

DIFF 2021: Championing the indomitable spirit of cinema lovers in Bangladesh

By Ms. Sadia Khalid

As the pandemic pushed major festivals to alter their schedules or go online, the 19th Dhaka International Film Festival held its usual spot in the calendar. This time introducing the online platform for the first time, the festival was held from January 16-24, 2021. This year, the festival was dedicated to the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the pride of Bangladesh, for his birth centenary. Also, this year, the festival paid their respect to Satyajit Ray in tribute section for his birth centenary as well. Dhaka International Film Festival screened 226 films from 73 countries in theatres and online concurrently in this edition and the outcome was phenomenal.



With the theme of “Better Film, Better Audience and Better Society,” the festival has been organized on a regular basis by Rainbow Film Society, which has been dedicated to the promotion of a healthy cine culture in Bangladesh and in celebrating the global mainstream in film and its social relevance since 1977.

The films are screened under 8 sections every year- Asian Cinema Competition Section, Retrospective, Cinema of the World Section, Bangladesh Panorama, Children Films Section, Women Filmmakers Section, Short and Independent Section and Spiritual Films Section.

Hybrid festival

Covid regulations made it impractical to host foreign delegates like the previous years. But that couldn't dampen the spirits of the indomitable audiences and organizers. In fact, the online streaming engaged around 30,000 more audiences and the lines at the theatres were as long as ever, although social distancing was strictly maintained in the seating arrangements cutting the theatre capacity in half.

Jury board

An all-Bangladeshi jury board was formed for the first time due to travel restrictions. Several popular actors joined their ranks for a change, including Arifa Pervin Zaman Moushumi, Ferdous Ahmed, Rokeya Prachy, Whida Mollick Jolly and Bonna Mirza. Catholic priest, Rev. Fr. Bulbul Augustine Rebeiro, and film editor Chaitali Somadder were grouped with Ms. Mirza in the Spiritual Films section while the rest were an assortment of film critics and academics containing Moinuddin Khaled, Dr. Shahanara F. Chowdhury, A M Mamunur Rashid, Ershad Kamol Khan, and Sadia Khalid Reeti. A majority of the jurors were women.

New additions

There were many other additions in this edition of DIFF. As mentioned above, two new segments were added besides the existing 8 sections. One was a dedication of the festival as a whole, to mark the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a segment called- "Legendary leaders who changed the world". And for the tribute section of the festival, it was an acclamation shown to the maestro filmmaker Satyajit Ray, also for his birth centenary.

The first segment comprised of 9 films on world leaders who have fought for their nation in search for democracy and the latter consisted of 7 films of the Oscar-winning director. Every day at 6:30pm, a large LED screen under the open sky attracted people to flock to the grounds of Shilpakala Academy to enjoy films of these two sections. Although this was initially intended as a safety measure for coronavirus, the organizers hope to continue these open-air screenings, which was very popular among the audiences.

Opening ceremony

19th DIFF was inaugurated by Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen who was the chief guest. Indian high commissioner Vikram K Doraiswami was present as special guest and festival patron M Hamid was a guest at the event. The ceremony was presided over by Liberation War Museum trustee Mofidul Hoque. Festival director Ahmed Muftaba Zamal presented the welcome speech. The guests and audience observed one-minute silence in memory of the filmmakers and intellectuals who died for the coronavirus and during coronavirus lockdown.

"Dhaka International Film Festival is a flagship event in the realm of films. I am happy to see that the festival is becoming a dominant platform. This is a great event for gathering and promoting creative minds in the time of the pandemic. Through this event, people will know



and learn about culture, society, tradition and beliefs of other parts of the world,” said Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen. The minister congratulated the organisers for hosting the film festival in Dhaka. He said he is optimistic the festival will boost our film industry.

Thanking everyone, the festival director said: “We have been organising the festival for the last 28 years. As we do not have any permanent festival venue, we have to screen films in different venues in Dhaka including Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Bangladesh National Museum, Public Library and Star Cineplex. The new segments of the festival Legendary Leaders Who Changed the World and Tribute will take the event to new heights.” He also informed that the open-air screenings at the Nadan Mancha of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy is a new addition to the festival, which he hopes people will enjoy and DIFF will continue.

M Hamid said in his speech, “We were confused about whether we would be able to organise the festival amid the pandemic. I am elated that the festival is taking place. All the film festivals across the globe are being held online but we have organised the festival at physical venues. It’s a great achievement.’

Opening Film

The festival opened with a French film, “Spring Blossom” (2020), by 20-year-old director Suzanne Lindon. The film was an official selection at Cannes Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, and International Film Festival of India, among others. The story follows 16-year-old Suzanne, played by the director herself, who falls in love with a stage actor, Rafael, twice her age. On her way to school every day, she passes the theatre where he rehearses. Bored with her perfect life, she finds Rafael’s world much more intriguing

than that of her classmates. The two develop a romantic bond over grenadine soda at coffee shops until reality hits them hard when he finally introduces Suzanne to his aging theatre troupe who have nothing in common with her. The film deals with this controversial issue of an older person being romantically involved with a minor at a time when many important film personalities (Roman Polanski, Kevin Spacey, Asia Argento etc) are being “cancelled” for their conducts. “Spring Blossom” literally dances around the topic without addressing the elephant in the room, except when the pair share one tearful last dance, their little foxtrot ending as abruptly as the 73minute film.



Women’s Conference

Apart from the screenings, DIFF organized several seminars and conferences. The longest running of these is the 2-day Dhaka International Conference of Women in Cinema. The 7th edition of this conference was held on January 17th and 18th at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy’s Jatio Chitrasahala Auditorium.

The women's conference began with a dance drama performed by the cultural unit of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. Performers dressed as legendary Bengali women across history told their stories through dance and narration. Princess Leelaboti, poet Chandraboti, Rassundari Devi, Nawab Faizunnessa, Begum Rokeya, Preetilata Waddedar, Ila Mitra, Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Mujib, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Sufia Kamal, and Jahanara Imam were among the women whose contributions were championed in this segment.



State Minister of Cultural Affairs K M Khalid, Director General of BSA Liaquat Ali Lucky, and DIFF chairperson professor Kishwar Kamal, inaugurated the conference while film festival programmers Hannah Fisher (Canada) and Meral Melika Duran (France) joined online.

The papers presented at the conference were: “A Few Good Films: Alternative Representation of Women in Films in the 70s in Bangladesh” by Mehzad Ghalib, “We tell the Truth through Cinema- Women of Iranian Cinema” by Elaheh Nobakht (Iran), “Depicting Son Preference in Indian Cinema: A Feminist Contemplation” by Debjani Halder (India), “Women in VR: Is another train leaving without us?” by Sadia Khalid, "Role of Film Festivals and Social Media to empower and encourage Women in Cinema. And Nepalese Women Film Maker's stand in the present scenario in 7 decades' history." by Nisha Shrestha (Nepal), “Beyond Bangla Borders: Made in Bangladesh: A Case Study” by Sydney Levine (USA).

West Meets East

At the West Meets East program on January 19th, Indian film critic Meenakshi Shedde talked about building an effective festival strategy, Creative lead of Zee5 Anindita Choudhury and director Ariq Anam Khan talked about landing films on OTT platforms, Norwe-



gian distributor Age Hoffart and director/producer Abu Shahed Emon talked about co-production markets, and Sydney Levine concluded the session an overview of a film's festival journey. The program was moderated by director AKA Ghalib and film critic/screenwriter and Sadia Khalid Reeti.

Meenakshi Shedde gave valuable advice about choosing the story, saying: “Don’t try to make a festival film. We, the programmers are tired of watching everyone’s interpretation of a festival film. Make the film that you want to make... The intention shows in the work.”

Sydney Levine prepared a festival calendar for new filmmakers. However, Covid changed the calendars for at least two years. She went into great details about how to make a positive impression at festivals. She even shared a few tips about reading body languages to determine whom to approach at a gathering in festivals.

‘Satyajit Ray: National as Global’

The seminars concluded on January 20th with a tribute to Satyajit Ray. Celebrated Indian Bengali actors Sharmila Tagore and Dhritiman Chatterjee joined the discussion at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy virtually, along with keynote speaker Mofidul Hoque, actor and former Minister of Cultural Affairs Asaduzzaman Noor, art critic Moinuddin Khaled and Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed.

The seminar titled “Satyajit Ray: National as Global” discussed Ray’s trajectories from inheritance of artistic expression to his learnings from various medium, including literature, art, music, design. Padma Bhushan Sharmila Tagore fondly recalled her memories of working with him saying “He ventured in every aspect of filmmaking. In Aranyer Din Ratri, he



also operated the camera... It was so intuitive like a musical rhythm.” She expressed regret that she could not be in “Ashani Shanket” because Ray chose Farida Akhtar Babita for the co-production film.

Dhritiman Chatterjee, who played politically active role in both Ray’s and Mrinal Sen’s films pointed out the difference between the two, saying, “In terms of language, Ray did what was right for him, but for Mrinal da as we know, made films in different languages even in those that he didn’t understand. Mrinal Sen because of his background was more explicitly political, while Ray although he was very progressive his interest was more in the reaction, conviction and confusion of human beings.”

Asaduzzaman Noor, who presided over the session, mentioned in his closing remarks, “I have a confession. Although I walked miles to watch his films and will still do, I dearly miss his Feluda and Shoknu series. I miss him as a writer as well.”

All these open for all talks were broadcast live on the festival's Facebook page. The discussions are still available on the festival’s Facebook and YouTube channel.

Closing ceremony

Curtain fell on the 19th Dhaka International Film Festival on January 24th with a closing and award ceremony. Information Minister Hasan Mahmud was the chief guest at the event. State Minister for Cultural Affairs KM Khalid was present as special guest at the



programme which was presided over by State Minister for Foreign Affairs and Chief Patron of the festival M Shahriar Alam. Executive member of the festival committee M Hamid was also present.

The programme commenced with dance performances by Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy dance troupe, Bhabna Nritya Dal, and Nandan Kalakendra.

Ahmed Muztaba Zamal expressed delight at the audience turnout. “It was not so easy to organise this festival in the time of COVID-19,” he commented.

Winners

Five of the fifteen awards went to Central Asian recipients from Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Bashkortostan, and Mongolia.

In the main competition, the Asian Film Competition, Kyrgyz film “The Road to Eden” (2020), directed by Bakyt Mukul and Dastan Zhapar Uulu, won the Best Film Award. The Best Director Award went to Ksenia Lagutina for “Farida” (2020), an Azerbaijan and Russia

co-production. Kazakh actress Meruert Subbusinova bagged the Best Actress Award for “Mariam,” as Nejat Isler from Turkey won the Best Actor Award for “9,75”. The Best Cinematography Award went to the Galbadrakh Batmunkh from Mongolia for the film “The Woman” (2020). Nasim Ahmadpour and Sharam Mokri won the Best Script Writer Award for the Iranian film “Careless Crime” (2020).

In the Women Filmmakers Section, Iranian film Tirishko, directed by Shakiba Khaleghi, won the Best Short Film Award (Short Fiction) and Swedish film “Incidents-Way Home” (2020), directed by Jessica Lauren, won a Special Mention (Short Fiction). The Russia-Syria co-production “Forbidden Children” (2019), directed by Evdokia Moskvina, won the Best Documentary Award. Margarida Paiva won the Best Director Award for “A Robba



Gnor” (2019), a Norway-Italy joint venture.

In the Spiritual Film section, “Senior Citizen” (2020, Cyprus), directed by Marinos Kartikis won the Best Feature Award in the Feature Film category, as “Sunless Shadows” (Iran and Norway, 2019), directed by Mehrdad Oskouei, received the Best Documentary nod. The Badal Rahman Award for Best Children Film went to “Taganok Team”, directed by Aniur Askarov, from Russia.

Bangladesh Panorama

From eight entries, the FIPRESCI prize went to Masud Hasan Ujjal’s “Incomplete Breath” (Unoponchash Batash, 2020) in the Bangladesh Panorama segment. With a generous

runtime of 147mins, the story goes like this- Neera, a microbiologist, falls head over heels for Ayon, a medical sales agent. She stalks him until eventually he falls for her too. Unfortunately, Ayon is terminally ill and their romance turns a dark corner, as Neera becomes engrossed with the idea of bringing back the dead. This is the only film in the lot that was technically sound, but the story drags on for an hour and a half too long. The genre starts as romance, moves into melodrama in the second act, ultimately landing into some horror/sci-fi trope towards the end. The songs transport you to the simpler times of the 90s. But overall, the surreal opening scene is this movie’s unrivalled highlight.

“Gondi” (2020), directed by Fakhrul Arefeen Khan, won the Best Audience Award. Based on a story by Suvojit Roy, “Gondi” revolves around Asgar (Sabyasachi), a retired old man who lives alone, dabbling in astrology to pass the time. His closest friend is his granddaughter who lives in England with her parents (Majnun Mijan and Aparna Ghosh). The highlight of Asgar’s lonely days is the Skype call with that granddaughter. Suborna’s character, on the



“The Road to Eden”, directed by Bakyt Mukul and Dastan Zhapar Uulu

other hand, is a practicing dentist; a widow, whose daughter also lives in England. Fate seems to play Cupid, as these two keep bumping into each other under hilarious circumstances. As their friendship deepens, their children can't accept the intimacy and stage a cruel intervention. The central theme of the film is “friendship without boundaries,” an important premise to explore in our society. We are overly critical of friendship with someone from the opposite sex, even more so when that camaraderie is between two elderly people. Films like Gondi can play a part in conditioning people to become more accepting of such companionships.

While DIFF is garnering praise with its Asian Competition, Retrospective, and Tribute sections, the festival's attempt at showcasing our home-grown talent has so far been futile because of the continued dominance of substandard films in this section. Some of last year's most celebrated Bangladeshi films could not be screened here because of the directors'



“Senior Citizen”, directed by Marinos Kartikkis



preference to screen at foreign festivals, or hold the Bangladeshi premiere at some other festival where they might win some prize money, or merely for they could not move past an overtly concerned censor board. It seems one can't simply blame the organizers for the current state of this uninspired collection in the Bangladesh Panorama section.

What's next?

At the closing ceremony, the festival director announced the dates of the 20th edition, on January 15th to 23rd 2022. Among new additions, there will be a script competition with lucrative cash prizes and opportunities for international collaboration as a part of the fourth West Meets East. Since the timeline marks the Golden jubilee of Bangladesh and the 30th founding anniversary of DIFF, the festival aspires to meticulously celebrate the auspicious occasions next year.

In the words of the festival director, “Alongside the Golden jubilee of our independence, it will be the 20th edition of the festival and Rainbow will celebrate 45 years of its formation. We will make up for everything we missed this year for the pandemic. On top of everything, we will continue the online streaming next year. DIFF 2022 should be a festival to remember.”

About the Author

Ms. Sadia Khalid She is a screenwriter and film critic from Bangladesh. She graduated in Screenwriting from the University of California, Los Angeles and worked on numerous scripts in Hollywood. She has also worked as an entertainment journalist at the Daily Bruin in Los Angeles and the Daily Star in Dhaka. She is currently the Cultural Editor of Dhaka Tribune. Sadia has served as a jury member at different international film festivals. She served as a FIPRESCI jury at Cannes, Dhaka and Kerala. She also teaches film studies at different universities and institutions.