Bollywood gets serious

Humanitarian issues and social concerns join lighthearted tales on the roster at the Indian Film Festival.

The Union Carbide gas spill in Bhopal, the plight of disenfranchised Muslim youth in a post-Sept. 11 world and the serial bombings in Mumbai (Bombay) more than a decade ago are some of the offerings at this week's Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles.

Which begs the question: What happened to the dreamy song-and-dance sequences of lovers prancing through rain-soaked forests that are the staple of Bollywood films?

"We're always interested in films that are more on the heavy side," said Christina Marouda, the organization's festival director. "And when you're showcasing independent films, they tend to be more serious and to deal with different issues that come from India."

Indeed, even the most mainstream Bollywood production in the roster of 30 films that will be screened at the festival, which runs from Wednesday through Sunday at the ArcLight in Hollywood, is of a somber nature: "Black," by acclaimed Bollywood director Sanjay Leela Bhansali, is about a young girl who is blind, mute and deaf.

Nonetheless, there are still moments of levity in the lineup, with an emphasis on Indian cinema's best in features, documentaries and shorts.

This year, the festival's third, organizers received more than 200 submissions from around the world, which were either produced by Indians or set in India.

Other highlights of the event include free live musical performances and a family day. (The website for the event is www.indianfilmfestival.org)

"Depending on what the year looks like in terms of film production, the program shapes up on its own," said Marouda. "We don't really choose a subject and try to find films to fit in with that agenda."

Among the more lighthearted films is "Hari Om," the feature film debut by Bhartabala Ganapathy, a Mumbai-based former television commercial director who is working on India's first IMAX feature, about the creation of the Taj Mahal.

Having received an enthusiastic response at other festivals, Ganapathy said he was especially excited about showing "Hari Om" to potential distributors.

"All you need is one person from the industry to come and watch the movie with an audience," said Ganapathy.

The film stars Vijay Raaz, the comical wedding planner from Mira Nair's hit "Monsoon Wedding." Set in Rajasthan, it is the story of a French couple, played by Jean-Marie Lamour (whose credits include "Swimming Pool") and Camille Natta ("Crimson Rivers 2"), who get separated while traveling by train through the scenic Indian state. Natta's character, Isa, gets picked up by a chauffeur, played by Raaz.

"I wanted to make a movie that had a bit of everything -- romance, emotion, drama," said Ganapathy, who...
likened it to "an Indian 'Lost in Translation.'"

Most of the films being screened will be followed by question and answer sessions with the filmmakers. Also planned is a panel on co-producing for those interested in working with Indian studios and filmmakers. Panelist and producer Mark Burton of WonderFilms ("The Terrorist," "Cherish" and Deepa Mehta's upcoming "Water") said the festival has helped to increase awareness of the scope of Indian cinema.

"It's something I've been tangentially a part of for 10 years," he said. "India has a very vibrant film industry and film culture. But often what happens in Hollywood is that it's a very myopic world. My greatest hope is that [the festival] begins to expose people to these movies."

That appears to be the case.

In its first year, there were only five people on the film festival's organizing committee; now there are 18. Last year's event drew about 7,000 people, but according to Marouda, and based on initial ticket sales, that figure should be about 15% higher this year.

Also, in the past, about 60% of guests were from the South Asian community. But Marouda said that as word has spread about the quality and breadth of Indian cinema, a larger percentage of viewers this year will most likely be non-Indians.

Certainly, this being Hollywood, the organizers are hoping to amp up the celebrity factor: Jurors at this year's event include indie favorite Radha Mitchell and Parminder Nagra of "ER." Many of the films are making their U.S. or world debuts at the festival.

Among these is "The New Heroes: India," part of a longer series that will air on PBS this summer about ordinary people around the globe doing extraordinary things.

Hosted by Robert Redford and directed by Carl Byker and Mitch Wilson, the documentary poignantly profiles three people in India who have devoted their lives to helping others: a man who frees children from bonded labor; a woman who has created schools on train platforms in one of the poorest parts of the country; a doctor who helps hundreds of thousands of people every year receive free eye surgery.

For Byker, working in India was an intense experience, one he is hoping his audiences will share. He was in India for 29 days and filmed for all but one.