

Love in the time of war

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Julie Andrews in The Sound of Music.



Rate

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

There are a million conflicts in the world. Today. There were a million conflicts in the world. Yesterday and the day before. But romance weathered all this ugliness through love and longing, through a sense of belonging and commitment. A coy glance or a warm hug or a stolen kiss was magically mesmeric and banished the darks clouds of rift and rancour.

Indeed, some of the greatest on-screen love stories have unfolded against bloody wars and unimaginable human suffering. We have seen the blossoming of romances in the horrific confines of concentration camps. We have seen men and women across barbed-wire fences fall in love, knowing full well that their love is hopeless.

In Adoor Gopalakrishnan's 1989 *Mathilukal* (The Walls), we watch a political prisoner (played by Mammooty) during India's independence struggle fall in love with a woman, also incarcerated but in the women's wing that is separated from the men's by a high wall. The man gets enamoured of the woman's voice which comes floating across the wall. He has never seen her. He never does. But still nurses a deep sense of affection for her. And she for him.

Take *Gone with the Wind* in 1939 — adapted from Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel. The long, long story unfolds against the backdrop of the American Civil War, fought between the northern and southern States over the abolishing of slavery. The blow-hot-blow-cold romance between Scarlett O'Hara (played by the vivacious Vivien Leigh) and Rhett Butler (the dashing Clark Gable) ignites the air as Atlanta burns, as did much of America with brothers butchering brothers. It is not the gore we remember after all these years, but the haunting poignancy of

the affair between the ravishingly pretty Scarlett and the hot and handsome Rhett. As the battle rages and black slaves wait anxiously to be freed, Cupid ties Scarlett and Rhett in a beautiful bond.

There is another wartime love story which is my all-time favourite. Casablanca, which was released in 1942 and which traces the lives of two people — Rick Blaine, who runs a night club (Rick's Cafe Americano in Casablanca) and Ilsa Lund (portrayed by the Swedish actress Ingrid Bergman), a stunner whom he meets in Paris. There is one memorable scene there: we see the two by a window and they hug each other as they hear the distant sound of guns — signalling the advancing German army. But nothing, not even the fear of war, can spoil the mood of love that afternoon, when Rick and Ilsa clink their glasses and kiss. "Here's looking at you, kid," he says and draws her close to him in a warm embrace.

Many months later when they meet in Casablanca, at his cafe, Rick talks about that marvellous day. "Not an easy day to forget," Ilsa reminisces. "I remember every detail," he tells her. "The Germans wore gravy, you wore blue," he is wistfully nostalgic. The movie is full of such lovely lines. At the climax, as the plane to Lisbon is about take-off from Casablanca and as Ilsa is coaxed into boarding it, she tearfully asks Rick, "What about us?" He answers softly: "We'll always have Paris. We didn't have, we, we lost it until you came to Casablanca. We got it back last night."

Another favourite film of mine is The Sound of Music, which is set in the final months of the Golden Age of Music in Salzburg, the final months before Hitler's forces invade Austria and kill just about every little joy. The Sound of Music, which opened in 1965, narrates the story of Captain Von Trapp (Christopher Plummer) and Maria (studying to be a nun, portrayed by Julie Andrews). The Captain — who runs his home like an army barrack — falls deeply in love with Maria (who is hired as a governess) as he watches her befriend his seven children from an earlier marriage and help him bond with and understand them.

There is another little romance in The Sound of Music — between the Captain's eldest daughter, Liesl (Charmian Carr), and Rolfe. Director Robert Wise captures the tender feelings between the two (he is 17, and she 16) through an immensely melodic song, You are 16, going on 17...

Some weeks ago, when Carr (who was in her early seventies) died, The Indian Express wrote: "The passing of Charmian Carr, who played young Liesl in the 1965 classic, The Sound of Music, marks the fading of a Hollywood era — but also emphasises its tremendous vitality... Despite the powerful Maria-Von Trapp track, Carr could convey a tremulous first love, followed by a first-time broken heart.

"But she survived. And this is why The Sound of Music was so important. The movie emphasised how amidst war, life, with its music, its magic, its mischief, somehow always triumphed. The more aggressors tried to make the world a joyless place, the more the world responded by singing another song. Liesl was important in this light — she was a fantasy figure in a time when millions of children were massacred in the Holocaust, who could never experience their first crush, their first kiss, their first understanding of how fragile and strong people are. Exemplifying a now-gone Hollywood of dances and songs, The Sound of Music paid homage to those young people and their music-shorn lives.

"In times when the world is blanketed in military conflicts, it's vital to remember Liesl trilling, I am sixteen, going on seventeen. That song still holds for young people everywhere, who deserve a chance to hear The Sound of Music — and make some of their own."

How true! How very true.

Rekka

This year seems like a dream run for Vijay Sethupathi with six releases, the latest being Rekka (Wings). Having earned the title of Makkal Selvan/People's Darling in line with the Tamil film tradition of celebrating actors with honorific, Sethupathi literally takes wings in the movie

transforming himself into a super man. While most of his six films this year were more or less rooted in realism, Rekka tends to slip into fantasy. A powerful actor who exhibits the right kind of emotions and in the right measure, Sethupathi seems to have been pushed into the highly popular genre, which in Tamil cinema passes off for entertainment, often brutally crass. And Rekka stands in stark contrast to his earlier Aandavan Kattalai, where he was absolutely charming as a man lost in a world of deceit.

In Rekka, Sethupathi's Shiva lives with his parents and sister in Kumbakonam, and, though a lawyer (with not a single scene in court), he plays the roadside Samaritan often helping young women escape unwanted marriages arranged by their parents. In the bargain, he creates enemies among those men who feel slighted at the eleventh hour.

One of them is David (Kishore), who many months later finds a chance to get even with Shiva, forcing him to kidnap the daughter (Anjali, essayed by Lakshmi Menon) of an influential Madurai politician. With the marriage of his sister in progress, Shiva is cornered all right with David's henchmen all set to create mayhem at the ceremony.

What follows is beyond any shred of logic. While Anjali — who had once seen and admired Shiva — is all too willing to hold his hand and run away with him from her home, making his task look like a cake walk, David has his own little game to play — a game in which Anjali and her knight in shining armour are but pawns.

Boringly predictable, the narrative stutters and stammers through a medley of songs (some imagined!) and fights — with very little space for character development or emotional enrichment. Stretched thin, the plot relies heavily on its lead guy, Sethupathi. He has indeed a fascinating presence and a lovely way of saying his lines, punctuated with a smile here and a smile there. Great, but all this may lose its sheen if Sethupathi decides to become yet another star, throwing away the immense potential he has to disappear into a character.

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