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Fans out in force for Da Vinci premiere - but even kinder reviews are scathing

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Amid an unprecedented amount of hype and hoopla for an opening movie at the Cannes film festival, it took the inimitable Ian McKellen to knock Dan Brown and his swollen bestseller down to size with a single word - "codswallop".

Sir Ian, who plays the Earl Grey-loving grail expert Sir Leigh Teabing in The Da Vinci Code, said before the film's world premiere yesterday: "While I was reading the book I believed it entirely. Clever Dan Brown twisted my mind convincingly.

"But when I put it down I thought, 'What a load of ... [eloquent pause] potential codswallop."

The Cannes film festival has an ambiguous relationship with Hollywood, on the one hand championing auteur cinema and film-making as an art, on the other lapping up blockbuster glitz. This year's opening marked a particularly successful seduction by populism, as the Croisette was thronged by Da Vinci Code fans after the arrival of the cast on a specially arranged train from London and the erection in the old port of an IM Pei-esque pyramid for last night's opening party.

Controversy may be raging abroad, with an attempted ban on the film in the Philippines, protests in India and pulpit denunciations in Greece, Russia and Romania, but outside the Palais des Festivals were just two figures of dissent, a monk and a nun in quiet protest at the story's heterodox view of Christ and the Catholic church.

That said, dissent of a different sort has already begun to be voiced. The kinder critical assessments of The Da Vinci Code describe it as "a stodgy, grim thing"; "ponderous and full of mumbo-jumbo"; and "tripe of the highest possible order". Ron Howard, the director, yesterday said he had not read any reviews. "Maybe some of the adjectives in some of the other reviews will be more ... upbeat," he suggested.

The film's cast and director played down the controversial content, though Mr Howard admitted that "given the content of the story, this is a film likely to be upsetting to some people".

Tom Hanks, who plays a Harvard symbolologist, Robert Langdon, said: "I view this as a great opportunity to discuss and clarify one's own place in the universe and cosmos. This is a film that can spur a better understanding to the individual. It's not a documentary. Things are not pulled up and called the facts." Asked whether his wife Rita Wilson, who comes from a Greek Orthodox background, had any qualms about a story that has been condemned from Greek churches, he said: "No, absolutely not. My heritage, and that of my wife, suggests that our sins have been taken away, not our brains."

The Da Vinci Code opens worldwide on Friday, after a build-up that kept the film's content swathed in secrecy until the first exclusive press screenings on Tuesday night. Test screenings to gauge public reaction were "small and under the radar ... I asked the participants not to go on the net and talk about the movie," Howard said.

Twenty films will this year compete for Cannes' prestigious Palme d'Or. They include two British movies, Ken Loach's The Wind that Shakes the Barley, and Andrea Arnold's Red Road, after several years of British films failing to make the selection.

The president of the jury, the Chinese director Wong Kar-wei (2046; In the Mood for Love) said: "It is like a cycle. Last year there were a lot of Asian films and no films from England. This year there is less Asian film and two films from England. But I don't think this should be taken as a trend."

Other films in the running for the Palme include Sofia Coppola's Marie Antoinette, Richard Linklater's Fast Food Nation and Pedro Almodóvar's Volver, starring Penélope Cruz.

The British actor Helena Bonham Carter takes her place this year on the most prestigious film jury in the world, despite her "pretty bad" taste in film. "Being on a jury is fun because you are in a position of power," she said. "On the whole as an actor you are in the position of begging, in a deprived position. If you are on a jury, people tend to suck up to you; so I thought that would be fun.

"I am not very comfortable with judging, because I have been judged so often. I don't know how good a jury member I will be, because on the whole my taste in film is pretty bad. In the end you just have to trust your instincts."

The jury also includes the actors Tim Roth, Samuel L Jackson and Monica Bellucci.....**THE END**

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