



As Time Goes By in Rick's Cafe



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Hollywood never went to Morocco to film the 1942 *Casablanca*. Instead, the production house, Warner Brothers, erected a set in its own backyard that replicated the North African city of Casablanca and planted in it Rick's Café American, a saloon, whose keeper, Richard Blaine or Rick made sure that his customers had a good time — gambling, dancing and listening to Sam play *As Time Goes By*.

Casablanca was an important conduit for those fleeing Nazi tyranny in Europe, and Rick's Café was one of those places in the middle of the desert where one could possibly hope for a letter of transit or exit visa which will put them on a plane to the New World or America.

But Hollywood never thought it important to go to Casablanca to shoot a movie that opened a few

weeks after the Allied invasion of North Africa and went on to assume a cult status. Neither Warner Brothers nor director Michael Curtiz dreamt that the black-and-white *Casablanca* would become such a hot hit. It is considered a classic today.

Equally incredible, decades later, a former American diplomat thought that it would be a splendid idea to open a restaurant in Casablanca and call it Rick's Café American. Kathy Kriger was part of the US Consulate in Casablanca, and after her assignment was over, she used her power to cut through Moroccan red tape to get the café going. And it has been there for about a decade now, and those who throng it never tire of admiring the similarity between the set that Hollywood put up and Kriger's Rick's Café Americain.

Who can ever forget Humphrey Bogart's Rick with his dry humour and in his first truly romantic role? Who can forget that ravishingly lovely Ingrid Bergman

— playing Ilsa Lund, wife of a renowned Czech Resistant leader, Victor Laszlo — in love with Rick? And, and who can ever forget that brilliant actor called Claude Rains essaying Captain Louis Renault with a twinkle in his eye and unbelievably French?

Although Kriger could not possibly invent these immortal characters, she has Issam — not Sam — playing the piano and humming that superbly melodious song, *As Time Goes By*.

And while Bogart's Rick's Café offered just about caviar, Kriger's joint has on its menu Moroccan and continental delicacies, both for lunch and dinner. Also, we do not have Rick close to the door of the saloon and whose one nod was enough to let in or deny admittance to a visitor.

"I was amazed in my four years here that no one ever thought of establishing a Rick's Café," recalled Kriger. Her career as a diplomat gave her the connections she needed to open the restaurant amid Morocco's red tape and

bureaucracy. Every time her project stalled, she called in favours from the capital, Rabat, pulling strings just like Bogart did in the movie. "I used him as a mentor when I was doing this project," admitted Kriger. "I often wondered, what would Rick do?"

Today, Rick's Café is a must see place for all those fans of the film *Casablanca*, fans of Bogart and Bergman, fans of Rains. But of course.

Velaiyilla Pattathari

When one walks into a Dhanush film, one must be prepared for a parallel soundtrack, which emerges from the audiences. There is so much hooting and screaming every time the actor appears on the screen that the dialogues are lost, and for a serious viewer or critic, this is sheer nightmare.

But such is the halo around Dhanush that despite his recent box-office disasters, fans adore him and producers continue to hire him. Even those from

Bollywood. Balki's Shamitabh (with Amitabh Bachchan) and reportedly Anand Rai's sequel to *Tanu Weds Manu* have Dhanush.

Unfortunately, apart from his national award winning role in *Aadukalam*, Dhanush has not proved his mettle. One important reason is his limited range, and in most of the 24 movies he has been seen till now, he plays the downtrodden and the distressed hero.

His 25th film, *Velaiyilla Pattathari*, (which he has produced), portrays him as, the title conveys, an unemployed youth, Raghuvaran, with a degree in civil engineering who finds his knocks going unanswered. When a firm is willing to engage him, his uprightness gets in the way. He will, for instance, not design an eight-storey structure when the plan sanctions six. He will also not take up a job in a call centre, for that is infra-dig.

So, Raghuvaran remains the butt of his father's ridicule who is clearly distraught that while his younger son has a handsome job and a handsome salary, the older sibling, Raghuvaran, is idling away his time.

Of course, *Velaiyilla Pattathari*, changes tracks midway to give Raghuvaran a chance, both professionally and personally. He lands a great assignment that is both demanding and dangerous, and the girl next door, Shalini (Amala Paul), a dentist earning a fantastic salary, falls in love with him — a guy who is unshaven, unwaged and rides a rickety two-wheeler that most of the time has to be pedalled like a bicycle. Now, why would any attractive dentist flip for a man like Raghuvaran is something that is beyond my sense of logic, but then, many of the episodes in the movie baffle one's intelligence.

Like, when Dhanush takes his shirt off (a la Salman Khan) to take on a dozen hefty men out to destroy his dream and his very being.

In the end, although *Velaiyilla Pattathari* presents a grave social malaise — that of joblessness among engineering graduates in Tamil Nadu with 3000-odd colleges turning out hundreds of thousands of degree holders year after year — the script plays spoil sport.

Performances do not lift the movie either. While Saranya has consoled herself into essaying the mother in just about every film she is in, Paul is a mere ornamental vase on the mantelpiece. Dhanush is Dhanush, making little attempt to vary his style or punch substance into his abs.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran has watched *Casablanca* many, many times, and still adores it, and he may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com