

Toronto International Film Festival 2015

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HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2015

The print ads and trailers for Toronto's 40th edition (10-20 September 2015) showed a striking motif of a powdered explosion at reduced speed varying only by colour scheme - a nice metaphor for the celebratory blast of diversity that any healthy entity turning forty ought to enjoy. But far from being complacent, Toronto humbly adapted to a competitive festival circuit by tweaking key strategies (all but retreating from 2014's decision permitting only world premieres to screen on its opening weekend), while also launching new ideas (the inauguration of a juried feature film competition eponymously named after Jia Zhangke's 2000 film *Platform*). On a related note, Sinophone content dominated this year's skinny selection of about two dozen Asian films, about half of which came from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Elsewhere, the Philippines and South Korea, normally better represented, saw fewer films than past years. Overall, here were ten titles of interest:

Angry Indian Goddesses (Pan Nalin, India 2015) Billed as "India's first female buddy movie" (because bromances are Bollywood's evergreen specialty), Pan Nalin's frisky bachelorette comedy dares to take sharp subversive turns to reflect the female condition domestically. A bohemian lass invites six of her pluckiest friends to her Goan home to announce wedding plans, only for a series of events to eclipse her revelation. This ensemble unites the charming talents of Tannishtha Chatterjee, Rajshri Deshpande, Sarah Jane Dias, Pavleen Gujral, Amrit Maghera, Anushka Manchanda and Sandhya Mridul. So rapturous was the film's reception late in the festival that it was voted runner-up for the audience choice award.

A Copy of My Mind (Joko Anwar, Indonesia/South Korea 2015) In this Jakarta-set tale, a beauty salon worker and a DVD bootlegger fall for each other, but a foolish action from the former during a visit to a customer soon thrusts their lives in mortal danger. After making a series of well-received films spanning the genres of romantic comedy, dystopian fantasy and horror, writer-director Joko Anwar's latest film can't seem to summon the right tone for what's essentially a dark political thriller. The first in Joko's planned trilogy of love letters to Indonesia, this co-production involving South Korea's largest entertainment conglomerate represents the country's strategic foray into financing Southeast Asian filmmaking.

Honor Thy Father (Erik Matti, Philippines 2015) A churchgoing couple pays for the sins of their father after his death exposes the man's investment scheme as a racket while leaving them as default guarantors to a murderous herd of parishioners baying for blood. Headlining a cast of reprobate characters, John Lloyd Cruz emerges from the comfort of his matinee idol cocoon to play a fraught son-in-law who convinces himself that committing multiple wrongs will make it right for his besieged family. Apart from being apposite for its theme of religious demagoguery, writer-director Erik Matti's latest film is a solid morality tale that plays as a crime thriller.

Imbisibol (Lawrence Fajardo, Japan/Philippines 2015) After directing Herlyn Gail Alegre's play of the same name in 2013, editor-director Lawrence Fajardo brings this Fukuoka-set winter tale to the big screen. Like the play, the film explores the bisecting lives of a small community of Filipino migrants, many of whom are undocumented and live in constant fear of deportation in a country known for being less open to immigration. Films about the Filipino immigrant experience in foreign lands are few, but the issue was examined in sustained depth in Lav Diaz's *Batang West Side* (2001). The Tagalog name of Fajardo's film uses the Anglicized loanword for 'invisible'.

Jafar Panahi's Taxi (Jafar Panahi, Iran 2015) In the spirit of the handful of cinematic works set in cars (notably a few from fellow Iranian Abbas Kiarostami), Jafar Panahi's latest film does just that - except the metaphor of confinement reflects his status as enemy of the state. Here he plays himself in the lead role as a cabbie to give us a slice of Tehran through his engaging interactions with various family, friends and fares, many of whom have intimate experience with the power of state control. This is Panahi's third furtive film made in defiance of a 20-year filmmaking ban in 2010 on state charges of treason.

Mountains May Depart (Jia Zhangke, China/France/Japan 2015) Set in 1999, 2014 and 2025, Jia Zhangke's ambitious new film chronicles the lives of an itinerant Shanxi family over a quarter century. A young couple's mobility across class and borders forms an enticing first two chapters, but this isn't matched by the finale which explores the effects of their transactional marriage on their bicultural son. Interestingly, these characters' destinies mirror the thematic shifts in Jia's career: from austere stories of alienation in his provincial hometown, he branched out to capture social changes across the country before venturing beyond its shores. This is Jia's first film partially made outside China.

Mr. Six (Guan Hu, China 2015) After rich gangsters abduct his estranged son, a former street ruffian (big budget director Feng Xiaogang) makes repeated attempts to save him in a covert bid to atone for ditching the boy and his mother years ago. Although played as a drama with comedic sprinklings, Guan Hu's entertaining Beijing-set tale is also a blunt commentary on the generational tensions inspired by China's tryst with the free market and global mobility. Feng plays the titular role of the crusty middle-aged man alienated by a changing society with such ease that it's easy to forget he can sometimes be like this in reality.

River (Jamie M. Dagg, Canada/Laos 2015) Served in the popular fugitive genre, Jamie M. Dagg's feature debut is a dependable thriller inscribed with a conscience. Off duty from his humanitarian aid job in Laos, a boozed American doctor (Canadian Rossif Sutherland) saves a woman from two equally sloshed foreigners. But when he learns that one assailant is dead and the victim cannot recall his valour, he flees for consular protection in a skein of gripping passages across the Mekong River to Thailand (where the film was also shot). Thai actor Vithaya Pansringarm, who has gained visibility in recent Western films, shows up here as a virtuous bartender.

Stranger (Yermek Tursunov, Kazakhstan 2015) Set during the Soviet Union's agricultural collectivization of the 1930s, an orphaned boy learns to survive the harsh Kazakh steppe as he grows up with minimal contact to a changing world. Although based on a key part of Kazakh history during the early 20th century, writer-director Yermek Tursunov's latest film is less a historical drama than an abstract cinematic throwback to the wealth of nomadic customs that Soviet policy cruelly eradicated. While not readily known in the West, Kazakh cinema has still managed to produce pockets of visibility at film festivals and award circuits over the past few decades.

The Whispering Star (Sono Sion, Japan 2015)

Shot in monochrome and set in a post-apocalyptic universe, the latest from Sono Sion's active imagination follows a spaceship-bound android tasked to visit various planets to deliver memories in packages to an endangered human race. Sono created the screenplay and storyboard a quarter century ago, but revised it to incorporate key elements of the 2011 Tohoku calamity to underscore the consequences of human frailties. Unlike the jazz that usually marks his films, this one is quiet, reflective and beautifully attuned to the Japanese aesthetic of transience. This is also the first film Sono has directed under his new production company.

Author Information

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