



NOTHING SLEEPY ABOUT IT: *Winter Sleep* is magnificently mounted, the lighting is alluring, and the shots – each one of them – are composed with breathtaking imagination.

The gems of Cannes

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

After a long time, critics and the jury thought alike, when the one led by New Zealand auteur Jane Campion awarded the recently concluded Cannes Film Festival's most prestigious Palm d'Or for the brilliantly made Turkish work, Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Winter Sleep*.

The FIPRESCI or international critics' prize also went to this movie. Ceylan's win coincided with the 100 years of Turkish cinema, and he was visibly moved at the awards ceremony, despite his three previous honours at Cannes. "I dedicate this award to the young people of Turkey who lost their lives during the past year," Ceylan said.

Earlier, when I walked into the screening of *Winter Sleep*, I was really apprehensive that it would push me into a slumber. For, it was three hours and 15 minutes long, and the Turkish helmer was known to narrate his stories with an "I have all the time in the world" attitude. But the film just sucked me in, and the first time my mind wandered out of Ceylan's little world of deeply personal relationships and conflicts was when *Winter Sleep* was about to end.

Out of the theatre, I asked myself why I had been so enraptured by the work. It really does not have a story in the real sense of the term. But it has a great script, and this great script is narrated with exciting ease, and helping to push the narration are the riveting performances. As one reviewer quipped, "Ceylan's cast acts with such precision and feeling that even Ingmar Bergman would have applauded." *Winter Sleep* is magnificently mounted, the lighting is alluring, and the shots – each one of them – are composed with breathtaking imagination.

Ceylan told me during an interview after the screening that he had found the hotel, where much of the story unfolds, after a long search. Yes, there were biographical elements in it, and the movie reflected the current state of Turkish society.

Shot in a small Cappadocia village in the middle of scenic natural beauty, *Winter Sleep* centres on a theatre actor turned writer/journalist and his relationship with his pretty young wife and sister going through a divorce.

Aydin (Haluk Bilginer), a middle aged former actor, has inherited the hotel and most of the land around it. He is a thinker, and one of his projects is to write the history of Turkish theatre. His sister, Necla (Demet Akbag), is bitter, cynical and sharp tongued. She is staying in the hotel. Wife Nihal (Melisa Sozen) feels intellectually inferior to her husband and tries to fill the void by engaging in social work. Her husband does not like this.

These characters live in a kind of pressure-cooker existence which is accentuated with the coming of winter, a season that keeps them indoors and at nodding distances from one another. A little later into the picture, more characters are introduced: an unruly boy who breaks the window pane of Aydin's car, his apologetic father, aggressive uncle and so on. Through these men and situations, Ceylan establishes his protagonist's character.

Winter Sleep evokes plenty of tension. And there is nothing lethargic or sleepy or wintery about the film. With haunting close-ups (that made Bergman such a powerful director), Ceylan presents what is essentially an intimate tale of three people, forced to live in close proximity by relationships and the season itself. "You see the seasons very well in Turkey, and it changes human psychology and behaviour," Ceylan averred.

There were several more gems at Cannes. In a year when the Festival was strong on British presence, Mike Leigh's biopic on the 19th century romantic landscape painter, JMW Turner, called *Mr Turner*, was an equally engaging Competition entry. Timothy Spall – who won the Best Actor Palm and who has made seven movies with Leigh over 33 years – plays Turner, a flawed but passionate character, whose work was extraordinary.

Much like the Festival's opening work, *Grace of Monaco*, *Mr Turner* is not, strictly speaking, a documentary, but "a dramatic distillation". Leigh takes plenty of artistic licence to tell the story of a genius, albeit a story that is based on accepted truths about the man and his magnificent paintings.

And mind you, it is never easy to make a film on fictionalised art history, which can topple, as we have seen in some of the earlier works by other directors. There is always this danger of the movie appearing like a hagiography and/or presumptuous psychologising.

Although *Mr Turner* may not appeal to a wide audience, given its subject, the film is bound to weather stormy waters sailing on the shoulders of Spall. He is just brilliant, infusing into his part the eccentric genius of a great 19th century artist – who was completely wedded to his art, and who often treated his wife and children with reckless disdain. There is one scene where he ties himself to the mast of a ship as it rolls and pitches in a terrible tempest: the man wanted to paint a hurricane and had to have a first-hand experience of it.

As a painter – the impressiveness of whose work is conveyed most splendidly by Leigh through several breathtaking shots of Nature and landscape – Turner was a proud man whose lust for life was well known. And Leigh presents a very balanced picture of the man, and we are shown his warts as we are his wonderful works. Plus, the detailing of the period and the way

the scenes have been mounted are par excellence.

Mr Turner not only captures the painter's passion for painting, but also his great love for his father, and this relationship has been spelt out in a matter-of-fact manner. It never seems dramatic, it never goes overboard. Turner's housekeeper – who is treated as a menial but is sexually abused – and the keeper of a Margate boarding house who eventually becomes his lover, are well etched out figures that make *Mr Turner* gripping.

However, the English that is spoken in Leigh's creation can be difficult to understand, and it may not be a bad idea to run subtitles. Something that the other British master, Ken Loach, had done in some of his pictures.

And Loach, who presented his *Jimmy's Hall* also in Competition, underplayed his earlier comment when he addressed the Cannes media after his screening.

The 77-year-old auteur, with such remarkable movies as *Bread and Roses*, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* and *Angel's Share*, said: "It's a hard job to give up ... I said that in a moment of maximum pressure when we hadn't shot a foot of film and the mountain in front of us was quite high, and I thought I can't go through this again".

Jimmy's Hall – which follows the nine awards in different categories that Loach won at Cannes over the years – is set in the church dominated 1920s Ireland, where freedom of speech and modern music as well as dance are frowned upon by religious heads. They feel that these are "unholy, un-Irish".

Now, does this remind us of some of the restrictive nations? Or, more importantly, India, where radicals have often stopped Valentine Day's celebrations and women from visiting pubs. They have even chastised young couples holding hands in public! And all this in the name of culture, Indian culture, whose ancient erotic temple sculptures and the Kama Sutra have vowed the world.

In *Jimmy's Hall*, the church and the State vehemently oppose socialist leanings and even non-religious social gatherings in the aftermath of the Irish civil war. And this is what the church priest tells his Sunday morning congregation.

A hauntingly simple story, who's detailing of the period is absolutely fascinating, *Jimmy's Hall* is elegantly shot, and dwells on the life of James Galton (played superbly by Barry Ward).

He comes back to his mother in a small Irish village after a stint in New York. Once a supporter of the Irish Republican causes, it is not so much his political beliefs as the song and dance he brings back from America that gets him into trouble.

James or Jimmy opens a dance hall, a community space where boxing and art are taught, and where jazz can be played on the gramophone and dances performed. The young and the old are truly hooked. The place also becomes a centre of debate on social injustices – which irks the powerful landlords there and Father Sheridan (Jim Norton), who thinks that these are un-godly activities.

The climax will leave many of us teary-eyed, and Ward is charming and intense as the man whose passion for a bit of clean fun and social discussions is seen as examples of Communist leanings. And the church and the State play perfect kill-joys.

Next week: Some more Cannes gems and a legend's adieu.

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