

At Dubai Festival, The Worthy and Inversion are great watch

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Inversion is a quietly dramatic tale of a Tehran woman.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Every time I watch a film on water war, I am reminded of the Indian director Shekar Kapoor's Paani – which he announced with a lot of fanfare at Cannes some years ago. "The next war will be on water, and my work will fictionally explore how the have-nots living in the lower deck of a city have to fight for this precious liquid of life, while the haves on the plush upper deck have an abundance of it." Of course, true to Kapoor's movie being Indian, he had planned to insert into his narrative a love story between a poor boy and a rich girl. But of course.

That Kapoor's idea is yet to travel from the writing board to the shooting floor is a sad reality, and with the two Indian States of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu fighting over the Cauvery river water, Paani appears more and more relevant.

Interestingly, Ali F Mostafa's third feature, *The Worthy* – which was just screened at the ongoing Dubai International Film Festival – is about a bitter, bloody conflict over water. In Arabic, Mostafa's work is a post-Apocalyptic thriller – a subject that also assumes a high degree of connectedness in the kind of nuclear charged world that we happen to live in. A drama of sheer survival and with a touch of the Middle-Eastern flavour, *The Worthy*, set to open in the region this coming February, is certainly not for the weak hearted. There is one horribly gruesome scene in which the wounded leg of a man is sawed out!

From his feel good *From A to B* – where three friends travel from Abu Dhabi to Beirut – *The Worthy* is one long jump into a terrifying abyss. Here a group of survivors, led by a truck driver, takes refuge in a ruined building that has the only known source of fresh water. When the driver lets in two strangers, a man and a woman – all hell breaks loose, and in a scary vicious cat-and-mouse game, the men and women are forced to prove who among them the worthy of the lot is.

What is admirable about the movie is the way Mostafa introduces an element of compassion – when the driver allows the two strangers to enter his precious abode. But human nature being what it is, the inter-play of greed and oneupmanship creeps in to wreak havoc.

Oneupmanship can also be seen in the Iranian work, Behnam Behzadi's latest outing, *Inversion*, a quietly dramatic tale of a Tehran woman, Nilofer – whose goodness is taken advantage of by her brother. Her view that she is liberated and independent comes crashing down when he tries to force her out of the city where she runs a tailoring outfit and has just found new love.

When Tehran is engulfed in poisonous smog and her old mother falls ill, the doctor suggests that she move out of the city. Nilofer's two siblings – her older sister and brother – cannot accompany their mother to a countryside home with clean air. At least, they feel they cannot, and so they make plans for the old lady to be moved out along with Nilofer. She is not even consulted. This is when Nilofer begins to feel that her life is being run by others, and her idea of a single woman living a life of freedom appears to come crashing down.

Behzadi must be lauded for the kind of control he exerts over the script, making sure that his actors perform with restraint. The film could have so easily slipped into melodrama and mayhem. And, a highly explosive subject of difficult brother-sister relationship turns out to be a great watch. The emotions are underplayed, no howling, no river of tears flowing down the face. A marvellous effort, indeed.

John Madden

British auteur John Madden is best known in India for two of his works – *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* – both set in Rajasthan and starring actors like the *Slumdog Millionaire*-*The Man Who Knew Infinity*'s Dev Patel and Judi Dench (whose role as M in the *Bond* series is unforgettable). But she has also played Queen Elizabeth in Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* – a fictional romantic affair between a woman (Gwyneth Paltrow) and the Bard of Avon (Joseph Fiennes) when he was writing *Romeo and Juliet*.

Madden's other memorable movie was the 2001 *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* – which had two great actors, Nicolas Cage and Penelope Cruz, as lovers during the Italian occupation of a picturesque Greek island. Here was an army captain, whose passion was music, not war, and, believe it or not, he was commanding a regiment of soldiers that had never fought a war.

Madden's latest outing, *Miss Sloane* (which opened the Festival) is far removed from the romanticism of *Shakespeare in Love* and the musical disposition of *Captain Corelli*. The Jessica Chastain-starrer, *Miss Sloane*, is a ruthless look at the American gun culture – nothing to do with love or affection. Sex here is purely a physical need, and the film does not even remotely resemble the emotional upheavals one saw in the *Marigold* editions.

In the course of an interview with me the other day in Dubai, Madden said that he was not thinking of a third work in the *Marigold*

franchise. "No, not immediately". What about something else set in India? "Admittedly, I feel very, very connected to that country.

"India is an extraordinary country, and the first Marigold movie took me there. I put into it a lot of sentiments I felt about India. The film is also about people colliding with Indian culture for the first time. The energy of that place really startled me. I enjoyed doing both the Marigold movies. I love that contradictory nature of the culture.

"Interestingly, India has been on my mind for a long time. I had promised my wife that I would take her there for her birthday. But the film got there first."

Switching over to his Dubai opener, he avers that having lived in America for a long time, he was quite familiar with its politics. The gun is such an integral part of it, and "I have always wondered why the problem of gun culture is so evasive, why it refuses to go away."

With Trump set to become the US President, there is "lot of volatility. The situation is dismaying, to say the least. Politically, there is a lot of uncertainty. I would think one of the ways to tackle the evil of gun culture will be to get the grassroots involved." No mean task, though.

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