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Ashes on a Road Trip

Gautaman Bhaskaran

Most movie festivals had to be cancelled this year, given the havoc caused by Covid-19. However, with some marginal letup in the rate of infections in Italy and Japan, both Venice and Tokyo held their annual events, the latter with a mix of physical and digital forms. The only entry from India, Mangesh Joshi's *Ashes on a Road Trip*, reminded one of the 1998 Cannes title, Patrice Chereau's *Those Who Love Me Can Take The Train*. Chereau's work takes us to the funeral of a minor painter, and his relatives gather at his twin brother's home, where long-buried secrets are openly tossed around. Similarly, Joshi's work is a subtle but powerful

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look at how human relationships begin to break after a death. Puru Dada is gone, and his three younger brothers, Satish Karkhanis (Mohan Agashe), Pradeep Karkhanis (Pradeep Joshi) and Ajit Karkhanis (Ajit Abhyankar), begin the rituals of cremation. Puru on his deathbed had expressed his wish to have his ashes buried in their ancestral home and fields. So, the three men and their sister, Sadhana Karkhanis (Geetanjali Kulkarni), set out in a van driven by Dada's son Om Karkhanis (Amey Wagh). The movie turns into an adventure-filled road trip, sweetly poignant at times and punishingly painful at other.



No Choice

Much like most Iranian movies, Reza Dormishian's *No Choice* uses minimalism to tell us a socially relevant story that is as distressing as it is elevating. The work, with a mostly female cast, is gripping with its powerful imagery, no-nonsense script and brilliant performances. The film could have been a little less than 108 minutes. But never mind, it presents a socio-legal thriller without exaggerated frills and mannerisms. An auteur with the most original of ideas, Dormishian tackles hugely disturbing happenings in Iran — the miserable condition of the homeless, who do not have an inkling of even what their basic rights are, the illegal trade in surrogacy and the misdeeds in the medical fraternity that go under the guise of community welfare. Golbahar (Pardis Ahmadiyeh), pretty teenager who lives on the streets of Tehran, is recklessly used as a baby-producing machine by a pimp, Mojtaba (Mojtaba Pirzadeh). When she meets with an accident, has a miscarriage and has her fallopian tubes tied up during the procedure at the hospital without her consent, all hell breaks loose. Social-activist lawyer, Sara Nedayi (Negar Javaherian) defends Golbahar, taking on the powerful medical system.

Japanese master Koji Fukada's offering *The Real Thing* is, well, a romance about a salaryman (as employees are referred to in Japan). First produced by Japan's Nagoya TV as a 10-episode series from a comic book and helmed by Fukada, *The Real Thing* has been condensed to nearly



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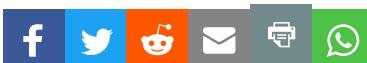
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four hours for a theatrical opening. And in these 233 minutes, the Tsuji (played by Win Morisaki) flits from one woman to another — and then back to the first and the second in what appears like an endless game of musical chairs.

There was something about first-time feature film director David Bonneville's (renowned for his shorts) *The Last Bath*, which reminded one of the celebrated 1960s musical, *The Sound of Music*. Like Maria in the latter film, Josefina (played by Anabela Moreira) is all set to take her celibacy vows to become a nun in a convent near Porto in Portugal when a tragedy pushes her away from this path. Just like Maria is sent to take care of the widowed Captain Von Trapp's seven children, Josefina has to rush to care for her nephew when her father passes away. The 15-year-old boy, Alexandre (Martim Canavarro), has been, in the absence of his mother, staying with his grandfather. Like Maria, Josefina, too, faces an inner turmoil in her relationship with her young nephew. *The Last Bath* is disturbingly complex, intense and even dark as we see a family on the verge of dysfunction.

Writer-director Shen Yu, in his debut work *The Old Town Girls*, weaves a rather sad story of a teenager, the shy Shui Qing (Li Gengxi), who having grown up with her father, is both excited and scared when her mother, the hot-tempered Qu Ting (Wan Qian), returns home after many years. Obviously, there is gnawing tension that the movie underlines exceptionally well. There may not be many surprises in *The Old Town Girls*, but what is remarkable is Shui's innocence which keeps her hoping that her mother has but noble intentions. The teenager is desperate for some kind of stability, harmony and joy, especially after the kind of raw deal she gets from her stepmother. In the midst of lurking sorrow, the director uses daylight and bright imagery for relief, and we are taken through a labyrinth of emotions. Shui's factory-worker father's life is no less complicated, and this presents a third dimension to the plot and also serves as a reason for his placid neglect of his daughter.

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