

## Festival Review

Meena Karnik

### 51<sup>st</sup> International Film Festival of India



The International Film Festival of India (IFFI), that happens every year in Goa during 20 to 28 November was postponed this year due to Covid and the 51<sup>st</sup> edition finally took place from 16 to 24 January 2021. It was also announced that the 52<sup>nd</sup> IFFI will be held as usual in the month of November this year.

The city of Panjim was decked up like it is every year, there were lights and music but the soul seemed to be missing. First of all, the number of delegates was way below the normal count which was obvious given the circumstances. Many regulars did not want to take any risk and understandably so.

The hardcore film buffs like us looked at the opportunity to watch films in a theatre after a long time. This was also perhaps the first international festival to take place physically since the break of the pandemic, most of the festivals were either cancelled or were organized online. So, credit where due, the DFF (Directorate of Film Festivals) and ESG (Entertainment Society of Goa) did a splendid job of making this a successful event.

The organizers took all the precautions for the safety of the delegates. There were sanitizers at every entry point and temperatures noted. The ticket booking like last year was done only through the website and

the catalogue giving all the information of the films that were to be screened was not printed at all. But that was fine since all the information was available on the IFFI website and again, like last year one could not just read the synopsis but also watch the trailer before making the choice of films to be viewed. The theatres were sanitized after every show and the number of shows was reduced to make that possible. The occupancy was either 50 percent or 200, whichever was less. The delegates needed to sit on alternate chairs so that the physical distancing was taken care of.

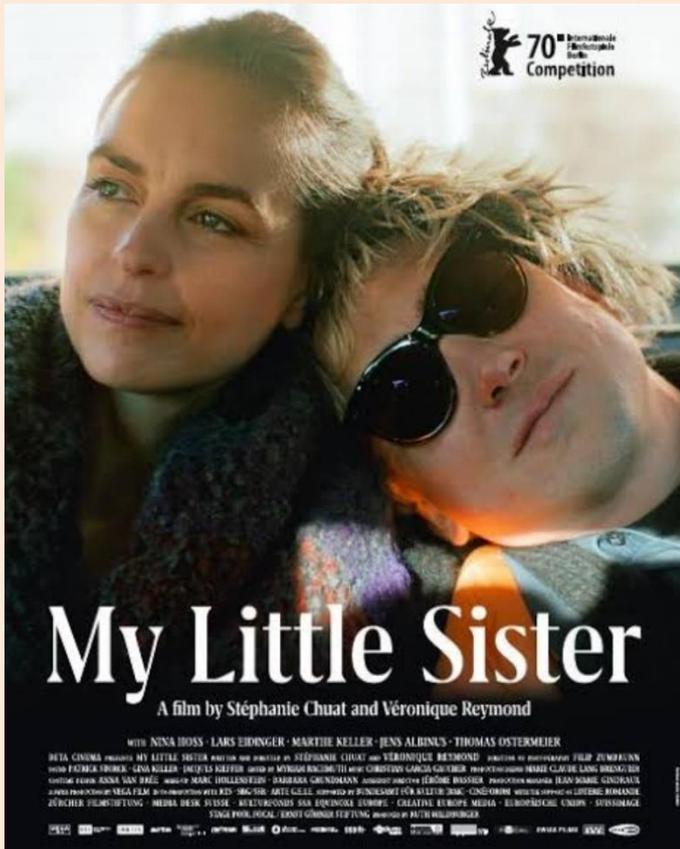


“This is a very positive step,” said Ujjwal Nirgudkar, technical consultant for India’s National Film Heritage and who was responsible for the smooth projection of the films. “It is very important that this festival is happening. This gives a message to the film festival fraternity worldwide that if proper care is taken, it isn’t difficult to organize an international festival even during these trying times. The Kerala Film festival will be almost immediately held after this. It is a sort of confidence building measure. According to me, that would be the biggest achievement of this festival,” Shri. Nirgudkar concluded.

One cannot disagree with what he said. The enthusiasm of the delegates was proof enough to corroborate his views. But does that define the success of a festival? What exactly is the objective of the film festival? Getting together of film enthusiasts? Or to showcase world cinema? Or to get films of the directors from around the globe who have made a mark or are a budding talent that one

needs to look out for? And if good films is the basic criterion of the success of any film festival, this one sure did not meet the necessary mark. The films were quite disappointing. May be the selectors did not have much choice since the pandemic restricted a lot of work during the major part of 2020. Also, may be, as a viewer, we are now spoilt with numerous choices through OTT platforms. A platform like MUBI offers a vast number of excellent films, old and new, classics and experimental. What was once possible only at the film festivals is now available on our smart phones. Of course, one cannot compare the experience of watching a film in the theatre with like minded people with viewing it on your smart phone. The atmosphere of the festival is therefore equally important. It compliments and enriches you, but only when the films that you get to watch are good. Goa gave the ambience, but failed to impress with the choice of films. That though doesn’t mean that the festival was a total washout. Far from it, there were a few good and brilliant films from the ones I watched.

For example, Director Piotr Domalewski’s “I Never Cry”. It tells the story of a seventeen year old Polish girl, Ola, who lives with her mother and a disabled brother. Her father, in order to earn a living is working in faraway Dublin, Ireland. Ola is aggressive, impulsive, desperately wants a car and her only hope is her father who has promised to save up for it. The day when Ola fails her driving test for the third time, her family gets a call from Dublin informing her father has had a fatal accident at work. Ola’s mother wants his remains to be brought home and given a proper burial. And so, begins the journey of Ola in an unknown land, in a world full of strangers. There are facts that she needs to learn, shocking truths that she needs to face, deal with the bureaucracy and the system that sees no emotions, make tough decisions along the way and get to know the father who was always absent while she grew up. In a way, it is a coming-of-age story of Ola, making her realize that there is a world beyond cars and responsibilities beyond feelings. It’s a simple story, the one narrated in a straightforward manner and yet so very honestly portrayed.



Another strongly emotional but absolutely unmelodramatic film, even while dealing with a subject like terminal illness and cancer, was “My Little Sister” by Stephanie Chuat and Veronique Reymond. Lisa and Sven are twins, while Lisa is a talented playwright and Sven a well-known theatre actor in Berlin. Lisa has moved to Switzerland with her two kids and a very successful husband. Sven is diagnosed with leukemia and Lisa stops writing the day he is diagnosed. A story of two siblings, their bond and Lisa’s desperate efforts to make her brother stand on the stage for one last time. She begins to write a monologue and is in a hurry to

complete it while jeopardizing her already fractured marriage. This tale has no happy ending, but it doesn’t make you sad either. The sound of the keyboard clicking is as soothing to Sven as it is to us. Both these films had a simplistic tone about them, in the treatment as well as portrayal.

Croatian director Ognjen Svilicic’s “The Voice” wasn’t as uncomplicated as the above two films, but wasn’t as moving either. In fact, it was the opposite, talking about the complex issue of religion and a sixteen years old’s resistance to be a believer. Goran is sent to a Catholic school because his mother needs to be on a cruise ship for work. Goran speaks very little and there is not much that happens throughout the film. It is the same ritual every morning during breakfast when all the students need to pray to the Lord for giving them their daily bread. The teacher and the students are stunned when Goran sits quietly without praying which leads to friction among the students and the teachers as well. A minority in the whole premises, Goran is not even aggressive enough to put up a fight at first but questions the majority’s faith all the time. The film doesn’t take sides, it doesn’t give answers and with very little dialogues and incidences, doesn’t even justify any side. At the most it suggests people to co-exist with all the contradictory views.

There were very few political films this year, at least from the ones I got to watch, and this one though not political in the real sense, did delve on the subject so relevant in today’s world.

---

*Ms. Meena Karnik is a Member of Fipresci-India, based in Mumbai.*