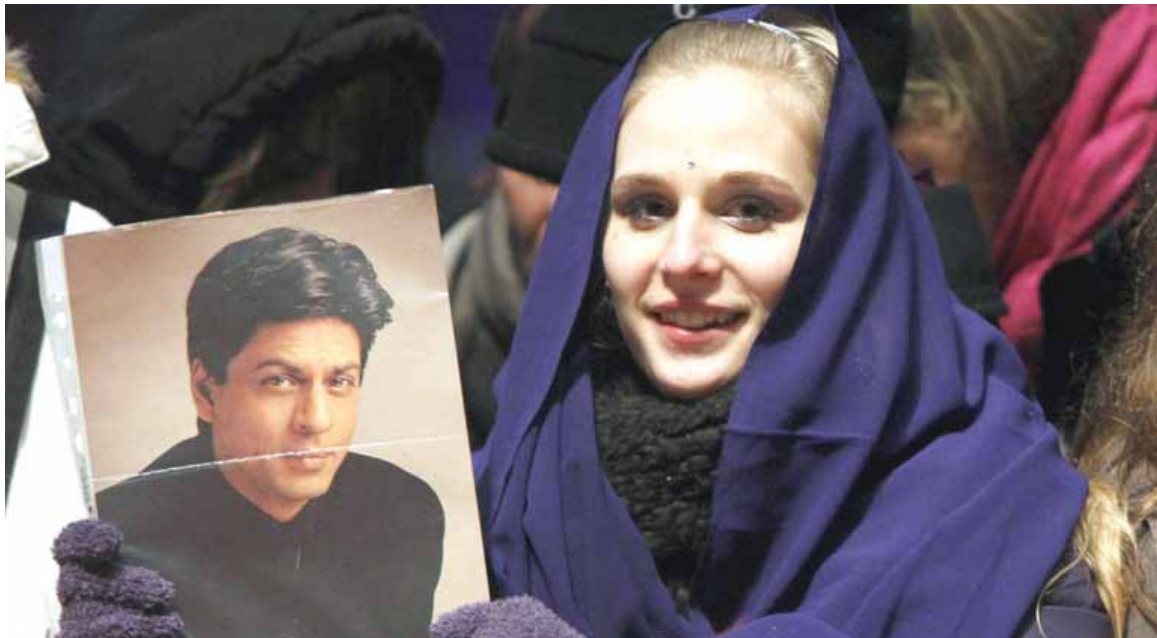


cinema



* A German fan waits for the arrival of Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan at the 60th Berlinale International Film Festival in Berlin February 12, 2010. Khan, who enjoys a massive fan following outside India, will be attending the festival for the screening of his latest film *Don 2* next month.

When the stars shine down

Indian films have always enjoyed a kind of appeal that grew out of the allure for stars rather than for performances or technique or story or script. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Thirty years into writing on cinema, I have never stopped being amazed at the craze for stars. Be it Chennai or Mumbai or Deauville or Doha or Cannes or Venice, fans queue up for hours to catch a glimpse of those fleeting men and women who seem to descend from the skies to take a few steps on earth.

The Red Carpet at Cannes or Venice or Berlin is the most sought-after spot in a festival, and I have seen photographers and others taking vantage positions hours before celebrities begin arriving.

Indian cinema actors have always held a hard-to-explain fascination across the seas, so

much so that even those who remotely look like a star attract notice, particularly during movie festivals.

On the couple of occasions my wife had been to Cannes, her sari-clad appearance had drawn attention. Are you an Indian actress, she would be asked on the streets, and some had even wanted a photograph taken with her. While my wife thoroughly enjoyed every moment of the adulation, I, clearly embarrassed, would disappear round the corner. But, such is the power of moving images, especially those from India that are often seen as some sort of exotic.

Indian films have always enjoyed a kind of appeal that grew out of the allure for stars rather than

for performances or technique or story or script. In the 1950s, Raj Kapoor, who often mimicked Charlie Chaplin, sang his way into the heart of Russians. The words from his song, *Awaara Hoon* (I am a tramp), was on just about every lip. I am told that they still are!

Decades later, in the fading years of the 1990s, Tamil superstar Rajinikanth mesmerised the Japanese with his *Muthu* (Prince), and during my six-month stay there, I was astonished at the following the actor had. In the mid-2000s, taxi drivers in Deauville (the city in France's Normandy renowned for its Allied landings during World War II) gushed over Amitabh Bachchan, whom they had driven around.

In Marrakech, a whole square of people danced and clapped in glee watching Vishal Bharadwaj's *Omkara* (an Indian take on *Othello*). At the festival there, I could not believe when I saw young Moroccan girls dressed in saris and speaking Hindi (picked up from Indian television serials and cinema) waiting to catch a glimpse of Bollywood heroes and heroines.

At the 2008 Berlin International Film Festival, 'Bollywood Badshah', as Shah Rukh Khan is endearingly addressed, was literally mobbed when he presented his *Om Shanti Om*. German fans, mostly women, drooled over him, and the country's media started singing a different tune. India was no longer riding on the bullock cart, and one journalist even said that Khan was as popular as the Pope.

"He is as popular as the Pope, but he (Khan) has more sex appeal," wrote Ekkehard Knoerer in the Berlin tabloid, *Die Tageszeitung*. The German daily, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which was highly critical of India and Indians until the mid-1990s, when the world began to notice of the South Asian country's economic and technological prowess, wrote that many people from all over Europe had come to Berlin to see their favourite star.

It is, therefore, not surprising that this year's Berlin Film Festival (to begin on February 9) should have chosen to screen Shah Rukh Khan's *Don 2*. He will fly into Berlin to promote his latest movie, directed by Farhan Akhtar.

Apart from the enormous magnetism that Khan exudes in Germany, the festival could have had another reason to choose *Don 2*. Produced by Excel

Entertainment and Film Base Berlin and distributed by Reliance Entertainment, the movie was mostly shot in Berlin.

Touristy locations like Brandenburg Gate, Olympia Stadium, Ganderman Market and East Side Gallery will whizz past on the screen as Khan plots his move against his enemies, Europe's intimidatingly powerful drug cartel, which is furious because the Indian, a smuggler himself, has undercut prices.

The producers decided on Berlin, because they wanted a more realistic backdrop, and not the usual picture postcard Swiss Alps or French chateaus or Parisian sights or the British countryside. *Don 2*, made for \$16.7mn and dubbed in German, will open in Germany's theatres on February 16. Later, it will travel to Russia, Turkey, Israel, France, China and South Korea.

It is quite another thing that *Don 2* was critically panned in India, though I have always wondered why the foreign press is kinder in such cases.

Indian critic Rajeev Masand said: "For the film's plot — which basically involves our flamboyant criminal protagonist (Shah Rukh Khan) assembling a team to pull off a seemingly impossible heist in Berlin — the makers borrow ideas from some fine capers like *Ocean's Eleven* and the *Mission Impossible* movies. Still what they deliver in the end is a clunky and spectacularly boring film that is neither smart nor particularly fun. For what's intended as a slick action thriller, *Don 2* moves at an unforgivably slow pace. Even the actor's most loyal fans will find themselves yawning." (Will those in Germany actually do so?)

Variety's reviewer Ronnie Scheib was charitable: "Writer-director Akhtar handles the *Ocean's Eleven*-type bank job with aplomb, but what gives the proceedings their zing are the strong emotional undercurrents interlinking Khan and his multiple enemies, and the palpable sexual sparks ricocheting between Khan and conflicted cop Chopra. In contrast with *RA. One*, Khan's last overwrought starring venture, the explosions and CGI pyrotechnics in *Don 2* always take a backseat to physical immediacy and psychological tension. The fact that Khan (finally fully recovered from back surgery) undertakes his own stunts certainly adds to the movie's kinetic flow."

For me *Don 2* seemed like a soulless stunt show. But who cares about what critics think, for the masses, even in this day and age, seek magic inside the darkened auditorium, letting only popcorn (and, of course the mobile telephone) break the mesmeric mood.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades, and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)