Missing women force a rethink at Cannes

After several years, four women directors have been shortlisted for the coveted Palme d’Or

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A routine press conference on the eve of the Cannes Film Festival on Monday turned controversial with general delegate of the festival Thierry Fremaux on the defensive over the award of the honorary Palme d’Or to legendary French actor Alain Delon, despite his archaic views on homosexuality and his admission of having slapped women.

“We are not giving the Nobel Peace Prize,” said Mr. Fremaux, when questioned about the criticism heaped against Cannes on the issue.

While talking about the “contradictions in history”, Mr. Fremaux said the festival was honouring Mr. Delon for his years as an actor. He stressed on the significance of “context”, saying that the actor came from a different generation but was being judged with the eyes of the new and young.

He felt that Cannes was criticised more than other organisations when it came to societal and political issues, and there was this expectation by the media that the festival should be “impeccable and perfect”.

‘Only the best’

Mr. Fremaux asserted that the selection of films at the festival would not be on the basis of gender.

“The films that are there deserved to be selected; they are not there simply because they have been made by women,” said Mr. Fremaux. “We are looking at the end of chain,” he said, while, according to him, it is the beginning – the fostering at film schools, training and exposure that need to be widened.

Cannes has traditionally been criticised for its gender skew. Till last year, there had been 1,600-odd competition titles from men in the entire history of the festival as against just 82 from women. It had made 82 women film professionals stage a silent protest on the red carpet on May 12 last year, perhaps the most memorable image of Cannes 2018. Jane Campion remains the only female director to have won the Palme d’Or for her 1993 film The Piano.

This year has seen a marginal improvement with four women directors competing for the Palme D’Or – Mati Diop for Atlantique, Jessica Hausner for Little Joe, Céline Sciamma for Portrait of a Lady on Fire and Justine Triet for Sibyl – and 13 in the overall selection.

The Un Certain Regard section has six films directed by seven female directors among the 16 titles on view – Zabou Breitman and Eléa Gobé Mévellec’s The Swallows of Kabul, Monia Chokri’s A Brother’s Life, Danielle Lessovitz’s Port Authority, Mounia Meddour’s Papicha, Maryam Touzani’s Adam and Annie Silverstein’s Bull. Last year in a ‘50:50 by 2020’ pledge, Cannes took upon itself to record the gender of the cast and crew of all films submitted, to make public the names of selection committee members and work towards gender parity on the board of the festival management and the programming teams.

In a start, the selection committee for the films this year was gender balanced with an equal number of women and men.

If the main competition opens with Jim Jarmusch’s The Dead Don’t Die, it’s Chokri’s A Brother’s Life that kicks off Un Certain Regard.