

cinema



* Cai Shangjun won the Silver Lion for Best Direction for his provocative *People Mountain, People Sea*. Actor Michael Fassbender (below) holds the Coppa Volpi for Best Actor for his movie *Shame*.

Scandal, shame and glory at Venice

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The French copied Italians once to establish a movie festival on the Riviera in the late 1930s, but what now ironically looks like a reversal of sorts, the Venice International Film Festival borrows from Cannes. Controversy in particular.

Chinese director, Lou Ye — who in 2006 was banned from making movies for five years after he had screened his bold (set against the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest) and sexually provocative, *Summer Palace* at Cannes — got (or smuggled) his *Love and Bruises* into Venice this year.

Shot mostly in Paris with a content even more sexual than what it was in *Summer Palace*, *Love and Bruises* is a love story between a Chinese immigrant girl and a French worker, though Lou calls it “a symbol for political and social issues”.

If Beijing must have been peeved over this Venetian impertinence, China could not have been any less angry with the inclusion, also in the Festival, of Cai Shangjun's *People Mountain, People Sea*. A surprise film (included in Competition, midway during the Festival), a practice that Festival Director Marco Mueller started in 2006, the Shangjun work too did not have an okay from Beijing, which strictly controls the kind of cinema that is made and, more importantly, exhibited to the world.

Undoubtedly, China would not have wanted an international audience and media to see *People Mountain, People Sea*. For,

it contains grim scenes of China's tough labour conditions in its coal mines. Cai won the Silver Lion for Best Direction, a case of rubbing salt on the wound.

However, the story about a man, who, disillusioned with the police force, chases his brother's murderer, and in the end masquerades as a miner to try and destroy the killer working in the collieries, is not anything out of the ordinary.

There was, though, some great cinema at Venice, setting off against some bad fare.

David Cronenberg's *A Dangerous Method* on psychiatry and psychoanalysis is a sober work with a disarmingly authentic feel and look. Set in the early years of 1900 at Zurich and Vienna (hotbeds of sexual revolution then), Cronenberg's (*A History of Violence*, *Eastern Promises* and *Crash*) work borrows significant segments from the lives of Sigmund Freud, psychiatrist Carl Jung and their beautiful patient, Sabina Spielrein.

Not only does she mess up the great relationship between these two brilliant pioneers of psychoanalysis, but also, paradoxically, helps them enrich their theories, even discover some facets and add on to what they already know.

The film opens histrionically with a madly raving Spielrein (Keira Knightley) inside a horse-carriage that is rushing her to Carl Jung's (Michael Fassbender) hospital in Zurich. There, Jung tries out his mentor, Sigmund Freud's (Viggo Mortensen) psychoanalysis or “talking cure” on her, and in the months to follow, she not only recovers from her mental illness (probably hysteria brought about by her father's abuse of her

in her childhood), but also shows promise of herself becoming a great psychiatrist. She did become one, a renowned one at that.

A-married-with-kids Jung finds himself drawn to Spielrein, and he breaks the doctor-patient code by having a sexual affair with her — further ruining his already strained relationship with Freud. The two men by then had begun to differ in their approaches to treatment: while Freud believed that every mental disorder could be traced to sexual problems, Jung went beyond these to look at mysticism as well.

Fassbender was just brilliant as the doctor, and he was as inspiring when he threw away the white coat and stripped himself to the skin in Steve McQueen's *Shame* that got him the Coppa Volpi for Best Actor.

In *Shame*, Fassbender essays a 30-plus businessman in New York addicted to sex. His life apart from work (what it is, is never clear) is but a string of sexual encounters that ranges from one-night stands to whoring.

Fassbender, unbelievably different here from what he was in *A Dangerous Method*, is a guiltless sex addict whose Brandon is forced to apply the brakes on his runaway libido when his sister, Sissy (portrayed with easy charm and charisma by Carey Mulligan) arrives at his flat and makes herself

at home. She is suicidal, and yet somehow manages to bring about a semblance of sanity to Brandon, who perhaps for the first time begins to feel some kind of emotional bonding in his life.

Shame is bold, uncompromisingly so. But the only thing that the movie leaves us uncomfortably in the dark is why Brandon finds himself on such an obsessive path.

Steven Soderbergh — whose debut feature at 26, *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, won him the 1989 Palm d'Or at Cannes and which provoked a near stampede at the International Film Festival of India in Kolkata later — brought *Contagion* to Venice.

Like some of his movies, *Contagion* is dramatic in its subject. It plots an outbreak of a deadly virus in today's times, something similar to the 1918 Spanish flu that reportedly killed closer to 100mn people in about two years.

Through an impressive bevy of stars, the film narrates how Gwyneth Paltrow's character, a high flying businesswoman, picks the bug in Hong Kong and spreads it all along her journey back home to the US. Her screen husband, Matt Damon, is immune though, but half his family dies.

With Jude Law as a journalist, Kate Winslet as a WHO doctor (sent to Hong Kong to try and trace the origin of the infection) and Marion Cotillard and, Laurence Fishburne in various other roles, *Contagion* is racy and is likely to make us nervous every time we hear someone cough or sneeze.

Finally, I saw an adaptation of one of the greatest English classics, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, written between 1845 and 1846, though published only in 1847.

Set on the British Yorkshire Moor in a manor called *Wuthering Heights*, the story narrates the almost obsessive love between Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, an orphan brought up by her parents.

It is this *Wuthering Heights*, later lauded as a still better work than *Jane Eyre*, that British director Andrea Arnold has visualised into a movie. Arnold, who made gritty cinema such as *Red Road* and *Fish Tank*, has made a movie that is quite dark, hardly verbal and captivatingly rustic. And she has made Heathcliff a black (played by James Howson) in a daring departure from the book.

Though wonderfully shot in natural light and in wind-swept Yorkshire by Robbie Ryan, the movie fails to create the mesmeric richness and tragic poignancy of the written classic. Somewhere, I felt unsatisfied.

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