



From *Hamlet* to *Haider*

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

William Shakespeare may be a brilliant playwright, whose comic and tragic tales have always had a universal appeal. But the dramas, written in exquisite poetic forms could not have been easy to adapt to cinema. And, it could have been even harder to transport them to and set in an alien milieu. But Indian director, Vishal Bharadwaj, has achieved this with more than a fair degree of excellence.

His latest Shakespearean translation has been *Haider* – after *Maqbool* and *Omkara* – which opened last week. *Haider* is based on *Hamlet*, and is the final part of Bharadwaj's trilogy on the Bard's tragedies.

Punched with power, *Haider* narrates Kashmir's tumultuous story of political upheaval through Shahid Kapoor, Irrfan Khan, Kay Kay Menon, Tabu and Sharadha Kapoor. Set in 1995 at the height of insurgency in the state, the movie follows Kapoor's *Haider*, an Aligarh student, who comes home in Kashmir and is shocked to see his mother Ghazala (Tabu) in the arms of his uncle Khurram (Menon) just days after her husband was whisked away by the army.

Haider is all the more upset when he finds out that his mother and uncle had conspired to get the father, a peace loving doctor, out of the way. Baying for revenge, *Haider* soon becomes a pawn in the hands of different political organisations fighting for power.

Haider can be interpreted in many ways: is it an indictment of the Indian Army, as some have started to allege. Or, is it pro-Army? There is one chilling scene when a man with his face covered in a balaclava plays judge, and with just a flick of his eye determines the fate of civilians as they are paraded. One of them is *Haider*'s father, who is detained.

However, it will be farfetched to associate this incident in the film with any sort of negativity on the part of the army. Let us not forget that it is the family – much like the case in *Hamlet* – that schemes. Ghazala and Khurram, of course. Yet, there are times when Bharadwaj allows the political mayhem to overshadow and distort the family's heartbreaks and misfortunes. This is clearly one weakness in *Haider*, something that Bharadwaj steered clear of in *Maqbool* and *Omkara*.

The director's first Shakespearean attempt was *Maqbool* – with Irrfan Khan, Pankaj Kapoor and Tabu – culled from *Macbeth*. Setting it in Mumbai's underworld, Bharadwaj used the Elizabethan plot to tell a very Indian story of treachery and lust. But it remained confined to and content with home and family.

His next, *Othello*, customised as *Omkara*, had Ajay Devgn playing Othello, Kareena Kapoor, Desdemona and Saif Ali Khan that wicked Iago. *Omkara* is certainly my favourite, though I did not much care for Devgn. But Khan was just brilliant, and to me this was a great discovery.

I had till then never imagined that he had this potential. And the tragically

dramatic events unfold not in Venice – as in the original – but in the badlands of Uttar Pradesh. Bharadwaj had infused into his *Omkara* a lot of Indianness. The handkerchief, for instance, in *Othello* became a waistlet in the Indian movie.

So, it did not surprise me when *Omkara* screening in an open air theatre during the 2006 Marrakech International Film Festival, attracted almost hysteric applause from the hundreds of men and women who had gathered there to watch the movie and their favourite Bollywood stars. I remember local Moroccan girls dressed in sari and speaking Hindi, which they said they had picked up by watching television serials!

Indian film at Abu Dhabi

The Bengali movie, *Labour of Love*, which premiered at Venice early this month, will be showcased at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, beginning on October 23. *Labour of Love*, by Aditya Vikram Sengupta, will be part of Abu Dhabi's New Horizons, a section which showed Anup Singh's *Qissa* last year.

In fact, compared with just one Indian movie at Abu Dhabi this time, there were nine films last October. Some of them were classics like *Pyaasa*, *Garam Hawa* and *Duvida*. The others included new works, such as Richie Mehta's *Siddharth*, Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* and Aparna Sen's *Goynarbaksho*.

Helmed with sheer lyricism, *Labour of Love* or *Asha Jaoar Majhe* is about a young Bengali couple living in a recession-hit Kolkata, their humdrum middleclass existence filled with monotonous jobs and punctuated by meal breaks and sleep.

They never meet each other. For, the man works at night in the printing press of a newspaper, and his wife during the day in a handbag factory. Interestingly, there are no dialogues, some background score though.

Labour of Love will be one of the 197 movies from 61 countries that Festival will unspool till November 1. Of these, nine features will be world premieres.

The rich selection includes Egyptian director Ibrahim El Batout's thriller on organ trafficking, *El Ott (The Cat)*, and the Arabic road film, *A to B*, by Emirati helmer Ali F Mostafa.

The Arab section has Naji Abu Nowar's *Theeb*, shot in the Jordanian desert with real Bedouins. It premiered at Venice and clinched the best director's prize. Then there will be the 3D documentary, Iraqi *Odyssey*, Palestinian helmer Amer al-Shomali's and Canadian director Paul Cowan's documentary *The Wanted 18*, and the Lebanese drama, *The Valley*. All these have been supported by Abu Dhabi's Sanad Film Fund.

Outside this, the titles will include China's *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (top winner in Berlin); Turkish helmer Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Winter Sleep*, which scooped the Cannes Palm d'Or; Mauritanian director Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu*, about the occupation of Timbuktu by militant Islamic rebels; and Iranian-American helmer Ramin Bahrani's *99 Homes*, which made waves at Venice.

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