Less is more at film fest

New fest director Kirpal Singh is more selective and emphasizes "classical" values in choice of films

This year's Singapore International Film Festival will see an emphasis on "classical" values of film-making in its programming, says first-time festival director, academic and poet Kirpal Singh.

Singh is more selective in choice of films, having moved to Australia, where he got married and had three children.

"We have something for the young and the old, something for someone who wants more familiarity. We want to make sure we don't just cover extremes," says Singh.

He preferred to call the inclusion of more tried-and-tested fare an "evolution" in programming, rather a departure from past practice.

Last year, for example, six films were withdrawn from the festival over film classification issues relating to religious and homosexual themes, language and images. Roughly the same number have been withdrawn in previous years.

Films which provoke for provocations sake have been excluded from this year's programme, in favour of films which deal with sensitive issues in a "powerful, compelling mode", he says.

Dr Singh says he does not expect films on the list this year to run afoul of the Board of Film Censors, Media Development Authority.

The festival will be a retrospective of the work of established Australian film-maker Bruce Beresford. The 69-year-old is best known as the director of the Best Picture Oscar-winning drama Driving Miss Daisy (1989), and the war drama Paradise Road (1997).

He was also nominated for the Best Writing (Adapted Screenplay) Oscar for co-writing the war-crime period drama, Breaker Morant (1980).

Driving Miss Daisy and Breaker Morant will be screened at the festival. Beresford's latest film, Mao's Last Dancer (2009), will have its Singapore premiere as the opening film on April 15.

Beresford will give a free public talk at the Singapore Management University on April 14 on the making of Dancer, a drama based on the 2003 biography of Li Cunxin, a dancer from China who defected to the United States in 1979 and later moved to Australia, where he got married and had three children.

Beijing-trained dancer Chi Chao, who plays Li Cunxin in the film, will also attend the festival.

Other VIPs at this year's festival, now in its 23rd edition, include Japanese director Miwa Nishikawa, director of the closing film, the drama Dear Doctor, about a small-town doctor with a secret.

There will be fewer films this year — about 150, including short films — compared with last year's 200 because of the increased selectivity, says Dr Singh.

The associate professor at the Singapore Management University adds that avant-garde works will not be forgotten. For example, there is the critically acclaimed and obscure male-bonding movie Spring Forward (1999), starring Liev Schreiber and Ned Beatty and directed by American indie director Tom Gilroy.

The teaching element will be emphasised as part of the festival's goal of reaching out to tertiary students.

A new special programme, Women in Film, will feature To Whom It May Concern: Kashen's Journey, a biography of Eurasian actress Nancy Kwam, who played the title role in the classic The World Of Suzie Wong (1960).

There will be discussions on gender issues based on ideas raised in the film.

Also attending the festival is acclaimed Sri Lankan director Bennett Rathnayake. His film Ira Handa Yaya (Under The Sun And Moon), about the civil war in his homeland, has been selected for the Asian Feature Film Competition section.

Sri Lankan director Bennet Rathnayake's Ira Handa Yaya (Under The Sun And Moon, right), which has been selected for the Asian Feature Film Competition section, will be screened.

Movie buffs can look forward to a retrospective of the works of Australian film-maker Bruce Beresford (above), including his latest film, Mao's Last Dancer, which stars Chi Chao (left).

Beresford will be attending the festival and giving a talk on the making of this film.

PHOTOS: SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL