

Festival Report

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*77th Cannes: A Critic's Diary***Trinkets of Duds, Dead Ducks & Few Sparkling Solitaires**

Driven by curiosity and emboldened by the hype and hoopla surrounding it, one had always aspired to mark one's attendance at the Cannes International Film Festival. That it happened was like a dream come true—a magical, mesmerising moment.

Making it to the Cannes Film Festival is like undertaking a pilgrimage to Indian holy sites or, for that matter, going on a Hajj to Mecca. Swamped amidst the sea of swarming cinephiles in Cannes around the French Riviera is like being at Kumbh Mela in India.

It was overwhelming being at the hip and happening Festival du Cannes, as one soaked in the colourful and festive atmosphere of the bustling town's *Boulevard de la Croisette*, curving along the coast, lined with sandy beaches, upmarket boutiques and palatial hotels, all hive of activity, humming with conversations.

What, however, was rather disappointing and disheartening was the bill of fare that was served in the festival's main competition section – (*In*

Competition or Film d'ouverture). Even this disappointment could have been ingested with a tinge of stoic acceptance but for the fact that the online ticket booking system turned out to be a 'farce'.

Not even one of the ten days spent at the prestigious film festival billed as the Temple of Festival of Cinemas did one get to book the ticket/s of the day of one's choice. This even after having paid a princely amount for the most coveted Marche du Film / Film Market badge with media accreditation refused. The last-minute queue was the only saving grace for less privileged sections like myself.

Be that as it may, coming to the festival's lineup of films, *In Competition or Film d'ouverture* boasted a heavy-duty lineup of 22 films. The *Un Certain Regard* (*A Certain Glance/In Certain Perspective*) segment featured 18 films. In sum, the two combined feature a total of 40 films.

If *In Competition* had eventual *Grand Prix* winner India's Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine As Light* seemingly a Cannes favourite, having struck

gold three years earlier too with her 92 mins campus documentary *A Night of Knowing Nothing* picking the Golden Eye with the jury eulogising it as “a film with a strong artistic vision, which combines the personal and the political in a hypnotic way. For a first film, that makes it even more amazing.”

The *Un Certain Regard* saw Sandhya Suri’s *Santosh*, a familiar police procedural cum caste politics-based thriller failing to make the grade but ensuring there were two Indian women film-makers of contention in the festival’s most eagerly sought-after categories ensuring the country’s tricolour fluttered high and cheery.

That 16 min FTII Diploma Film *Sunflowers Were The First to Know* by Chidananda S Naik, competing in the La Cinef (The Cinema) Section, bagged the coveted First Prize doing India and Karnataka produced was the icing on the cake.

Well, that said. Determined to catch as many as five films per day, one had to, however, be satisfied with watching a total of 25 films through the festival, making it 13+12 apiece from two sections. Women’s films and narratives dealing with women’s issues held a centre stage of discourse, while those with political hues, festival heavyweights, and veterans fell by the wayside given their indulgent and not-too-impressive fares.

Short spells of drizzle and an ever-growing shortage of tickets for favourite films, coupled with heightened security, long walks from one venue to another, and snaking through endless waiting queues, turned a real dampener for diehard film buffs wanting to experience Cannes up close and personal.

From among 25 films this critic could catch up with at the festival, what roiled one was many of them were excessively voyeuristic and titillating fares, almost in the vein of semi-porn stuff, especially the Portugal film *Grand Tour* by Miguel Gomes wherein you had a scene a young pair copulating in front of an audience cheering them up.

Given the squeamish experience, one consciously put off watching the eventual Palme d’Or winner Sean Baker’s *Anora*, whose synopsis and reviews were off-putting enough to shun it with a barge pole.

As if to prove Indian filmmakers were nowhere far from such adult adventure, the Grand Prix winner *All We Image As Light* by Payal Kapadia conveniently made the most of the absence of censorship with gratuitous sex scenes between its Hindu-Muslim romantic pair. That the film has been valorised and paeans sung about its winning the film (which adopts the stand Bollywood template) award is another matter.

That the Bulgarian film-maker Konstantin Bojanov’s *Shameless* (suggestively titled), set around a Delhi brothel and a sex worker’s dalliance with a forbidden relationship, left nothing for imagination only points to the films that found their way into both the sections of the premier film festival.

Indeed, India’s Central Board of Film Certification and its mandarins are sure to have their hands full tearing their hair when these films come up before them before their India release in due course after their run of the film festival circuit tours.

Many of the films were more in the commercial thriller genre rather than the aesthetically done art house fares one traditionally expects at the film festival, which the movie can gauge. Jacques Audiard’s Spanish musical melodrama *Emilia Pérez*, which won the Jury Prize and Best Actress award for four cast members, is a case in point.

Likewise, Marcus Van Horn’s *The Girl with the Needle* turned out more of a life-based infanticide crime thriller, while the competition’s two experimental films, Jia Zhang-ke’s *Caught by the Tides* and Best Director-winner Miguel Gomes’ *Grand Tour* falling in the similar vein.

Both the men and women directors seemed to compete with one another in providing audiences with that lurid and lascivious ‘female’ gaze without any grit or hitchback.

For Coralie Fargeat’s body-horror thriller *The Substance*, which won the Best Screenplay award, in attempting to turn the spotlight on the double standards of the entertainment industry, she indulged herself in the exact sexist representation of her narcissist protagonist.

Meanwhile, Andrea Arnold’s lyrical coming-of-age drama *Bird* and Agathe Reidinger’s impressive debut feature *Wild Diamond* are

sympathetic portraits of working-class teenage girls from dysfunctional families navigating a society dominated by manipulative, violent men.

What further struck a raw nerve was 77-year-old Paul Schrader's confessional *Oh Canada* (a ranting, shrivelled, and wrinkled Richard Gere) and 81-year-old David Cronenberg's atmospheric but dialogue-driven *The Shrouds* touching on personal themes of grief, loss and mortality, were taxing to sit through. Joining their ranks was 85-year-old Francis Ford Coppola's sci-fi *Megalopolis*, a Roman Epic fable set in an imagined dystopian Modern America.

Equally insufferable were the two most overtly political films in competition: Ali Abbasi's exploration of Donald Trump's rise to power in *The Apprentice* and Kirill Serebrennikov's biopic of a Russian right-wing extremist in *Limonov—The Ballad*. So, too, was Italy's Paolo Sorrentino's *Parthenope*, a feminine epic that takes one through Parthenope's life, from her birth in 1950 to the modern day.

The same goes for Laetitia Dosch's Swiss fare comedic *Dog on Trial*, or for that matter France's Céline Sallette's *Nikki*, the biopic on artist Niki de Saint Phalle, or Ariane Labed Irish horror thriller *September Sisters*, about two sisters.

However, despite the several minutes, you had a few glittering diamonds that made your time at the 77th Cannes, ensuring all was not lost, but that festivals have their share of the good, the bad and the ugly, and one must make do with them, for good or worse.

Among the impressive lot this critic found *In the Competition* section was Andrea Arnold's *Coming of Age Bird*, which coveted you about a 12-year-old pre-pubescent girl discovering herself as she blossoms with age, the superlative Danesh real-life saga *The Girl With the Needle* about Karoline, a young factory worker, striving to climb out of poverty in post-WW1 Copenhagen and her horrendous misadventure, and Emanuel Parvu's Romanian gay

saga *Three Kilometres to the end of the World* in a traditional bound village, besides the Iranian political thriller *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* by the exiled Mohammad Rasoulof which won the Special Prize in the main competition.

In the *Un Certain Regard* section, you had the section's top winner, *Black Dog*, by the Chinese director Guan Hu. It is a highly politically surcharged drama about displacement and development against the backdrop of the 2008 Olympic Games in China.

The Norwegian show *Stealer Armand* by Halfdan Ullmann Tondel is set in an elementary school and the 'supposed' indiscretion of a young boy with another; the charming and captivating Latvian animation film *Flow* by Gints Zilbaldois about a cat's adventure in the animal world, French director Boris Lojkine's pulse-pounding, timely and universal tale *The Story of Souleymane* of refugees and asylum, which rightfully bagged the Jury Prize, the FIPRESCI Award as well the Best Actor Award for non-actor Abou Sangare as a Guinean seeking asylum in France.

You also had the Japanese children's fable *My Sunshine* by Hiroshi Okuyama, which was impressive with its soulful storytelling about a young school boy's infatuation with an elder school girl, Saudi newcomer Tawfik Alzaidi's *Norah*, which received a Special Mention in *Un Certain Regard* about the emancipation of women and individual freedom and expression to art through Nader, a new schoolteacher and an artist who meets Norah, a young woman who ignites the creativity inside him and inspires him to paint again. And last but not least, Mo Harawe's soulful and heart-wrenching Somalian fare, *The Village Next to Paradise*, is about a young boy and his single father as it follows the destinies of a family in search of a better life.

Having tasted blood with the first encounter with the world's third prominent film festival—the Cannes International Film Festival—Festival de Cannes—one awaits another May encounter that will best the previous one. Until then, au revoir!