



Cannes makes a great choice in Vidya Balan

Indian actresses are no strangers to this festival on the French Riviera. And this time Balan makes it to the international competition jury. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Indian actress Vidya Balan will be part of the international competition jury of the Cannes Film Festival, set to kick off on the French Riviera on May 15.

Curiously, while in the decade beginning 2000 there have been seven Indians on the main competition jury, five have been women, four of them actresses. If Arundhati Roy (2000) was the only Indian writer, Shekhar Kapur (2010) was the only Indian

male on the jury. With Aishwarya Rai (2003), Nandita Das (2005) Sharmila Tagore (2009) and Balan this year, Cannes is undoubtedly in love with Indian actresses.

And why not? For there is nothing like a beautiful face to pep up a festival's glamour quotient. For years, the exquisitely pretty Rai has been walking the Red Carpet at Cannes. If I am right, the first time she came to the Festival was in 2002 with her movie, *Devdas*.

Devdas was not a great choice, given Sanjay Leela Bhansali's flawed attempt to jazz up a very ordinary middleclass Bengali story with opulent sets, glittering costumes and melodrama. Although Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's 1917 novel — which provided the fodder for Bhansali's work — was an extremely defeatist kind of story, it was an interesting study of class distinction in early 20th century Bengal.

Despite *Devdas* not going down too well with critics and others, Cannes invited Rai to be on the jury, and she came with her then boyfriend, Vivek Oberoi, in tow. They were inseparable, and seemed deeply in love. At least, Oberoi was — without any doubt.

I still remember the Hinduja party that year at the family's lovely villa overlooking a picturesque valley (and with some delicious Indian vegetarian food, prepared by the ladies of the house or so I was given to understand). After the party, Oberoi had many anxious moments when the lift carrying Rai took its own time arriving on the ground floor. Oberoi looked so distraught!

At other times, Rai and Oberoi were seen cuddled together even during the jury screenings.

I have no idea whether Das came with a companion. If she did, I did not see him even during my interview with her in her hotel room. If a guy was around, she was discreet about it.

Back to Balan, who will be at Cannes this summer — perhaps with her husband, Siddharth Roy Kapur. The couple married last year. The Indian media is still silent on who will accompany the actress, concentrating on issues as skin deep as what Vidya will wear.

Balan is reportedly pulling out all stops to make a great fashion statement on the Red Carpet, I am told. An NDTV report says: "The Cannes Red Carpet has a long history of fashion faux pas, not least from Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai Bachchan who got it wrong for years before finally getting it right. So Vidya isn't taking any chances, we hear, and will be dressed by her style conspirator of old, Sabyasachi Mukherjee. That means we can expect a spectacular sari or two. Aishwarya left fashion critics



✱ Vidya Balan: Cannes-bound.

divided in her Abu-Jani sari and jacket ensemble last year."

As much as Cannes may be all about beautiful people, choicest of wines and food as well as pulse-pounding parties, the Festival has another side to it, a more serious and sombre side. Which is sensitive, sensible and meaningful cinema and the vital business of cinema.

If Cannes has held on to its pre-eminent position as the world's number one film festival with its impressive selections of movies and juries, its huge market, where hundreds of film deals worth millions of dollars are clinched, contributes in no small way to make this 12-day cinema event all the more fantastic.

This year's main jury, for instance, has great names. Steven Spielberg (who is the president), Ang Lee (*Life of Pi*), Christoph Waltz (*Inglorious Basterds*, *Django Unchained*), Daniel Auteuil (French actor, director), Cristian Mungiu (Romanian helmer), Naomi Kawase (Japanese director), Lynne Ramsay (British helmer) and Nicole Kidman (Australian actress). This is indeed a celebrated jury, by far the best in many years, and Miss Balan is, to use a cliché, in August company.

Born in Ottapalam, a small town in Kerala, Balan would make South India proud. A region which has never had much of an international exposure — thanks to Bollywood's money and muscle power — South India may well be on Cloud Nine with Cannes bestowing the honour on Balan.

Balan herself could not have been happier, given the string of rejections which marked her early career in the initial years of 2000. She was labelled a jinx after her first movie opposite Mohanlal was shelved. The producer could not believe or accept that a work

starring a super star like Mohanlal could have ended this way.

Balan became the scapegoat, and she was dropped from several other Malayalam works and at least one Tamil film, *Run*. The last must have been terribly humiliating; she was asked to leave after her first shooting schedule, and Meera Jasmine stepped in.

However, good times were round the corner for Balan. Pradeep Sarkar's *Parineeta* (Hindi, 2005) — a story based on Chattopadhyay's novel about romantic love between an idealistic woman and an egoistic man — proved a turning point for Balan. But, the part came after a gruelling audition which lasted six months!

Post 2005, Balan's career began to fly, and her performances in movies like *Ishqiya*, *No One Killed Jessica*, *The Dirty Picture* and *Kahaani* were hailed by critics and audiences. And with a face as beautiful and expressive as Balan's, there can be no more regrets.

And look at her range. As the sister of an aspiring model (murdered because she refused a drink to an influential politician's son) in *No One Killed Jessica*, Balan was subdued and sorrowful. Mimicking southern siren Silk Smitha in *A Dirty Picture*, Vidya was loud, saucy and seductive.

She turned sleuth in *Kahaani*, flying down from London to Kolkata to trace her husband's killer. A "widow" in *Ishqiya*, she was cunning trying to seduce two men at the same time to fulfil her own goals. What an amazing array of characters that is!

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been following Vidya Balan's career for many years, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com)



✱ A combination picture shows the president of (from top left) 66th Cannes Film Festival Steven Spielberg and members of the jury, Australian actress and producer Nicole Kidman, Taiwanese director, producer and scriptwriter Ang Lee. From centre left: Austrian actor Christoph Waltz, French actor and director Daniel Auteuil, Indian actress Vidya Balan. From bottom left: Japanese director Naomi Kawase, Scottish director Lynne Ramsay, Romanian director Cristian Mungiu. The jury, headed by Spielberg, will award the coveted Palme d'Or to one of the 19 films in competition at the May 15-26 festival.