

Venice Film Festival promises to be gripping

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MUSICAL: A screen grab from *La La Land*, which is being billed as an early contender for Oscars.



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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The world's oldest movie festival at Venice opens today — August 31 — on the breathtakingly beautiful island of Lido, which stands across a lagoon overlooking mainland's St Marks Square. Damien Chazelle's *La La Land* will unroll the 11-day cinematic event — which during Mussolini's days gave such a hard time to the French that they went back home sulking but determined to start something that they could call their own. Thus began Cannes, which despite a severe hiccup brought about World War II, is now the unchallenged queen of all film festivals.

La La Land is a musical and seems like a pleasant opening shot, compared with last-year's bone chilling *Everest*, where several climbers die in a terrifying blizzard. Staring Emma Stone, Ryan Gosling and John Legend, *La La Land* is being seen as a wonderful tribute to the golden age of Hollywood musicals. Not just this, but as Venice Festival Director Alberto Barbera, said in a media interview: "La La Land is a movie that does not merely reinvent the musical genre, it gives it a brand new start...the film with the biggest chance to become an Oscar contender."

La La Land traces the life of a couple — Mia (Stone), an aspiring actress who serves lattes to cinema stars in between her disappointing auditions, and Sebastian (Gosling), a jazz musician, who survives by playing cocktail gigs in seedy bars. As success begins to knock on their lives, Mia and Sebastian will have to confront decisions that affect their love affair.

Some of the other movies that are being keenly awaited on the Lido are Tom Ford's drama, *Nocturnal Animals*, Jacqueline Kennedy biopic *Jackie*, starring Natalie Portman, and Michael

Fassbender-Alicia Vikander romance, *The Light Between Oceans*.

And then, there is Mel Gibson, whose directorial effort after a 10-year hiatus, a war biopic called *Hacksaw Ridge*, may well turn out to scintillating.

Also on the list of titles marked with stars are Rama Burshtein's *Through The Wall* and Katell Quillévéré's *Heal The Living*.

Yet another hotly anticipated feature at Venice will be Paolo Sorrentino's *The Young Pope*. The dashing young Hollywood actor, Jude Law, will play the American pontiff Pius XIII — a conservative, cigarette smoking Catholic priest. The film will have Diane Keaton as a nun. The cast, entirely international, will include James Cromwell essaying Cardinal Michael Spencer, Silvio Orlando as Cardinal Voiello, Cecile de France as Vatican City's marketing executive, Sofia, and the hot French actress, Ludvine Sagnier, (remember her in *Swimming Pool?*), as the wife of a Swiss guard. Wow, that is quite an impressive cast list.

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Adoor's *Pinneyum*

The master of the medium, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, once took on the holy cow of Communism in his *Mukhamukham* (*Face-to-Face*) — undaunted by the fact that he happened to be living in the lion's very own den! Kerala was the first State in India to have had a democratically voted Communist Government (which was in the late 1950s), and the second in the world after San Marino.

Earlier, Adoor made his debut in 1972 with *Swayamvaram* — a provocative look at a couple living together outside marriage. This was considered scandalous and unacceptable in those times.

His latest outing, his 12th feature, *Pinneyum* — which comes after a long gap of eight years — is yet another shocker. He lambasts his own Nair community, and he does it with a kind of courage that can come only out of conviction.

Adoor takes us back to the 2000 era in Kerala, which was beginning to see the ugly face of consumerism. It was a time when Kerala's Gulf boom was on with just about every other household having at least one member of its family on the deserts of Arabia. It was not uncommon to see Malayalees flush with money, which they liberally used to shower themselves with all kinds of goodies. I have seen the rather uncanny sight of a huge, garishly painted bungalow standing rather forlornly bang in the midst of paddy fields! Towns brightened up with men and women sporting expensive clothes, and driving around in the fanciest of cars. These jalopies were insanely priced.

And those who did not have these, aspired, often desperately, to up their status with Gulf money by chasing sometimes almost impossible dreams.

The Nair family in *Pinneyum* also has its aspirations — only that in this case they stoke the fire of avarice. The family comprises a retired school-master, Pappu Pillai (played with a touch of brilliance, as ever, by Nedumudi Venu), his rather sickly son, Kuttan (another great performer, Indrans), daughter Devi (Kavya Madhavan, a fine piece of acting here), her husband, Purushotaman (a controlled Dileep) and their little daughter, Revathy (who grows up to be newcomer Meera Nalloor). And there is also Devi's maternal uncle, Kuttan Pillai (another engrossing performance by Vijayaraghavan).

The Nairs' dream begins on a low key. Pappu wants his son-in-law, Purushotaman — who lives with him — to find a job, which he has not been able to in many years, with the family depending largely on Devi's salary from her teaching assignment in a local school. Purushotaman is the butt of ridicule. His father-in-law and Devi's uncle never let go a chance to criticise him — the exceptions being his wife and her brother. And while "ghar-jamai"

Purushotaman punctuates his time between job interviews by devouring the works of Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle, Gopalakrishnan drops a hint here of the menacingly dark clouds which are gathering on the horizon.

When Purushotaman finally clinches an opportunity in Dubai, the family is deliriously happy, and his frequent visits home bring in a lot of joy — and envy. Neighbours and long forgotten relatives begin to troop into the Nair household seeking favours. And the Nairs themselves begin to feel their feet going off the ground. Their needs multiply, their wants even more so.

Till a time comes when Purushotaman, Pappu and Uncle Kuttan plan an insurance fraud. Devi is not happy with the idea, while her brother, Kuttan, is kept well out of this devious plot, which involves a murder.

One is aghast at the way the Nairs turn into ruthless killers from the simple god-fearing people that they were — kind and considerate and compassionate. So much so that when one watches that crucial scene in Pinneyum, one is shocked into a state of disbelief.

An engaging work from a man who has given us gems like Elippathayam (Rat-Trap, about the debasement of the landed gentry in Kerala), Vidheyam (The Servile, which explores the brute force of the powerful) and Nizhalkkuthu (Shadow Kill, tracing a hangman's guilt).

* Gautaman Bhaskaran is covering the Venice Film Festival, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com