India's star turn

The first festival in the U.S. solely devoted to movies from and about India will feature 24.

When the call went out for filmmakers to submit their projects for possible inclusion in the first-ever Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, some 200 submissions arrived from around the world. Neither the number nor the fact that many came from outside India surprised festival director Christina Marouda.

Formerly connected with the American Film Festival and the Los Angeles Film Festival, Marouda believes that Indian films were overdue for widespread exposure. She noted that the festival, which starts Wednesday at ArcLight Cinemas in Hollywood, is riding a new wave of popularity in world cinema.

The festival comes on the heels of critical and commercial hits like Mira Nair's "Monsoon Wedding"; "Lagaan," which was nominated for a best foreign language film Oscar last year; and the current art-house hit "Bend It Like Beckham." Such international directors as Baz Luhrmann were acknowledging the influence of Bollywood (India's thriving movie production studios) on their own work. In addition, the government of India recently opened the door for more joint ventures, which Marouda believes will "allow us to see more productions of an international standard."

The festival, which runs through Sunday, is the first of its kind in the U.S. dedicated entirely to films -- be they features, shorts or documentaries -- from and about India, by Indian and non-Indian filmmakers.

"I've always loved Indian cinema and the culture, did some research and found that while there were Indian sections in international film festivals, or South Asian festivals, there wasn't something devoted just to this particular culture," said Marouda, who is of Greek descent.

The festival features 24 films, all recent productions, selected to appeal to all tastes. They include "A Very, Very Silent Film," a 6-minute production about prostitution in India and the first Indian short to have won at Cannes; a big-budget Bollywood movie "Company," set at the heart of a criminal empire; and Ismail Merchant's "The Mystic Masseur," which opened last year in the U.S. Merchant will introduce the film, which plays at noon on Sunday.

"We wanted to have films that represented all the different categories," said Marouda. "That's why there is a Bollywood movie and films from South India, some made by Indian filmmakers in the U.S. or the U.K., others by non-Indian filmmakers."

Bombay-based actor and filmmaker Rahul Bose is screening his first writing and directorial effort, "Everybody Says I'm Fine!," which has played in numerous festivals around the world. "The most consistent comment I'm getting is that this is not an Indian movie. It just happens to be set in India," Bose said of his film, which revolves around an upscale beauty salon in Bombay where the hairstylist can read the minds of his clients. (It screens on Thursday at 8:45 p.m.).

"Nothing prepares [audiences] for the way people speak English in high-society Bombay," he said. "The cell phones, the Mercedes-Benzes, the kids in Dolce & Gabbana. That's a given in the movie. There's no tutoring, there's no look at how we've changed. And it goes beyond that into the emotional tale. It's a movie that could have been made in any salon in the world." The movie, which will open in limited release around the country May 16, may well prove to be another breakout hit in the vein of recent Indian productions.
"That success has proved that Indian cinema can be modern and good and have something to say," said Bose. "And the timing is just right. A film festival showcasing work from any country must have a reason to exist. If you show 11 bad movies in your festival, you are doing a disservice to the one or two good films that come out. Only when one can be assured of a certain quality should one stick one's neck out. As far as India is concerned, we've reached that."

Larry Whittenberger, who works on programming for ArcLight Cinemas, said that the response so far has been impressive.

"This being the very first Indian film festival in the U.S., we jumped at the opportunity," he said. "We are now able to showcase a lot of films from India that normally don't get seen by audiences here."

Marouda said the event would provide a welcome opportunity for new audiences who may have not been willing to explore Indian cinema because it is a genre so often equated with Bollywood -- three-hour song-and-dance spectacles that are usually short on plot and substance, and long on glitz.

"Bollywood is considered to be directly related to Indian cinema, but that's not really the truth," said Marouda. "The marketing comes through Bombay, and that's Bollywood, and so that's become the main focus of Indian cinema. They have come to international attention because they have the right names, the money behind the marketing and [because] people are entertained by them. But too many films are produced, and a very small percentage is of high quality."

The festival will also include a symposium about Indian film, moderated by independent producer Rana Joy Glickman, who is of Indian descent.

"I've spent lots of time in India and have always been so mesmerized by the prolific nature of Indian films, which in the past have existed on their own island," she said.

But with the immediate worldwide availability of Indian films, all that is changing.

"There is a thirst that needs to be quenched, the whole celebration and song and dance that are typical elements of an Indian film. There is just something so joyous and celebratory about them, and I love the idea of splashing them about Hollywood."

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Indian Film Festival

Where: ArcLight Cinemas, 6360 Sunset Blvd., L.A.

When: Wednesday-Sunday

Price: $9-$11

Contact: ArcLight Cinemas, (323) 464-4226, www.arclightcinemas.com; or Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, (310) 364-4403