In the last decade Bollywood hype has increasingly captured the fancy of Indians in the United States as well as the mainstream media and audiences. This is such a prevelant trend that the extravaganzas once considered vacuous and escapist have now become a respected and integral component of Indian culture.

In the face of Bollywood’s seductive allure, Indian alternate cinema has always found itself relegated to the shadows, where barely registers on the periphery of most Indians’ viewing choices. With few, if any, distribution outlets, Indie films look to film festivals as a Mecca that connects their distinctive voices to an audience. The Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles (IFFLA) is one such platform, a haven for filmmakers who eschew glamour and venture into unexplored directions, often working on shoestring budgets and with little support, as well as for audiences that hunger for films outside of Bollywood.

As IFFLA gears up to celebrate its milestone 10th anniversary in April 2012, it also continues to press the unique geographical advantage it has over other Indian film festivals around the world: its base in the very heart of the world’s cinema fountainhead, Hollywood. The organization, in its nine years of existence, has worked untiringly to build bridges between Bollywood and Hollywood.

The Genesis

IFFLA was born when a Greek woman, Christi"n Marouda, working with the American Film Institute Film Festival (AFI Fest) realized that there were no film festivals in the United States specifically promoting Indian films, despite the fact that the U.S. had the most prolific film industry in the world and that a sizeable Indian population existed in Southern California.

Marouda set about creating a festival from scratch. She was no stranger to Indian cinema, having been introduced to it as a teenager by her older sister, a fan of Indian culture and films. They’d spend many Sundays watching Bollywood films as well as Tamil films without subtitles.

The intent of the festival, Marouda has said, was to provide exposure to films that needed a platform, a premier Indian film festival in the U.S. with its feet firmly grounded in films from and about India.

Marouda, just 27 at the time, pulled in about eight supporters to kick-start the planning process. She and two other programmers, including Mumbai based journalist and experienced festival curator Uma Da Cunha, searched for worthy titles and called filmmakers to enter them in the inaugural edition. Cold calling was a norm in those early days, recalled IFFLA publicist Surekha Paruchuri, who has been with the fest from the start. They called companies seeking sponsorships and contacted airlines to provide passage for participating filmmakers and talent. They knocked on the doors of Indian businesses in Little India district of Artesia, gave pitches at private parties, and distributed fliers.

“That first year was a lot of hard work, but so much fun too. We were constantly learning new skills and realizing abilities we didn’t even know we had,” Paruchuri said. Their initial success set a standard which they still strive to maintain. “We were dedicated and ambitious, and bent on making a meaningful impact,” she added.

Later, influential entertainment industry attorney Arnold Peter joined IFFLA as chair of its board of directors in 2007. His industry insight and networking were...
solid complements to Marouda’s understanding of cinema and organizational zeal. Under the adroit steering of these two leaders, IFFLA has emerged as a singular event that skillfully brings together the art, entertainment, and business of Indian cinema.

At this point, Marouda said, the organization wants to take advantage of the attention it has garnered and create the right partnership between the two industries. “We are looking for those relationships—cultivated through the years—to flourish,” she added.

The IFFLA Showcase

India is a country with a long tradition of parallel cinema, where directors Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy, Mrinal Sen and Adoor Gopalakrishnan nurtured their deeply humane vision on celluloid; and later Shyam Benegal and Govind Nihalani insisted on telling stories of ordinary humans and their extraordinary struggles in the face of challenges as large as legendary Bollywood actors Amitabh Bachchan and Dharmendra. It’s the oeuvre of their cinematic heirs that IFFLA has persisted in showcasing for a decade, laying out a veritable feast every year of diverse Indian and diaspora fare, usually screening 30-plus features, documentaries and short films.

Six programmers, including filmmakers, screenwriters and critics from diverse backgrounds assess the entries that come in by the end of January each year and select the movies that will play at the festival. This year, they sifted through over 350 entries and came up with a cache of 33 films from 11 countries in 25 languages.

“Rigorous discussion on the movies watched is an important part of the selection process, with the aim of showcasing new voices and emerging talent,” Sundance Film Festival programmer John Nein said of IFFLA. “Something interesting is happening in Indian cinema in the last few years: a lot of young filmmakers are coming forward who have a kind of fresh energy,” he added.

Critic David Chute, a long-time IFFLA observer, wrote in LA Weekly, “IFFLA is a jewel of a festival, one of the best-programmed and best-run motion-picture events on Earth….It rightly makes an effort every year to correct the imbalance in international distribution patterns, tilting its emphasis firmly toward indie films and documentaries.”

Many stylistic and thematic gems have glittered at IFFLA over the years, highlighting the art of cinema as well as the issue-based preoccupations of the times. Over the years, a festival follower may recall several touchstone screenings:

- Anurag Kashyap’s intricate, non-linear narrative Black Friday, the first feature to address the serial bombings that rocked Mumbai in 1993, which follows the men who orchestrated the devastation in response to brutal violence against Muslims, as well as the police investigation into the tragic events;
- Nishikant Kamat’s stunning debut feature Dombivli Fast, a gritty, realistic depiction of a lower middle-class Mumbai family placed in hostile circumstances;
- Priyadarshan’s powerful Kanchivaram, set in Kanchi’s silk weaving industry of pre-independence India, which tells the deeply tragic-ironic story of a man trapped by social forces and the conflict between one’s adopted ideals and individual dreams;
- Nina Paley’s Sita Sings The Blues, a witty jazz musical version of the Ramayana set in the 1920s;
- Richie Mehta’s Amal, a simple yet touching tale of a rickshaw driver in materialistic Delhi who possesses the rare quality of contentment;
- Vikramaditya Motwane’s Udaan, an inspiring story of self-realization against all odds, about a teenage boy who returns home from boarding school and clashes head-on with his ruthless, authoritarian father;
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• Deepa Mehta’s *Water*, set in Colonial India of the 1930s, about the practice of child marriage, where young girls were often married to older men to ensure their family’s economic survival;
• and Shashank Ghosh’s rip-roaring and stylized curry western *Quick Gun Murugun*, about a South Indian cowboy on a mission to save cows from the owners of non-vegetarian restaurants.

Regional languages in India have nurtured parallel cinema through the decades, with pioneers such as Girish Kasaravalli (Kannada), Sen, Ghatak, Gautam Ghosh and Rituparno Ghosh (Bengali), and Gopalakrishnan, G. Arvindam and Shaji N. Karun (Malayalam) leading and keeping the movement alive.

Feature films made in Indian languages other than Hindi form a large contingent of entries at IFFLA. Over the years, attendees got to watch such works as Mani Ratnam’s *A Peck on the Cheek* (Tamil), *Kandukondain Kandukondain* (Tamil) based on Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* and starring Aishwarya Rai, *Vanaja* (Telugu), *Chokher Bali* (Bengali), *Vihir* (Marathi), and *Harishchandrachi Factory* (Marathi) on the life of Dadasaheb Phalke, the pioneer of Indian cinema, among many others.

Filmmaker Laxmikant Shetgaonkar was heartened by the respect regional language films get at this fest. His Konkani film *Beyond The Bridge*, about a lonely forest ranger’s unusual relationship with a mute mad woman that delicately weaves together the issues of mental illness, environmental protection and the complex dynamics of village power structures, bagged the best narrative award at IFFLA last year.

Documentaries showcased often turn the spotlight on social issues such as Deepa Bhatia’s *Nero’s Guests*, a searing film on the devastating but largely ignored wave of farmer suicides in India and one journalist's efforts to educate the public about their suffering; Nishtha Jain’s *At My Doorstep*, which examines social and economic inequality in India by following the people who work, often invisibly, in her apartment building, chronicling their modest dreams and the heartbreaking sacrifices required to achieve them; Rajesh Jals’s *Children of the Pyre*, where children unabashedly tell their own stories of living amidst death while working on the cremation grounds of Ganges River in Varanasi; *Supermen Of Malegaon*, where director Faiza Ahmad Khan captures a wannabe filmmaker’s hilarious and creative attempts to overcome myriad challenges while shooting his most ambitious project, in the process reminding moviegoers of the sheer joy and excitement inherent in films and filmmaking; *Big In Bollywood*, where actor Omi Vaidya journeys from anonymity to stardom when he stars in the blockbuster “3 Idiots,” as seen through the eyes of Omi’s best friends, directors Kenny Meehan and Bill Bowles; *The Sun Behind the Clouds*, in which Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin give viewers extraordinary access to all sides of the struggle for freedom in Tibet; Megan Doneman’s *Yes, Madam Sir*, about India’s first woman IPS officer Kiran Bedi’s extraordinary life and ground-breaking work; and Liz Mermin’s *Shot In Bombay*, which focuses on the inventive methods filmmaker Apoorva Lakhia and his crew used to shoot their film *Shootout At Lokhandwala* when the production was held up because its lead actor, Sunjay Dutt, got enmeshed in a weapons-possession trial linked to Mumbai bomb attacks.

Actress Janina Gavankar at IFFLA 2011 opening night.
Among the many memorable shorts aired at IFFLA were Gitanjali Rao’s *Printed Rainbow*, about an old woman and her cat who escape the loneliness and isolation of their apartment in the city through fantastical imaginings inspired by a prized matchbox collection; Dipti Gogna’s *Narmeen*, about a young Muslim mother who tries to cope with the loss of her child by befriending a little Sikh boy during India’s Partition; Gregg Helvey’s *Kavi*, a commentary on child labor where a young boy tries to lead his family out of bonded labor in a brick kiln; Ritesh Batra’s *Gareeb Nawaz’s Taxi*, depicting how the title character’s silent and monotonous world changes forever when a drag queen enters his taxi; Terrie Samundra’s *Kunjo*, where betrayal complicates the burgeoning friendship of two girls from across the class divide when the local school holds a screenplay competition; Rakesh Chaudhary’s *The Eclipse of Taregna*, about how an eclipse draws a man, his grandson, and their village closer together; Shlok Sharma’s *Tubelight’s Moon*, where a street urchin innovatively tries to capture the splendor of the moon; and Nisha Ganatra’s *Beholder*, touching on issues of race, sexual orientation, and conformity while examining the notion of identity and the costs of belonging;

These are works that don’t offer instant gratification, but demand some reflection before they yield joy. Most of these cannot be found in the neighborhood grocery store or even at a regional movie theatre; They are virtually inaccessible outside a film fest.

Work of the diaspora community of Indians that has been a vibrant component of world cinema forms a major part of IFFLA. “From Mira Nair to Gurinder Chadha and Deepa Mehta, there is a sizeable body of work by filmmakers outside of India, with their roots firmly in their home culture and their intersections with other cultures,” wrote Shekhar Deshpande, journalist and associate professor and director of communication program at Arcadia University in Pennsylvania, who attended the fest this year.

These themes are reflected in many of the offerings of directors based in the U.S., U.K., and Australia that have screened at IFFLA such as Deepa Mehta’s *Heaven And Earth*, about a young Punjabi woman who unknowingly marries an abusive man in the U.S. and is trapped into his rigidly orthodox family; Dilip Mehta’s comedy *Cooking With Stella*, about a sly cook working for a U.S. diplomat’s family based in Delhi; Rajiv Dassani’s much awarded short film *A Day’s Work*, about a young Mexican immigrant in Los Angeles who gets stuck in the middle of a simple misunderstanding that explodes into a violent standoff; Geeta Malik’s *Troublemaker*, which maps out a young Indian-American woman’s precarious road to adulthood, a journey filled with angst, cocktails, and indecision that many can relate to; Kim Longinnoto’s documentary *Pink Saris*, a portrait of a home-grown activist in a small town in Northern India who falls victim to her own hype; and lesbian filmmaker Sonali Gulati’s own story *I Am*, documenting her interactions with gays and lesbians in India where homosexuality is illegal, a story from the front lines of a changing world of individuals, families, and nations choosing between love and fear.

“This commitment to cinema that is different from the usual fare is a strategic contribution IFFLA makes to our understanding of ourselves,” Deshpande wrote. “Programming is at the heart of the identity of a film festival,” he added. The programming “provides a direction to the festival that appears to be a strategic compromise between the need to highlight talented works...
outside the mainstream—‘India-centric’ films produced by North American as well as diasporic filmmakers—and the desire to attract a broader audience to what has become a major event for the Indian community on the West Coast.”

The late Manish Acharya, whose *Loins Of Punjab* screened at the 2008 IFFLA, once said: “I have been to quite a few festivals … but NONE made me want the festival to go on longer. I think that somewhere amidst the fantastic location, the wonderful curating, and the perfect staff, you have created, well, magic.”

**Platforms to connect Hollywood-Bollywood**

Besides a feast of movies, IFFLA hosts several events in an effort to strengthen the bonds between the Indian film industry and Hollywood.

The success of *Slumdog Millionaire* spurred tremendous interest in Indian films and in India as a viable base and market for Hollywood studios. A sizable volume of work is being generated by partnerships between Indian media companies and Hollywood studios that have set up offices in India. In the midst of this situation, through its Leadership Awards, IFFLA recognizes the achievements of executives who have influenced the creation and distribution of Indian-themed content globally and who have led the expansion of the entertainment and media industry in India. The awards are presented at a luncheon held at a Hollywood club during the film fest.

Recipients have included Sony Pictures Television Networks President, Andy Kaplan; Chief Executive Officer of Multi Screen Media Private Limited, Man Jit Singh; Chairman and Managing Director of PVR Cinemas, Ajay Bilji; Executive Vice President of Warner Bros. International, Richard Fox, who also heads up all of Warner Bros. non-U.S. initiatives; Amit Khanna, Chairman of Reliance BIG Entertainment, the media arm of the $75 billion Ambani Group that purchased Dreamworks a couple of years ago; Sanford Panitch, president of Fox International Productions; and Andy Bird, Chairman of Walt Disney International.

Last year, IFFLA also honored film producer Ashok Amritraj with its Trailblazer Award, commemorating the release of his 100th film. Over his 30-year career in Hollywood, Amritraj’s films have grossed over $1 billion worldwide.

Amritraj lauded IFFLA’s efforts that opened doors for Indian films and talent in Hollywood, where only a few Indians have made inroads so far.

Uday Kumar, business head of Reliance Mediaworks North America, noted that generating awareness of Indian cinema and content right in the center of Hollywood is IFFLA’s most important contribution. “That’s what Indian cinema needs at this stage,” he said.

Taking the networking idea further, IFFLA’s One-on-One program connects participating filmmakers in speed-dating style sessions with Hollywood executives, providing opportunities to forge relationships, explore opportunities, and gauge prospects.

Actor Ravi Kapoor, whose directorial short *Victor Ramirez, Asesino* screened at the fest,
said that he was thrilled at the opportunities to connect with an audience, with other filmmakers and with the industry as well.

Three seminars helmed by noted industry leaders and talent throw light on cross-continental entertainment business issues. For instance, this year, in the seminar titled “Hollywood's Evolving Relationship with India,” leading experts discussed the growing partnerships between Hollywood and the Indian entertainment industry, analyzing how these avenues converge in terms of the world's two largest media content providers, touching on the current state of opportunities and projected future investments. As South Asians join the media fray in stories that go beyond ethnicity and touch on issues of modern American life, the sphere of opportunities in Hollywood is making a gradual shift. A panel of professionals from different entertainment organizations that provide resources for artists to continue this trend discussed “Breaking into the Industry: Opportunities and Challenges for South Asian American Filmmakers and Talent,” which was the second seminar. And in the third seminar, “Meet the Filmmakers Behind the New Wave of Indian Cinema,” IFFLA's invited filmmakers held forth on recent and future trends in Indian cinema.

Karen Kirkland of Nickelodeon said she comes to IFFLA to tap into the multitude of talented writers. Rebecca Yee of the Screen Actors Guild observed, “It’s a great venue to network with writers, directors, producers and other industry professionals,” Both executives have served as seminar panelists.

Explaining the heavy emphasis on the business aspect, Peter, chair of the IFFLA Board said, “The fest is predicated on creating a well-rounded experience for our audience and our filmmakers. It is important to address current issues that arise out of the growth of the Indian film industry not only as a major content provider, but also as a future trend-setter.”

“This is a true celebration of the art and business of Indian film and culture as well as an opportunity to connect with the game changers and emerging filmmakers of Indian themed content,” Marouda said.

IFFLA also supports promising film work. For instance, Kranti Kanade’s script titled Against Itself won an IFFLA grant of $10,000 last year. He is now shepherding it through post-production under the name Gandhi of the Month. The film stars Oscar-nominated actor Harvey Keitel as a secular expatriate American schoolmaster in India who struggles against a tide of anti-Christian sentiment that threatens his students, his school, and his life.

Marouda pointed out, “We’ve had filmmakers who came here with a three-minute short film some years ago, their first time out of India, who are now talking with studios here and are being represented by the Creative Artists Agency.”

**Complete entertainment**

IFFLA is mounted every year as an event where attendees can relish many aspects of the rich Indian culture.

While its slate of new wave films are a true delight for the film aficionado, IFFLA is also a great venue to
savor the rollicking entertainment of classic Bollywood song-and-dance flicks. Its “Bollywood by Night” series features screenings of recent hits, starring Bollywood heart-throbs, slick action, brisk storytelling, and pulsating music and dances. During these 21-and-over-only screenings, viewers can enjoy a glass of wine in the theater and unwind.

The festivities in the courtyard are as much an attraction as the films themselves. Indian décor such as brightly embroidered Rajasthani tents, filigreed brass lamps and posters from IFFLA and individual movies create a colorful, aesthetic backdrop in the expansive ArcLight Hollywood courtyard that morphs into IFFLA’s Rhythm Village most evening. Here live Indian music and dances are performed by world-renowned artists while Indian food trucks serve ethnic gourmet and street fare.

When Bollywood Step Dance performers swept into the center of the courtyard this year, attendees and passers-by stood arrested. They stopped to watch and many couldn’t help bursting into their own impromptu dance moves. Dance performances alternate with the eclectic fusion music of Rukus Avenue record label’s Sammy and Anchal Chand, who create IFFLA’s Rhythm Village. Recent performers have included renowned artists such as Gingger Shankar, Hip Hop band Houdini and King, Ragapella, and Dhol Nation’s Malinder, whose booming dhol playing creates a folksy, festive atmosphere.

This year the organizers roped in social networking media with gusto and kept alive a loyal fan base through Twitter, Facebook, and liveblogging with posts and updates about goings-on and last minute recommendations.

“As a major global phenomenon, film festivals serve many functions: they shape how communities come together, how they reassert themselves and how they connect to their own heritage. For communities in diaspora, those attempting to find home away from home, film festivals offer spaces, opportunities for revelry, patronage of their own artists and moments of communion,” Deshpande wrote. “This function is not unlike that served by religious or traditional festivals, which remind us who we are even in the midst of a life that rarely connects to traditional elements.”
Supporters — A mixed bunch

People involved at all levels of IFFLA are a multi-cultural bunch, revealing how the centrality of Indian films is nurtured and promoted by others in one of the major cities in the U.S.

Its proximity to Hollywood gives the fest a unique opportunity to leverage access to entertainment industry experts and groundbreakers. Actors, producers, distributors, talent scouts and others of diverse ethnicities have participated in IFFLA seminars and sat on its three juries.

The fest comes together every year with the support of over 40 staff members who work part-time year-round, and over 120 volunteers who sign up to work the festival and are its face for the attendees.

Over the years the festival has cultivated a loyal patronage of Indian and international companies as sponsors, including Wells Fargo Bank, Deluxe Labs, Price-waterhouseCoopers, Universal Studios, Nickleodeon, The Walt Disney Company, Sony, and Star Plus.

The fest is also embraced heartily by Indian-American actors who feel at home. They attend and play key roles in introducing participating filmmakers to the machinations of Hollywood, sharing their experiences and mentoring them. For instance, actor Rupak Ginn (Royal Pains) was a seminar panelist this year, and Parvesh Cheena, Gupta of Outsourced fame, served on the shorts jury. Other past attendees include Anil Kapoor (Slumdog Millionaire, ER), Anupam Kher (Zokkomon, Bend It Like Beckham), Kirron Kher, Naseerruddin Shah, Gulshan Grover, Janina Gavankar (True Blood), Lisa Ray (Cooking With Stella, Water), Rahul Bose, Kunal Nayyar (The Big Bang Theory), Vik Sahay (Chuck), Omi Vaidya (Three Idiots), Samrat Chakrabarti (The Waiting City), Pooja Kumar (Bollywood Hero) and Parminder Nagra (ER)

Ginn, who is associated with the festival in many capacities, summed it all up when he claimed, “Always innovating never resting, that’s IFFLA.

About the Author

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