



# The Song of Scorpions

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Indian director Anup Singh will soon begin shooting his latest film, titled *Mantra – The Song of Scorpions*. To be set in Rajasthan, the plot is a strange mix of folklore and exotica.

A yarn — woven around a simple tribe that lives in box-like houses bang in the midst of the harsh Rajasthan desert, which is also home to one of the most venomous scorpions on earth — *Mantra* promises to be as hauntingly lyrical as eerily mysterious.

“When stung by one of these deadly creatures, the only known cure is to find a woman, known as Scorpion Singer, who can read the poisonous melody in the patient’s pulse and hum a counter melody. This way, she draws out the lethal toxin from the victim’s system,” said Singh from Geneva, where he lives for most part of the year. “The Scorpion Singer has the ability to feel the venom as it travels through the body, and she has to stop its flow through the blood stream before it reaches the heart in 24 hours.”

In certainly a coup of sorts, Singh has roped in the ravishing and gifted Iranian actress, Golshifteh Farahani — who will essay, Nooran, the Scorpion Singer. At one point in the movie, she would find that her own life has been poisoned by the man she loves.

Farahani’s life itself has been as stirring. Her defiance has often bordered on the scandalous. As a girl growing up in Teheran, she once ganged up with classmates against her school management because the classrooms had no heating. On another occasion, she played Cupid. She lied to her parents so that her elder sister could meet her boyfriend.

Farahani grew even more daring as she got into her teens. Barely 16, she tonsured her head saying that she no longer needed a scarf, because there was no hair to cover. No girl in Iran would have been bold enough to do that. Not just this, but Farahani dressed like a boy and cycled around Teheran. At 17, she went to an acting school much against the wishes of her parents, who wanted her to learn the piano.

In an interview with me at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival two years ago, Farahani came out with a shocker: “I was far from a good girl that Iranian society expected of me. Instead, I chose to play with the lion’s tail.”

The tail grew longer, and Farahani seemed to enjoy the challenges that multiplied along with it. She married when she was 20 and soon after fell afoul of the Iranian authorities when she acted with Leonardo DiCaprio in Ridley Scott’s CIA thriller, *Body of Lies*.

Accused of collaborating with the West, she ran away to Paris, and soon after, divorced her husband. That was in 2008, and she has been living in the city ever since, savouring to the hilt French liberty and free spiritedness. And she has been making, what she feels is, the best use of it. In Paris, she once posed for a racy magazine cover, enormously upsetting the Iranian clergy.

Farahani’s choice of movies has been as salacious. In *The Patience Stone* — screened at the Festival — she portrays a rebellious character. We see her tending to her comatose husband with a bullet in his neck, and as the plot progresses, she begins to confess to her husband — partly to fight her loneliness and boredom. The confessions stretch over several days, and with the passing of time, they get increasingly saucy and spicy.

Will *Mantra* be as piquant as *The Patience*



**REBEL:** Golshifteh Farahani will act in Anup Singh’s upcoming film.



Anup Singh’s latest film will narrate the travails of the Scorpion Singer, a woman who can cure the sting of the deadly scorpion.



A screen grab from Anup Singh’s latest film *Qissa*. His next film will feature Irani actress Golshifteh Farahani.

*Stone*? Singh has this rare ability to take us by surprise, and his new work may well be electrifying.

But who is the man who will taunt and trouble Farahani’s Nooran in *Mantra*? Singh is yet to decide on this, but the buzz is that Indian actor Irrfan Khan can be the Scorpion Singer’s lover. Khan has been exceptional in celebrated works like *The Lunch Box*, *Maqbool* (based on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*), *Haider* (Hamlet), *Paan Singh Tomar* (about a champion steeple chase runner), *The Namesake* (based on a Jhumpa Lahiri novel) and in Hollywood films like *Shumdog Millionaire*, *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Life of Pi*.

Khan is familiar with Singh’s cinema, having worked with the director’s last film, *Qissa* or *Fable*, which opened last week — after having been in the cans for over two years. Singh explaining the delay says: “I think it’s worth keeping in mind that *Qissa* is a movie in the Punjabi language. Usually, a work in Punjabi never sees an all-India release. But the producer, National Film Development Corporation of India, felt that *Qissa* deserved a national exposure, but it took a long time to convince theatres.”

*Qissa* has been a hit in the festival circuit, and it focusses on one of India’s most traumatic chapters in history: the partition. Khan is Umber Singh, one among the hundreds of thousands of people who had to flee Pakistan. Uprooted from his home and hearth, Umber

finally settles down with his young wife in an Indian village, and longs for a son. But when his wife gives birth to their fourth daughter, Umber decides to bring her up like a boy, and the tragic consequences of it all is painted with a touch of brilliance.

Anup Singh’s *Mantra* will, one is sure, be as fascinating narrating the travails of the Scorpion Singer as she fights evil that comes crawling — and, well, walking.

## Tamiluku En Ondrai Aluthavum

A superbly refreshing plot about how a solar flare-up impedes mobile telephone services pushes *Tamiluku En Ondrai Aluthavum* (Press One For Tamil) into the realm of good cinema. First-time director and writer Ramprakash Rayappa weaves four different stories into what threatens to spin into a tragedy.

Set in the course of a day in Chennai, we have a terrorist who plants a bomb in a call taxi whose driver, Raja (Satish), is busy wooing the one girl who flips for him. As the explosive is about to go off, the flare-up hits cellular airwaves, and the extremist cannot ignite the remote-controlled device with the help of his mobile instrument.

At another end of the city, real-estate dealer Mukil (Attakathi Dinesh) cannot find his lover, Simmi (Bindu Madhavi) — who is trapped under debris on a construction site with a huge stone about to crush her out of existence.

Oblivious of all these disasters set to

strike, Vasanth (Nakul) — a take-off on the Aamir Khan character in *Three Idiots* — is a technological wizard who is on his house terrace trying to sort out the knotty airwaves problem. Watching him both in awe and fear are two executives of the mobile company hit by the natural catastrophe.

Though Rayappa does tie up the different strands of the narrative with admirable neatness, the film is low on excitement. The movie describes itself as a thriller, but there is very little of that nail-biting feeling associated with this genre. And, of course, we have seen how the 2006’s *Babel*, an American-Mexican-French drama, took us through several riveting plots before tossing up a marvellous climax. *Tamiluku En Ondrai Aluthavum* is certainly not as exhilarating as *Babel* was.

Besides, one of Rayappa’s tales is very weak — if Mukil and Simi fail to light the romantic fire, their meeting by itself is silly.

Rayappa is also saddled with unimpressive actors. Except for Urvashi (who is remarkable as Vasanth’s unlettered but high-on-scientific-info mother) and Satish (terrifically convincing), the rest of the performing team appear to lack the kind of energy essential for an adventure of this sort.

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