

Dynamics of Better Films: An overview of the 15th Dhaka International Film Festival

By Manoj Barpujari

For a film aficionado it was a great chance to see some quality films. For a film society sympathizer it was a pleasant surprise to witness the enthusiasm created over a nine-day extravaganza of everything a film festival ought to have. Not many film societies around the globe have the luxury of running a festival with such pomp and gaiety – at least not in India. Coming from a not-so-far-off place like Guwahati in north-east India where film culture is yet to flourish to a satisfactory level, I was quite amazed to find the heart-warming atmosphere all throughout the days and nights of the 15th Dhaka International Film Festival (DIFF). The lasting impression it cast on me was the total ambience the festival created owing to generous help and cooperation from the government and the public alike that made the tasks of its organizer the Rainbow Film Society relatively easy.



Sometimes some events make me recall a famous Dickensian dictum “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” In a time of global warming, terror strikes, war-mongering, growing economic imbalance and intolerance of all hues, Brexit, Trump and all – a time of renewed Orwellian dystopia – it takes a real courage and self-belief to conceive something against the tide. Yes, the

entertainment industry is growing all the time, increasing its share of GDP. But orthodox film festivals do not go hand in hand with “the tyranny of entertainment”, courtesy of Richard Schickel. Braving the odds, Dhaka also geared up for its prestigious event, shrugging off certain pall of gloom following some unwanted, ghastly incident that took the world by surprise in the middle of the last year. There would be vested interests pulling from behind to discourage anything that exchanges ideas, opens up the hearts, enriches or enlightens the cultural bonds. A film society and a film festival always stood up to those virtues of humanity since their birth in Europe and throughout their development elsewhere. Dhaka’s own festival is another bright example of this growth; and everybody associated with it, either an insider or any outsider, has been immensely happy that from this year on the biennial festival has turned to an annual carnival.



The spirits of DIFF was heightened at the opening ceremony of this year’s edition. As the festival entered its 25th year, it started off in flying colours with no less a person than the Hon’ble President of the Republic Md. Abdul Hamid inaugurating it. The most enduring aspect of the festival, as I saw, was its world view. Holding a democratic urge high above bigotry, the ceremony started with recitations from the Holy Books of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian faith. The Hon’ble President of the nation, as the Chief Guest of the ceremony held at Bangladesh National Museum, acknowledged the global language of cinema transcending time and space while recalling the contributions of filmmakers of pre-liberation and post-liberation periods of the country to world cinema. It was pleasantly relieving to hear particularly Hasanul Haq Inu, the Minister of Information, enthraling the audience with a rich adulation of the film medium. The Minister of Finance A. M. Abdul Muhith and the State Minister of Foreign Affairs Shariar Alam also spoke on the government’s resolve to extend an all-out support to the festival which was another welcome development for a film festival that has been showcasing aesthetically and philosophically rich films from all over

the world. It struck my mind instantly that if something could get a solid backing of exactly what it needed, then it would be neigh impossible to hold it back from achieving success. The DIFF director Ahmed Muztaba Zamal has done something really wonderful. The crest he received from the Hon'ble President on that evening was not just a recognition of what he has been doing over the years, but a symbol of triumph and glory too, setting an example to emulate for lesser privileged festivals.



The inaugural programme would not have been more satisfying without watching the official opening film. It was the acclaimed Palestinian drama *3000 Nights* directed by Mai Masri. At a time when West Asian situation is threatening to explode with no solution in sight and to snowball into a major crisis again, the film gave the festival a perfect start. It focuses on a Palestinian woman who is detained on charges of helping a teenage boy suspected of attacking a military checkpoint. Despite a staunch defense by her lawyer, she undergoes eight years in prison while giving birth to a baby boy and struggling to raise her son behind bars. Meanwhile she encounters terrifying circumstances in which Palestinian political prisoners are incarcerated with Israeli criminal inmates. While the tensions of the outer world surface among the inmates in dramatic twists and turns, it is in the confining space of the high-security prison that the real high voltage drama of the film is played out. It is an examination of not only a Palestinian woman undergoing all kinds of injustice, but also of determination of the protagonist against

unpredictable odds. A meticulous screenplay, strong characterization and mise-en-scene, as though too much for the cramped space, allow all the dramas of life drenched in political complication unfold here.



3000 Nights set the ball rolling for the nine-day extravaganza of film viewing and other parallel events. This time there were 188 films from 67 participating countries and the films were showcased in different sections namely Asian Competition, Cinema of the World, Retrospective (Abbas Kiarostami and YesimUstaoglu), Nordic Film Session, Children Film, Short and Independent Section, Women Filmmaker, Spiritual Film Section etc.

Besides the film screening programmes, as a part of the festival, there was a one-day seminar on “Global Journey of Bangladeshi Films” held second time in a row. It was on International Emerging Talent Films Association (IEFTA), a European body based in Monaco organized a day long discussion programme / conference on Bangladesh films in association with the. IEFTA arranged an open dialogue with filmmakers, scholars, government officials, film festival organizations and Universities from Bangladesh. The goal was to help films from Bangladesh reach wider market and further strengthen festival presence.

DIFF also organized a painting exhibition for the first time, by a young talented Iranian painter- Sara Hojjati, from 8th – 20th January 2017, at the Shilpangon Art Gallery.

The seventh Dhaka Cine Workshop that started one week in advance was an impressive success as the number of participants from many countries increased significantly. The course Director was Iranian born Majid Movasseghi, who currently lives in Zurich. Around 30 students from Bhutan, India, Iran, Italy, Tajikistan, Ukraine and from Bangladesh has participated in this workshop. The students created 7 films during the workshop.



A two-day conference on “Third Dhaka International Conference on Women in Cinema” which was organized in association with the Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka at the Alliance Francaise de Dhaka drew much attention and well-synchronized participation from filmmakers, scholars, students and media persons. Among the speakers, those who made real impact were the FIPRESCI (the international federation of film critics) President AlinTascian, Tajik filmmaker and film historian Dr. Sharofat Arabova, Bangladeshi filmmaker and television personality Samia Zaman and Cambridge student film festival Director Bernadette Schramm by their sheer insight and factual analyses.

But whatever said or written about a film festival, they cannot be satisfying without discussing and reading of the most important films screened in it. The Dhaka festival too had its share of excellent films that made the selection of the outstanding films quite tough for the juries. Being a member of the FIPRESCI jury I had to see a total of 22 Asian films. It was a grueling week of film viewing that culminated in a very cordial discussion with jury colleagues Rabiul Husain and Chang Seok Yong, both veteran writer-critics from Bangladesh and South Korea respectively. The choice was pleasantly hard-reaching as we short-listed five films

and gradually zeroed in to the ultimate winner. On the closing ceremony, the festival director called upon Mofidul Hoque, a renowned cultural activist and critic from the host country, to hand over the prize to the Iraqi film *The Dark Wind*. It was a pleasure of sort to award this film not for its reputation of being the first ever feature film from Iraq, or anywhere, that exposes the barbaric acts of ISIS against the ethnically Kurdish religious community of the Yazidis, but for being a well-made film. Directed by Hussein Hassan, it is a different love story set against Iraqi Kurdistan. It is observed again and again that women protagonists are holding centre stage in cinematic tales of love and genocide and this film is no exception either. It tells the story of a young Yazidi woman who is abducted along with other young women by the raiders in black outfits of Islamic State. Later she is rescued from the clutches of sex slave traders, only to be rejected by community elders for getting pregnant in her captivity; however ultimately she is saved by her fiancé who happens to be a Yazidi soldier –a chain of events that projects human resilience in an unbearable painful backdrop. The semiotics – from the refugee camps under the UN to images of gender politics in the film – make for interesting contemporary reading of a film narrative.



There were altogether 17 awards given away in the festival; two of these awards were shared by two different films, while there were an additional eight Special Mention won by others. Being included in a jury makes your seeing options limited and therefore it is impossible for one individual to write about all the award winners. But some of the entries were clubbed in different segments of competition and it made possible to assess some of the award winning films. The

jury of the main Asian Film Competition section selected Iranian director Reza Mirkarimi's feature film *Daughter* as the Best Film. The award had prize money too and another thing to cheer about the film was its Best Actor award winning performance from Farhad Aslani. DIFF was happy to see the internationally celebrated film director himself collecting the best film award which rightly acknowledged a skillful depiction of a family life taking meaningful recourse to relationship tensions in a patriarchal society. Though *Daughter* examines father-daughter relationship, it has other contours, particularly the position of women in the society, coming to the fore in a visibly subdued yet strikingly touching way. On the other hand, with so many serious directors around – everybody squeezing the best out of his or her lead role players – it is easily comprehensible that choosing the best performer onscreen was a real taxing job on the juries' part. But sometimes the script or the narrative makes the performance easily noticeable and one such film was *3000 Nights*: it was chosen above others for the Best Actress award for the Palestinian actress Maisa AdbEihadi.

Interestingly, DIFF had a large representation from Iran, and with its filmmakers consistently causing ripples in the festival circuit world over, it was no surprise that they received quite a few awards. The Best Director award went to another Iranian director Parviz Shahbazi for his film *Malaria*. Its plot invited rapt attention owing to a thriller-like beginning flashing back to an uncommon boy-and-girl-eloping episode from the countryside to Tehran streets, their chance meeting with a music band and a whole gamut of meanings taking the viewer to a wide open conclusion. That makes a strong script indeed. However the award for the Best Script was shared by one Iranian and one Turkish film. The former is *Life and a Day* written by its director Saeed Roostaei himself. It is an acute drama of one eventful day in the life of a family with a plethora of complicated issues. The latter is *Rauf* written by Soner Caner who jointly directed the film with Baris Kaya. It deals with a school drop-out boy's innocence that stays in sharp contrast with an interminable war that affects life often tragically in a Turkish interior. The images of these films have the power of impacting the viewers in no uncertain terms. But when the cinematography takes several extra steps to capture the ambience in full physical risks and creative zeal, and strikes exceptional aesthetic beauty, then it is certain to claim the accolades. Turkish film *Cold of Kalandar* deservedly won the award for Best Cinematography for its breath-taking visuals. Directed by a young and talented Mustafa Kara, the film tells a story of struggles and endurance of life in mountainous Black Sea region with all the captivating indoor and outdoor camerawork, making it understandable why the director could not restrict the length of the film.

The organizer of DIFF- Rainbow Film Society also is celebrating their 40 years of their activities. The Dhaka filmfest is not new to me as I did a stint here in 2010 as juror. I could see the changes taking place in organization of the festival, for good obviously. Earlier the venues were confined to the National Museum and the adjacent Central Public Library auditoriums. Now there are the Alliance Francaise de Dhaka, the Edward M Kennedy Center and the Star Cineplex, adding cozy quaintness to the festival. But one most encouraging development is, to repeat, the festival transforming to an annual event. The theme of the DIFF has stood tall and it reads: "Better Film. Better Audience. Better Society." It explains

all, reflecting the spirit of the film society movement and the rationale of the film festival as well. There could not be a better proposition for any film festival than this slogan.