

cinema



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An Arab Spring in autumn

The uprising in the Middle East was a dominant theme at the Doha Tribeca Film Festival this year, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

In a world that now has as many movie festivals as there are number of days in a year, it is not surprising that the Gulf has three major such events. The youngest is the recently concluded Doha Tribeca Film Festival, and the oldest, the Dubai International Film Festival, which has a December run.

The Festival at Doha began, at least this year, a couple of days after the fifth edition of the one at Abu Dhabi ended. Certainly Doha needs to find another slot, unless, of course, it believes that those who might have travelled long distances to be at Abu Dhabi will step into the Qatari capital.

Arguably, Doha had a couple of scoring points this season. Its third

edition attracted a fair group of international celebrities, though apart from moviemaker Anurag Kashyap, actress Frieda Pinto and fashion designer Manish Malhotra, there was no other Indian. As the Festival's Head of Communications Majid Wasi said, the Diwali festival, which coincided with the Festival, had kept Indians away.

However, celebrities such as Robert De Niro, Jean Jacques Annaud, Luc Besson, Michelle Yeoh and Mark Strong among others did troop into Doha, a fact that made the Festival higher on talent than Abu Dhabi.

But ultimately, a Festival's best indicator of success is its selections. This is not very easy, given the state

of Arab cinema, which Doha or Abu Dhabi or even Dubai would like to focus on. After the decline of Egyptian cinema, films in the region have not really made a mark.

Be that as it may, Doha got hold of some wonderful movies, both features and documentaries on the Arab Spring. Indeed a smart move by Doha.

Sherif El Bendary's *On the Road to Downtown* is a documentary set in Cairo during the popular demonstrations there, when hundreds of people marched on the streets urging President Hosni Mubarak to quit. We know that he did.

Bendary was one among those crowds of men and women, who shouted slogans till their voices grew hoarse. Bendary, like a few others, carried a camcorder to record a historic movement that promised to change people's lives. Whether it would, time alone will tell us.

On the Road to Downtown was part of the Festival's Competition, and is a touching study of several characters who live in Cairo's neighbourhoods. An intense discussion of the uprising can be seen.

Bendary began work on his documentary four months before trouble erupted in Egypt, but began the actual shoot only after Mubarak went. And with the region in a political flux, there is a tendency to look for answers – not from the rulers, but the ruled, and *On the Road to Downtown* presents an engaging exchange with the man on the street.

Among the competing entries in the Narrative Feature category, Merzak Allouache's *Normal*, also uses ordinary citizens as a sounding board for a debate on the revolution. Two years before Tunisia and Egypt were caught in a political tsunami, Allouache was documenting the frustration of the youth which could not freely channel its enormous energy into artistic avenues. There was really no freedom.

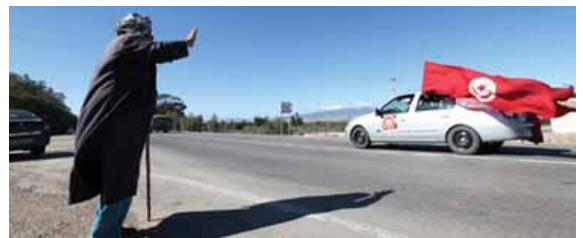
In his 100-minute fiction, Allouache traces the lives of a few



* *Normal*



* *On the Road to Downtown*



* *Rouge Parole*

actors whose personal dilemmas confront and conflict with the larger issue of artistic liberty. One woman in a film that Allouache had shot earlier – and whose characters assemble at the helmer's house – is peeved when she sees her boyfriend kiss an actress on the screen. Allouache introduces such personal predicaments into the larger framework of the community that is grappling with its own demons. Equally engaging is the way the director asks his assembled cast to talk about the Arab Spring. What do they feel? How do they react? The questions and their answers mix and mingle with the story.

Elyes Bacarr also uses the fiction format in his *Rouge Parole* to take us into the political storm. The movie is an emotional look at the heroes of the Tunisian revolt that led to dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali's ouster.

Interestingly, the Festival's opening work, *Black Gold*, by Jean Jacques Annaud, was being shot in Tunisia exactly at the time when Ben Ali's was being pushed out. Annaud said that he asked most of his cast and crew to return home, but a few like Frieda Pinto chose to stay back to watch the dawn of a new era.

Unfortunately, I could not get to interview Annaud, because his publicists felt that since the movie had no distributor in India there was no point in giving an Indian journalist time. I wonder whether the publicists were right: will not a Pinto film release in India, and that too one in English.

In any case, *Black Gold* was awfully disappointing. To me it had the feel of a 1980s movie, and seemed like a rerun of Lawrence of Arabia with Antonio Banderas trying to look like Peter O'Toole. But Annaud is no David Lean, and

Banderas does not match quite up to O'Toole.

What is more, it was not always convincing to see actors from outside the Middle East play Arabs. As much as Anthony Quinn essaying a Mexican in *Lawrence of Arabia* seemed unconvincing, British actor Mark Strong as Emir Amar did not fit in. It was not very different for Pinto, who portrays Princess Lallah. She came in for criticism earlier when she became a Palestinian girl in *Miral*, and Pinto needs to work hard on her expressiveness and choose her parts with greater care.

Black Gold traces the seeds of the oil war in the 1930s Gulf that brought the American companies in close proximity to the warring Arabs and the nomadic Bedouins.

In contrast, the closing film, *The Lady*, a biopic of Burmese activist Aung San Suu Kyi, was invigorating. Directed by France's Luc Besson, it may be a politico-romantic drama, but focuses mostly on the personal life of the lady, played brilliantly by Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh.

The movie traces the oppressively cruel military rule in Myanmar (once called Burma) and the defiant sacrifices made by Suu Kyi, her Oxford professor husband, Michael Aris (essayed with equal excellence by David Thewlis), and two sons.

Though a little too long at 143 minutes, particularly for a movie whose protagonist spends most of her time under house arrest, *The Lady* nonetheless manages to engage with splendid mounting and a gripping narrative.

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