

CAAMFest 2015

By Leena Prasad

A story about a rebellious Indian woman finding her sexual identity is not ground-breaking. When the woman happens to be an aspiring writer in a wheelchair and has cerebral palsy, however, the expressions of her fiery passions can explode in unexpected directions. Laila (Kalki Koechlin), in *Margarita with a Straw*, arrives in Manhattan after a disastrous romantic encounter at Delhi University, develops a crush on an American boy, and falls in love with a blind South Asian lesbian activist. This, however, is simply the outline of Laila's emotional journey. The actual drama is in the unfolding of the relationship between Laila and her mother (Revathy) both of who are strong women with life philosophies that don't always match.

Margarita with a Straw is the centerpiece at the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM)'s annual film fest, CAAMFest 2015, which takes place from March 12-22 in San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland. CAAM is a non-profit organization that funds, produces, distributes, and exhibits works in film, television, and digital media in order to popularize the diverse and vibrant Asian-American culture.

"After seeing the film, grown men came up to me with tears in their eyes," Shonali Bose, the director of *Margarita with a Straw*, says about her experience at the Palm Springs International Film Festival. This winner of Best Asian Film at the 2014 Toronto International Film Festival is the first script by an Indian director to win a Sundance Institute-Mahindra Global Film-making Award. The movie also captured an award from Network for the Promotion of Indian Cinema. Furthermore, at the Black Nights Film Festival in Tallinn, Estonia, lead actress Kalki Koechlin won a best actress award.

When asked about the upcoming film release in India, Bose says that it's "the most exciting thing happening in my life." She has mixed feelings about the Indian release. "I have high faith in the intelligence of the Indian audiences and am confident that anybody who comes to see the film will tell

ten people to watch it." She is also "terrified that people will not show up because of insufficient marketing and competition from other films" or that the subject matter might not have the entertainment value that they expect, i.e., "are we in the mood for that [a movie where the main character has cerebral palsy]?"

The seeds for the movie were planted during a conversation in which Bose's



Kalki Koechlin in *Margarita with a Straw*

cousin, a wheel-chair bound woman with cerebral palsy, expressed that she wanted sex as a birthday present. This film is not the cousin's story, however. The narrative took a life of its own when Bose decided to unmask, channel, and weave her own emotional turmoil (at the death of a son) into the fabric of the sensibilities of the film. This dissolution of the line between story-teller and the story was so poignant that she found herself overcome with tears while shooting some of the scenes in the movie. Although many film reviews have focused on Laila's sexual and romantic journey, Bose says that the primary theme of the movie is the mother-daughter relationship.

This may just be the year of the Indian woman at CAAMFest. Girl-power takes on a different form in *Miss India America*, a comedy in which a valedictorian loses her boyfriend to a beauty queen and goes on a quest to win him back by scheming with her best friend. In another film, *Jaya*, a girl posing as a boy, seeks acknowledgement from a man who looks like her father, a man who had walked out on her.

On a different note, *Bhopal, a Prayer for Rain*, tells the story of the days leading up

to the colossal pesticide plant gas leak in Bhopal, India on December 2-4, 1984. In the docudrama, a local journalist, Morwani (Kal Penn), and a Parish Match reporter, Eva Gascon (Misch Barton), try to warn people about the possibility of the impending disaster while Warren Anderson (Martin Sheen) ignores the deteriorating conditions of the plant and lack of safety measures.

For a quick narrative fix, there are two Indian shorts at the CAAMFest. In the comedy *My Hot Mom Gandhi*, an Indian-American couple drives around San Francisco as they plan party costumes with the overachieving goals of being funny, provocative, and relevant. Zooming far and away from San Francisco and into the science-fiction realm, in the short story, *Vimana*, a team of astronauts looms far above a new planet in a quest for making a fresh start for Earthlings but are faced with difficult choices.

In addition to the Indian-centric movies, there are several Asian films being shown at CAAMFest. To round out the offerings, there are live music performances and food. The music performance, *Directions in Sound*, is streamed from Cambodia, Vietnam, Los Angeles, and the Bay Area and paired with music-centric films. The food celebration has taken on an identity of its own and is known as CAAMFeast, a pairing of the food with the food-centric narratives that the cooking has inspired.

The "CAAMFeast Award: Stories, Food, and You" takes place on March 7 at the One Kearny Club in San Francisco. This culinary award ceremony and cocktail reception will be honoring the Masumoto Family who own the Masumoto Farms (*Changing Season: On the Masumoto Family Farm*), media entrepreneur Danielle Chang of LUCKYRICE fame (*Lucky Chow*), and local rising-star chef Tim Luym (*Supper Club*) of Attic Restaurant. ■

March 12-22, schedules, film details at <http://caamfest.com>.