Indian Film Festival of L.A. looks at life from Delhi to Orange County

By Bob Strauss, Los Angeles Daily News

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“This is really the best representation of what the filmmaking communities in India and the diaspora looks like,” festival founder Christine Marouda says.

The film festival, which returns to Hollywood's ArcLight Theatres, runs from Wednesday through April 12. Director Shlok Sharma's first feature, “Haraamkhor,” about a 15-year-old's crush on a schoolmate who's having an affair with her teacher, is Thursday's opening night gala selection.

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A year later, actress Meera Simhan appeared on an Indian-themed episode of “New Girl,” hit it off with Simone, and slipped her a screenplay she'd written with her husband — who, it turns out, is Kapoor.

“At that moment, I knew this was meant to be,” Simone says.

That script about a medical school-bound, second-generation O.C. overachiever (played by Tiya Sircar) who enters the Miss India California beauty pageant to spite an ex-boyfriend, became both Kapoor's feature debut and a calling card for dozens of young Indo-American actors (Simone plays a rival contestant).

“When I was a series regular on ‘Gideon's Crossing' and ‘Crossing Jordan,' I think I was the only South Asian actor in a regular TV role,” says England-born actor Kapoor. “Since then, it's just exploded. It's happened so fast, and it probably has something to do with what our film is exploring, which is the incredible drive to achieve that exists in our culture.”

Kapoor admits, however, that “Miss India America” probably would have never even made it to any movie screen five years ago.

“We just wouldn't have been able to find all the right cast. But because there has been such an explosion of younger South Asian talent, we were able to make the film,” he says. “And IFFLA has become a bit of the social glue for South Asian creative types to come and connect and inspire each other as well.”

But festivalgoers don't have to be in the industry to appreciate the festival. It's a chance for all film lovers, whether or not their roots are in India, to discover what's happening in one of the world's most eclectic cinema industries.

This year, there's a focus on youth, and not just aspiring brain surgeon beauty queens. From “Haraamkhor” to village child street preachers (“Elizabeth Ekadashi”) and siblings’ quests to get their first taste of pizza (“The Crow's Egg”) or meet their favorite movie star (closing night gala “Dhanak”), many new films focus on India's children.

“We have a very strong feeling of celebrating contemporary youth,” notes the festival's artistic director, Jasmine Jaisinghani. “Every year, the films themselves show what is being revealed, and there was no doubt about it, this year it was different points of view of the youth spirit, how they get themselves out of any kind of circumstance, whether it's a dire one or one of joy.”
Some of the movies also touch on that Indian perennial, social issues, although this year the festival was unable to get one recently banned by an Indian court, the BBC documentary “India’s Daughter,” about a deadly gang rape that outraged the nation and the world.

“There are subtle messages in many of our films,” Marouda says, referring to such entries as “Tigers,” about a Pakistani pharmaceuticals salesman whose Western-manufactured baby formula proves dangerous, and “Four Colors,” which tackles the caste system. “Sometimes, people have said that these independent films tend to show a dark side of India, but a lot of it has to do with reality and what really interests a filmmaker. If everything works well and everyone is happy, I don't think you're going to get a lot of art coming out of that.”

Sharma concurs.

“There are a lot of things which influence us,” Sharma says. “Different people and different issues which disturb us, bother us, affect us, and that's where all these stories come — from people around us, from day-to-day life around us. I read an article, hear of something, it bothers me or makes me think and question, and I decide to deal with it by saying it through a story.”

The importance of such festivals as IFFLA can't be emphasized enough, Simone says.

“When I came to L.A. six years ago, one of the first things someone took me to was IFFLA,” recalls Simone, a former TV host in Canada. “It was almost, like, reassuring to go and see not only the quantity but the quality of incredible work that was being produced. ... They bring together the community.”

When: Wednesday-April 12.


Tickets: $15 per screening. Passes $100-$1,200. Opening and closing galas $25 each; galas and parties $75 each.

Information: www.indianfilmfestival.org