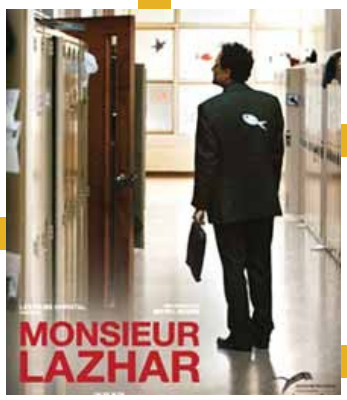
cinema



Cinema on the desert

Glimpses from the Abu Dhabi Film Festival that ended earlier this week. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

October may not be exactly the right time to hold a movie festival in a desert, particularly at that time of the year when sandstorms blind you, reducing visibility to dangerous levels and blanketing monuments and memories. But Nature played mercy, and the recent Abu Dhabi Film Festival rolled its fifth edition with a breeze.

In fact, the open-air theatre at Fairmont Bab Al Bahr where the inaugural movie, *Monsieur Lazhar*, and many more films screened, offered a perfect setting. The Festival's Executive Director, Peter Scarlet, almost turned poet on the opening night, when he waxed eloquence describing the marvellous full moon that dazzled on a bright, clear sky even as the magnificently illuminated Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque across a creek by the auditorium seemed to enhance the etherealness of it all.

However, as much as Philippe Falardeau's *Monsieur Lazhar* was an extremely engaging film, it was swathed in tragedy and did not quite pep up the Festival mood – an essential ingredient I would think to get a long cinema event sprinting.

Be that as it may, *Monsieur Lazhar* gripped me with its layered look at a school tragedy. An Algerian refugee, Bachir Lazhar (played by Algerian writer-director Fellag), sorrowed by a personal loss becomes a teacher in a Montreal school, which is also coming to grips with its own terrible misfortune. A teacher there hangs herself in a classroom (what horror), much to the revulsion of the authorities and the emotional distress of the students, one of whom actually sees her hanging from the ceiling.

Reminiscent of the original student-teacher drama, *To Sir With Love*, Monsieur Lazhar though follows a gloomy path rather than a somewhat aggressive one that the Sidney Poitier movie treaded on.

Based on a play by *Évelyne de la Chenelière*, *Monsieur Lazhar* not only effectively alternates between the bleak and the sunny, but also probes deeply disturbing issues like the effect of unnatural death on young minds. Traces of child molestation and the desperation for survival through deceit are handled with feeling and admirable restraint.

Often touching, the work has great moments, as when Lazhar's eyes well up at a schoolgirl's purity of prose. His relationship with the children help him come to terms with his own horrific past, and Falardeau's economy of words and visuals are indeed a treat, infusing a remarkable sense of neatness in the entire work.

I particularly liked the way the movie closes. It was a great shot that only a great director can bring himself to do.

Perhaps, the Festival's best offering was Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation* (which won a Special Jury Prize) that paints the grief of a family as the quarrelling husband and wife decide to split, leaving their 11-year-old daughter in utter dilemma. The wife wants to leave Iran and bring up her daughter in a country that she feels will be conducive for the mental and physical wellbeing of the girl, but her husband would hear nothing of that, because his old and ailing father needs him.

What makes this work a piece of great cinema is Farhadi's analysis of the contemporary Iranian society through a neatly crafted film, well mounted and intelligently edited, and narrated with sensitivity.

There were other great moments during the 10-day Festival which showcased 170 movies from about 40 countries. Faouzi Bensaidi's Moroccan drama, *Death for Sale*, plunges into the depths of poverty and a sense of hopeless despair that push three young men into committing a heist at a jewellery shop. Part of the marginalised section of the port city of Tetoun in Morocco, the men find themselves trapped in a web spun by smugglers and corrupt cops.

Curiously, each of the men has an entirely different reason for planning the robbery. Malik wants to help his Cabaret dancer girlfriend find a substantial sum of money to get her out of the seedy life. Allal hopes the loot can get him into big-time smuggling, while Soufiane just wants to murder the store owner, because he practises another faith.

Bensaidi, however, has different plans for them, and in a neat climax he shocks us all.

On a far lighter vein was Japan's *I Wish* where Hirokazu Kore-eda infuses hilarity by showing how two boys, brothers really, use a bullet train to get their wish fulfilled. Believing in a rumour that a wish could be fulfilled when they see a bullet train on its maiden run, the boys begin a visually delightful journey of optimism and sheer wonder.

Also about children was the South African entry, *Lucky*, by Avie Luthra where the matronly character essayed by Jayashree Basavaraj helps a little boy, Lucky, who loses his mother to Aids, find his father. Basavaraj, who won the Best Actress Award, weaves into her role a sense of compassion and strictness as she goes about getting the father accept his son.

Yet again about children was Sweden's *She Monkeys*, helmed by Lisa Aschan, that probes unhealthy competitiveness between two teenage girls for a place in an equestrian acrobatics troupe. Set against the country's blue-grey landscape, the film is a psycho-dramatic tale of how the deep friendship between the girls turns into destructive rivalry.

The Festival had an array of feature-length documentaries as well, and the two that stole a march over the rest was Gemma Atwal's *Marathon Boy* and Atia and Mohamed Jabarah Al Daradji's *In My Mother's Arms*, both enormously moving. Atwal talks about India's running child prodigy, Budia, and how he comes to grief when his coach is hounded out by jealous bureaucrats and politicians and finally shot dead. The incident caused a huge uproar in the country a few years ago, a loss it felt of a potentially good trainer who could have perhaps got the little lad on to the Olympics track.

On the other hand, *In My Mother's Arms* is a poignant study of post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, where orphaned-by-war children crave for motherly love.

Several other films, such as Michael Winterbottom's *Trishna*, Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and David Cronenberg's *A Dangerous Method* made their Middle Eastern premiere in a Festival that though this time was not rich on international celebrities as it was last year. Apart from Winterbottom and Tilda Swinton, both of whom got the Festival' career achievement awards, there was none from the international arena.

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