Indian Film Festival Brings Two Cultures Together

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It's a cinematic story you've heard a million times before: girl moves to the big city, falls in love with the magic of film, establishes the bridge between the world's two strongest industries. Wait, what?

Bollywood -- a name that has grown from kitschy buzzword to the very definition of global media powerhouse. But Indian cinema has grown beyond the glitz-and-glamour often associated with the big budget productions of Mumbai, and the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles (IFFLA) is one organization that seeks to discover and showcase that growth.

Reaching its decade anniversary this year, IFFLA has one unique advantage over other India-themed fests -- it's held right in the heart of Hollywood. Serving as a bridge between the US and the Indian entertainment industries, the festival was founded by Christina Marouda, a young woman from the island of Crete in Greece. Working at the American Film Institute at the time, Marouda realized that despite being the most prolific industry in the world, there was no platform for Indian films in the United States. That did not make sense to her given her knowledge of India having the largest film industry in the world.

Marouda starting watching Indian films as a teenager in Greece along with her sister, at times sans subtitles. This early love of Hindi & Tamil cinema was the passion that, when combined with her professional experience, inspired that very first festival. It was the time of Monsoon Wedding and Lagaan having made their mark in the US. Marouda's intent was to provide exposure to films in search of a solid platform that would go beyond just a cultural event for the diaspora.

There was a lot of cold-calling that initial lean year as Marouda and associates reached out to filmmakers to submit for IFFLA's inaugural program. Then, the small but dedicated team pursued sponsors, secured travel arrangements and hospitality for its guests, and pounded the pavement from Hollywood to Little India to raise support and awareness for the festival.

"We look back on our first decade with a sense of exhilaration and pride. From the very beginning, our mission was to establish a film festival that would not only pave the way for a greater appreciation of Indian cinema and culture in the U.S., but also serve as the portal between the two largest entertainment industries in the world," says Marouda.

While it sprung from modest means, the drive and dedication of Marouda and her ever-growing team proved fruitful, as IFFLA developed into a breeding ground for emerging talent. IFFLA's first ever Film Fund Grant winner Kranti Kanade's winning script Against Itself (a.k.a. Gandhi of the Month) is now a feature film starring Oscar-nominated actor Harvey Keitel in the lead role.

Marouda points 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 making films with US studios and are being represented by top agencies like Creative Artists Agency."
That kind of support bridge is invaluable not only to filmmakers looking to find a worldwide audience, but to an increasing batch of Hollywood movers and shakers looking towards the global marketplace to make their mark.

So what does the 10th anniversary have in store? Marouda says, "I look forward to the next decade with zeal and I anticipate what IFFLA’s board and staff will be able to achieve as the dialogue between these two film industries continues to flourish, and the content they create continues to evolve and be refined."