



HIGH EXPECTATIONS: From A To B, Day for Night and The Last Metro are some of the films to look forward to at the festival.

Abu Dhabi Film Fest has riveting themes

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The best thing that a movie festival can do is to kick off with a breezy work. The Abu Dhabi Film Festival opening tomorrow will do precisely this. Emirati director Ali Mustafa's *From A to B* that heralds the major cinematic event in the region is a road movie about three young men who travel 2,400 km from the UAE capital to Beirut as some sort of homage to a dear friend who is dead.

What is equally interesting about the movie is that the festival will for the first time in its eight years open with a locally made Emirati work. "It is a huge honour for us and we're very proud to be presenting an Emirati film on the opening night," Festival Director Ali Al Jabri said.

Abu Dhabi will present another novel feature. For the first time in the Arab world, the festival will screen a selection of restored works — some made by the legendary French auteur, Francois Truffaut. In fact, the festival coincides with his 30th death anniversary. He was a brilliant movie critic who turned into an equally brilliant director — a man who could rip apart a film and yet not flinch from meeting its maker! What a shame he died when he was just 52.

The restored Truffaut basket will include the Academy Award winning *Day for Night* (my favourite too, and which inspired so many, many other works even in India) and *The Last Metro*, which was shown at Cannes this May. In fact, both Cannes and Venice have been screening restored classics for

some years now.

Some of the other restored movies at Abu Dhabi will be Sergei Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates* and Lino Brocka's *Manila in the Claws of Lights*.

Running from October 23 to November 1, the festival has other riveting themes on show. One will be on the Arab diaspora. And the festival gives us a fascinating insight into this as a prelude. "In *The Immigrant*, Charlie Chaplin plays a penniless tramp for laughs as he crosses the Atlantic to find his fortune in the US. We chuckle as he lurches on board a ship where seafaring passengers are packed like sardines and lands on his luck by stumbling on a few dollars, which he uses to woo and marry a fellow passenger.

"But unlike the 1917 silent classic, the reality of migration rarely, if ever, means stepping from poverty to a happy ending just 20 minutes later. The reality for the millions who pack their few possessions to migrate to an unknown land for an uncertain future is, of course, far more precarious.

"Across the Middle East and in such war zones as Syria, Iraq and Libya, enforced displacements, penurious states and punitive regimes mean that mass migration is a daily occurrence. But the history of migration from the Arab world, whether for survival or for riches, stretches back several centuries.

"The Arab diaspora is now scattered across the globe, from the Americas to Asia and Africa, with about 30 million living miles away from their homeland.

Whether they are first-generation immigrants or descendants who have assimilated, what that diaspora creates is a bridge between two cultures and a series

of tough choices — ones consisting of cooperation or conflict."

These ideas have been explored through nine features and three shorts that are wonderfully different from some of the Hollywood fare on the subject, which has been a " clichéd depiction of the Middle East".

The movies in this section include *Waiting for Happiness* made in 2002 by Mauritanian director Abderrahmane Sissako and set in a transit village exploring themes of belonging, rootlessness and transience; *Inch'Allah Dimanche* (2001) by French-Algerian helmer Yamina Benguigui, focusing on an Algerian woman torn from her roots to join her abusive husband in France; *Jalla! Jalla!* (2000), a comedy by Josef Fares about a cross-cultural relationship set in Sweden; and Algerian-French auteur Lyès Salem's short film, *Jean Fares* (2001), where a simple decision to name a new baby becomes a cultural minefield.

Intishal al-Timimi, Festival's Director for Arab Programming, said that these movies had all been made in the past two decades, because "filmmaking from the Arab diaspora is relatively new. Some people started life in their countries and moved abroad. Some of them were born overseas and some have movies in the language of their new country with little or no Arabic."

The diaspora films, which are among the 108 movies being screened over the 10-day festival, form a retrospective of sorts.

Indian Panorama

Twenty-six feature and 15 non-features have been chosen for the prestigious Indian Panorama, an important part of the

International Film Festival of India (IFFI), to be held in Panaji from November 20.

The feature film jury was headed by director AK Bir, while documentary moviemaker, Mike Pandey, chaired the non-feature jury.

Of these 26 features, two will be picked to compete at IFFI along with several other entries coming from the world over.

Paresh Mokashi's *Elizabeth Ekadshi* will open the Panorama along with Shabnam Sukhdev's documentary, *The Last Adieu*. This section will be inaugurated on November 21.

Seven full-length movies each in Malayalam and Marathi, five in Bengali, two in Hindi and one each in Assamese, Kannada, Khasi, Odiya and Tamil have made it to the Panorama this year.

Ideally, the Panorama should be the cream of IFFI, but often it is given low priority. The worst of the auditoriums are allotted for this, and some great films run without adequate publicity, and sink into oblivion.

The Directorate of Film Festivals, which conducts IFFI, must understand that foreign critics and delegates would be keen on watching Indian cinema at Goa — not quite the international fare, most of which they probably would have seen elsewhere. So, it is about time that the Indian Panorama is pepped up and publicised.

● *Gautaman Bhaskaran has covered the Abu Dhabi Film Festival for many years and will be there again this year. He was also part of the Feature Film Jury which picked the 26 movies out of about 190, and he may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com*