

cinema



Naseeruddin Shah at his candid best

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The first time I saw Naseeruddin Shah was in the middle of a night on the outskirts of what was then Bombay. A huge sack of hay was burning, and Shah was playing a dacoit, darting around the ball of fire. What a sight that was.

Two days later, at the very same location, he had slipped out of his coarse costume and smoothened his rugged looks to appear in a lawyer's black gown, clean shaven, glib talking and quick witted.

Shah has had this amazing ability to vanish behind many, many masks, each drawing him into a distinct character, a different story. From a quiet, lustful zamindar in the 1975 *Nishant* to a nihilistic, selfish film director in *Bhumika* to a cussing motor mechanic in *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Ata Hai* to a blind school principal in *Sparsh* to a mad ruler in *Bhavni Bhavai* to an oppressed Harijan in *Paar*, Shah had raced through a wide range of parts and emotions. He has been a wily Brahmin, a carefree photographer, a professor, a Christian priest, a small time crook, an anonymous antagonist, a cop, a musician and finally he has been you, perhaps even me.

Shah's life in cinema has been marvellous, mysterious, exciting, mundane, raunchy, sedate, garrulous, sober, angry, calm, romantic, cunning and clever. I wonder whether there has been another Indian actor (maybe even international) with this kind of brilliant talent to get into and out of a

large number of characters — and with such consistency and frequency.

Yet, off screen Shah never lets these multitude of faces cloud his real persona. His humility is humbling. And I have never seen him being anything else — that is right from my first meeting with him a quarter century ago to one the other afternoon outside Chennai's Music Academy, where he was directing and acting in an English play, *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*.

Earlier that day, when I called him, he had just arrived in Chennai after a night long shoot at Hyderabad's Ramoji Rao Studio. "I am doing *The Dirty Picture* with Vidya Balan (essaying the tragic life of Silk Smitha, often dubbed the soft-porn actress of southern India, who took her own life at a young age), and I need to sleep a bit before going to the theatre for a rehearsal. But I shall certainly meet you before the play" he sounded encouraging.

And indeed, when I later walked into the Music Academy, he was there and ready to talk to me. We walked outside the auditorium, found a row of two-wheelers and he sat on one. With a strange looking cigarette between his lips, he was at his blunt best. That is Naseer, who is never afraid to look straight into your eye and say what he believes in. So what if others hate him for that.

True to his style, he begins with a bang. There is no hope for small, sensible and meaningful cinema in India, he says. And emphasises it by saying, "absolutely none",

and bursts out laughing. This comes from one who has been part of a small, very small, band of actors that strove for excellence, and did get around doing such great cinema in the 1970s. They may have been disillusioned, but I think some of them are still at it.

Shah says "there will be a few crazy guys who will continue doing this". His sense of humour is as intact as his causticness. "Of course it is futile for those who are making films they believe in to expect those movies to be universally accepted. In fact, it is a contradiction. You say you are making films for yourself and then you get upset when you do not find an audience. I do not quite get this paradox".

But can one make movies for himself? "Of course not", he quips. "Cinema by its very nature is a commercial medium. I do not buy this film as art business. It is not art. It is a business. It is a means of expression. I think a true movie artiste appears once in a century, and we have had a few in the last century. There was Akira Kurosawa, there was Federico Fellini, Vittorio De Sica, Ritwick Ghatak and there was Satyajit Ray. And Ghatak came before Ray. I think Ghatak was not public relations savvy. Ghatak did not give a shit, and that was the problem. He antagonised people. So he was not celebrated".

Naseer is devastatingly candid. In recent times, he feels that Anusha Rizvi's Amir Khan produced *PeepLi (Live)* was the best. "It was not even ghost directed by Khan. It was

helmed by this very strong willed lady who made it the way she wanted to do it. It was most skilfully made, most pertinent to our time and marvellously acted".

When I ask Shah what was his most satisfying film in recent years, he laughs. "I do not seek satisfaction from movies apart from the financial... There is a great amount satisfaction in getting paid well. It is heartening to see the number of zeroes keep increasing.

"I did four films last year, one of which was a box office disaster, *Saat Khoon Maaf*. One met with disaster during the shoot. That was called *The Coffin Maker*. It was abandoned half way. And one met with disaster by the time it was finished. It was *The Hunt*, directed by Anup Kurian. It may or may not be released. Again, I did *Michael* with a first-time helmer, Ribhu Dasgupta. I have great hope on this. It should be out this year."

Naseer says he also enjoyed doing *Ishqiya*. "But it failed in the last part. I would have thought that the most interesting thing would have been to explore the falling out of the uncle and his nephew (portrayed by Shah and Arshad Warsi). That should have been explored rather than bringing back to life the dead villain. This was an easy way out. I have told this to both (producer) Vishal Bharadwaj and (director) Abhishek Chaubey. I think they chickened out and did not work hard enough on this last part. If this segment had been as good as the rest of the movie, I think we would have had an all-time winner."

Naseer feels that Balan, who essayed the female protagonist in *Ishqiya*, is an excellent actress, who is far ahead of "all these girls". She is "a risk-taking girl. She is doing this part of Silk Smitha in *The Dirty Picture*. I think she will be a knockout. So far, she has always played slightly coy characters. And as Smitha, she is going to astonish her fans".

The other film of Naseer that will be out this year is *Chargesheet* by "my favourite Dev Anand", Shah bursts out laughing again. "He is the man I have always been in love with. I did this movie out of sheer love for him and nothing else. You can never resist him. He is so full of beans."

So is Naseer, and as a parting question I ask him whether he saw the Tamil version of his *A Wednesday* (called *Umaipol Oruvan*). "No," Naseer is quick. "I was afraid that Kamal (Hassan) would play all the roles". Both of us burst out laughing.

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