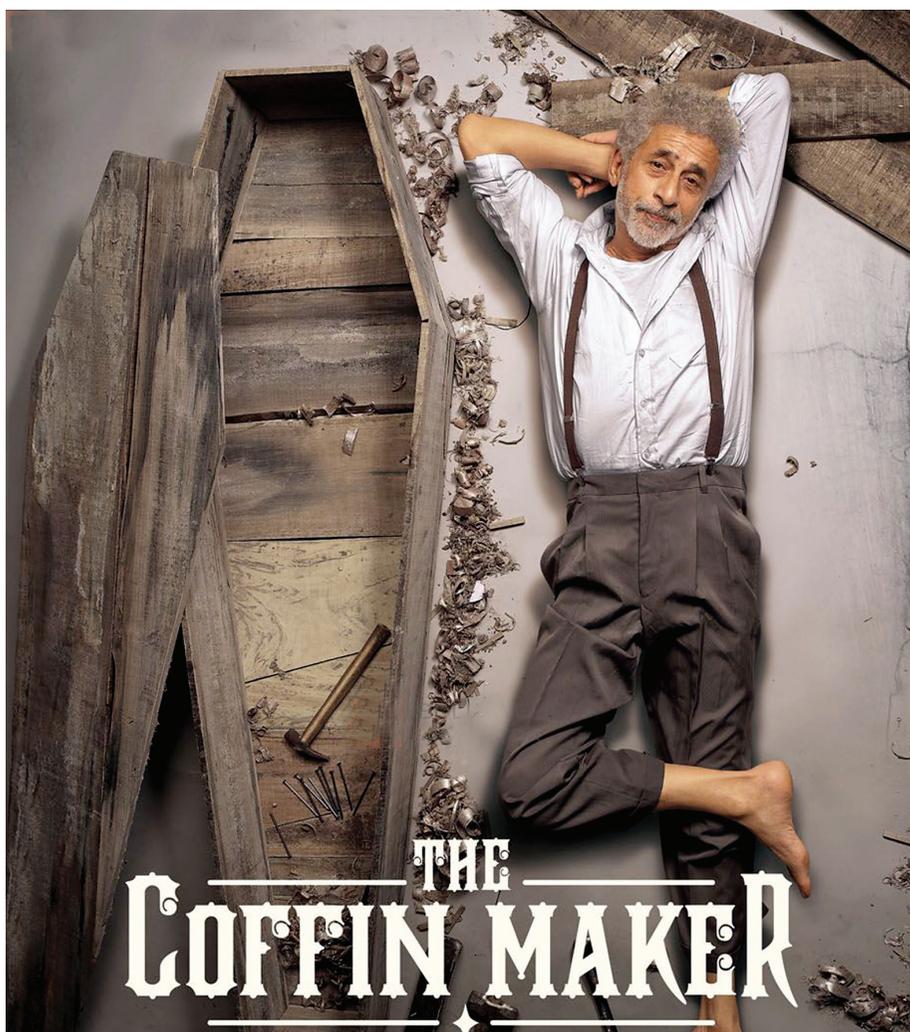




# Goa film fest promises sumptuous spread



**THE PROTAGONIST:** Naseeruddin Shah in Veena Bakshi's *The Coffin Maker*.

## By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**T**he International Film Festival of India will open in Panaji tomorrow with the celebrated director Jiri Menzel's *The Don Juans*.

A Czech comedy that will hopefully create the mood for 11 days of movies and magic, *The Don Juans* is operatic in just about every way, revolving around a small town company's delightful dilemma over the production of Don Giovanni. The film is a burst of energy created through terrific gags and the exuberant notes of Mozart. Does this remind you of Emir Kusturica's cinema?

The Festival's 44th edition will close on November 30 with Justin Chadwick's *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, based on the 1994 700-page memoirs of the legendary apartheid leader and former South African president. Serious and sombre – quite in contrast to the inaugural work – the closing movie has been critically applauded for the riveting performance of Idris Elba as Nelson Mandela. One critic called him “a Mandela for the ages”.

Between the opening and the closing night, one of the highlights of the Festival will be the 15-film Competition. This year it boasts of Kaushik Ganguly's *Apu's Song* and Veena

Bakshi's *The Coffin Maker*, both from India.

Most Indians will be familiar with Apu, the character in Satyajit Ray's debut feature, *Pather Panchali* (1955).

The iconic boy who played Apu is Subir Banerjee, and Ganguly's movie revolves around the life of this lad. Strangely, Banerjee never acted again, and *Apu's Song* (a spin from the English translation of Ray's work, *Song of the Little Road*) follows Banerjee as he travels to a film festival in Germany to receive an award, reminiscing about his life on the way.

Equally poignant is the Naseeruddin Shah-starrer, *The Coffin Maker*, where hard days force Anton hailing from a distinguished family of carpenters to take up coffin making.

Along with these two Indian titles, 13 others from different parts of the world will vie for the Golden Peacock Award. The Iraqi work, *My Sweet Pepper Land* about one woman's battle against socially restrictive Kurdish practices, Japan's *Like Father Like Son* (a dramatic look at what happens after babies are mistakenly switched at a hospital), Greece's *Joy* (which looks into the mind of a baby snatcher) and East Timor *Beatriz's War* (that talks about the agony of two people separated during war and occupation) are some of the competing entries.

Over 11 days, the Festival offers a collage of contemporary and classical forms from all corners of the globe, with Cinema of the

World letting us peep into human dilemmas (male brutality, hospital blunders, road rage, terror) and Indian Panorama screening the cream of the nation's varied cultures and languages. We have a Malayali shop-owner fighting eviction, we have a private sleuth trying to unearth the secrets of a Bengal palace, we have a little girl burdened by the punishing education system in Tamil Nadu and we have a poor Odisha farmer frightened of losing his land. Quite a spread.

### Ram-Leela, Shakespeare in sheen

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* is a picture postcard all right, frame-by-frame indeed. Much like his earlier *Devdas* (a Cannes screener) and *Saawariya*, *Ram-Leela* appears like a palate of myriad colours, bright enough to blind you, but, more importantly, to distract you.

In this whirlwind of hues (with Holi providing yet another reason to show off with colours) and innumerable songs as well dances, and with Gujaratis in their ornamental turbans and flowing lehengas, one forgets that this is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* retold.

The setting is not Verona, but a town that resembles Varanasi – especially when one sees the river and the little lamps floating on it – where even the slightest of provocation like a kid easing himself is good enough to start a gun duel. Call it the Indian Wild West. And yes, weapons are sold in the open, and even the prettiest of women carry them, though strangely, they seem to forget them when they are chased by rapists! But not to worry, the women sprint like Olympic runners leaving the evil pursuers far behind.

It is in a scenario like this that we have two warring clans, whose 500-year-old feud and the bitterness of it all, fails to stop Ram (played by Ranveer Singh) from wooing Leela (Deepika Padukone), belonging to the enemy camp. She does not play coy either, and plants a firm kiss on his mouth when he asks to be painted with colour during Holi – when he dares into the lion's den for the first time and meets her.

Many battles and murders later, and despite the almost heartless mother of Leela (Supriya Pathak) presiding over the destinies of many, including Ram, he elopes with Leela, only to be caught and separated. Finally, when they come together, it is the bullet that unites them. Ah, this is Romeo and Juliet, and



A scene from Jiri Menzel's *The Don Juans*.

it has to end only this way.

A careless script that makes the narrative so unconvincing (I could, for instance, never understand why Ram, that wild guy with multiple abs, goes down so tamely when he is being brought back after the elopement), the opulent artifice of the sets and the poor performance of Singh are such dampers that you would want to dump the movie half way through. Padukone is passable, though her attraction in *Ram-Leela* would appear to be in what she wears or does not wear. But Pathak is just brilliant as the Queen Mother, so to say, hard and unmerciful till the end. It is too late by then.

I cannot help comparing *Ram-Leela* with Vishal Bhardwaj's two Shakespearean adaptations – *Maqbool* from *Macbeth* set in Mumbai's underworld with Irrfan Khan portraying the lead character with panache (also wonderful performances by Pankaj Kapoor, Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah) and *Omkaara* from *Othello*, unfolding in central India with Saif Ali Khan giving us his career best as Ishwar Langda Tyagi (Iago in the original).

Bhardwaj's recreations of the milieu and the mood were aptly imaginative, neatly weaving into the script the Bard's letter and spirit. Treachery, deceit, jealousy, insecurity, love and lust slipped from Shakespeare's Stratford into Bhardwaj's badlands.

While Bhardwaj offered a truly restrained and authentic look at Shakespeare, Bhansali goes overboard with so much gloss and glitter that his film ends up as one without any soul. Surely, this is no Shakespeare. Surely, this is not even cinema. Rather, it is a string of photographs, capturing beautiful people in ethereal settings.

● *Gautaman Bhaskaran will cover the International Film Festival of India for the 25th year, and may be emailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com*



**A DUD:** Sanjay Leela Bhansali has failed to impress with *Ram-Leela*.