

# Panahi's *Taxi* drives away with Berlin Bear

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Often, art is an uncontrollable passion, and for one who creates it, the urge to tap the keys of a computer or pick up a paint brush to splash colours on a canvas or step behind a camera to weave images on a screen is like an itch which refuses to go away.

The illustrious Iranian film director, Jafar Panahi — who is now under house arrest of sorts in Tehran and who has been banned from making movies for 20 years till 2030 — must have this irresistible desire to film — a desire that refuses to be cowed down even by the threat of a long jail term, which hangs over his head.

In the short time since the sentence was slapped on him by the Iranian authorities, Panahi has not only made three movies, but has managed to smuggle them into major festivals. Which have also been sporting enough to accept them, celebrate them and even give major awards.

Panahi's latest work, *Taxi*, won the recently-concluded Berlin Film Festival's top Golden Bear. The auteur was not there. He could not be there, for he is not allowed to travel, and so his young niece accepted the trophy.

To shoot *Taxi*, Panahi fooled the law by turning a yellow cab into a mobile movie studio and placing a camera on the dashboard. As the taxi cruises through the colourful streets of Tehran, Panahi, who himself plays the driver (this was gutsy), picks up different kinds of passengers, many of whom have candid conversations with him. It may well seem like the *One Thousand and One Stories* of the Arabian Night.

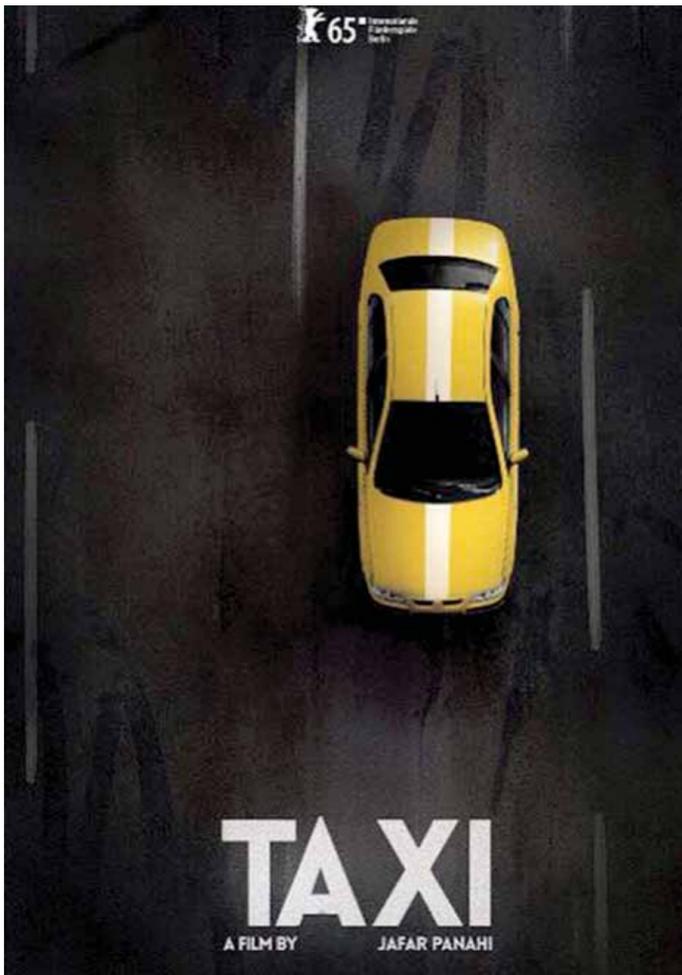
Earlier in 2011 — just a year into his sentence — Panahi secretly shot a film in his own house from the script of a movie he was planning before misfortune overtook him. He called it *This Is Not A Film*, copied it in a pen-drive, hid it inside a cake and smuggled it into Cannes. The Festival screened it.

Once, Cannes placed an empty chair on the dais during the inaugural evening to tell the world that it missed Panahi, who was to have been on the jury that year.

An emboldened Panahi went on to make two more movies: *Closed Curtain* which was shown in the 2013 Berlin and *Taxi* at this year's Berlin. *Closed Curtain* was also made clandestinely in the auteur's villa on the Caspian Sea, and narrates the story of a writer who hides his dog in a secluded house — afraid that the authorities will kill his pet and punish him. Dogs are considered unclean under Islamic law.

While I have watched both *This Is Not A Film* and *Closed Curtain*, I have not yet seen *Taxi*. So will not be able to talk about its artistic merits and demerits. A question here troubles me though. Was the Darren Aronofsky jury at Berlin driven by considerations other than the movie's cinematic qualities when picking *Taxi* for the Golden Bear?

It is an undisputed fact that Panahi has



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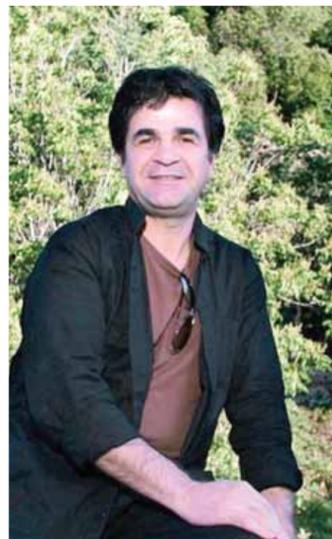
won considerable sympathy and support of the international fraternity in recent times.

Such empathy can play on the psyche of a jury. Although Panahi's *This Is Not A Film* did not walk away with any prize at Cannes, the Festival's jury in 2004, chaired by American director Quentin Tarantino, awarded the prestigious Palm d'Or to Michael Moore's documentary, *Fahrenheit 9/11* — a prize most saw as political, as venting of rage. Tarantino, like many others of his ilk, and even the masses in the country, was angry with the Bush regime and upset over the body bags arriving from battlefields in Iraq. For Tarantino, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a hard indictment of the Bush policies, provided a great opportunity to second Moore's views. And what better platform than Cannes to do this? A senior member of the Cannes'

administration told me later that the Festival itself was not too pleased with the Tarantino decision. But, well, what can you do? Cannes will never interfere with a jury, he said.

In India, other kinds of sentiments play. Language and regionalism among others. On the few occasions I have been on juries to select pictures for the Indian Panorama of the International Film Festival of India, some members of the panel have always been appalled by my rejection of a Tamil movie when I felt that it did not warrant a place. "But you are a Tamil, you should be sympathetic to a film from your state," they have said with sarcasm written all over their faces!

So, time will tell us whether Panahi's *Taxi* artistically deserved Berlin's Golden Bear. Or, was it sympathy and political pull at work?



Jafar Panahi at Cannes in 2007.

Photo credit: Cines del Sur Granada Film Festival

## *Anegan*

Tamil cinema's disposition to build a bridge between the rich and the poor, between the underdog and the powerful has turned into an obsessive compulsive disorder. K V Anand's *Anegan* — who has besides directing, written the story and screenplay — goes beyond cementing this divide. The film gets into the 1960s mood — when Indian cinema played around with plots centring on reincarnation and the paranormal.

Dhanush — who is now beginning to copy his father-in-law Rajinikanth's mannerisms — plays three different roles — actually three different men living in three different eras. As the movie begins, we are transported to the 1962 Burma where a Tamil coolie, Murugappa, falls in love with Samudra (Amyra Dastur), the young and vivacious daughter of a powerful Burmese military officer. A coup there leads to Indians being deported, and when Murugappa tries to flee with his sweetheart on board a ship, both are killed.

The two meet again in the 1987 Madras as Kaali, a rowdy, and Kalyani, this time the daughter of a pious middle-class Brahmin. Death intervenes again in the form of a corrupt businessman, Kiran (a new look Karthik), who is obsessed with Kalyani.

When the lovers are reborn in present-day Chennai — as Ashwin and Madhu, two software professionals, it does not need much guessing to figure out what holds for the seemingly inseparable lovers.

If *Anegan* is a mishmash of many films that one has seen over the years, the performances are passé. Yes, a new look Karthik may be a novelty, but Dhanush appears to be disinterested in changing his style or his roles. And with an unimpressive screen presence, it is always incredulous how the most attractive of women swoon when he comes along.

But then the present-day Tamil cinema hardly cares about logic or authenticity. It dishes out caricatures that fans adore. And when the darkness of a cinema auditorium offers perfect anonymity, they just go berserk.

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