

THE WEEK

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Reel of honour



Conquering heights: Vikramaditya Motwane's directorial debut, Udaan, will feature in the A Certain Regard category

of all festivals' and also debased as an ugly prostitute shamelessly selling art. But the festival is a show of sheer cinema, monolithic market and titillating glamour.

It is then not surprising that India, being the world's most prolific movie producer, would want to be part of this great spectacle. The alluring Aishwarya Rai has been flying into Cannes year after year: she has been on the jury, she has had her Devdas screened there and she has been the face of L'Oreal. Her husband, Abhishek, and the senior Bachchans have been there. Preity Zinta, Sharmila Tagore, Nandita Das, Meera Nair and Arundhati Roy have been part of the Indian celebrity brigade at Cannes.

The festival, unlike even a decade ago, swarms with Indians today, with the Hinduja and Vijay Mallya competing with each other to host the spiciest of parties. Last year, Mallya took his guests by boat to a picturesque island for an Indian night. Hrithik Roshan and papa Rakesh Roshan came along. So did Barbara Mori, the sexy Mexican actor who starred with Hrithik in Kites (to open on May 21). Hrithik and Barbara sat apart on the boat, perhaps trying hard to dispel rumours of their 'affair'.

But cinematically, India has had a dry run. While the 1980s were a great time for India with film-makers like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Adoor Gopalakrishnan showcasing their works. Cannes saw very little of Indian cinema in the next two decades. The festival has resisted selecting works from India since 2003, when Murali Nair's Malayalam entry, Arimpara, made it to the 'A Certain Regard' category. The reason was partly the kind of cinema that India sent, and the festival's rank bad selection. After 1982, when Adoor's classic tale of feudalism, Elippathayam, was shown at Cannes, there really has not been a great Indian celluloid work. Shaji N. Karun's Swaham, which competed in 1994, was so dismal and complex for the western mind that the theatre was empty long before the last reels rolled on. His subsequent Vanaprastham (1999) or Nair's Marana Simhasanam (1999) or Pattiyude Divasam (2001) or Arimpara drew a blank with audiences and critics.

However, Udaan by Vikramaditya Motwane, has broken the seven-year jinx. Motwane's first work, it will be shown in 'A Certain Regard', the festival's second most important section after 'Competition'. The director says that although he had been to Cannes in 2002, with Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Devdas, he had no inkling that Udaan would endear to the selectors.

Produced by the newly established Anurag Kashyap Films, the two-hour-17-minute-long Udaan in Hindi is the story of a boy growing up in an emotional vacuum. Having studied in a boarding school, he has not seen his father in eight years. The movie—starring television actors Ronit Roy and Ram Kapoor and debutant Rajat Barmecha—traces their relationship as it struggles to take off. Motwane avers that the work has autobiographical elements. "But it also includes the stories of my family members, friends and people I have known," he says.

Before Udaan's inclusion in the festival was announced in Paris on April 15, nobody had heard of Motwane. Udaan will be screened along with the creations of heavyweights such as Jean-Luc Godard (Socialisme), the auteur credited with the French New Wave, 102-year-old Manoel de Oliveira (The Strange Case of Angelica) and Lodge Kerrigan (Rebecca H).

Udaan's selection coincides with a strong Asian presence at Cannes' 63rd edition. And Korean helmers are leading the contingent. South Korea's Im Sang-soo's The Housemaid—remake of a 1960s classic thriller of the same title—and Lee Chang-dong's Poetry will compete for the Festival's most cherished Palm d'Or. Lee's Secret Sunshine ran for the prize in 2007, and clinched the best actress award for Jeon Do-yeon.

Also in 'Competition' are Japan's Takeshi Kitano with his Outrage, where the auteur returns to the gangster genre, and Thai newcomer Apichatpong Weerasethakul with Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives. It tackles the profound theme of karma and reincarnation.

As usual, Cannes has a mix of the known and the unknown faces. Woody Allen (You Will Meet A Tall Dark Stranger with India's Freida Pinto in it, though she will not be on the Red Carpet), Oliver Stone (Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps) and Stephen Frears (Tamara Drewe) will add a dash of zing to 'Out of Competition' cinema. Allen did not want his work to compete, and the festival agreed.

Giants like Mike Leigh (Another Year), Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu (Biutiful), Abbas Kiarostami (Certified Copy) and Bertrand Tavernier (The Princess of Montpensier) will enrich the 'Competition'. So too will Nikita Mikhalkov (Burnt By The Sun 2) and Rachid Bouchareb (Outside the Law).

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With Leigh, Frears and Ridley Scott (his Robin Hood will open the festival) at Cannes, this seems like a great year for the Brits as well: it is no secret that they have had a lean period in recent times. Though not as terrible as India's!

The Americans must be disappointed: only one 'Competition' entry from Doug Liman. His Fair Game is strong on cast, and includes the irresistible Sean Penn (who chaired the Cannes jury in 2008), Anthony Hopkins and Naomi Watts. She also stars in Allen's work.

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