



# Hollywood a spoonful of sugar

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**M**any decades ago, Satyajit Ray said that he had learnt the craft of movie making from Hollywood. Indeed, he had, stirring the skill in a screenful of stories from his own land to produce the prettiest of films.

There is little doubt that Hollywood has given the world a magic potion called mesmerizing movie. Once in Japan during a six-month research fellowship, I found that it was the Hollywood fare that drew the largest crowds, while the local Japanese cinema went abegging for custom.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the director of the Cannes Film Festival, Thierry Fremaux, should have made great efforts in the first years of his office in the early 2000 to woo Hollywood – which had kind of parted ways with the world's most magnificent movie event in the 1990s. I remember Fremaux making a lot many trips to America than he did elsewhere in order to get Hollywood back on the French Riviera. He succeeded.

After Cannes, it now seems to be the turn of Dubai to shift its gaze towards Hollywood. While the recently concluded Dubai International Film Festival gave its 10<sup>th</sup> edition an Arab flavour – even opening with the Palestinian work, *Omar* (which also won the top prize), and filling the programme with tens of movies from the region – nobody could deny that it was American cinema that stole the show.

The Festival Director, Abdulhamid Juma, admitted that “Hollywood is always going to be number one in the world...although when you set out to celebrate Arab cinema and bring in Hollywood stars, you are always at risk of overshadowing your own focus.”

True, but what do you do! A festival's commitment is certainly to offer a platform to its own home-grown films. But a festival has another equally important obligation, which is to give its audiences the best of cinema. And it is this tightrope that a festival is often compelled to walk on.

Dubai did it this year, and it must have realised that the movies that garnered the maximum attention were those that came from the other side of the Atlantic. And they were also the films that were given the prominent red-carpet slots!

One of the finest movies I saw at Dubai was John Lee Hancock's *Saving Mr Banks*. It was superb on the cast front with Tom Hanks and Emma Thompson, as it was on its narrative style and substance that in a nutshell was all about the fight between words and visuals, between two desperate people. The film tells us all about the dramatic developments before the great classic, *Mary Poppins*, got made. A lot many of us would remember that as a work which took us on a flight of fancy with Mary and her Penguins.

The English woman who wrote the magical piece of fiction called *Mary Poppins*, P.L. Travers, was a snooty, egocentric writer who looked down on Americans and did not want to sell movie rights to Walt Disney. But the “mouse man” was dying to get his hands on the book, for he had promised his little daughters that he would get their favourite Poppins' characters dancing and flying on the screen.

For 20 years, Travers said no, nothing doing. The little girls were no longer little, and as Disney was getting more and more



**IMPRESSIVE WORK:** Chiwetel Ejiofor plays the lead in *12 Years A Slave*; below, Tom Hanks and Emma Thompson in a scene from *Saving Mr Banks*.



despairing, Travers found herself in the same boat. Her manager warned her that she was financially bankrupt and would not even have a house to call home if she did not sell *Mary Poppins* to Walt Disney.

Now she was as distressed as Disney, only that the two were frantic about different things: he about the promise he was longing to keep, and she about the roof she did not want to let go. Or fly off, should I say.

So Travers travelled to Hollywood determined to give Mr Disney and the studio guys the hardest time of their lives. And she did that, of course. *Saving Mr Banks* takes us back to 1906 Australia, to the impoverished family of a suicidal mother and an alcoholic banker father. Travers is their little daughter, kind and lovely, who grows up into the writer of *Mary Poppins*. And Hancock keeps us riveted to the screen as he takes us back and forth, between Travers the adorable little lass and Travers the extraordinarily difficult woman. Hanks as Disney and Thompson as Travers admirably help the narration glide almost with fairy-tale precision – letting us peep, though, mostly into her world. We never see Disney's daughters, and this economy of narration helps retain the focus on the “fight”, if I may call it so.

However, *Saving Mr Banks* is no serious,

sombre boardroom kind of boredom with men in grey suits and women in black dresses getting down to hard negotiations. Even as Travers plunges into a discussion of her contract with the Disney boys, there is music and mirth with the guys bursting into songs from *Mary Poppins* – all of course to impress the lady of steel who would not let the molten in her melt so easily.

*Saving Mr Banks* is delightfully anecdotal and there are truly some hilarious scenes as when Travers walks into her Beverley Hills hotel to find her room full of Disney toys. She is furious, and pushes each one of them into the cupboard.

But one night as she lies on her bed, cold and lonely, she picks a stuffed toy and goes to sleep cuddled with it. There are several scenes in the Disney studio as she helps with putting together the script that are witty to a viewer – not quite though to the guys working with her. She drives them crazy. “Are you sure Mr Disney can train real penguins to dance” she once asks. “No, no”, says a studio hand. “We will use animated birds” and that is enough to send Travers back to Britain.

Interspersed with all these are those torturous memories from Travers' childhood, and the film smoothly pans from one to the other. There is no confusion whatsoever. Yes,

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*Mary Poppins* with that great star and singing sensation, Julie Andrews, was a grand classic, and *Saving Mr Banks* may not be able to get too close to the allure of spoonful of sugar. Perhaps, it even dare not.

There was another Hollywood work that I quite enjoyed. Steve McQueen's *12 Years A Slave* takes us to the 1840s America, a time when the nation was struggling to hold its union together. While the southern States with their cotton plantations were bent on retaining black slavery (treating these men and women as not more than mere property), the north wanted to abolish this inhumanly degrading system.

McQueen's movie is about one such slave, Solomon Northrup (excellently played by Chiwetel Ejiofor), a free black man from New York who is kidnapped and sold to southern slave masters. Based on true events, Northrup is finally and miraculously rescued after 12 years of bondage – when he faces torture, treachery and shame.

In recent months, we have seen other slave dramas, the most impressive being *Django Unchained* with its rebels. But neither Northrup nor the others in the movie are gutsy enough to fight the animal savagery of their white masters – and throughout the film, I kept wondering why these tortured blacks did not revolt. But I suppose the movie is all about an actual happening.

Northrup published his memoir – detailing his nightmarish 12 years – in 1853, a year after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came out. The memoir inspired two stage adaptations. However, it was forgotten after that, and McQueen's work is bound to bring the story back into the limelight, with the movie having a bright chance at the coming Oscars. It has already picked up seven Golden Globe nominations.

British helmer McQueen, known for his *Hunger* and *Shame*, broadens his canvas in *12 Years A Slave* to paint a picture of the American society on the eve of the civil war – fought between the southern and northern States. And much like *Gone With The Wind*, McQueen's work uses the strife as a backdrop to tell us tales about the men and the women who lived then.

While, *Gone With The Wind* is essentially a love story set in the south and in which black slaves are not shown as being ill-treated (with some even aghast at the idea of freedom), *12 Years A Slave* presents the horrific side of slavery with white masters being unimaginably cruel.

There are whippings on the plantations, there are executions, and to top it all, there is sheer drudgery of everyday life which the slaves have to endure.

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