



# world

## Storytelling at the 56<sup>th</sup> London Film Festival

[ By Sanam Maher ]

“There is no dialogue between these two worlds,” said Mira Nair at the premiere of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* during the British Film Institute’s (BFI) London Film Festival (LFF), referring to the relationship between the western world and developing countries. “If we don’t tell our own stories,” she continued, “no one else will tell them for us.” It is this endeavour that characterised much of the content at the festival — during 12 days, 227 feature films and documentaries and 111 short films from 68 countries attempted to bring the world to London’s audience.

More than the choice of films on offer at the festival is perhaps the choices that we as an audience make — what films are we gravitating towards? What stories are captivating us right now and why? While tickets for some big-name films — Mike Newell’s *Great Expectations* (the film closed the festival), *Midnight’s Children*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *Ginger and Rosa* (Sally Potter’s latest



Above and below: *Beasts of the Southern Wild* had its UK premiere at the festival; Golshifteh Farahani stars in Atiq Rahimi’s *The Patience Stone*, set in Kabul

production), *Rust and Bone* (by A Prophet's director Jacques Audiard) or Michael Winterbottom's *Everyday* – were sold out within minutes, it was interesting to note the smaller films that matched such ticket sales. These sales can be attributed in no small part to the BFI's clever marketing (*Wadjda*, for example, was pitched as an "achievement" by a female director from "a country where it is illegal for a woman to drive let alone direct" and shot "on location in a country where cinemas themselves have been banned for over 30 years"). Word of mouth could be the other reason. As the LFF takes place at the tail end of the international festival calendar; positive reviews from the Toronto International Film Festival, Venice and Cannes and the Sundance Film Festival raised expectations for many films showing at the festival. (29-year-old Benh Zietlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, for instance, was an eagerly anticipated addition to the festival, following unanimously rave reviews since its premiere at Sundance in January.)

Afghan director Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* (Syngué Sabour), screened on the second day of the festival, is an evocative reminder of the stories Nair was referring to — the stories that are under-reported or overlooked, misreported or glimpsed from a restrictive view. The film is Afghanistan's entry in the foreign language category at next year's Oscars and is based on Rahimi's Prix Goncourt-winning novel of the same name. He eschews any names or dates – the village where the film is set remains unnamed, as does his female protagonist – thus creating proxies for the stories of millions. In the heart of a village crawling with militiamen and their opponents (Rahimi's reference is probably to the civil war in 1980s), a

## ...and the rest

### Some of the most talked about films at the festival

#### Frankenweenie

Director Tim Burton and Helena Bonham Carter were honoured as the British Film Institute fellows this year; while Burton's 3D stop-motion animated story about a boy and his dog opened the festival, Bonham Carter's *Great Expectations* closed the 12-day event.

#### Argo

Based on a true (and recently declassified) story of a mission to rescue six Americans trapped in Tehran in 1979.

#### Quartet

Dustin Hoffman makes his directorial debut with a story about four ageing opera singers.

#### Amour

This is Michael Haneke's Palme d'Or-winning love story about an octogenarian couple.

#### No

The final instalment in director Pablo Larrain's trilogy of films set in Chile under Augusto Pinochet.

#### My brother the Devil

Sally el Hosaini's debut won her the Best British Newcomer award for a story about two brothers caught in a world of gang violence.

#### Ship of Theseus

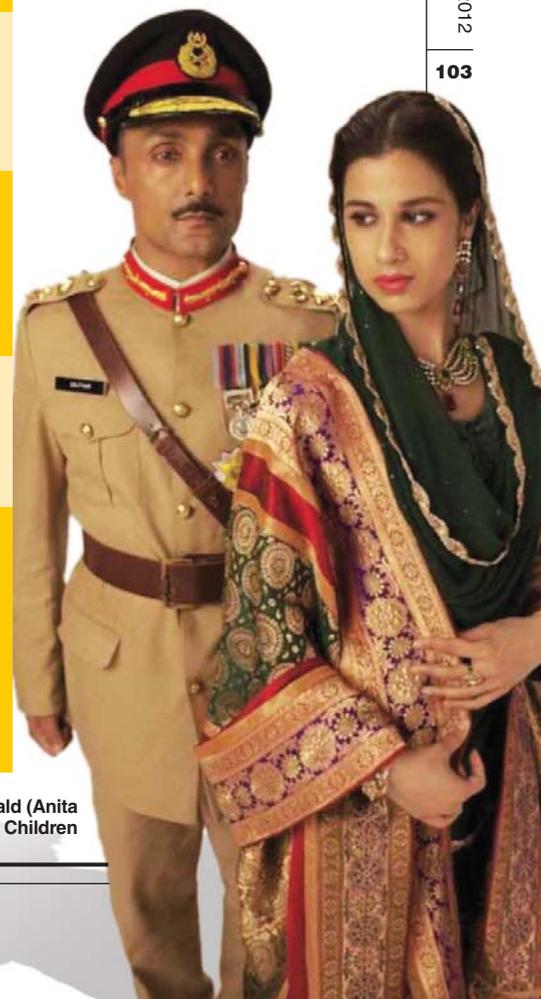
Anand Gandhi's first feature, set in Mumbai, was commended by the judges of the Best Feature competition.

#### Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God

Director Alex Gibney's documentary won the festival's Grierson Award for its documentation of the Church's response to the scandal of child abuse within the institution.

woman tends to her husband, a fighter who has been in coma for over two weeks. She keeps him alive via a feeding tube and protects him from the intermittent shelling in their neighbourhood. She hears the story of the 'patience stone' from her aunt — a stone with magical properties that listens to all your worries and then shatters, thus freeing you from the burden of your misery. She soon begins a one-sided conversation with her husband. She narrates to him the story of her sister, bartered by her father in order to settle a gambling debt, of her mother-in-law's constant nagging, of sexual harassment at the hands of her brother-in-laws. Rahimi's *Shehrezade* tells us shocking but unsurprising stories of the extraordinary lengths to which we will go in order to survive as his female protagonist ultimately resorts to prostitution in order to buy her husband's medicines.

Despite their different focus, Eran Riklis' *Zaytoun* (an optimistic road/buddy movie



General Zulfikar (Rahul Bose) and his wife Emerald (Anita Majumdar) in a still from *Midnight's Children*



Top to bottom: Helena Bonham Carter stars as Miss Havisham in Mike Newell's *Great Expectations*; Kate Hudson and Riz Ahmed star in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; Stephen Dorff and Abedallah el-Akal star in Israeli director Eran Riklis' buddy/road-movie *Zaytoun*

that posits that all we need to bridge the chasm between Israelis and Palestinians is dialogue and personal interaction), Ibrahim el-Batout's *Winter of Discontent* and Nabil Ayouch's *Horses of God* all

worlds of Resnais, Truffaut, Godard and Fellini. During a screening of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as I looked around at hundreds of faces illuminated by the glow of images of Lahore's Pak Tea House on-screen and the hall filled with the operatic tones of Fared Ayaz and his troupe, I realised that this education could open up worlds to us — unimaginable, extraordinary worlds. ■

explore extraordinary acts of another nature — the violent responses we are driven to by circumstances. *Winter of Discontent* sets the stage for protests in Egypt this year and Batout's film is terrifying for the acts of torture and violence that it hints at. It was interesting to note the reaction of many Egyptians in the audience at the screening — they laughed in derision at the depictions of police officials and intelligence officials and there was a sense that, even as this is the first feature film to explore the events that took place at the Tahrir Square, it still falls short of encapsulating the sheer energy and anger of the protestors in Cairo at the time. Set in Sidi Moumen slum in Casablanca and inspired by multiple attacks there in 2003 as well as 9/11, *Horses of God* is the story of creeping fundamentalist thought and behaviour and the ways in which they take root in impoverished communities.

The films on offer at the festival were divided into roughly 14 categories, including 'love', 'debate', 'dare', 'laugh' and 'journey'. This year's much-loved 'treasures' category included restorations of *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* (1963) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (the infamous 1962 production or showdown, rather, between Joan Crawford and Bette Davis). While Jacques Audiard's love story, *Rust and Bone*, picked up the festival's Best Film award, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* was awarded the Sutherland Award (for the most original and imaginative feature debut). The film's pint-sized star, Quvenzhané Wallis, has generated much Oscar buzz with her impeccable performance as Hushpuppy, a little girl living amongst a fringe group of drunkards and misfits in 'the Bathtub' in southern Louisiana. Wallis was just five-years-old when she auditioned for the role and seven when production on the film was complete. A richly detailed magic-realist story, *Beasts* is worth a watch if only for Dan Romer and Zeitlin's lush music score.

"I feel like I got my education at that cinema," said writer, Salman Rushdie at the LFF, referring to a cinema in Cambridge that introduced him to the