Indian Film Festival shows India’s cinematic shift, new perspectives

By Bob Strauss , Los Angeles Daily News

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When: Various screening times Tuesday through April 13.

Where: ArcLight Cinemas, 6360 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles.

Tickets: $14 for most films. Opening night tickets $75. Passes for all or most activities $200-$500.


While it’s generally known that India has the largest movie industry on Earth, it takes something like the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles to show the rest of the world what exists beyond Bollywood.

Starting its 12th edition Tuesday at the ArcLight Hollywood, the six-day event will highlight features, documentaries and shorts from throughout the South Asian nation and the Indian diaspora, in a variety of languages and styles.

Although there will be the popular Bombay by Night pair of Hindi films next weekend, the main focus of IFFLA will be, as it has often been, on newer waves of Indian cinema that eschew Bollywood singing, dancing and broad acting for more realistic portraits of a vast and diverse culture.

“One of the themes of this year’s festival is that there is more regional cinema,” says Jasmine Jaisinghani, an L.A. native who took the festival’s newly created post of artistic director in December. “There are films from Calcutta, from Kashmir, from Maharashtra and Kerala. But what’s interesting with this new wave of directors is that it’s not necessarily about a particular area of India, it’s about a new perspective of how they’re showing the stories.”

Indeed, the festival’s opening night gala, “Sold,” is a Calcutta-set but mostly English-language adaptation of Patricia McCormick’s acclaimed novel, directed by American Jeffrey D. Brown, executive produced by Emma Thompson and acted by a cast of Bollywood stars and Indian newcomers, along with such Yanks as Gillian Anderson and David Arquette.

Brown, who had a Bengali stepfather, was floored by the resources he found in India when he went to shoot the harrowing tale of child sex trafficking.

“India is a very populous country, so the amount of really talented actors is substantial, and most of the actors speak not just English, but various other languages,” Brown marvels. “And it’s less expensive to shoot in India, but it is a little bit more chaotic. People love movies there, and if you’re out shooting on the streets, you’ve got to shoot and move quickly because crowds can gather fast.”

Another English-language film, “Jadoo,” about feuding restaurateur brothers in Britain, is IFFLA’s closing
night gala on April 13. Then there’s the New York and Prague-set Internet romance “Hank and Asha,” and the generational conflict drama “Brahmin Bulls,” which was filmed right here in L.A.

Back on the subcontinent, a number of this year’s entries deal with dislocation in India’s rapidly changing society. And there’s one, “Fandry,” that tackles an issue as old as the civilization itself in a new way.

“Dalits have appeared in Bollywood movies, but they’re played by actors from higher castes and I’ve never seen relatable stories,” Nagraj Manjule, a Marathi poet and member of the “untouchable” caste who makes his feature directing debut with “Fandry,” says through a translator. “I wanted to present an honest and authentic view of our story.”

IFFLA founder Christina Marouda is thrilled that her festival is showcasing the changes she’s seen in Indian cinema over the past dozen years in the hometown of the world’s third-largest movie industry (Nigeria is second, if you were wondering).

“They’re universal stories, very grounded,” says Marouda, who fell in love with Indian films as a teenager in Greece. “A few years ago, major world festivals such as Cannes and Berlin really started creating Indian showcases. That brought to the attention of the world the idea that there are films beyond Bollywood, which is what we had been trying to do for years and years and years.

“Cut to what’s happening now: there is a plethora of emerging Indian filmmakers who can see their first film going to festivals like Cannes,” she continues. “By the time they come to us, sales agents, distributors and producers in L.A. are eager to come and see them and meet with those filmmakers.”

Whether or not you go to IFFLA for business, you can enjoy live music and dancing when the festival turns the ArcLight courtyard into its annual Rhythm Village. As for what more you can expect inside the theater, “We look for diversity, but equally important, we look for good cinema,” artistic director Jaisinghani says. “Coupled with what we think will work for our audience, that shapes our program, and I think that, this year, we have a little bit of something for everybody.”