



CINEMA



★ Pipe opener: Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* is about getting lost in the dark and airless space.

Dark waters to flow by Venice

By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

As the 70th edition of the world's oldest film festival unrolls today on Venice's Lido, the selections do not seem to offer much optimism.

Even the opening movie, Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*, deals with a terrifying subject — of getting lost in the dark and airless space. A science fiction — not the usual theme for a Venice opener, the last one being Clint Eastwood's *Space Cowboys* in 2000 — Warner Brothers' *Gravity* is "a heart-pounding thriller that pulls you into the infinite and unforgiving realm of deep space".

Sandra Bullock plays Dr. Ryan Stone, a brilliant medical engineer on her first shuttle mission, with veteran astronaut Matt Kowalsky (George Clooney). But on a seemingly routine spacewalk, disaster strikes.

The shuttle is destroyed, leaving Stone and Kowalsky completely alone — tethered to nothing but each other and spiralling out into the blackness. The deafening silence tells them that they have lost any link to earth... and any chance for rescue. As fear turns to panic, every gulp of air eats away at what little oxygen is left. But the only way home may be to go further out into the frightening expanse of space.

Clooney is no stranger to Venice, nor is Cuarón. An actor who always reminds me of some of the greatest gentlemen stars like Cary Grant and Gregory Peck, Clooney had his *The Ides of March* inaugurate the 2011 Festival. And what a hit he was with *Venetians*.

Cuarón has had a long relationship with Venice. His coming-of-age story with two teenage boys and an older woman on a road trip, *Y Tu Mamá Tambien*, won the Golden Osella for Best Screenplay in 2001. In 2006, Cuarón's *Children of Men* won the Golden

Osella for Best Cinematography, honouring Emmanuel Lubezki. Interestingly, he is also the director of photography for *Gravity*, to be shown in 3D.

Of course, Cuarón is one of the most celebrated directors of his generation. His debut work in 1991, *Solo Con Tu Pareja*, a dark comedy starring Daniel Giménez Cacho and Claudia Ramírez, was the biggest box-office hit in Mexico in 1992. Cuarón made his first American feature in 1995, a charming children's fable, *A Little Princess*.

This was followed by an adaptation of Charles Dickens' novel, *Great Expectations*, in 1998 with Gwyneth Paltrow, Robert De Niro, Anne Bancroft and Ethan Hawke enriching the screen, each with a superb performance. In 2003, Cuarón made *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the third in the series of phenomenally successful adaptations of J.K. Rowling's novels; Rowling herself named Cuarón's film as her personal favourite in the series. In a career of unusually varied styles and themes, Cuarón now comes with *Gravity*.

Much like the Venice starter, the others in the basket offer little relief from the innumerable crises plaguing the world. The Indian title in the *Orizzonti* / *New Horizons* section is a 20-minute short film called *Kash* by Shubhashish Bhutiani. Starring Sonika Chhabra, Shaayan Samser and Anil Sharma, the movie has been inspired by a true 1984 story revolving around the assassination of Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi by two of her Sikh bodyguards.

During the anti-Sikh riots which broke out after this killing, the film shows the struggle of a schoolteacher to protect a Sikh student from murderous mobs. (But did not Sashi Kumar make something similar in *Kops Taru*, based on N.S. Madhavan's short story?)

Again like *Kash*, much of cinema in the land of godalas this year will focus on the dark and seamy aspects of our lives. As the Festival Director for the second year in

running, Alberto Barbera, began announcing the list a few weeks ago in Rome, it was quite apparent that themes harped on suffering, prostitution, paedophilia, homophobia, violence against women and fragmentation of the family.

Or, the movies sparked debates. The renowned Japanese animator, Hayao Miyazaki's first feature in five years, *The Wind Rises*, to premiere at Venice, has created a storm in the helmer's native country.

To begin with, in stark contrast to his earlier animation films like *Spirited Away*, *Ponyo* and *Howl's Moving Castle*, which were pleasant and happy stories, *The Wind Rises* is a biopic of Jiro Horikoshi, the man who designed the highly destructive Zero fighter plane which Japan used during World War II.

The movie by itself may not have raised a hullabaloo or caused anger, but it comes at a time when the new Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is planning to amend the nation's constitution. This will allow the country to build a full-fledged military, which Tokyo was forced to disband after the war.

Now Miyazaki feels that this step will be improper, and he split this out in a no-holds-barred essay published in July. The director, who is both loved and venerated, is now being lambasted for his line of thinking on the proposed constitutional amendment. Some conservative Japanese have used the internet to call him a "traitor".

Although *The Wind Rises*, talks about the suffering Japan went through in the years leading to the war — when it faced economic stagnation and a wide range of problems which plague the country today, the common Japanese man finds it difficult to accept the 72-year-old director's pacifist stance.

The lead character of Horikoshi is seen in the film as a thoughtful young man playing with paper planes with a girl in the background. The countryside the two are gazing at looks peaceful. There is a factory, there is a steam train. And then the war hits.

The mood of the movie changes from one of tranquility to one of turmoil. Horikoshi plane breaks up in the sky, and the ground gets bloodied.

Interestingly, Horikoshi was someone closely associated with Miyazaki. The director's father had a company which supplied rollers for the Zero planes. Also the father ran a club which served occupying American soldiers, and Miyazaki grew up watching all these.

As far as the other titles in the lineup go, both North American and British cinema have been well represented in Competition. James Franco's *Child of God*, David Gordon Green's *Joe*, Kelly Reichardt's *Night Moves*, and Peter Landesman's *Parkland* are among the American fare.

Stephen Frears's *Philomena*, interpreted by Judi Dench, John Curran's *Prozac*, Terry Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem*, and Christopher Waltz and Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* are part of the UK basket.

Italy's offerings are Gianni Amelio's *L'Integrabile* and Emma Dante's debut, *Vin Cristallino Bandiera*.

France will show Philippe Garrel's *La Jalousie*, along with a few co-productions with directors Amos Gitai (*Amo Arabia* from Israel), Merzak Allouache (*Les Terrasses*, Algeria), and Xavier Dolan (*Tom à la Ferme*, Canada).

There is, then, the Greek work, *Mis Violence*, by Alexandros Avranas and the German film by Philipp Gröning, who returns with the harsh and rigorous *Die Fran des Postboten*.

Taiwanese Master Tsai Ming-Liang's last movie, *Stray Dogs*, will enrich competition. Barbera described it as "a sum of all his cinema".

● **Gautaman Bhaskaran** has been covering the Venice Film Festival for 15 years, and is back on the Lido this summer, and he may be e-mailed at gautammb@hotmail.com