

cinema



* A dancer performs as directors Jeff Zimbalist (third left) and Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra arrive on the red carpet before the screening of their documentary *Bollywood – The Greatest Love Story Ever Told* presented out-of-competition at the 64th Cannes Film Festival on May 14.

Feasting on disinformation

The single Indian film that made it to the Cannes Film Festival was by far its most shoddy offering, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Shameful as it may sound, Indians merrily continue to spread disinformation about the Cannes Film Festival, whose 64th edition ended on May 22. Worse, the media endorses this, as merrily. It does not bother to check facts or speak to those who have made an effort to visit or cover the Festival for a reasonable length of time.

For many years, I have been noticing a disgraceful trend among Indian producers and others connected with the cinema industry. They take their movies to Cannes, hire an auditorium in the huge film market there, invite a few people, mostly Indians, and feed newspapers and television channels back home that their works were at the Festival.

The media, ever hungry for such easy stories, publish or telecast them. Hundreds of thousands of Indian readers and television watchers feel elated: they are proud that so many of their movies have played at Cannes, the world's largest and most renowned film festival.

What a lie that the people have swallowed so effortlessly. The truth is that such pictures are not part of the Festival, not part of its official sections, broadly confined to Competition, Outside Competition, Special Screenings, A Certain Regard and Classics. There are three other sections that run alongside the Festival: Critics' Weeks, Directors' Fortnight and Cinefondation.

But who cares about these lies or bothers to check facts before publishing or broadcasting them? In an atmosphere where there has been a virtual famine of Indian movies at Cannes, anything goes. Even a crass work like Shekhar Kapoor's *Bollywood: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*. Admittedly, it was part of the Festival this year, though screening outside Competition. I do not have the vaguest idea why Cannes chose it at all in the first place.

Surely, there were some far, far better films made in India that could have found a slot at Cannes. The only reason I can think of is that Cannes probably felt morally obliged to show Kapoor's work, having sponsored the project

a year ago. It was not financed by the Festival, though. Kapoor himself is the producer, but it is not clear whether he had a financier to back him.

The Press Trust of India, one of the media agencies that I covered the Festival for this year, was not quite happy with the fact that I had not, till then, written anything about the movie, though I tried explaining it to them that it had not yet been screened for the media.

But who bothers about the film, as long as you corner Kapoor and get a byte from him — a terrible habit among Indian journalists who cover cinema. They seldom watch a movie with the result that they end up asking the most mundane and stupid questions.

Often, I have been irritated by questions like "oh what do you think of the festival" even before the event had got underway. So, I suppose the PTI was perfectly justified in its annoyance.

When, finally, I got around watching *Bollywood: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*, I was terribly disappointed. Not just this,

even those who might have had a soft corner for Bollywood would now think twice before watching anything from the Mumbai stable. The film came as a blow at a time when India is struggling to find some space, however tiny, at Cannes.

The movie, strictly a documentary — that has been helmed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra (*Delhi 6*, *Rang De Basanti*) and Jeff Zimbalist (an American documentary filmmaker best known for his *Favela Rising*, *The Two Escobars*, and *The Scribe of Uraba*) — is indeed a love story, though of Hindi film song sequences.

But it has been compiled in such a clumsy, amateurish manner that even those like me who grew up on Bollywood found it thoroughly confusing. The movie dazzles you all right, but beyond the bright colours, the often garish costumes and the opulent sets, it has nothing, nothing at all to offer. It leaves you deeply dissatisfied, and come on, one did not expect this from Kapoor (*Masoom Bandit Queen*, *Elizabeth*, etc) and Mehra.

Termed as a musical tribute, the documentary shows tens of clips of dancing men and women, mouthing lyrically the saddest of songs, the happiest of songs. The mesmeric numbers from *Mughal - E - Azam* (Madhubala and Dilip Kumar), the lilting folk tunes from Shammii Kapoor hits, the sorrowful outpourings in *Pyasa* (Guru Dutt), the exuberant melody from *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and the enticing dance duet between Aishwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit in *Devdas* and so on were all there on the screen. But for the uninitiated and even the well-informed, the images seemed to flash by too quickly, leaving behind a blur in the head.

No attempt has been made to put the images in some kind of chronological order, and without proper identification or classification, they all appeared like scenes strung together without any thought or sensitivity.

What is more, there is commentary, though sketchy. And apart from a cursory interlude with some Mumbai residents, there is little explanation coming. Finally, when Kapoor and his directors get some Bollywood celebrities to talk, they are frustratingly brief. Aishwarya Rai likens Indian films to an Indian food thali, with "a little bit of everything... there is some spice, there is some sugar, there is some sour stuff". This was so juvenile, I thought, as did many others. Dev Anand feels that music is imperative in a Bollywood film. Dixit likes the traditional songs the best. Surely, they could have made more valuable contributions.

How naïve and half-hearted Kapoor's effort seemed. Little wonder, then, that with this kind of Indian offering, Cannes is so wary about picking up any movie from the country.

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Back home after the Festival, I was surprised to note a conference on Cannes, organised by the Chennai branch of the Alliance Francaise. The two speakers were K Hariharan, a moviemaker and director of the LV Prasad Film & TV Academy, and entrepreneur Sudhir Rao. Hariharan has never been to the Festival, Rao has been there twice as part of the India Pavillion in those years when it was a sham. I, for the world of me could not understand why these two men were chosen to talk on Cannes. They were certainly not experts on the subject, and this brings us back to what I had begun this column with. Disinformation. Indians love to make a feast out of it.

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