



TAKING FLIGHT: Filmmaker Alejandro (right) is seen on the sets of *Birdman*. It stars Michael Keaton (left) along with Edward Norton, Amy Ryan, Emma Stone and Naomi Watts.

India goes to Venice

By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

India has scored a double whammy at the upcoming Venice International Film Festival. While *Court* by Chaitanya Tamhane will screen at Horizons, the most sought after category after Competition and Outside Competition, Aditya Vikram Sengupta's *Labour of Love*, will be part of Venice Days, a sidebar that is only comparable to Cannes' Directors' Fortnight.

Tamhane's debut feature, *Court*, is a gripping drama that takes off with the discovery of a sewerage worker's body inside a manhole in Mumbai. The movie then shifts to a courtroom, where an ageing folk singer is accused of being responsible for the death. The prosecution is arguing that an inflammatory song could have incited the labourer to commit suicide. And as these events unfold, the lives of the lawyers and the judge involved in the sordid case are laid bare.

The second Indian entry, *Labour of Love*, made in Bengali and by the first-time Kolkata-based director, Aditya Vikram Sengupta, will be among the 12 movies this year competing for several awards, including that for first features and the Venice Days Jury Prize.

Labour of Love is set in the crumbling lanes and by-lanes of teeming Kolkata and traces the eventful lives of two people caught in the throes of recession. Ritwick Chakraborty and Basabdrutta Chatterjee will essay the leads. India aside, the 71st edition of the Festival will open on August 27 with Alejandro Inárritu's *Birdman* or *The Virtue of Ignorance*. It stars

Michael Keaton along with Edward Norton, Amy Ryan, Emma Stone and Naomi Watts.

Inárritu caught international attention and garnered immense acclaim with his *Babel* in the 2006 Cannes Film Festival. Excellently crafted, the movie unfolds in four different countries – Mexico, America, Japan and Morocco – to culminate neatly in Africa. Many Indian films tried to copy this multiple stories, but rather unsuccessfully. Inárritu's *Amores Perros*, *21 Grams* and *Beautiful* also clinched honours on various occasions.

Birdman is a black comedy that weaves the tale of an actor (essayed by Keaton) – renowned for portraying an iconic superhero – as he struggles to mount a Broadway play. In the days leading up to the opening night, he tries to get over his ego and get his family and career back on track.

Inárritu is no stranger to Venice. His *21 Grams* – which interweaves several plots around the tragedy of a car accident – got Sean Penn the Best Actor Coppa Volpi in the 2003 Venice Festival. In 2007, the director was part of the international competition jury at Venice.

The Festival, running till September 6, will also screen the works of Lars Von Trier (his controversial *Nymphomaniac Vol II* in its uncut version that was not offered to Cannes in May) and James Franco, and stars such as Al Pacino, Willem Dafoe, Ethan Hawke, Bill Murray and Jennifer Aniston will walk the Red Carpet on Lido, an island off mainland Venice.

The prestigious Competition will include films by helmers as eminent as Fatih Akin (*The Cut*), Joshua Oppenheimer (*The Look of Silence*) and Roy Andersson (*A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence*).

Dafoe will essay Pier Paolo Pasolini, one of Italy's most controversial directors, in Abel Ferrara's biopic. This will explore the artist's final days in Rome before his tragic death.

French-Arab actor, Tahar Rahim (of *The Prophet* fame), will star as the lead in *The Cut*, Akin's last chapter in his trilogy of love, death and the devil. In the Out of Competition basket, Venice will present Von Trier's creation, James Franco's *The Sound* and the *Fury*, Peter Bogdanovich's *She's Funny That Way*, Barry Levinson's *The Humbling* and Lisa Cholodenko's *Olive Kitteridge*.

Horizons will show Michael Almereyda's *Cymbeline* (with Milla Jovovich, Ed Harris, Dakota Johnson, Penn Badgley, John Leguizamo, Bill Pullman and Hawke). It is said to be a modern take on the Shakespeare play. Hong Kong's Ann Hui will close the festival with an out-of-competition screening of *The Golden Era*. The biopic traces the life of Xiao Hong, who wrote about Japanese imperialism in China.

Thirumanam Enum Nikkah

Aneesh's *Thirumanam Enum Nikkah* has a story and script that seem to have been penned in the most amateurish, nay bizarre, style. The film does take off on a rail of novelty, but soon derails. We have Jai's Vijayaraghavan, a devout Hindu Brahmin – sacred ash on his forehead and a holy thread across his chest – trying desperately to get a train ticket in Chennai's Central Station, where a tout offers him one, but under an assumed name. So, Vijayaraghavan become Abu Bakr, a Muslim.

And in one of the first among an endless number of coincidences, Bakr's compartment

has a woman, Vishnupriya (Nazriya Nazim), also a pious Hindu and travelling under the fictitious name of Ayesha. Here the tout is not responsible for a Shakespearean kind of comic mixup, but her boss – who asks her to impersonate a colleague (Ayesha of course) for a product demonstration in Coimbatore. No ticket examiner asking for identification! And a boss cavalier enough to indulge in such an audacious act!

The movie chugs along on a series of such ludicrous sleepers, each more unbelievably mystifying than the other. Bakr and Ayesha fall in love (but of course) and are all set to marry – but not before they convince their families that they have chosen partners from different faiths. Imagine, till the very end, neither comes clean. He feels that since she is a Muslim, he better be one too. She just about imagines the same. And this in this day and age, when youngsters care little about such issues.

Director Aneesh weaves into this preposterous plot a sub-text: Bakr gets friendly with a Unani doctor in order to learn about Islam, and his daughter flips for the guy. And we have the usual melodramatic fight between the girl's brother and Bakr, and Aneesh probably felt that his work would not sparkle unless he gets his hero into a superman mode.

Add to this the lengthy homilies about Hinduism and Islam, with different characters singing paeans to the similarities they share. And, except for Nazim, who is superbly charming as the girl playing both a Muslim and a Hindu – changing ever so often from a burka to a sari or salwar-kameez, the rest of the cast are no better than caricatures. Jai is his usual wooden best, with even his dialogue delivery most unimpressive.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has covered the Venice International Film Festival for well over a decade, and will be back there this year, and he may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com)