

cinema



* *Harud*: Aamir Bashir presents the horrific conditions in Kashmir unleashed by the security forces, and portrays this through the suffering of a small family.

Fearless tales to the fore

The Dubai International Film Festival showcased several stories that touch socially relevant issues. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The just-concluded Dubai International Film Festival lined up a cinema that went beyond exotic imagery and meaningless entertainment. Many of the Middle Eastern movies that I saw told stories that moved and disturbed me. I was provoked to pause and ponder about them long after the screenings were over. Yes, the films were not technically good. Some of them could have done with a fair amount of polish. But they were honest, and strove to make socially and culturally relevant points. And, above all, they were bold, almost fearless.

Screenwriter Mohamed Diab's debut helming effort, *Six, Seven, Eight*, takes an unflinching look at sexual harassment. Three women living in Cairo, from varying social and economic classes, find their lives miserable and torturous when they are constantly abused. Nelly

dreams of being a stand-up comic, but her reputation is in disarray after she files a sexual harassment complaint with the police in a male-chauvinist community. Fayza is a traditional mother and wife who finds life hard because she is constantly assaulted on public buses. Seba is a wealthy jeweller whose is recovering from a molestation.

Bushra, who plays Fayza, told a Press conference that molesters did not confine themselves to any particular age group or economic status. When asked how women would like to defend themselves she said that each would have to make her own choice. Fayza, for instance, uses a sharp pin-like object to maim the men who paw her.

Equally unnerving was an Iraqi work, *The Singer*. Helmer Kassem Hawal gives us a brutal image of a dictator (who resembles Saddam Hussain). When a famous singer's

car breaks down and he is delayed for a performance to celebrate the despot's birthday, he is humiliated and disgraced. What is as awful is the way women guests are frisked, and voyeuristically watched by male guards on monitor screens! When a woman asks the frisker how such a body search would help, the reply smacks of the dictator's strange paranoia: you might have hidden a vial of deadly germs inside you!

Jordan's *Transit Cities* reveals the cultural shock of a young woman who returns to Amman after a 10-year stay in the US. She finds herself shackled by religious intolerance. In a very telling scene, a bank manager gives her a rug and asks her to cover her bare legs. The message that follows may not be exactly welcome: the woman's father asking her to leave her own country seems terribly defeatist. Does this sound like the desperate

things seem to be getting quieter, the family is rattled by yet another tragedy.

There were other films that could not afford to be as daring, but yet found a way of saying what they wanted to. At one point, Iranian cinema, pushed to the wall by a government that frowned on artistic freedom, had to make mostly movies with children or about children.

There were a few who did dare to stick their necks out, and paid the price. Jaffer Panahi is a classic case. Arrested, he spent a long time in prison, and was later confined to his home. He still is, and not being allowed to travel.

At the Festival, I noticed that Iranian directors have begun to make a cinema that while seemingly talking about people trapped in challenging situations was actually underlining issues that had far wider ramifications.

Sepideh Farsi's *The House Under The Water* follows two teens who cause the accidental drowning of a child. One of them goes to jail, and it is 30 years later that he is freed, but only to find himself a suspect in another drowning death. Was Farsi implying the gross unfairness of a legal system?

Mohsen Abdolvahab weaves three stories into his *Please Do Not Disturb*. In one, we see a woman beaten by her husband hesitating to formally complain to the police. In the second, a clergyman begins a negotiation with a thief, and the last segment focuses on an elderly couple afraid to open the door to a young mechanic, who has to come to repair their broken television set.

The protagonist of *The Hunter* (directed by Rafi Pitts) turns a murderer after his wife and six-year-old child are killed in the run-up to Iran's disputed 2009 elections.

We see in these films a strong underlying moral dilemma of the individual, but on a closer look, it is apparent that the helmers are in effect talking about how state authority has been interfering in the personal freedom and civil liberties.

cry of a population, at least a large part of it, that may well want to move on in life without repressive restrictions?

Zelal is a quiet masterpiece of hard-hitting reportage by directors Mustapha Hasnaoui and Marianne Khoury. The work has drawn critical praise for its candid insight into the lives of those afflicted by mental illness in Egypt today. Shot in two large asylums, the movie reveals the horrific conditions in which patients are expected to live — squalor and neglect is endemic, staff is stretched beyond breaking point, and therapy and treatment are non-existent.

India's *Harud* (Autumn) is scary. Aamir Bashir presents the horrific conditions in Kashmir unleashed by the security forces, and portrays this through the suffering of a small family. Rafiq and his parents are trying to come to terms with the loss of his elder brother, and when



* *Zelal*: candid insight into the lives of those afflicted by mental illness in Egypt today.