

cinema



Directed by Srijit Mukherjee
AUTOGRAPH



Abu Dhabi trailer

Two Indian movies to be showcased at the film festival in the UAE, set to open this weekend. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The Abu Dhabi Film Festival will screen two Indian movies. One will be Tigmanshu Dhulia's *Paan Singh Tomar* in Hindi, and the other, Srijit Mukherjee's debut, *Autograph*, in Bengali. And the Festival, to roll on October 14, feels that these will be huge attractions for expat Indians and cinema enthusiasts across continents.

Autograph, starring Nandana Sen and Prosenjit Chatterjee, will have its world premiere at the Festival, set to roll on October 14. It revolves around three people from the world of arts: a young director, a superstar and a theatre actress. Thrown together on a cinema set, they find their lives somersaulting.

Taking a captivating, thoughtful approach to celebrity culture and the pitfalls of the film world, *Autograph* has been inspired by Satyajit Ray's *Nayak* and Ingmar's Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*.

Essentially a movie within a movie, the script splits into two parallel strands, playing with the blurred boundaries between reality and the make-believe world of Tollywood (in Kolkata) stardom.

The two narratives interweave as the story jumps between reel and real events: while one of the strands follows the unconventional relationship brewing between the superstar and a journalist, the other details the emotional triangle among the director, the actress and the superstar.

Mukherjee, an economist-turned-director, first came into limelight with his play, *Feluda Ferot*. Based on the immortal characters that Ray created for his extremely popular *Feluda* series of crime and mystery tales, Mukherjee's work was celebrated in Bengal.

The helmer says that *Autograph* — where

a young director is trying to remake the Ray classic of *Nayak* (essayed by the matinee idol, Uttam Kumar) — is a tribute to the great master.

Mukherjee, Chatterjee and Sen, the daughter of the renowned economist, Amartya Sen, are expected to be at the Festival.

Also to be internationally premiered will be *Paan Singh Tomar*. Helmed by Tigmanshu Dhulia, it narrates the tale of a champion runner in the Indian Army who turns into an outlaw wreaking havoc in the Chambal Valley. Irrfan Khan is Tomar, and Mahie Gill portrays his screen wife. Both Khan and Dhulia will be at Abu Dhabi.

Dhulia is known for his socially provocative works. After being the casting director for Shekhar Kapur's explosive *Bandit Queen* (1994, based on dacoit Phoolan Devi's life), Dhulia made his first feature in 2003, *Haasil*, about student politics in northern India. His next picture, *Charas: A Joint Operation*, was a thriller on drug gangs shot in Himachal Pradesh.

The two Indian entries will be part of the 70 from about 28 countries to be showcased at the young Abu Dhabi Festival. Thirteen of these will be screened for the first time anywhere in the world, and four among them were partly funded by Sanad, the Festival's moneybags that help develop and post-produce Arab features and shorts.

The fourth edition of the 10-day cinematic event, renamed Abu Dhabi Film Festival instead of the earlier Middle East International Film Festival, will open with Randal Wallace's American biographical work, *Secretariat*. The story of Penny Chenery, whose racehorse, *Secretariat*, won the 1973 Triple Crown, it will be acted out by

Diane Lane and John Malkovich among others.

The Festival will end on October 23 with Tsui Hark's *Detective Dee* and the *Mystery of the Phantom Flame*, a fictional account of the exploits of Di Renjie, a celebrated official in China's Tang Dynasty. This screening will be preceded by the Black Pearl Awards.

Peter Scarlet, the Festival's Executive Director — who added a liberal dash of drama last year when he brought out some goats at the closing night gala of Grant Heslov's-George Clooney-starrer *The Men Who Stare At Goats* — told *The National*, a daily from Abu Dhabi: "People in my business, we get praised and blamed for the movies we show, but we're working in the vineyards trying to bring in the grapes, and if the stuff isn't there, it isn't there. I think overall we have a strong programme, and the presence of the Middle East on screen is going to be as strong as last year."

The Festival will show a lot of cinema from all over the world, but then there is no forgetting the fact that work about the Middle East needs to be highlighted. Last year, the Festival made a determined effort to gently nudge audiences towards watching films set in the region. Must have been a tough task, though, for the lure of Hollywood is very strong.

At the same time, Scarlet, the former artistic director of the Tribeca Film Festival, added that a movie festival need not mimic the United Nations. It does not have to represent each country on this earth. The best of cinema must be played. Wherever they come from.

And what is this best this year? Here are a few examples. One of them, Mark Romanek's *Never Let Me Go*, adapts Japanese

born British author Kazuo Ishiguro's novel to tell us the story of human clones and organ donors through characters portrayed by Keira Knightley, Carey Mulligan and Andrew Garfield. Francois Ozon's screwball 1970s comedy, *Potiche*, with Gerard Depardieu and Catherine Deneuve as the trophy wife-turned-no-nonsense boss, and Julien Schnabel's Middle Eastern epic, *Miral*, where India's Frieda Pinto (made famous by *Slumdog Millionaire*) essays a haughty Palestinian schoolgirl who eventually becomes a journalist and author, are also on the must-not-miss list.

Here are some more. Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies*, traces the plight of two children as they carry out their mother's last wish asking them to find their father and brother they have never met. The daughter leaves Montreal and heads to the Middle East, and the films goes back and forth in time. "It's a very modern way to tell Greek tragedy," Villeneuve says. "A very ancient and mythological story with modern warfare."

Now, the world premieres in the Festival are: *Here Comes the Rain* by Bahij Hojeij (Lebanon, UAE), *Taming* by Nidal Al-Dibs (Syria), *Homeland* by George Sluizer (Netherlands), *A Man's Story* by Varon Bonicos (UK), *Back Door Channels: The Price of Peace* by Harry Hunkele (USA), *In/Out of the Room* by Dina Hamza (Egypt), *Living Skin* by Fawzi Saleh (Egypt), *OK, Enough, Goodbye* by Rania Attieh and Daniel Garcia (Lebanon, UAE), *Qarantina* by Oday Rasheed (Iraq, Germany, UAE), *Sun Dress* by Saeed Salmeen (UAE), *Wrecked* by Michael Greenspan (Canada), *Paan Singh Tomar* and *Autograph* (both India)

The Festival has three competitions for features that offer cash awards worth \$1mn. Along with the Narrative and Documentary Competitions be will be New Horizons, a competition for first- and second-time directors.

The other sections include Showcase, an international selection of outstanding movies eligible for the \$30,000 Audience Award, and a section titled, *What in the World Are We Doing to Our World?*, films on the environment. There will also be a category on restored classics.

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