

Souks and Stars

Imposing minarets, royal dinners, a thousand-year-old palm grove and Shashi Kapoor. **Meher Marfatia** is enveloped by the energy and vibrance of the Third Annual Marrakech Film Festival

Illustrations by Farzana Cooper

Few despatches penned from other interesting parts of the globe have, for me, matched the exotically romantic cadences struck by a byline which reads: 'Meher Marfatia from Marrakech'. Savouring the sound of the line said aloud, I'm equally sure no travel stop could generate the frissons of delight bordering on rapture that this incredibly beautiful city has *pour moi*. Framed by the snow-capped heights of the Atlas Mountains, the small African country of Morocco — described as the tantalising lower lip on the mouth of the Mediterranean Sea — has taken its name from the imperial inner city of Marrakech. Declared 'incontestably my favourite destination' by American film-maker Martin Scorsese, Marrakech, with its rose-coloured medieval fortress ramparts and a thousand-year-old palm grove, has always been considered maddeningly mysterious, right from the earliest days of the Berbers inhabiting it.

So here I am, having just returned from the Third Annual Marrakech Film Festival as a journalist guest invited by Louis Vuitton, purveyors of one of the world's most exclusive luxury product ranges. Everything had prepared me for the pure enchantment of the garden kingdom of the Saadian Dynasty; yet, I ended up utterly mesmerised, almost hypnotised, by the spell cast by this sumptuous place and its exuberant people.

The tiled courtyards, splendid palaces and teeming central squares of Marrakech radiate more magic come film fest time, when the city explodes into a kaleidoscopic whirl of even

stronger surging vitality. Accepted worldwide since its recent inception, as a serious space for dialogue from which emanates a wealth of cinematic trends, the Marrakech festival is designed as the African version of Cannes' prestigious motion picture event. Films shortlisted for the official 2003 selection, on view from October 3 to 8, rated 73 major international productions on editorial rigour, coherence and creativity.

Thanks to Aamir Khan's *Lagaan* released before a highly appreciative crowd at last year's festival here, a well-received, special Indian panorama segment found its way into this time's programme. Chosen by Nadine Tarbouriech, project leader on a retrospective of Indian cinema from the 1930s to the present day, to unveil at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in February 2004, the schedule opened with a tribute to Amitabh Bachchan, widely hailed by Moroccans as *Shouza*, the fearless one! (In fact, posters of the veteran actor's *Armaan*, playing in the city, were routinely gawped at by schoolchildren in the little alleys leading off from Bank Street.) Guru Dutt, Satyajit Ray, Govind Nihalani, Gautam Ghose, Sanjay Leela Bhansali and Ramgopal Varma's directorial talents were showcased; relatively younger talents screened included Vishal Bhardwaj, Shaad Ali, Manish Jha and Chandan Arora with *Maqbool*, *Saatbiya*, *Matruboomi* and *Main Madhuri Dixit Banna Chabti Hoon* respectively.

The Bachchan family was in full attendance, followed by a starry brigade comprising Shashi Kapoor who graced the jury, Sharmila Tagore, Tabu, Manisha Koirala, Amisha Patel,



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Pankaj Kapur, Apurva Lakhia and Rajpal Yadav. While our stars and directors were in evidence throughout, suitably jewelled or jacketed for formal evening celebrations at the Badii Palace (Koirala and Patel resplendent with fabulous Louis Vuitton bags and outfits that they posed with), Hollywood celeb-spotting threw up thespian Jeremy Irons, hunky Colin Farrell and charismatic Oliver Stone, among a host of highly feted French, Argentinian, Belgian, Iraqi and Moroccan luminaries. Like several other invitees, I was all too aware this was vintage silver screen turf – movie buffs need only remember how Peter O'Toole swanned around these sands for David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, besides Orson Welles shooting *Othello* and Scorsese his *Kundun* here.

An elite dinner hosted by His Majesty King Mohammed VI at the Royal Palace ushered in a heady world of fairytale-like lighting and freshly fragrant floral decorations highlighted by live orchestral music and a feast offering platters piled high with local delicacies so appetising, one felt indolent beyond words. The other really big evening was the Louis Vuitton 'Bollywood theme' party in honour of our Indian contingent, replete with Hindi hit tunes to which grooved an elite Dior-scented, diamond-draped special bunch of invitees from across Europe. To say the tony bash was packed with party animals may be the hugest understatement this side of the Atlantic. Drinks downed with characteristically nonchalant elegance, the crème de la crème swung stylishly, tirelessly, till the dawn call of the muezzin echoed from around the imposing minaret of the Koutoubia mosque near which our hotel was located.

A Moroccan proverb goes: 'He who has no time is dead'. Then, properly soaking in the mystic marvels of traditional souks, lush park greenery, the gorgeously glowing Menara pavilion at dusk reflected in the serene waters surrounding it, the fantasia-like sights of the Jemaa el Fna public square awash in handicraft stalls, the aroma from snail merchants' carts, itinerant jugglers and tambourine-strumming troubadours... it appears one would need a lifetime, if not longer, to savour the magic of Marrakech. **V**

Verve contributor, Meher Marfatia, is a Mumbai-based freelance writer with a special interest in the arts and a passion for all things cinematic.

