



BY THE BAY: Cannes Film Festival was to have begun in 1939, but Hitler's invasion of Poland which provoked World War II, delayed the festival on the scenic French Riviera till 1946. This year, the Festival runs from May 13 to 24.

The amazing Cannes

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The Cannes Film Festival has never ceased to amaze me. No wonder, it remains my most favourite cinema event, one that I have kept returning to for no less than 25 years.

And the amazement comes in different forms – novelty, enterprise, guts, scandal and seduction. This year, the Festival's 68th edition which runs from May 13 to 24, will for the first ever time have two renowned directors jointly presiding over the main international jury – American auteurs, Joel and Ethan Coen. Brothers, they have been making movies together for a long time.

"We look forward to returning to Cannes this year," the Coens said from the *Hail Caesar!* film shoot with George Clooney, Christophe Lambert, Scarlett Johansson, Tilda Swinton, Josh Brolin and Channing Tatum. "We welcome as always the opportunity to watch movies there from all over the world. Cannes is a festival that has been important to us since the very beginning of our career. Presiding over the jury is a special honour, since we have never heretofore been president of anything."

Appointing Joel and Ethan has a significance in addition to the uniqueness of selecting a pair to chair the jury. This year is the 120th anniversary of the Lumiere Cinematograph. Auguste and Louis Lumiere were brothers celebrated as the first filmmakers in history. They patented the cinematograph, which, in contrast to Edison's "peepshow" kinescope, allowed simultaneous viewing by a multiple number of people. Their first movie, *Sortie de l'usine Lumière de Lyon*, shot in 1894, is considered

the first true motion picture.

Cannes, therefore, thought it fit to commemorate the work of all "cinema brothers" – the Coens included.

Palme d'Or laureates in 1991, the Coen brothers have been an integral part of the Festival. Since *Raising Arizona* (1987), their second film, they have been invited to the Official Selection and have presented nine of their movies, often winning the most prestigious prizes: the Palme d'Or in 1991 for *Barton Fink*; the Award for Best Director in 1996 for *Fargo* as well as for *The Man Who Wasn't There* in 2001. And in 2013, *Inside Llewyn Davis* won the Grand Prix, from the Steven Spielberg jury.

The Festival displayed equally remarkable courage when it opened with an animated 3D feature, *Up*, in 2009. I remember the press screening of *Up* – which took place, as is the norm, well before its official presentation on the inaugural night. The hundreds of journalists there wore 3D glasses, and watched the Festival Director, Thierry Fremaux, also sporting a pair of them, make a crisp presentation. "Come on, put your glasses on", he had prodded us into a spirit of joyful freshness.

Up – an American 3D computer-animated comic adventure produced by Pixar Animation Studios, released by Walt Disney Pictures and helmed by Pete Docter – centres on an elderly widower named Carl Frederickson (voiced by Edward Asner) and a passionate young voyager named Russell (Jordan Nagai). The two tie thousands of helium balloons to Carl's house and get it up and flying. Their destination is the wilds of South America – an exploration that Carl had promised his love but could not keep.

Cannes' quest for gutsy innovativeness has sometimes contrasted with the salacious and the scandalous. In a way, the Festival

grew out of an outrage in the 1930s, when the world's oldest film festival at Venice (1932) under Mussolini – and with the active encouragement by Hitler – started a blatant propagation of Fascist doctrine.

The awards were rigged and some of the independent prize-winning movies were not allowed to be screened in Italy or Germany. This angered the French in particular, and they decided to have their own festival. Cannes was to have begun in 1939, but Hitler's invasion of Poland which provoked World War II, delayed the festival on the French Riviera till 1946.

Cannes has seen several infamies since then. In 2011, the Festival was forced to declare one of its most favoured helmers, Lars Von Trier, persona non-grata. Known for his fear of flying, and his quixotic as well as deliberately exasperating behaviour, he crossed the line during a press conference that year soon after the screening of his film, *Melancholia*.

As the star of the movie, Kristen Dunst, looked on ashen-faced, he told journalists: "I thought I was a Jew for a long time and was very happy being a Jew ... Then it turned out that I was not a Jew ... I found out that I was really a Nazi which also gave me some pleasure."

Half the world pounced on Cannes, and the Festival had little choice but to ask him to go. Even though, Fremaux and the Festival were magnanimous enough to ask him to return the following year, he is yet to do that. But Von Trier was not the first man to have fallen out of favour at Cannes. And, for the Festival to have been forgiving.

The 1958 Cannes, fed up with the consistently harsh criticism by the master filmmaker and critic, Francois Truffaut, proclaimed him persona non-grata. Despite this, he attended the Festival and wrote in one

of his pieces that "without radical changes, Cannes is condemned."

The Festival was livid at such denigration. It felt humiliated and scandalised, but chose to overlook it the very next year, when it invited Truffaut's film, *400 Blows*. What is more, he was also awarded the Palm for Best Director!

Cannes has been appalled in other ways as well. In 1954, a B-list actress, Simone Silva – bent on bettering Brigitte Bardot's bikini-clad appearance on the beach along with Kirk Douglas – rushed up to singer-actor Robert Mitchum (who was visiting Cannes for the first time and was with his wife) and while pretending to pose for photographers, allowed her flimsy pink top to slip.

In the ensuing melee when some lensmen tumbled off the cliff, Mitchum gathered Simone and covered her to preserve her modesty. The pictures splashed across the pages of many newspapers the world over gave a bad name to the Festival.

Those were times when such dare-bare acts elicited scorn and ridicule, and the then Festival Director had to make a public apology fearing a conservative backlash and had to ask Simone to leave the town. In fact, the Director had to go to America the next year to convince journalists that the "Festival was not there to fabricate erotic scandals but to defend cinema".

However, by the beginning of the 1990s, topless models and actresses on the Cannes beach were a pretty common sight – as eagerly sought after by the paparazzi as they were in the 1950s and 1960s. And this no longer bothers the Festival or the world at large.

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