

Pulsating probables of Cannes

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DISTINCTION: Cate Blanchett will helm the international jury at the Cannes Film Festival this year.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The Cannes Film Festival forever fascinates with its flavour. For the 28 years that I have covered the 12-day cinematic event on the fabulous French Riviera, I have never ceased to be sucked into surprises. And the Festival's unwavering method that the French themselves are famous for, has held the Festival flying high.

Come January, the Festival announces the chairman of its international jury. Cate Blanchett, it will be this year, the Australian actress renowned for movies like *Babel*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* and *Blue Jasmine*, which fetched her an Oscar for best actress.

And of course, three weeks before the Festival starts, the titles are announced at a Paris Press conference. This year, Cannes' 71st edition begins on May 8, but with the Berlin Film Festival just over, the air is thick with the basket of probables that will roll into the Riviera.

As one French journal quipped: "As always, theories have started swirling around the probable selection that will be unveiled in April by Cannes' General Delegate Thierry Frémaux, but we can already say that on paper, the 2018 edition looks to be utterly breathtaking, making the hunt for this year's Palme d'Or (Festival top prize) all the more exciting".

Some of the titles that just about every critic and anybody else who will be at Cannes this May will look forward to are: *The Wild Pear Tree* by Turkey's Nuri Bilge Ceylan, *Loro* by Italy's Paolo Sorrentino, *Peterloo* by British director Mike Leigh, *Everybody Knows* by Iran's Asghar Farhadi, *The Death and Life of John F. Donovan* by Canada's Xavier Dolan, *Ash Is Purest White* by China's Jia Zhangke, *Sunset* by Hungary's László Nemes, *The Favourite* by Greece's Yorgos Lanthimos, *Donbass* by Ukraine's Sergei Loznitsa, *Where Life Is Born* by Mexico's Carlos Reygadas, *The Sisters Brothers* by France's Jacques Audiard, *Vision* by Japan's Naomi Kawase and *Shoplifters* by fellow Japanese, Hirokazu Kore-eda.

Also, there can be *Roma* by Mexico's Alfonso Cuarón, Steve McQueen's *Windows* from the UK, *The Image Book* from Jean-Luc Godard and Terrence Malick's American drama, *Radegund*.

It is clear from the list that Cannes is a lot about permanence and loyalty. So many of the helmers have had a relationship with the Festival — often for long years. Some of the striking examples are Kawase, Dolan, Leigh, Cuarón, Malik, Farhadi.

Such continuity has been one of the strongest pillars of Cannes — which has been quite unlike that at Venice or Berlin. Both Venice — which happens every autumn on the quaint little island of Lido, off the mainland, Berlin do go in for changes, both cosmetic and otherwise. Last year, Venice opened a swanky courtyard, and its experimentation has ranged from such structural changes to directors.

One can, therefore, safely conclude that Cannes stands for continuity. It follows then that the Festival is less likely to take a new director from India, and this can be a reason for the country's absence on the Riviera. At least, most of the times.

Paradoxically, while Indian representation outside of movies at Cannes has grown phenomenally in the past decade, the cinema from a nation which produces close to 2,000 films a year (making it the largest in the world) is often not to be seen at the May Festival. There are no clear answers for this, but I would suppose that a lot more PR push is needed for an Indian title to roll its way through hundreds of offerings if it has to catch the eye of Cannes selectors.

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Sridevi:

Last week, Indian actress Sridevi died in Dubai, where she had gone to attend a marriage. She was only 54. Tragically, the death cut short a career that she had just got re-rolling in 2012 with *English Vinglish*. This Hindi film came after a 15-year hiatus, and had not just an interesting plot, but also a great performance by an actress who was legendarily known as an interviewer's nightmare, but a viewer's delight.

As Shashi Godbole in Gauri Shinde's debut feature, *English Vinglish*, Sridevi stole hearts with her almost Herculean achievement of mastering English during a four-week crash course in New York. The change from a hesitant housewife to a bolder woman was portrayed with remarkable conviction by a Sridevi who had not faced the camera in ages.

Of course, we would never know why she chose to slip into the shadows for that decade and half, before *English Vinglish* came on. The official version is all that we have: playing a perfect wife to Boney Kapoor, whom she married in 1996, and a doting mother to her two daughters, Jahnvi and Khushi.

She doted on her girls all right, and I have wondered sometimes whether this love helped her to clinch brilliance in her 300th film, *Mom* (2017), helmed by Ravi Udyawar.

Of course, not many would now remember that Sridevi had a sparkling early innings in Tamil cinema. And her first movie as a leading lady was the 1976 *Moondru Mudichu*, a fascinating revenge drama helmed by the legendary K. Balachander. As a young woman, Sridevi's Selvi, is devastated when she sees Rajinikanth's Prashanth refusing to save his best friend, Balaji (Kamal Hassan), when he falls off a boat in the middle of a lake. In love with Balaji, Selvi understands Prashanth's ulterior motive, and sets upon to seek revenge later by marrying his father! Paradoxically, Sridevi's first and final work would harp on revenge.

Movies like *16 Vayathinile*, *Meendum Kokila* and *Johnny* undoubtedly laid the ground for Sridevi's splendid sojourn. Not only was she paired with real greats like Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth (who was once superb, and it was only later, he tended to slip into gimmickry) but also had the great fortune of being directed by extraordinarily talented men like Balachander, J. Mahendran and Bharathiraja.

In Bharathiraja's *16 Vayathinile*, Sridevi is torn between two men, a lame Kamal, who is the butt of village jokes and an urbane veterinarian. She conveys the dilemma with remarkable fortitude, and helped the film attain a cult status. It is still considered as one of the best works portraying most realistically Tamil Nadu's rural life.

In the 1981 *Meendum Kokila*, Sridevi plays the wronged wife, who finally wins over the affections of her lawyer husband (Haasan). It was gripping to watch a woman whose determination to get her wayward husband back home — much like it was seeing her play the ruthlessly reckless Devki.

In Mahendran's *Johnny*, Sridevi paired with Rajinikanth (in a dual role) is a singer, who walks into confusion and chaos when the two men pass off as each other. In a role that was an emotional high point of her first steps into her career, Sridevi is still remembered for the angst and anxiety she infused into her character.

And who can ever forget her in Balu Mahendra's *Moondram Pirai* (1982), where she slips into retrograde amnesia and becomes childlike, and is taken under the care of a schoolteacher (Kamal). Tending to her childish fantasies for several months, he falls in love with her, and in the end when she regains her memory, the scene of their parting is what great love stories are made of. The now-cured woman has no inkling of her care-giver and goes away without even a goodbye — with Haasan trying desperately to evoke her intermediary memory.

Undoubtedly an incredible performer, Sridevi born in Sivakasi to a Tamil father and a Telugu mother first appeared on screen as a four-year-old child. Little would have anybody then guessed that the child would go on to light the screen with her firecracker luminosity.

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