

## My 10 most favourite foreign films

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A scene from Toni Erdmann.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

This week, I am going to list my 10 most favourite films in languages other than Indian. And like last week, this week's exercise has not been easy. It is always a dilemma to zero in on 10. But, well, here they are.

The Cannes Competition title, Maren Ade's German-language Toni Erdmann, was one of the most endearing movies I watched in 2016. A delightful art house comedy by Ade, Toni Erdmann is an extraordinarily touching story of a father's bid to get his grown-up daughter to loosen up and be less of a workaholic. To achieve this, the father, Winfried (played by Austrian theatre veteran Peter Simonischek), disguises himself in a variety of ways to elicit laughter from his girl, Ines (German leading lady Sandra Hüller). At three hours, there is never a dull moment.

Another work about father and daughter was Graduation in which Romanian director Cristian Mungiu (Best Director Palm at Cannes) reaffirmed that style was unimportant while telling a story in a film, and he did this with admirable excellence. In Graduation, he examines a universal dilemma of parental anxiety for a child's welfare. Dr Romeo Adrian (played by Adrian Titieni) is a respectable member of his society who wants the very best for his academically talented daughter, Eliza (Maria Dragus) – which is to send her away from the morally bankrupt and corrupt Romania to England, where she has won a scholarship to study psychology. But she has to pass one last graduation test that will see her getting on the plane. However, on the morning of her examination, she is assaulted outside her school and nearly raped, and the father finds himself being forced to make moral compromises to ensure that Eliza gets her required grades. Graduation is a very powerful work where Mungiu's unassuming helming makes a great impact on the viewer – a realist, indeed he is who shuns stylistic adornments and firmly believes that technical tricks do not make a magical movie.

Spanish master Pedro Almodovar's latest work, Julieta, is also about parental anxiousness – actually a melodrama handled with first-class restraint, and which is based on Alice Munro's short stories about a woman reflecting on her estranged relationship with her daughter. Like most of his films, Julieta is set in Spain. A lot of Julieta is set in the 1980s and is inspired by Almodovar's own mother. Julieta is the auteur's 20th feature, and like most of his films, it is centred on the lives of women. His latest creation reminded me of his 2006 Oscar-clincher, Volver, and Julieta has also been liberally influenced by his recent Hitchcockian dramas – Broken Embraces and The Skin I Live In. However, Julieta is the least complex of the lot and is a simple story of a mother whose daughter on turning 18 goes away. The older woman is held responsible by the girl for her father's accidental death at sea. Narrated as a flashback through letters which Julieta writes to her daughter 12 years after she disappears – and whose address the mother chances upon – the movie is every bit an Almodovar work. Strong colours (silky reds greens and blues) that are often flashy, and ornately decorated interiors make Julieta enticing.

Jeff Nichols' Loving reminded me of all that is happening in today's India. A moving story about an interracial marriage between Richard and Mildred, Nichols' work traces the couple's turbulent life in the late 1950s in the American state of Virginia, where such a union was against the law. Eventually, the US Supreme Court held that marriage was a human right, and Virginia had to repeal the Act. A strong parallel may be drawn between Loving and the khap rulings in India on inter-caste marriages/love affairs, which have led to horrible tragedies snuffing out young lives. Loving has been narrated with hauntingly refreshing subtlety in a script that could have in an average Indian director's hand gone off the top with weepy emotionalism. Nichols shows admirable control while taking us through the deeply disturbing life of the Lovings – who on being asked to quit Virginia, try and make a life in Washington. But they find that they cannot raise their three children there and return to Virginia – with predictably gloomy consequences.

Damien Chazelle's La La Land, which opened Venice last year, is all about hope and dream. And what better way to show these than through a musical. The movie just dazzled, and it reminded me of the great song-and-dance stuff that people like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers as well as Gene Kelly gave us in once-upon-a-time Hollywood.

La La Land is a classic tale of escapism of the boy-meets-girl variety – where Mia (Emma Stone) and Sebastian (Ryan Gosling), in spite of all their woeful struggles, manage to fall in love, sing and dance. She fails in audition after audition, and he survives from the tips he gets

playing the piano at pubs. Till he lands a solid job, and she wins a contract that takes her to Paris. It is certainly a story right out of a dream factory, and what a pleasing picture.

Tom Ford came out with a gripping tale of love and revenge and redemption, *Nocturnal Animals* – which is based on Austin Wright's *Tony and Susan*. The book is set in 1993, and the film as well, in times when mobile phones were not all that widely used. Ford chooses Texas to unfold his thrilling piece of drama that certainly had me hooked. With the lead parts played by Amy Adams and Jake Gyllenhaal, *Nocturnal Animals* reveals the mastery that Ford has over the medium. As he transports his story from the present to the past and back to the present, one had no confusion about the narrative. Such was the auteur's control and command over his work that the frames slipped from one point in time to another with flawless finesse and extraordinary ease.

Renowned British director Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake*, is a moving portrait of what a stubborn bureaucracy can do to men and women as they struggle through joblessness and poverty. Based on extensive research and interviews by the screenwriter, Paul Laverty, Loach's work focuses on a fictional story, that of Daniel Blake. He is a middle-aged widower in North East England, who finds after a heart attack that he cannot work or get State benefits. And his painful experiences are narrated with ruthless starkness in a film that is a strong indictment of all that is wrong with the UK today. Though *I, Daniel Blake* may seem somewhat exaggerated and one can predict how it would end, there is no denying that it is a work which caused pain in me. With stand-up comic Dave Johns as Daniel Blake and Hayley Squires as Katie, the single mother of two children who is relocated to a government flat in Newcastle with its cheaper standards of living, Loach's movie takes us right into the storm of bureaucratic obstinacy and unfeeling attitude. How cruel it all seems! Loach paints the grimness of a working class life in England with all its hurting and pathos.

*The Handmaiden*, by Park Chan-wook, has been adapted from Sarah Waters' Victorian era lesbian novel called *Fingersmith*. The story has been translocated to Japan, and marks the return of the director to Korean language production after his English debut, *Stoker*. *The Handmaiden* is a thriller of sorts that tells us the story of a Korean woman in the 1930s in a criminal pact with an aristocratic swindler, who is trying to fool a rich Japanese heiress into marrying him. *The Handmaiden* is beautifully crafted and is playful despite its grim subject. The lesbian theme has been handled with artistic sensibility.

Kenji Yamauchi's Japanese work, *At the Terrace*, unfolds a story of rivalry and ribald at a terrace party in Tokyo where two women and five men, all sozzled up, play a devastating psychological game of cat and mouse. It all begins rather innocuously with one of the men flirting with the wife of another till the masks are blown away revealing an ugly, tainted humanity. Secret desires, jealousies and hatred are laid bare as the seven people argue and bicker throwing caution and humility and decency and decorum to the winds. What was really fascinating about this work was the helmer's ability – throughout the 90-minute run time – to keep our attention riveted on his characters as they striped each other's veneer of respectability. There were several moments when I thought that the camera would step away from the terrace – where all the action takes place. But no, the camera remained on the terrace in what one thought was a spectacular narration of a very ordinary incident – of an after party that went wrong. A terrific climax totally unpredictable seemed like a great desert.

Behnam Behzadi's latest outing, *Inversion*, from Iran is a quietly dramatic tale of a Tehran woman, Nilofer – whose goodness is taken advantage of by her brother. Her view that she is liberated and independent comes crashing down when he tries to force her out of the city where she runs a tailoring outfit and has just found new love. When Tehran is engulfed in poisonous smog and her old mother falls ill, the doctor suggests that she move out of the city. Nilofer's two siblings – her older sister and brother – cannot accompany their mother to a countryside home with clean air. At least, they feel they cannot, and so they make plans for the old lady to be moved out along with Nilofer. She is not even consulted. This is when Nilofer begins to feel that her life is being run by others, and her idea of a single woman living a life of freedom appears to come crashing down. Behzadi must be lauded for the kind of control he exerts over the script, making sure that his actors perform with restraint. The emotions are underplayed, no howling, no river of tears flowing down the face. A fantastic effort, indeed.

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many film festivals through the year that gives him a wonderful opportunity to watch the creations of many directors from different parts of the world. He may be e-mailed at [gautamanb@hotmail.com](mailto:gautamanb@hotmail.com)