

# cinema



\* *Something in the Air* ... traces student unrest of the late 1960s Europe.



\* *Fill the Void* ... earned the Best Actress award for its lead star Hadas Yaron.



\* *The Master* ... the story of a cult leader and a lost soul.



\* *Dormant Beauty* ... another work about a community's conflicting interests and religious loyalties.

## Venetian violets

The Venice Film Festival and controversy are inseparable, especially on the awards night. This year was no exception, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

**T**he Venice Film Festival went down this week in a trail of controversy. Its 80th birthday, though its 69th edition, which began with trepidation, given the appointment of a new director, Alberto Barbera, replacing the highly lauded Marco Mueller and his eight-year reign, ended with a blot. The awards lent themselves to a raging debate.

It is reported that the jury, chaired by the American movie director, Michael Mann, was set to declare the Paul Thomas Anderson-helmed feature, *The Master*, the Golden Lion Winner, the Festival's top trophy. But a quirky Festival rule made that impossible, and the Golden Lion went to Korean director Kim Ki-duk's *Pieta*. Not at all worthy of the win, in my opinion.

During the jury's first deliberations, it had supposedly wanted to honour *The Master* on the early origins of Scientology with the Golden Lion, Anderson with the Silver Lion for direction and the actors, Joaquin Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman, with the Silver Lion for best performances.

But since the Festival regulations do not allow a film to clinch more than two major prizes, the jury was asked to re-deliberate, and it had to rather "unhappily" strip *The Master* of its Golden Lion and give it to *Pieta* about a sadistic loan shark and his strange

relationship with a woman who says is his mother.

But would it not have made better sense to retain the Golden Lion with *The Master*, and shift the acting prize to someone else?

In 2008, the same set of irrational rules made it impossible for the jury to give the Golden Lion to Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* and to also honour Mickey Rourke with the Coppa Volpi for best actor. In the end, the movie was given the Golden Lion, and Rourke lost out on the acting award, which was given to Italy's Silvio Orlando for his work in *Giovanna's Father*.

Venice and controversy are inseparable, especially on the awards night. The world's oldest Festival has had an ugly history of such controversy since the days when it was in the grip of Fascist rulers. In recent years, controversy has returned to trouble and even shame the Lido event. In 2010, jury president Quentin Tarantino faced severe criticism when most of the Festival's main prizes went to directors he was close to, including the Golden Lion to *Somewhere* by Sofia Coppola, Tarantino's former girlfriend.

This year, the Special Jury Prize went to Ulrich Seidl's *Paradise: Faith* (an exploration of religious faith) and the Coppa Volpi prize for best actress to Hadas Yaron for her part in *Fill the Void* from Israel. Italian star Fabrizio Falco got

the Marcello Mastroianni trophy for best new young actor or actress for his roles in Marco Bellocchio's *Dormant Beauty* and *The Son Was Here* by Daniele Cipri.

Away from the glitter of the closing night and the unpleasantness of controversies, Venice had a slimmer but exciting and varied selection with a fair sprinkle of celebrities this summer. James Bond came to the Lido, though not as the ruthless 007 but as a business tycoon who gets hit by Cupid's arrows darted by a beautiful cancer survivor. After his action sequences as the British secret agent that kept us at the edge of our seats for many years, it was wonderful to see a relaxed Pierce Brosnan in a Susanne Bier-helmed film, *Love Is All You Need*.

The work was as refreshing as Brosnan was in his new avatar: with much of cinema on the Lido talking about violent Japanese Yakuza, incest, torture and other forms of human degradation, Bier's movie was a delightful love story set in an extraordinarily pleasing part of Italy, and the occasion, a great wedding that to me seemed as trying as one in India.

Brosnan plays Philip, a rich widower and big shot in the Copenhagen fruit and vegetable market. He is hosting his son's wedding in his villa at Sorrento, and there is also the bride's mother, Ida (Trine Dyrholm), who is just recovering from cancer. Somewhat nervous as she is awaiting the final "cured" signal from her

doctors, and also devastated by her husband deserting her for a younger woman, Ida's first brush with Philip at the airport parking is far from pleasant.

But well into the marriage — where Philip's sister-in-law is trying to revive an old romance with him — he finds Cupid darting arrows at his heart which he thought had gone cold.

There was another love story, Terrance Malik's *To This Wonder* about a weak man terrified of emotional commitment. Pretty pictures, great music, but hardly an original story that split critics almost vertically. Much like the directors' *Tree of Life*, *To This Wonder* is abstract to the point of being pretentious. There were more boos than claps at the premiere.

Science and religion played their parts as well. *The Master* was powerful and thought-titillating, and traced the story of a cult leader and a lost soul.

We are at the close of World War II, and the American Navy man, Freddie Quell (a great piece of acting by Phoenix) drinks his way out of relationships and into psychiatric chambers before finally landing at Lancaster Dodd's (another marvellous performance by Hoffman) doorstep. The man calls himself a writer, philosopher and scientist, and in the course of time that takes the two men through emotional upheavals, arguments, brush with the law and journeys, Quell learns to control his temper and urge to hit the bottle.

He becomes somewhat more balanced than what we see him in the beginning. *The Master* may not have the dramatic arc, but is alluringly shot, capturing the finer essence and nuances of the period (with Johnny Greenwood's haunting score), and, more importantly, effectively contrasting the two major parts. Dodd is gentle and firm, Quell is harsh and angry, even ungainly.

The Hadas Yaron starrer *Fill the Void* by Rama Burshtein is the story of young Hasidic woman who faces a momentous dilemma when her sister dies after childbirth. Should she, as her religiously orthodox Jewish family wishes, marry the widowed man? The movie presents a stark canvas of a community with its contradictions, which as the woman realises are not so bad after all.

Marco Bellocchio's *Dormant Beauty* was another work about a community's conflicting interests and religious loyalties. A multi-linear drama, the film takes off from Italy's most renowned case of euthanasia that ended in the legally approved death of Eluana Englaro, a woman who had been in a coma for 17 years. We watch the clash between government senators, Catholic protagonists, desperate mothers and a doctor bent on not letting anyone die. With panache and great style, and lovely digressions, Bellocchio handles the theme confidently.

There was politics aplenty, political radicalisation. Robert Redford's *The Company You Keep* gripped one with an FBI investigation to bring former Weather Underground activists to justice. Oliver Assayas' *Something in the Air* was not as nostalgic as it was real tracing the director's own experiences in the student unrest of the late 1960s Europe. Mira Nair's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* talks of political polarisation post 9/11.

Then there were other gems. Ariel Vromen's account of a cold contract killer in *The Iceman*, Brian De Palma's neo-Hitchcockian exercise in *Passion* and Kirill Serebrennikov's brush with adulterous love and longing in *Betrayer*. One writer described Palma and Serebrennikov as being under the spell of *Vertigo*, which recently topped Sight & Sound's poll of all-time great works.

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