



* Indian American film producer Ashok Amritaj (left) and CEO of Image Nation Michael Garin arrive at the red carpet for the opening ceremony of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival.

Indian autumn at Abu Dhabi Festival

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The Abu Dhabi Film Festival, whose seventh edition is now on, opened with an American movie, Daniel Schechter's *Life of Crime*, a delightful romp through a kidnap gone horribly wrong. Two men recently out of jail abduct the socialite wife of a rich property owner, but the man with ill-gotten wealth all stashed away, is in no mood to oblige with the ransom. For, he is all set to divorce his wife and marry a hot young woman.

Before *Life of Crime* kicked off the Festival, actor Forest Whitaker (who was recently seen in the opening film at Mumbai, *The Butler*, though he did not

mark his presence there and I wonder why) — was honoured with a Black Pearl Lifetime Achievement Award. Also feted with a Lifetime Achievement Award was the excellent Palestinian actress and director, Hiam Abbas, who is also on the main jury.

Abbas, who starred in Julian Schnabel's *Miral*, Steven Spielberg's *Munich*, Thomas McCarthy's *The Visitor*, and Eran Riklis' *Lemon Tree*, among other works, made her directorial debut in 2012 with *Palestinian Inheritance*. The latest picture where she stars is Ghazi Albuliwi's *Peace After Marriage*, which opened the Abu Dhabi Showcase section.

For Indians though, it was Frieda Pinto who stole the limelight in *Miral*, first seen at Abu Dhabi some years ago. Not Abbas, though she is considered a legend in the Gulf. Although as a school girl, Pinto's

part was the best that I have seen of hers till now, Abbas's portrayal as the head of an orphanage in Jerusalem after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war was brilliantly nuanced.

This year, Pinto is not at Abu Dhabi, but there is a lot of India there. Tennis-player-turned-producer Ashok Amritaj — who was also seen on the stage during the inaugural ceremony along with Schechter and *Crime* actor Mark Boone — held a master class about his eventful journey from his home in Chennai to the playing courts of the world and finally to Hollywood — where he has been producing highly successful movies under his Hyde Park Entertainment banner. His story is now a book, an autobiography, which was recently launched in India.

However, the master class by Irrfan Khan, whose *Qissa* played at Abu Dhabi,

was extremely lively, and the actor, whom I have described as one the best India has and certainly the best of the Khans, was his wittiest best. More importantly, he had no airs, and was willing to laugh at himself.

He spoke about how his teacher forced him to sing in a school concert, and no words flowed out. Just nothing came out as he stood on the stage. "I was so shy that I could not even say my own name," he told the master class.

"I joined the National School Drama in New Delhi hoping that it would help me get into cinema," Khan was disarmingly honest. He also spoke of his disappointments, one which related to his role being completely excised in Meera Nair's *Salaam Bombay*. Fifteen years later, Nair made up for this by offering him a great role him in *The Namesake*.

The Khan starrer *Qissa* or *Fable* is piece set during India's traumatic Partition, and Irrfan's Umber Singh is one among those thousands of people uprooted from either side of the border who loses his very sense of belonging. Forced to flee his village with his young wife and little daughters as well as the others, Singh settles down in India, and is determined not only to better his life than what it was in Pakistan, but also to have a son.

But when his wife gives birth to a fourth child, also a girl like his earlier three children, Singh slips into a make-believe world. He decides to raise this fourth daughter of his as a son, teaches her to live like a man. Later, when she has to get married to a gypsy, pushed as she in into a sticky situation, the storm is not far in coming.

While Khan is absolutely superb as Singh, enacting a very difficult part with flawlessly natural ease — with Tisca Chopra as his screen wife and Tillotama Shome (of *Monsoon Wedding*) as the fourth daughter, Kanwar — *Qissa*, helmed by Anup Singh gets into a kind of storyline that is hard to digest. Post the first half of the film, it takes off into a plot that is rather convoluted and confusing.

Singh, who wrote the script along with Madhuja Mukherjee, cannot, it seems, decide where he would like to take his story to. Is it a ghost story or is it a figment of Kanwar's imagination which runs riot? Scenes like the completely burnt down house of Umber Singh verge on the point of narrative exaggeration.

What is of course interesting, about *Qissa* is that it is one of those rare Punjabi movies travelling today outside India. And it sure appeared like a Punjabi Autumn in Abu Dhabi. For, *Run for Your Life* is also in Punjabi, more precisely the language is Lahori, with the dialect's wit and nuances in place.

One of the very, very few Pakistani films being made these days, *Run For Your Life* is also being celebrated as the first ever work sent up by the country in 50 years for a possible Oscar nomination in the foreign language category.

Apart from these, Abu Dhabi's seventh edition, headed by Ali al-Jabri, has an engaging basket of films, including Aparna Sen's *The Jewellery Box*, *In the Sands of Babylon*, by Iraqi-Dutch director Mohamed Jabarah al-Daradji, Egyptian social drama *Villa* — 69 (a first narrative feature by Ayten Amin who co-directed documentary *Tahrir 2011: the Good, the Bad and the Politician*), Danis Tanovich's *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker*, *Child's Pose* by Calin Peter Netzer (both premiered in Berlin), Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*, (at Cannes) and Venice Golden Lion winner *Sacro GRA*, by Gianfranco Rosi.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran is covering the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com