

In Brief

Toronto International Film Festival

'Slumdog Millionaire', a tribute to Mumbai, wins top award

By Janet Guttsman

—TORONTO

'Slumdog Millionaire,' a tribute to Mumbai and a story about a dream, won the top award at the Toronto Film Festival on September 13, ending a low-key event where many studios kept their best movies away.

The winning film, directed by Britain's Danny Boyle, opens in select U.S. theaters on November 28.

It tells of a teenager from the Indian slums who wins a chance of becoming a millionaire in a television game show.

The film received an enthusiastic reception from the Toronto audience, and actress Freida Pinto accepted the Cadillac People's Choice Award on Boyle's behalf.

"There are a lot of firsts for me in this," she said. "It's my first premiere, my first time dealing with the press, and now it's my first award. 'Slumdog Millionaire' is a film about an underdog who believes in something."

[Starring Dev Patel, Madhur Mittal, and Freida Pinto along with veteran Bollywood stars Anil Kapoor and Irrfan Khan, the film is based on the best-selling novel 'Q&A' by Vikas Swarup.]

The Toronto festival, where the top award is chosen by the public rather than by industry experts or other insiders, opened on Sept. 4 with



Anil Kapoor, right, and Dev Patel, left, in a still from 'Slumdog Millionaire'.

'Passchendaele,' a romance set partly in the mud-filled trenches of World War One.

It closed on Sept. 13 with a gala performance of 'Stone of Destiny,' the story of Scottish nationalists who seek to reclaim the Stone of Scone from London's Westminster Abbey.

But critics were underwhelmed with many of the movies on offer, and Hollywood was clearly holding some of its top Oscar contenders back for later in the year.

"It was a difficult year," film festival chief executive Piers Handling told the final reception.

"People felt that some of the films they took up last fall did not perform that well, so there was a sense of slight gloom and depression."

Other winners at the end of the festival included 'Hunger,' about IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands, and 'Disgrace,' a father-daughter story based on the bleak Booker prize-winning novel from South African writer J.M. Coetzee.

The top prize at last year's festival was won by Russian mob movie 'Eastern Promises,' which went on to win a best actor Oscar nomination for Viggo Mortensen. —Reuters

Launch

MGM Network backs Hollywood script for foray into India

—MUMBAI

MGM Networks will stick to its strength of Hollywood films in India, but may consider a foray into regional-language content when it gains a wider viewership, a senior executive said on September 16.

MGM Networks, which manages Metro-Goldwin-Mayer's interests in cable, satellite and television, is launching at a time when global media and entertainment firms such as Viacom Inc and Time Warner's Turner are adding local content.

The MGM channel, which will be distributed by a unit of News Corp's Star, will be available on cable, direct-to-home satellite and other new platforms such as IPTV to reach a wider audience in an increasingly crowded market.

"We know there is an English-speaking audi-

ence that is watching Hollywood rather than the dominant local fare," Executive Vice President Bruce Tuchman said ahead of the launch.

"There will be decisions about regional-language after we have launched and got bigger," he said.

Annual revenue for television in India, which is seeing an explosion of new channels, is forecast to more than double to \$11.6 billion by 2012, making it the most lucrative TV market in Asia, according to research firm Media Partners Asia.

But price controls and intense competition will slow the growth of average revenue per user, it has said, while costs of production, distribution, content and technology will rise.

MGM, home to the lucrative James Bond franchise, has equity stakes in regional-language

movie and entertainment TV channels in markets such as Latin America and Korea, Tuchman said.

But it would be premature to say it would follow a similar model in India, he said.

News Corp's Twentieth Century Fox and Star earlier this month formed a joint venture to produce local-language films in Asia, and Star also plans to launch six regional language channels in India.

Turner International is also launching more TV channels.

"We know people are doing that here -- producing local content for the market," Tuchman said. "But specialist content is going to be important, and right now we are probably not going to pretend to be what we are not." —Reuters

5th annual Sikh Film Festival

Collection of 16 films in 4 distinct categories to be screened

The Sikh Arts and Film Foundation's 5th Annual Film Festival and Gala Dinner is scheduled to be held in New York City on October 3 and 4. The festivities would begin with the gala on Oct. 3 at 'Ciprianis' on Wall Street, to be followed by the film festival and after party on the next day at the Asia Society and Museum, a press release said.

Gen JJ Singh, Governor of Arunachal Pradesh and ret'd. Chief of Armed Forces; Tarlochan Singh, Member of Parliament (MP); Navjot S Sidhu MP; Tom DiNapoli, New York State Comptroller; along with several Hollywood actors are to attend the gala.

Acclaimed Punjabi and Sufi Singer Rabbi Shergill; Padma Shree Vikramjit Singh, who will launch his Musical Group Punj Darya and New York's very own DJ Rekha, creator and producer of 'Basement Bhangra' are to perform at the gala, the release said.

Film and television actress, Kathryn

Winnick, ('Law and Order') is the Mistress of Ceremonies. A silent auction of Sikh Art will also be held during the gala.

The honorees for this year's event are Stuart Rabinowitz, President of Hofstra University - Vision; Ajay Banga, Chief Executive Officer of Citi Asia Pacific - Leadership; Susan Stronge, Senior Curator of Asian Department of The Victoria & Albert Museum - Creativity; and Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF), Sikh Coalition, United Sikhs - Community Service.

A collection of sixteen films in four distinct categories, produced by Indians based in the U.S., Canada, UK, France, India and as well as non-Indians, are to be screened at the festival.

The films in the Children's category include 'Sabat Surat' by Jaspreet Kaur (Canada); 'One Light' by Angad Singh (USA); 'Sikh Rattle and Roll' by Ekta Walia (UK) and 'The Sikh next door' by Tammy Yeager (USA).

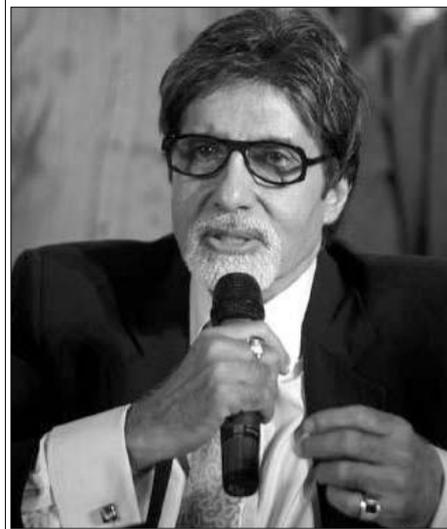
In the short film category has seven movies including 'Saving Mom and Dad' by Kartik Singh (France); 'The Holy Duels of Hola Mohalla' by Vani Subramanian (India); 'On Common Ground - Sikh American cultural awareness training for law enforcement' by U.S. Department of Justice and SALDEF; 'Warrior Saints' by Kevin Lee (USA); 'The Sky Below' by Sarah Singh (USA); 'Reaching for home' by Jasmeet Bansal (USA); and 'Kabaddi Cops' by Greg Cote (Canada).

In the Documentary section, the Emmy award winner 'Sikhs in America' by Marissa Aroy and Nial McKay will be featured besides 'Pahelwani' by Navdeep Kandola (UK); 'Warrior Boyz' by Baljeet Sangra (Canada); and the PBS independent lens presentation, 'A dream in doubt' by Tami Yeager and Preetmohan Singh.

The feature presentation is the New York Premiere of the critically acclaimed 'Ocean Of Pearls' by Dr. Sarab Singh Neelam.

(Compiled from a press release by B. Kulkarni)

New release



Amitabh Bachchan speaks during a news conference to promote his new film 'The Last Lear' in Kolkata on September 12. (Photo: Reuters)

'Last Lear' is a treat for Shakespeare lovers

By Shilpa Jamkhandikar

—MUMBAI

It's not about Shakespeare and not based on 'King Lear,' but fans of the Bard may find traces of both in a new Bollywood film set in modern-day India.

Amitabh Bachchan, Bollywood's biggest star, plays a reclusive stage actor in 'The Last Lear,' one who quotes Shakespeare with relish and is making his movie debut at an old age.

Passages from some of Shakespeare's best known works are sprinkled into the film's dialogues and, in one scene, Bachchan chases a reporter out of his house for misspelling the name of Oberon, the king of the fairies in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'.

"Shakespeare almost becomes a character in the film," director Rituparno Ghosh told Reuters.

"He acts as the divine power, and his presence in certain moments almost acts as a divine intervention."

'The Last Lear,' one of few Bollywood films to be made in English, opened in Indian cinemas on September 12, a year after it premiered at the Toronto film festival.

Ghosh said his film's protagonist is also similar to the ageing monarch of Shakespeare's 'King Lear'.

"Metaphorically, the vulnerability of old age, an old man who is taken advantage of, is represented in the film," he said.

For Bachchan, the role of Harry and the way he used Shakespeare's language to illustrate his points brought back memories of his own early acting days.

"I have enjoyed so many of his (Shakespeare's) plays, it's difficult to say which one is my favorite," he told a news conference last week.

There were doubts about the film's release for a while.

A regional political party in Mumbai, the home of Bollywood, had threatened to boycott Bachchan's films after his wife Jaya apparently promoted Hindi over Marathi, the city's local language.

Posters of the film were torn down and a theater screening the film vandalized, forcing producers to cancel its premiere earlier last week.

But the party called off the boycott of Bollywood's first family after Bachchan apologized for Jaya's off-the-cuff remark, allowing 'The Last Lear' to make it to cinemas on schedule. —Reuters