PYONGYANG, North Korea — Sprawling 10 million square feet across a hilly expanse on the outskirts of this capital city, the Pyongyang Film Studio, said to be the world’s largest, features a variety of representations of foreign locales reflecting North Korea’s propagandized vision of the outside world.

There are sets meant to depict Japan, a generic European streetscape and South Korea circa 1950. The street standing in for South Korea, the North’s longtime rival and more prosperous neighbor, includes a seedy brothel, a tawdry bar and a shady blood bank, all seemingly designed to cast it as a paradigm of decrepitude and sin.

On a recent sunny afternoon, however, the studio was eerily empty. The postproduction facilities appeared unstaffed, and the interior sets, veiled in cobwebs and dust, looked in disrepair.

Asked about the evident decay, a guide insisted that the sets were constantly in use.

“There was a crew shooting here yesterday, and they will be shooting again tomorrow,” he said. “They are just taking a break today.”

The guide’s charges were in town for one of the few chances that outsiders have to go behind the baffling facade of North Korea — the biennial Pyongyang International Film Festival. And like the studio tour, this year’s festival, the 15th, offered a vivid disconnect from the underlying poverty of a nation unable to feed its citizens and reeling from tough United Nations sanctions prompted by its nuclear weapons program.

The opening ceremony did not lack grandiosity. Staged in mid-September at the capital’s Central Youth Hall, glimmering for the occasion, it was attended by government functionaries, festival delegates and representatives from various embassies. Cars belonging to officials and buses carrying performing arts groups clogged the expansive parking lot as smartly dressed women filed into the packed theater, the clicking of their heels reverberating off the walls of the high-ceilinged lobby. There was no mention of the United Nations sanctions or recent devastating floods.

The evening also introduced the five-member jury, all male, headed by Yuri Mityushin, a Russian citizen, formerly employed by the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, who currently runs a “law enforcement” film festival in Moscow. In previous years the festival has had jurors from Iran, Syria and China.

The hierarchy of this year’s jury was decided just days earlier in a somewhat confounding manner, according to Matt Hulse, a British filmmaker on the panel. At the jury’s first meeting, after everyone had traded introductions, a representative from the Ministry of Culture, which oversees the festival, proposed Mr. Mityushin as president, citing his seniority, and then asked every juror to applaud if they agreed, Mr. Hulse said.

“In such a dauntingly formal situation, and having met the fellow jurors only moments before, it felt impossible to object, despite a niggling feeling that this just wasn’t fair,” he added.

The opening ceremony concluded with the hosts, standing beneath a sculpted dove, announcing that the festival would showcase films from countries opposed to war and “aspiring to a beautiful and peaceful life.”

The festival rarely features Oscar hopefuls or Hollywood stars; if a film is screening, it is probably promoting socialist values or patriotic sentiment. Guests then sat for the opening film, “A Quiet Outpost,” a jingoistic Russian war drama that was a paean to the military and ended with a gory 30-minute battle sequence.

During the eight-day program, 11 feature films vied for the Best Torch Award, and the jury was instructed to judge the films based on how well they symbolized the festival’s official theme — “Independence, Peace and Friendship” — and whether they articulated the ideology of juche, or self-reliance, developed by the country’s founding father, Kim Il-sung.

The complete lineup was noticeably slimmer than in years past, with 60 films from 21 countries compared with more than 100 films at previous festivals. Germany, France and India were represented, but as in the past, films from the United States and South Korea were conspicuously absent.

The sole North Korean title in the feature competition, “The Story of Our Home,” was a drama apparently based on true events about a young college graduate who selflessly devotes herself to raising orphans and who wins accolades from the North’s current leader, Kim Jong-un. Other entries from the North included an animated short and a slice-of-life documentary, “Prosperous Pyongyang.”

Films that “display themes of self-reliance, community spirit and morality common in domestically produced movies” are generally selected, said Vicky Mohieddeen, the creative projects manager at Koryo Tours, which has been an official partner of the festival since 2002 and helps international filmmakers submit their movies to the Ministry of Culture. Feel-good fare such as “Bend It Like Beckham” and period pieces like “Atonement” have been screened in the past.

“Sports movies where individuals realize that if they work as a team, they can achieve more than they would on their own are also popular,” Ms. Mohieddeen said.

For many international delegates, the primary attraction of the festival is the experience of watching films alongside North Koreans, despite an awareness that they are interacting with only a privileged section of Pyongyang society. Sitting in an auditorium with 2,000 people also often leads to more casual encounters than is otherwise possible in North Korea, where itineraries are tightly controlled and conversations with ordinary people are rare. The potential of initiating such dialogue in a society reeling from isolationism is also reason enough for many artists to want their work screened in the country.

“A crowd’s high level of engagement is extremely heartwarming for a filmmaker,” said Nicholas Bonner, a British filmmaker whose “Comrade Kim Goes Flying” screened at the festival in 2012. “They respond very viscerally to what’s happening on the screen.”

This year, after a full evening showing of “Baahubali: The Beginning,” an Indian fantasy epic in the vein of “The Lord of the Rings,” concluded with a cliffhanger, many North Koreans in the audience gasped and then lingered before leaving the auditorium.

“Is this a true story?” one incredulous North Korean asked me.

“Please ask the filmmakers to submit the second part for the next festival,” said another, after learning that I was an Indian citizen. (The next festival is scheduled for 2018.)

The crowd at the conclusion of the festival expressed little surprise, by contrast, when the Best Torch Award went to the national entry, “The Story of Our Home,” and its star, Paek Sol-mi, was named best actress for what was her screen debut.

Film has always been important to the North Korean regime. Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un’s father, who died in 2011, was obsessed with cinema. His personal library was said to contain more than 20,000 foreign titles. He is said to have frequently visited sets to offer on-the-spot guidance, and he wrote a lengthy treatise, “On the Art of the Cinema,” in which he claimed creative work was “an honorable revolutionary task.” All North Korean artists are expected to read this tract and internalize its lessons.

Yet like the vast film studio and the glamorous festival, even that injunction seemed to have a Potemkin village aspect.

Ri Won-bok, a 56-year-old actor who has starred in films like “Order No. 027” and been named a People’s Actor, one of the nation’s highest honors, said, “I read the book nearly every day.”

But when asked to name his favorite lesson from it, he deliberated for a moment, as if he didn’t understand the question, before smiling and saying he couldn’t remember a specific one. After all, there were so many of them.