

# cinema



✳ Irrfan Khan: Staying in the shadows.

## Irrfan's incredible journey

The quietest of the Khans in the Indian film industry, Irrfan has evolved into a fine actor with some staggering performances to his credit. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

**A**ng Lee's *Life of Pi* opened the International Film Festival of India at Goa's Panaji on Tuesday. Adapted to the screen from Yann Martel's 2002 Man Booker Prize winning novel, *Life of Pi* is a tempestuous tale of a boy whose ship is wrecked in a killer storm on high seas. The boy, Pi, loses his mother, father and kid brother along with their little zoo when the family is sailing from their hometown of Pondicherry or Pondicherry (close to Chennai in India) to Canada. In the end, Pi finds himself on a lifeboat with the most unlikely of companions, a Royal Bengal Tiger. Forced to spend many, many weeks on the tiny boat drifting on the waves, Pi learns to survive against not just Nature's fierce odds, but also a deadly beast.

While New Delhi's Suraj Sharma's essays the young Pi, whose carelessness on a

cyclonic night costs the life of his parents and brother, Irrfan plays the older Pi.

During a recent chat with me, Irrfan said that it was an impossibly difficult book to adapt for a movie. It was extremely complex and, Lee shot the first parts of the film in Pondicherry, where the story actually begins, later moving to his native Taiwan for the more complex scenes. He recreated the Pacific Ocean, where Pi's family perishes on a night of killer waves, in a disused airport. A gigantic water tank was built to simulate the effects of the hurricane in the 3D movie.

With the production company, Fox, pulling out all stops, the shoot seemed so easy. As Irrfan averred, money was never a problem, and the challenge of getting the tiger and the boy together was not as imposing as it had appeared in the beginning. "They had got four tigers from Canada or Russia, but, of course, in the end, it was all about computer graphics".

Irrfan has only a small role to play in the film, and unlike the young Pi, who had a physically punishing and dangerous part to do, the older Pi had to grapple with mental challenges.

Sharma was merely 16 when he signed for Lee's first three-dimensional adventure. After three years, the movie is now complete, and "being a part of the film has been a life-changing experience", Sharma said during a recent chat. "It has really changed me and how I perceive the entire world in many ways ... People say that I have grown up personally after this movie. Like, I went there as a 16-year-old boy. Now, sometimes I feel like I am 40 years old."

"Earlier, I used to live in my own little shell and everything was small. Now I have realised that the world is this open place with opportunities. Now I know how to deal with situations in a better way and I can work five times harder without it affecting me because I have already worked like that. I've just become more ready for things," Sharma added.

Irrfan agreed with this to say that in an important way, the shoot itself had been as perilous as the actual story, where the boy kept the tiger alive and the tiger kept the boy alive. For each, the other was not just a distraction, but a point of hope, a point of survival. Pi wanted to outwit and outlive the animal, while it must have probably felt the same about the boy. So, both gave each other some kind of meaning to exist. "Perhaps the tiger would not have lived had it been alone on the boat. It was the presence of the boy that probably encouraged it to continue its fight to find food and sustain itself."

Irrfan felt that it would be very difficult for an Indian director to replicate Lee's work in *Life of Pi*. "We are just not prepared for that kind of complexity." Also, Indian movie companies and helmets are quite content with what they are producing. They have little desire to reach out to an international audience.

However, Irrfan hoped that the new crop of directors would learn to understand the grammar of cinema better, in a way that their own films would hold out a great promise of appealing to a world audience. "Yes, funding would still remain an issue."

Irrfan, who has done some extraordinarily interesting roles in equally fascinating films like *Pan Singh Tomar*, *Yeh Saali Zindagi* and



✳ A still from *Life of Pi*.

earlier *Maqbool* (based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), is now shooting for Tigmanshu Dhulia's *Sahib Bibi Aur Gangster 2*. Part one did not have Irrfan in it, and he is stepping into Randeep Hooda's shoes, who played the gangster.

In an earlier column of mine published in the *Gulf Times* during October 2010, I had written: "He is the quietest of the Khans in India, and there are no less than five of them. While Salman moved his muscles and sometimes his might to invariably attract the wrong kind of attention, Shah Rukh got audiences especially in Germany on a high, Saif caught me by sheer surprise as Langda Tyagi in *Omkaara* and Aamir cleverly wormed his way into the almost impregnable fort called the Oscars Academy – Irrfan Khan stayed in the shadows.

"But Asif Kapadia's *The Warrior* and Vishal Bharadwaj's *Maqbool* changed this. People who saw him in London after *The Warrior*, which, opened in 2001, called him a "sex symbol"; and this adulation may not have catapulted him into mid-air, but certainly pumped the essential vitamins into his psyche. *Maqbool* came two years later, and as the title character in the Hindi adaptation of Shakespeare's celebrated play, *Macbeth*, Khan played the role with flawless perfection.

The screen had finally parted to reveal an actor consummately at ease with the parts he portrayed. As Ashoke Ganguli in Nair's (she was setting right a wrong) version of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*, he was every inch the immigrant desperately seeking a place among New Yorkers. He was pairing with Tabu again after *Maqbool*.

"In an interview once Khan said: 'You know when Tabu and I met for the workshop before shooting *Maqbool*, I was really apprehensive. Even on the set we met almost as strangers. When we finally started shooting I wanted to sit with her for 10 minutes holding her hand just to establish a comfort level. That never happened. First we shot the poignant climactic sequence. The way she reacted to me in that scene convinced me that we were like a nut and bolt on screen. She became a part of me and I part of her. My love for her character possessed me. During her death scene, I achieved a mental state that had prompted me to become an actor in the first place'. Well, in *The Namesake*, Khan took his acting to a still higher plain."

With Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*, Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart*, Dhulia's *Paan Singh Tomar* behind him, Khan is all set to dream big. But those like Tabu who helped him evolve continue to be in his dreams. During a recent promotional campaign for *Life of Pi* in Chennai, when Tabu said that she appears in Lee's work much earlier than Irrfan does and does not share screen space with him, the actor had a wonderful rejoinder. "But you are always in my dreams."

I am sure she is, but Irrfan's dreams must now include still greater performances than what we have already seen. I have little doubt about this.

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