The six-day festival will open with ‘Cooking With Stella.’ The broad scope of films in the festival should broaden the perception of Indian cinema.

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FOR LAUGHS: Lisa Ray stars in the comedy "Cooking With Stella." (Indian Film Festival of...)

This week, filmmaker Dilip Mehta will have traveled from India to Los Angeles with just one thing driving him: He wants more people to see his movie.

The 57-year-old's feature film debut, a comedy about the devious personal chef to the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi called "Cooking With Stella," will open during a benefit gala at the annual Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles on Tuesday night. There, it will be one of 33 films screening through Sunday.

For Mehta, the journey is well worth the exposure.

"I was delighted that the festival has taken the film in," the director said last week via telephone from India, where he was attending a wedding. "It shows they support something a little more dicey and out of the ordinary."

The inclusive festival was founded as a nonprofit organization in 2003 by Christina Marouda, who grew up in her native Greece with an affinity for Indian film. After working in marketing and distribution at a number of international film festivals, she began to feel there wasn't an adequate platform for Indian cinema in the States.

"I knew that the Indian film industry is the largest in the world, so it just didn't make sense to me that such an important sector of the industry was not represented in the U.S. at all," said Marouda, who serves as the festival's executive director.

Since its inception, the festival — now in its eighth year — has expanded from four days to six with more than 7,000 people expected to attend. Marouda oversees a team in L.A. and a consultant in India who help choose the final selections from more than 350 submissions. Many of the projects they are looking for, Marouda said, come from new voices who are looking to broaden the perception of Indian cinema.
"The festival helps to let people know that there are other types of Bollywood," said actor Samrat Chakrabarti, who has attended the festival for the last three years and stars in two of its films this year, including the closing night movie "The Waiting City." "Commercial cinema in India is growing and changing. The West has mostly seen the song and dance idea or ‘Slumdog Millionaire,’ which portrays a great story but shows a lot of poverty. But there are many shades of brown coming out of India."

And the films don’t have to come from inside the country, said Marouda. A movie can be directed by an Indian filmmaker in the diaspora — mostly within the U.S., the U.K. or Canada — or, for example, by an Australian filmmaker going to India to shoot a film with Indian actors.

The audience that the breadth of programming attracts also makes the festival a prime location to talk business.

"The fact that we have some proximity to Hollywood and the business side of the industry can lead to something that goes beyond just a cultural event," said Marouda. To that end, she has organized festival events to help integrate Indian cinema into the industry, including a day of seminars at Creative Artists Agency and a "speed-dating" event that mixes filmmakers with distribution executives, producers and agents.

That could be where Mehta’s film finds an American distributor.

"We are looking for distributors. [The film is] not exotic slum India, it's a different India, and I think distributors will sit up and take notice," the director said. "No matter what, the festival gives us exposure. At the end of the day, it's the people who decide whether the film is good or not. Without the audiences, there is no film."

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