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Shakespeare shakes Thailand

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BANNED: Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (called *Shakespeare Tong Tie* or *Shakespeare Must Die*) has been banned.

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By Gautaman Bhaskaran
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One is not surprised that cinema has always given the jitters to people and people's representatives. In India, despite its well-professed democracy and democratic institutions, films have been banned or stopped from popping out of the cans for years.

Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday* on the Mumbai riots could be released in theatres many years after it was made. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* was not allowed to run. Kamal Hassan's *Viswaroopam* could open after much wrangling with a small and insignificant group. Santosh Sivan's *Inam* had to be taken off before it could even complete a week.

However, all the Indian producers, financiers and moviemakers who have suffered from such "censorship" would perhaps, feel a sense of solace to learn that they are not alone in this struggle to express what they want to through what is undoubtedly a visually vibrant medium.

In Thailand, Ing Kanjanavanit could not have dreamt that her adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (called *Shakespeare Tong Tie* or *Shakespeare Must Die*)

would be banned by the authorities. Although Thailand has had various kinds of dictatorial regimes over the years, it still seems incredulous that Mr William Shakespeare, a poet and playwright who lived some 450 years ago in England, could still have the power to rattle the powers-that-be in Bangkok!

The director is being seen as a dangerous subversive, and why? Kanjanavanit, who went to school in Derbyshire (Britain) and later in Surrey (also Britain), got her first dose of autocratic medicine when her documentary, *Citizen Juling* (about the killing of a teacher by some Muslim women in southern Thailand), was labelled controversial and not allowed to travel to foreign festivals.

So, Kanjanavanit decided to tackle something as safe as Shakespeare. *Macbeth*, she chose, but little did she realise then that even this will attract brickbats.

Though she translated the play as precisely as possible, she added what she felt would be pointers to contemporary happenings in her own country, and therein lay the seeds of her trouble.

One of them is the way in which Thailand's former Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, is being sidelined. His detractors assumed that Kanjanavanit's film would keep the memory of the man and his rule alive, even though the helmer had been shouting that she was no fan of his "blatant and obscene ethics". Of course, the movie is no anti-Thaksin propaganda.

However, a more important reason for Kanjanavanit's woes may lie in one of the scenes that occur at the end of the film where *Macbeth's* execution resembles the horrifying massacre at Thammasat University at Bangkok in October 1976. Over 40 pro-democracy students, who had been staging satirical plays, were murdered.

The movie, therefore, can be viewed as a strong critique of the present Thai administration. So was *Macbeth* in a way. And Shakespeare can shake all right. It is in a scenario such as this comes the glad news that Saudi Arabia, whose aversion for cinema is well known, may well have theatres soon. An investor has applied to the Saudi General Commission of Audiovisual Media for opening cinemas.

The Commission has asked the investor to submit a detailed plan, and this in a country where cinema is banned.

But, ban or no ban, Saudis travel to nearby Dubai and Bahrain to watch the films they want to. And television channels in Saudi Arabia have also been beaming movies from across the world. So the ban is hardly effective.

Once, the Kingdom of Bhutan disallowed television, but later had to lift the curb when it saw subjects thinking of ingenious ways of getting channels into their living rooms.

The right to express through cinema or any other means can never be effectively checked. I have seen Iranian and Chinese films being smuggled into the Cannes Film Festival through methods absolutely unimaginable and novel. And there you go.

One of the biggest banes of Indian cinema has been miscasting or stereotyping. For years, Tamil actor Santhanam played the same old comedian, till he was roped in to essay the lead in *Vallavanukku Pullum Aayudham*. But here again, the role had an overdose of his comic characteristics.

It has not been different with another very good actor, Prakash Raj, who has been done to death in villainous roles in several languages. People seem to have forgotten his brilliant portrayal of an impoverished silk weaver in the Tamil work, *Kanchivaram*, a part he infused with pain and tragedy.

Prakash Raj's latest Tamil picture, *Un Samayal Arayil* (In Your Kitchen), which comes after his singularly moving performance in the father-daughter relationship story, *Abhiyum Naanum*, is a remake of the Malayalam movie, *Salt N' Pepper*.

As a 45-year-old archaeologist, Raj's Kalidasan is wonderfully believable. A foodie, who, much to the consternation of his live-in relative, Vaidhi (a touching performance by Elango Kumaravel), even dares to "steal" the cook from the house of a girl he visits for a possible marriage alliance, Kalidasan peppers his part with a kind of lighthearted pathos rarely seen in Indian cinema. But when he is not busy tucking in delicacies, he is passionate about his excavated discoveries as he is about helping an aged Adivasi find a home.

Life for Kalidasan steps on the accelerator when a wrong call connects him to Gowri (Sneha), trying to have a "Kutti Dosai" (mini dosa) home delivered.

Kalidasan pretends to take the order, but when it never reaches her, it leads to an angry telephonic outburst from a hungry Gowri, a 30-something single woman dubbing artist living with friends.

Cupid strikes when Kalidasan's young nephew, Naveen (Tejus), gets the two talking. However, Kalidasan and Gowri chicken out when they finally decide to meet: Naveen and Gowri's roommate, Meghna (Samyuktha Hornad), are asked to impersonate, and the classic tale of errors results in trouble and torment.

My quarrel with the film is two-fold. Somehow, food begins to fade out of the plot, rendering the title a trifle imprecise, and the escapades of the younger couple hog much of the screen time post intermission. A classic pitfall of Indian movies which get too ambitious filling their plates with more than what they can digest. It could have been so much more wonderful to see Prakash Raj and Sneha together beyond the mere minutes that they actually do so. In fact, they share the screen space only at the climax! A pity, for both the performances were refreshingly riveting.

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