



Gone with the Wind turns 75

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Come December 13, *Gone with the Wind* will complete 75 years. That immortal romance set against the 19th century American Civil War is still considered by some as the king of the movie world. Adapted by the legendary producer, David O Selznick, from Margaret Mitchell's Pulitzer Prize winning expansive novel, *Gone with the Wind* first opened in Atlanta, the city where the author with just one novel to her credit lived and died – tragically in a road accident.

Running for 238 minutes and starring stars such as Clark Gable (as Rhett Butler), Vivian Leigh (Scarlett O'Hara), Olivia de Havilland, Leslie Howard and Hattie McDaniel, the film had as many as three directors – Victor Fleming, George Cukor and Sam Wood.

Though viewed as a timeless classic, many now aver that the movie's portrayal of the Civil War was not exactly accurate. Now playing across America, *Gone with the Wind* had goofed up in several places. Or so says a 30-minute documentary made by moviemaker and historian Gary Leva. Here historians talk about how the film had implied that the Civil War was fought only for noble causes, including the rights of the States.

"But when you get right down to it, what state right are you talking about?" asks the University of North Carolina history professor David Goldfield in the documentary. "You're talking about the right of individuals to own slaves."

The story may be about the rich and spoilt socialite in the South, Scarlett. But the war is an all pervading reality in the movie. Nobody can overlook this.



INACCURATE: Although McDaniel – who essays Scarlett's devoted nanny, Mammy, a slave – was the first African-American actor to be nominated for and win an Academy Award, *Gone with the Wind's* portrayal of black characters has been criticised since the day the movie first opened.

"[Slavery] is such a component of the film, and the characters who you are rooting for are oblivious," movie critic Ben Mankiewicz, was quoted as saying.

Also, although McDaniel – who essays Scarlett's devoted nanny, Mammy, a slave – was the first African-American actor to be nominated for and win an Academy Award, *Gone with the Wind's* portrayal of black characters has been criticised since the day the movie first opened.

"In *Gone with the Wind*, slavery is shown in the most benevolent terms," Leva said. "Characters like Mammy are looked at like

family members. And there's no hint at any sort of wrongdoing – the slave masters do nothing in the film that seems inappropriate." But the truth was something else.

As an article on the movie said, *Gone with the Wind* got one thing right: tomorrow is another day – and indeed so. Let us, for a moment, look at the recent slave dramas, *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained*. These modern movies dealt with slavery very differently. Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* has one scene in which an owner forces a slave to take part in gruesome death matches.

So, *Gone with the Wind* despite being a cinematic masterpiece, is politically a disaster. "If you were to do the film today, you wouldn't make it nearly as romantic. You'd make the movie much grittier. And you could show, I think, in a balanced way, that some Southern slave owners were, perhaps, kind human beings, and some of them were brutal." This is brought out with marvellous lucidity in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*.

Nobody quite knows whether these issues were tossed at Mitchell, whose book inspired the film. And, yes, she herself – despite being pressured – never wrote a sequel, though one was penned later in 1991 by Alexandra Ripley, and called *Scarlett*.

"What would I call it? Back with the Breeze," Mitchell used to retort whenever anybody asked her to write a sequel. Selznick himself tried hard to get Mitchell to do a sequel, but failed. Even the film rights for the novel came from Mitchell after much cajoling.

And Selznick had several other issues as well to deal with. The production was troubled from the beginning. The shoot was delayed by two years, because Selznick wanted Gable to do the part of Butler. And Selznick could not find his Scarlett, and the search led to 1,400 women being interviewed. Till one evening with the cameras already rolling and with Atlanta "burning", Selznick's brother brought Leigh along. The moment Selznick saw her, he knew that he had found his Scarlett.

Selznick had massive problems with his directors. The first, Cukor, was fired and was replaced by Fleming, who in turn had to make way for Wood.

Finally, all this was not in vain. In 1940, *Gone with the Wind* walked away with 10 Academy Awards (out of the 13 it was nominated for), including those for Best Picture, Best Director (Fleming), Best Adapted Screenplay (posthumously given to Sidney Howard), Best Actress (Leigh) and Best Supporting Actress (McDaniel).

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Mani Ratnam shooting again

Mani Ratnam is making a movie. And after an 18-month break. It will be in Tamil and Malayalam, and in the typical Ratnam style, the whole project was kept under wraps till the other day. Even now, we know very little about the work.

The film, to be set in Mumbai and Chennai, is yet to be titled. But we understand that the ace cinematographer, PC Sreeram, will lens the movie, and his association with Ratnam comes after 14 years – when the two worked in the Shalini-Madhavan starrer, *Alaipayuthey*, in 2000. AR Rahman will set the score for Ratnam's latest outing.

To be produced by Ratnam's own production house, Madras Talkie's, the helmer's work will have Dulquer Salmaan (Mammooty's son) and Nitya Menen playing the leads with Prakash Raj essaying an important part. Salmaan and Menen have been a hot pair, and were seen in Anwar Rasheed's *Ustad Hotel*. We also saw them in Anjali Menon's *Bangalore Days*, though they played cousins there.

In recent years, Ratnam has not had much of success. His bilingual *Raavan/Raavanan* in Hindi and Tamil bombed at the boxoffice, despite its promos being screened at the Cannes Film Festival, and the movies themselves being screened later at the Venice Film Festival, the world's two most prestigious cinema events after the Oscars. His 2013 *Kadal* also sank.

It is quite possible that Ratnam stepped out



BACK: Mani Ratnam is making a movie after an 18-month break.

of his comfort zone, if I may say so. The Tamil director's strength has always been city-centric plots. I have always felt that his early movies like *Mouna Raagam* (with Revathi and Mohan), *Nayagan* (with Kamal Hassan) and, of course, *Alaipayuthey* were his best. These were extremely intimate films that told us very personal stories set in huge, often unfeeling metros.

Take *Nayagan*. Inspired by the Mumbai underworld don, Varadaraja Mudaliar, the movie was just superb – tracing the life of an

orphan in a cold city like Mumbai who grows up to be a much feared man. But while the city looks up to him, his own daughter is upset and angry, and tells him that his ways are nothing short of cruel and heinous. She leaves home, and the man, already shaken by two tragedies in his life – the death of his young wife and son in a shootout and a bomb blast respectively – is absolutely shattered. But he bears the separation stoically.

Ratnam's later *Alaipayuthey* is a romance set in Chennai, where the train plays Cupid. After Shakti (Shalini) and Karthik (Madhavan), marry much against their families' wishes, they are bugged by trivial marital differences that one day blow into a major emotional trauma.

Both *Nayagan* and *Alaipayuthey* were wonderfully crafted and mounted films that above all touched us in no small way. I have always wondered whether *Nayagan* would have been as great had Ratnam not chosen Kamal Hassan to play the title role. And would Kamal have been as brilliant had another director handled him.

Undoubtedly, cinema is a director's medium. But his actor must be mouldable. Otherwise, both could be talking at cross purposes.

Ratnam has made 22 movies in a 31-year career, and has been largely responsible in making stars out of Rahman, Madhavan and Aishwarya Rai among others. Remember, Rai in *Iruvar* with Mohanlal and Prakash Raj?

But will Mani's magic work this time?