



Crowning glory for Kamal

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

One of the finest actors Indian cinema has ever known in all its 100 years is Kamal Hassan. And it could not have been more apt in this centenary year for the upcoming Mumbai Film Festival (October 17-24) to have decided to confer its Lifetime Achievement Award on the essentially Tamil actor, though he has made forays into other South Indian languages and even Hindi.

One of the most memorable Hindi movies where Hassan acted was *Ek Duje Ke Liye*, a tragedy in the true Shakespearean style with both the hero and the heroine dying a needless death. Playing a Tamil in the film, Hassan managed to present a picture of authenticity with his broken Hindi – which in reality was so.

In another Hindi work, *Sagar*, Hassan was bold enough to be a “second hero” with Rishi Kapoor being number one. Here again, Hassan epitomised tragedy, and although his Hindi had improved, it was far from perfect – probably a reason why he never made a deeper dent into Bollywood, something that another Tamil actor, Madhavan, who grew up in Dhanbad, has been able to with his near flawless diction. But that Hassan is an exceptionally brilliant performer is not in doubt.

One of the few actors to have completed 50 years in cinema, he is one of the best known icons in South India along with Rajnikanth. Hassan has been amazingly multi-faceted. Works like *Moondram Pirai* (1982), *Nayagan* (1987), *Pushpak* (1987) and *Appu Raja* (1989) have been some of his landmark movies.

If one were to single out just one film of his as the best, it will probably be Mani Ratnam's *Nayagan*, where Hassan portrays a Mumbai don, who ultimately falls a victim to violence, a path he himself had chosen and celebrated. Time called *Nayagan* as “one of the greatest of all time”.

But was *Nayagan* so extraordinary because of Hassan or Ratnam? This question has



* Golden run: Kamal Hassan has completed half a century in films.

always foxed me much like another one. Was Bhumika such an outstanding work because of its director Shyam Benegal or lead actress, Smita Patil? I would never know or be able to answer with definitive conviction.

Hassan began as a four-year-old child artist in Kalathur Kannamma, playing along with two of the best known stars of the time, Gemini Ganesha and Savithri.

It was years later when Hassan was a strapping youth that his big break came with the 1975 *Apoorva Raagangal*, helmed by K. Balachander, renowned for his socially-relevant hits. Portraying a rebel in love with an older woman, Hassan became a sensation.

The movie was one among the very few where both Kamal and Rajnikanth came together. Not just this, but *Apoorva Raagangal* is also considered to be Rajnikanth's best work. Or just about.

Hassan attained greater glory as a guileless schoolteacher in love with a childlike amnesiac woman in *Moondram Pirai*. As a womaniser in *Manmadha Leelai*, as a village bumpkin in *16 Vayathinile*, as a psychopathic sexual killer in *Sigappu Rojakkal* and a blind violinist in *Raja Paarvai*, he affirmed and reaffirmed his sheer range, style and versatility. Much later in 2008, he appeared as ten different characters in *Dasavatham*.

Not a great work though. Not novel either. Decades before that, Sivaji Ganesha had played nine different men in *Navarathri*.

In the midst of such illustrious innings, Hassan has had his share of dark days. His marriage with Sarika was stormy – reportedly with at least one ugly episode. His last movie, *Viswaroopam*, displeased Muslim groups and its opening was delayed by a few weeks. Ultimately, the film was not a hit with critics or the masses.

Knocking 60, Kamal now needs a booster all right to lift his sagging spirit. Maybe he should think of something small, something intimate, something touching.



* Coming back to life: Nagesh will be seen again thanks to technology.

Nagesh

Tamil actor Nagesh will come alive on the big screen in the Rajnikanth starrer, *Kochadaiiyaan*. But Nagesh died in 2009! Thanks to the performance capture technology used in the movie, the actor will rise again.

Essentially a comedian, who later in his life portrayed other kinds of characters, Nagesh did about a thousand films between 1958 and 2008 in a life where there was never a dull moment. Yet, nobody could have ever imagined that a full four years after having passed away, Nagesh would be playing along with Tamil cinema's most popular superstar, Rajnikanth.

That is the trick of technology. The high resolution images of Nagesh were scanned to create a 3D model. Since *Kochadaiiyaan*, directed by Rajnikanth's daughter, Soundarya, is a period movie, the photographs of a younger Nagesh were used. Finally, actors who spoke and looked exactly like him were used to capture the motion

and movement of Nagesh as he was once seen on the screen.

Nagesh, often called the Jerry Lewis of India, because the Indian actor often imitated the American star, would have been mighty pleased with himself had he been here. It is no small deal to be performing all along with Rajnikanth, and that too after being dead!

For Nagesh, success came neither too easily nor consistently. It was only in 1964 after several years in theatre and cinema often doing insignificant parts that Nagesh hit it high with his *Server Sundaram*. It was almost a biopic of his where he turns his rags into riches becoming a star from a restaurant waiter. The film was a tragic comedy full of Nagesh's trademark tricks crowned with sorrow and pain.

He did many, many more movies – like *Kaadhalikka Neramillai*, *Ethir Neechal* and *Apoorva Raagangal* – and with many, many actors – from Sivaji Ganesha to Gemini Ganesha to M.G. Ramachandran to....

However, his stand-off with actress Manorama and

his insinuations against Ramachandran, who went on to become the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, marred Nagesh's prospects. Also, his marriage to a Christian woman did not go down well with his family. All these things pulled Nagesh down professionally and financially. His early drinking and smoking binges told on his health, and although Ramachandran forgave Nagesh, and he did have friends like Kamal Hassan, the comedian could have scaled greater heights if only he had been a little more prudent, perhaps.

Now, Soundarya's attempt to get Nagesh breathing again – that too a younger and brighter Nagesh – could not be a small step in the comedian's rocky life. *Kochadaiiyaan* will open in December.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com