiennes headline a wild adventure yarn.

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A fine new addition to the library of imaginative children's film fantasy, *The Games Maker* is a dark, continually inventive 3D adventure about a family of board game creators menaced by an evil rival. Starring 13-year-old **David Mazouz**, who plays the boy Bruce Wayne on TV's *Gotham*, and flanked by **Joseph Fiennes**, **Tom Cavanagh** and **Ed Asner**, this high-quality entertainment marks a successful venture into English-language live action for award-winning Argentine producer and animation director **Juan Pablo Buscarini** (*Condor Crux*, *the Legend* and *The Mouse Perez*). It was released by Disney in Latin America to the merry tune of \$6 million, which, coupled with its bow in Sundance Kids, should be a good sendoff for international family film markets.

The filmmakers opt for a timeless look that recalls the 1950s, when 13-year-old Ivan Drago (Mazouz) is growing up in a suburban house with his parents, played by Reverse-Flash Tom Cavanagh and Italian actress **Valentina Lodovini**. Hopelessly unsuited for the sports Dad wants him to master, Ivan has a secret talent waiting to be discovered. He finds himself compulsively drawn to a comic book contest calling for game designers. While Mom protectively shields his creative genius from his father, who is inexplicably hostile to the world of games, Ivan creates one imaginative game after another and eventually wins the contest. The prize turns out to be quite disappointing, however: an indelible tattoo that fixes itself to his arm.

In the first plot turn, Ivan learns his estranged grandfather was once a world-famous board games master, and that his company headquarters are in a place called Zyl. But before he can get there, a freak hot air balloon accident leaves him parentless. He is whisked away to live at a creepy boarding school where he is literally kept a prisoner. The Possom School, which would make the Addams family shudder, is a multi-story English manor constructed on a swamp and is slowly sinking into the ground, floor by floor. It will be up to Ivan to complete the job, House of Usher fashion. In the chaos, he stages a daring escape, thanks to the help of a resourceful, fearless little girl who lives in the walls (a delightful **Megan Charpentier**.)

The plot turns much looser when he reaches Zyl at last and is reunited with his kindly grandfather (Asner), a sort of retired wizard of Oz. The charming Tyrol-style town is deserted, having lost its population due to the

curse of the evil Morodian (Fiennes). There is a feeling in these scenes of Ivan wandering through a retro videogame, though in many ways the film owes more to *Hugo* and **Ray Bradbury** than modern IT technology, and this is certainly a merit.

Mazouz is a child actor who grows on you scene by scene, as he advances from his initially off-putting scaredy-cat number, to a bold show of courage in the final scenes set in the robotic steam-punk of Morodian's laboratories and fun fair. Fiennes glares at Ivan from behind dark glasses, dressed like an outlandish extra from *The Grand Budapest Hotel* but much nastier. His master plan is to subjugate the boy and make him work as a slave for his Profound Games Co. One sure-fire sign that his board games are evil is that they're designed to become obsolete in six months, so players have to purchase new ones. Furthermore, in a bow to *The Truman Show*, Morodian has turned Ivan's life into an elaborate exhibit for the public, who are entertained by his double, "Professional Ivan", played with comic aplomb by **Ivan Masliah**.

The tech work is outstanding on almost all levels, with **Dimitri Capuani**'s fresh and complex production design taking the lead. What oddly lags behind is the 3D work, a half-hearted affair that seems like an after-thought and whose only discernible merit is to give the shots some *Alice in Wonderland*-type depth of field.

Venue: Hong Kong Film Festival, March 23, 2015.

Production companies: Pampa Films, Sepia Films, DAP Italy in association with 7Glab Entertainment, Orinoco Films, Telefe

Cast: David Mazouz, Joseph Fiennes, Tom Cavanagh, Ed Asner, Valentina Lodovini, Megan Charpentier

Director: Juan Pablo Buscarini

Screenwriters: Juan Pablo Buscarini with Damon Syson, Lucinda Syson, based on a novel by Pablo De Santis

Producers: Pablo Bossi, Juan Pablo Buscarini, Jose Ibanez, Tina Pehme, Kim Roberts

Executive producers: Nicolas Rodriguez Ballesteros, Veronica Cura, Guido De Angelis, Marco DeAngelis, Nicola De Angelis, Roberto Manni, Ben Odell

Director of photography: Roman Osin

Production designer: Dimitri Capuani

Editor: Austin Andrews

Music: Keith Power

Casting: J.C. Cantu, Catharine Falcon

Sales Agent: Cinema Management Group

No rating, 111 minutes