

VERSATILE: Irrfan Khan in the film *The Lunchbox*.

The multifaceted Irrfan Khan

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The first time I met Irrfan Khan was at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival in one of its earliest editions. He was there with his director, Tigmanshu Dhulia, and movie, *Paan Singh Tomar*. The film, about a star award-winning steeplechase runner, who disillusioned with and humiliated by the administration turns into a rebel, not a dacoit as some others see him. Every time, someone calls him a dacoit, he corrects this by saying that he is not one, but a rebel fighting for a cause.

Paan Singh Tomar was a hit at Abu Dhabi, yet could not find a distributor in India for two long years. But when it opened, the movie was critically acclaimed, and I felt then that Khan had arrived. In one of my first columns on him, I had called Irrfan the greatest of Khans — perhaps much to the chagrin of actors like Shahrukh and Salman. (I would not like to bracket Saif here: he is capable of some fine work. Example, *Omkara*, adapted from *Othello*, where he was amazing as Langda Tyagi or Iago.)

For Irrfan, there was no looking back after *Paan Singh Tomar*, and Khan — who is now heading the top Narrative Feature Competition jury at the ongoing eighth edition of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival — has played a million different roles (so to say in a manner of speaking), each time disappearing into them in an almost magical way. A cop

in Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* as well as in the Angelina Jolie-starrer, *A Mighty Heart*, a Shakespearean schemer in Vishal Bharadwaj's *Maqbool*, a ghost in *Haider*, a steeplechase runner in *Paan Singh Tomar* and an aging loverboy in Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox*, Khan is a performer par excellence — while the rest of the Khans in Bollywood are, well, showmen. These are men who would dare not step out of their carefully-manicured images!

In an exclusive chat with me here the other afternoon, Irrfan says that he has more or less completed two or three projects — *Jurassic Park*, Meghna Gulzar's *Talwaar* on the famous Arushi murder case in Delhi, and Nishikant's Kamath's *Madari*, a story about a vigilante force (although some websites say Khan will portray Arvind Kejriwal of the Aam Aadmi Movement which Irrfan denies).

These movies will form a part of the small percentage that can be rightly termed sensitive and meaningful cinema — a cinema that struggles to find distributors and exhibitors, struggles to uphold the sanctity of the country's entertainment industry by fighting the money and muscle power of Bollywood. "I do not know why Bollywood has become synonymous with Indian cinema," Khan reflects. "And not many write about this." Some excellent Marathi films are being made — like, for instance, *Court*, which premiered at the recent Venice Film Festival, and *Khilla*, to be screened at the Indian Panorama (part of the International Film Festival of India to be held in Panaji,

Goa, from November 20).

Of course, this is not even to remotely suggest that all that comes out of the Bollywood stable is bad. In Vishal Bharadwaj's latest Shakespearean drama, *Haider* (an adaptation of *Hamlet*) — the last of the director's tragic trilogy of the Bard of Avon, (the other two being *Maqbool/Macbeth* and *Omkara/Othello*) — Irrfan plays a fascinating character, Ghost. He says that Bharadwaj and he hit upon the idea of such a character while they were discussing Khan's role. The Ghost was not part of the original script.

Back home, Irrfan will begin shooting *Piku* (nothing to do with Satyajit Ray's classic by the same name) — where he will be paired with Deepika Padukone. About a father (essayed by Amitabh Bachchan)-daughter relationship, *Piku* will be helmed by Shoojit Sircar (*Vicky Donor* and *Madras Cafe*), and its principal photography will begin very soon. "The movie is set in Calcutta (Khan still calls it Calcutta and not Kolkata) and it is all about a Bengali family...I will be going straight to that city after this," Khan avers.

Sircar is of course a Bengali, and his characterisation of the Bengali family in *Vicky Donor* (a great movie, one of the best that I have seen in recent times) was just superb. The way Sircar had mixed and mingled wit and the sombre was extremely interesting.

Bharadwaj is set to write another part for Khan. "His Shakespearean works have been great. A movie like *Maqbool* culminates

nicely. And when you have a complicated subject, you need good actors like Tabu and Pankaj Kapur," Khan feels. Although cinema is a director's medium, you need good actors. Otherwise a helmer can bang his head against the wall, and will get nothing out of an actor.

In this context, Irrfan talks about Tabu. "I think Tabu's role in *Haider* was her lifetime best. "It is a very complex part. She is a villain. Yet, she is not a villain? Sadly, actresses like Tabu have very little being written for them. After a long time, she was seen in *Haider* — as his mother. Also, it was a very brave decision to play mother, especially in Hindi cinema." Yes, once you become a mother on screen, the next step can only be a grandmother!

"Somewhere Indian cinema has not matured — although, the 1950s and the 1960s were a golden period. We then had our own distinct style. There may have been songs and dances. But we were dealing with issues. Even an ordinary film had something to say. Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, Mehboob Khan, Raj Kapoor and the like had something to tell us without making it sound preachy," Irrfan contends.

However, Indian cinema is once again meandering into meaningful movies. And actors like Irrfan are an integral part of this journey.

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