



**RUFFLED FEATHERS:** Often depressive and phobic about everything in life (he never gets into an aeroplane!), except filmmaking, director Lars Von Trier has been as controversial in his creations as he has been in his utterances.

# Will Von Trier be at it again?

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**A**s I prepare to cover the Cannes Film Festival in May, I have this question haunting me. Will Danish master Lars Von Trier arrive on the Croisette with his two-part *Nymphomaniac*? And if he does, will he keep his mouth shut, a “moun vrath” (fast of silence) he has been undertaking since the controversy he sparked at Cannes in 2011.

Soon after his movie, *Melancholia*, was screened at competition there that year, he told a media conference: “What can I say? I understand Hitler, but I think he did some wrong things, yes, absolutely. ... He’s not what you would call a good guy, but I understand much about him, and I sympathise with him a little bit. But come on, I’m not for the Second World War, and I’m not against Jews. ... I am of course very much for Jews, no not too much, because Israel is pain in the \*\*\*; but still how can I get out of this sentence ...”

Although this was a statement made in jest, Von Trier upset half the world, and the festival was forced to declare him persona non grata. He had to leave Cannes. But the French being French, and Cannes known for its large-heartedness, forgave Von Trier the very next year, and announced that the auteur was welcome again.

So, will Von Trier arrive from Denmark by

road in his caravan this summer? He might, for all you know. Often depressive and phobic about everything in life (he never gets into an aeroplane!), except filmmaking, the director has been as controversial in his creations as he has been in his utterances.

His *Antichrist* (with Charlotte Gainsbourg playing the female lead), screened at Cannes, had graphic scenes of genital mutilation. Even some “hardened” movie critics at the festival felt a sense of deep revulsion. But that is the way, Von Trier likes to shock us or shake us.

Von Trier’s latest, *Nymphomania* (Part 1 and 2) is about a woman, a self-confessed nymphomaniac who seduces men for sport. I am told porn actors have been used to portray actual sex scenes.

Of course, this is nothing new. The helmer’s 1998 *The Idiots* also had sexual explicitness. And in 1998, the world was less liberal, and the Von Trier jolt seemed harder.

But Von Trier fans and followers did not miss a certain dichotomy here. On the one hand, he portrayed an absolute sense of sexual freedom. On the other, he rained abuse on his women characters. They suffered, and suffered terribly – a fact that got him the label of misogynist.

This is a charge that has dogged him since he made *Breaking the Waves* in 1996. Emily Watson essays a naïve country girl, Bess McNeill. When her husband is paralysed after an accident on an oil rig, he asks Bess to have sex with other men and describe it to him.

This will help preserve their marriage, he

feels. In the bargain, Bess becomes a complete wreck. There are horrific scenes of her being molested and mistreated. In *Dogville*, Nicole Kidman essays a character who is raped and enslaved.

In the 2000 Danish musical drama, *Dancer in the Dark*, Von Trier had the Icelandic singer, Bjork, as his heroine, Selma. A Czech immigrant working in America, she is going blind because of a genetic factor, and is desperately trying to save money for an operation that will save her son from losing his sight as well. Much like his other women protagonists, Selma is misunderstood, hurt, humiliated and her life tragically cut short.

No wonder then, some of the actresses who have worked with Von Trier asked him why he hated women. Kidman was one. It is said Bjork was so agitated that she began eating her sweater!

However, one writer clarifies that Von Trier is not a woman hater. Rather, his cinema is all about “repercussions of depression”. The Danish master ought to know this. He has himself been in deep depression, and there were times when he would not even get out of bed to get himself a glass of water. Yet, he has always shaken himself out of it – to write and helm some great dramas.

## Thegidi

*Thegidi* (Deception) by P Ramesh is one of the better Tamil films I have seen in recent months. A murder-mystery, the movie, though, is not as thrilling as one would



expect a work in this genre to be. Its pace is languorous, and the plot unfolds in a deliberate rhythm. In fact, even the suspense is gone before the final reels roll on. Yet, it endears in a strange sort of way.

About a man, Vetri (Ashok Selvan) from Thanjavur who masters with a degree in criminology and becomes a sleuth in a Chennai detective agency, *Thegidi* while pointing out to his exceptional ability for observation (there is a remarkable scene in his classroom that conveys this), falters at a point. It does not tell us why he misses out on the obvious in his firm.

And is it not the cardinal rule of a detective to remain as unobtrusive as possible when he is following a suspect or one who is under surveillance for whatever reason? Yet, Vetri is often seen driving a big, almost flashy car, though he is otherwise modestly dressed.

Ironically, all the three men Vetri is asked to follow and gather facts about die in unnatural circumstances. One falls to his death from a construction site. One drowns in a river, and the third is run over by a car. Vetri’s fourth case involves a woman, Madhushree (Janani Iyer), and he, despite a stricture against it, falls in love with her, and fears that she would die as well.

Vetri, for reasons that foxed me, appears nervous and ill at ease, a clear case of miscasting here. Selvan is wooden and a huge disappointment in a work that could have been otherwise a couple of shades better. Iyer has a very limited part, and she does fair justice to that.

Another point that pulls the film down is the music, and like most Indian directors, Ramesh allows that to be intrusively irritating. Only very few understand the effectiveness of silence in effectively pushing a narrative.

Despite its flaws, *Thegidi* is a novel attempt at telling a murder story and in a very different kind of way, minus the pulse-pounding twists and turns that one usually associates with mysteries.

Rather, *Thegidi* is beautifully controlled and scripted with a sense of visual stillness. The characters are no restless beings, and their parts have been written with a fair degree of authenticity. There are many aspects in the movie which are quite believable – something not seen often in Indian cinema.

Yes, *Thegidi* is not for those seeking a rollercoaster ride through car chases, fistfights and Bondish exploits.

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