



The shine at Mumbai Film Fest

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Although the International Film Festival of India is often touted as the country's biggest cinematic event, the one held in Mumbai every October is by far the most impressive. The 15th edition of the Mumbai Film Festival — which begins its roll on October 17 — has been for some years now lining up brilliant movies, both in its competition section and sidebars.

This year, the Festival with its large canvas of 200 films from 65 countries, will open with Lee Daniels' *The Butler*. An inspiring story of an American southerner who served no less than seven Presidents in the White House — from Eisenhower to Reagan — the work is a touching journey of a man who began his life in the cotton fields of Georgia and ended up as a White House staffer, played by Forest Whitaker. The movie marks the return of Oprah Winfrey, who co-stars with Whitaker. She was last seen in the 1998 *Beloved*.

The Festival has managed to clinch an equally impressive closing night work.

On October 24, Bill Condon's *The Fifth Estate* will sing adieu. A dramatic thriller, *The Fifth Estate*, which opened the recent Toronto Film Festival, is a biopic of the WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange (played by Benedict Cumberbatch).

Based on two books, including one by Daniel Domscheit-Berg (who is also a major character in the movie portrayed by Daniel Bruhl), the film takes us through the twists and turns of Assange's life, who emerges as a feared and much hated leader of WikiLeaks, a website that aims at exposing corruption in the government and the corporate world.

Condon, who has lately been acknowledged as a bankable director (*Dreamgirls*, and *Twilight* movies), tries to balance *The Fifth Estate* between suspense and characterisation, between the friendship and hostility of Assange and Domscheit-Berg.

Also, the film slips into a subplot chronicling Domscheit-Berg's romance with his girlfriend, essayed by Alicia Vikander. Interestingly, she is not just a doll. She becomes some sort of a conscience keeper when Assange starts to get reckless with his leaks.

As *The Fifth Estate* runs through some of the most memorable moments (including America's war in Afghanistan), with Assange daring the powers that be, the movie begins to breathe fire and look visually stunning.

In a way, *The Fifth Estate* could be today's *All the President's Men*. If at all Condon's work stumbles, it is when it skirts the moral questions, even the dilemma, that Assange's mission threw up.

Between the opening and the closing galas, the Festival has an interesting palate of cinema to offer. Categorized as Kabul Fresh, this slot will screen nine shorts (the longest is 26 minutes) giving us a peek into strife-torn Afghanistan. Never seen before in India, the titles like *Eye Witness*, *Driving Test*, *Life Imprisonment*, *A Time called Oldness* and *The Glasses* promise stories of a land that has been battered by *Super Powers* and wracked by sectarian violence, its simple people sacrificed at the altar of suffering.

Probably as a contrast to Kabul Fresh, the Festival will show several Spanish films — both the old classics, like *The Hunt* by Carlos Saura and *The Spirit of the Beehive*, as well as a pick of the latest from a nation known for its celebratory spirit. Son of Cain and Picasso's Gang are two in this lot. But where is Pedro Almodovar, the most renowned of Spanish auteurs?

Almodovar's latest *I Am So Excited* — described as his return to broad comedy — is neither in Mumbai nor listed as Spain's official submission for the foreign language Oscars. The man seems to be under a cloud, and maybe Mumbai could have drawn him out of it by screening his work.

The Festival, headed by Srinivasan Narayanan, will also present controversial

movies. And what is a festival without a dash of this?

One of the most sought-after films in Mumbai will be Tunisia-born Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, which won the Palm d'Or at Cannes last May.

It will travel to India in a trail of controversy that has in recent weeks reached a crescendo, almost as provocative as the movie itself. The past weeks have seen a war of words between Kechiche and one of the two stars, Lea Seydoux, in *Blue is the Warmest Colour*.

In just about four months after the big night at Cannes when Kechiche and Seydoux as well as the other actress, Adele Exarchopoulos, hugged one another and planted kisses, the relationship has soured beyond belief.

In an interview to a French magazine, the 52-year-old director, settled in France for a long time, went to the extent of saying that the film should not be released. "It's been too tarnished. The Palme d'Or was a fleeting instant of happiness; since then, I've felt humiliated, dishonoured, rejected — as if I'm cursed", he lamented.

Kechiche's remarks come in the wake of serious allegations that he mistreated his cast and crew during the movie shoot. Seydoux described her experience on the set as terrible, and referred to one incident when Kechiche lost his temper after 100 takes of the same scene, a violent fight, and demanded that the actresses carry on even though Exarchopoulos was bleeding.

Also, the author of the Gallic novel on which the film is based, Julie Maroh, has accused the helmer of turning the movie into pornography. She was referring to the graphic scenes of lesbian love in the celluloid work.

Another Festival entry that has caused ripples at home is Asghar Farhadi's (on one of the juries in Mumbai) Iranian work, *The Past*. The film is the country's Oscar submission in the foreign language category. Critics have lamented that the movie is



* A scene from the movie *The Butler*.

"not Iranian enough". About an Iranian who returns to France after four years to divorce his French wife, he uncovers a secret. Contrary to Farhadi's earlier, *A Separation*, *The Past* has a plot that could have unfolded anywhere. *A Separation* won the Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film in 2012.

Apart from these, the Festival will have an international competition for first features, a section on world cinema, some restored classics and the cream of Indian cinema.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran will cover the Mumbai Film Festival, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com



* A scene from the film *The Past*.



* The protagonists in *The Fifth Estate*.