



# Birdman a big draw

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**M**exican director Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's *Birdman* got a splendid reception on the opening night of the ongoing 71st edition of the Venice International Film Festival. On the island of Lido (off mainland Venice), where the Festival began its 11-day roll last week, *Birdman or The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance* got a standing applause from the huge gathering present there, and near unanimous kudos from the international media. What a stark contrast this was to the Canes Film Festival opener in May, *Grace of Monaco*, which was universally panned by critics.

After the premiere of *Birdman* that was also attended by the Italian President, Giorgio Napolitano as the Guest of Honour, the movie's stars and director, including Michael Keaton, Edward Norton, Emma Stone, Amy Ryan and Inarritu took turns taking their bows – replicating a scene from the film.

After last year's Venice opener, *Gravity*, took home seven Academy Awards, the bar has been set high, and Keaton with his superb performance, and Norton with an equally captivating one, have already been thrown into the Oscar race.

And Inarritu has truly been an actor's director. His last three films, *21 Grams*, *Babel* and *Biutiful*, have all had their actors garner an Oscar nod. Keaton may well join this brigade.

In *Birdman*, Keaton plays Riggan Thompson, a once glorious actor trying to put his Broadway career on track. And as he tries this, he is insecure, he is arrogant and he is desperate. But he is also human, and some of the scenes with his former wife (Amy Ryan) and daughter (Emma Stone) underline this in a very poignant sort of way.

The movie is as arresting as Keaton's performance. Wonderfully scripted, the black comedy is precise and polished. It is technically brilliant – much in the same way Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* was last year. Cuarón is also a Mexican.

*Birdman*, set in real time (Alfred Hitchcock was one of the first to accomplish this in *Rope*) with long and complex shots, highlights Thompson's angst as he tries to stage a Raymond Carver story. He funds it, directs it and also stars in it – hoping that this would pump oxygen into his near lifeless career.

As the play races towards its opening night. Thompson has many demons to tackle: Mike Shiner (Edward Norton), who comes as a replacement to an injured actor, is known to have a massive ego, the demands of Thompson's girlfriend, and the problems of his freshly rehabilitated daughter, Sam (Emma Stone), also working as an assistant in the production. More importantly, Thompson has to convince theatre critic Tabitha (Lindsay Duncan) not to rip his play apart.

Meanwhile, the Festival, which runs till September 6, has been sailing through one controversy after another. We saw the one that engulfed the Palestinian helmer Suha Arraf's *Vila Touma*. She had got Tel-Aviv peeved when she termed her film Palestinian, for the work had been funded by Israeli organisations.

And we now have Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's



**CENTRE OF ATTRACTION:** *Birdman*

feature, *Tales* – which had upset Iranian censors – in the prestigious Competition at Venice.

*Tales*, Rakhshan's latest work, will crisscross the world after its Venice premiere. Toronto, Vienna, London, Thessaloniki, Hamburg and Busan will be some of the stops.

In fact, *Tales* is actually two years old, but it could not be shown during the presidential rule of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. *Tales* is a bold story set against the backdrop of many of the ills now plaguing Iran: the plight of women and the kind of problems students and workers face. Obviously, these had angered the censors.

However, with a slight easing of cultural restrictions in Iran now under Ahmadinejad's successor, President, Hassan Rouhani, movies like *Tales* seem to be breathing easy.

The somewhat comfortable political situation in Iran has seen one more of the country's directors, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, emerge from years of exile in London. His latest film, *The President*, plays at Venice.

Inspired by the Arab Spring which led to the downfall of several Middle Eastern leaders

like Hosni Mubarak, *The President* traces the life of a dictator who is forced to flee after a rebellion in his land and seek refuge among those very people he had tortured and jailed.

The dictator and his grandson disguise themselves first as shepherds and later as street musicians and travel around their country, and the boy sees the horrors that had been inflicted by the dictatorial regime.

## *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

Many schoolboys and schoolgirls who grew up in the urban India of the 1960s will remember reading D H Lawrence's sexually explicit, Italian novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, first published in 1928. The book was of course banned in India, but copies of the novel somehow managed to sneak into bedrooms.

Now, BBC One is all set to adapt the novel into a television film. Shooting will begin this October and, the drama will be aired in 2015.

Holliday Grainger, who starred in *The Borgias* and *Bonnie & Clyde*, will play the title role, with *Game of Thrones* star Richard Madden playing gamekeeper Oliver Mellors. James Norton, who was seen in BBC One's

*Happy Valley*, will play Lady Chatterley's war-wounded husband, Sir Clifford Chatterley.

The BBC movie, written and directed by Jed Mercurio, graphically describes the sexual affair of an upper class, married woman with her gamekeeper. Her husband has been crippled in war, and is impotent.

The book caused social storms and scandals, and even in Britain a trial was held in 1960 to determine if the story fell under the country's Obscene Publications Act.

Later, the novel was expurgated, and the heavily censored copies were sold in America and elsewhere. In India, bookseller Ranjit Udeshi of Mumbai was prosecuted under the Indian Penal Code for selling an unexpurgated copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

But one presumes nobody could do anything about the hundreds of unexpurgated copies floating all over India then.

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