

# Venice Fest to hum La La Land on the opening night

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A still from La La Land.



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**By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The Venice Film Festival will open with Damien Chazelle's *La La Land* on August 31. The movie will be part of the 20-odd titles competing for the prestigious Golden Lion.

Last year, Venice opened with Baltasar Kormakur's pulse-pounding mountain adventure, *Everest* — where a number of climbers got caught in a severe snow storm. A bone-chilling escapade on the world's highest mountain in 1996 that left eight climbers dead was captured with splendid detailing — albeit in a fictionalised version — in *Everest*.

Speaking just before *Everest* screened, Kormakur told a media conference in Venice that he did all he could to make his movie as realistic and as exciting as possible. They imported snow from Holland to shoot in England's Pinewood Studio. "It was the real stuff, minus 60 degrees; when we were shooting at Pinewood, we blasted it in their faces as hard as we could. I wanted the actors to respond to the environment," Kormakur averred "The more you draw from reality, the more likely you are to get reality."

Kormakur — who hails from Iceland — joked that he had been practising for this film even when he was a boy. He would walk to school in a blizzard. At other times, he would step out of home on his family's farm when a snow storm was raging. All this proved to be a valuable experience when he was shooting *Everest*.

In contrast, *La La Land* will be a pleasing musical drama starring Emma Stone, Ryan Gosling and John Legend — and it reunites Chazelle with JK Simmons, who won the Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his role as a punishing music instructor in the coming-of-age movie, *Whiplash*. The Director of the Festival, Alberto Barbera, called *La La Land* "a surprising tribute to the golden age of American musicals... It is a movie that does not merely reinvent the musical genre, it gives it a brand new start. If *Whiplash* was the revelation of a new filmmaker, *La La Land* is his definitive, albeit precocious, consecration among the great directors of Hollywood's new firmament."

The question is will *La La Land* try and revive the long forgotten Hollywood musicals. The 1950s were a golden period for such cinema that emerged from some of the biggest studios in

Los Angeles. Works like *An American in Paris*, *Singin in the Rain*, *Carmen Jones* were delightful hits.

In the 1960s and later, an attempt was made to bring back the musical genre with titles like *The Sound of Music*, *Mary Poppins* and *My Fair Lady*. But I think beyond these, nothing much happened, and *La La Land* looks like yet another try to get musicals on to the screen.

*La La Land*, a Hollywood romance traces the life of a couple — Mia (Stone), an aspiring actress who serves lattes to film stars in between her disappointing auditions, and Sebastian (Gosling), a jazz musician who survives by playing cocktail gigs in seedy bars. As success begins to knock on their lives, Mia and Sebastian will have to confront decisions that affect their love affair.

Meanwhile, Barbera will remain head of the Festival for another four-year term, till 2020. His predecessor, Marco Mueller, also served the Festival as Director for eight years, and he is recognised as having been a driving force behind Venice's revival after its longish bad patch. Muller now heads the Macau International Film Festival, whose first edition is slated for December. He headed the Beijing International Film Festival for a single term last year.

The Venice Film Festival, the oldest in the world having begun in 1932 primarily as a platform for movies propagating the message of Fascist leaders like Hitler and Mussolini, will run till September 10.

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## Appa

Tamil cinema is usually high on content, but often low on form, and Samuthirakani's *Appa* (Father) is a classic example of this. The film, which has also been written by Samuthirakani, has an important message, though not entirely unstated in the world of cinema. Samuthirakani, who wears a third hat in the movie, that of the lead performer, a father called Dayalan, says that it is unfair for parents to impose their sense of life on their children. There is no point in reliving our lives through our sons and daughters, who may well have their own dreams and ambitions. Of course, we have seen such a message in films like *Three Idiots*. *Appa* is all about this, entirely about this, in fact.

Samuthirakani — who has been trying to expand his acting range ( as a great cop in *Visaaranai*, as a clownish headmaster in *Amma Kanakku* and as an extremely understanding parent in *Appa*) — stands as a contrast to two other fathers in the movie, played by Thambi Ramaiah (as Singaperumal) and Nammo Narayana (Nadunilaiyan). Dayalan — despite a violently disagreeable wife (breaks every stick of furniture in the house), who wants her son, Vetriswaran, to compete with the world by scoring near-impossible grades at school — stands firm. The man wants the boy to learn life skills — which include his passion (swimming) and civility in society. Dayalan teaches Vetriswaran even how to mingle with girls.

On the other hand, Singaperumal makes a donkey out of his son, finally driving him to a boarding school, where he is stripped for a minor mistake and beaten the whole night. Swinging between these two pendulums is Nadunilaiyan, who coaches his son to remain in the shadows so that he can ultimately disappear, unsung and maybe even unloved.

Honestly, Samuthirakani need not have gone to this kind of extent tell his audiences what is desirable and what is not. So, it is not surprising that *Appa* in the end seems like some moral-science class. Preachy to the point of being a laborious watch, *Appa* appears like a hard task which the writer-director has set upon himself to pen and helm a film advisory for parents. Surely, no viewer would want to be paying ticket money to be given lessons on how to raise their children.

A little more finesse could have perhaps lifted *Appa* out of its self-inflicted drudgery, but I

must add that the movie's climax has been handled with commendable restraint. A maturity, rarely seen in Indian cinema, is clearly discernible here.

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