

Festival Report**S Viswanath****Charming Cinemas that Coveted Cinephiles at Karlovy Vary IFF**

The 58th Edition of the largest film festival in the Czech Republic and the most prestigious such festival in Central and Eastern Europe—the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival—KVIFF 2024—turned out to be an eclectic and engaging cinematic experience.

Billed as one of the oldest A-list film festivals (i.e., non-specialised festivals with a competition for feature-length fiction films), it is counted among Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Locarno, San Sebastian, Montreal, Shanghai, and Tokyo film festivals. It is considered the most important cinema jamboree in Central and Eastern Europe. The festival witnessed a multifarious tableau of fantabulous films coveting cineastes.

Rich and resplendent in their thematic content. Presenting a diversified and delectable directorial delineation, the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival –June 28-July 6, 2024, was a virtual tour-de-force for film aficionados and discerning film critics. Living true to its reputation as an informal congregation of cineastes providing inimitable audience experience, it has long been renowned for its rich history.

The film festival features two of its most key competitive sections: the Crystal Globe Competition, a non-specialised international competition of

feature-length fiction and documentary films, and the Proxima Competition, which sees the world's new voices from across the vast cinematic spectrum in contention. The two competitions presented a tantalising tableau of cinematic treats to savour.

The film festival, which showcases the works of upcoming filmmakers and adventurous works by renowned auteurs, complements the Crystal Globe Competition, celebrating contemporary cinema with a collection of forward-thinking and



exciting discoveries.

In fact, it was as if one had found cinematic nirvana in the serene, sylvan hilly landscape and discovered a cinema Shangri-La at Karlovy Vary, a la Hugh Conway of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, who found inner peace, love, and a sense of purpose in Shangri-La.

It was, as written by James Hilton of Hugh Conway, in my case as well. The lived experience at Karlovy Vary was quite in contrast to the one seen at the earlier Cannes Film Festival. While the two major film festivals may be separated by two decades, their birth and sojourn turned into a mountain of difference between them.

As a film critic and chief cinema programmer/creative advisor, having attended the

two feted film festivals, one returned much wiser and more prosperous by the divergent experiences the two film festivals unspooled before its multifarious attendees.

While there was equally palpable excitement and enthusiasm at both film festivals, what, however, differentiated one from the other was that if at one you virtually felt boxed in, unwanted and out of place, constantly under scrutiny and shuffled across, at the other, you felt almost like a State guest, warmly welcomed and at home.

This critic found Cannes a bit “chaotic” and “cacophonous,” while at Karlovy Vary, the festival was run with “orderliness” and “a certain sedate calmness”, as experienced by those in attendance.

One of Europe’s major film festivals, the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, plays out amidst a panoply of quaint, old-world charm posh spa hotels and, most importantly, the Tepla River, the tributary of Ohre that serenely flows alongside the walkway bridges canal’s embankment, as well as the hot springs spewing out clouds of vaporous steam from the ground below.

At Karlovy Vary, everything unfolds at a quiet, serene, calming pace, allowing one to soak in the serene and soothing balmy proceedings amidst its magical, surreal milieu.

Well-laid-out sections and easy accessibility, as well as an equally warmly welcoming atmosphere and personnel, made it such a pleasurable experience to be at Karlovy Vary.

One of the other unique features of the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival was its signature festival shorts. Each was unique and very special to watch, cheer, and chuckle at, which were played out before the main film screening.

Coming to films proper, the two competition sections saw 12 films apiece vying for the coveted Crystal Globe & Proxima Awards. The films in contention were from Japan, Portugal, Singapore, the Netherlands, Norway, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Croatia, the UK, Germany, Bulgaria, Morocco, Italy, Turkey, Moldova, the US, China, India, Sweden, Israel, and Peru.

The UK documentary *A Sudden Glimpse to Deeper Things* by Mark Cousins on British painter

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham bagged the prestigious US\$25,000 Crystal Global Grand Prix Award, which was adjudicated by a five-member jury led by American producer Christine Vachon.

Under the section, the US\$15,000 Special Jury Prize goes to the Norwegian film *Loveable (Elskling)* by Lilja Ingolfsdottir, while Singapore’s Nelicia Low won the Best Director Award.

Incidentally, the film also picked the FIPRESCI Jury Award, adjudicated by the six-jurors team, which described it in its citation: “*We experience human drama on the smallest scale possible, in the smallest cell of society. It’s a sparkling film – not only a star but a firework. We witness the birth of a grand filmmaker, with a first long feature that has already gone under the skin of everybody here, with its painfully accurate writing, intensity, rawness, universality, “loveableness”, ugliness, and immense cinematic energy. It was our festival darling, our “elskling”: Loveable*”.

The Special Jury Mention was earned by Romanian director Noaz Deshe’s *Xoftek* and Czech Republic’s Adam Martinec for his film *Our Lovely Pig Slaughter (Mord)* and the Audience Award to *Waves (Viny)* by Czech Republic’s actor-director Jiří Mádľ.

Although they may not have won the Crystal Globe, this critic was impressed by Portugal director Margarida Cardoso’s *Banzo*, a real-life, moving, and engaging tale set on a tropical island along the African coast. The inhabitants (the shackled workers) are afflicted with “slave nostalgia,” and they experience intense homesickness.



The other film that touched an emotive chord was *The Hungarian Dressmaker (Ema a smrtihlav)* by Slovak Republic’s Iveta Grofova, revolving around the widow seamstress Marika who harbours a Jewish boy and bravely fends off the inquisitive interests of a German Nazi Officer and Captain of

Slovakia's Hlinka Guard, caught as she is between two opposing feuding forces.

Similarly, Croatia's Bruno Ankovic's debut feature *Celebration (Proslav)*, set in an impoverished Croatian village between 1928 and 1945 and centred around the village's hardships, particularly its young radical political activist Mijo, caught the eye in this section.

The Proxima Competition, adjudicated by the jury led by Bianca Balbuena from the Philippines, saw Chinese director Zhengfan Yang's *Stranger (Ju wai ren)* covet the US\$15,000 Proxima Grand Prix Award with Peru's Paolo Tizón anointed with the US\$10,000 Special Jury Prize for his *Night Has Come (Vino la noche)*.

Interestingly, the film also found favour with FIPRESCI jurors who picked it for the award, describing it as "a powerful debut feature that boldly reveals the fragility hidden in all human endeavours. This outstanding documentary is not afraid to let the light and darkness fight not only on the thematic level but also on the formal one. It depicts a battle with an invisible enemy thousands of miles from Karlovy Vary, but it also recalls the wars around us".

Czech Republic's Martin Pavol Repka's *March to May (Od marca do mája)* garnered a Special Mention in the section.

This critic, however, found Russian Director Anja Kreis' mystical film *The Alienated (Fara Suflet/Bez Sduse)* ruminates about the concept of death and the abortions carried out by the gynaecologists believing the young women are carrying Antichrist in their wombs.

The episodic Chinese film *Stranger (Ju wai ren/Cizinec)* by Zhengfan Yang, which takes a reflective and ruminative look at isolation in intimate spaces, was interesting and intriguing to experience.

From the festival's Special Screenings section, comprising ten curated films, one found the Iranian film *In the Land of Brothers* by the director-duo Alireza Ghasemi and Raha Amirfazli. The film is about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the

flight of Afghans to neighbouring Iran, hoping for fraternal coexistence but caught in the crosshairs of the locals.

Similarly, the Ukrainian film *Real* by Oleh Sentsov, about Ukraine's defence against the Russian invasion, resonated with the current strife between the two warring nations.

The Other One (Ta druha) by Czech Republic's Marie-Magdalena Kochova and *The Gardner's Year (Zahradnikov rok)* by Jiří Havelka were the other two interesting and engaging fares in the section.



The Horizons Segment featuring 51 films had around eight films (*Girls Will Be Girls* from India by Suchi Talati, *The Story of Souleymane* from France by Boris Lojkine, *Brief History Of A Family* from China by Lin Jianjie, *My Favourite Cake* from Iran by director-duo Maryam Moghaddam & Behtash Sanaeaha, *The Girl With The Needle* by Magnus von Horn from Denmark, the Ukrainian drama *Porcelain War* by the directors Brendan Bellomo & Slava Leontyev, *Three Kilometres to the End of the World* from Romania by Emanuel Parvu and *The Village Next to Paradise* from Somalia by Mo Harawe, that impressed this critic making for a delectable watch.

The Karlovy Vary International Film Festival was an eye-opener, providing a window to diversified cinemas from the region that hitherto missed out on the regular film festival circuits. This provided for a unique and insightful cinematic experience from this side of the global film amphitheatre.