

Rajinikanth must reinvent himself to live on

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NEW DIRECTIONS: Rajinikanth needs to reinvent himself along the lines of Kamal Haasan, Amitabh Bachchan and Rishi Kapoor.



Rate

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Despite the massive publicity for *Kabali* that got the thousands of the film's lead star, Rajinikanth, on a frenzied high, he seemed to have disappointed both critics and the man on street. One of the key points of the public relations campaign was the *Kabali* director, Pa Ranjith, assertion — which he made time and again — that he would turn the superstar into a super actor — the kind one saw of him in his early works with auteurs such as K Balachander, Bharathiraja and J Mahendran to name just three.

But as I walked out of an early screening of *Kabali* on July 22, there was disappointment writ large on the faces of viewers. Even during the show, there was silence, except for the first 10 minutes when one saw Rajinikanth emerge out of the prison after a 25-year incarceration — suited and booted. This was certainly unusual for any Tamil movie with any star worth the name, and the kind of din spectators (girls included) create made it almost impossible to follow what was being spoken on screen. But the silence during *Kabali* was disturbing in different sort of way.

As Tamil actor and stand-up comedian, Bosskey, told me soon after watching the film, "this is hardly a Rajinikanth movie". How true.

For, *Kabali* was minus all the antics we have got so used to seeing in Rajinikanth — right from flicking a cigarette in the air to the way he wears and re-wears his "angavastram" (shawl). In any case, Ranjith had planned this — to get the star out of his starry mannerisms that have over a period of time got quite jaded. People were tired of them, and this was one important reason why Rajinikanth's past few movies like *Enthiran*, *Kochadaiyaan* and *Lingaa* had

battered the boxoffice into pulp.

To top it all, Rajinikanth has not been keeping well, and the star one saw in *Kabali* conveyed this in no uncertain terms. As one viewer quipped at the film's intermission, "Thalaivar (Rajinikanth) is looking so weak".

So, Ranjith must have had all the noble intentions when he got *Kabali* off the drawing board. He wanted to show an ageing Rajinikanth, but a gangster — who would leave most of the actions to his henchmen, stepping into the ring only in the final sequences to draw his pistols out of his coat sleeves (!) and vanquish the heavily made-up Winston Chao (who essays the Malaysian baddie, Tony Lee, and looking positively uncomfortable trying to talk Tamil).

Ranjith got this all right, turning the superman into a docile but dressed-up don. But what the director could not achieve was to transform the showman Rajinikanth into actor Rajinikanth. The helmer completely failed here. Not surprisingly so. For, this was a big task for a rather inexperienced director like Ranjith — with just two movies, romantic comedy *Attakathi* and crime drama *Madras*, in his basket.

To be honest, Rajinikanth is far too gone into gimmicks, far too used to showing off with his tricks, and it will need a director of substantial stature to remould Rajinikanth into an actor — all over again. One can only think of two names here. One, Mani Ratnam — whose gangster adventure, *Nayagan*, made many, many years ago, still remains a high point in Tamil cinema, nay Indian cinema, and certainly Ratnam's career best, yes still, and protagonist Kamal Hassan's best as well, yes still. Two, Vetrimaaran, whose *Visaaranai* (2015 Venice premiere) and earlier *Aadukalam* were laudable cinematic efforts.

So, Rajinikanth in *Kabali* seemed as if he was stranded in no man's land. He was stopped by Ranjith — or so he has been saying in his interviews — from performing gimmicks (except in one scene where he crosses his legs with stylish panache), and the actor could not sparkle as an actor. Ranjith's fault to a large extent, for, let us not forget that while theatre is an actor's platform, cinema is a director's medium.

In the final analysis, one must contend that *Kabali* must prod Rajinikanth to pause and ponder. It is time, he ceases to view himself as a lover or he-man chasing nubile young lasses or taking on Goliaths of goondas. A classic example he must bear in mind is that of Dev Anand, who just could not free himself from the lover-boy image (even when he was knocking 80), with the result that film after film of his flopped.

On the contrary, artists like Kamal Haasan, Amitabh Bachchan and Rishi Kapoor, have been smart enough to reinvent themselves. We saw a different Kamal in *Unnaipol Oruvan* and *Papanasam*, though there were disasters like *Uttama Villain* and *Viswaroopam* between these two high points.

Bachchan's *Cheeni Kum*, *Aarakshan*, *Satyagraha*, *Black*, *Paa*, *Piku*, *Te3N* and *Wazir* have amply proved that here was a man willing to move with times, even if that meant letting go an avatar which had made him, in the first place, a celebrated star. Gone was that angry young man of *Zanzeer*, gone was that lover boy of *Silsila*. Bachchan drew the drapes over these characters to become a proud restaurant owner in London, a true teacher, a grieving grandfather and a cantankerous old father with an obsessive bowel syndrome.

And the Rishi Kapoor one watched in *D Day*, where he plays an underworld kingpin! What a change from his Bobby days and his several other romantic movies. He was fantastic in *Shuddh Desi Romance* as a marriage broker, he was just wonderful in *Kapoor and Sons*, though the make-up went overboard.

Yes, Bachchan and Kapoor and even Hassan got themselves good scripts, and able helmers. But above all, these men made up their minds to select stories that seeped into their ageing psyches — unlike a Dev Saab, who clung on to his youth and youthful heroines. And fell from a majestic citadel like *Guide*.

Rajinikanth must get rid of the on-screen halo around him, and pick scripts that will help him shine all over again. As an actor, of course. It is still not too late.

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