

## Top ten foreign films in 2017

2018 10:04 PM

January  
02



IMPRESSIVE: Becoming Cary Grant makes quite a statement.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The year which went by did throw up some very interesting films in English and other foreign languages, and I did face a dilemma while picking my 10 best works. But here they go.

**Becoming Cary Grant:** The Hollywood star, Cary Grant, has been one of my favourites, and a documentary on him at the Cannes Film Festival was just adorable. Mark Kidel's English-language *Becoming Cary Grant* explored the man and the actor. If he enriched some of the movies like Alfred Hitchcock's *North By Northwest*, his tryst with yoga, hypnosis and eventually LSD sessions (when the drug was legal) helped him find inner peace and to come to grips with his childhood dilemma of having to grow up without a mother. Kidel portrays Grant as an actor who was forever in flight. He was a Bristol (that is where he was born) street urchin, who set off to conquer Hollywood. He did become an American prince, an embodiment of grace and glamour. Some called him the male version of Grace Kelly, who became the Princesses of Monaco. The documentary gives us such rare insights into Grant's life.

**Our Souls At Night:** Ritesh Batra's English-language *Our Souls At Night*, with two of the biggest actors the world has ever known, Robert Redford and Jane Fonda, is a sweet romantic story that I saw at the Venice Film Festival. Batra, who seems to be drawn to English-language fiction (with his second feature, *The Sense of an Ending*, based on the British writer, Julian Patrick Barnes, who won the Man Booker Prize in 2011), finds his latest inspiration from American novelist Kent Haruf's work, *Our Souls at Night*. Batra has spun his narrative around loneliness (a theme we also saw in his *The Lunchbox* - with Irrfan Khan's Fernandes pining for love). The movie opens in one of the most unpretentious ways. We see Robert Redford as Louis Waters, an elderly widower, having a quiet dinner (so different from the garishly loud manner in which Indian heroes make their entries) when an ageing widow, Addie Moore, knocks on his door. They have lived as neighbours in a small Colorado town for 70 years, but had barely spoken to each other. Addie comes with a proposal. She would like him to share her bed – not really for sex, but for conversational company. He agrees after contemplating for a day. And so begins a love story without much ado.

**Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri:** Also a Venice title, this English film by Martin McDonagh is all about a common citizen tackling a personal tragedy in a small American town. When the police fail to make any arrests seven months after her young daughter had been raped and murdered, Frances McDormand's Mildred takes over by buying ad space on three billboards outside the town of Ebbing to make a statement on Easter Sunday: Her daughter was 'raped while dying, and still no arrests Sheriff Willoughby?'; they ask consecutively. A unique way of addressing police apathy, I would think, which in the movie leads to television channels picking up the story and to a whole lot of unsavoury incidents. The film gripped me with its pace and novelty. And yes, McDormand was just delightful, foul-mouthed and funny, to watch as a mother grieving over her daughter's death, but not giving up to get to the bottom of it all.

**The Shape of Water:** Who could have thought of a male mermaid – at least of sorts – in Guillermo Del Toro's *The Shape of Water*, is also in English. Not quite beautiful as "female" mermaids can be, but the creature in this movie has fins and gills, and has been dragged from South America to a dirty tank in a lab by scientists who believe that this living being can give the US an edge over the Soviet Union. Yes, it is the era of the Cold War when the two Super Powers were at each other's throats. And a mute girl, Elisa (played by Sally Hawkins), is a cleaner, who takes an awful lot of pity for this guy in the tank, and as she sneaks to him during lunch break offering him a bit of her own food, a strange romance develops between the two, leading to frightening consequences. But then the course of true love never runs smooth, does it? Sad and sexy and sweet as well, *The Shape of Water* is lovely and novel, and deserved the Venice's top honours, Golden Lion for Best Picture.

**In the Fade:** Turkish director Fatih Akin, who lives in Germany, was back at the Cannes Film Festival with his latest outing, *In the Fade* (German) – an emotional tale of a German mother's angst at having lost her six-year-old son and her Turkish husband in a Neo-Nazi attack.

The culprits are a young German couple. And after the courts falter and set them free, the mother seeks revenge, planting a bomb under a caravan that the two use. She also kills herself. In the Fade is narrated in three chapters. The first one is all about Katja (Diane Kruger), who marries Nuri (Numan Acar), in prison. He is serving time for a drug-related offence. But he is soon out, and the couple lives a happy life with their six-year-old son. The second chapter is all about the horrific nail-bomb attack in which the father and son are killed. The third segment takes us into revenge and retribution. Akin's In the Fade has the same power and punch that we saw in his earlier The Cut - a bold plot about the 1915 Armenian genocide in which 1.5 million people were butchered.

Loveless: An unforgiving image of Russia, Andrey Zvyagintsev's Loveless deals with parental selfishness and how it shatters, even destroys, the lives of their children. The movie is a powerful indictment of an unfeeling society from a helmer who earlier gave us a masterful Leviathan. A constantly bickering couple on the verge of separating finds their 12-year-old son missing - a son they were trying to push on to the other. There is one scene which is heartrending: we see the little boy shutting himself in a room and crying after he hears his parents loudly disagreeing on his custody. This is no case of each wanting to keep the boy, but one where neither wants to have anything to do with him. Zhenia (Maryana Spivak) and Boris (Alexey Rozin) are fed up with each other. Both want to start a new life, and their son, Alyosha (Matvei Novikov), seems like a huge obstacle to this. Zhenia has found a new lover, an older but a rich man. Boris has a young girlfriend, who is already pregnant. Will the new partners be willing to accept Alyosha?

Radiance: The Japanese director, Naomi Kawase's latest film, Radiance (Hikari in Japanese), takes us into the world of the blind and partially-sighted — tracing the relationship between a photographer whose vision is fading and a woman who pens movie audio descriptions. Kawase uses disability most artfully to weave a love story between Misako (Misaki Ayame) - who is writing a description for the visually challenged — and Nakamori (Nagase Masatoshi), a celebrated photographer. He is one of Misako's listeners. On the verge of blindness, he is caustic and angry. Misako has her own tragedies to grapple with: a father who mysteriously disappeared several years ago and a mother sinking into dementia. Perhaps these misfortunes push her to understand Nakamori's frustration. Captivatingly photographed, and convincingly narrated.

The Insult: The Insult, by Ziad Doueiri, explores guilt and honour, but both laced with ego, a giant version of it. A small slur turns into a mighty war and divides a nation. The film pits a Palestinian Muslim construction worker in Lebanon (technically a refugee) against a Christian Lebanese house owner. The two men's spat over a gutter leads to words and then blows. This, in turn, results in a court case, where lawyers further vitiate the atmosphere. Beirut is in flames as Palestinians and Lebanese fight over what began as a small ego clash! Although Doueiri ends his work on a note of hope and reconciliation, I wonder whether men akin to the characters in his movie with their huge egos would ever let the world move towards resolutions.

Zagros: Sahim Omar Khalifa's Zagros in Kurdish seemed like a Shakespearean tragedy retold. Zagros is a shepherd on the hills of Kurdistan who leads a blissful content life tending to his flock and returning home to his city-bred wife, Havin, and their little daughter. But suspicion and jealousy destroy all of this – provoked by his father, who poisons Zagros' mind with stories about Havin's "unfaithfulness". The film is a terrifyingly bold expose of bigotry and conservatism.

Withered Green: Mohammed Hammad's latest work, Withered Green seemed to herald a new kind of movie movement in West Asia. I was quite surprised to see it – a subdued, subtle and minimalistic way of story-telling aided by some fine performances, controlled yet powerful. The film's bare frames heighten the emotional sequences between two sisters, one is content with her single-hood, and the other is at the gates of marriage. Two women living alone without male company is uncommon in their part of the world, and this creates hassles for Iman (Heba Ali) – who is the guardian for her younger sister, Noha (Asmaa Fawzi), about to get engaged. The ceremony requires a male member to be present, but the two women have lived secluded lives and are not close to any male relative. When Iman asks two of her uncles, they make excuses and refuse to take on the responsibility.

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