

Those magic moments at Cannes

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A scene from Loving.



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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The just-concluded 69th Cannes Film Festival had its share of gems. But sadly not all of them appealed to the Australian director George Miller's jury. In fact, some of the movies that got the largest number of stars from critics went unsung on the night of the Palm d'Or Awards. But here are some of my favourites, some of my very own gems. A brief look at each of them.



A lot of Julieta is set in the 1980s.

Spanish master Pedro Almodovar's latest work, *Julieta*, is a melodrama handled with brilliant restraint, and is based on Alice Munro's short stories about a woman reflecting on her estranged relationship with her daughter. Like most of his films, *Julieta* is set in Spain, though he had toyed with the idea of shooting the movie in the US with Meryl Streep.

"I was hoping to do the film in English and in New York," he said. "I even spoke to the American actress who was delighted at the thought of working with me. But I wasn't sure of myself."

Saying that a lot of *Julieta* was set in the 1980s and that it was also inspired by his own mother, Almodovar felt that women in that era had much more freedom than what they have today. "Women now are different because of the world they live in."

Julieta is the auteur's 20th feature, and like most of his movies is centred on the lives of women. His latest creation reminded me of his 2006 Oscar-clincher, *Volver*, and *Julieta* has also been liberally influenced by his recent Hitchcockian dramas — *Broken Embraces* and *The Skin I Live In*. However, *Julieta* is the least complex of the lot and is a simple story of a mother whose daughter on turning 18 goes away. The girl holds her mother responsible for her father's accidental death at sea.

Narrated as a flashback told through letters which *Julieta* writes to her daughter 12 years after she disappears — and whose address the older woman chances upon — *Julieta* is every bit an Almodovar work. Strong colours (silky reds greens and blues) that are often flashy and ornately decorated interiors make *Julieta* enticing. One notices a Lucien Freud poster and a score book by Sakamoto in *Julieta*'s home at Madrid.

The film begins by showing a middle-aged *Julieta* all set to leave Madrid with her lover, Lorenza, when she meets a childhood friend of her daughter — a meeting that forces a change of plans, and pushes the movie into its rocky course. *Julieta* unpacks and begins to write long letters to her daughter explaining how she and her father had met on a train.

Once considered enfant terrible of Spanish cinema, Almodovar has now mellowed down, and *Julieta* may seem like a huge contrast to his early and brazen, *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down*. As

Almodovar once quipped, “mistakes are made, stakes have been high, but hopes remain. And life is long”. The man has terrific optimism, and we see this in the way he uses colour to pep up our mood and help us troop out of the auditorium with a swing in our stride.

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In Graduation, Romanian director Cristian Mungiu (Best Director Palm) has reaffirmed that style is unimportant while telling a story in a film, and he does this with admirable excellence. Earlier, he had won the Palm d’Or for his abortionist tale, *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*, and a director’s trophy for *Beyond the Hills* at Cannes.

In Graduation, he examines a universal dilemma of parental anxiety for a child’s welfare. Dr Romeo Adrian (played by Adrian Titieni) is a respectable member of society, who wants the very best for his academically brilliant daughter, Eliza (Maria Dragus) — which is to send her away from the morally bankrupt and corrupt Romania to England, where she has won a scholarship to study psychology. But she has to pass one graduation test that will see her getting on the plane.

However, on the morning of her examination, she is assaulted outside her school and nearly raped, and the father finds himself being forced to make moral compromises to ensure that Eliza gets her required grades. Graduation is an extraordinarily powerful work where Mungiu’s unassuming helming makes a great impact on the viewer — a realist, indeed he is who shuns stylistic adornments and firmly believes that technical tricks do not make a magical movie.

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Jim Jarmusch’s *Patterson* is a disarmingly simple work that is paced evenly without the traditional cinematic highs and lows or what is referred to as dramatic curves.

The film stretches over eight days observing a bus driver (played with incredible ease by Adam Driver) telling us about the tiny details of his life at home and outside. Driver Patterson pens poetry during his off time, and leads a humdrum existence with his ravishing looking wife, Laura (essayed by the talented Golshifteh Farahani) who dreams of becoming a music star.

Patterson lives in the American city of Patterson, New Jersey, wakes up at 6:15 every morning and goes through his daily grind of driving his bus, overhearing the conversations of men and women who hop on to his vehicle, writes a few lines of poetry every time he gets a break and ends the day by visiting his favourite bar.

Jarmusch often makes use of genres like Western or the vampire movie to examine troubling questions about existence. But *Patterson* is quite different where the director embarks on a straightforward narrative to study the similarities in the driver’s life, sometimes the differences.

The film does bring out the undercurrents in Patterson’s life that we see through his muted reactions as he overhears the conversations of some of his passengers or when he writes about his marriage in his poems. Jarmusch gives a hint as to how his married life will shape out. Despite Patterson’s and Laura’s wonderfully easy relationship, it might run into problems later. Laura is often disappointed that Patterson does not make enough efforts to have his poetry published. She feels that it needs to be shared with the world.

There is a third character in *Patterson*, the family dog, a cute little thing which one night chews up the book of poems. But Patterson is unruffled, for he is sure to write more as he

drives his bus along the streets of his American city.

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Jeff Nichols' *Loving* — based on a true story — reminded me of all that is happening in today's India. A moving story about an interracial marriage between Richard and Mildred Loving, Nichols' work traces the couple's turbulent life in the late 1950s in the American State of Virginia, where such a union was against the law. Eventually, the US Supreme Court held that marriage was a human right, and Virginia had to repeal the Act.

A strong parallel may be drawn between Loving and the khap rulings in India on inter-caste marriages/love affairs, which have led to horrible tragedies snuffing out young lives.

Nicholas told a media conference soon after his Competition entry was screened that "I truly believe this is one of the most pure love stories in American history." He was describing the eventful life of the white southern construction worker, Richard, played by the Australian actor Joel Edgerton, and his African-American wife, Mildred, portrayed by the Ethiopian-Irish actress, Ruth Negga.

The Lovings got married in Washington, and returned to their native home in Virginia, only to be arrested. Their prison sentences were suspended on the condition that they remain outside the State for 25 years, a ruling they eventually fought and defied. And helping the couple's cause was the momentous civil rights movement that was spreading across America. In 1967, the Supreme Court decreed in favour of Richard and Mildred.

"The court case is fascinating; how these lawyers got this case to the Supreme Court could make a film in and of itself," said Nichols, who also wrote the screenplay. "I didn't want to make that movie," he added. "I wanted to make one about two people in love."

Loving — which is the second movie of Nichols after the 2012 *Mud* to make a Cannes debut — has relied heavily on the documentary, *The Loving Story* — which has the actual footage of the inter-racial couple. The documentary was aired by HBO in 2012, and when Nichols sent it to his wife asking what she thought about a feature on the Lovings, she wrote an email to him: "I really love you, but if you don't make this film I'm going to divorce you."

Loving has been narrated with hauntingly refreshing subtlety in a script that could have in an average Indian director's hand gone off the top with weepy emotionalism. Nichols shows admirable restraint while taking us through the deeply disturbing life of the Lovings — who on being asked to quit Virginia, try and make a life in Washington. But they find that they cannot raise their three children there, and return to Virginia. But the law catches up with them, and they have to once again leave what is really their home and family.

Stripped of all artifice, Edgerton and Negga play their parts in such an ordinary, un-cinematic manner that they end up infusing power into the narrative. Herein lies the appeal of *Loving* that has been told in such a charmingly simple way.

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