

# cinema



\* Governor Morris (George Clooney, left) addresses supporters after receiving Senator Thompson's (Jeffrey Wright, centre) endorsement; Morris' wife, Cindy (Jennifer Ehle, right) and their daughter (Talia Akiva, bottom right) stand by in *The Ides of March*.

## A beguiling cocktail of hits and misses

Hollywood releases and some less-than-commendable regional fare cast a long shadow on this year's Venice International Film Festival, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

**T**he Venice International Film Festival that ended its 11-day run last week on the little island of Lido, off Venice, began with some breath-taking cinema. But it could not sustain the calibre and class after the first few days.

An important reason could have been long-time Festival Director Marco Mueller's near obsessive desire to go for an all-out premiere show. The 65 movies in the main official sections were being screened for the first time ever. If I am right, they were not even shown in the countries where they were made. This was certainly one important criterion for competing entries.

Also, a good many of them were in the English language, often from Hollywood. Not that they were bad, but I felt that they were not really an 'A' class festival material. Now, what was William Friedkin's *Killer Joe* — about an American cop who moonlights as a professional killer — doing in the main competition,

veying for the Golden Lion with about 20-odd other films? Why was Ami Canaan Mann's *Texas Killing Fields* — about serial murders of young women — competing?

I also felt that movies such as *The Last Man on Earth* (Gianni Pacinotti, Italy), *The Exchange* (Eran Kolirin, Germany), *Faust* (Alexander Sokurov, Russia), which went on to win the Golden Lion, *Life Without Principle* (Johnnie To, Hong Kong) and a few others were disappointing to say the least.

Every time I saw such a film, I was left wondering why an Indian movie could not have been selected in competition. A Festival selector tells me that of the 150 or so Indian films that were seen by Venice, none except Gurvinder Singh's *Aims For A Blind Horse* and Amit Dutta *Golden Bird* could qualify. They were rejected on some ground or the other. One of the reasons could have been the eligibility criteria: a work could not have been shown anywhere, including perhaps the country of origin.

A few titles that could have made it to Venice strike me: Indian movies that were better than the bad ones I mentioned above. Here they are: *Ishqiya* (Hindi), *Aaranya Kaandam*, *Angadi Theru* (both Tamil), *Traffic* (Malayalam) and Buddhadeb Dasgupta's latest creation in Bengali.

Somewhere, Cannes and Venice have deep-rooted prejudices about Indian cinema, strengthened perhaps early on by India-based selectors, who were either Bollywood-besotted or played publicists to their favourite stars, directors and production houses. Last year, a high-ranking Cannes administrator told me that he was quite annoyed at the way some bad Indian cinema was being pushed on to him!

Now, for some cinema from Venice that pleased me and many other critics.

George Clooney's political thriller, *The Ides of March*, may not exactly have been opening movie material, but it was intelligent, high

on production values and acted out superbly. The Clooney-Grant Heslov written work (based on Beau Willimon's play, *Farragut North*) was gripping. What made *The Ides of March* a pure delight to watch was its story line of political sex and some great acting by Clooney as US Democratic presidential candidate Mike Morris and Ryan Gosling as the campaign mastermind, Stephen Meyers.

When Morris, a liberal and honest politician, is caught having sex with a beautiful and smart intern, Evan Rachel Wood's Molly Stearns (who gets pregnant and needs to have an abortion), a political storm — much like what happened when Clinton — seems to gather. The scandal threatens to ruin Morris's career, particularly after he fires Meyers. But the young man could be the only guy who could save Morris. As Meyers tells Morris in a line that clinches the film, one can start a costly war or bankrupt the country, but one cannot afford to have an

affair with an intern. Clinton found that out, though he escaped. But Morris was not too sure that he could be as lucky.

Roman Polanski's *Carnage* gripped me with its magnificent ensemble cast of Christopher Waltz (*Inglorious Basterds*, *Water for the Elephants*), Kate Winslet, Jodie Foster and John C Reilly (*We Need to Talk about Kevin*) and terrific script played out in real time.

Polanski, who still cannot travel to the US because of a sex abuse case hanging over him, cockily sets his movie in New York. The opening shot, a long one, shows us two boys fighting that ends up with one of them hurting the other. Their parents Penelope (Foster) and Michael Longstreet (Reilly) as well as Nancy (Winslet) and Alan Cowen (Waltz) meet a little later in a New York apartment to discuss and put aside the incident, which is really nothing more than a boys' squabble.

Adapted from Yasmina Reza's immensely popular play, *The God of Carnage* that was staged to full houses in New York, London and Paris, the film co-written by Polanski was as engaging as it is provoking, though the final part appeared a bit of a drag. Although it is an out-and-out chamber piece set in a classy New York apartment and resembles a theatrical production, it is nonetheless a fine piece of cinema that is bound to attract Academy voters in the coming Oscar season.

Wonderful characterisations with Alan as a prudish upper crust lawyer who is forever on his mobile phone and Penelope as an uptight art lover and author propel *Carnage* into quite another realm. A seemingly calm Nancy (an investment broker by profession, who is always guilty of having neglected her children) soon loses control of herself as the conversation among the four slip from the pretentious civil to biting sarcasm. She vomits and that too on Penelope's precious collection of art books, setting off reels of drama.

Even this histrionic turn-of-events does not stop by what now has got into a bitter argument about childcare and cruelty to birds. More coffee follows and the visiting couple (Alan and Nancy) somehow never seem to drag themselves out of Longstreet's flat. When coffee is replaced by alcohol, tongues can no longer be reined in, and anger pours out not only against the "guilty" child, but also against each other. The wives accuse the husbands, the husbands the wives — and viciousness creeps in.

*Carnage*, though, ends with disarming simplicity, telling adults what fools they really are.

(To be continued next week)

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