

cinema



★ Kareena Kapoor in Heroine - borrowed tales from Bollywood.

A cut-and-paste Heroine

Director Madhur Bhandarkar rarely transforms the wealth of material at his disposal into a credible story, and his latest film is no exception, says **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Madhur Bhandarkar's masala is slices from the world he has seen. Or, heard about. Mumbai's bars, India's corporate culture, media, the country's fashion industry and Bollywood among others have provided the prosecution for his innumerable films. But Bhandarkar has not been able to use such incident for creating meaningful cinema with the result that his work often appears banal. In his zeal for authenticity, he has invariably written scripts and helmed movies that while attempting to tell real stories have gone overboard with just cliché, but exaggerations. I think that the true greatness of a director or auteur lies in his ability to transform an actual incident into an artistic splendour through a process of sheer ingenuity.

Films do reflect life around us, around the theatres. But a good director ought to be able to lift life

out of the streets, embellish it with inventiveness and adapt it to the screen.

Bhandarkar picks plots from a studio or a street or business house or a bar, but fails to pack it with the right dose of artistic resourcefulness, thus giving way to formulae and typebats. Except for his early *Chandi Bar*, where actress Tabu embodies the pain and pathos of a bar dancer driven to desperation by a rapist uncle and a hoodlum husband, Bhandarkar's other works have been hugely disappointing. Whether it was *Page 3* (on glamour-struck corporates and publicity chases) or *Goposte* with its vice executives and bloody writhes or *Fashion*, peering into the ugly underbelly of the industry with its drugged, deranged and disoriented models, Bhandarkar seldom seemed to be in control of his film.

What has particularly dismayed critics is his habit of drawing from actual incidents and being careless not to filter and fine-tune them into a story and script which are not fake. His attempts to pass these as "realistic cinema" appear like gibberish.

One writer rubbishes his movies as "just a collection of incidents that characterise that industry." He has made a career out of this.

Bhandarkar's latest, *Heroine*, is hardly any different, and just think of the hullabaloo it created a year ago. He came to Cannes in 2011, *Akshaya* in his two, and overbooked - attended only by Indian journalists - announced the launch of *Heroine*. Roughly three weeks later, Rat's father-in-law, Big B (Anilbhai Bachchan), made another announcement. His daughter-in-law was pregnant, he tweeted. Heavens fell, and Bhandarkar bowed.

He went into a depression and was probably all set to renounce the world when Kareena Kapoor walked in and agreed to be Bhandarkar's *Heroine*. She, in fact, had been his first choice, but something went

awful so starved of sex that even the slightest hint of a rebuttal is enough to push them to the editing table in order to chop their "unco-operative, heroines off the frames."

Kapoor's Mahi Aroza comes to Mumbai to become a star. Running away from a family that quarrelled and broke up, she is longing for love, and well, Aryan Khanna (Ajay Kapoor) offers that on a platter. He is married, but Hindi cinema must be shown as morally impeccable. So he is divorcing his wife. Wait a second, Mahi is no home-breaker, for Aryan had decided on the divorce before the curtain opened to reveal a ravishing Aroza.

However, Aryan's on-the-way-out wife is not going to let the marriage go without some fireworks. Her aside remarks aimed at Mahi even while she is trying to play mother to Aryan's young son speak hysteria, and our *Heroine* empties a glass of expensive red wine on the wife at a party. The wife rushes to the washroom, Mahi runs out of the party and Aryan walks out of her life. He cannot handle tantrums, and Mahi has an excess of it. But, of course, for she suffers from bipolar disorder - and needs psychiatric counselling, pills and alcohol to wash them down. She is really screwed up. As most of Bhandarkar's women are, I think he takes some kind of vicarious pleasure in dressing up his girls in misery suits. We have seen that in *Fashion*, we have seen that in *Chandi Bar* and so on.

Another element of *Heroine*'s narrative is about Mahi's new love (post Aryan's departure), a cricketer played by Randeep Hooda. He wooes her with diamonds and is ready to tie the knot, but Mahi is not sure whether he is Mr Right.

She keeps him hanging, until one night, he quits telling her she is insecure and obsessive. Oh, that is she is, and in one of her sinking moments, she releases her sex tapes (with Aryan) to a free run on the MMS. Does this sound like Paris Hilton's story?

None those familiar with *Rocky* (and even Hollywood for the sex tapes segment) would easily identify Bhandarkar's characters and the situations he places them in. While he takes Mahi on a rollercoaster ride of delicious joy, terrible depression, anxiety and terrifying self-destruction, it is more than apparent to a viewer that he is using his medium also to take potshots at some of the cinema folk we know.

A star's passport scandal involving her age, another actress' plastic surgery and the like have all wormed their way into the script. Remember one heroine went to the police with a complaint against her husband (or was it boyfriend), another had an affair with a cricketer...

Well, watch *Heroine* for a replay of all these.

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Emma Watson goes to school - in a movie

By Roger Moore

For 10 years Emma Watson put her real life on hold as played the plucky Hermione Granger in the eight films that brought J.K. Rowling's wondrous world of *Harry Potter* to the screen. It made Watson rich and famous beyond her wildest imaginations. But it made her live her life in a very weird order," she says. "*Harry Potter* pushed my life back." Now 21, she finds herself "having a delayed adolescent experience" - a year-late turn at high school, for instance.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower has been one of her favourite novels. And being Emma Watson, one of the most photographed, Internet-searched and adored young women in the world, she could have a hand in getting it turned into a film. No, she wouldn't be the lead, and yes, she would have to fake her way through a "real" American high school experience. But the young Briton was game to give it a try.

"American culture and American high schools are like another world to me," Watson says. "I had to do a lot of research just to get myself comfortable with an experience that Logan (Lerman, the film's lead) and Ezra (Miller, who plays her half-brother) would have absorbed just by growing up in America. I felt very much like the outsider."

She had to master the accent and absorb the American high school vibe. And it was worth it, she says, just to get on film a work that fills what she saw as a lengthy gap in the "authentic adolescent experience, as presented in movies." In other words, she says, her generation never got its *Breakfast Club*.

"I hope that's what we've made, something that feels that real."

Watson's star power - playing Sam, "the muse, the inspiration" for Charlie, a troubled, bookish teen played by Lerman - allowed novelist-screenwriter Stephen Chbosky to make his movie. And more than that, he feels blessed at being able to cast a still-rising star who seems perfect for Sam, a sexy, smart and sensitive character who drives the protagonist's actions from the moment Charlie casts his eyes on her.

"She's been through this whirlwind of attention and come out of it kind and thoughtful," Chbosky says of Watson.

"That's Sam, too. Emma's personal history" connected the actress to the role.

And Watson has matured into a model and an actress with that "piercing, delicate aura" director Sanda Goldbacher, who directed her on the BBC production of *Belle's Shoes*, has noted. "You just want to gaze and gaze at her!"

The fame the *Potter* pictures brought her is still a driving force in Watson's life. It's what caused her to delay finishing college (Brown University, and Britain's Worcester College, Oxford). And it's what allows her to pick and choose "visionary" filmmakers to work with, even though all her box-office clout is based on a role she's no longer playing.

She landed a plum supporting role in *My Week With Marilyn*. She's one of the stars of Sofia Coppola's teen-thieves drama *The Thirring Ring*. She's currently filming *Noah*, director Darren Aronofsky's take on the Biblical story. "And I really wanted to work with Guillermo del Toro," so she's helping prep the *Pan's Labyrinth* director's take on *Beauty and the Beast*, which they expect to film next summer.

"I'm going to keep learning, that's how I will do it," Watson says. "I am very much aware that I have learned on the job my whole life. There hasn't been much time for experimentation or training. I get on the set and I learn in front of everyone. It's intimidating and scary, because when you make mistakes - and I make my share - you make them on a set where everyone's watching."

"If I am going to keep doing this and not get around to going to drama school, I very much want to be around people I know can teach me something."

What she learned in *Wallflower* was a way to channel her off-screen passion, dancing, into a movie. Granted, it was a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* scene that required her to shake her groove thing, but director Chbosky had Watson and co-star Miller work that out themselves.

"It's a GREAT trick for getting two actors into each other's rhythms, learning to trust one another," Watson says. "But terrifying. REALLY! I have to get up in front of an audience in fishnet and a corset and pretend to be Susan Sarandon!" Sarandon starred in the original cult film, vamped by the kids of *Wallflower* in one memorable scene. "It's good to get terrified, now and then."

"Pushed me out of my comfort zone, which is a good thing."

For half her life, Watson's comfort zone was the sets for *Hogwarts School* in the *Harry Potter* films. Today, fans of that series may not have moved on, but Watson certainly has.

"Even though it wasn't so long ago that we finished with all that, it feels a VERY long way off - the distant past," she says. "I know that the entire series still feels very present for fans, because they can pop the DVD in and it's there, immediately. It's back! But not for me."

"It's something I am fond of having done, and very proud of. But don't know how I'm going to feel about people hanging on to it or



★ Logan Lerman left, and Emma Watson star in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

trying to relive it years down the road. We'll have to see."

Chbosky, her *Wallflower* director, sees instincts that "are going to give her a remarkable career" in the movies - an eagerness to work in ensembles, a generosity, and "because she chooses projects rather than parts." Watson is more interested in the whole movie, Chbosky says, than the number of lines she might have in it.

But with all this work lined up, you might

feel that she won't ever have time to get to all the things she missed during her teens, which she says is still a priority.

Watson herself is not worried. "The shape of my life has been a bit odd. But it's good to be as busy as I am, as a result. I'll get around to it. I started to figure that out only recently, that everything, all those big life moments, will happen," she says. "But thanks to *Harry Potter*, they'll just happen out of order for me?" - MCT