

cinema



* (From left) French actress Charlotte Gainsbourg, US actress Kirsten Dunst, Danish director Lars Von Trier and guest arrive for the screening of *Melancholia* during the 64th Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, France on Wednesday.



* Iranian director Jafar Panahi and Mohamad Rasoulof: preferential treatment?

Different standards for different folks?

The Cannes Film Festival organisers banned Lars Von Trier, but had no problem in exhibiting the works of two Iranian directors banned by their own country, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Incredible as it may sound, the just concluded Cannes Film Festival while lionising two Iranian moviemakers, stopped from working because their country felt that they were anti-national, went and banned a Danish director for a remark considered hurtful to the Jews.

In the first instance, Jafer Panahi and Mohamad Rasoulof have been under arrest of some sort in Iran, whose rulers feel that the two helmers have been making a kind of cinema that questions their authority. In the second, Lars Von Trier, celebrated for his *Dogma 95* (that tried taking cinema back to its natural roots of no-props, no artificial lighting, etc) and a host of films, including *Breaking the Waves* and *Dogville*, was banned by the Festival in its concluding days, because he jocularly told a press conference that he was a Nazi and he sympathised with Hitler. He was declared persona non-grata soon after the conference, which followed the competition screening of his *Melancholia*.

Known to have been suffering from severe depression for some years now that forced him to stay in bed without wanting to even get up and fetch a glass of water, Von

Trier has had this knack of getting himself into messy situations. In 2009, he presented *Antichrist* at the Cannes competition, and with some frighteningly distasteful scenes of genital mutilation, the movie raised uncomfortable questions.

Von Trier, who suffers from fears and anxieties, including the phobia for flying, talks of doom and the end of the world in *Melancholia*. One journalist after watching it called him a "psychic circus master".

The apocalypse tale that often plays out like a fairy tale did attract its share of boos as it did claps when its press show ended at Cannes. Despite an arresting performance by Kirsten Dunst as the film's lead protagonist (she won the Best Actress Award on the closing night), a haunting Wagnerian soundtrack and an almost ethereal country house location, *Melancholia* often appears lifeless.

Dunst's Justine has just married Michael (Alexander Skaarsgard), and the movie follows her as she goes for her reception to her sister (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and her rich husband's country home.

We soon realise that Justine is suffering from depression or melancholia through her strange behaviour that forces her to wander

off ever so often from the evening's ceremonial dinner.

In an important way, Justine's dark moods appear to be a forerunner of a planetary collision that is all set to wipe away life from the earth.

Melancholia in the end seems to be echoing its maker's own depressive tendencies. And we have seen that all along — particularly in the way his female characters are written and portrayed. Right from *Breaking the Ways to Dogville* to *Dancer in the Dark* to *Antichrist* to *Melancholia*, his women have been shown as suffering souls, leading tortured and crucified existences.

When the ban came at Cannes, (although his work was allowed to remain in the race), Von Trier joked again by saying that he felt a little happy about it, perhaps further irking the Festival and the Jewish community. The American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors & Their Descendants, an umbrella organisation of survivor groups, said: "This is a welcome action, which declares to the world that the suffering of victims is not a fit subject for mockery or casual self-promotion. The organisers of the Cannes Film Festival have eloquently taken a determined moral

stand against cavalier expressions of hate and insensitivity to those brutalised by the Nazis — Jew and non-Jew".

One man's meat is another man's poison. The Festival, which banned a renowned director apparently to respect the sentiments of Jews, did not think twice before smuggling in the films of Panahi and Rasoulof from Iran, where they are considered insensitive and unpatriotic. Here, the Festival deemed it fit to help these two men in their right to freedom of expression.

But Von Trier's right to comment — and come on, that was but a silly joke — was admonished, and the punishment was unjustly severe. Now, you do not ask your guest — and Von Trier has been a close friend of the Festival head, Gilles Jacob, a Jew himself, and a darling of Cannes for years with several of his movies getting in there — to get out, whatever be the provocation.

And this was far from serious, and in fact Von Trier's Nazi remark produced laughs at the press conference.

The sheer duplicity of the Festival is disturbing given the fact that it did not think twice before getting the Iranian films clandestinely out of the country. Panahi's *This Is Not a Film* may be the ultimate underground movie: made for €3,200, shot on digital video (and, at one point, an iPhone) and smuggled into France on a USB thumb drive that was hidden inside a cake.

Shot almost entirely in Panahi's posh flat, (indicating that he is quite rich), the documentary chronicles a day in his life. Like most Iranian movies in which the line between fact and fiction is unclear, his work shows him attending telephone calls, watching television and discussing a script (which may never translate into a film, at least not for a long time). His visitors or interrupters vary from a neighbour looking for a dog-sitter to a friendly, young garbage collector to his daughter's large pet iguana.

Rasoulof's *Goodbye*, also made surreptitiously, about a woman trying to leave Iran, won the best

prize for director in the A Certain Regard section.

Both films are just very ordinary, and if *Goodbye* won an award, I think it was more to do with the helmer's plight in Iran rather than strictly its merit. Sometimes, the jury's decisions are overtly political. Remember Michael Moore's Bush-bashing documentary, *Fahrenheit 9/11* in 2004 at Cannes, where the movie won the top Palm D'Or? That year, the jury was presided over by the American cult director and reported Bush-hater, Quentin Tarantino. Nobody really believed that Moore deserved the award, but well, then.

The Cannes Film Festival has always had this political kink, and as we all know it emerged in 1939 out of a political necessity. The French found the Venice Film Festival firmly in the grip of Fascists and Nazis, who were merrily rewarding propagandist cinema. The French, feeling suffocated and neglected in such an atmosphere, decided to have their own movie festival. Unfortunately, Cannes in its inaugural edition in 1939, had to draw the curtains a couple of days into the Festival when Hitler's armies marched into Poland, signalling the start of World War II. It was only in 1946 that Cannes could restart.

In the late 1960s, workers' and students' agitations in France and elsewhere in Europe led to the Festival winding up prematurely. One of the agitators was the brilliant French critic and director, Francois Truffaut, who had then been debarred from the Festival for his scathing criticism of it.

He wrote that the Festival was encouraging third-rate commercial French cinema, ignoring artistic fare — a tendency that still persists.

But all said and done, Cannes does make amends. Truffaut later went on to be a favourite of the Festival with many of his works screening there.

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