

cinema



* Riz Khan and Kate Hudson in a scene from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Based on a novel by Mohsin Hamid, the Mira Nair-directed movie will be opening the Venice Film Festival today.

The Golden Lion roars

Gautaman Bhaskaran on this year's Venice Film Festival line-up

The Venice Film Festival will celebrate its 80th anniversary here this evening by opening with Mira Nair's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

For India, this is a double whammy. All set to mark a hundred years of its own cinema in 2013, Nair's movie will be seen as an honour for a nation, which despite its 1,200-1,300 films a year had invariably cut a sorry figure on the world screen.

What could be an even greater tribute to India is the fact that Venice is 80, making it the oldest movie festival anywhere, and Nair's work takes the pride of place by opening the 11-day festivity.

Now, some may quip that Mira is not quite Indian. I disagree. She may now be living between New York and Kampala, her adopted home. But she is a Punjabi, her family hailing from the Golden Temple city of Amritsar, and she

was born in Rourkela, where her father was a civil servant and her mother a social worker.

Nair went to school in Shimla, and later to New Delhi's Miranda House. She first dabbled in entertainment by being part of the stormy political street theatre in Delhi University and an amateur drama troupe before a scholarship took her away to Harvard. All these make her essentially Indian, do they not?

Produced by Lydia Dean Pilcher and presented by the Doha Film Institute as part of its efforts to fund meaningful cinema, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been adapted from a best-selling novel by Mohsin Hamid with the same title.

Nair — who won the Golden Lion at Venice in 2001 for her India-based and poignantly Indian story of *Monsoon Wedding* — will walk the red carpet on the Adriatic Sea-washed island of Lido (just off mainland Venice) for the fifth time.

Her *Mississippi Masala* competed in 1991 and *Vanity Fair* in 2004. Her *11.09.01, India*, premiered in 2002 Outside Competition.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, with Riz Ahmed, Kate Hudson, Kiefer Sutherland, Liev Schreiber, Martin Donovan, Om Puri, Shabana Azmi, Haluk Bilginer and Meesha Shafi playing variedly interesting roles, was shot in New York, Atlanta, Istanbul, Lahore and Delhi.

Said to be a riveting political thriller (so was last year's Venice opener, George Clooney's *Ides of March*) about a young and ambitious Pakistani man, who while chasing the American dream on Wall Street, gets caught in a hostage crisis and finds himself torn between seductive corporate success and homeland loyalty, Nair's creation has the right ingredients to spice up the evening.

Will this day be as memorable as the one on August 6, 1932, when the Festival first began its roll on

the terrace of Hotel Excelsior, which still exists and plays host to celebrities, the open lawn these days bustling with actors, PR guys and media men?

Rouben Mamoulian's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* set in motion the balmy autumn evening eight decades ago as it did a Festival whose roller coaster ride is well known, whose turbulent times mirroring Italy's volatile politics have been well documented. A grand ball at the Excelsior followed the screening of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and the gathering must have included a fair sprinkling of political leaders, who could have been anxious and uneasy.

The world was hurtling towards a great war, and the Festival itself served more as a political platform for Fascist propaganda than as a showcase for varied arthouse fare.

Although the President of the Biennale di Venezia, Paolo Baratta, said recently that "the

Venice Film Festival was conceived from the very beginning with sensitivity and a mission to present multiplicity of expression"; this has been rubbished by independent observers, the French in particular.

They found the Festival terribly biased in the way it made its selections or decided on its prize winners. This was an important reason for the eventual emergence of the Cannes Film Festival in 1939 which vowed to stay clear of biases and political isms. That this did not always happen is another story.

Getting back to the 1932 Venice Festival, the young movie critic, Michelangelo Antonioni (who went on to become a great director), wrote, though 10 years later, that the first edition was memorable. "Through August 21st, the screen at the Excelsior showed the works of masters such as Mario Camerini (*Gli uomini, che mascalzoni...*), the first Italian film to be presented, with great success), Frank Capra (*Forbidden*), René Clair (*A nous la liberté*), Alexander Dovzhenko (*Earth*), Edmund Goulding (*Grand Hotel*), Joris Ivens (*Rain*), and King Vidor (*The Champ*). In all, there were 26 movies from seven nations that year".

Film director Raffaello Matarazzo, then a critic for the *Tevere*, reporting the inauguration, wrote: "One could imagine Lumière hiding in a corner, crying with joy".

It was only in 1934 that the Festival became an annual event, and it took another 15 years for the Golden Lion to begin its majestic roar. So, this year, it will be the Festival's 69th chapter, running till September 8, and headed by a new man, Alberto Barbera, who takes over from Marco Muller, who ended his eight-year term some months ago.

Barbera hoped to make his first Festival an interesting cocktail of established names and new voices. There will be 50 world premieres this time, including new movies from Terence Malick, Susanne Bier, Robert Redford, Brian De Palma, Spike Lee, Manoel de Oliveira and Amos Gitai. The new voices will be those of Rama Burshtein, (*Fill the Void*), and Haifaa al-Mansour (*Wajida*, the first ever work from Saudi Arabia).

The competition line-up is slimmer than they have been under Mueller.

Barbera wants every film to enjoy equal exposure. "I don't like the bulimia that characterises most festivals. A festival should take the responsibility to be more selective. Each movie should be equally promoted. If you have 25 films in Competition and screen three movies a day, one of them is not going to get a great screening time. I don't want to hide any films," he said.

Venice regulars will be watching.

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