

Critic Barry Norman, beguiling and bold

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Barry Norman.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Once, Thierry Fremaux, the Cannes Film Festival supremo, famously remarked that every movie-goer fancied himself or herself as a cinema critic, dashing off their often half-baked thoughts on Facebook or Twitter or whatever even before the end credits rolled on. And this is not just true of Cannes or Venice or Berlin, but also of many Indian theatres, where so many viewers turn film critics, punching their points of pleasure or displeasure on their mobile phones even as a movie is sailing from frame to frame. But ask these bragging critics about a Chidanand Dasgupta or a Francois Truffaut or a Godard or a Barry Norman, they would most unashamedly plead ignorance.

If Norman – who recently died in his sleep, aged 83, leaving behind his two daughters and grandchildren, his wife having predeceased him – was not as widely known as Truffaut or Godard, it was only because he did not step behind the camera like the French masters of the medium, graduating as they did from being pen-pushers to camera-crankers.

Barry was a journalist, remained a journalist all his life and went on to become a legendary film critic. Unlike many, many young writers today who crave to start critiquing cinema even before they have understood the basic grammar of movies, Norman started as a reporter at the Daily Mail in England. He did various other journalistic assignments – as a columnist and as an editorial writer in a paper as renowned as The Guardian – before the BBC spotted his immense talent and hired him as a cinema presenter.

Norman's show, *Film...*, lasted 26 years, from 1972 to 1998 (the longest in the BBC's history) – when every week he spoke about movies, applauding them or rubbishing them. As he said in one of his interviews: "It is impossible to like all films. If someone said I love movies, he is an idiot, because most films are not worth loving. Most are worth hating. Some worth loathing."

Now how many critics do we know who have this kind of courage of conviction and who have the fearless ability to write or say what they feel ought to be written or said.

I call Barry really, really gutsy, and he was certainly one of my heroes whose weekly fix of movies gave me the high all right, and certainly kick started my dream to become a film critic. And as Barry did tell me on one of my first visits to Cannes, "And why not?" – when I evinced my interest to start analysing cinema. And this, I realised later, was one of his pet phrases, something that was also so positive.

Over the years, Barry and the BBC became Siamese twins – one could not live without the other. The television channel did try out a couple of other presenters like Iain Johnstone and Tina Brown, but they did not work. The BBC had to come back to Norman.

I started watching Barry a long time ago. If he was my television idol, The Guardian's cinema critic (later with the Evening Standard), Derek Malcolm, was my print hero. Both had a way with words, and in the most gentlest of manners they could demolish even a demon. What, then, was mere celluloid!

Did Norman ever talk about Indian cinema. Hardly ever I would think – which was unlike Malcolm, who was a great friend of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Adoor Gopalakrishnan, and a great admirer of meaningful Indian cinema.

However, in Barry's book of 100 Best Films of the Century, Ray's *Pather Panchali* figures, the only Indian work. The tome is a delightful mix. If there is *Casablanca*, there is also *Citizen Kane*. There is *The Gold Rush* as there is *Gone with the Wind*. We have *It Happened One Night* as we have *The Lady Vanishes*, *The Thief of Baghdad*, *Rashomon*, *Sunset Boulevard* and *Whisky Galore*.

Son of Leslie Norman, a respected movie producer of such classics as *The Cruel Sea* and the 1960s TV series like *The Saint*, *The Persuaders* and *The Avengers*, Barry was utterly beguiling, extremely knowledgeable, but was never, never overawed by the industry's super weights.

He remained unaffected when Hollywood actor John Wayne (who made Westerns a household name) called Norman "liberal pinko faggot", because the critic had laughed when the star had said in one of his press conferences that America might consider bombing Moscow. Norman could not care. He did not let such jibes mar his critical abilities or his passionate professionalism, and he was courageous.

On another occasion, Norman told a colleague that Arnold Schwarzenegger had no humour and was a "self-satisfied clod". Again, after

having waited for Madonna at a Paris hotel for an hour and 40 minutes, Norman left. He later said that he would have been rude to her if he had gone ahead with the interview. A gentleman who would not dream of being impolite to a lady.

In 1998, Star's Sky TV offered him a fancy salary, which Norman could not resist. He left the BBC – which was angry that he was quitting and did not even wish him a proper goodbye. He stayed with Sky till 2001, but it was not the same Barry. He had lost his sheen, and one hardly saw him on TV, and when I ran into him at Cannes, he tried to make light of his situation. But I could see, he was not happy. Somehow, it seemed that the BBC had been like his shadow, without which Barry could not exist. Not quite.

And it was loss even for the masses, who waited for his reviews to decide whether they ought to see a film or not. As Malcolm wrote in an obit piece: "Time and again, people said to me after a somewhat sour review: 'But Well, Barry Norman liked it, so it should be alright'...."

And it was so.

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