



Simple Sheen, simpler stories

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The other day, I met Martin Sheen at the now playing Dubai International Film Festival who made a remark that was so close to my own cherished view.

"I am not much into the technique of cinema", he said. "It takes away something from cinema. Animated movies do not quite appeal to me...They are kind of cartoonish". Although, he was part of last year's *The Amazing Spider-Man* (where Irrfan Khan also plays a small part), Sheen at 73 is clearly from a generation that believes in the dictum that good stories make good cinema. And if that good story ends happily, it makes that picture even better.

But then this thinking is certainly "outdated". The now men and women think quite differently. Take, for instance, the 30-year-old CNN-IBN producer, who watched a Jason Reitman film, *Labor Day*, with me the other evening.

At the end of it, he was unhappy that the movie ended happily. Maybe, he did not like to see the protagonist go down so tamely in the end – used to as he and his ilk are seeing heroic men with ripping muscles on the screen always triumphing. Not real men and women, who most of the time lead ordinary (read boring) lives.

Labor Day, is of course, a simple sweet story narrated by a 13-year-old boy, Henry, who is grappling with his own sexual awakening as he is with his mother's abandonment.

The film is certainly Kate Winslet's (Adele), who after a series of pregnancy-related mishaps finds her husband walking out on her. And into the mother-son's lives comes Frank, a convicted murderer (guilty of killing his wife), who forces himself into Adele's home and makes himself comfortable – till the time she falls in love with him. She is then even willing to run away with him to Canada.

The plot is set in the 1987 America, in a small provincial town – where the people are helpful to the point of being intrusive. When

Henry goes to the shop and asks for a razor, the guy at the counter thinks that the boy has made a mistake.

He should be taking back home a razor for a woman, for Adele has no man around. As the movie progresses, it gets increasingly difficult for Adele to harbour the fugitive man, who may not have, as we are gently pushed into believing, intended to kill his young wife.

For, after all there is no violence in Frank. He is absolutely tender, but the film, adapted from the fine 2009 Joyce Maynard novel, has to finally get on to that bumpy stretch for that element of dramatic excitement.

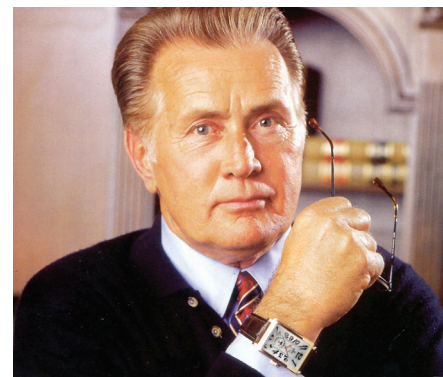
However, Reitman does not allow *Labor Day* to slip into a Salman Khan *Dabangg* look-alike. His style is subtle, and his characters are controlled. Winslet's Adele handles the enormity of her pain and frustration with admirable restraint.

The director handles both his work and his heroine, Winslet with marvellous finesse. Here is an emotionally drained, physically withered woman who finds that spark to live when romance knocks on her door. The transformation is wonderfully conveyed.

Yes, *Labor Day* has the late 1980s feel. And one is convinced, at least when one looks at Reitman's canvas, that small town America was like this with its simple folks who would be concerned if a 13-year-old lad is loitering on the street. There is a touching scene when a cop finding Harry on road asks him to hop on to his car, and takes him back home.

Labor Day is simplicity all the way, shorn of that overdose of special effects which Sheen shies away from.

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By the Window:

There was another lovely movie I saw, though in Chennai last week. It was *Jannal Orum/By the Window*.

As I have stated in my earlier columns here, Tamil cinema is still bold enough to take the viewer to the village and dress up its actors in *lungis* and half-saris.

However, these films, while touching upon novel plots and offering a different kind of look, seem to lack in finesse, which Bollywood has perfected. So, a lot many of Tamil movies have an unpolished look about them. Yet, some of them can be quite endearing. Karu Pazhaniappan's latest Tamil work, *Jannal Orum*, is one.

It is set at the foothills of Tamil Nadu's temple town of Palani, and the camera captures the freshness and greenery in all their splendour. In many ways, the story unfolds through the windows of a bus which runs between Palani and Pannaikadu – with those inside and outside forming the *dramatis personae*.

Parthiban's Karuppu is the driver of the bus, while Vimal plays Subbiah the conductor, and during their daily journey, the two meet a variety of men and women, some who commute every day on work. We have a habitual drunk, we have a young woman (Manisha Yadav as Kalyani) and we have a vendor with his basket of hens.

Pazhaniappan enlarges his canvas to let his story step off the bus – where we have a church priest, a man whom we later learn is obsessively in love, an elderly couple waiting for their son to return from Surat so that they can marry him to the girl they themselves have adopted and nurtured.

In this crossroad of characters, the bus swerves sharply one evening to dive into a murder – presenting the curve in an otherwise straight narrative.

Jannal Orum is a disarmingly simple tale – with romance thrown in between Subbiah and Kalyani (who works in a telephone company) and some peppy lines that are mercifully neither clichéd nor stupid. Yes, the songs are an unnecessary intrusion in an otherwise captivating script with some very natural performances by the lead actors.

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