'Angry Indian Goddesses': IFFLA Review

2:44 PM PDT 4/20/2016 by Justin Lowe

Pan Nalin’s ensemble dramedy follows a group of Indian women who confront frequent discrimination and harassment with courage and humor.

Incidents related to violence and discrimination against women in India continue to generate news headlines, prompting vehement reactions from numerous segments of society. *Angry Indian Goddesses* constitutes veteran indie filmmaker Pan Nalin’s focused response — an indictment of chauvinistic attitudes and behavior that doesn’t need cultural translation to convey its outraged perspective. Described as “India’s first female buddy-movie,” Nalin’s feature was an award-winner at both the 2015 Toronto and Rome film festivals and has already opened in more than 60 countries, although an eventual U.S. art house release might face a degree of resistance to the pic’s melodramatic plot machinations.

Nalin signals his agenda from the outset, depicting his ensemble of female protagonists in a variety of
situations that demonstrate their second-class social status. Shifting gears to the picturesque southwest coastal enclave of Goa, he follows commercial photographer Frieda (Sarah-Jane Dias), who’s gathering five women friends at her family home, with her cousin Jo (Amrit Maghera), a struggling Bollywood actress, prominent among them. Mad (musician Anushka Manchanda) is a soulful but unsuccessful singer-songwriter, while Su (Sandhya Mridul) is a hard-driving business executive who shows up with her young daughter. Only beautiful Pam (Pavleen Gujral) lacks a career, stuck in an arranged marriage with a wealthy but neglectful husband. She’s the antithesis of fiery community activist Nargis (Tannishtha Chatterjee), whose current human-rights campaign just happens to oppose a mining project masterminded by Su’s corporation.

What Frieda hasn’t told them all is that she’s been holding back news of her secret wedding plans until everyone has arrived in Goa. Her unexpected announcement sets off a flurry of questions and speculation, but Frieda isn’t going to be revealing her intended’s identity until the time is right. Meanwhile, the women entertain themselves with impromptu song and dance sessions accompanied by Mad’s guitar, leisurely group meals at funky local eateries and daytrip outings to the beach during nearly a week of relaxation and celebration. Once Frieda finally discloses her wedding plans, however, the revelation is so surprising that some of the women question her judgment, setting off a chain of events that will critically test their bonds of friendship and loyalty.

Nalin has logged a varied career that includes both features and documentaries that have often focused on Buddhist themes, but Angry Indian Goddesses is a determined dive into the secular realm in pursuit of its timely topic. Setting an agenda that emphasizes respect for women’s rights induces a degree of moralizing that inevitably shapes the narrative, not entirely for the better. An emphasis on the women’s reactions to a variety of discriminatory situations starts to resemble a checklist approach, ticking off situations that cover career challenges, marriage dilemmas and personal relationships. A counter-tendency to glamorize scenes of the women bonding with one another results in rather predictable scripting that eventually becomes freighted with an excess of emotionality.

Nalin assembles an appealing ensemble that relies more on the breadth of the cast than the depth of each individual actor’s experience, establishing a comfortable sense of onscreen camaraderie. A traditional Portuguese-style home and beautiful island locations attractively frame the filmmaker’s informal stylistic approach, highlighting the naturalistic setting and performances.

Venue: Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles
Production companies: Jungle Book Entertainment, One Two Films, Protein Entertainment
Cast: Sarah-Jane Dias, Rajshri Deshpande, Sandhya Mridul, Amrit Maghera, Pavleen Gujral, Anushka Manchanda, Tannishtha Chatterjee
Director-writer: Pan Nalin
Producers: Gaurav Dhingra, Pan Nalin
Executive producer: Nandish Domlur
Director of photography: Swapnil S. Sonawane
Production designer: Aradhana Seth
Costume designer: Ashima Belapurkar
Editor: Shreyas Bellangdy
Music: Cyril Morin
Not rated, 115 minutes

'The Long Night of Francisco Sanctis' ('La Larga Noche de Francisco Sanctis'): Cannes Review

2:04 PM PDT 5/22/2016 by Boyd van Hoeij

Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival
Lean and mean. TWITTER

Argentinean rookie directors Andrea Testa and Francisco Marquez premiered their paranoid period thriller in the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival.

At first glance, the life of Francisco Sanctis, a middle-class office worker from Buenos Aires with a wife and two young kids, is far removed from what's going on at a political level in 1977 Argentina, where a junta deposed the government a year earlier and possible opponents of the new regime started to vanish into thin air (the victims were the so-called “desaparecidos” or "disappeared"). But in this slender — the film clocks in at 78 minutes — but hardly slight adaptation of Humberto Constantini’s novel The Long Night of Francisco Sanctis (La Larga Noche de Francisco Sanctis), young writer-directors Andrea Testa and Francisco Marquez shrewdly use their Average-Joe protagonist to explore questions of (feigned) political disinterest and civil responsibility under a repressive dictatorship. Festivals, including those focusing on emerging talent, will gladly be part of Night's long journey, with home-format sales a given and scattered theatrical interest likely.

Francisco Sanctis (Diego Velazquez, Wild Tales), in typical 1970s attire and a Tom Selleck ‘stache, is preparing breakfast for his wife, Angelica (Laura Paredes), and two young children in the cramped kitchen of their apartment. He’s excited about a possible promotion at work, though judging by Angelica’s response — “Blabla,” is all she says — she’s heard all this before and knows what’ll happen next. Cut to the office later that day and his bosses are happy to hand Francisco an “incentive box” with groceries but refuse to talk about any possible move up the hierarchical ladder.

Just before the protagonist’s sense of pride and self-worth completely deflates, however, old acquaintance
Elena (Valeria Lois) gets in touch with him with a seemingly innocent request involving an old poem of his. The duo meet that evening to discuss the details in her car, with the directors using the cramped quarters to ratchet up the tension — there’s something Hitchcockian about their meeting — with Elena’s expensive-looking, all-scarlet outfit also possibly setting off alarm bells. The woman in red finally asks Francisco to tell a couple who’ll be “visited” tonight by the authorities that they need to leave (she cannot do it because that would potentially betray her as the source of the leak).

This puts the onus on the seemingly apolitical protagonist, someone who until then seemed only worried about his own self-advancement and taking care of young family, while completely ignoring the dark political realities of his country. Suddenly Francisco’s faced with several equally terrifying prospects: To not do anything, but possibly be responsible for the disappearance of the unknown couple, to go and tell them and save them (but would this mean he’d have to become part of something resembling a resistance movement?) or to try and tell them, get caught and possibly be made to join the desaparicidios too. Making matters worse is the fact that the poem from his student days serves as a reminder of his idealistic and more politically engaged younger self.

Francisco’s struggle with what he now perceives as his duty is the motor of the film’s narrative as well as a source of suspense, with the fact that he doesn’t know at what time the names he’s been given will be visited tonight serving as an excuse not to go there straight away. (It’s details such as this that reveal how painstakingly constructed the story really is.) Francisco thus finds himself walking aimlessly around the dark and labyrinthine streets of the city at night, becoming increasingly paranoid. A friend at a bar (Marcelo Subbioto) makes him doubtful of Elena’s past and intentions. The few people Sanctis encounters on the otherwise deserted streets aren’t much more helpful, with everyone potentially a government agent, snitch or law-abiding citizen who would disapprove of his inaction. A sequence at a movie theater in which he tries to clandestinely meet a young man (Rafael Federman) is especially well-handled, playing off of the notion Sanctis can’t quite believe himself in what kind of spy-territory he suddenly seems to have crash-landed.

That the directors, who also wrote the adaptation, can make audiences read all these ideas between the lines of the film’s scant dialogue is a testament to their skills as filmmakers. And in a sense, the paranoid protagonist’s attempts to read and decipher the situations and people around him echoes what audiences will simultaneously be doing as they watch the film themselves. Though the actors and especially Velazquez are good, Testa and Marquez have not made a character drama at all but rather a movie that suggests people prefer to stay apolitical or intentionally myopic so they don’t have to deal with situations they don’t like and that could be potentially harmful. Since the characters are thus more vessels for ideas than fully rounded humans, the film’s prospects will be limited to the higher end of the arthouse segment, though that doesn’t make the feature any less fascinating.

Production company: PensaconlosmanosCast: Diego Velazquez, Laura Paredes, Valeria Lois, Marcela
Subiotto, Rafael Federman
Directors: Andrea Testa, Francisco Marquez
Screenplay: Andrea Testa, Francisco Marquez, based on the novel by Humberto Constantini
Producers: Francisco Marquez, Andrea Testa, Luciana Piantanida
Executive producer: Luciana Piantanida
Director of photography: Federico Lastra
Production designer: Julieta Dolinsky
Costume designer: Jam Monti
Editor: Lorena Moriconi
Sales: Films Boutique
No rating, 78 minutes