

# cinema

## Stormy saga by the sea

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

In many ways, Venice is not just about its tragic merchant and sly Jew that Shakespeare immortalised in a play. It is not about its gondolas and gondoliers, or its labyrinth of canals and lagoons.

The city on water that is often splashed by the Adriatic waves is also about its stimulating film festival held every September.

The oldest in the world, having opened in 1932, the 11-day cinematic event has rolled and pitched in storms of a hundred kinds that have sometimes threatened to pull it down to the bottom of the ocean.

But the Venice International Film Festival — which sets sail today (August 31) — has stood like a giant rock, frustrating the political and artistic tempests. Even in the bygone era of Fascism, when movies praised some of the cruellest dictators history has ever known, the Festival managed to uphold the values of cinema. At least in some ways.

After the guns of World War II fell silent, the Venetian lion woke up roaring, heralding the freer and fascinating visual expression of Neo-realism. Rossellini and De Sica lighted up the screen with intriguing reality, paving the way for men like Fellini.

However, if Venice fancied itself into thinking that the new cinema signalled the end of all its woes, it was mistaken. Call it a curse, the Festival has been destined to remain on choppy waters, though with a lifebuoy firmly around.

If Venice failed to be as great as Cannes, an important reason has been the frequent change of guard. The Festival has had as many directors as there were governments in Italy. It is only the last eight years that Marco Mueller had been at the Festival's helm that it has seen stability and gradual progress.

The latest of its troubles is the Palazzo del Cinema, the main screening venue on the island of Lido, off the Venetian shores.

The current Palazzo had its red-ribbon ceremony in 1938, but later plans to get a new building up have fallen through at least thrice. The latest blueprint for a \$170mn immensely fancy edifice — resembling ironically a gold-leaf laced ship turned upside down — appears to have hit an iceberg. For the past two years, I have been seeing furious activity to brick up the new Palazzo, and I am told about \$50mn have already been spent.

But much to the Venice administration's dismay, workers found layers of toxic asbestos sheets when they dug a huge hole to erect supporting pillars.

However, the Festival has side-stepped this problem for the time being and gone ahead with renovating its existing infrastructure. The hole has been covered up for this Festival, and plans are afoot to try and raise a smaller edifice on it that can do with a shallower foundation.

The "crater" now hidden from prying eyes, the Festival goer has been promised an attractively refurbished Sala Grande, one of the main auditoriums. Modernism tempered with historic grandeur will be its high point.

Of no less significance is the Festival's promise of better restaurants. Food has always been a problem on the Lido, with audiences from late evening screenings



\* A grazing light effect is created by lighting on the ceiling and walls of the Great Hall of the Palazzo del Cinema during the press launch of the renovated theatre this week. The Venice Film Festival runs from today until September 10.

struggling to get a decent dinner. And there will be more water buses between Venice and Lido, and a shuttle service to take you from point to point on the island. New spaces to relax and have refreshments have come up in Lido's unused Nicelli airport and a former army barracks.

Probably, the only major grievance that Lido visitors will have this year may pertain to inadequate number of hotels, a long-standing issue. Mueller says an empty luxury cruise ship, docked at a Lido pier, can be used as offices, screening venues and sleeping bunks.

Trust Mueller to come out with something as novel as this. This apart, he has single-handedly pulled out the gasping Festival from the Adriatic depths, and resuscitated it with an aggressive dose of art and glamour, premiers and path-breaking films. These have been daringly different, exquisitely experimental and compelling to the core.

As I walk into the first shows of the Festival, I would, like many others, be wondering whether Mueller will remain firmly anchored next September. With his contract getting over just after this Festival, and with hunters from other festivals trying to trap the man, it is possible that Venice will lose its dear Marco in the coming months.

And many would want Mueller to step into their own arenas. It is well known that he won on very difficult fronts: he got the world to take note of the Festival during the depressive years of economic doom, and somehow pushed out the newly established Rome Film Festival (with loads of money and political backing) from global radar.

Mueller even advanced his Festival dates to let them clash with those of North America's most important movie festival in Toronto. He quipped, let the world choose between these two. It was a very bold move that rattled Toronto, which begins this time on September 8 with Venice closing on September 10. If Rome failed to get the attention it desperately sought, Toronto has decided to play safe by starting its projectors when the Venetian ship is just about to sail away.

It is, therefore, not surprising for Giancarlo Galan, Italy's Minister of Cultural Heritage and Activities, to have declared that the very idea of Mueller leaving Venice sounds blasphemous.

Understandable. This year, all the 65 movies in the Festival's main sections are never-before-screened-anywhere premieres. In fact, for years, Mueller has been almost obstinate about screening premieres, though in previous years, this "rule" generally applied to competing entries.

So, one can expect that Venice this year will be abuzz with the newest of cinema and the shiniest of star power. That irresistible George Clooney will arrive on the Lido on the opening night with his *Ides of March* — about the dirty politics of Howard Dean's 2004 American presidential campaign. And that alluring Madonna will bring her *W.E.*, tracing the relationship between Wallis Simpson and King Edward VIII.

Apart from Clooney and Madonna, Al Pacino will be at Venice for *Wilde Salome*, where he will be King Herod. Kate Winslet

will be on the island to promote two competition movies. She stars along with Jodie Foster in Roman Polanski's *Carnage*, and with Gwyneth Paltrow, Matt Damon and Jude Law in Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion*.

The main selections are flush with English-language films that include some provocative fare, such as David Cronenberg's *Sigmund Freud - Carl Jung* study, *A Dangerous Method*, with Keira Knightley and Viggo Mortensen; Abel Ferrara's *4:44 The Last Day on Earth*, starring Willem Dafoe; William Friedkin's *Killer Joe* and the Mia Farrow starrer, *Dark Horse*, from Todd Solondz, a helmer whose middle name can well be controversy.

There is also a growing buzz around intriguing Russian director Aleksander Sokurov's *Faust*, and Vincent Paronnaud's and Marjane Satrapi's *Chicken With Plums*.

The Festival basket looks all too enthralling.

And let me end my piece with a quote. "Losing Mueller could be disastrous...I don't see any other candidate out there who can put together a Venice Festival worthy of the name," says Francesco Di Pace, director of Venice's International Critics' Week. "It would be difficult to replace Marco without sinking what Venice has become under him."

It seems that Marco Mueller is Venice's lifeline.

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