

cinema



* British actor Colin Firth speaks to the media during his arrival at the red carpet for the opening ceremony of the 7th edition of the Dubai International Film Festival this week.

DIFF spreads out a wide canvas

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The Seventh Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) began on Sunday evening amid a galaxy of stars, scintillating fireworks, a glittering open-air beach party and an engaging movie. Tom Hooper's *The King's Speech*, a highly acclaimed work that has already created a big buzz by clinching eight British independent Film Awards, including those for Best Picture, was screened to a huge audience that seemed to love every minute of it as it narrated the story of a nervous British monarch.

Debilitated by a stammer, King George VI is forced on to the throne of England after his father dies and brother Edward VIII abdicates in order to marry a commoner, Mrs Simpson. The new King hires a speech therapist to help him tide over his defect. Marvellously enacted, beautifully mounted, *The King's Speech* dramatically captures an England in the mid-1930s as it stands on the edge of another war, frightened by Hitler's resolve to drag the world into yet another bloody mess.

Colin Firth, who plays the king, Geoffrey Rush (a brilliant performance as the therapist) and Helena Bonham Carter (as George VI's queen) walked the Red Carpet just before *The King's Speech* unrolled.

Along with Firth, the evening's celebrity lineup included actor Sean Penn, Cannes prize winner

Souleymane Cisse from Africa and Pan-Arab singer Sabah. They have been honoured with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Sabah is the second woman to be feted by the Festival, while Cisse will make Africa proud.

In the days to come, the Festival will see celebrities such as Colin Farrell, Ed Harris, Jim Sturgess, Peter Weir, Beau Garrett, Jean Reno (who is acting in an Emirati work, *The Philosopher* directed by Abdullah al-Kaabi) Carey Mulligan, Khaled Abol Naga, Bushra, Nelly Karim, Aparna Sen and Shyamaprasad.

The Festival this year is keyed in to showcase the best of international cinema, stepping far beyond glitz and glamour.

And the 157 films from 57 countries that have been lined up in the next eight days till December 19, will perhaps highlight this. The canvas is really wide stretching from South America to South Korea, with a strong competition thrown in.

In a significant first, audiences across Dubai have been able to watch the Red Carpet ceremony live and for free at the Festival's new outdoor venue in the Jumeirah Beach Resort.

The Festival's important Arab films, from Iraq to Morocco, are primarily distributed among its in-competition Muhr Arab and Muhr Emirati Awards segment and its out-of-competition Arabian Nights and Gulf Voices categories.

The Festival includes 41 world and 13 international premieres that will touch just about every genre from thriller to comedy and drama to documentary.

Swimming against Bollywood's tide

Much like Hollywood that has been pushing independent European cinema out of existence, Bollywood has been elbowing smaller, sensitive and meaningful Indian films out of theatres.

So, it is admirable, and even courageous, for men like Girish Kasaravalli, who makes cinema in Kannada, to continue swimming in waters infested by bigger, more moneyed and phenomenally powerful sharks. He has kept his head and shoulders above the water, and has been scripting and helming the kind of films he firmly believes in.

An important reason for Kasaravalli's fine cinema may lie in his early life. He was born in Kesalur in the Shimoga district of Karnataka in 1950 to parents who loved books and the arts. He not only developed a passion for reading, but also certain folk forms, such as Yakshagana. A folk system of dance native to Karnataka, his father was an ardent patron of it. Young Kasaravalli also developed a fascination for cinema very early in life, watching popular Kannada movies that were shown in his village by touring talkies.

Although he graduated in pharmacology, his deep interest in cinema took him to the Pune Film and Television Institute of India. There, a magical world opened up for him, and his first feature, *Ghatashradha*, in 1977 won him the Golden Lotus and many other awards. His second film, *Tabarana Kathe*, which I consider his best till date, also clinched the Golden Lotus. A socially disturbing work about the painful plight of a government employee to earn his pension, the picture still moves me after all these years.

Kasaravalli's latest, *Riding the Dreams (Kanasemba Kudureyaneri)*, screened at the recent Mumbai Film Festival, is part of India's reality cinema savoured by a small, but devoted group of audience. In fact, Bengaluru-based Kasaravalli's cinema has never been big crowd-pullers, and this movie is not likely to be an exception.

Already part of the festival circuit, it was shot on the outskirts of Bijapur in Karnataka, and follows the life of a grave-digger, Irya (Vaijanath Biradar), and his wife, Rudri (Umashree). Literally eking a living off the dead, Irya worships Siddha, the messenger of death who appears in his dream every time someone in the village dies. Alerted about the death of the old landlord, Gowda (Akki Chennabasappa), Irya begins to prepare the grave. But he is perplexed when Gowda's caretaker, Mathadayya (Sadashiv Brahmavar), denies that his master is dead. Irya and Rudri begin to worry about the dreams going wrong, and their lives getting even more depressing.

The film is a brilliant study of how India's poorest of the poor struggle to survive in awfully degrading conditions, going hungry to bed night after night. Kasaravalli draws a moving comparison between Irya's righteous principles and those of the landlord's rich son, Shivanna (Shivaranajan), who callously leaves the father's corpse to rot while he finishes a long out-of-town business engagement.

Kasaravalli, one of the pioneers of the New Indian Cinema of the 1970s, has a set of dedicated actors. Engagingly convincing, Biradar and Umashree are seen throughout the movie in tattered clothes, getting every inch into the characters. Manohar's lilting background score is perhaps the only artifice here.

Will the heroes and heroines of Bollywood dare this?



* A scene from the Kannada film *Kanasemba Kudureyaneri*: fine cinema