

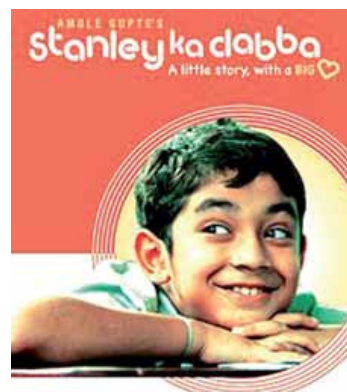
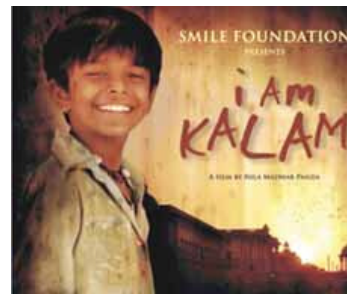
cinema



* *Lost in Africa*



* *The Other*



Back to the tent

The movies showcased at the recent International Children's Film Festival of India were impressive, but the event was a letdown, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Raise a tent in a cultural village. Put a screen on the wall. Place a World War II vintage film projector. Throw a few chairs, archaic air conditioners, and ramshackle sound boxes — and you have a theatre ready to show some of the world's best movies.

This was exactly the scene at Hyderabad's Shilparamam, an arts and crafts village that was transformed into the main venue for the recent International Children's Film Festival of India.

Hundreds of children were carted into the three such makeshift cinemas every day. Mostly from the schools in villages and small towns around Hyderabad, the children looked at the whole exercise as a picnic, the like of which they have never experienced before.

This was so different from the visits to the zoo or museums or maybe even the circus, and a day-long outing at a theatre, away from the drudgery of classrooms and books, seemed electrifying to them.

The children watched the movies in languages as varied as French or Farsi or Dutch or German or Hindi or Bengali, and struggled to keep up with the subtitles in English. They were bewildered. They had no clue about what they were watching. They had not been prepared by their teachers, who were perhaps as ignorant as the children themselves.

But then the children clapped and screamed over Coke and popcorn. Nandita Das, Chairperson of the Children's Film Society of India, which organised the Festival along with the Andhra Pradesh government, told me that the children loved the films and the whole show.

But, of course, they would have. Anything away from their text-books and school routine was bound to thrill them.

However, for the adults, including international guests and the international jury who saw the movies in the tents with frequent disruptions (because a single projector was used), nothing could have been sillier than screening world class cinema in such primitive conditions. And exasperating too.

Come on, this is not the 1930s India, and Hyderabad is no village. It is a city with state-of-the-art cinemas and it is one of the country's top hi-tech centres. There are many swanky theatres with excellent projection and sound systems readily available there.

But the organisers — for reasons best known to them — decided to experiment with tent theatres — and mind you this was the Festival's 17th edition! Unfortunately, they could not carry out this experiment with even a modicum of success.

I have just been to the Doha Tribeca Film Festival where too tent theatres were built in a sprawling cultural village. But once you stepped inside the tents, the auditoriums were the last word in excellence with wonderful seating arrangement, projection and sound system.

But Doha has much more money than India has is the common explanation I heard ever so often in Hyderabad. Well, it does. But then why waste money on erecting these tents at Shilparamam and get into this grand mess? Nobody had a convincing answer. Mohan Agashe, veteran theatre and movie actor summed it all up nicely in just a single sentence. Nobody cares about children's cinema. Yes, that is what it is.

In a nation where "chalta hai" (anything goes) is the prevailing attitude, the Festival, whose several editions have been held in Hyderabad, is treated with sickening

casualness. What is more, I saw a similar chaos in the late 1990s, when I used to cover the biennial Festival regularly. The picture has merely got bleaker. Though there were no tents then. Regular cinemas were used.

Nonetheless, one must give it to the Festival for having secured some great cinema, a lot of which spoke of angst and frustration. Arguably the best in the international competition with 15 movies, Kikuo Kawasaki's *David and Kamal* is a work that touches your heart with its story of childhood innocence and a friendship free from animosity and bigotry.

David, an American Jew, while visiting his father in Jerusalem has his precious bag of rare coins stolen by Kamal, an Arab street child and petty thief. Eventually, the two young boys forge a bond that crosses the daunting barriers of religion and state. In a restrained way, Kawasaki conveys how children are not slaves to hard-hearted adult prejudices, and have the magnanimity to pack a lot of love and affection into a relationship.

In Mark de Cloe's *The Strongest Man in Holland*, little Luuk's search for an absent father takes him to a weight-lifter, and the boy hits upon a painful family secret. What begins as a journey of hope soon loses its spark when he finds out that he grew out of a test-tube.

Iran's *The Other* by Mahdi Rahmani traces the hostility of a boy towards a man who is all set to become his stepfather. But at the end of a road trip the two undertake to Teheran, a disarming bond is built. Scripted with admirable sensitivity, *The Other* underlines the fear of a boy left with no choice but to share his mother's affections with a stranger.

In a pulse-pounding story, told through gang rivalries, slum children and the greed of an impoverished community, Vibeke Muasya's

Lost in Africa shows the anguish of a mother when her adopted African son goes missing in Kenya while on a holiday. The maladies of the modern day form the backdrop for the narrative where again the goodness of childhood is examined through a touching rapport between the lost boy and a boy criminal.

Winter's *Daughter from Germany's Johannes Schmid* is about a girl's search for her biological father that takes her to a snow-clad Polish port city. She finds him all right, but the joy is dilemmatic.

Also about predicaments and the inability to confront them, China's *The Star and the Sea* (by Xiao Guiyun and Li Qiankuan) travels with a boy and his mother as they flee to Singapore leaving behind poverty and sorrow. But, it is only when the lad finds a mentor that his life begins to float on calmer waters.

There were a few Indian works that were as engaging: competing entries such as *I Am Kalam* (by Nila Madhab Panda) and Amole Gupta's *Stanley ka Dabba* (already written about in these columns) captivated me with their childhood simplicity and youthful exuberance in the face of economic and social deprivation.

Admittedly an impressive lineup, though marred by the tent trauma.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran covered the International Children's Film Festival of India this November after more than a decade, and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)