

**Festival Report**

**Nirmal Dhar**

**Miskolc: An Unknown Film Festival**



Even though this is Iraq, the place feels more like a slice of the Sundarbans — water everywhere, life floating between the reeds. The school sits on the other side of a maze of canal and muddy gullies, and the only way across is by narrow boats nudged forward with long bamboo poles. Every morning, a teenage girl Lamia and her classmate Saeed make that journey. It was probably April 26, sometime in the nineties. It was drizzling. President Saddam Hussein’s birthday was just two days away — April 28. The teacher at the school had a plan: poor students would bring cakes from home. Then, as a gesture of “loyalty,” the teacher would dedicate it to the dictator — and afterward, he would slice and devour every bit.

To carry out the master's orders, not only Namia and Sayed, but also Lamia's old grandmother had to leave the village and come to the city to collect flour, sugar, and eggs, which were necessary for making cakes. But the city was panic-stricken. The markets were barren from famine, and bombers roared suddenly overhead. Worse still, the city’s people suffered not only from hunger but from an insatiable craving for more. For money, Lamia's dear companion Saeed sold the rooster, and even the old watch of the monk kept at home. But she got invalid/fake notes in her hand! Even in the dimly lit streets of the city, there is a lot of poverty and deceit. Yet, in the meantime, the grandmother bakes a cake for Lamia with a little cake-making spice. Sayeed takes some of the stolen fruits.

Saddam Hussein himself cuts a cake on his birthday, surrounded by his entourage, in a ceremonial event. The camera moves after a brief pause to show bombs falling on Lamia and Saeed's school. The president's birthday cake does not exist. A terrible panic spreads throughout the quiet village and school like that in the city. The whole country is abuzz with the random flights of warplanes. An inevitable sign of the future. It is surprising to think that this is the first feature film by Iraqi director Hassan Hadi. There are no slogans, no shouted dialogues. He uses light and shadow to portray the daily life of a flooded Iraqi village and a half-destroyed city. The tone is detached, yet the cruelty it conveys cuts deep—it is profoundly moving in its quiet pain.

The film won the ‘Camera d'Or’ award at the Cannes Film Festival by the decision of the jury of film experts. Hadi also won the ‘Audience Award’ in the vote of the general audience. This Iraqi film has won a hat-trick of awards at the recently concluded Miskolc International Film Festival in Hungary. Not only the FIPRESCI jury, but also the Ecumenical Jury and the Art House Cinema Award (CICAE) - all three awards went to Hassan Hadi. He could not come to the festival. In fact, after winning Venice, his film went on a world tour. Invitations are coming from all festivals. Humans are one piece. One can't ‘clone’ them. All three awards were given to the film’s art director.

Now let's turn our attention to this relatively unknown film festival in Hungary. When the central unit of FIPRESCI gave me their seal of approval as a jury member, one of my colleagues expressed mild resentment and asked, “Why Miskolc, when there are so

many other reputed festivals?” Indeed, after Berlin, Busan, Armenia, Taiwan, and Vladivostok, why Miskolc — an unfamiliar name to many, isn't it? My answer was simple: Anything that is not huge, is always beautiful. Years of travelling to festivals have convinced me that while the “big five” — Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto, and San Sebastián — dominate the global film circuit, festivals like Karlovy Vary, Cairo, Locarno, El Gouna, and Rotterdam possess a different charm. They are more intimate, the venues are less crowded with commercial guests, and they offer ample space for meaningful interactions among festival participants. The atmosphere is alive with genuine discussions and friendly exchanges — the true spirit of cinema.

Keeping this in mind, I have a fondness for Miskolc. Yet I have always known that Budapest is not only the capital of Hungary but also the heart of Hungarian cinema. Who hasn't been connected to its vibrant film scene—the MA Film Studio, Korda Studio, Budapest Film Academy, or the University of Theatre and Film Arts? The elder Miklós Jancsó, often called the poet of Hungarian cinema, István Szabó, whose *Mephisto* and *Colonel Redl* remain timeless, Béla Tarr, famously referred to as the Tarkovsky of Hungary, and Márta Mészáros, whose trilogy *Diary for My Children*, *Diary for My Lovers*, and *Diary for My Father and Mother* still rank among Hungarian classics—all of them are connected to the city of Budapest.

Once again, I remembered the film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, directed by the American filmmaker Wes Anderson. As far as I recall, I saw the film at the Berlin Film Festival in 2014. The movie was partially shot

in Budapest and featured a star-studded cast including Ralph Fiennes, Adrien Brody, Willem Dafoe, Harvey Keitel, Jude Law, Bill Murray, Léa Seydoux, and Tilda Swinton. Also, the city of Budapest has a piece of European history connected to it.

Yet, leaving aside that history, what is the origin of the country's only international film festival being held in a little-known town called 'Miskolc', about two hundred kilometres away? I wanted to know. The festival opened on September 5. I reached Budapest at exactly 9:30 am the day before. A young festival volunteer arrived there with a car. From there, I had to travel about two hundred kilometres further north. After crossing the long sky, such a long way! I wouldn't feel tired! No, I didn't. First of all, the weather was beautiful. I can say it was quite temperate, mixed with hot and cold. At that moment, my young guide was also a source of hope.

I heard the history of the city of Miskolc from her. The girl is from this city. Not only the small town of Miskolc, but also the surrounding villages, are full of little-known stories about people in the film industry. For example, Alfred Zucker, the founder of the Hollywood giant Paramount Pictures, was born in a neighbouring village called Ricse. Hungary is also the birthplace of William Fox, one of the heads of another major Hollywood studio, Twentieth Century Fox. He was born in Tolcsva, a village near Miskolc. There are others as well. Powell and Pressburger's production company shook up British cinema in London during the 1940s and 1950s. The better half of that company, Emeric Pressburger, was also born in Miskolc. To the north lies the Bükk mountain,

with the Sajó River flowing alongside it. This September, the weather was reminiscent of a Swiss summer—pleasant not only physically but also mentally.

I listened to her story during the long, two-hour motor tour. It wasn't recounted verbatim, yet I was also introduced to the rich film history of Miskolc. The next day, on the evening of September 5, the 21st Cine-Fest will be inaugurated in the heart of the city—also known as the City Zentrum—at the 'Pressburger' Hall of the Art House building. The fact that the festival is being held in a theatre named after a film enthusiast is a fitting tribute to him. Later, I learned that the city's mayor, József Tóth, and festival director, Tibor Biro, had also installed a memorial plaque at Emeric Pressburger's house that very morning.

At exactly 1:45 PM, the car dropped me off at a four-star hotel called Oreg—an old building, mid-range but comfortable, blending the charm of a classic house with touches of modern luxury. It had a hint of middle-class sensibility, yet it didn't lack in character. At the reception, I learned that all the festival jurors, along with some guests, were staying here. My plan was simple: go inside and soothe my tired body in the bathhouse.

Just then, the phone rang. On the other end was Mrs. Timi Kokai Negi, the coordinator of the jurors. With her usual politeness, she greeted me warmly: "Welcome!" She went on to say that there would be a dinner for the jurors at a restaurant called Impresso Club at 8 PM—a chance for everyone to get acquainted.

I had no idea where the Impresso Club was or how to get there, but eager to rest my

weary body, I replied hastily, “Okay! No problem! I’ll be there!”

Then, after taking a bath, I ate a full meal of rice, chicken fries, and curd with corn at the small restaurant downstairs, and I sank into a deep slumber. The interruption to my sleep occurred around 8:00 pm. Kokai Negi called again! “Where are you? We’ve already sat down for dinner. When will you come back?” I was in no mood to answer the question with my sleepy eyes. I just said, “I don’t know where the restaurant is, and I don’t even know how to get there. Please send me a car.” The answer came from the other side: the place is a five-minute walk from your hotel. Now I understand that you are suffering from jet lag. You don’t have to come at night anymore. I will send the food to your hotel. I was convinced by Timir’s assurance. However, he also told me to collect the jury’s documents, identity badges, and other information from the festival centre tomorrow after breakfast.

The next morning, at ten o’clock, I found the location of the film festival office in the heart of Miskolc, Centrum, just two hundred meters away. There were eight houses and a Press Burger Hall. That was when I realized that the other two members of my group hadn’t arrived in the city yet. Ziva Emersich from Slovenia, who was coming from Ljubljana, would arrive at noon, while the other, Dorka Dorfas, a Hungarian, was coming from Budapest. It then occurred to me that none of the ‘Fripreski’ jury could have attended the dinner the previous night. I was informed that, in addition to the four members of the main jury and the three members of the equinoctial jury, three members each from Cinewave, East of Europe, and CIC had

already arrived. I immediately began talking to the young Brazilian director Ingrid Machado, the young German film researcher Lisa Hacker, and the Norwegian film professor Peter Stuart Robinson. I also met Carmen Gray, a journalist from Germany, whom I had worked with two years earlier at the Duhok Film Festival in Kurdistan.

At first, I didn’t recognize her. Later, when I mentioned Duhok, Carmen said, “That’s why the face looked familiar. I couldn’t quite place it.” After that, there was no need to revisit old friendships. Fourteen or fifteen juries from different departments, seated in three boxes at Pressburger Hall, watched the film and discussed it in private. We didn’t always agree — there were differences of opinion — but we worked in a film-friendly atmosphere.

That same afternoon, I came to the Impresso Club for lunch and met the veteran Hungarian actor Robert Koltai. His face looked familiar, but I couldn’t remember his name. The woman with him seemed to be his wife. Without any hesitation, I went forward and enquired, “The man standing next to you looks very familiar, I’ve seen him in a movie...” Before I could finish my sentence, she replied to me in fragmented English, “He is Robert Koltai, the Hungarian actor-director.” Lugosi’s film *Man Without a Name* is etched in my memory. I had first seen it at the Berlin Film Festival. I had also seen two more of his films — *We Never Die*, which Robert himself directed, and Janos Razor’s *Love Mother*. Without a moment’s hesitation, I invited him to the Kolkata Film Festival. Hearing this, he said, “Very good idea. Never been to your country! When is your festival?” I told him the dates. He replied, “Tell the

festival office to contact me. I will try.” This year, the Miskolc Festival is honouring him with the Lifetime Achievement Award — that’s why he’s here for just two days. Before getting into the car, he turned to me and said, “Are you staying for the evening? See you.”

The meeting, however, did not take place that evening. The Koltai couple were swept away by the crowd at the inauguration. Two days later, though, his wife emailed me to say that they had received an invitation from the Kolkata Film Festival and had already sent their confirmation. This was certainly wonderful news.

Like other events here, the inauguration of the Miskolc festival was notably free of showiness. The festival director, Tibor Biro, program director, Peter Madras, and the city mayor took the stage to congratulate the audience and wish the festival success. Not only was Robert Koltai honoured, but veteran Hungarian director Timar Peter also received a lifetime achievement award. In response, Robert recited a long poem written by his father. I couldn’t understand the language, but I could sense that it carried a message of love for the homeland. The audience rose to applaud him.

We would like to inform you that another honouree was recognized at the closing and awards ceremony. Erik Poppe, a renowned director from neighbouring Norway—not Hungary—was honoured with the title of ‘Ambassador of European Cinema’. In his brief speech, he stated unequivocally: “Right-wing and reactionary politics are spreading their wings all over the world. If their advance is not stopped now, a deeper darkness is approaching the entire world!” In support of his statement, that

evening I watched Erik’s latest film, *Quisling: The Final Days*. The film focuses on Vidkun Quisling, the Norwegian Prime Minister who supported Nazi forces during World War II. Quisling allegedly saved Norway from certain Nazi destruction through his diplomatic manoeuvres, but after the war, he was punished as a war criminal. The film primarily depicts his trial. Truly, it is a film to remember.

### **A few appealing films of the festival**

As mentioned at the beginning, Hassan Hadi’s first feature film, *The President’s Cake*, a co-production between Iraq and Qatar, achieved a remarkable hat-trick by winning the festival’s Best Film award in three consecutive categories. I also briefly discussed the film at the start of my article. Hassan’s major accomplishment is that, without any sloganeering, he is able to reflect the situation across the entire country simply by portraying the daily life of an ordinary citizen in a medium-sized Iraqi city. The excesses of Saddam’s rule, the disruption of ordinary people’s lives, and the looming threat of America are all subtly present, seamlessly intertwined with everyday life. This is where the film’s universal appeal lies.

The main jury selected two films as the best and recognized them with special awards. Joachim Trier’s *Sentimental Value* (Norway) won the Presburger Award, while actress Kristen Stewart’s *The Chronology of Water* (USA) received the Zucker Award. As mentioned earlier, these two Hungarian figures, Emeric Presburger and Alfred Zucker, are considered the backbone of Hollywood. That is why Miskolc honoured the two best films in their names. *Sentimental*

*Value* is a family story about the emotional separation and conflict between an elderly film director and his two daughters. Joachim Trier masterfully portrays the silent tension between the director, Gustav, and his eldest daughter, actress Nora. By offering Nora the role of his deceased wife, Gustav attempts to revive his declining career while showcasing her acting talent. In other words, the film also explores a twisted game of personal and professional interests. Stellan Skarsgård as Gustav and Renate Reinsve as Nora deliver touching performances, which are the film's main attraction.

Kristen Stewart's work suggests that she could embody Princess Diana in *Spencer* or bring George Seberg to life in a full-length adaptation of Godard's ground-breaking film *Breathless*. Remarkably, she was the first to step behind the camera and demonstrate, in her directorial debut, how vividly and unflinchingly the story of sexual abuse of teenage girls can be portrayed through words and dialogue. For this film, she chose the memoir of a writer named Lydia Izuknavich. Lydia had dreamed of becoming a swimmer, yet even in her teenage years, water became a source of nightmarish sexual trauma multiple times. Lydia once said, "In water, like in books, you can leave your life!" Later in life, she took revenge for the abuse she endured; her "relationships" with various men shifted from sadness to something more poisonous. Christine's directing is completely non-linear, yet fluent and effortless. Her editing, particularly in revealing Lydia's emotional conflict, is also highly impressive. Despite

this, the Cannes jury awarded Best Director to Mexican filmmaker Mendonça Filho for *The Secret Agent*, which was also featured at the festival. I watched it, and frankly, it didn't seem that remarkable—but perhaps the presence of Mexican superstar Wagner Moura worked some kind of "magic." He did win the Best Actor award at Cannes!

It's not clear to me, why the Hungarian film by László Nemes, *Orphan*, was overlooked. After returning from Venice, I also sensed an unspoken enthusiasm among the festival organizers about this film. Director László Miskolc attended the Hungarian premiere for just one day! In addition to the opening French film, Cédric Flappis' *Caller of Time*, the lineup included Julia Durkanyu's *Alpha* (France-Belgium), Yorgos Lanthimos' *Bougonia*, Germany's *What Merila Knows* (director: Friedrich Hambaleck), and Scarlett Johansson's comedy, *Eleanor the Great*.

As a jury member, I had to watch eighteen feature films in five days, along with a five-hour short animation. Some films had to be left out. However, during the last two days of rest, I watched Bulgaria's Stefan Komandarev's *Made in Yi-You*, China's Jing Yi's *The Botanist*, and, as the closing film, Eric Poppe's milestone *Quisling: The Final Days*! I've invited Eric to the Kolkata Film Festival next year, and he said "yes." Let's see what happens!

**Translated from Bengali by:  
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