

At Dubai Fest, Lumiere show and honours for Rekha, Jackson

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Rekha and Samuel L. Jackson



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The Dubai International Film Festival, which begins its run today, has obviously gained a lot of importance in the absence of any other similar event in the region. With the movie festival in Abu Dhabi having packed up a couple of years ago, and the one in Doha toned down to a more specialised kind of show, Dubai has become a premium exhibition of world cinema and cinematic events.

In fact, some of the programmes outside film screenings really sparkle. This year, the one event that I would not miss for anything in the world is a Lumiere show – which will translate into a double whammy. In what seems like a spectacular 4K compilation of restored works which the French cinema pioneers, brothers Auguste and Louis Lumiere, made between 1895 and 1905, these will be presented by no less a person than the Cannes Film Festival supremo, Thierry Fremaux. I am sure nobody else can do this better than him.

Fremaux wears two hats – as the chief of the world's premiere movie festival at Cannes and as the head of the Institut Lumiere at Lyon. He said in a note that "the showcase enables us to rediscover and celebrate Auguste and Louis Lumiere, moviemakers who are responsible for film as we know it, whose pioneering moving image snapshots of life at the end of the 19th century (and the start of the 20th century) paved the way for the popularisation of the medium and its evolution into an art form." This outstanding package will have 98 shorts, all restored and conserved.

In 1895, the Lumiere Brothers invented the Cinematograph (a device for capturing, developing and projecting movies) and went on to film some of the first moving images in the history of cinema. Some of them show factory workers emerging from work, a steam engine and people scaling a snow-covered mountain. Some of these are celebrated masterpieces, others lesser known gems. They give us a glimpse of France and the world as they looked once upon a time.

The French have always been known as masters of preservation, and, it comes as no surprise that the Lumiere cinema has been conserved. What is more, the Brothers' house in Lyon (France) is now a beautifully preserved museum.

(India too had its movie pioneers like Dadasaheb Phalke and Hiralal Sen among others. There are no memorials or museums for them, if one is right. A proper museum for the legendary Satyajit Ray – who actually introduced Indian cinema to the world on the Cannes platform – is still being talked about – although a part of his house in Kolkata is now being seen as a memorial to the master).

The couple of other programmes that will add feathers to the Dubai cap are the Lifetime Achievement Awards.

The legendary Indian actress Rekha will be honoured. In a four-decade career that saw her act in 180 films, Rekha's first steps into cinema were unimpressive and seemed dangerously close to being one that would crash even before taking off. Although her first work as a heroine was no less than one with the reigning Kannada superstar of the day, Rajkumar, in Operation Jackpot Nalli CID 999 in 1969, she actually came into the limelight with a Hindi picture, Sawan Badon, in 1970 co-starring with Navin Nischol. The movie was a runaway success, but Rekha was yet to arrive! And apart from her dark complexion and plump figure – two hugely minus points in the Hindi cinema industry – nobody really thought that Rekha would become an actress worth the name.

Adding to her struggle was a scandal in a film, Anjana Safar, she did with Biswajeet in 1969 – where she said she was tricked into kissing her hero in a version meant for the international circuit. The movie made it to the Life magazine in an era when kissing on the Indian screen was such a novelty, nay an outrage.

But Rekha weathered this cyclonic phase – often contending by way of explanation that she was forced by her mother, Pushpavalli, into choosing films like Anjana Safar, Asha Jyoti and Zameen Aasman that bombed at the box office and stopped her from flying high in the skies. Yet, nobody still understands why she said no to a brilliant work like Shankarabharanam; she was sounded out for the Hindi version of it. It was a huge miss.

But luck came knocking on her. Yash Chopra's Faasle and Girish Karnad's Utsav came along, and Rekha's career took an upswing. There really was no looking back after that, and years later, her father and one of the most popular movie stars of his time, Gemini Ganesh (also called the King of Romance), would tell me during a long chat at his Madras home that "You know I am really very, very proud of my daughter Rekha. Her talent is immense, and far, far ahead of mine."

After all these years, nobody can deny that Rekha was among the best that the Hindi film industry had ever produced – and one can easily rank her along with Madhubala, Nutan and Waheeda Rehman – some of the most iconic performers of all time. Rekha's brilliant acting in works such as Umrao Jaan, Khubsoorat, Khoon Bhari Maang, Silsila and Khiladiyon Ka Khiliadi have been tempered with rare intensity. What a marvellous journey!

Another Lifetime Achievement Award will be bestowed on Samuel Jackson – in fact during the opening ceremony on December 7. Two days later on December 9, fans will have a unique opportunity to hear Jackson speak about his eventful life and illustrious career. The session, In Conversation, will also include a question-answer segment with the audience. Jackson got into movies in 1972 with Together for Days – a romance between an African-American and a Caucasian, and the turmoil this causes in the two families. This film reminded one of a Sidney Poitier starrer, Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, in 1967 that also dealt with an inter-racial relationship. After playing a motley group of characters, Jackson emerged with his breakout performance in Spike Lee's drama, Jungle Fever (1991). As drug addict Gator, he walked away with a Special Jury Prize for a supporting role at the Cannes Film Festival. It was, however, Quentin Tarantino's blood-and-gore Pulp Fiction in 1994 – which incidentally was Jackson's 13th movie – that firmly established the actor as one of Hollywood's greats. The number 13 proved lucky for him, and he clinched the British Academy of Film and Television Arts Award for his supporting part as Jules Winnfield. He was also nominated for the Golden Globe and Academy Award.

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