

Venice Fest presents a lovely wide canvas of life, sweet and sad

September 12 2017 10:55 PM



A scene from Stephen Frears' Victoria and Abdul.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

If one wants to watch great cinema, at least some great cinema, the Venice Film Festival is certainly an excellent venue, which unlike the more illustrious, more glamorous and much more crowded Cannes, is calmer and awesomely serene. Held every year on the quaint little island of Lido – which stands overlooking the historic Saint Marco Square – the Venice Festival floored me with some riveting work this autumn.

Who could have thought of a male mermaid – at least of sorts – in Guillermo Del Toro's *The Shape of Water*. 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 the tank 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* was lovely and novel, and deserved the Festival's top honours, Golden Lion for Best Picture.

The other film that moved me immensely was Andrew Haigh's *Lean On Pete* (which won its young actor, Charlie Plummer the Marcello Mastroianni Award) – which talks about a boy's love for a race horse, not the phoney kind we see in India, where bulls are tortured in the name of sport (Jallikattu). Also called Charlie in the film, the boy, barely 15, finds his life crashing when his father dies of blood poisoning. With a mother having run away when he was very young, Charlie steals the horse (all set to be shot, because it is wounded) and tries taking it across the countryside to his aunt. It is a journey fraught with problems, and Haigh does manage to weave out of all this sadness a story that ends bright and cheerful. The boy's affection for the horse was touching to the core, and this is what love for animals is all about.

There were other movies that took us to mankind's many dilemmas. Alexander Payne's *Downsizing* – which opened the Festival – tackles the problem of population by offering a magical solution. Shrink men to the size of a finger – so that there is enough space and food for all. Narrated with a touch of iconic comic, *Downsizing* has Matt Damon, Christoph Waltz and Hong Chau all playing miniature men and women. They form a colony where life is simply plentiful. And not just this, they all get to enjoy first-class air travel and live in virtual palaces. Undoubtedly, a breathtakingly beautiful way of addressing the planet's one overriding challenge of over population.

Captivating in its own way (though the casting could have better without Damon, who remains his wooden best in film after film), *Downsizing* has, though, as a redemption, Waltz – who as a rich businessman infuses into the plot a lovely piece of performance. His humour, his sarcasm and his wonderful expressiveness (and what a contrast to the role he portrayed as a ruthless Nazi officer in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds*) add many stars to Payne's work, which is science-fiction all right, dangling as it does a sweet pill to free the bursting-at-its-seams earth of one terrible malady.

This may sound strange, but in a crowded planet, people are still lonely, and India's Ritesh Batra (the man behind *The Lunchbox*) presented yet another sweet romantic story, *Our Souls at Night*, with two of the biggest actors the world has ever known, Robert Redford and Jane Fonda.

Batra, who seems to be drawn to English-language fiction (with his second feature, *The Sense of an Ending*, based on a work by the British writer, Julian Patrick Barnes, who won the Man Booker Prize in 2011), finds his latest inspiration from American novelist Kent Haruf's novel, *Our Souls at Night*.

Batra has spun his story around loneliness (a theme we also saw in *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 a conversational company. He agrees after contemplating for a day. And so begins a love story without much ado or elaborate preamble, and it turned out to be gripping.

Also harping on the theme of loneliness and, well some kind of love was Stephen Frears' Victoria and Abdul. Judi Dench – who has been familiar to all of us as M in the James Bond thrillers – essays Queen Victoria in Frears' latest outing, while Indian actor Ali Fazal – seen in films like Fukrey, Bobby Jasoos and Happy Bhag Jayegi – is Abdul Karim, a munshi or clerk in the royal household. As Karim, a clerk at the Agra Central Jail, his life lights up when he is sent to England, where he finds himself as the personal assistant to the Queen.

Based on a book, titled Victoria and Abdul: The True Story of The Queen's Closest Confidant by Shrabani Basu, Frears' examines how a young 24-year-old Abdul soon became a close confidant of an ageing and lonely Victoria – who had recently been devastated by the death of her Scottish gillie, John Brown. Her husband had been long gone. Abdul neatly places himself into this vacuum by becoming the Queen's teacher. He gives her Urdu lessons and keeps her informed about Indian political and social affairs during the turbulent 1887. Abdul's increasingly intimate relationship with Victoria gets the royal household uncomfortable and insecure leading to a near revolt. Pitted against a raging movement in India for independence from years of British rule and a growing hostility inside the royal palace is a tender story between an ordinary munshi and a prim-and-proper elderly Empress.

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