

cinema

Directors in need of a clear direction

Some of today's helmers seem such a weak lot, easily giving in to unreasonable star demands, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Often I have been told that theatre is an actor's medium, while film is a director's. If one were to look at the history of cinema, helmers were indeed powerful, enjoying king-size reputation.

I do not think that anybody dared disobey Alfred Hitchcock, who went on to make some utterly masterful movies. Think of the sheer jitters that *Psycho* gave you through the shower screen as Anthony Perkins went about his murderous business in the garb of motel keeper Norman Bates. Or, look at the thrill Cary Grant gave you in *North By Northwest* as a hapless New York advertising executive being chased by spies, and, in one dramatic sequence, by a small aeroplane, flying low as he ran across a large, open field.

Then there was Hollywood's star producer, David O Selznick, who might have as well doubled as director. He was "mercurial, shrewd, self-confident and enormously gifted," a man who gave some of the most memorable films that the world never got tired of.

Gone with the Wind was one, a movie where he turned Vivien Leigh into Scarlett O'Hara, nay into a virtual star. Not just her, he spurred the careers of Clark Gable, Gregory Peck, Fred Astaire, Ingrid Bergman and Katherine Hepburn.

And then men like Federico

Fellini, Akira Kurosawa and Ingmar Bergman ... The list can go on, the list of those men who were truly auteurs, who had complete control over their work.

World cinema has even now directors such as these. Pedro Almodovar the Spanish giant who moulded Penelope Cruz into an epitome of excellence. Steven Spielberg, Michael Haneke and so on.

At home, we have had greats such as Satyajit Ray, Ritwick Ghatak, Mrinal Sen and Adoor Gopalakrishnan among others. I have watched Ray at work. Invariably in total awe as he went about quietly, but effectively.

I have watched Adoor on the set. There is absolute discipline and decorum when the camera is rolling and work is in progress. He does not let anybody disturb or distract him: evenings – after pack-up – see him closeted in his hotel room planning the next day's shoot.

Would anybody have dared to throw a tantrum with Adoor around or even with Ray? No way. They have been directors of fortitude and resilience. They have never brooked interference, certainly never, never with their scripts. Which these helmers treated as reverentially as they would a holy text, because they sweated over them to make them as perfect as possible.

But, some of today's helmers seem such a weak lot, easily giving



* A promotional poster from Ram Gopal Varma's *Not A Love Story* (left), in which Mahie Gill (above) boldly essays the role of model Maria Susairaj who was released from jail recently after being implicated in the brutal murder of her boyfriend.

in to unreasonable star demands. And these could be from a change of costume to lines to camera positions to scripts.

About a month ago, I wrote how Aishwarya Rai had taken Madhur Bhandarkar for a little ride, hiding from him and the world that she was pregnant. Poor Bhandarkar went with her to the Cannes Film Festival in May and dramatically announced the launch of his dream project, *Heroine*. The title role was to be played by Rai.

With the shoot well into several weeks, the Bachchans came out with the news of Aishwarya's pregnancy, about four or five months old. Bhandarkar's world came crashing down.

However, he seems to have emerged from his "shock", and is reportedly all set to revive *Heroine* with Kareena Kapoor.

Kapoor (30) has now agreed to step into Rai's shoes, but the fuss continues with Kareena insisting – as she did earlier – on script changes. She does not want to be seen making intensely passionate love to either of her heroes, Arjun Rampal or Arunoday Singh. In what I perceive as typical Indian hypocrisy, Kapoor is fine with being shown doing drugs, smoking and drinking on screen, but not making love. Such intimate scenes have to be toned down or glossed over, she has said.

"Kareena has consented to the snorting (drugs), drinking and

smoking scenes. Earlier, she had strong reservations about them. Now, she just doesn't want to do the explicit lovemaking scenes with Arjun Rampal and Sudhir Mishra's discovery Arunoday Singh. Those scenes are extremely sexy and Kareena is just not comfortable doing them," *Mumbai Mirror* quotes a source.

My point is, cannot Bhandarkar and the production company, UTV, find someone other than Kapoor to star in their *Heroine*? I am sure there are any number of capable actresses who may be willing to essay the part without demanding changes to or fretting over the script. Must a director like Bhandarkar get down to playing puppet?

Let us now look at another story, where the actress dared and the helmer was wracked by guilt! In a no-holds barred portrayal, Mahie Gill (*Dev D*, etc), slipped into the character, inspired by Maria Susairaj, who has just walked out of jail after serving a three-year term for tampering with the evidence in the murder of her boyfriend.

In the movie, *Not A Love Story*, Gill was professional enough to follow the script in its entirety, including its bold scenes.

But, in what appeared like role-reversal, Gill's director, Ram Gopal Varma, is allegedly guilt-ridden at having asked his heroine to do those scenes!

"She understood the script so

well. I felt odd that I had to put a girl in such a situation. There were retakes, too. And that felt more awkward," he said.

Mahie, on the other hand, quipped: "The intimate scenes were no big deal. Once you get into the skin of the character it is all okay. We are actors after all! Ramu was more embarrassed than I was. I remember once he even left the set. He keeps apologising to me, and I have to keep reassuring him that it's all okay!"

What once appalled me was Shyam Benegal's *Hari Bhari*. I watched him shoot it several years ago at Hyderabad's famed Ramoji Rao Studio for a full five days. I sat quietly in a corner, taking notes and clicking pictures.

Benegal is the man who had with some others been at the vanguard of the New Indian Cinema in the early 1970s, giving us rare gems on celluloid. But on the set of *Hari Bhari*, he seemed to have completely lost control. One of his actresses, Shabana Azmi, was, I felt, proxy directing the whole show.

Hari Bhari turned out to be way below the Benegal mark of excellence. But of course.

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