



In the Palm of her hand

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Jane Campion, the renowned New Zealand writer, director and producer will chair the international jury of the world's most famous Cannes Film Festival. The 12-day event on the French Riviera will run from May 14 to 25.

Many women have chaired the Festival on the picturesque shores of the Mediterranean Sea, but Campion is the only female director to have won the Palm d'Or, and the fact that she garnered it twice makes it a unique double in the history of the Festival.

Fifty-nine-year-old Campion first came to Cannes in 1986 with her short movie, *Peel*, which clinched the Palm d'Or. Several shorts and features later, Campion won yet another accolade at Cannes in 1993, this time a more prestigious prize, the top Palm d'Or for the Best Feature Film, *The Piano*.

Set in New Zealand, *The Piano* is a haunting love story of a mute pianist as she and her young daughter weather many storms to save her beloved piano. There are haunting scenes of the piano standing forlornly on the cyclone swept sea-beach in New Zealand with Campion's protagonist and her little daughter standing guard — till a retired sailor comes into their lives, and eventually to their rescue.

Campion made many movies, including *Sweetie*, *An Angel at my Table*, *Portrait of a Lady* and *In The Cut*. However, Indians will identify with her 1999 *Holy Smoke*.

Shot in India, the film traces the traumatic life of Ruth, essayed by Kate Winslet, who is spiritually awakened by a guru, and it takes a lot of effort on the part of her mother and lover to get the young woman out of the clutches of the holy smoke.

Born into a family of artists, Campion studied anthropology, then art, before turning to cinema, where her rise to success was meteoric. She captivated international critics with *Sweetie* (1989), her first fiction feature, selected for Cannes Competition.

After *An Angel at my Table* (1990), inspired by the works of Janet Frame — in which the theme of an extraordinary woman engaged in the painful quest to assert her identity had already been sketched out — she returned to Competition at Cannes in 1993 with *The Piano*, winning the Palm.

A few months later, Campion, nominated for the Best Director Oscar (for *The Piano*), picked up the Award for the best Screenplay.

Her subsequent works featured several variants of female characters involved in an intense yet often thwarted quest for fulfilment: *Portrait of a Lady* in 1996 with Nicole Kidman, *Holy Smoke* in 1999 with Winslet, and *In the Cut* (2003) with Meg Ryan. Her last work, *Bright Star*, a fictionalised biography of the poet Keats and his muse, was presented in Competition at Cannes in 2009.

Soon after her selection as the president of the jury, Campion said: "Since I first went to Cannes with my short movie in 1986, I have had the opportunity to see the Festival from many sides and my admiration for this Queen of Film festivals has only grown larger.

At the Cannes Film Festival, they manage to combine and celebrate the glamour of the industry, the stars, the parties, the beaches, the business, while rigorously maintaining the Festival's seriousness about the Art and excellence of new world cinema. "

In the words of Gilles Jacob, the Festival's



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RIDING A CREST OF WAVE: Mohanlal and Meena in a scene from *Drishyam*.

legendary head: "Once upon a time there was an unknown young director from Down Under who was no doubt proud enough that the Festival de Cannes was going to present even one of the three shorts she had just finished. But they were shot through with such courage and humanity and captured such a unique world that the Festival refused to choose and — in a masterstroke — screened all three, marking the advent of a true master. Jane Campion had arrived, and she brought a whole new style with her. That led to *Sweetie*, *The Piano* and more recently *Bright Star* — that marvellous movie, shot through, as ever, with poetry. You'll hardly be surprised that amid such a welter of emotions, I've taken to calling her *My Lady Jane*."

The Festival's General Delegate, Thierry Fremaux, added: "We are immensely proud that Jane Campion has accepted

our invitation. Following on from Michèle Morgan, Jeanne Moreau, Françoise Sagan, Isabelle Adjani, Liv Ullmann and Isabelle Huppert in 2009, she is the latest distinguished name to grace a prestigious roster of female Presidents.

Coming from a country and indeed a continent where cinema is a rare but powerful phenomenon, she is one of those directors who perfectly embody the idea that you can make films as an artist and yet still appeal to a worldwide public. And we are confident that her exacting approach will be mirrored by her jury."

The other jurors in Campion's team will be announced closer to the start of the Festival.

A word on *Drishyam*

Although Jethu Joseph's *Drishyam* has one of the two Malayalam superstars, Mohanlal,

assuring the film of a minimum profit, it is even then rare for such a movie to have done so well. Reportedly, the most sought after film in 2013, *Drishyam*, made at Rs3.5 crores, has so far collected Rs15 crores in theatrical admissions.

Besides, the movie has been sold to Asianet television channel for a record Rs6.5 crores. The remake rights have garnered another Rs1.55 crores.

With *Drishyam* running into its third week now and in 90 screens in Kerala and elsewhere, the picture has thrown up a question. Why is it so popular?

There are no item numbers, no romantic songs and dances in New Zealand or on the Swiss Alps or in any other exotic location, and there are no fights where the hero vanquishes the villain. Certainly no gimmicks of any sort.

The answer came to me when I watched the film at a Chennai multiplex the other day. It was a noon show on a week day, and the auditorium was almost packed, and every time Mohanlal's Georgekutty scored a point with the police — not through physical bouts, but smart moves using his cerebral powers — the crowds in the cinema clapped hysterically. To me the answer came from the sound of the applause: here was a nation clearly angry with the men in khaki, here was a country of overwhelmingly poor people frustrated by police brutality.

Drishyam proves precisely this, and a few days after I had watched the picture, angry crowds stormed a police station in Chennai when an inspector shot at a juvenile delinquent. The boy was wounded, and the cop, in utter violation of norms, had kept the teenager in a lockup for a whole night.

In *Drishyam*, this is what is seen when Georgekutty, his wife and two young daughters are brutalised by policemen on the orders of an Inspector General of Police, whose son is missing.

Georgekutty and his family are suspects here, and there are gruesome scenes of a burly cop beating up not only the man, but also his wife, and horror of horrors, the daughters, one of whom is just about eight or nine years old.

With an excellent performance by Mohanlal, and some notable moments by Meena (essaying Georgekutty's wife, Rani) and the younger daughter, Esther's Anu, *Drishyam* rolls off as a simple family drama of a cable television operator. Though a primary school dropout, Georgekutty is extraordinarily brainy, having learnt a hell of a lot from the movies he watches on the telly throughout the day.

For the Inspector General, this is the sore point, being outwitted by a virtual illiterate, and the fact that she is the mother of the missing boy merely adds to her ire — driving her to seek extrajudicial means to ferret out the truth.

Scripted more or less in a convincing manner and mounted with finesse, writer-director Joseph fleshes out his characters. However, *Drishyam* often seems like a radio play, long dialogues mar its cinematic qualities, and like many other helmers, Joseph, too, does not know where to end his film. Cinema need not be so explanatory, certainly this is not how contemporary movies are made.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran has watched Indian and world cinema for over three decades, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com