



OPENING ACT: One of the first scenes in *The President*, shot in Georgia, shows the ruler in military uniform showing his little grandson (also in uniform) what power is all about.

Makhmalbaf's *The President* to open Indian film fest

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

It is always wonderful when a movie festival opens with a breezy work, and if it also engages you with a couple of questions — all the better. Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *The President* — which will herald the 45th edition of the International Film Festival of India on Thursday at Panaji in Goa — fits this bill all right.

The President is no heavy homily. Rather it is narrated with a lot of wit and bit of wisdom. But more importantly, the movie would seem apt given the kind of political turbulence much of the world is passing through today. The anger against dictatorial regimes, the disdain for dynastic rule and the craving for democratic movement are what we have been seeing in the recent past, in India and elsewhere.

And Makhmalbaf laces his creation with his own personal experiences — anger and angst injected into the narrative. Which, though, is not allowed to sink into sorrow and despair. On the contrary, the auteur uses a tongue-in-cheek approach, and what a delight this is.

Hounded out of his own country by an autocratic regime and exiled in London, Makhmalbaf arrives with a parable on violence, *The President*, which clearly indicates that it was inspired by the Arab Spring, is a mighty powerful and poignant look at the brutality and bestiality of dictators.

One of the first scenes in *The President*, shot in Georgia, shows the ruler in military

uniform showing his little grandson (also in uniform) what power is all about. Sitting on a high balcony overlooking his city, the President orders the city lights to be switched off. The moment he barks his diktat into the telephone, the whole place, except for the palace, plunges into darkness. A few moments later, when he commands that the lights be switched on, they begin to glow.

This little game, much to the awe and amazement of the lad (and to our humour), goes on for a while, till the lights do not come on at all. What follows is the sound of gunfire, and, well, a coup breaks out. The President and his grandson have to run and hide from a murderous mob baying for their blood. They disguise themselves first as shepherds and later as musicians and keep hopping from place to place, and there is no single man or woman who has a kind word for the dictator. So bloody cruel was his reign.

In many ways, *The President* is gripping — though the movie, one must dare say, is not in the same league as, for instance, Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar* — a haunting story set in Taliban's Afghanistan about a sister who goes there in search of a missing and suicidal sibling.

It was during a trip to Afghanistan eight years ago that Makhmalbaf thought of *The President*. Looking at the rubble that was Kabul from atop the destroyed Darul Aman Palace, he wondered about a king and his tendency to show off his total power. Could there be anybody better than a child to whom he could display his unchallenged skills?

Makhmalbaf told the media at the recent Venice Film Festival (where I watched the work) that dictators did not easily give up their powers, and those seeking a democratic

path often had to resort to violence to get the man out. So the road to democracy was strewn with bodies and blood. Invariably, the end of a dictatorship did not signal the end of hostility.

This was witnessed during the French Revolution. We see this in *The President* with the crowds going berserk. And eventually when they get what they have been looking for, there are vastly differing opinions on what the punishment ought to be.

So, in a way revolutions cause further upheaval. "There can be no end to this cycle unless mankind is able to build a new and better culture to deal with such situations. I hope my work is a small step and hope for creating this new culture," Makhmalbaf added.

And before *The President* gets rolling, the festival's opening ceremony will be star-studded. Amitabh Bachchan will be the chief guest, and he would be sharing the dais with Rajnikanth, who will be honoured with the Special Centenary Award — which is an annual prize given to a cinema personality. Actors Anupam Kher and Raveena Tandon will anchor the evening, while actress Shobana will perform an array of dances.

Over the next several days, the Festival will unspool 300 movies. There are retrospectives of Gulzar, Jeon Soo Il (South Korea), and Makhmalbaf (Iran), and a poster exhibition of the films of Poland's Krzysztof Kielowski, among other features. China will be the country of focus, and Wong Kar-Wai will be feted with a Lifetime Achievement Award.

Film Bazaar: Mira Nair's production *Three And A Half* and Amitava's *Kaul Interpreter of Maladies* are two of the 32 projects chosen for the National Film Development

Corporation's (NFDC) Co-Production Market at the Film Bazaar this year. The Bazaar runs from November 20 to 24 along with the International Film Festival of India.

Three and a Half will be helmed by Nair's long-time associate, Sooni Taraporewala, while Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize winning short story is the inspiration for *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Of these 32 projects, 14 are foreign and the rest Indian. The Indian lineup includes Aamir Bashir's *Winter* and *The Boyfriend* by Vidur Nauriyal and Ashim Ahluwalia.

The international line-up includes two projects from the US, two from Sri Lanka and others from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Norway, France, Germany, Singapore and the UK.

In the past years, Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox*, Kanu Behl's Cannes title *Titli* and Chaitanya Tamhane's recent Venice winner *Court* have been some of the entries at the Market.

Last year, the Film Bazaar attracted men like the Director of the Cannes Film Festival, Thierry Fremaux, his deputy, Christian Jeune, the Director of the Rome Film Festival, Marco Mueller, and the legendary British movie critic, Derek Malcolm.

Over the years, the Bazaar has become an important place for Indian writers, directors and producers to find expertise and funding. Sessions on script writing have been very popular, and many producers have found funding agencies at the Bazaar.

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