

Never Say Goodbye and its Stars Get Lost in the International Crowd; Mira Nair Remains the Darling of the Toronto International Film Festival

Never before has a mainstream Bollywood blockbuster enjoyed a prestigious gala spot at the Toronto International Film Festival. The red carpet treatment of *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehana* (*Never Say Goodbye*) alongside international titles like *Babel* starring Brad Pitt, *Volver* with Penelope Cruz and *All the King's Men* starring Sean Penn, raised many eyebrows. But having Indian star icons Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan in the mix was also an extremely potent opportunity, one that TIFF programmers just didn't want to miss. But despite all the buzz, fanfare and idolatry, the illustrious and powerful trio - Bachchan, Khan and Johar - and the biggest overseas hit, was lost in the critical mass of 352 films from 61 countries.

Even as frenzied fans patrolled the streets, phoned hotels to figure out the whereabouts of their favourite superstars and wreaked mayhem on the red carpet, mainstream media stayed away from both the press and industry screening and the press conference of *Never Say Goodbye*.

Sharing the global platform, and in contrast, much of the hype was Mira Nair's *The Namesake* starring Tabu, Irrfan Khan, Kal Penn and Zuleikha Robinson. Nair emerged as the irrefutable darling of the festival. The film had long press and industry line-ups and packed public screenings. Both Nair and Tabu who were in town for the premiere avoided interviews, as the film is slated for a March 2007 release. Doing poetic justice to the adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's book, Nair creates a visual canvas which is evocatively realistic and full of vibrant strokes. The film captures the essence of the book and has stellar performances from Irrfan, Tabu and Penn.

Also part of the impressive Indian line-up this year was Chitra Palekar's *Maati Maay* (*A Grave-Keeper's Tale*) with Nandita Das and Atul Kulkarni. A moving and saddening story of a woman who gets cast away as an evil spirit, the film makes social commentary, which is subtle yet hard-hitting. Director Palekar felt confident about her film sharing the same platform with *KANK*.

Kabir Khan's *Kabul Express*, starring John Abraham and Arshad Warsi, is set in Afghanistan amid tanks and the post 9/11 landscape. Even though the film is not getting many favourable reviews, Abraham has become a huge favourite at the festival both because of his boyish looks and the spotlight he had last year in Deepa Mehta's *Water*.

Other festival films included Rajnesh Domalpalli's *Vanaja*, the story of a young, ambitious girl who makes her way into the household of a rich landlady in the hopes of securing a better future as a Kuchipudi dancer. But

she becomes a victim of rape and class divide, dealing with the situation with remarkable strength. Also at the festival were Hoabam Paban Kumar's *A Cry in the Dark*, Tarsem's *The Fall* and John Jeffcoat's *Outsourced*, which dealt with various captivating themes.

Some industry insiders felt that films like *Never Say Goodbye* really didn't need a platform because of the grand exposure they receive at other places, and it is the independent films which need to be spotlighted. But despite the debate, both the film and its stars garnered limited mention and photos in the local newspapers. The tight window the stars had for personal interviews was cited as a possible reason. Even though Bachchan had supposedly flown out of town, he was seen attending the public screening of Nair's *The Namesake*. Later, *Screen Daily* announced that Bachchan is expected to be the lead in Deepa Mehta's *Exclusion*, a \$15 million historical drama of the Sikhs who arrived in British Columbia, Canada, in 1914.

Omni reviewer, Mohit Rajhans, and moderator of this year's South Asian press conferences at TIFF says, "The press and media didn't understand the impact of having these people (Bachchan and Khan) here." Listing two major drawbacks Rajhans says, "The film had already been released, and the lead up wasn't done properly. Unlike Hollywood films there are no hype vehicles for Indian cinema."

However, casting director and the Indian film representative at TIFF, Uma Da Cunha, felt that the festival was very representative this year. "There is a Marathi film, a Telugu film and a Manipuri film at the festival. All of these are not the foremost Indian languages. But then, of course, there's *Kabul Express* from the Yash Raj stables and *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehana*, which is star-driven and has a high voltage presence. It might dwarf the others but the Film Festival does manage that well." Talking about the lack of mainstream interest in the Bollywood genre she said, "Even in Cannes, they hardly created a ripple."

Cameron Bailey, TIFF Programmer for South Asia who was instrumental in bringing *Never Say Goodbye* to the festival said, "The Indian film industry is one of the largest on the planet, but it is not plugged into the outside world. The festival was trying to be that bridge by showing *KANK* globally."

But as one critic points out, "The film festival embracers will not let names fool them or the hype associated with these people. At the end of the day they are looking for good performances!" ANOKHI

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