



# Some stimulating cinema at Goa festival



**WELL MADE:** The movies that were the highlight of the International Film Festival of India.

## By Gautaman Bhaskaran

If a film festival throws up at least half a dozen good movies, I would be happy. If the number is 10, I would be thrilled. Yes, sometimes, I have even ended up watching 20 great pictures — this was truly a bonus. But I have always contended that one should not blame a festival if it fails to screen a good package. It could have been a bad year for cinema. And, remember, every master does not make a masterpiece every time he wields the megaphone. Every actor does not give a brilliant performance every time he dons the greasepaint.

So, here we go. At the recent International Film Festival of India at Panaji in Goa, I saw six movies that I quite liked. I liked them because they were narrated without much ado. They told simple stories that spoke about human failings and strengths. And, above all, the films did not use an excess of technique or gimmickry — that many directors today resort to. I suspect that they do these probably to hide a weak script or performance.

I loved British helmer Ken Loach's *Jimmy's Hall* set in the early 1920s Ireland, which was just getting over a civil war. The movie focusses on the only Irishman ever to be deported from his homeland, and in a way *Jimmy's Hall* could be a follow-up to Loach's brilliant 2006 Palm d'Or winner, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*.

Although Loach has had several of his films at Cannes' Competition and is perhaps one of the ablest auteurs to have articulated a Left-wing perspective with such conviction, there are some who are vehemently opposed to his kind of cinema, largely because of his Left leanings.

*Jimmy's Hall* is a wonderful story — and I firmly believe that a good movie must be able to tell a good story and lucidly. Jimmy Gralton (Barry Ward), an American citizen, returns to his village in Ireland after a decade and is egged by youngsters there to reopen a dance

hall. Known for supporting Irish Republican causes, Gralton wishes to lead a quiet life, but sees nothing wrong in a bit of American Jazz and dance with the help of a gramophone he has.

But the hall soon becomes a centre for other things: art, literature and boxing are taught, and fiery debates on social injustices, including land reforms, emerge. The big landlords are peeved, and so is the village priest, who equates this kind of modern music to the very Devil.

In Zhang Yimou's Gong Lee-starrer, *Coming Home*, the drama shifts into the confined space of a home. The film is a riveting expose of family guilt, love and reconciliation. Adapted from the novel *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* by America-based novelist Yan Geling (whose *The 13 Flowers of Nanjing* was adapted into Zhang's *The Flowers of War*), *Coming Home* is set in China's politically turbulent 1970s. Professor Lu Yanshi is a victim of Mao's Cultural Revolution, and is sent away to jail. When he escapes from prison and comes home to his wife (Gong Li) and teenage daughter, Dandan, the girl, keen on playing the first ballerina, bites the bait of a Communist Party spy and turns her father in.

Zhang's choreographed scenes of Dandan spilling the beans across a busy train station and the wife's attempt to save her husband are superbly done. So too those sequences when the Revolution ends and the father returns home as a free man only to find his wife unable to recognise him (some form of dementia) and his daughter shattered with sorrow and guilt.

Liv Ullmann's *Miss Julie* also unfolds in the narrowed space of a kitchen in the palatial home of a baron. And it is late 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland when class distinctions mingle with religious and sexual fervours to define relationships, especially between the sexes.

On a mid-summer's evening, the baron's daughter, Julie (Jessica Chastain), flush with drink and dancing walks into the kitchen where her father's valet (Colin Farrell) is with his pious fiancée, Kathleen (Samantha Morton). With her father away, and not

bothered about a scandal, Julie tries to sexually arouse John — and right in front of Kathleen. After a while, he gives in, warning her that she is playing with fire. Julie is both arrogant and tender, commanding him to obey her terrible whims. Kiss my boot, she orders. He obeys, anger rising within him, anger that overwhelms him in the end.

Ullmann's work is pure theatre, and the camera hardly ever travels out of the palatial mansion. But extraordinary performances by the trio kept me in rapt attention of what was going on — for all of 129 minutes.

Michael Winterbottom's *The Face of an Angel* is based on the true incident of Meredith Kercher, an English student, who was murdered while she was on a study tour of Italy. The tragedy turned into a media circus of sickening proportions, while the victim herself was largely forgotten, opines Winterbottom.

Happily, Winterbottom in his classic style (remember his *Welcome to Sarajevo*) gives us more than just a narration of the incident. He tries to analyse the motive behind the killing. The suspected murderers were first convicted and later declared innocent on appeal. Winterbottom gets us to see this through the eyes of a moviemaker. The casting of Daniel Bruhl, Kate Beckinsale and Cara Delevingne is fine, and Winterbottom sets the film in the divinely picturesque Siena in Italy, far away from where the crime actually happened. And the real suspects, Amanda Knox, Raffaele Sollecito and Rudy Guede, have been given different names in the movie — and this distance helps the narration to spin with ease. Eventually, the director on screen (Winterbottom's alter-ego) decides, much to the anguish of his producer, that what he wants to make is not a film about death and murder, but about love and life.

Morten Tyldum's *The Imitation Game* tells us in the end that what Alan Turing (Benedict Cumberbatch) discovered to crack the German Enigma code and help the Allies win World War II (even shorten it by two years saving thousands of lives) was what we today call computer. The movie, while getting us on

a high with Turing's spellbinding discovery, underlines his plight. He was eventually arrested for homosexuality.

*The Imitation Game* talks about a desperate time in British history when Germans were pounding their capital. London then engages six math and chess wizards to break Enigma, which sends naval instructions every day to the Nazis. The Enigma's code is almost impossible to decipher, and this is when Turing steps in. He is in absolute contempt of the rest of his team, and the others hate him. But he is modern-day Sherlock Holmes who sees things which others do not. There is one delightful scene when Turing is fired, but he trumps over this by writing a letter directly to Winston Churchill. Tyldum spares viewers unnecessary details of how exactly Turing and his men built the machine to crack the German code — thereby making viewing the film far more enjoyable.

Nithiwat Tharatorn's romance, *The Teacher's Diary*, set in a remote part of Thailand is a beautiful story of how two teachers find love through the pages of a lost diary. Tightly scripted with witty lines thrown in — that steers the movie from sinking into an emotional mush — with great direction and acting, the movie has children playing Cupid to bring together two strangers who had never met before. Also, the two realise that they are capable of much more than what they thought they could achieve. Their challenges are enormous: the school is in the middle of a large river that is used for fishing by the local folks, who send their children to that school. And when a hurricane strikes, the male teacher is as frightened and helpless as the little children. In the end, he finds love, having fallen in it as he reads the diary of a female teacher who has quit the school when she gets engaged to a rich guy from afar.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran has covered the International Film Festival of India for 25 years, and may be e-mailed at [gautamanb@hotmail.com](mailto:gautamanb@hotmail.com)