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Films

Spanish is Good, But English Ought to be Better

Penelope Cruz struggles with language barrier in her quest to conquer Hollywood



Penelope Cruz is Spanish. And she is Spanish in every sense of the term. Fiery and funny, sexy and seductive, and saucy and spicy that only the Spanish can be. An actress who played a murderess in Pedro Almodovar’s brilliant cinematic piece, “Volver”, a chef wracked by motion sickness in the hilarious screwball comedy, “Woman on Top”, a gypsy in the swashbuckling satire “Fanfan La Tulipe”, a lovelorn lass in “Captain Corelli’s Mandolin” and now as a passionate painter in “Vicky Cristina Barcelona”, for which she won the BAFTA Best Actress Award, followed by an Oscar for the best supporting role.

Cruz’s range is truly incredible. But for a long time, it was felt that she was good merely in Spanish films. She certainly had a problem with English, as was apparent in the 2001 “Vanilla Sky”, where she struggled with her diction and delivery. The movie was damaging in another aspect. Her tumultuous affair with the leading man, Tom Cruise, even as he was going through a messy divorce with long-time wife, Nicole Kidman, may have made the new couple the hottest in Hollywood and a darned favourite of the paparazzi, but it drove Cruz to the backseat.

While Cruz and Cruise sailed along between 2001 and 2004, her roles shrivelled and shrunk. Most of them were minor ones in uncelebrated American indies, such as “Waking Up in Reno”, “Masked and Anonymous” and “Noel”. Sadly, the few meatier parts in foreign films – “Fanfan La Tulipe”, “Don’t Move” and “Bandidas” – just did not catch the right eye in the right place.

Her old mentor and Spanish master, Pedro Almodovar, had to rescue a sinking, struggling Cruz in his magnificent 2006 “Volver”. As Raimunda in a small Spanish town, Cruz was marvellous as a woman haunted by her mother’s ghost and a murder she is forced to commit. Switching from wrath and fear to girlishness and garrulousness as a perky cook feeding a movie

unit, Cruz stole the show and told her critics that she had a lot of pluck still left in her. But “Volver” was in Spanish, and Cruz had to prove that she could do an English job with equal ease.

Came her Jeeves, bespectacled and haggard, an image that did not quite give the impression of a knight in shining armour: Woody Allen, still nurturing his muse, Scarlett Johansson, decided to cast Cruz in his “Vicky Cristina Barcelona”. If Allen resurrected himself with this movie, Cruz proved that she could comfortably handle an American production. As Maria Elena, the Spanish wife of painter Juan Antonio (essayed by Javier Bardem), she breathed fire into his relationship with Vicky (Rebecca Hall) and Cristina (Johansson).



“Elena” may have got Cruz an Oscar, but doubts about her English fluency remain. For in the Allen work, she speaks English with the obvious Spanish accent. However, Cruz says that after living and working in America for a few years now, she is more relaxed and confident. “You need the language to survive. That is how you learn”. She feels she could

not have played Elena five years ago.

Now working in Madrid for Almodovar’s “Broken Embraces”, Cruz is back into a language she knows best, and back into yet another relationship, this time with Bardem. However, a string of ruined romances, including the much celebrated one with Cruise, has not pushed her into gloom. “I am not a stable person”, she had once said. “But who is?” she asked, exuding a confidence that reminds me of there being a tomorrow which Vivien Leigh famously foresaw as Scarlett O Hara in “Gone With the Wind”.

That morrow may come with Cruz’s latest English work, “Elegy” (*pictures*), opening this summer, where she plays a student who falls in love with her college professor (Ben Kingsley). The work is based on Philip Roth’s novel, “The Dying Animal” (2007), and probes the power of love and the effect that beauty can have on a relationship.

The señorita has both and this creates a kind of alternate realities she is known to have grown up with in Madrid. As the daughter of a motor mechanic, she went to an unusual drama school: her mother’s beauty parlour, where she watched women as they relaxed and got agitated pouring out their hearts. A training in ballet helped her acquire grace and discipline, a discipline to get what she had set her heart on. For the moment, it could be Bardem and English.

Gautaman Bhaskaran is India-based film critic and writer and winner of the Cannes gold medal for consistent excellence in coverage

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