

# cinema

## Venetian vista

**Gautaman Bhaskaran** on the highlights of this year's Venice Film Festival that starts today

Venice may be hosting the world's oldest film festival, but this year's edition largely flaunts a flock of young directors. Not just this, for the fourth time in five years, the top Competition is entirely made up of world premieres. The other sections are a mix of experimental movies and big budget fare, which could go on to become blockbusters.

Incredible as it may sound, the average age of 23 directors, whose creations would enrich the Competition is just 47 — far lower than the earlier 66 versions of the Festival. There are a couple of exceptions, though: Monte Hellman at 78 will compete with his crime thriller, *Road to Nowhere*, while 72-year-old Jerzy Skolimowski will be on the Lido also with a crime story, *Essential Killing*.

As the Festival's Artistic Director, Marco Mueller, averred, certain dynamism could be seen in the cinema of recent years, and Venice was merely mirroring this. Even the usually caustic Italian media agreed that this year's Venice lineup was boundlessly youthful.

In total, the Festival will have 79 world premieres, including Anurag Kashyap's *The Girl in Yellow Boots*. The American contingent is ample, the European stack will be robust and the Asian representations are significant. All this will add up to a "meticulously calibrated mix of classic auteur and genre fare, plus more esoteric offerings".

Julian Schnabel's Israel-Palestine conflict narrative *Miral*, Sofia Coppola's father-daughter work *Somewhere*, Vincent Gallo's suicide drama *Promises Written in Water*, and Kelly Reichardt's Oregon Trail period piece *Meek's Cutoff* will vie for the prestigious Golden Lion.

Among Europe's celebrated helmers will be Abdellatif Kechiche, Francois Ozon and Tom Tykwer, and the Asian canvas will project the films of Tsui Hark, Takashi Miike and Tran Anh Hung, among others.

Darren Aronofsky's psychological thriller *Black Swan*, with Natalie Portman in the role of a New York City ballet dancer, will open the Venice festival today. The movie, one of the 23 competing entries, also stars Winona Ryder, Vincent Cassel and Mila Kunis. With an austerity drive in place on the Lido and no grand opening night party, the inaugural evening will unspool two more films: Robert Rodriguez's action picture *Machete*, and Andrew Lau's martial-arts story *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen*.

America will compensate for its poor show Cannes this May with six movies in Competition and 13 more in the other sections. Affleck's *The Town*, in which the actor essays a bank robber, Martin Scorsese and Kent Jones' Elia Kazan tribute documentary *A Letter to Elia*, Casey Affleck's directorial debut, *I'm Still Here: the Lost Year of Joaquin Phoenix*, John Turturro's love letter to Neapolitan music, *Passione* and Julie

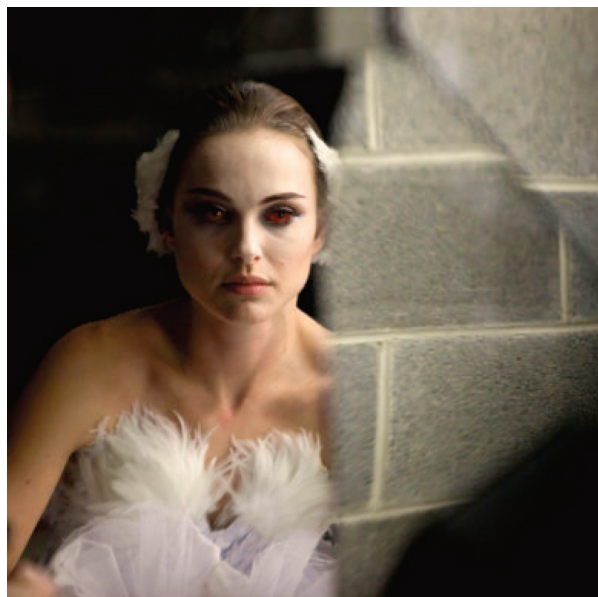
Taymor's gender-bending *The Tempest*, with Helen Mirren that will close the Festival on September 11, are some of the Venetian gems.

The titles to look forward to from Europe include Kechiche's *Black Venus*, the true tale of 19th-century South African tribeswoman Sarah Baartman "who, due to her oversized physical features, was displayed as a naked circus freak"; Ozon's *Potiche*, a comedy starring Catherine Deneuve and Gerard Depardieu and Tom Tykwer's love triangle *Three* that takes place in Berlin. Another triangular affair to be seen is Spanish cult auteur Alex de la Iglesia's *A Sad Trumpet Ballad*, where two clowns fall in love with the same woman trapeze artist.

Asia will present cult Japanese director Miike's samurai swashbuckler *Thirteen Assassins*, Hong Kong helmer Hark's period mystery thriller *Detective Dee and the Mystery of Phantom Flame*.

One will also get to see two 3-D films: *The Child's Eye* by Hong Kong's Pang Brothers and *Shock Labyrinth* by Japan's Takashi Shimizu.

The Queen of the Adriatic, as Venice is often endearingly called, is all set to present a kingly package of movies. At least that is what it looks like for now.



✳️ Natalie Portman stars as a New York ballet dancer in the psychological thriller *Black Swan*.



### Indian entries

Two Indian movies will screen at the Festival. Mani Ratnam's *Raavan* in Hindi and Anurag Kashyap's *The Girl in Yellow Boots* will play in Out-of-Competition slots. Ratnam, who will be honoured by the Festival with the Jaeger-LeCoultre Glory to the Filmmaker Award, has already premiered his movie in India, though to poor box-office returns and unflattering reviews. Both Abhishek Bachchan and wife Aishwarya Rai were panned for their below average performances.

It is the Tamil version of Ratnam's work, *Raavanan* that attracted somewhat kinder reviews and also did commercially better than the one in Hindi. An important reason for this was actor Vikram's engaging style and markedly better acting skills than Bachchan's. Yet, Venice has chosen to show the Hindi edition.

Kashyap will be at Venice for the second consecutive year: last year, he had *Dev D* and *Gulaal* on the Lido. Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's *Delhi 6* was the third Indian entry last time, and all three films played outside the main Competition.

*The Girl in Yellow Boots* (above) stars Kashyap's girlfriend, Kalki Koechlin, Naseeruddin Shah, Gulshan Devaiya, Shivkumar Subramaniam, Divya Jagdale, Kumud Mishra and Kartik Krishnan among others. The movie has been written by Kashyap and Koechlin. The plot, not exactly novel, centres on Ruth (Koechlin), searching for a father she has hardly seen, but cannot forget. Driven to desperation, she begins working without a legal permit in a Mumbai massage parlour, and Kashyap uses the city with its dark underbelly to show how Ruth gets sucked into it.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran will be at Venice for the 10th year, and may be contacted at [gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in](mailto:gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in))

### Jafar Panahi plays a different note

Iran's enfant terrible, director Jafar Panahi's new work, *The Accordion* will be part of the Venice Film Festival, which rolls today. The nine-minute short will open Venice Days, a part of the Festival's 67th edition held on the island of Lido, off the mainland. It is not clear, as yet, whether Panahi will be able to attend his screening. Last May, he could not be part of the jury at Cannes, because he was under arrest for having made an anti-government movie. In a symbolic and

touching gesture, Cannes had placed an empty chair on the stage to mark Panahi's absence.

"I am a social-minded filmmaker", stated Panahi, "and I am sensitive to every new phenomenon which occurs in my society. Of course I react to it and, perhaps, *The Accordion* represents my reaction to the events surrounding me, and my way of observing reality."

The plot is about a boy and a girl who have their accordion confiscated after an accident.

Panahi says: "*The Accordion* is the story of humankind's materialistic

need to survive in a pretentious religion. In it, a boy is prevented from playing for reasons of religious prohibition, which he accepts in order to survive.

"But the main character of the movie is the girl or, perhaps, in my view, the symbol of the next generation. In her ideal world she realises man's need for survival and decides to avoid the violence and share her small income with someone else who is also in need."

The film seems like a powerful metaphor on violence, tolerance and, finally, hope.



✳️ A scene from Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi's *The Accordion*.