

cinema



* Susan Sarandon and Richard Gere in *Arbitrage*. The film, expected to clinch an Oscar for Gere, is set to open the Abu Dhabi Film Festival next week.

Abu Dhabi festival sets stage for global films

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Today, there are as many movie festivals as there are days in a year. Almost every country has a festival, often many festivals. In India, there are over half a dozen, and more are coming, the latest being a second one in New Delhi.

Having covered film festivals for a quarter century, I am often in a dilemma over which to cover. And which to give it a miss. For, movie festivals do overlap. A classic example is Venice and Toronto. Invariably, several journalists, critics and PR guys leave Venice half way through the Festival and head for Toronto, which is becoming huge and a hot spot for world premieres.

The other example is the Abu Dhabi Film Festival and the Reliance-funded Mumbai Film Festival. Mumbai begins a few days after Abu Dhabi does. With invites from both, I have to make choices that are not easy. One, Mumbai is run by people who are my dear friends, and it is always difficult to convince buddies. "But Gautaman, you are a friend, and why are you ditching us?" asked Amit Khanna of the Mumbai Film Festival over the telephone the other morning.

But, well, I am covering Abu Dhabi this year, as I have for some years now. The reason is purely professional. Where else apart from Abu Dhabi or Dubai or Marrakech

that one gets to see Arab cinema, Middle Eastern cinema or African. So, Abu Dhabi, it will be this year. Not Mumbai.

Abu Dhabi will unfold on October 11 under a new management and Director. The extremely genial Peter Scarlett has quit, and Ali al-Jabri (whom I have not yet met) has taken over the six-year-old 10-day event. "All I can say is that everything is going well and as planned", he told the *Khaleej Times* recently. This time, the Festival will be organised by TwoFour54 as part of a plan to strategically align the event with Abu Dhabi's other media initiatives and related programmes.

The Festival, which runs till October 20, returns this year to its usual and popular venue, the Emirates Palace. Last year, the main venue was shifted to the Fairmont Hotel, which was far away from the main Festival hotel and the main screening venue, Marina Mall. The Emirates Palace, which also doubles up as the main Festival hotel and screening centre, is just a seven-minute drive from the Marina Mall, a delight for the always-in-a-rush journalist.

Apart from the Festival's competitions for long, short and documentary movies, the 50th anniversary of Algerian independence will be celebrated with a programme of the country's cinema. Then there will be a showcase of critically acclaimed films from all over the world with the Festival opening with the Richard Gere-starrer, *Arbitrage*.

Produced by Saudi Arabia's Mohamed al-Turki, the movie is being seen as a bridge that unites the East with the West, and the presence of the film's director, Nicholas Jarecki, and stars, Gere and Nate Parker (along with Indian superstar Mammooty), is certainly bound to strengthen these ties as well as add a dash of glamour to the opening night on the sands of Arabia.

Arbitrage is undoubtedly a Gere movie. At 63, he still exudes that boyish charm we saw in the late 1970s and early 1980s in films like *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Pretty Woman*, and it is this charisma that carries Jarecki's first feature. As Robert Miller, a hedge fund manager on Wall Street, Gere plays a villain of sorts, albeit one who just cannot be hated. Trying to palm off a company he had built from scratch through a merger he negotiates, craftily hiding its \$400mn debt — even from his daughter, Brooke (Brit Marling), who is the chief accountant there — Miller is an uncanny combination of pre-infamy Bernie Madoff and Chappaquiddick Teddy Kennedy. He represents a world that is selfish, has no scruples and uses money to get away with some of the worst misdemeanours. In a subplot, Miller is seen walking away from a terrible car accident where his lover, Julie Cote (former Victoria's Secret model Laetitia Casta), is killed. He tries to wriggle out of the mess by asking Jimmy Grant (Nate Parker), the son of a former chauffeur, for help, putting the boy's life and future in jeopardy. When things reach a flashpoint, Miller dangles millions to keep Grant with him.

Will *Arbitrage*, which also stars Susan Sarandon as Miller's wife, help Gere win an Oscar? He has never been nominated before, though surprisingly his co-stars in many of his movies were, and in two cases, they even won. Writers have pointed out that Gere could effortlessly help others around him come out with their best, and what a contrast that is to his own role in *Arbitrage*. Maybe, at least this time, the Academy would not overlook the actor's great piece of acting.

Among the several fiction features, documentary features and shorts from 48 countries — with several world premieres — India's *Mumbai Cha Raja* by Manjeet Singh and *I.D.* by Kamal will compete in a section called New Horizons. Nisha Pahuja's *The World Before Her* will be part of the Documentary Feature Competition, and *Sujata* by Shlok Sharma will vie with other short movies.

Beyond India (whose actress and activist Shabana Azmi presides over the main jury, the first woman ever to hold the position), works like *After the Battle* (Egypt's Yousry Nasrallah), *Betrayal* (Russia), Michael Winterbottom's *Everyday*, *Gebo and the Shadow* (by 103-year-old Manoel de Oliveira), Sally Potter's *Ginger and Rosa*, *Harraga Blues* (from Algeria), Tunisia's *Hidden Beauty*, *In the House* (by Francois Ozon), Australia's *Lore*, *No* (from Chile), *Perfumes of Algiers* (Rachid Benhadj), China's *The Last Supper*, *A Hijacking* (Denmark), Iran's *A Respectable Family*, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (USA), Swedish *Eat Sleep Die*, *Keep Smiling* (Georgia), Morocco's *The Miscreants*, *The Company You Keep* (Robert Redford) and *Songlap* from Malaysia will be some of the films to look for at the Festival.

The Festival will for the first time honour an Arab talent, actress Sawasn Badr, with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Claudia Cardinale, Tunisia-born Italian actress, will be the second recipient of this Award.

No food for thought in this big buffet

During my three decades of reviewing films, I have often noticed that those with the biggest hype and the strongest PR campaign eventually fail to impress. Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish* has for months been touted as actress Sridevi's comeback venture. Look how young and lovely she looks at 40, ran PR jingles. Young and lovely she does appear, but not as lovely when it comes to performance. Sridevi's voice has always had the quiver, which made her dialogues unclear and her delivery unimpressive. Yes, she has those mesmeric eyes, which she uses with great effect. But that is not enough.

As for the movie itself, Shinde is yet another of those who believe that the Indian ticket-paying public must have a big buffet on the screen. Otherwise, the money is not well spent. Sridevi is Sashi, who makes home for a top-notch corporate executive, forever buried in meetings and making money, a mother-in-law (unbelievably kind to her daughter-in-law by Indian standards) and two kids, one a teenage girl, who has sheer disdain for her mother, because she cannot read, write or speak English. The husband is no less scornful, though he cleverly camouflages the cruel barbs, and barely tolerates her little "laddoo" -making business. In this mundane existence of Sashi's, an opportunity comes by when she is asked to help her New York-based widowed sister with the marriage of her daughter. Sashi flies to the US to begin a journey over a senselessly written script.

Here are examples. Amitabh Bachchan is her co-passenger, who makes a fool of himself on the flight, a mindless add-on to the story. Sashi stutters and stammers her English way through the American immigration (but before that struggling with the immigration form at the Indian airport printed in English — but I thought a Hindi version was always there!) and decides to join a four-week crash course in the alien language in a New York academy. Her teacher is gay, and Sashi tells the motley group of students in her class (a French chef, a Spanish nanny, a Pakistani cabbie, a Tamil IT guy — this community has become a must — a hairdresser from South-east Asia and an African) how wrong it is to discriminate one with a different sexual preference! I could have yawned.

But I have to keep awake; there are more morals coming. The French chef flirts for Sashi, who leads him on, and how? By not telling him in one simple sentence that she is married and not looking for a fling? Obviously, Shinde had planned a drama at the end — marital loyalty, familial bond — that could not have been melodramatised if the poor French man had been told right at the beginning what he had to have known.

Now, why must a work on the importance of the English language, not just in India but also the world over, digress and ramble? Could it not have stuck to its main theme, instead of distracting itself with this extra-marital pit, which at one point tempts Sashi to fling herself into it? The plot thus gets diluted and weakened — tasting like flavourless coffee.

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