

cinema

A love story written in blood

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

When I walked into a swanky and popular cinema in Chennai the other evening to watch Ram Gopal Varma's *Not A Love Story*, I was surprised to see an almost all-male audience. Apparently, women were not interested in seeing a highly media-publicised murder of a young television company executive, who was killed with a kitchen knife by a jealous fiancé and the body chopped into many pieces, packed in plastic bags, taken to a forest near Mumbai and burnt with the help of petrol.

Varma said his film was not a biopic, but had been inspired by the 2008 Neeraj Grover murder in Mumbai. Helping Maria Susairaj, a Kannada starlet, to find a slot in television serials (or was it movies?), Grover fell in love with her. Though engaged to a naval officer, Emile Jerome Mathew, Susairaj had reportedly told Grover that she did not much care for her fiancé. One morning, Mathew, then living in Kochi, flew down to Mumbai, caught a naked Grover in Susairaj's flat, and in a fit of jealous rage, stabbed him to death.

If Varma meant that by changing a situation here or there or by using Chandigarh instead of Kochi or by giving Mathew a different job profile or by giving his characters names different from those who played out the actual sensation-driven murder plot the celluloid work becomes inspirational, I have my reservations. It is close to being a biopic.

So, we have Deepak Dobriyal playing Robin Fernandes (or real-life Mathew) working in a Chandigarh firm (not a naval outfit) and Mahie Gill as his fiancée, Anusha Chawla (stepping into the slippers

of Susairaj). She bids farewell to a suspicious, insecure-about-her-love Fernandes (whose hour-to-hour mobile calls drive her nearly insane) and goes away to Mumbai to try her luck in movies.

Her path is strewn with the same clichés — of men who want to paw her before letting their cameras caress her.

Varma's *Not A Love Story* ends abruptly with the second half focusing on the trial of Fernandes and Chawla, who states that she was emotionally blackmailed by her fiancé into helping him dispose of the body of casting agent Ashish Bhatnagar (essayed by Ajay Gehi stepping in for Grover). The legal proceedings seem terribly amateurish with the two defence lawyers — for Chawla and Fernandes — stopping short of clowning around.

Varma does not say what happened in the end to the two accused, but we know in reality, Susairaj walked out of jail recently after a three-year-sentence. Mathew was found guilty of a somewhat lesser offence and imprisoned for 10 years. He is still in.

Obviously, when the movie was being made Varma would not have been sure of how the real-life tale would run. Also, a certain perspective is lacking. Adoor Gopalakrishnan once said that unless considerable time elapsed it was very difficult to make a film on an actual incident with a degree of fortitude. *Not A Love Story* suffers precisely from this.

A redeeming feature about the movie is performance. Gill is splendid as a woman caught between an overtly possessive fiancé and a man she regards as her saviour in the jungle called cinema. But the man who walks away with the acting honours is the mild-mannered cop, portrayed by Zakir Hussain, who eventually cracks the case by cracking Chawla. The few minutes with this sober inspector are about the best in the entire film.



* Mahie Gill is splendid as a woman caught between an overtly possessive fiancé and a man she regards as her saviour in the jungle called cinema, in *Not A Love Story*.



* A publicity poster for Rajinikanth's upcoming historical action movie *Rana*. The production has been delayed due to the Tamil superstar's mysterious ailment.

Rajni keeps all guessing

Tamil superstar Rajinikanth may begin shooting for *Rana*, a historical action movie helmed by K S Ravikumar, in November. We were initially given to understand that the month could be September. It was then put off to October, and now the new date is November.

Nobody knows what exactly is wrong with Rajinikanth, but a doctor friend of mine tells me that he had a kidney ailment. Some months ago, he fell ill while *Rana* went on the floors, and had to be rushed to hospital. After several days in two of Chennai's hospitals, he went to Singapore for "specialised treatment".

I have never understood why Indian celebrities are so secretive about the state of their health. I recall onetime Tamil matinee idol and state Chief Minister M G Ramachandran reportedly being dead against anybody discussing his health. In fact, he is supposed to have instructed his close aides and family to try and keep even his hospital visits a top secret.

Curiously, this attitude cuts across several professions. Nobody seems to know what is wrong with Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi. One foreign publication wrote that she was suffering from cancer and was being treated in a New York hospital.

Actors and politicians appear to be obsessed with eternal youth, or call it a sense of immortality. Rajinikanth, of course, at 60-plus still cavorts with women in their twenties (in his films). He wears a wig, and the most bizarre of costumes to come across the screen as a dashing, debonair romantic hero.

The same is the case with Dev Anand. At 86, he has just now begun to try and act his age. Till even a decade ago, he was essaying characters in their thirties — hiding his wrinkled neck with a scarf.

Bliss it is to be young, but bliss by far it is to appear young when one is really not so.

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