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Critic with the soul of a poet

A tribute to Roger Ebert, one of the greatest film critics the world has ever known. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Roger Ebert, who died last week in Chicago after a decade-long battle with cancer, was one of the greatest film critics the world has ever known. A native of Illinois in the US, he was fearless, never flinched from writing or saying (on television) what he thought about a movie. He panned a great art house fare and acclaimed a rank commercial film — if he felt that this was what they deserved.

I am sure he had a great many admirers as perhaps a great many enemies — who probably admired him as well, though grudgingly and secretly. For, nobody could ever point a finger at Ebert and say that this critic was prejudiced or careless enough to pen an opinion which was off the mark.

If his sting hurt some, Ebert's graciousness pleased many.

The New York Times' critic A O

Scott wrote in an obituary: "His brutal Cannes takedown of Vincent Gallo's *Brown Bunny* elicited a furious, vulgar reaction from the director, but when Roger saw a later cut of the movie, he found reason to praise it. And after savaging *Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo* he was pleased to tell the world that the film's star, Rob Schneider, had sent him flowers and a get-well card."

The first movie critic to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1975, Ebert reviewed cinema for the *Chicago Sun-Times* for 47 years, and that was the only paper he worked for, becoming a household name in America through his review show, *Sneak Previews*. He was also the first ever film critic to earn a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Todd MacCarthy, *The Hollywood Reporter's* Chief Movie Critic wrote a moving tribute to Ebert: "If it hadn't been for Roger Ebert, I might well not have pursued a career in

writing about films, as it was thanks to him that my words saw print for the first time.

"When Roger joined the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 1966 and was installed as the paper's movie critic the following year, it was a like a huge breath of fresh air for those of us who cared about films. Chicago was a great newspaper town, but when I was growing up there, virtually all the critics were little old ladies who wore funny hats and had names like Mae Timee.

"Roger replaced one of them, Eleanor Keen, and when this brash, sharp-witted guy in his mid-20s started writing about Truffaut and Godard, championing movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* and celebrating everyone from Groucho Marx to Russ Meyer, film freaks felt as though one of our own finally was in the right place at the right time."

Unfortunately, Ebert was not as

well known in India as, say, Francois Truffaut (not just a legendary movie critic but also a renowned film maker) or even Derek Malcolm, once *The Guardian's* celebrated movie critic and now with the *Evening Standard*.

If Truffaut's work, both criticism and film direction, was — and still is — extremely popular in India, and if Malcolm is a face that every movie buff/critic in India will readily recognise (also because he is a regular visitor), Ebert was not even a name in this part of the world where I come from, the Indian subcontinent.

However, Ebert did come to India, probably just once during the 1999 Calcutta Film Festival. As Simantini Dey writes in *Firstpost*, Ebert was overwhelmed by the popular response he saw. He wrote: "The grounds of Nandan (the Festival venue) are filled with conversation. On the grass, students in threes and fours sit in the sun with the Festival programme, discussing the movie they have seen. On railings and benches, older people nod in earnest debate."

As Dey concludes, "It is indeed rare that an outsider encapsulates the essence of a city during one short visit, but when Roger Ebert, one of the greatest film critics of our times, came to Calcutta (or Kolkata as it is now known), he discovered its soul. Whether he liked it or not is something we shall never know ... but at least we know he saw it for what it was."

I suppose Ebert had this great ability to discover a soul. No wonder, then, that he was famously described as a critic who had a soul, the soul of a poet.

If there is one state in India whose passion for cinema is unbelievable, it is West Bengal. It is almost unreal the way a Calcuttan

will give up just about everything to get into a theatre during a movie festival. I have seen frayed tempers and police lathi-charges as crowds swelled unimaginably before a screening.

Once the film ended and tempers had cooled, those who had pushed and abused one another would bask in the pleasure of having seen a great work. They would be ready to set aside their earlier animosity and talk animatedly with precisely those whom they had quarrelled with. Movies had this amazing ability to unite. And educate.

Cinema certainly enlightened me. Once upon a time. Even now, it does enlighten me. I grew up in what was then Calcutta, and my house rubbed shoulders with one of the cities most respected theatres, Basusree. I watched some of the most lilting fantasies of the age.

If a Shammi Kapoor "yahoood" with a Saira Banu on the snows of Kashmir (not Kilimanjaro), there was Joy Mukherjee rickshaw-pulling Sadhana on the ups and downs of Shimla. Waheeda Rehman's ghostly song on the moor to allure Biswajeet (not Baskerville) haunted me all right, but, in the end, cinema lit up our minds with positive energy, infused by the likes of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwick Ghatak. Most of their works played at Basusree, and it was not uncommon to see Sen walking into the theatre to catch Ray's *Sonar Kella* or *Pratidwandi* — or Ray watching a Sen's work in rapt attention.

Outside the auditorium, they were known to be rivals, sometimes airing their disagreements through newspaper columns!

The films of Ray and his ilk as well as from Bombay which played at Basusree made bold statements against societal prejudices and injustices. Care for orphaned children, the grit to follow the dictates of love, and compassion for the weak were ideals which were woven into the scripts in such an innocuous manner that one hardly felt like being lectured. That was the greatness of cinema then which moulded men into great rasikas or admirers of meaningful movies.

And in this veneration, there was little room for commerce. Ebert rightly pointed out after his visit: "I have been here at the Calcutta Film Festival for five days without once hearing the word 'Miramax'. No one has discussed a deal. There has been no speculation about a movie's box-office prospects. I have not seen a single star. I have been plunged into a world of passionate debate about film — nonstop talking about theory, politics and art. For the visiting American, dazed and sedated by the weekly mumbo-jumbo about the weekend's top 10, this is like a wake-up plunge into cold water."

That was Ebert, and that was Calcutta — once upon a time.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran grew up in the then Calcutta, learning to understand and appreciate what cinema was all about, sensitive and sensible cinema that is, and he may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com)