

# A Better Film Culture for a New Society: The 14th Dhaka International Film Festival, 2016

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By Steven Yates

The 14th Dhaka International Film Festival with its perennial tagline “Better Films, Better Audience, Better Society” is the call in reaching out to an international audience in order to enrich cinema culture both nationally and across the world. The audience, filmmakers, journalists and other delegates did just that by embracing a festival that has struggled to exist, relying on kindness through sponsorship in getting people from across the world to Dhaka. That being secured, this year’s festival was conspicuous by its warmth and interaction from the numerous international guests.



The opening ceremony at the Bangladesh National Museum had traditional Bangladeshi song and dance performed by local people in national costume and was a friendly and fun affair. Speeches followed then *Under Construction*, directed by Rubaiyat Hossain (one of only a handful of Bangladesh female filmmakers), was the

opening screening. It tells the story of a modern Muslim woman in urban Bangladesh, an actress who reconstructs the famous Rabindranath Tagore play and rediscovers herself in doing so. Though it didn't feature in the main competition it was omnipresent during the festival. Backed by a poster campaign, the film was very timely released into local cinemas at the end of the festival. It was also rewarded with the audience award and a Special Mention in the Women Filmmaker Section where the Iranian film Track 143 (Shiyar-e 143), directed by Narges Abyar, was the winner.

As for the program, there were five juries in all: The Australasian Film Competition, Women Filmmakers, Short and Independent films, Spiritual Section and the FIPRESCI Critics Jury.

The women section jury was made up of Anja Breien, Chairman, Norway; Angela Kirk, UK; Dr. Sahraa Karimi, Afghanistan; Nada Azhari Gillon, France; and Bhavani Prakash, India. The other films they awarded or recognized were Best Documentary for K2 and The Invisible Footmen, Pakistan-Brazil-USA, directed by Iara Lee; Best Short for Spring Flood (Springtij), directed by Jeannice Adriaansens from Belgium. Special mention in the women section category went to Dust of The Earth (Topurak), Kyrgyzstan, directed by Cholponai Borubaeva.





The head of the Women Filmmaker section Jury was Anja Breien, the Norwegian filmmaker who can count Ingmar Bergman amongst the people who has both admired and worked with her. Born in 1940, she studied at the French film school L'Institut des hautes etudes cinematographiques (IDHEC), graduating in 1964. The festival screened eight of her films in the Retrospective section, most notably the trilogy beginning with the feminist comedy *Wives* (Hustruer, 1975), a response to John Cassavetes *Husbands* (1970). This was followed by *Wives 2* in 1985 and *Wives 3* in 1996. In a career spanning five decades, Anja Breien is now revered as one of Norway's most influential filmmakers and continues to arouse much academic interest.

The Retrospective section also screened five films from French director Agnes Varda. Born in 1928, the start of her film career predates that of the French New Wave and the festival screened *La Pointe Courte* (1955), cited as a major influence on the movement which historically had its beginnings with Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (*A bout de Souffle*, 1959). The use of locations and non-professional actors in her film were not only a catalyst to what came four years later but gave her a signature directorial style that influenced the Nouvelle Vague directors who lauded

the Hollywood auteur directors like Alfred Hitchcock, Billy Wilder and John Ford in their writings for the now legendary French film publication Cahiers du Cinema just before the onset of their careers. Agnes Varda was also married to famous French actor and director Jacques Demy and her film of his childhood *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991) also featured in her retrospective.

Following the first in 2014, the second International Conference on Women in Cinema took place on 15th–16th January 2016 at the Alliance Françoise de Dhaka, where some of the out of competition festival screening sections also took place. Historically in cinema, rather than assimilating women filmmakers, films about women have usually been made by male screenwriters, directors or producers. The objective of the conference, as detailed in the program introduction, was “To improve the standard and content of women based cinema and also to create an interaction among the women who are involved in the medium of cinema through exchanging ideas and sharing diverse experiences.” One of this year’s retrospective participants Agnes Varda has spoken of a “women’s visual vocabulary” which exists independently in cinema. Varda claims that there are certain subjects that she feels more attracted to and to expressing more than if she were a man.





A conference such as this couldn't take place in Dhaka without some sort of acknowledgment to Rebecca, the first female filmmaker of Bangladesh. In the accompanying program catalogue, a short biography details the life and career of the pioneering director and the conference fully acknowledged her contribution and work to the Cinema of Bangladesh. On the first day the program was introduced and presided by Bangladesh filmmaker Samia Zaman who introduced keynote speeches from: Alin Tasciyan, film critic, Turkey; Fatemeh Motamed-Arya, actress, Iran; and Dr. Gitiara Nasreen, Professor of Dhaka University, Bangladesh. There then followed a face to face interview with festival guest and program retrospective participant Anja Breien from Norway.

A seminar on Women as storytellers or the Feminine narrative in Cinema was led by Sahraa Karimi, film director and scriptwriter from Afghanistan. After reading out a keynote paper, she introduced Alin Tasciyan to preside a discussion that also included Nefise Ozkal Lorentzen, a filmmaker from Norway, and Rubaiyat Hossain, a filmmaker and researcher from Bangladesh. The seminar session looked at the role of women filmmakers as activists and catalysts for help bringing change in the global society. The focus particularly centered on women as filmmakers and activ-

ists in the Asian region and the participants, speeches and seminar reflected this.

The second half of the first day took on a more interactive academic stance on women in cinema. Moving away from Asia to the subject of Hidden Histories on Film: Female Directors from South Eastern Europe, Dina Iordanova (Professor of Global Cinema and Creative Cultures, University of St. Andrews, Scotland) delivered her paper in which she demonstrated how her research tried to pinpoint what is the most prevailing aspect of female filmmaking in South Eastern Europe. Central to this she used the example of the film *Waiting for the Clouds* (*Bulutlari beklerken*, France-Germany-Greece-Turkey, 2004), directed by Yesim Ustaoglu. It looks at the hushed histories that took place in the Balkans, during the 20th Century and how poverty and migration affected families. Fatemeh Motamed-Arya presided over a discussion that followed the speech which also included Gulbara Tolomushova, film personality, Kyrgyzstan, and Professor Dr. Sonia Nishat Amin of Dhaka University, Bangladesh.

The final session of the first day looked at the Streaming Images of women in Indian Cinema, with a keynote speech from Indian film and theatre actress Bhavani Prakash. In it she addressed the socio-political and socio-economic situation of women in India today and how that is reflected in the country's contemporary



cinema. It focused in particular on the Kannada new wave films and how repression and intolerance has increased in the Modi regime, concurrent with the speaker's own development as an actress. Led by Elora Halim Chowdhury (Associate Professor, Women's Studies Department, UMASS, Boston, USA), a discussion followed which also included Nada Azhari Gillon, a journalist from France, and Dr. Fahmidul Huq of Dhaka University, Bangladesh.

On the second day of the conference, Dr. Sharofat M. Arabova presented her paper Attributes of Narrative in Women's Cinema in which she talked about women directors and artists as having comment traits in their creative processes. Following on from this, Sahraa Karimi, filmmaker and activist from Afghanistan, chaired a discussion with Fatemeh Motamed-Arya and Shamim Akhter, a Bangladeshi filmmaker. The next session was Reflections on the Production Process: Film Culture and Gender, which was an attempt to understand cinema and its inter-relation with the empowerment of women. With a keynote speech delivered by Josephine Masarella (Filmmaker and teacher from Hamilton, Ontario, Canada), a discussion followed chaired by Dr. Gitiara Nasreen, a Professor of Dhaka University, Bangladesh and also included Norwegian filmmaker Hilde Haug and Dr. Bushra Sultana of Dhaka University.



After the lunch break, the third session of the day took place. Rubaiyat Hossain, Filmmaker and Researcher from Bangladesh was the key note speaker for Female Directors: Female Gaze and a discussion was led afterwards by Suraiya Begum, Secretary, Prime Minister's Office, Bangladesh Government, and also included Robyn Hugan, Filmmaker, Australia and Dr. Sharofat M. Arabova, Filmmaker, film historian, Tajikistan. Finally, there was an hour-long declaration at the end of the two day long program which was read out in an informal closing ceremony at the end of the conference, conducted by the Conference coordinator Ishrat Khan Borsha and presided over by Mofidul Haque, Cultural activist and Trustee of the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum. Also part of the closing session was Robyn Hugan, Samia Zaman filmmaker from Bangladesh and Professor Dr. Sadeka Halim of Dhaka University, Bangladesh.

The competition program, the Australasian Film Competition, consisted of 20 films from Turkey to the Far East and took place in the Central Public Library Auditorium. Going from West to East in no particular chronological order, the competition still began with the Turkish film Sivas by first-time director Hüseyin Kaan Müjdecı. It was to unanimously win the FIPRESCI prize as chosen from the three man jury,



including local Bangladeshi critic Mofidul Hoque, along with Italian film critic Massimo Lechi and UK film critic Steven Yates. Sivas tells the tale of a 10-year-old boy who adopts a stray dog to enter for fighting competitions and involuntarily learns the rites of passage in life very quickly. It triumphed over 19 other films in the critics' prize because of what FIPRESCI called its "masterful conveyance of childhood innocence denied by the brutality of a human environment, achieved through the dark imagery of the poignant mise-en-scene."

Admittedly, the quality of the quality of the competition program did vary somewhat and also regards content and balance many countries were not represented at all, while others had two or more entries. It was, however, encouraging to see that Bangladesh entered three further films (not including Under Construction) in the main competition. Again, the consistency of the entries were a little unbalanced but local audiences could take heart by the Special Mentions Bangladesh films received for A Day in the Life of Anil Bagchi (Anil Bagchir Ek Din), directed by locally renowned director Morshedul Islam, in the Best Film Category. A film almost practically split into two, it takes place during the East Pakistan liberation wars of 1971. Anil Bagchi is a simple timid man who lives in a village with his father and only sister who loves a young Muslim man. The other half of the film is set inside a bus where an older family man (played by Gazi Rakayet who steals the film) monologues almost French New Wave style and tries to help Anil.

Special Mention in the Best Director Category went to Abu Shah Demon, the director of Jalal's Story. The young director's film screening was completely full and there was real anticipation prior to the screening that was introduced by the filmmaker along with some of the cast. The story tells of three stages in the life of Jalal, from when he was abandoned as a baby by superstitious villagers, his childhood living with a landowner and finally as a young man where he works for a politician. There was plenty of humor in this film too and it depicts the circle of life in the life of Jalal. .

The main five-person jury of the Australasian Film Competition consisted of Mr. Mohammad Malas, Chairman, Syria; Alin Tasciyan, Turkey; Yadollah Samadi, Iran; Haider Rizvi, Bangladesh; and Gulbara Tolomushova, Kyrgyzstan. They awarded Best Film to A Few Cubic Meters of Love, directed by Jamshid Mahmoudi, and Iran-Afghanistan co-production. The prize came with a cash award of TK: 100.000 (USD 1250). The film itself tells the story of a young immigrant Iranian worker who finds work in an Afghanistan factory. Facing resentment, things take a further turn for the worse when he falls in love with the daughter of a fellow factory worker who is totally and fanatically against the romantic union. The film is a simple depiction



of love set against the national and religious divide and all the ensuing problems and oppressions which are difficult to overcome.

The Spiritual section screened 16 feature and documentary films from North and South America, Europe, and across Asia. Here there was a different country represented for every film in competition which truly showed the variety of world cinema more than in any other section. There was a winning prize and special mention for both the features and documentaries. The best feature award went to the Iranian film *Today*, directed by Reza Mirkarimi, a simple plot but compelling film of a Taxi driver who must take a young woman to a hospital. Special mention in the features went to the Chinese short film *Lifeline*, directed by Bin Li, about the only resident of a traditional mountain village who is also a fortune teller. Best Documentary went to the one-hour *Nobody Home*, directed by Michal ben Toviv and a USA-Jerusalem co-production which looks at three people of different faiths all living on the mountain of olives in Jerusalem. Special mention for documentary went to the Argentinian production *Madre de los Dioses*, directed by Pauo Agüero and focusing on four sacred mothers deep in the heart of Patagonia.

The five-person Spiritual jury consisted of Charirman Adam Dawla from Bangladesh who has made documentary films in the UK, Germany, Brazil and the USA as



well as being part of the production team for the German TV company ZDF's crime famous crime series Ein Fall für Zwei. Also in the jury was Canadian based independent documentary filmmaker Josephine Massarella, Myrna Tsapa a TV and documentary filmmaker from Greece who has been directing since 2000, independent filmmaker Bobby Sarma Baruah from India who is currently completing her doctorate on the influence of folk culture in Assamese cinema, and US born filmmaker Maria Hengge who grew up in Munich, studied acting in Vienna, dramaturgy for film in Berlin, has appeared in theatre, and in films as actor and director.

The perennially important Shorts and Independents film section included a variety of films from young talents across the world hoping to be feature directors in the future. The jury was made up of Dr. Zakir Hossain Raju, Chairman, Bangladesh; Maheen Zia, Pakistan; Hilde Haug, Norway; Yesim Guzelpinar, England; and Debanik Kundu, India. Best Fiction film went to two films: Cloud and Mud (Pan Ruo Yun Ni, China), directed by Acheng Dong, and also Ketchup Kid, Austria, directed by Patrick Vollrath, with the Special Mention going to It Hits upon the Roof, Iran, directed by Teymoor Ghaderi. Many of these young filmmakers were present at the festival and spent all week making a collaborative short film with such dedication and sacrifice that they were to mainly miss the festival program screenings. They were under the constant guidance and dedication of Turkish-Norwegian writer, documentary film and TV drama director Nefise Özkal Lorentzen.

Furthermore, there was a section on Children's film with subjects detailing the lives,

aspirations and fears of young ones. In all there were ten films in competition, with two from Europe alongside eight Asian entries. The winner, The Badal Rahman Award with Crest and Certificate, was Child Haus, Philippines, directed by Luisitio Ignacio. In this film, children are plucked from their families, many of them sick, and brought under one roof in a charity home. There they have to endure the miseries they never would have expected as children and also without their families to look after them.

Out of competition, there was a section of new films called Cinema of the World, showcasing 23 new and recent films from Europe, Asia, The Philippines, Australia, Central and South America. Argentina was represented by three films more than any other country in the section, with Brazil and France two each. The highlights were the Taiwanese production Elena about a factory worker whose life changes at 26 years of age after a car accident when she decides to learn violin and become a violin teacher. Years later she is still struggling financially so decides to find a husband but her life is still a struggle. The UK-Iranian co-production The Edit focuses on an Iranian documentary filmmaker and his film on a UK war veteran in Iraq. The filmmaker subsequently falls in love with his editor, who also has a young son.

A section showcasing recent Scandinavian films shows how Dhaka reaches out to other far-flung parts of the world in order to present to and enrich its local audience. There were 17 shorts and features presented from Scandinavia and Finland, including a short from Russia. Norway seemed to stand out and the documentary Manislam by Nefise Özkal Lorentzen depicted the burdens of manhood in Islamic cultures, so bringing David vs. Goliath into the present day. More poignantly was the documentary film (also from Norway) The Vanishing Act of Einars (Einars Forsvinningsnummer), Elsa Kvamme's documentary on psychologist Einar Lunga who was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2007 and how he readjusted to life afterwards. The film's screening in Dhaka was all the more timely given that Einar Lunga was to die shortly after the festival. The Norwegian fiction film A Thousand Times Good Night, by director Erik Poppe, stars Juliette Binoche as a war photographer who won't compromise her work for the love of her husband and daughters. Of the shorts, one which particularly stood out was from Finland. My Turn (Mun Vuoro) by Hanna Nordenswan is a documentary about women who like to dance for longevity, the problem being that men tend to die earlier.

The closing ceremony was also at the Bangladesh National Museum Auditorium so bookended the nine days of the festival nicely. It was a nice ceremony, again with traditional Bangladeshi song and dance performances. After that, it was straight down to the business of presenting the numerous awards. Following this, speeches and the further good news confirmed that the Bangladesh Government has plans to



make the festival an annual event, meant everyone can now anticipate the 15th Dhaka International Film Festival early next year and was therefore the perfect closure for this festival.

Although this unique and imitable Bangladesh capital does have its poverty, environmental and noise pollution, a huge population density and manic traffic problems, the 14th Dhaka International Film Festival was full of co-operation, optimism, idealism and friendliness. All the guests, centered in one central hotel and under friendly but secure protection, bonded and formed many friendships. As evident from the enthusiasm and discussions, conferences and workshops and not least social events, everyone who made the short or long journey contributed greatly to a resonant and creative festival that served the tagline “Better Film, Better Audience, Better Society” most perfectly.

#### Award’s list of the 14th DIFF

1. Best Children Film Badal Rahman Award  
Child Haus, Dir- Luisitio Ignacio, Philippines, 88min
2. Best Audience Award :  
“Under Construction” Directed by Rubaiyat Hossain, Bangladesh, 88mins.
3. Spiritual films section  
Best Feature: "Today" Directed by Reza Mirkarimi, Iran, 87 min

Special Mention : "Lifeline" , Directed by Bin Li, China, 16mins

Best Documentary:

"Nobody Home" , Directed by Michal ben Toviv, USA/Jerusalem, 60mins

Special Mention :

"Madre de los Dioses" , Directed by Pauo Agüero, Argentina, 85mins.

4.Short and Independent films section

Best Fiction: "Pan Ruo Yun Ni" (Cloud & Mud) , Directed by Acheng Dong, China, 15mins

And "Ketchup Kid" Directed by Patrick Vollrath , Austria, 18mins.

Special Mention : "It Hits upon the Roof" , Directed by Teymoor Ghaderi, Iran, 3mins.

5.Women Filmmaker section

Best Feature : "Shiyar-e 143" (Track 143), Directed by Narges Abyar, Iran, 95 min.

Special Mention : "Under Construction" , Directed by Rubaiyat Hossain, Bangladesh, 88mins

Best Short : "Springtij" (Spring Flood), Directed by Jeannice Adriaansens, Belgium, 27mins.

Special Mention : "Topurak" (Dust of The Earth), Directed by Cholponai Borubaeva, Kyrgyzstan, 23mins

Best Documentary:

"K2 and The Invisible Footmen" , Directed by Iara Lee,Pakistan/Brazil/USA, 54mins.

6. FIPRESCI Jury : Australasian Competition Film Section

In an International Competition of 20 Films from Australasia, jury has chosen the Turkish Film "Sivas" directed by Hüseyin Kaan Müjdecı as the FIPRESCI - Critics Prize Winner.

7. Australasian Competition Film Section

Best Film:

"A Few Cubic Meters of Love",

Directed by Jamshid Mahmoudi, Iran/Afghanistan, 90 min.

Special Mention Best Film Categories:

"Anil Bagchir Ek Din" (A Day in the Life of Anil Bagchi),

Directed by Morshedul Islam, Bangladesh, 114mins

Best Director: Tom Waller, Director of "The Last Executioner", Thailand, 90mins.

Special Mention : Abu Shahed Emon, Director of "Jalal's Story", Bangladesh, 121mins

Best Actress:

Fatemeh Motamed-Aria (Iran). For "Nabat" Directed by Elchin Musaoglu, Azerbaijan

Best Actor: Vithaya Pansringarm, For "The Last Executioner", Directed by Tom Waller, Thailand and Mahmoud Abo Al Abbas, For "Samt Al Rai" (The Silence of the Shepherd), Directed by Raad Moshatat, Iraq

Best Cinematography : Ibrahim Yaghi , For "Sara" Directed by Khalil Al Mozian, Palestine

Best Script: Niloufar Mahlouji and Azita Iraei. For "Se Mahi" (Three Fish), Directed by Hamidreza Ghorbani, Iran.