

Fascinating Films in 50th International Film Festival of India



Balloon

“The whole aspect of cinema and film festivals (is) to come together and celebrate art and humanity”: Keanu Reeves, film actor.

“In India there is a psychological problem that movies going to (or being exhibited at) the film festivals are boring”: Anurag Kashyap, film director.

Film festivals are tricky proposition. The aforesaid reflections are ample testimony to this fact. So is curating cinemas. Especially for film festivals of international kind, where virtually the entire nation descends to soak in the scintillating cinematic works at play.

Held annually they provide opportunity to savour *crème la crème* of contemporary cinemas for local diaspora. Also, film festivals need to look at different palates of appreciating audiences to engage in, and assimilate the disparate and delectable fares, showcased.

Furthermore, with film festivals done thing world over, films picked *a la carte* become the calling card for cineastes to be there, be seen, and be heard. For under the ubiquitous umbrella an entire cinema fraternity come calling with a collective interest in films to reflect upon where the industry is going and stands.

After all, film festivals are a crucial and pivotal link in the chain of global film culture, they bring to the table. Be it celebrated auteurs, or most important of all –cinema audiences, and the like. Hailed as most democratic art forms, film festivals, given the diversity of languages, cultures, politics and social mores, not only consolidate and catalyse the thinking process of people who congregate, but also, through film content they bring, help crystalising the creative thinking and collective cinematic experience as audiences confabulate over movies they saw and savoured.

Besides being the fulcrum of sharing and community fellow feeling, film festivals bring a whole diversity of rich socio-political and cultural voices from multifarious sources for discerning cinema buff to revel and rejoice in. From providing variety, different approaches to life, living and thoughts, films, as art form, become excellent and potent tool of social expression, which are facilitated by film festivals showcasing them.



Captive

Also film festivals enable the coming together of cineastes to explore new cultures and celebrate creativity in all its myriad, multifarious forms, cultivating in them an intense interest in cinema giving audiences single window access to cinemas they otherwise might not have had occasion or opportunity to explore and experience, appreciate its aesthetics as ultimate art form.

Well, with more and more film festivals sprouting year after year, film festivals, in hindsight, have their own limitations as well. Not all films that form its cornucopia of cinemas will interest every participant who logs in or registers as delegate or film fraternity or curator of another festival of their own.

It is in this regard, the International Film Festival of India, toasting its 50th edition, which has carved a global branding as a festival of choice, turned out a mixed medley of movies with a handful cinemas catching one's eye.

Present at IFFI annually, it is indeed a privilege for me to present a panoply of films that lit up IFFI, gilding the annual jamboree's golden edition, with their delectable delineations coveting true blue cinephiles.

After all, while filmmakers drawn from different strata of society and social moorings bring alive on to screen, the life, vibrant cultures, and art in its pristine form, for our eager and expectant eyes, as audience, it becomes incumbent upon critics, a very important task, to respond, to rejoice in, reflect upon, and thereon, spread the good word. To gush and talk about films that really bowled you over and would stay with one for a lifetime.

For me, piece de resistance of IFFI was *Commitment*. Featured under Master Frames, this Turkish beauty by Semih Kaplanoglu, with its masterly rendition of transaction between a young mother and a nanny she chooses to care for her child was cinema at its best. Turkey's official submission for Oscars, it evocatively explores familial bonds and children's relationships with their own mothers to understand how we inevitably inherit the traits of our elders.

As Kaplanoglu puts it: In the world that we live, I believe women are really suffering. Especially in the modern world. On one hand, they have their own nature, their life and their work. On the other, they have family, husband, children and home. To take care of both worlds, is really difficult. In that *Commitment* holds a mirror to the angst and anxieties of modern parent-child relationships and dilemmas one faces being a woman, more so a mother, with career aspirations.

As Kaplanoglu observes: "I have always thought of telling the story of modernism, which distances family members from their roles as mother, father, child and confusion

this causes.” Indeed Commitment is a reflective of modern times which is rupturing filial relationships. Truly a film at its aesthetic and social best.

The second, featured in International Competition, was Chinese film *Balloon*,



About Endlessness

marvelous work by Pema Tseden. Set in Tibetan grasslands it makes a scathing indictment of China's single child policy, cleverly using the condom as socio-political metaphor to drive its universal homily.

A novelist and filmmaker, Pema Tseden's film while touching upon topics such as Buddhist religion, mysticism and philosophy, brings to fore the clash of modern and traditional values in the lives of rural Tibetans. What is surprising is while for these rustics mating the rams and ewes is everyday affair, they are, however, overtly puritanical about sex in their own lives.

Captives, by Hungarian director Kristoef Deak, is another chilling cinema. It spotlights on a family and visitors at their doorstep, being incarcerated by communist secret police, on suspicion they had harboured and facilitated the escape of a wanted activist. Told with finesse with that tangling touch of sardonic humour and based on real events, the film, set in Budapest, Hungary, during Communist Era, in 1951, is a sheer pleasure to experience and engage in as the confrontation between the imprisoned inmates and the secret police reaches flashpoint before final denouement.

Lillian, an Austrian Odyssey of Herculean proportion, by Andreas Horvath, is singular triumph of enduring human spirit and determination. It is about a Russian emigrant woman, who decides to trek back to Russia from New York, after her visa expires. A true life saga told in all its epic grandeur with equally enchanting cinematography as the protagonist embarks upon a fascinating and life threatening journey with grit and gumption only she could muster with her sense of purpose. Using the proverbial roadie format made familiar by likes of Bruno Dumont to Wim Wenders, the film takes audiences on an exploratory trip of America, as it brings subtly to fore the racial divide with treatment of Native Americans and modern-day US is built upon, exposing the cruel underbelly of existence as we embark upon excruciating journey into the abyss of uncertainty.

Iranian film *Son-Mother* by Mohammad Rasoulof, speaks of a widowed mother's angst and anxiety to accept a proposal that would separate her son, and the heart wrenching socio-religious dynamics the country shackles its women folk with. Narrated from twin points of perspective of the mother and the son, Rasoulof's scathing and critical film speaks volumes about the kind of cinemas that emerges from Iran keeping up to its glorious tradition as it exposes country's archaic rules and laws and venal citizens full of prejudice against independent women. The film starkly mirrors the state of women living under constant scrutiny in a country that subjects them to theocracy and outdated traditions where people become the oppressors of their own fate.

Monsters (Monstri), from Debut Section, from Romania by Marius Oltenau, centering round a couple in crisis, is interesting for its framing device, bringing to fore their marital fissures, in the course of a day. Through couple's

encounters the film drives its homily of what it takes to letting go in order marriage and love could survive and fight one's own demons. Boldly taking to stylistic variable screen ratio, maintaining 1:1 square format during opening sections to capture the claustrophobic isolation of the two protagonists, thereafter widening and narrowing the screen during final act as their shaky emotional connection fluctuates, the director subtly provides a vivid visual metaphor as the couple reunite for painful crisis negotiations on their imploding marriage.

About Endlessness, from Master Frames, by Swedish director Roy Anderson, provides a peek into cinema as pure art and aesthetic form presenting a cosmic view of human existence in all its existential dilemmas. As ever, the film from the director of the earlier equally enchanting *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* populates his film



Son Mother

with lost souls and lonely hearts with passages of quiet musical accompaniment, opera arias, and choirs, and shot in bleached-out palette, provides a profound and pictorial imagery and beauty to his masterly craft.

The Hong Kong film *Still Human* by Oliver Su Kuen Chan, from World Panorama, is a

must watch revolving round a wheelchair bound elderly man and young Filipino nurse who comes to look after him. This heartfelt and genuine portrayal of a Filipino domestic helper's story also turns out a tribute to those who refuse to stop chasing their dreams. It speaks of how stricken with poverty, these women who move overseas in search of El Dorado face conditions far from ideal encountering racism and classism with abuses ranging from underpayment of salaries to denial of basic human rights of mandatory rest day. It also spotlights on how the master and servant who harbour their own dreams but unable to pursue because of different situations in their lives, and the two help each other to pursue their dreams as they slowly shed their inhibitions and initial awkwardness as they warm up to each other's roles and responsibilities overcoming barriers in language, culture, gender, age, or social status bringing to truism French Philosopher Rene Descartes famous adage: "I dream, therefore I am."

The Dominion Republic flick *Sanctorum* by Joshua Gil is about a mother forcefully separated from her child. Besides its poignant tale of loss, suffering and indomitable search, with elements of magic realism the film comes across as true cinematic experience, an elevating and engaging human drama.

Likewise, Iranian thriller *The Warden* by Nima Javidi wherein the protagonist, in for promotion finds himself at sea on learning one of the inmates has gone missing during transit to another prison. Set in 1960s during Shah's rule, the film is also an allegorical saga touching upon more social issues such as efficacy of capital punishment and abuse of authority by the disciplinarian warden desperate not to ruin his prospective career. Taking on classic manhunt thriller format with gradual edgy build-up to its finale, "The Warden" is another example of how Iranian

directors have crafted the fine art of film making to perfection.

As the title bespeaks, Polish film *My Name Is Sara*, by Steven Orrit, is about Sara, a 13 year-old Polish Jew, who finds refuge with a farmer and his wife. But to her disbelief, she discovers the dark secrets of her employers' marriage, and thereon strive to protect, her own true identity. Based on a true-life story of a 13 year-old Polish Jew, who after grueling escape to Ukrainian countryside, steals her best friend's identity to find refuge in the small village, it offers a rare offers a fascinating insight into Ukrainian identity and society, besides being a testament to grit and bravery of a single woman who faces sure death in the face of all odds.

The Serbian film *I Was At Home, But*, by Angela Schanelec is about a widowed mother



My Name is Sara

yet to come to terms with her widowhood and the return of her young son, who having run away from home, and spending a week in the wild returns home following a foot injury. Elegant and stylistic the film is a probing study into the psyche of its protagonists with a moody gut wrenching rumination of lives and a stark and somber mediation on grief and life.

China's *A First Farewell*, by writer-director Wang Lina, revolves round three Uighur children and their farming families necessitated by regulations for increased levels of Mandarin language-based teaching

in schools. Beautifully photographed, the film is an emotionally rewarding glimpse into challenges faced by Muslim minority offering subtle yet insightful look at how China's Muslim minority grapples with pressure to ditch their own culture and conform to social mores of the day. The film skillfully speaks about the human costs of State-enforced cultural policies.



Beanpole

Serbian *Stitches* by Miroslav Terzic, based on a real life expose speaks of how a seamstress who believes she was deceived years earlier by doctors claiming her baby was stillborn, and turns a lone crusader taking on a corrupt system in pursuit of the truth. The thoughtful, psychologically compelling fare shows how the grieving mother is unable to let go of the notion that her son might as well be alive, and perhaps even walk before her one day.

Peruvian film *Song Without A Name* by Melina Leon, dramatises a true-life case of Peruvian baby trafficking. Set in 1988, it spotlights on a destitute Quecha villager from outer limits of Lima, who drawn by a radio ad to a private clinic offering free natal care to expecting mothers, learns the horrible truth that her baby girl she delivers has been snatched away by the fake clinic, and her search through official red tape bears no fruit till a journalist learns of her tragedy and investigates in this riveting Kafkaesque moving and meditative crime thriller.

Russian *Beanpole* by Kantemir Balagov, is

a moody, well-crafted highly compelling and disturbing film about the psychological aftermath of war on people. Set in ravaged Leningrad soon after WW-II, which demolished buildings and city in ruins, leaving citizens physically and mentally in tatters, the film follows two female soldiers who have since returned from war. One of them Iya, suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome and Masha, who still vows vengeance, and how the two navigate and come to terms with the new situation while trying to rebuild their lives and leave behind traumatic past.

Slovakian *The Painted Bird* by Vaclav Marhoul based on Jerzy Kosinski's war novel

The Painted Bird is a riveting visceral cinema as savage and searing as it can be, taking audiences through a three-hour scorching sojourn of its run time.

Told from the perspective of a Jewish boy escaping extermination who is forced to hit the road and make it on his own in a hostile world governed by hate, fear and violence, the film journeys through a world driven by prejudice, superstition and own rules. The epic pastoral horror is a stark reminder of why war survival stories are equally necessary to our understanding of innocence and beastliness of it.

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