

Cannes set for exciting times

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THE BIG ONE: Veteran Cate Blanchett will head the Cannes Film Festival jury this year.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Most movie festivals across the world are political. Some openly so, some covertly. Often political inclinations and disinclinations seep into the selection of titles or the composition of juries or their verdicts. In all the 28 years that I have covered the Cannes Film Festival, the most significant politics-at-play year was 2004, when Micheal Moore's Bush-bashing documentary, *9/11*, won the top Palm d'Or from a jury headed by another Bush hater, American moviemaker Quentin Tarantino.

It was an era when not just the Americans but large parts of the world were angry with President Bush's foreign policy. And *Fahrenheit 9/11* — which lambasted Bush's war on terror and dubbed American corporate media cheerleaders of the 2003 invasion of Iraq — attracted a 20-minute standing ovation at its official screening, though an earlier press show passed with just lukewarm response. The documentary averred that the press had failed to provide an accurate and objective analysis of the need for the invasion, a war that cost American lives. However, the film was later found to contain inaccuracies, and its title alluding to Ray Bradbury's 1953 novel, *Fahrenheit 451* (a dystopian image of the future US), became a subject of controversy. Even more disturbing was the movie's tagline: The temperature at freedom burns.

Cut to 2018, when Cannes will celebrate its 71st edition, and as its chief, Thierry Fremaux, contended, the year will mark the beginning of a new decade. Indeed, and this year also happens to be the 50th anniversary of the students' revolt in France. Often termed Paris 1968, the year was revolutionary in other ways as well. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Tet Offensive in Vietnam all happened in May 1968.

In France, students protested against consumerism, capitalism and archaic traditional values. Workers joined the movement, and the demonstrations were so widespread that France came to a virtual stop.

But at Cannes, preparations for the 21st edition of the Festival was in full gear, and the event kicked off on May 10 with the restored version of *Gone with the Wind*, based on Margaret Mitchell's only novel, a poignant love story set against the tragedy of the American Civil War. While *Atlanta* burned on the screen at the breathtaking French Riviera, famous for its rich playboys and aristocratic women (whose lifestyles were far, far removed from the French working class), Paris and much of France also lay in ruins. President Charles De Gaulle was at his wit's end.

While De Gaulle was probably dithering, directors like Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut slipped into Cannes with the single-minded intention to close the Festival. They felt that France had no business to be celebrating cinema at Cannes, while the country was crying.

Truffaut was an enfant terrible, and was part of a group of young turks — which felt that French cinema was moribund. He covered the Festival as a journalist from 1955 to 1958, and in those years, he literally brought the roof down at Cannes with his acerbic criticism of French cinema and the kind of selections which the Festival made. He said that while small countries sent in their best fare, the big ones like France, Italy and the US offered their worst. One particularly year, when a French-majority jury gave the Festival's three most important prizes to French works, it smelt of "chauvinism". All this happened — as he added — because those at the helm of affair at Cannes did not love cinema.

And in 1958, Truffaut was declared persona non-grata, but the French being French and fair to the core, Cannes accepted his first feature, *400 Blows*, in 1959 and he walked away with the Best Director trophy!

But somehow, Truffaut was never comfortable with what Cannes was doing, and 1968 gave him another opportunity to tell the Festival that it must stay rooted. In a recent article in *Deadline Hollywood*, Ali Jaafar wrote: "On May 13 1968, the French Critics Association issued a statement calling on those present to demonstrate in solidarity of the students, protest against the heavy-handed tactics of the police, and demand the Festival be suspended. Festival founder and longtime President Robert Favre le Bret refused. As a concession, he offered to

cancel parties and cocktails. That wasn't enough, however, for the impassioned leaders of the French New Wave, one of whom — Claude Lelouch — actually reported for revolutionary duty in Cannes on-board his private yacht.

"Fervour was spreading as the three musketeers of Godard, Truffaut and Lelouch set about disrupting the Festival, enlisting members of the jury —including Roman Polanski — and moviemakers, some of whom like Carlos Saura even had their own films in the Festival, to the cause. During one heated debate, Godard lost his cool, screaming at someone who was against cancelling the Festival: "We're talking about solidarity with the students and the workers and you're speaking about travelling shots and close-ups!"

"At times, the scenes bordered on farcical. When the Festival tried to go through with the screening of Carlos Saura's Peppermint Frapp against the wishes of the moviemakers, Saura and leading lady Geraldine Chaplin, Truffaut and Godard among others, tried to grab hold of the curtain in front of the screen to prevent it from opening; hanging on like leaves on a tree. There were fist fights. Godard lost his glasses while Truffaut took a tumble."

In the end, Le Bret had to listen to men like Truffaut and Godard, and the Festival was stopped on May 19, five days before its official closure. And Cannes would never be the same again. In 1969, a new section, Directors' Fortnight, came into being, and it slotted daring works. Even in the Festival's main Competition, radical titles like Easy Rider and M*A*S*H were shown and they even won prizes.

I am not sure whether Truffaut and Godard got what they wanted from the Festival, but the 1968 events ultimately drove a wedge between the two friends. While Godard turned out to be a genuine political rebel, Truffaut's concern remained cinema. He went on to create some splendid stuff, and one of my favourites from his basket remains the 1973 Day for Night — where Truffaut himself plays a director helming a film, with Jacqueline Bisset as a movie star.

In my long association with the Festival, I have seen some extraordinarily bold titles like Brown Bunny, The Idiots and Nymphomaniac. I have also seen some scandals like the one which the modern-day enfant terrible, Lars Von Trier, provoked in 2011 soon after his Melancholia was screened to the press. At the press conference soon after the film, he jocularly supported Hitler, angering half the world. The Festival had to move quickly, and it declared him persona non-grata and he was asked to leave Cannes. Seemed like history repeating itself.

Of course, Fremaux forgave him a long time ago, and now reportedly wants him back at the Festival this May, with his latest, The House That Jack Built, starring Matt Dillon and Uma Thurman among others. The story follows a serial killer, Jack (Dillon), over a 12-year period in the 1970s and the 1980s. Von Trier described his movie as one "celebrating the idea that life is evil and soulless".

If Von Trap does arrive at Cannes, his visit will coincide with a highly charged world which is baying for sexual offenders. The Icelandic pop singer, Bjork, had alleged that Von Trier had sexually harassed her during the shoot of Dancer in the Dark — which won her the Best Actress prize at Cannes. But Von Trier countered by saying "that was not the case. But we were definitely not friends, that's a fact".

The Cannes press can be punishingly cruel, and may not think twice before aiming hard questions at him. That is, if he decides to be at Cannes.

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