Screen grabs from *Island City.*

Island City, a disturbing film on Mumbai

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Debutant director Ruchika Oberoi's *Island City* — which was part of the recent Venice Film Festival — is a disturbing work of how a huge metropolis like Mumbai throttles individual freedom, thinking and even desire. And in a way that there seems little possibility of escape.

Oberoi strings three short stories together — the link being the island city of Mumbai and autocratic human behaviour. In the first of the shorts, Fun Committee, a middle-aged bachelor is stuck in an endless routine that makes him almost a zombie. He works in an office that believes in organisation, discipline and obedience. Which of course means that none of the employees has the right to question authority. Seems like some kind of medieval dictatorship. However, when the company finds its profits diving because its workforce is listless and dispirited, a plan is mooted to send each one of them on a day's trip to an amusement park, and our middle-aged man is the first victim of this forced fun.

The second story, *The Ghost in the Machine*, centres on a man, who is on life-support in an intensive care unit. His family of mother, wife and two children are worried and anxious, but at the same time relieved to feel a breath of freedom. For, the man had been almost tyrannical. And while he is in hospital, the family indulges in the luxury of giving itself a television set — an entertainment banned by the man.

The final short, Contact, is about another tyrannical man, whose fiancée, struggling under the daily grind of earning a living and facing his whimsical qualms, finds joy and sunshine one morning when a letter arrives for her. It is a love letter from a man who does not identify himself, but waxes eloquent about his feelings for her. But will this last?

In a long chat from Mumbai, Oberoi says: "Mumbai starts affecting you from the moment you set foot here and I did so many years ago as a single, young, impressionable woman. Many moons and bitter-sweet experiences later, certain observations and interactions with different quarters stayed with me and I was keen to string them together to see if I could create an impression of these times of transition.

"I chose three that offered me the opportunity for some lightness as well as drama. There was the brush with certain slightly humourless upper caste people, known for their correctness, frugality and Brahminical purity, and I thought about doing something that disturbed their stoic sense of morality in a quirky sort of way."

Here are some more questions that I posed.

What inspired you to make this movie?
I feel quite drawn to a certain twisted, dark kind of comedy and this film allowed me to explore working in this genre. The fun of doing three thoroughly different stories, each treated in a completely different manner, also drew me to making this movie.

Is there a link between the three stories?
There is an incident in the first story that connects to the other two, however for me the connect between the stories is more thematic.

Is it authoritarianism or subjugation?
There are themes of authority and control. Each of the characters is also facing a certain kind of disconnect and then, through it all runs a grain of comedy and absurdity.

Is *Island City* biographical by any chance?
The first two stories are based on certain observed absurd situations. The third one is based on a story written by my husband, in which I completely changed the characters and the setting to incorporate some of my impressions of Mumbai. However, even though all three stories start out based in actuality, each moves slightly into another zone by the end of the film.

Going forward, what do you plan to do?
I plan to work along with my producer, National Film Development Corporation of India, to try and ensure a good release for *Island City* in the country. I feel that the movie has the potential to appeal to a larger cinema-going audience and not just Indie film enthusiasts. I also plan to take a small break and then begin work on my next script.

Maya
Sometimes, I feel that Indian producers and directors ought to watch British and American horror films to learn the technique of this genre. They do not have the faintest of idea of how to script, narrate and helm a ghost story. And with such movies — which are frightfully awful than frightening — now returning to the theatres (after their popularity in the 1960s and the 1970s), there is pressing need to master the craft of horror.

Ashwin Saravanan's *Maya* relies heavily on weird music and noises to scare the viewer, and when enough of this has been done, the film starts to startle you by thrusting ghostly figures on your face. A headless torso, a man who is completely covered by plaster and a woman whose face is hidden by dishevelled hair hardly produce the kind of emotions which writer-director Saravanan might have expected from modern-day audiences. Many among them, in the cinema where I watched *Maya*, were heard laughing — when they should have been trembling with terror. *Maya* clearly fails on this front.

The plot is no great shakes either. In black-and-white flashbacks, we are told how Maya's childhoold is taken away from her some two decades ago in a mental asylum — located inside an eerie jungle, called Mayavanam (pray why this spot) — where she is pushed into by her relatives. A perfectly sane Maya is driven to despair by the medical experiments conducted on her (seems like a Nazi concentration camp) that eventually kill her. So, this is no ordinary asylum, but one where the wickedest of deeds are committed in the name of medical science!

As the movie shifts into colour, we have a single mother called Apsara (played by Nayanthara), and a cartoonist, Arjun (Aari), who begins to investigate the strange once-upon-a-time bizarre goings-on in the asylum, which is by then disused and dilapidated, for the evil men have been long dead. Arjun also knows that those who dared to get inside the forest have never come back.

The story weaves in and out of the past, telling us about Apsara's tryst with the cinema industry, and about a producer as well as a director who shoot a film inside Mayavanam for a contest — which requires one to watch it all alone in a darkened auditorium with an electro-cardio graph machine strapped to him or her to monitor the heart. One who watches the movie without getting his or her pulse racing wins the prize money. How much more freakish can *Maya* get?

Anything more about the narrative will be a dead give-away, and Maya is not impressive on the acting front either. A de-glam Nayanthara often looks strained rather than pained as Apsara, and emoting has never been her strong point. Even during the climax, when she walks into a mist-swept Mayavanam, creepy and crowded with the supernatural, Nayanthara's face appears blank. Where is the fear, and come on, one need not get into a haunted forest in the dead of night with a torchlight whose beam is an apology for illumination.

If Saravanan had hoped to create a ghost tale out of all this (look at the autorickshaw with Apsara that travels on deserted Chennai roads and other kinds of desolateness that Maya forces on us), he could not have been more wide off the mark. *Maya* may be mysterious all right, but the shadows and the flickering bulbs hardly put the fear of devil in us.

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