

At Dubai Fest, some films tugged at the heart

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Only Men Go To The Grave deals with burning issues in the Arab society.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

I may be a movie critic, but sometimes I would like to call myself an emotional critic. For, sweetest are those films that end up tugging my heart. Really, I am not a great one to be floored by style or technique. Any day, give me a movie that has a great story and which is narrated with feeling, a sense of passion, and I am hooked.

So, much as one would disagree with me, I – at the recent Dubai International Film Festival – did not quite care for movies like Rogue One: A Star Wars Story with all its 3D trappings and special effects or The Founder about the dubious emergence of McDonald's or Collateral Beauty tracing the life of a New York advertising executive or Befikre that seemed like a PR campaign for Paris. As a friend from the French Cultural Centre in Dubai quipped: "They have not shown the finest parts of the city, the oldest, the most historic". He was bang on. The film has so much of the Eiffel Tower and hardly anything other than that! And, as for the plot and theme, come on, Mr Aditya Chopra, you could have done much better than this. Remember, you once gave us Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge!

Among the five Indian titles at the Festival, there was one that I quite liked, though, as I did tell the director, Shubhashish Bhutiani, he could have ended his work a few minutes earlier. This would have been far more effective. But I would think that most helmers are averse to giving a free hand to their editors.

But then Bhutiani's Mukti Bhawan or Hotel Salvation was very different from the over-the-top kind of cinema we are battered with day in and day out. And movie fits perfectly well with the cinema of subdued. The young Bhutiani, barely 25, presents a poignant plot of 77-year-old Dayanand Kumar (and what a marvellous piece of acting here by Lalit Behl), who wants to spend his last days at the holy city of Varanasi after he has a dream that is recurrent and ominous. He feels his end is round the corner, and he would want to die on the banks of the Ganges in Varanasi. A death there is believed to stop the cycle of birth.

But his son, Rajiv (another superb performance by Adil Hussain) is in a quandary. With a wife and a daughter who is all set to get married, and a boss at office who just cannot exist without Rajiv, he somehow agrees to take the old man to Varanasi. It is this journey that the father and son make which changes how they feel about each other. Their relationship turns from one that has been cold, even hostile, to one that is warm, caring and understanding.

Really a wonderful piece of cinema that to me came as a wind of reassurance, Mukti Bhawan has been admirably helmed and mounted. Bhutiani does not shy away from showing us the ugly side of Varanasi, images that are disturbing and which seem to erase a bit of the city's holiness. But then it is here that some men and women believe that they can find salvation, yes in all this mess. And Kumar is one among them who is determined to spend his last days in the city, and despite his son's and grand-daughter's pleas, he sets on his journey to life's end.

There were a few more films at Dubai that gripped me. Magdy Ahmed Ali's The Preacher is based on the controversial Egyptian writer, Ibrahim Essa's 2013 best-selling novel, The Televangelist. A thriller, the movie examines the politics of the region, particularly in Egypt. And this is important, given the kind of turmoil we have seen there in recent times. The Preacher takes on the attack on the Coptic church and on the Sufi Muslims in Egypt – urging for restraint and tolerance.

Amr Sa'ad is brilliant as the lead actor, playing Sheikh Hatem – a pious, witty man who lands a job as a television evangelist. While he is quite liberal in his private life, his public utterances seem somewhat rigid. He marries a beautiful woman and they have a son, but Hatem's over-protectiveness puts the little boy at risk.

The film takes us through many paths: how his audience is handpicked and how the questions are pre-approved. But then there is one woman who veers off the prescribed path and asks an explosive question. The movie then turns into a thriller, and there is more tension brewing when Hatem is asked to help sort out a family squabble of a son-in-law wanting to convert to Christianity. The Preacher is really engaging, because its protagonist defies definition. Is he a rationalist? Is he autocratic? We would never know, but he is a glib talker, a humorist and plays his game with charismatic cunning.

Emirati director Abdulla al-Kaabi's Only Men Go To The Grave focusses on burning issues like gender equality in the Arab society. Many felt that the opening sequence felt like a Pedro Almodovar work, and Kaabi takes us to Ghanima (played by Hebe Sabah), a radio host, who gets an urgent call saying that her mother is dying, and that she wishes to reveal a secret. But before her mother can disclose what she wants to, she falls from the roof and dies. And then the family gets into a mess – when the mourning period becomes one for pulling skeletons out of the cupboard. While the film deals with a lofty subject – which includes taboos like women being disallowed from the burial

ground – the execution at times looks listless.

After this sombre story, I saw *Solitaire*, a Lebanese work from Sophie Boutros. Theresa is a Lebanese woman, the wife of a small town mayor. When her daughter brings home her suitor, a Syrian, the mother is horrified. For, years ago, her young brother was killed in Syrian bombing. The movie is extremely comical with the brother, looking out of a photograph on the wall, keeps talking to Theresa, imploring not to agree to her daughter's match. And in a subtext, we see the mayor having his bit of fun with Theresa's best friend! A wonderfully breezy work that had me rooted to my seat.

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