

Tokyo Film Fest offers fascinating variety

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WEIRD: Alifu, The Prince/ss, a Taiwan movie, is the tale of a son of a tribal chief, who later becomes a woman.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

One of the most fascinating aspects of a movie festival is the variety, sheer variety, it offers, and the just-concluded 30th edition of the Tokyo International Film Festival topped here with a fantastic array of subjects.

Wang Yu-lin came from Taiwan with his third feature, *Alifu, The Prince/ss*. Despite a rather sloppy style of storytelling, what did interest me, though, was the movie's offering of physical diversity with the help of some fine performances.

Newcomer Utjon Tjakivalid plays the title character, Alifu, the son of a tribal chief who heads a community of indigenous people in Taiwan.

Tremble All You Want takes you into the world of Japanese chick literature – where we are introduced to a young Mayu Matsuoka (playing Yoshiko Eto, her beauty making her all the more desperate about the fact that she does not have a boyfriend. Well-made and witty, the film stresses on the dilemma of the young in Japan.

Working long hours, sometimes sleeping in her office, dreading as she does about the long commute back home, and unhappy that she did not approach a handsome classmate she loved, Yoshiko lets a decade slip by before she hits upon a plan to meet him again. She calls a school reunion, meets the guy, but he does not remember her. Wounded and miserable, Yoshiko finally deletes him from her memory.

But then another prince charming is waiting right there in her office, and when he asks her out on a date, Yoshiko is deliriously overjoyed.

Interestingly, *Tremble All You Want* has a firm finger on the neurotic female mind, and it cleverly juxtaposes the real and the unreal. Often, when Yoshiko is fantasising, we believe it to be true. This is what adds a dash of pep to the film.

Rabindra Tagore's *Kabuliwala* apart from being an incredible part of a great folklore – that has weathered the storms of time to get firmly embedded in the average Indian's psyche – has been an attractive subject for moviemakers like Tapan Sinha (who had Chhabi Biswas essaying the title character of *Kabuliwala* in 1957) and Hemen Gupta (who had Balraj Sahani as his hero in a 1961 edition) among others.

And it is this *Kabuliwala* that producer Sunil Doshi and director Deb Medhekar have reworked into yet another film, titling it *Bioscopewala*. It is in Hindi. Doshi and Medhekar have added to Tagore's late 19th century version, and their embellishments certainly pep up the narrative to make it delightfully contemporary. Of course, a Tagore story never dates.

In *Bioscopewala*, Danny Denzongpa – whom we have for years associated with villainy in Hindi movies – essays the title character, a *Kabuliwala* who comes to Kolkata in the early 1990s – driven as he was out of Afghanistan by a rapidly fundamental regime, his little cinema theatre burnt down. And in Kolkata, he entertains children with his bioscope, giving them hours of joy by allowing them to fly across continents and peep into the world of Indian films. One of them who is mesmerised by all this imagery is Minnie – who, like in Tagore's story, gets fond of the *Kabuliwala*, sorry *Bioscopewala*.

However, things take a horrible turn when the *Bioscopewala* is jailed for murder and cast away for many years. And when he comes out, Minnie is a young woman (Geetanjali Thapa), a documentary movie-maker living in France. When her estranged, father Robi Basu (Adil Hussain), dies in a plane crash while he is on his way to Afghanistan, the daughter returns home wondering why he was making that trip. It is then that she meets *Bioscopewala*, who is by then bedridden and afflicted with Alzheimer's disease.

Minnie undertakes that unfinished trip of her father's to Kabul, where she discovers that the *Bioscopewala* had a daughter, and the man's extraordinary affection for Minnie stemmed from his ties with his own daughter. He had looked upon Minnie as his own little lass.

In many ways, Medhekar's work is hauntingly poignant tracing the lovely relationship between Minnie and the *Bioscopewala* – for whom the Kolkata girl brought back beautiful memories of his daughter back home.

Bioscopewala may be a little heavy on sentiment, a trifle too emotional, but the film has the power to pull you into its arms – much like how the Afghan draws little Minnie into his fold, a Minnie who serves as a proxy daughter for Denzongpa's Rehmat Khan or *Bioscopewala* – forced out of his home and hearth and pushed far away from his little girl on the mountains.

Enriching the screenplay is a wonderfully melodious song written by Gulzar, and music composed by Sandesh Shandilya (with Resul Pookutty's sound design). Shot partly in the Bowbazar area of North Kolkata and in a big Mumbai bungalow (seen in the movie as a haveli in Kolkata), *Bioscopewala* does not end the way Tagore's or the earlier films did. Medhekar's work offers something more modern which is quite lovely.

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