Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles: the 2 Percent Solution

Yearly event culls the cream of Bollywood and beyond

A title card at the end of Paresh Mokashi’s Harishchandrachi Factory, India’s Oscar submission for 2009 and a centerpiece of the Eighth Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, states the nation’s claim to an output of more than 900 films a year. IFFLA is a jewel of a festival, one of the best-programmed and best-run motion-picture events on Earth. How does this comparatively modest five-day series of 17 narrative and documentary features, and attendant shorts, end up feeling so beautifully balanced, even though its "take rate" is less than 2 percent?

Harishchandrachi is an upbeat entertainment, a fitting monument to the anything-for-pleasure spirit of Indian commercial cinema, although it may disappoint some viewers who expect a historical drama about the idiom’s turn-of-the-century founder to be a lush and exotic epic, something more like the Taviani brothers' underrated Good Morning, Babylon. Instead, writer-director Mokashi has fashioned a film with the simple declarative style of a young-adult novel or an R.K. Narayan fable. The tale of professional magician–turned-filmmaker Dadasaheb Phalke (Nandu Madhav) is, for the most part, an uninflected success story. He woos investors in 1913 with gasp-inducing time-lapse footage of the sprouting of a pea plant, quickly raising the rupees needed to make India's first feature film, the trendsetting mythological epic Raja Harishchandra. It's fitting that Mokashi's tone is infectiously upbeat. Even a sequence in which the filmmaker's relatives try to have him committed for harboring such crazy dreams isn't staged as a snake-pit nightmare. Instead, the great man takes to his heels at the prospect like a silent-movie comedian — hand on hat, coattails flapping, the apparent founder of, among other things, the notorious Bollywood "comedy track."

IFFLA rightly makes an effort every year to correct the imbalance in international-distribution patterns tilting its emphasis firmly toward indie films and documentaries. The most fascinating of the festival's documentaries I witnessed was Kiran Deol's Woman Rebel, a virtual self-portrait, narrated in the first person by its noble, revolutionary heroine, Brigade Commissioner Silu of the Maoist Revolutionary Army of Nepal. This somewhat flat and pedestrian movie raises the interesting possibility that playing soldier in a coed guerrilla troop may have been an uplifting endeavor for those who participated, even if their political hopes fizzled out. (The 10-year insurgency ended with a cease-fire in 2001.) You get the sense that the mere existence of an army that was 40 percent female in the midst of a hidebound traditional society would have shifted the culture on its axis, no matter what it accomplished politically.

Among the movies unfortunately not offered for preview was Road, Movie, by Dev Benegal, whose English August and Split Wide Open are landmarks of Indian alternative cinema. The new work is about a footloose young man (Abhay Deol) wandering rural India in an outdoor touring cinema truck, a relic of the grassroots exhibition patterns that spread the movie bug to the villages in the 1950s and '60s. Also of interest, even sight unseen, is Aditya Bhattacharya's influential 1989 urban noir, Raakh ("Ashes"), to be shown at IFFLA in a recent recut known as Raakh Redux, or Ashes to Ashes. Future megastar Aamir Khan plays a gangster who helps a derelict teenager exact revenge for the gang-rape of his girlfriend.
Khan also stars in the one must-see entry in this year's Bollywood by Night sidebar, Raj Kumar "Munnabhai" Hirani's raucously funny "technical college" comedy, 3 Idiots. Khan has evolved into a major producer and director over the past 20 years, managing to mix creative prestige with unbeatable box office: Idiots quickly displaced his 2008 sledgehammer action hit, Ghajini, as the highest-grossing Indian movie of all time. As the endlessly energetic Rannccchoddas Chanchad, "Rancho" for short, he's a mathematical genius with a mysterious past who leads roommates R. Madhavan and Sharman Joshi, and g.f. Kareena Kapoor, to a hugely satisfying mountaintop showdown with a superguru of the digital age, an inventor-entrepreneur of globe-spanning omniscience. Director Hirani orchestrates the successive revelations with the flair of a natural-born showman, a masterful sleight of hand that a movie magician like Dadasaheb Phalke would surely enjoy.

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- 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

Around The Web

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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

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