IFFLA: Bollywood in Black and Blue

Film noir, an animated musical and a star tribute cap Indian film fest

By David Chute Wednesday, Apr 22 2009

Priyas Gupta’s visually impeccable Siddharth: The Prisoner hitches a disquisition on urban angst to that most moth-eaten of noir conceits, the old “switched bag” trick, as an ex-con novelist’s precious comeback manuscript changes places with an identical briefcase full of mob money. Within minutes, the movie, which screens at the closing weekend of this year’s Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, wanders off the main drag down side streets drenched in atmospheric anomie, with no sense of narrative direction to bring the spectacle into focus. Gupta has fallen into a trap as old as the festival circuit itself: His higher aspirations have made the craft — and the craftiness — of pulp storytelling seem crass and dispensable.

The programmers of the IFFLA, now in its seventh year, rarely make that same mistake. They have always had a decent sense of how hard it is for filmmakers to do good work in commercial idioms. The clearest evidence of their down-to-earth attitude this year is the expansive tribute to one of our Bollywood favorites, actor Anil Kapoor, a major leading man of the 1980s: His peak star turns include Shekhar Kapur’s Mr. India (1987) and Vinod Chopra’s 1942: A Love Story (1993). In his later work as a character actor, Kapoor has often relished playing swashbuckling con men and conniving opportunists — his deceitful quiz master in Slumdog Millionaire is a beautifully calibrated example.

In 1997’s Virasat (Inheritor) screening at the festival, director Priyadarshan (Billu Barber) marches through an almost scene-for-scene remake of the 1992 blood-and-thunder Tamil melodrama Thevar Magan (Thevar’s Son), and Kapoor rises to the occasion. The transformation is blood chilling as Kapoor’s callow, city-educated rich kid returns to the brutal rural landscape of his warlord childhood and is pulled back into the atavistic values of blood oaths and revenge that dominate its still-feudal culture.

One of the unexpected dividends of watching Nina Paley’s gorgeous animated feature Sita Sings the Blues is that you come away from it with a somewhat coherent sense of what the bleep is going on in the ancient Hindu epic The Ramayana of Valmiki. Paley draws from a dozen traditions of animation, finds autobiographical significance in the story of Sita’s stubborn loyalty to her betrayed and exiled husband, and pulls in blues icon Annette Hanshaw as a de facto Bollywood playback singer. The movie is all over the place, and you’d swear it couldn’t possibly work, but the artist’s playful personality comes through in every frame and holds it all together.

Playfulness may not be the key to human happiness, but at an indie-centric film festival, it’s a step in the right direction. (ArcLight Hollywood; thru Sun., April 26. www.indianfilmfestival.org)

—David Chute

Print
Write to Editor

More Short Run »
Find capsule reviews, showtimes & tickets for all films in town.

- **The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies**, 54.7 mil, 89.1 mil
- **Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb**, 17.1 mil, 17.1 mil
- **Annie**, 15.9 mil, 15.9 mil
- **Exodus: Gods and Kings**, 8.1 mil, 38.9 mil
- **The Hunger Games: Mockingjay - Part 1**, 7.9 mil, 289.4 mil
- **Wild**, 4.1 mil, 7.2 mil
- **Big Hero 6**, 3.6 mil, 190.5 mil
- **Top Five**, 3.6 mil, 12.5 mil
- **PK (Peekay)**, 3.6 mil, 3.6 mil
- **Penguins of Madagascar**, 3.5 mil, 64.1 mil

Scores provided by [Rotten Tomatoes](http://www.rottentomatoes.com)

### Around The Web

View all movie trailers >>

- **Film TV**

  **The 10 Best TV Shows of 2014**

  TV continued to unmoor from its origins and transform into something else this year. No longer tethered to a specific appliance, a particular kind of storytelling or even commercial concerns, "television" now feels like an increasingly obsolete word. But that's a discussion for another time, for we've come to celebrate...

  **Inkoo Kang** @ 1:25 PM On Wed, December 17

- **Film Film Reviews**

  **Video**

  **Into the Woods Sometimes Soars — but Also Dithers**

  Before worrying ourselves over its qualities as an adaptation, or its findings as an experiment in just how much tumpety-tump parump-pa-bump the human mind can endure, let's take a moment to marvel that Rob Marshall's Into the Woods even exists —
as a PG-rated film from Disney, no less! No...

Alan Scherstuhl @ 2:00 PM On Mon, December 22

* Film Film Reviews

**Ava DuVernay's Urgent Selma Speaks to the Now**

Describing Ava DuVernay's quietly remarkable Selma to a friend, I caught myself referring to the civil rights era as a historical event, a thing of the past, and then backtracked. The killing of Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice at the hands of police officers — not to mention...

Stephanie Zacharek @ 2:00 PM On Mon, December 22