Los Angeles Film Fest Showcases India's New Talent

UMA DA CUNHA

Shweta Tripathi

LOS ANGELES: The five day high-octane event of the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles (IFFLA), now in its thirteenth edition, concluded recently. The final screening was boosted by the festival’s eagerly anticipated awards, and on to its joyous closing night festivities.

The awards honoured many a first foray by India’s fresh-faced hopefuls making their bow as helmers, thespians and technicians.

The first award to be announced was for Best Actress. It went jointly to petite, prodigiously talented newcomer Shweta Tripathi and playwright-actress Kalki Koechlin.

Shweta won the award for her role in Haraamkhor, which held its world premiere at IFFLA. Speaking from the podium, Shweta disarmed the full-to-the-brim rapturous audience as she said, “What am I to say? This is my first feature film. IFFLA is my first film festival. Now, I am holding my very first award!”. Haraamkhor is the debut work of the mild, soft-spoken director Shlok Sharma and produced by the indomitable Guneet Monga (who was present). This dark film is on an irreversible collision course caused by a small town school-boy setting out to win the affection of his pretty classmate, quite unaware of her promiscuous crush on their bumbling teacher (masterfully enacted by Nawazuddin Siddiqui).

Kalki won the award for her highly praised performance as the incorrigibly gutsy, spastic-stricken girl in Shonali Bose’s Margarita with a Straw. The film unfurled on the last day at a surprise secret screening, held low-key because it was being premiered later at another leading local festival.
The Best Film Jury Award went to another first film, Chauranga (Four Colours), directed by Bikas Ranjan Mishra (the man behind the extremely popular website portal "Dear Cinema"). This film had its international premiere at IFFLA. It follows a 14-year-old Dalit boy whose love letter to a 16-year-old reveals the violence of class oppression that still exists in rural India.

The Audience Award for Best Narrative Feature went to yet another debut work, this time to a Tamil film, The Crow’s Egg directed by M Manikandan, making its U.S premiere. The film’s two engaging child actors, J Vignesh and Ramesh, play kiddie slum lords. Their street-smart bravado is aimed at getting to taste the mysterious ‘pizza’ relished by those better-off than themselves. The two shared the Best Actor Award.

Aditya Vikram Sengupta’s Bengali film Labour of Love won an Honourable Mention for Cinematography. This distinctive work started its festival run by winning the Best Debut Director award at the 2014 Venice Film Festival. The debut film lyrically presents one day in the life of a married couple without using a single spoken word, it gains an increasingly sensory impact through its visuals and sound effects. At IFFLA, the demand by viewers led to a repeat screening.

The remaining awards also went mostly to emerging filmmakers.

The Best Documentary Award went to Tomorrow we Disappear, the debut work by Jim Goldblum and Adam Weber, on Kathputli, India’s last colony of magicians, acrobats, and puppeteers, whose residents face eviction by a leading realty company. Another debut film, Sudarshan Suresh’s Khargosh (The Rabbit) won Honourable Mention. The film follows a debt-ridden farmer whose relationship with his daughter is tested when she adopts a rabbit.

The Jury Award for Best Short (and also the Audience Award) went to Pratyusha Gupta’s second film, Safar, in which IFFLA award winner Shweta Tripathi plays a reformed prostitute who finds it impossible to hide her past. Her co-stars are the accomplished Vipin Sharma and Mahabanoo Kotwal. Leena Pendharkar with a strong body of work behind her, won the Best Short Film for Dandekar makes a Sandwich, on a picky retiree who goes all out to get the right ingredients for his snack.

**Bollywood actor with a difference**

IFFLA also went all out to make choice decisions when it came to its Jury members. Popular in indie cinema, Abhay Deol, whose persona differs sharply from the typical poster-boy Bollywood, was on the Narrative Jury. It was unusual to see the tall, unassuming Abhay flitting amiably film to film as he went about his Jury task.

The closing film was Nagesh Kukunoor’s heart-warming suspense story, the Berlin award-winning Dhanak, around two orphaned kids who traverse the desert expanses of Rajasthan. Nagesh’s family, who live in the US, were in full attendance led by his expansive, ever smiling mother. The Chief Executive of all of Kunukoor films, Elahe Hiptoolah, also lent good cheer to a fitting finale for IFFLA.