



SCREEN GRAB: Dietrich Brueggemann's *Stations of the Cross* is a powerful German work that underlines faith and religion in their most radical forms.

Abu Dhabi Film Fest offers a fine fare

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The eighth edition of the recently-concluded Abu Dhabi Film Festival had on offer a splendidly varied fare. A kidnapped girl drama, a father-son dilemma, the story of a dogmatic teen, a tale of father's revenge and a political adventure were some of the themes that set the festival on a high. And here are some of the movies I just loved.

Stations of the Cross: Dietrich Brueggemann's *Stations of the Cross* is a powerful German work that underlines faith and religion in their most radical forms. Seen through the eyes of 14-year-old Maria (Lea van Acken), whose frailty hides a steely resolve to follow Christ's path of 14 Stations to the Cross, the film is also a tragic account of suppressed teenage desires and wasted life.

Brilliantly written by Brueggemann and his sister, Anna (the movie won the Best Script Award at the 2014 Berlin Film Festival), *Stations of the Cross* is divided into 14 chapters, named after the stations (Jesus is Condemned to Death, Jesus Falls the First Time, Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem and so on) Christ journeys through. Captured most of the time with a static camera in single takes, the movie batters and moves us with Maria's dilemma.

As the girl prepares for her confirmation, she faces almost impossible expectations placed on her by her mother and priest. In a pre-confirmation talk, the priest tells her and a few others about the evils of temptation and how important it is to be Christ's warrior. He criticises the Second Vatican Council, which modernised the Church and many of its rites – paving the way for Satanic stranglehold of the faith.

In the second chapter, we meet Maria's family out on a Sunday walk. The clan comprises her domineering mother, spineless father and three siblings, including four-year-old Johannes who does not speak, and the family's lovely French au pair, Bernadette (Lucie

Aron). In another chapter, we see a cute boy, Christian (Moritz Knapp), whose attention excites Maria and whose choir group also sings soul and gospel, music that could have evil influences. As Maria denies herself these little pleasures of life and puts herself on a path of self-destruction, we are confronted with the other side of religion, how it can suffocate us.

The Man from Oran: Six years after helming *Masquerade*, Lyes Salem presents *The Man from Oran*, a haunting political drama laced with the agony and angst of men and women who lived through the Algerian revolution. Interspersed with the heartrending stories of revolutionaries and their unimaginable sacrifices, Salem's latest film is also visually arresting with each frame magnificently composed. Indeed, a world unto itself.

The Man from Oran looks at the turbulent political history of Algeria – as it fights “not the French occupiers but colonialism” – over a 30-year-period through the eyes of two close friends, Djaffer (Lyes Salem) and Hamid (Khaled Benaissa). The opening shot shows them going for a drive, when they are ambushed by the French military forces. However, they manage to escape and join the National Liberation Army.

When independence comes to Algeria, it brings along its own woes, treacheries and tribulations. Corruption in political life, falsification of historical facts and personal loss as well frustration brought about by arrogance and thirst for power have all been dealt with remarkable lucidity and conviction.

Above all, the movie enumerates through Djaffer's life (an excellent performance by Salem, who also acts here) how tragic separations, breakdown of families, small sacrifices and strong selfish desires change the tone and tenor of a society.

In Order of Disappearance: Hans Petter Moland's *In Order of Disappearance*, which premiered at Berlin early this year, is a superbly crafted thriller where a mild-mannered snow-plow driver turns a small Norwegian town from its icy vastness into a bloody mess. Not since the days of the Coen's *Brothers' Fargo* have we

seen this much blood spilled in the cold North.

Stellan Skarsgard plays Nils Dickman, an ordinary snow-plow, whose reward as the Citizen of the Year tragically coincides with the murder of his son, working at the airport. Grim and calmly intelligent, the aggrieved father single-handedly avenges his son's death – which is made to look like the result of a drug overdose. When the cops write off the demise as another case of young people destroying themselves, a version which Nils wife, Gudrun (Hildegard Riise), accepts, not Nils, it leads to their marriage falling apart. But Nils is absolutely sure that his son was no junkie.

In a thrilling new chapter in Skarsgard's association with Moland – which began in 1995 with *Zero Kelvin* and was last seen in the 2010 *A Somewhat Gentle Man* – we watch Nils finishing off the criminals with the same kind of doggedness he clears the way in snowy wilderness. Coming to his aid are the modern-day smartphone and gang rivalry, which in the final scene leads to a nail-biting gun fight.

The Last Hammer Blow: This is an extraordinarily moving story of an adolescent's longing for his famous conductor father. Romain Paul plays 13-year-old Victor, whose mother, Nadia (Clotilde Hesme) is seriously ill with an unnamed disease and is separated from her lover. The fact that his musician father, Samuel Ravinia (Gregory Gadebois), is performing in nearby Montpellier does not make it any easier for Victor, and he makes several trips to rehearsals hoping to catch the man's attention. As if these were not enough, Victor's soccer coach wants the boy to prepare for special tryouts since he is clearly talented. In this rather uneasy existence, the teenage daughter of a neighbour comes as a whiff of fresh air for Victor living in trailer.

There are some wonderful moments in the film, like when the father and the son sit down for an impromptu pizza lunch struggling to say something to each other. So, rather awkwardly they begin discussing soccer and music. But happily, the movie does not go overboard with either musical metaphors or the music itself.

Paul is often mesmerizing, with both adults playing second fiddle in a film where much of the meaning emerges between the lines or, should we say, frames. Understated with absolutely remarkable performances by the other two principal characters as well.

Tales: One of Iran's best known helmers, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, strings together a series of shorts to tell us tales of love anguish and disappointment. A documentary maker is trying to capture the woes of workers crushed by capitalism. A taxi driver picks a woman who turns out to be his childhood friend, but now a prostitute. A woman is trying to get her nine months' pay from her bosses who have shut down their factory and vanished. A man is suspicious and disturbed when his wife gets a letter from her former husband. Each of these little stories is rivetingly narrated by Rakhshan, who for many years could only make documentaries. Now that the Iranian government is friendlier to culture, she decided to make this feature.

Memories on Stone: What can be more devastating to human psyche than finding one's name etched by one's father on the cold stone wall of a prison where he was tortured and murdered. This is what happens to Sinor (Shima Molaie), who plays the lead in this movie (helmed by Shawkat Amin Koriki) – where a director is trying to make a film about the Al Anfal Kurdish genocide in Iraq. Sinor is young and beautiful, and she appears just as the director is about to give up when he just cannot find an actress.

But Sinor comes with her own baggage. As much as she is passionate about acting in the movie (and there is a strong reason for this), she needs the permission of her uncle and fiancé. There are some hilarious moments – the guy gets all jealous and hassled when the hero holds Sinor's hand for a scene! *Memories on Stone* is certainly a beaten subject – about a film within a film that Francois Truffaut once did so brilliantly in *Day for Night*. But Koriki's work is executed with great subtlety and is an important document of the socio-cultural realities of present-day Kurdistan.

Fevers: Hicham Ayouch's film, *Fevers*, is a haunting story of 13-year-old Benjamin (Didier Michon) – who has only known hatred. After a stint in cruel foster homes, he comes to live with his father and grandparents. A real home to call his own at last, the lad does not know how to shake off his manipulative tendencies and anger in a family that goes out of its way to make him feel welcome. But there are times when his behaviour drives the others mad. There is one telling scene when the grandfather removes his belt and offers it to his son to give the boy a lashing. But the father refuses and eventually wins over Benjamin's love and trust. Michon is just splendid as the scowling, swearing boy, who has never known parental affection – with a mother in jail and a father too scared to play father.

Test: Arresting in its scenic splendour and dialogueless communication, Alexander Kott's love story takes places in Kazakhstan – the site of Soviet Union's first nuclear test in August 1949. A farmer and his daughter lead an idyllic existence, when the country tests its first nuclear weapon there presuming that it is uninhabited. Sometimes comical – as when two suitors for the girl appear on the scene and try banishing the other through gesticulations – the movie is a fine example of how lucidly cinema can communicate without words.

Difret: An audience award at Sundance, Zeresenay Mehari's Ethiopian work traces the life of a 14-year-old girl who is kidnapped, raped and told to marry the rapist. She escapes, but not before shooting the evil guy, and is lucky enough to find a lawyer who steps in to help her find justice.

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