

Penang (Malaysia) 1997

By Jan Uhde

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PENANG'S 1st EAST ASIA FILM AND TELEVISION FESTIVAL

LIKE the Hong Kong film industry, Iran has already had fifty years of filmmaking, amounting to the production of 1,200 films in that time. Few national cinemas have had to go through the changes and pressures that Iranian filmmaking has been subjected to from the Shah era of the 1970s to the tumultuous revolutionary days of the Ayatollah Khomeini to the recent creative years. In fact as early as 1989, the Hong Kong International Film Festival was showing Iranian features like Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *The Peddler* and Dariush Farhang's *The Spell*. Despite their difficulties, Iranian filmmakers have tenaciously held on to their art. This year, with much persistence, they have shown to the world that their cinema is more than children's films or propaganda.

Even before Abbas Kiarostami's *The Taste of Cherry* (Ta'm-e Gilass) shared this May's Cannes *Palme d'Or* with *The Eel* by veteran Japanese director Shohei Imamura (*Ballad of the Narayama*), Iranian films have won distinction at various international film festivals. Examples abound: Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *The Cyclist* won First Prize at Rimini Cinema Festival, 1989, *And Life Goes on* by Abbas Kiarostami won the Roberto Rossellini Prize at the Cannes Festival, 1992.

Having followed Iranian cinema since 1989, it was a pleasure to see the jurors of the Penang's 1st East Asia Film and Television Festival (27 August-3 September) astutely awarding seven out of the fifteen prizes to the two Iranian films, Majid Majidi's *The Father* (*Pedar*, 1996) and Kiumars Pourahmad's *Strange Sisters* (*Karahen Gharib*, 1996). The former is a touching story about a fourteen-year-old boy and his uneasy relationship with his new step-father, a policeman. The latter is a delightful tale about a pair of identical twin sisters who scheme to bring their estranged parents back together. *The Father* won for Best Film and Best Screenplay. Mohammed Kasebi was hailed Best Actor and the grouchy boy who plays his step-son, Hassan Sadeghi, was voted Best Supporting Actor. On the other hand, *Strange Sisters* won the Best Music and Special Jury awards while Kiumars Pourahmad was selected by the eight-member jury as Best Director.

However, the highly talented and regally beautiful Parivash Nazarieh who plays the remarried mother in *Pedar* (*Father*) lost out to Filipino actress Nora Annor who plays a highly disturbed victim of military terror during the Marcos regime in Joel Lamangan's *Bakit May Kahapon Pa?* (*Why Is There A Yesterday?*). The best supporting actress was a tri-contest among the hauntingly attractive surgeon Shim Hae-jin in Kang's *Gingko Bed*, the witty and resourceful twin sisters, Elaheh and Elham Aliari in *Strange Sisters* and Hong Kong's stunning newcomer Almen Wong in *Final Justice* by Derek Chiu (*The Log*).

The Sleeping Man, the latest film of the highly regarded Kohei Oguri (*For Kayako* and *The Sting of Death*), won both the Best Art Direction and Best Cinematography awards while the Best Stunt and Special Effects honours went to China's *The Sorrow of Brooke Steppes* directed by Mai Li Si. Jackie Kang's *Gingko Bed*, South Korea's highest grossing fantasy-romance thriller about a timeless love story stretching back a thousand years, won the Best Editing prize. India's veteran director B.R. Chopra, who won the Legendary Pearl Award, the highest honorary award for the most exemplary film maker whose works reach out beyond the borders of its country, was not on hand to receive it due to health problems.

In all, delegates from twenty-two countries were among the more than 1,500 people at the new Penang International Sports Arena and Aquatic Centre, with Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in attendance to commemorate the gala dinner event. Also gracing the evening with their presence were the Malaysian diva, Ning Baizura and the great Taiwanese singer Tsai Chin who performed two lively songs, including her signature theme from Bai Jing-rui's *The Last Night of Madam Tai Pan Chin*.

A variety of activities in the form of gala dinners, meet-the stars sessions, Bollywood Night, a retrospective and a hastily arranged film seminar loftily titled *Towards Greater Extra-Asian and Intra-Asian Accessibility and Acceptance of the Asian Film and Television Industry* were organised for the benefit of the press, film exhibitors, observers and the stars themselves. Hong Kong's Tony Leung Kar-fai (of *The Lover* repute) who

has starred in numerous Cantonese films in the past decade, drew an enthusiastic crowd of mainly Hokkien-speaking fans who eagerly snapped up his autographed T-shirts for charity. Ten T-shirts were signed by the superstar, the first eight going for M\$100 each and the last two at M\$200 and M\$500 respectively, giving a total of M\$1,500 to assist AIDS victims and help the famine casualties in North Korea.

King Hu's legendary classic, the three-hour long *A Touch of Zen*, seldom exhibited on the big screen, was shown in the director's cut at one of the Mega Pavilion cineplexes. The screening was enriched by the lead actor Shih Chin (who plays the crafty scholar who helps Hsu Feng and Pai Ying defeat the evil Eunuch Wu) who explained in some detail the making and the art direction of this influential masterpiece with the help of Chaplin Chang, the late director's production manager who translated his speech into English to a discerning audience.

One point of interest was that Eric Khoo's over-hyped and overrated Housing and Development Board Drama *12 Storeys* which vied for the Best Music Award with the Iranian *Strange Sisters*, China's *The Sorrow of Brooke Steppes* and the Korean *Gingko Bed*, lost out to the Iranian entry. The Singapore delegation were rooting for him to win at least this award but in the face of the heavyweights, the bantamweight Singaporean effort received a TKO. Other films in this year's competition included singer-composer M. Nasir's credible debut, *Merah*, a buddy-robber-reformation story which boasts some good action sequences and a strong performance by a macho-posturing Awie as the man who is finally reformed by his counsellor-turned-girlfriend Ziana Zain.

There were also a few interesting Indian films like the feminist *Saaz* by Sai Paranjpye about a pair of sisters who are keen rivals in singing and Rishpal Singh Vikal's *Kokh*, an angry anti-woman exploitation film which crusades against the role of unfortunate Indian women as baby machines, forced to produce male heirs for chauvinistic husbands. However, the film suffers from overbearing didacticism through the use of stereotypical, moralistic songs. On the other hand, Sri Lanka's Gamini Fonseka offered a good cautionary tale with *Night of Destiny (Anthima Reya, 1996)*, about the mentor of a worldly politician who gives his protégé his due. A promising out-of-competition film was *The Road Less Travelled*, sensitively directed by Singapore's Lim Suat Yen who speaks for aspiring "xin-yao" (ballad) singers in the long, difficult and often desperate journey to fame. Also from Singapore was the Mammon-and-Entertainment driven *Army Daze* directed by Ong Ken Seng depicting the silly romping of army recruits and based on Michael Chiang's successful theatrical play.

An array of film classics from all corners of the globe helped to bring an international atmosphere to this otherwise East Asian affair, and thankfully, with the Iranians in the lead, the viewings were a delight. The time-honoured films projected included Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) from Down Under, the evergreen *Wild, Wild Rose* (1960) from Hong Kong, Singapore's *Orang Minyak (The Oily Man, 1958)* a horror movie about a deranged man who attacks women. There was also a selection of twelve past and present French classics, including René Clément's *La Bataille du rail (The Battle of the Rails, 1946)*, Jacques Tati's *Les vacances de M. Hulot (Mr. Hulot's Holiday, 1953)*, François Truffaut's autobiographical masterpiece *Les quatre cents coups (The 400 Blows, 1959)* and Bertrand Tavernier's *Un dimanche à la campagne (A Sunday in the Country, 1984)*.

This being Penang's first film festival, it would be quite unreasonable for anyone to expect perfection. Although glitz and glamour, as in the red carpet treatment given to the festival's stars, was very much in evidence, this turned out to be a festival of discoveries and re-learning for the organisers, the critics, film buyers and exhibitors as well as for ordinary film fans. Films need viewers, and without their ardent support, any film festival, star-studded or otherwise, is bound to be doomed.

Author Information

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Figure 1: *Saaz* by Sai Paranjpye

Publications: *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* Second edition, with Yvonne Ng Uhde (Ridge Books, National University Press of Singapore, 2010); *Latent Images: Film in Singapore*, with Yvonne Ng Uhde (Oxford University Press, 2000); *Latent Images: Film in Singapore CD-ROM* (2003, co-author); *Vision and Persistence: Twenty Years of the Ontario Film Institute* (University of Waterloo Press, 1990) and *Ontario Film Institute Programming Activities Index 1969-1989* (Toronto: Ontario Science Centre, 1990). He co-edited the *Place in Space: Human Culture in Landscape* (Proceedings from the Second International Conference of the Working Group "Culture and Landscape" of the International Association of Landscape Ecology, Pudoc Scientific Publishers, Wageningen, Holland, 1993). Jan Uhde has published articles and reviews in several countries (including Canada, USA, Germany, Italy), participated in international juries at film festivals and presented papers at international conferences in North America and Europe. In 1998/99, he was a visiting researcher at the School for Film and Media Studies, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore.

His professional and research interests focus on Singapore cinema; the identification and distancing mechanisms of the film viewer; the non-authored modifications and manipulation of films; and specific aspects of film history, including the Central European cinema.

He founded KINEMA in 1993.