

cinema



* Frieda Pinto plays the lead in *Trishna*, Michael Winterbottom's Indian take on Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.



* Michelle Yeoh as Aung San Suu Kyi in *The Lady*. The Luc Besson-directed biopic will close the IFFI on December 3.

IFFI all bright and shining this autumn

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The other day, a friend of mine accused me of being responsible for getting the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) into Goa's Panaji. The Festival, whose 42nd edition is now on, pitched its tent at Panaji in 2004 after years of gypsy existence when it wandered from city to city every year. The Directorate of Film Festivals, which organises the 11-day annual cinematic event, felt that 60% of its energy went into setting up a base every 12 months.

Well, yes, I had argued for years in my columns and editorials which I wrote in *The Hindu* that the festival must have a permanent venue. Festivals the world over have one. But I never said that the venue ought to be Goa — or, for that matter any other city. It was the government of the day which decided on Panaji, hoping that it could be India's Cannes.

However, when Panaji was finally zeroed in on, there were fears that the Festival would be hijacked by Bollywood, one important reason being the city's proximity to Mumbai. In fact, IFFI now seems to be struggling precisely against that.

This time, the Festival was inaugurated by Bollywood "Badshah" Shah Rukh Khan. He walked in 40 minutes late to open IFFI on November 23 in Goa's Margao, keeping even Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting Ambika Soni and Goa's Chief

Minister Digambar Kamat waiting, not to mention the international jury (chairman Adoor Gopalakrishnan from India, Israel's Dan Wolman, Iran's Tahmineh Milani, Korea's Lee Yong Kwan and Laurence Kardish from the US).

It was not very different either the following day, when actress Madhuri Dixit was invited to inaugurate the Indian Panorama. She appeared 45 minutes late, irking the assembled delegates and journalists.

"We want to see the movie, not ministers or bureaucrats or stars", I heard several among the crowd shouting and clapping in protest. Dixit's arrive-as-you-please attitude pushed the opening film of the Panorama, *Urumi*, by 75 minutes. This was nothing short of sacrilege in a tightly packed Festival.

Also, nowhere in the world does a movie festival get bogged down by such elaborately inane speech-and-dance rituals on its opening night. It took as long as two hours on the inaugural evening of the Festival before the opening movie, *The Consul of Bordeaux*, could be screened. Audiences were clearly impatient by then, and many left in what could be seen as insulting to the Portuguese directors.

While Portugal's *The Consul of Bordeaux* (by Francisco Manso and Joao Correa) was an apt work given the fact that Goa was celebrating the Golden Jubilee of its liberation from Lisbon, the movie, though, ended up being one of those ponderous looks at a World War II incident. The story

of a man (in this case the French Consul) saving Jews from Hitler's hatred is a theme that has been beaten out of shape. And this depressingly dark work was neither invigorating nor elevating — ingredients essential to add that zing to get a festival sailing.

Santosh Sivan's *Urumi* — which heralded the Indian Panorama — dealt (quite aptly again) with an essentially Portuguese theme: Vasco da Gama's hunt for pepper and invasion of Kerala and Goa.

Photographed stunningly by Sivan himself, the movie is more fiction than fact, and often confuses the viewer with its innumerable characters and intricate plot twists. Interesting performances by Vidya Balan and Genelia D'Souza (weighed down by average efforts by Prabhu Deva and Prithviraj) were somewhat redeeming in a tiringly long work, 155 minutes in all.

Between *The Consul of Bordeaux* and *Urumi* was the lifetime felicitation of French director Bertrand Tavernier (*The Princess of Montpensier*, *In the Electric Mist* and *Holy Lola*). The award, carrying a grant of \$20,000, has been reinstated after a decade.

Paradoxically, the helmer rued that not one film of his had ever found a theatrical outlet in India. The man, who has visited country five times, said that he would think of making a movie in the country, maybe something on Indo-French relations.

Be that as it may, it was certainly wonderful that this award has been reintroduced, and the credit should go — at least largely to IFFI's new director, Shankar Mohan.

Mohan, who has been part of the Festival for about two decades, finally got a chance to steer the event, having seen many directors (most of them with little idea of cinema) pass by him. One only hopes that Mohan will remain in the seat for a reasonably long time to lift the Festival out of the darkness it has sunk into.

But as Gopalakrishnan said during the opening positive changes were already visible after Mohan's appointment. One, the 14-entry world competition was a good package of films from Israel, Iran, Iceland, France, Germany, Spain and so on.

What was as impressive was the lineup of celebrities, a kind I had not seen in years. British director Michael Winterbottom came with his *Trishna* (a modern-day adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* set in India) and its leading lady Frieda Pinto.



* Vidya Balan and Prithviraj in *Urumi*.

Then there were Tavernier, Luc Besson (whose marvellous biopic of Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Lady*, will close the Festival on December 3), and Australian director Phil Noyce.

A seminar on 3-D, films on soccer (because Goans love the game, and these were shown in an open-air football ground for the public) and several master classes made a heady cocktail.

Ultimately, a movie festival must have good cinema and star actors and directors. IFFI certainly managed to rope in some exciting celebrities and fare. In fact, what I noticed was that most delegates (including journalists) were not seen outside the theatres; they were mostly inside the auditoriums — an unmistakable sign of good selection.

As Mohan quipped, of course there are glitches, but they will soon be addressed to make IFFI one of the premier festivals in the world.

Quite possible, but the Information and Broadcasting Ministry that runs the Festival with the help of the Directorate, must let Mohan remain Director for at least a good five years if it wants IFFI to fly high.

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