

Pakistani filmmakers making their presence felt

By Laila Kazmi

Although the commercial film industry remains largely unpopular in Pakistan, the last five years have seen an upsurge in independently made films. Better technology and freer media have enabled artists and indie filmmakers to produce works, both experimental and conventional, that are refreshing alternatives to the characteristically low quality productions of 'Lollywood,' the oft-referred name for the Lahore based film industry.

Independent filmmakers, mostly working with short films, are breaking away from the usual formula films and creating works that are original and more daring, dealing often with gripping social and political issue. The new trend of film festivals, two main ones being the Kara Film Festival (Karachi) and Matteela (Lahore), are not only providing outlets for increasing numbers of Pakistani indie filmmakers but also bringing foreign films and filmmakers to the country.

Internationally, Pakistani filmmakers are making their presence felt in festivals around the world. Last year 's ISAFF opened with Sabiha Sumar's acclaimed "Khamosh Pani (Silent Waters)," a story of a mother's struggle to keep her son from turning to religious fundamentalism. Sharmeen Obaid is another filmmaker whose political documentaries have won several awards. Through her films, Sharmeen hopes to "initiate a dialogue" regarding the political and religious turmoil in Pakistan. Mehreen Jabbar's short films have also screened in many festivals. Her stories portray characters struggling with internal conflicts, sometimes dealing with issues of identity and sexuality. Hasan Zaidi, one of the main organizers of Kara Film Festival, made a name for himself with his 2002 "Raat Chali Hai Jhoom Ke (The Long Night)." Screened in Seattle by Tasveer, the film was billed as "Pakistan's first digital feature." It follows the bizarre events that unfold after a young man, educated in the US and working in Karachi, decides to meet the woman with whom he has been having a telephone affair.

Though there are still major obstacles for filmmakers to overcome, the biggest ones being the scarcity of film schools and adequate recording facilities, the future is looking bright for films from Pakistan.