

cinema

Educating Frieda

The *Slumdog Millionaire* actress sheds her glitzy image with a polished performance in *Miral*, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Often, it takes just one movie to get the red carpet unrolling, flashbulbs popping and celebratory drinks dizzying your senses. For India's Frieda Pinto, that one film was Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*, a work that was as intensely hated as it was passionately adored.

Some called it a masterpiece, some said it celebrated India's pathetic poverty. The Greek master, Theo Angelopoulos, walked out the screening merely 15 minutes after it had started, and described Boyle's film as shameful and pornographic.

But Pinto as *Slumdog Millionaire*'s Latika caught the eye of the world, even if she was not raved about in her home country. Not that she was particularly out of the ordinary in the movie, though she won a Screen Actors Guild Award and got a Bafta nod for Best Actress in a Supporting Role.

However, the fact that Boyle

(most known for the 1996 *Trainspotting* about a group of heroin addicts) chose her to play an important character made all the difference, particularly after the film garnered no less than eight Oscars, including those for Best Picture and Best Director.

For Frieda, the moon was there for the asking, and she asked for it, but not before she had ditched her boyfriend (Rita Faria did that as well after being crowned Miss World in 1966, the first Indian woman to clinch the honour) and cuddled up with Dev Patel, who as Jamal had essayed her lover in *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Then came Woody Allen with his, *You Will Meet A Tall Dark Stranger*. As Dia, Frieda got to rub shoulders with performers as distinguished as Anthony Hopkins, Antonio Banderas, Josh Brolin and Naomi Watts. It was not a great part for Frieda, but the Allen work went to Cannes last May. And once you are



* Frieda Pinto in a scene from *Miral*.

there, you have but made it, really you have.

Now Frieda's latest movie is at the ongoing Venice Film Festival. *Miral*, a Franco-Israeli film by Julian Schnabel (*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*), is part of the Festival's prestigious Competition.

I must say, Pinto is marvellous as Miral. She has now turned into an actress, the allure of modelling, the heady feeling of being called to work with Boyle and Allen seem to have slipped off her shoulders.

As *Miral*, she is a schoolgirl living

under the constant threat of the Israeli-Palestine conflict. Though holding an Israeli passport, Miral is a Palestinian, and she truly believes that she is one.

Inspired by the life of Palestinian born, though based in the West journalist and author, Rula Jebreal, who wrote the book and the screenplay for *Miral*, Schnabel's film explores the Middle East conflict through the eyes of the 17-year-old schoolgirl.

A seven-year-old Miral comes to a boarding school for girls orphaned by the bloody war. She has just lost her mother tragically, and her father feels that she would grow up best in the school. Until she is 17, Miral lives a life secluded from the troubles outside. But when she is asked to teach at a refugee camp, a shock awaits her, and she is gripped by a sense of anger, frustration and revulsion.

The movie goes on to tell us how Miral overcomes her personal dilemmas, including her love for a political activist, to eventually become a journalist and author.

The story begins in 1947, when Israel was born. Roughly three decades later, Hind Hussein (Hiam Abbass), a wealthy woman moved by the plight of orphaned Palestinian girls, opens a school firmly believing that education alone would help them cross the hurdles of life.

We are then introduced to two other women: Fatima (Ruba Blal), a nurse turned terrorist-killer, and Nadia (Yasmine al-Massri), who is forced to flee home and become a belly-dancer after being raped by

her father. Fatima places a bomb in a cinema destroying many lives, and is jailed for life. Nadia finds a kind husband, gives birth to Miral, but that does not stop her from turning into an alcoholic and killing herself. The man takes Miral to Hussein's school. Finally, Hussein helps Miral get over her political ambitions that could have only spelt disaster for her.

In many ways, *Miral* is truly Frieda's film, though it tends to gloss over very serious concerns. Issues like terrorism and, of course, Palestine run very deep, and the screenplay, I feel, appears somewhat like a lost child in a crowded bazaar. It does not know where to turn to.

Schnabel's creation, like the child, desperately seeks to touch upon many questions confronting the region, but ends up as a rather shallow effort. Israeli atrocities on Palestinians and West Bank colonies have all been run through quickly and unsatisfactorily.

Admittedly, Schnabel steers clear of dramatising the work, and ends on a very lovely note of the Oslo peace talks that inspire Miral to travel abroad and become a journalist. It is precisely this note of hope that Frieda as Miral helps keep alive — and push it forward. In a very restrained performance, she shines, and holds out the promise of entertaining us with some great fare in future.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been covering the Venice Film Festival for 10 years and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)



* Julian Schnabel (centre) is flanked by screenwriter Rula Jebreal (right) and his daughter, actress Stella Schnabel pose during the *Miral* red carpet event at the 67th Venice Film Festival on Thursday.