



Miss Lovely

Jewels in India's crown

With three films selected for Cannes and a flood of festival-worthy titles on the horizon, India's dynamic independent film sector is finally coming of age.

Liz Shackleton reports

After years of agonising about its lack of presence at the world's most prestigious film festival, India had an embarrassment of riches to offer Cannes this year. And while three films have been selected for various sections of the festival, there are other hotly anticipated titles from India that are likely to pop up at major festivals later in the year.

In Cannes selection are Ashim Ahluwalia's *Miss Lovely*, a drama set against India's sleazy C-grade film industry in the 1980s, which screens in Un Certain Regard; Vasan Bala's *Peddlers*, following three characters in Mumbai, screening in Critics' Week; and Anurag Kashyap's two-part *Gangs Of Wasseypur*, set in the mafia badlands of India's coal-mining industry, screening in Directors' Fortnight.

Other upcoming titles from India include *Monsoon Shootout*, the debut feature of award-winning shorts director Amit Kumar;

Anand Gandhi's philosophical drama *The Ship Of Theseus*; Ashish Shukla's cross-cultural thriller *Prague*; and Aditya Bhattacharya's crime thriller *Bombay's Most Wanted*, which features *The Sopranos*' John Ventimiglia in its cast.

Another highly anticipated title, Dibakar Banerjee's *Shanghai*, a political thriller about power-mongering in small-town India, will receive its world premiere on June 7 at the Videocon IIFA Weekend in Singapore, one day ahead of its release in India and diaspora territories through PVR Pictures.

In contrast to a few years ago, when Indian films struggled to make a connection to the global marketplace, many of these films have international sales agents attached — Fortissimo Films has picked up *Miss Lovely*, *Monsoon Shootout* and *The Ship Of Theseus*, while France's Elle Driver has *Gangs Of Wasseypur* and *Peddlers*.

This recent flood of festival-worthy titles stems from a dynamic up-and-coming independent scene which has been bubbling away in India for several years. "A lot of strands are starting to fall into place," observes Fortissimo Films' chairman Michael J Werner. "An Indian film community is beginning to emerge that better understands how to speak to the international community, and also what kind of storytelling resonates with international audiences."

He continues that institutional support from organisations such as India's National Film Development Corp (NFDC) has also played its part. "The »



Ishaqzaade



Gangs Of Wasseypur

other side of the coin is events like Film Bazaar bringing people in, the India Pavilion at Cannes and the Incredible India campaign, which are making international distributors much more aware of and interested in India,” Werner says.

In addition to hosting the annual Film Bazaar co-production market in Goa, the NFDC has returned to financing Indian productions across a range of languages in recent years. Upcoming projects include Anup Singh’s Punjabi-language *Qissa*, co-produced with Germany’s Heimatfilm and other European partners; Tamil action drama *Adigaram*, and Bengali film-maker Q’s *Tasher Desh*, co-produced with Indian partners and Belgium’s Entre Chien et Loup.

The NFDC also organises the India Pavilion at Cannes, which this year is hosting a ‘micro’ co-production market, showcasing projects from the November 2011 edition of Film Bazaar, along with networking receptions for Indian film-makers to mingle with their counterparts from Brazil, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Israel.

As last year, the NFDC has also selected six Indian film-makers to introduce to the international community, including Umesh Vinayak Kulkarni, whose *Temple (Deol)* screened at the Busan International Film Festival last year; Manjeet Singh, who took part in this year’s Producers’ Lab in Rotterdam with his project *Mumbai Cha Raja*, and Tamil film-maker Vetri Maaran, who won six National Film Awards for last year’s *Aadukalam*.

What is heartening about the films emerging from the independent space in India is their diversity, linguistically and also in terms of subject matter, storytelling and style. Many of the new independent film-makers utilise funding, stars and technicians from India’s established, commercial film industries, but are not catering to the general mass audience that Bollywood has to serve, so can give full reign to their creativity and vision.

Speaking about the three films he has recently picked up, Fortissimo’s Werner says: “Each film is very distinct and each should appeal to different segments of the marketplace. *Miss Lovely* is an exciting new voice set against a colourful background that’s different to anything else being made



Peddlers



‘At Cannes we’ll be focusing on new markets and opening up new territories’
Amrita Pandey, UTV

in India right now; *The Ship Of Theseus* is a well-written and moving story with a significant message and beautiful photography, and *Monsoon Shootout* is more of a genre film that is interesting in its storytelling and the situation it presents.”

Meanwhile, mainstream Bollywood will also be out in force at Cannes. India’s leading privately owned film studio, Yash Raj Films, is taking an office on the Croisette for the first time this year, to introduce the 40-year-old company to the international film community and also test the waters for its upcoming slate of high-profile Hindi films.

These include Habib Faisal’s *Ishaqzaade*, a love story set against small-town clan wars, which opened in India on May 11, and three blockbusters starring Bollywood’s most bankable triumvirate — *Ek Tha Tiger* with Salman Khan; a project directed by Yash Raj Films founder Yash Chopra, starring Shah Rukh Khan; and *Dhoom 3*, starring Aamir Khan.

However, Yash Raj Films vice-president, international operations, Avtar Panesar explains that while the company is developing a solid international strategy, it is not attempting to make “cross-over” pictures. Last year, Yash Raj launched a Los Angeles-based production company, YRF Entertainment, to make English-language films for a global audience, starting with *The Longest Week* starring Jason Bateman, which Voltage Pictures is handling internationally.



Delhi Belly

“For the films we make in India, the target audience is India and the Indian diaspora, and the films we produce in the US are for a completely different audience,” explains Panesar. “We are not trying to bridge that gap — if we happen to produce a film that works with both audiences, then that’s great, but you can’t set out to make that kind of film.”

Cannes regulars UTV Motion Pictures and Eros International will also have their usual berths in the Palais. Eros’ slate includes upcoming performance-capture epic *Kochadaiyaan* — *The Legend*, starring Rajinikanth. UTV will be focusing on Aamir Khan-produced comedy *Delhi Belly*, which recently had a mainstream release in Hong Kong, and Anurag Basu’s *Barfi!* starring Ranbir Kapoor as a happy-go-lucky deaf-mute.

All the major Indian studios, including Reliance Big Pictures and Viacom 18 Motion Pictures (which financed Kashyap’s *Gangs Of Wasseypur*), have direct distribution operations in markets such as the UK, US and Middle East, which account for 90% of their global revenues, and informal output deals in other Indian diaspora territories. But increasingly they are using international film festivals to test audience reaction to different kinds of local-language films, and attend film markets to explore distribution in non-traditional territories.

Opening up new markets

“At Cannes we’ll be focusing on new markets and opening up new territories — we recently had a lot of success with *Guzaarish* [starring Hrithik Roshan and Aishwarya Rai Bachchan] which opened theatrically in South Korea, Peru and France,” says Amrita Pandey, UTV’s senior vice-president, international distribution and syndication.

UTV is also in the process of examining how to maximise synergies with the global distribution networks of The Walt Disney Company, which is currently completing its buyout of the Indian studio. Indeed, most of the Indian majors are linked through ownership ties to US studio partners, or an international sales agent as in the case of Reliance, a majority investor in IM Global, which could open up new avenues of distribution.

But Cannes, with its attendant glamour and industry functions, will continue to be an important launchpad for the studios’ local-language pictures and international endeavours — it still makes headlines in India when Aishwarya Rai Bachchan walks up the red carpet. And for the burgeoning indie sector, the Cannes market is an essential platform for film-makers and producers to mingle with the international film industry.

This year’s Cannes, however, is likely to be the biggest celebration for India to date — with three films in various sections and many more in the pipeline, its indie film-makers can confidently say they have arrived. **E**