

cinema



* *The Repentant* ... sad story of a reformed fundamentalist.



* *Goodbye Morocco* ... impressive steamy thriller.

A good spread of Arab cinema

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

I have had the opportunity to watch three major movie festivals in the Middle East for some years now. The oldest is the one in Dubai, whose ninth edition begins on December 9. The Festival at Abu Dhabi had its sixth run in October. The youngest of the three is the Doha Tribeca Film Festival, four years old.

These annual cinematic events are extremely fulfilling, provided a journalist or critic gets his priorities right. If one were to attend these Festivals looking for a cinema other than Arab, one might just about be disappointed.

For instance, Abu Dhabi opened with Richard Gere's *Arbitrage*, which had had a wide theatrical release before it came to the Festival. *Arbitrage* was also widely seen in Indian cinemas. So, there really was nothing novel about the Gere starrer.

This was the same case at Doha, which kicked off on November 17 with Mira Nair's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which earlier had its world premiere at Venice, in fact opening the Festival on the Lido.

Now Dubai is all set to follow Abu

Dhabi and Doha. The inaugural movie at Dubai is Ang Lee's *Life of Pi*, which opened the International Film Festival of India at Goa in November, and which has since then been released theatrically the world over, including India.

However, if one were to set one's sights on Middle Eastern cinema, one could get a good spread at Abu Dhabi, Doha and Dubai. At Doha, I saw some marvellous work from the region, though those co-produced by European countries, like France or Spain or Belgium seemed to have an edge over the others.

One of the best pictures I saw was an Algerian-French production called *The Repentant* by Merzak Allouache. It is an extremely sad story of a fundamentalist who comes out of his mountainous den in Afghanistan to try and resume a civil life. But destiny plays villain, and when he escorts a young couple to the spot where their little daughter, slain by extremists, is buried, darkness engulfs all of them.

Another co-production — France and Belgium — was Nadir Mokneche's *Goodbye Morocco*. An impressive steamy thriller, supposedly inspired by a real incident, the movie is classily mounted with strong performances. Set in Tangiers and Casablanca, the

story follows a Moroccan woman, who along with her boyfriend unearths 4th century AD Christian fresco worth millions of dollars.

The money would help the woman kidnap her little son, living with her estranged husband. In a series of twists and turns, the helmer takes us through a neat plot of triangular love, murder and superstition — all cloaked in mystery.

The French, Tunisian and Qatari film, *Professor* is also about love, though between a middle-aged professor and a young student. Made by Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud, it looks at the perils of throwing up a cushy position and a happy family life for an exciting, though momentary, extra-marital relationship.

The other Moroccan entry, *God's Horses* by Nabil Ayouch takes us once again to extremism. Inspired by the terror attacks in the Casablanca of 2003 (what a different place it now seems after the Casablanca of Rick's Café), *God's Horses* follows the journey of two brothers as they inch towards a life of violence and terror. Their dilemma as they prepare for the ultimate sacrifice is captured with a touch of excellence, with pain and pathos. It left me wondering what drove men to throw away their lives.

Loose and messy search

Much like his earlier *3 Idiots*, Aamir Khan got on to a massive publicity campaign before his latest *Talaash* (Search), helmed by Reema Kagti, opened last week. If I may sum up the movie in a single sentence it will be: Sherlock Holmes goes spooky.

Moustachioed Aamir Khan plays cop Surjan Singh Shekhawat who takes up a high profile case of apparent accident and death of a film star in the early hours of the day. We see a car speeding up Mumbai's Marine Drive before swerving wildly and flying into the sea. The actor was not drunk. He was not on drugs. The power brakes in the car were working perfectly. What then made the car go out of control and plunge into the ocean?

Shekhawat has to find out. Fighting his own personal demons — who along with his wife Roshni (Rani Mukherji) is trying to grapple with the death of his eight-year-old son in a drowning accident — the policeman journeys through the seedy alleys of Mumbai's vice-dens, meeting Kareena Kapoor's prostitute, Rosie, a limping pimp called Taimur (Nawazuddin Siddiqui), and other such characters of the streets.

What begins promisingly as a crime thriller disintegrates into a paranormal tale of ghosts and spirits, getting uncomfortably close to Manoj Night Shyamalan's 1999 *The Sixth Sense*. This does not shock me any longer, for so many Indian movies are straight lifts from foreign cinema or inspired by it.

What also does not shock me any longer is performance. Khan is uptight, rarely breaking into a smile. I understand it is not easy to get over the death of such a young son, but this does not mean he has a right to look so emotionless and blank — at least most of the time. Mukherji carries the cross of this tragedy as well. On the other end of the arc, we have Kapoor, who appears far too glamorous to be a lowly call-girl.

Ultimately, *Talaash* comes off as loose and messy, and what is more, it has one foot in the crime/detective genre and another in the world of spirits. The result, neither of them manages to get a grip over the script. A sheer waste of 139 minutes of your time and the price you paid for the ticket.

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