



✱ The master at work, again: Vishal Bharadwaj is eyeing another Shakespearean work.

A Kashmiri Hamlet waits in the wings

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

One of the Indian obsessions has been William Shakespeare. Probably, no other playwright or novelist or even short story author outside India has ever been sought after and adapted to cinema as the Bard of Avon. Directors such as Kishore Sahu (who filmed *Hamlet*), Bimal Roy (whose *Do Dooni Char* was a screen version of *The Comedy of Errors*), Gulzar (who made *Angoor* also out of *The Comedy of Errors*) and Kerala's Jayaraj (whose used cinema to narrate *Othello* through the highly stylised classical form of Kaliyattam) have been Shakespeare fans.

But I wonder whether anybody has been as passionate as Vishal Bharadwaj. Indeed, his best movies have been adapted from the English dramatist's works. Bharadwaj's

2003 *Maqbool* not only caught the eye of the masses and the media, but also proved that Bollywood could borrow the Bard's situations and sensibilities and translate them with courage and conviction into gripping cinema. The film — a brilliant adaptation of *Macbeth* — transcended the line between stage and screen with élan, and conveyed a remarkable sense of Indianness. Using the original plot of love, loyalty and treachery, Bharadwaj filled his movie with characters far removed from the Shakespearean era.

The helmer had assembled an excellent cast of Irrfan (who played Miyan Maqbool or Macbeth in the original), Tabu (Nimmi/Lady Macbeth), Pankaj Kapoor, Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah.

The last two essay corrupt cops, but extraordinarily gifted astrologers who predict the rise and fall of Maqbool with amazing precision. But unlike in *Macbeth*, the policemen (who represent the Weird Sisters in the play) are not passive. They

aid and abet the intrigues which eventually destroy an entire family. The plot unfolds in the Mumbai underworld.

Bharadwaj's next foray into Shakespeare was *Omkara*, a take-off on *Othello*. And Vishal transports the drama from the lagoons of Venice and its cruel usury to the thug-infested badlands of Central India's Uttar Pradesh. Obviously, the film becomes immediately attractive to a circle wider than one Shakespeare could have ever hoped for in India.

Given the tendency of the modern generation of movie buffs, who can be easily bored by the costumes, conventions and conversations of an England long gone by, Bharadwaj cleverly avoids these and devises a ploy that works: his "Shakespeare" abuses in an Uttar Pradesh dialect, chews "paan", engages in duels not with swords but with revolvers and rifles, and gifts silver waistlets, not silk handkerchiefs.

Othello's famous gift of an handkerchief to wife Desdemona changes into a stone-studded silver waistband that Omkara Shukla presents his lover/fiancée Dolly Mishra.

Bharadwaj gives his characters names that either begin with the same letter as in the original version or, at least, sound similar. Ishwar 'Langda' Tyagi is Iago, and Keshav Upadhyay or Kesu is Cassio.

Though *Omkara* follows *Othello* most of the way, the film's wide use of Indian nuances made it a hit. Two actors — Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor — infuse a rare kind of energy into the movie. Khan as Ishwar is superb. In a remarkable switch, Khan, the syrupy, romantic hero, so used to wooing women with chocolates and roses, plays the villain, one of the most negative figures that Shakespeare ever penned.

His physical limp, sarcasm and volley of insults underline not just the anguish of the unfair treatment meted out to him by Omkara (portrayed by Ajay Devgn), but also a mind that is capable of sheer deceit. Kapoor can actually act, and sans elaborate make-up, she is disarming as Dolly. She performs with the craving of a woman who completely trusts her man, and is devastated when she finds him unresponsive, even cold.

I still remember the 2006 Marrakech Film Festival where *Omkara* was screened in an open air auditorium adjoining a souk, and the large crowd that had gathered there that moonlight night went ecstatic. What is more, there were tens of Moroccan girls dressed in sari and speaking Hindi, albeit somewhat broken. They had picked up the language by watching Hindi serials on television!

Bharadwaj is now planning his third shot at Shakespeare. To be called *Hyder*, it will emerge from *Hamlet*, the playwright's longest work that talks about revenge, justice, incest and other forms of moral debasement. *Hamlet* is undoubtedly one of the most power-packed and influencing tragedies in English literature that has lent itself to countless retelling and versions.

I am told that this was the Man of Avon's most cherished work during his life, and ranks among his most staged plays topping the Royal Shakespeare Company's performance list since 1879. *Hamlet* has inspired such literary giants as Goethe and Dickens, and is said to be the most filmed story after *Cinderella*.

Bharadwaj will hop on to this distinguished bandwagon as he begins his hunt for locations in Kashmir. Yes, in Kashmir, which suddenly seems to have become a hit with artists. Some days ago, Zubin Mehta chose the Valley to conduct his grand orchestra. And we would soon see *Hamlet* unfolding among the picturesqueness of the region, dotted as it with mountains and lakes.

Bharadwaj has been spending a lot of time in Kashmir, and his *Hyder* will be set in the State's urban and rural areas. One saw the director talking to locals, attending Kashmiri marriages and sipping tea in roadside shops. "I want to absorb as much of the Kashmir culture as possible", he said.

The director was also seen reading a book by Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott Clark, *The Meadow*, which is about the kidnapping of five foreigners when militancy was its peak in the Valley. Shahid Kapoor (who worked with Bharadwaj in *Kaminey*) has been picked to play the lead or Prince Hamlet, out to seek vengeance and vendetta.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran — who has seen all of Vishal Bharadwaj's films, including *Ishqiya*, *7 Khoon Maaf* and *adapted-from-Ruskin-Bond* *The Blue Umbrella* — may be e-mailed at gautamanab@hotmail.com