



IFFR FILM REVIEW

The Song of Scorpions: An Indian tale seasoned to Western taste

FAHMIM FERDOUS, back from Rotterdam

How far will you go for love? How much will you put at stake, especially if you're a camel trader in the deserts of Rajasthan head over heels for a healer who can cure people of deadly scorpion poison? In *The Song of Scorpions*, Anup Singh delves into the complex, universal human dynamics of love, loss, and revenge, painting a folk-fable picture that is engrossing if you're not looking too closely.

The third feature by Geneva-based Indian helmer Singh is part of the Voices Main Programme at International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) this year, in which he brings back his trusted compatriot Irrfan Khan to pair up with exiled Iranian actress Golshifteh Farahani.

Nooran (Farahani) is a young, independent girl who goes village to village on call as a scorpion singer – a healer who can de-poison victims of deadly desert scorpion bites through her singing. She lives with and is trained by her grandmother Zubaida

(Bollywood legend Waheeda Rehman), and is followed around the dunes of Jaisalmer by camel trader Aadam (Khan), her torn lover. As Nooran's life gets caught in a rapid spiral, she seeks out an oasis but finds a mirage.

The cast and their performances are among foremost of the marks that the film hits. Irrfan Khan pays back the director's confidence in him in a measured, pinpoint portrayal of a layered character and with it strengthens the director-actor chemistry that began with Singh's sophomore feature "Qissa". (Khan will also reportedly play the protagonist in his Singh's next project "Lasya: The Gentle Dance" which is said to be the final chapter of a trilogy of sorts.) Farahani blends seamlessly into the story while keeping her ferocity and charm, and the very young Sara Arjun punches beyond her weight as a small but important piece of the narrative. Waheeda Rehman's cameo (for which she also sings in her own voice) is a treat, especially for those who may have followed mainstream Indian cinema of

the yesteryears.

The photography by Swiss DOP Pietro Zuercher gives character to the desert backdrop, in slow-sweeping wide-angle camera pans bringing out its vastness in daytime and the subtle game of low light to accentuate the shadows at night, through a large-aperture eye. The sound and production design are also commendable, particularly the costume and indoor sets.

The film, sadly, is not without its pitfalls. Aadam has some essential finer strokes missing - particularly his relationship with his daughter and a visit to the brothel – which fogs up his character motivation. Zubaida's character is also discarded abruptly and is never resolved, essentially making her a plot device, as is (although to a lesser extent) Aadam's daughter.

But my biggest gripe with *The Song of Scorpions* is some of the film's treatment and directorial choices that speak quite openly about Singh's rather deliberate lean towards a more Western audience. The avoidance of more rounded depiction of societal

realities of rural India serves the purpose of the timeless, mythical ambience he intends and would pose no issues for an international festival audience, but for his audience back home it runs the risk of the screenplay being a little hollow in places. The story, while thematically organic as a folk fable, also feels a little dressed-up for a foreign audience in terms of the story arc and pace. And finally, the deliberate decision to use Western chamber instruments and arrangement for much of the score is a massive missed opportunity and almost feels like pandering to a European market, especially given Rajasthan's gamut of folk instruments and their vast evocative potential.

All of this is not essentially a problem; the film premiered at Locarno last year and was screened at SGIFF. It has all the goods to make the rounds at the festival circuit, but how well it sits with the Indian (or sub-continental) audience will be the real test for this film.

The writer attended the 47th IFFR as a participant of its Young Film Critics Programme. This review was first published on the IFFR Blog.

SWAGATA'S

Valentine ventures

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

Popular TV actor Swagata has her hands full with Valentine's Day less than a week away. The artiste is all set to revive some old school romance with a programme to be aired on Gazi TV. Swagata will host the show, which will feature popular old school romantic film tracks from the 1970's through the 1990's.

Five popular romantic films have been selected, whose tracks will be played on the show. Shooting has commenced on the FDC sets, regarding which Swagata shared, "I am not sticking to the familiar ways a programme is hosted; instead, I will delve into different characters to enhance the show."

Swagata will also host comedy show for ntv, titled "No. 13 Boarding". The programme is said to invite prominent showbiz personalities on their set, which will be emceed by Swagata in various costumes.

Off-camera, Swagata will host a radio programme for Bangladesh Betar titled "Tarar Shaathe Kichukkhon". She says: "Radio still remains a popular media in our country, and the enjoyment I derive from it is very different from how I feel on TV sets."

The artiste is also busy with various acting ventures. She recently began filming for "Sentimental Selim", a drama series directed by Zahid Hasan. She will also appear in two more drama serials - directed by Nayeem Imtiaz Naimul and Golam Shohrab Dodul. The actor for the first time also worked in a short film made by her husband, Rashed Zaman, who is a cinematographer. On Duronto TV, Swagata is a storyteller to children in a programme titled "Golpo Bola".



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

Milla Jovovich to replace Olivia Munn in "Hummingbird"

In a pre-Berlin Film Festival signing, Milla Jovovich has come on board to star in action-thriller "Hummingbird", based on John McClain's "Black List" script.

Jovovich is the third actress cast in the lead role. Zoe Saldana was cast a year ago and replaced in the fall by Olivia Munn in the role of a black-ops assassin who begins to question her skills and training when she's placed on a questionable assignment. Jovovich will be replacing Munn, according to Variety. Producers said Tuesday that "Hummingbird" will be in the vein of "Lucy" and the Jason Bourne film franchise.

Production will start in the summer. China's Fundamental Films will produce the movie alongside Broken Road Productions. Marcus Kryler and Fredrik Akerström, who directed Electronic Arts' "Battlefield 1" video game, will direct.

Paul WS Anderson is writing a script revision, while Lionsgate is handling international sales. Mark Gao and Gregory Ouanhon are producing the project with Todd Garner.

Jovovich starred in all six "Resident Evil"



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Terracotta workshop at Vertical Studio



STAFF CORRESPONDENT

"VERTICAL Art and Craft Research", a studio and research centre based in Savar, is organising a two-day (February 9-10) terracotta workshop, titled "Inflection of Terracotta: Workshop 2018" at their studio premises at Hemayetpur.

The workshop will be conducted by eminent sculptor Professor Hamiduzzaman Khan and noted ceramist Swapan Kumar Shikder, former Chairman of the Department of Ceramics, Faculty of Fine Art (FFA), University of Dhaka (DU).

Professor Nisar Hossain, Dean of FFA, DU and Engineer Mainul Abedin will inaugurate the workshop as honourable guests. Teachers and students from University of Dhaka, Chittagong University and Rajshahi University are participating in the workshop that will come to an end with a certificate giving ceremony and a musical performance.

Jacqueline to recreate Madhuri's "Ek Do Teen"

Bollywood actor Jacqueline Fernandez is all set to recreate the iconic Madhuri Dixit number "Ek Do Teen", for the upcoming film "Baaghi 2". The song was originally directed by veteran choreographer Saroj Khan for the 1988 film "Tezaab", while Ganesh Acharya will be at the helm of affairs this time. Interestingly, Ganesh was one of the background dancers in the Madhuri Dixit song while "Baaghi 2" director Ahmed Khan was Saroj Khan's assistant at the time.

Disclosing details of the shoot, Ahmed Khan said in a press statement, "There will be three choreographers on the set today, that's a picture perfect moment in itself. It's an all-time favourite and I have asked Ganesh to retain Saroj ji's famous hook steps and Manish Malhotra to keep Madhuri Dixit's pink outfit in mind while designing Jacqueline's costume. I want the same feel of the earlier song that still looms large on everyone's mind and also the same vibe, with the crowds chanting 'Mohini, Mohini' as Madhuri takes the stage."

Ahmed also said Jacqueline is "the perfect choice" for the song. "Baaghi 2" is a sequel to the 2016 film Baaghi, starring Tiger Shroff in the lead. After the success of "Heropanti" and "Baaghi", the sequel will be the third collaboration of Tiger and Sajid Nadiadwala.

Starring the rumoured couple Tiger and Disha Patani in the lead, "Baaghi 2" is produced by Sajid Nadiadwala under the banner name Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment and presented by Fox Star Studios. It is scheduled to release on March 30.

Source: Hindustan Times

