

Stars, Films, and a queer film makes it debut

**\*Zeenat Aman at Kashish\***

'Chura Liya Hai Tumne Jo Dil Ko' - the audience could well have sung to her as Zeenat Aman traipsed down the red carpet at PVR Juhu on Sunday. The occasion was the closing of Kashish - Mumbai International Queer Film Festival 2010, just before the screening of the festival closing film 'Donno Y... Na Jaane Kyu. "In the '70s, I was at the forefront of the hippie moment with 'Hare Ram Hare Krishna'; 'Donno Y...' will similarly lead the new wave of queer films in the country," said Zeenat Aman, who led the cast and crew of the yet to be released film, including Mahabanoo Mody-Kotwal and debutants Yuvraaj Parashar and Kapil Sharma.

"When Kapil came to me with the story of 'Donno Y...' I thought it was different, multi-layered with many shades," said Zeenat while speaking about the movie. "Bollywood has for years had dress designers, make-up artistes and hair dressers who were open about their sexuality and were accepted," she said, but in answer to an audience question she said, "I personally don't know of any gay actors who are in the closet."

Zeenat said that though Bollywood has fleetingly touched upon queer issues in films like 'Dostana', there was a change afoot to deal with the issue sensitively. Asked about the secret of her beauty, she replied modestly with a smile, "Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder."

Sanjay Sharma, the director of 'Donno Y', said that he was proud that it was the festival's closing film. The film's writer and actor Kapil Sharma said: "Our film is on a sensitive issue. We hope it entertains you and leaves you with a smile."

'Dunno Y...' is a film about an Anglo-Indian family living in Goa that goes through many crises – from a father who deserts the family to a son who comes to terms with his sexuality after his marriage. The film is a contemporary take on what it means to be gay in India where social taboos and family pressures do not allow a person to fulfil his need for love.

**\*Lost and Found' wins Best Indian Short at Kashish\***

Delhi-based filmmaker Shrenik Jain's 'Lost and Found' won the Best Indian Short Film Award at the Kashish - Mumbai International Queer Film Festival 2010. 'Lost and Found' is an 11-minute film about a comedy of errors that follows when two strangers meet in a crowded bus.

The awards were handed out at a ceremony at PVR Juhu on Sunday evening. The Best Short Documentary award went to Bharathy Manjula's Malayalam film 'XXWHY' about Kerala's first out female-to-male (F2M) transgender.

'Prodigal Sons' directed by Kimberly Reed, and 'Steam' directed by Eldar Rapaport, both from the USA, won Best Feature Documentary and Best International Short Film awards, respectively, at the festival.

Special jury cash awards were also handed out to 'Flying Inside My Body' (Short Documentary), 'Holding Hands' (Feature Documentary) and 'Dirty Magazines' (International Short Film), and a special jury award to a media student's film - 'Speak Up! It is not your fault'.

The jury was effusive in their praise for the films screened at the festival. "I enjoyed my four-day journey with Kashish," said Dolly Thakore, a theatre personality. "I wish these films could reach out and be shown to a wider audience," she said.

Reaching out to a larger audience should be the aim was also the view of another jury member and a film critic, Meenakshi Shedde. "The quality of the Indian films shown at Kashish was jaw dropping. They dealt with a spectrum of issues and were multi-layered. Even at international film festivals like Cannes and Venice, out of the many films screened, there are four or five that remain with you. At Kashish too, there are four to five films that I will take home and remember, said Meenakshi.

Jury member and nation-award winning actor Rajit Kapur credited Kashish with broadening his horizons and widening his perspective. "I do consider myself educated, liberal and modern. I am leaving Kashish after four days as a richer human being," said Kapur, adding, "These films should be a part of any mainstream film festival. This is a part of you, me, us."

Another jury member and again a National Award winning actor, Suhasini Mulay, also heaped praise on the films. "The calibre and craftsmanship of the filmmakers just got me...", she said. "The Indian entries were sensitive and well-made. They may have been made without much money, but conveyed what they wanted to say. That is the core of a good film."

Over the last four days, over 500 people came to watch the over 110 films that were screened simultaneously at two venues - PVR Juhu in suburban Mumbai and Alliance Francaise, Marine Lines in South Mumbai. "We never expected the film festival to get such a huge response," said Sridhar Rangayan, festival director.

The audience too was all praise for the film festival. Jehangir Jani, an artist known for alternative themes in his sculptures and paintings,

commented on the platform that Kashish provided for the community. "When I came out in the '80s I never knew anything about gay culture, except in snatches. Kashish is a landmark event because something like this has got a mainstream venue and is in the public eye."

As Dolly Thakore told Ashok Row Kavi, founder of Bombay Dost and Humsafar Trust, co-organisers of Kashish: "Little did one know that when we met in the early '80s, you would start a [gay] movement of such dimensions [in India]. What a wonderful team you have orchestrated... so disciplined and professional. You have to be proud of your success. I can't begin to tell you how privileged I feel to have participated in your maiden venture. Congratulations. More power to you."

\*List of awards at Kashish – Mumbai International Queer Film Festival 2010\*

\*Category: Short Documentary\*

1. Best Documentary Short Award plus Jury Cash Award - XXWHY
2. Special Jury Cash Award - FLYING INSIDE MY BODY.
3. Special Jury Cash Award for Student Film - SPEAK UP! IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT.

\*Category: Feature Documentary\*

1. Best Documentary Feature Award plus Jury Cash Award - PRODIGAL SONS.
2. Special Jury Cash Award - HOLDING HANDS.

\*Category: International Short\*

1. Best International Short Award plus Jury Cash Award - STEAM.
2. Special Jury Cash Award - DIRTY MAGAZINES.
3. Special Jury Cash Award - I AM GAY.

\*Category: Indian Short\*

1. Best Indian Short Award plus Jury Cash Award of Rs.10,000 - LOST & FOUND.

A look at the other three days of the festival

Day 3 – Ek Madhavbaug

A year and a half after director and playwright Chetan Datar's death, his pathbreaking play `Ek Madhavbaug' was translated into Hindi. A play reading by Mona Ambegaonkar brought the roof down at PVR Juhu.

An emotional Vivek Anand, CEO of Humsafar Trust and a close friend of Datar, who translated the play into Hindi, said it was a huge moment for him personally. "EK Madhavbaug was staged in Marathi and English and there were plans to always do a Hindi version, which never happened during Datar's lifetime," said Vivek.

A tale about an unconventional mom's discovery of her son's sexuality and her efforts to deal with it, got a standing ovation from the audience for Mona.

"Society may not be there to always support you and agree with your choices, but you have to go ahead with your journey irrespective," said Mona. Asked about how should parents deal with a lesbian or gay child, she replied, "It should be a hands-off approach, but be there to support them."

Mona's performance not only got a standing ovation but brought tears into many eyes.

Saturday also saw the houseful sign going up for four consecutive sessions at the 112-seater PVR Juhu.

The other highlights of the day were 'Suddenly, Last Winter' - about how a couple deals with a wave of homophobia sweeping through Italy; Prodigal Sons and Amnesia: The James Brighton Enigma.

There were many transgender-themed films at the Alliance Francaise today and the highlight there was a panel discussion called 'Trans Gaze -- the world of transgenders through the lens'. The panellists were the makers of a film called 'Our Family', Anjali Monteiro and Jayashankar, who belong to Tata Institute of Social Sciences; Prasanth Kanatur, whose film 'The Missing Colours' is being shown at the festival, and Urmi, head of the 'Care and Support' unit of Humsafar Trust. The discussion was moderated by Dalip Daswani.

Author R. Raj Rao attended some of the sessions at the Alliance Francaise along with friends from Pune.

Day 2 - Girls Day Out

It was a day for the girls. At PVR Juhu, there were two special film packages for women in love with women and a retrospective of lesbian filmmaker Pratibha Parmar.

Films in the 'Love stories for girls' and 'Girls Talk' packages were all about the first kiss from the girlfriend, blind dates and caring but bitchy lovers.

"The intention was to make it a sort of community outing so that a whole group of girl friends could come to the theatre together to meet, watch the films and talk," said festival director Sridhar Rangayan.

The highlights of the day were 'The Other War' - a tale from Israel about three women caught in the middle of a war, 'U-Haul: The Music Video' and 'Jodie: An icon'.

The T in LGBT was represented through two poignant movies, 'The Amazing Truth About Queen Raquella' and 'Unraveling Michelle', a journey through the male to female transition of a filmmaker.

In the afternoon, Onir, Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil, Mahesh Dattani, Meenakshi Shedde and Ashok Row Kavi came together for a discussion on role of the media and celebrity in advocacy, moderated by Parmesh Shahani. The discussion began with a brief flashback into queer representation in Indian cinema in recent years. Mahesh said that being at Kashish has brought home the fact that 12 years after writing the play 'A Muggy Night in Mumbai' on a gay theme, it's good to know that one is not alone on the subject of gay love, that there are other writers using this theme. Meenakshi Shedde, who was asked about 'Dostana' said that the movie was intelligent in the way the many layers of queer issues were represented in a movie that reached the mass market, hence the film is precious in its own way.

However, she praised 'Sancharam' for being a bold film that gave such dignity to same-sex love, in contrast to 'Dostana'. She also said that the upcoming 'Just Another Love Story' is also very sophisticated and brings out a nuanced discussion on alternate sexuality.

Ashok Row Kavi said that the last 15 years of the LGBT movement have been marked by fear and anxiety connected to Section 377. Carrying over from the panel discussion on cinema and censorship the previous day at the Alliance Francaise venue of Kashish, he said that why should only Karan Johar be allowed to make money on a Dostana -- why are film festivals like Kashish barred by the government from charging their delegates? We must have sustainable models for festivals in India.

Manav revealed that while being an out gay man and belonging to a royal family at the same time has brought him much love and respect abroad, he feels a great sense of responsibility from both these identities and he has had to keep a balance between the two. Manav said that he can't help it if he was born into a royal family but he would prefer being known as an activist. He tells other gay royals who are unwilling to come out to at least support the LGBT community in other ways.

Onir revealed how 'My Brother Nikhil' was his first film so it was important to position it. He had to 'cheat' the mainstream audience into watching his HIV-themed film by not highlighting the fact that a gay couple was at the centre of the film. After the theatrical release, the film went to gay festivals and events everywhere. Five years after that film, he finds

himself more confident as a filmmaker and has a film 'I AM' with the 'I AM OMAR' story highlighting police harassment of and social discrimination against gay men. Incidentally, the trailer of 'I AM' was premiered at the Kashish opening ceremony on Thursday.

Parmesh raised various questions related to celeb culture and the commoditization of culture including identities like 'queer'. Why are there not enough celebrities supporting the queer cause? Why are there very few queer celebrities? Ashok Row Kavi said that four of Bollywood's biggest directors are gay but closeted. They better be ashamed. At least I have Onir on my side. He added that we must not completely depend on celebrities; what's needed is a mass movement that walks on the feet of activists. Onir said it is important to have the right kind of celebrities endorsing queer issues, people who really believe in what they are saying. For example, we should not have an actor doing a pretend-gay role. Meenaskshi said there was no way of avoiding celeb culture but one way of taking advantage of it is to sensitize the intelligent celebrities about queer issues. Another way is for the queer community to take a stand on the other large issues that concern society which will open up our connections with it.

The discussion was punctuated with a lot of humor thanks to Ashok Row Kavi and Manav.

Kashish started distributing among its delegates complimentary copies of a booklet of extracts from a new shorty story collection called 'Quarantine' by debutant Rahul Mehta, thanks to publisher Random House.

### Kashish 2010 – Day 1

Kashish - Mumbai International Queer Film Festival had a star-studded opening on Thursday with some of the cast of 'I Am' inaugurating the four-day fest.

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Director Onir led his cast members, Manisha Koirala, Rahul Bose, Sanjay Suri and Purab Kohli in lighting the traditional lamp at PVR Juhu to declare the film festival open. This is the first queer film festival in India of international stature. It is also probably the first in India to be held at a mainstream venue. "I am really proud that Mumbai is hosting an international queer film festival of this stature," said actor Manisha Koirala. Sanjay Suri, who is also producing I Am, echoed this sentiment. "I wish this film festival had happened five years ago so that we could have premiered 'My Brother Nikhil' here," said Sanjay, who thanked the UNDP and Humsafar Trust for their support for 'I Am'.

Onir said he was proud to be part of the opening of Kashish.

Actor Rahul Bose dwelled on the fact that everyone is a victim of discrimination and stereotyping at some point of time. Onir's latest film is based on true incidents and is truly a community-owned film, with funds

raised through social networking sites and over 400 contributors worldwide coming together in common cause. Four stories of marginalized individuals who are forced to struggle against society, shot in four cities, dealing with four issues never dealt with by so-called mainstream cinema: I AM AFIA, I AM OMAR, I AM ABHIMANYU, I AM MEGHA.

Earlier during the opening ceremony, anchor Neha called upon festival directors Sridhar Rangayan and Vivek Anand and Ashok Row Kavi, Technical Officer Sexual Minorities Desk at UNAIDS India and the founder of Humsafar Trust to take the stage and set things in motion.

"We always wanted to get a queer film festival of international standards to Mumbai," said Sridhar. "This year the screenings are at Audi 5; I have a dream that at next year's edition of Kashish all five screens at PVR would screen the film festival," said Vivek. Ashok said that UNDP and UNAIDS would continue their support of Kashish.

Sridhar introduced the jury members: theatreperson Dolly Thakore; actor Suhasini Mulay; playwright Mahesh Dattani; actor Rajit Kapur; and film critic Meenakshi Shedde. Dolly Thakore expressed her unflinching support for the cause. Mahesh commended the Kashish team for "visibilising the invisibles." Suhasini Mulay and Rajit Kapur said they were amazed at the talent reflected in the films, including the Indian entries, many of which were first-time efforts.

The screenings began at 10 am simultaneously at PVR Juhu and Alliance Francaise, Manine Lines, to packed audiences. The highlights of Day 1 were 'Flying Inside My Body' - a documentary on photographer Sunil Gupta; two documentaries by Sophia College students 'Engaying Lives' and 'Speak Up, It's Not your fault'; and a panel discussion on cinema and censorship with panelists censor board member Nandini Sardesai, anti-censorship activist Gargi Sen, filmmaker Vinta Nanda and Ashok Row Kavi, moderated by Paromita Vohra.

Nandini and Gargi took diametrically opposite stands on the issue while others questioned the need for censoring films in the age of mobile MMS/online videos. Ashok Row Kavi held the audience enthralled with his unique take on queer representation in cinema.

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\*Photos:\*

To view pictures of the\* opening ceremony\*, please click on this link to get into an online folder containing the images (no sign-in required):

<https://docs.google.com/leaf?id=0B4aUlkRoQ5jgOWY2NGU2NmMtY2NkZi00M2Qz...>

To view pictures of the \*opening gala\* held at Vie Lounge Juhu on the eve of the festival (ie 21 April), please click on this link that will take you to the online folder (again, no sign-in required)

<https://docs.google.com/leaf?id=0B4aUlkRoQ5jgNzE3NTczNDQtNTU3Ni00NTBi...>

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Written by Administrator

Saturday, 05 May 2012 15:44 - Last Updated Monday, 07 May 2012 11:26

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