



Movies of substance

This year's film fest may have seen the absence of some major international stars, but the regional movies were definitely enticing, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

A film festival sparkles when it ropes in talent and lines up gripping cinema. The recent Dubai International Film Festival might not have been able to draw many international celebrities, having managed to attract just about a handful of them, like Colin Firth, Colin Farrell, Carey Mulligan and Souleymane Cisse, but it certainly had movies of substance.

Aparna Sen dropped out at the eleventh hour and Hollywood heart-throb Sean Penn found Haiti more alluring than Dubai, but the festival filled this vacuum with celluloid works that went far beyond entertainment, narrating stories that were virtual social documents.

It kicked off with Tom Hooper's highly acclaimed *The King's Speech*, which painted the pathos of a monarch who had to hire a therapist to boost his confidence and get his words flowing out,

after which Dubai very rightly focused on Arabian cinema.

Many of the Middle Eastern movies that I saw told stories that moved and disturbed me.

The films were not technically brilliant, but they were honest, and strove to make socially and culturally relevant points. And, above all, they were bold, almost fearless.

Screenwriter Mohammad Diab's debut helming effort, *Six, Seven, Eight*, takes an unflinching look at harassment. Three women living in Cairo, from varying social and economic classes, find their lives miserable and torturous when they are constantly abused.

Nelly dreams of being a stand-up comic, but her reputation is in disarray after she files a harassment complaint with the police in a male-dominated community.

Fayza is a traditional mother and wife who finds life hard

because she is constantly assaulted on public buses.

Seba is a wealthy jeweller whose is recovering after being assaulted.

Equally unnerving was an Iraqi work, *The Singer*. Director Kassem Hawal gives us a brutal image of a dictator. When a

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renowned singer's car breaks down and he is delayed for a performance to celebrate the dictator's birthday, he is humiliated and disgraced.

What is as disturbing is the way women guests are frisked, and watched by guards on monitor screens.

Jordan's *Transit Cities* reveals the cultural shock of a woman who returns to Amman after a ten-year stay in the US.

She finds herself shackled by intolerance. In a very telling scene, a bank manager gives her a rug and asks here to cover her legs.

Zelal is a quiet masterpiece of hard-hitting reportage by directors Mustapha Hasnaoui and Marianne Khoury.

The work has drawn global critical praise for its candid insight into the lives of those afflicted by mental illness in Egypt today.

Shot in two large asylums, the movie reveals the horrific conditions in which some patients live.

India's *Harud* (Autumn) is scary. Aamir Bashir presents the horrific conditions in Kashmir, and portrays this through the suffering of a small family.



Zelal (Egypt) is a masterpiece of hard-hitting reportage



Harud (India) focuses on Kashmir



The Way Home is an interesting Malayalam movie



Six, Seven, Eight is a story of three women

Rafiq and his parents are trying to come to terms with the loss of his elder brother, and when things seem to be getting quieter, the family faces yet another tragedy.

There were other films that could not afford to be as daring, but yet found a way of saying what they wanted to.

At one point, Iranian cinema, pushed to the wall by an unfriendly regime, had to make mostly movies with children or about children.

I noticed that Iranian directors had cleverly found a way to overcome the obstacles.

They are making movies that while seemingly talking about people trapped in challenging situations are actually underlining issues that had far wider ramifications. Yes, these are never overtly told, but are conveyed in a disguised and guarded manner.

Sepideh Farsi's *The House Under The Water* follows two teens who cause the accidental drowning of a child. One of them goes to jail, and it is only 30 years later that he is freed, but only to find himself a suspect in another drowning death. Was Farsi making a comment on the

legal system? Mohsen Abdul Vahab weaves three stories into his *Please Do Not Disturb*. In one, we see a woman beaten by her husband hesitating to complain to the police. In the second, a clergyman begins negotiating with a thief, and the last segment focuses on an elderly couple scared to open the door to a young mechanic who has to come to repair their broken TV set.

The Hunter from Rafi Pitts sees a man become a murderer after his wife and six-year-old child are killed in the run-up to disputed elections.

BOLLYWOOD AGAIN

Incredible as it may sound, a panel discussion on the Indian movie industry, organised as part of the film festival, turned out to be one just on Bollywood. And this in a city where most Indian expats are from the southern states of India!

There were two participants on the panel. Reliance Big Pictures' Amit Khanna and actor-director-producer Karan Johar. Both from Mumbai. And I could see two empty chairs on the dais. Did a couple of them fail to turn up?

I know there were other Indian filmmakers in town, and with their movies playing in the festival: Kerala's Shyamaprasad with his controversial *Elektra* (based on the Greek mythology, and which reportedly provoked protests back home when it opened); Tamil Nadu's Prabusolomon with his gripping love story, *Mynaa* (which recently took on the might of Rajnikanth's *Endhiran*); Kashmir's Aamir Bashir with his engaging *Harud* (Autumn); and, of course, Mumbai's own Krishna DK and Raj Nidimoru with their *Shor* (Noise), a comic drama on noise pollution during the Ganesh festival.

Both Khanna and Johar are well-informed speakers and had interesting things to say about India cinema's links with the Arab world. The ties, in fact, go back to the early 1950s when Indian films were a major attraction in places like Egypt and Lebanon.

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