

'Shakespearwalla' Vishal Bharadwaj ready to tickle

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MANTRA: "(Through Shakespearean adaptations,) I want to throw light on the politics, culture and music of contemporary India," says Vishal Bharadwaj.

★★★★★

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The whole world loves William Shakespeare, but I think Vishal Bharadwaj loves him a lot more. The Indian director has adapted three of the Bard of Avon's tragedies — Macbeth, Othello and Hamlet, and is now all set to get cracking with his comedies. He plans a trilogy of these, much like his earlier threesome of tragedies.

He told the Times of India in a recent interview: "I have had a lot of people come up to me and ask me when am I going to adapt a Shakespearean comedy for the big screen. My first work in the trilogy will be based on Twelfth Night. It will be called Chauthvin Ki Raat. This particular play had two titles. One was Twelfth Night and the other was What You Will. The play was called Twelfth Night because it was first performed 12 days after Christmas. The title also refers to the night before Epiphany, the day when the wise men visited infant Jesus. When I wanted adapt it to a more contemporary and Indian setting, I decided to call it Chauthvin Ki Raat because this night has a huge significance in the Indian context, as the moon is at its most beautiful. Chauthvin Ki Raat will be set in contemporary India like all my other Shakespeare adaptations, because I want to tell the stories of my country. I want to throw light on the politics, culture and music of contemporary India."

Admittedly, Shakespeare is universal, his plays tell us of those tales which transcend boundaries — geographical, emotional. Take just one of Shakespeare's dramas, Romeo and Juliet, and this is the sad story of the Montagues and the Capulets whose vicious rivalry takes the lives of two young lovers with stars in their eyes and love in their hearts. Romeo and Juliet has formed the basis of or inspiration for so many Indian films. And obviously so, because this Shakespearean theme can be as Indian as it can be African or South-east Asian or Middle-Eastern.

Other Indian helmers like Kishore Sahu (Hamlet), Gulzar (Angeer/The Comedy of Errors) and Bimal Roy (Do Dooni Char/also The Comedy of Errors) have also dabbled in Shakespeare. But what Bharadwaj did and with remarkable novelty and brilliance was to stretch the Bard's work beyond its physical boundaries, and place it firmly in Indian ethos and milieu.

Bharadwaj's Maqbool (based on Macbeth) in 2003 borrowed Shakespearean situations and sensibilities with courage and conviction, and translated them into gripping cinema. The auteur crossed the line between stage and screen with élan, and infused a remarkable sense of Indianness into his movies. Though he used the original plot, he filled it with characters and conditions far removed from Shakespeare's Elizabethan times.

Maqbool took us to Bombay's underworld with its greed for power, conflicting loyalties and the tragic consequences of all these, and how they destroyed the joys of love. With a cast of luminous actors — Irrfan, Pankaj Kapur, Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri and Tabu — Bharadwaj could just not go wrong. And Maqbool turned out to be a great work.

But my favourite in the tragic trilogy is certainly Omkara/Othello — where I literally discovered Saif Ali Khan's brilliance and enormous acting talent. Released in 2006, the film is not set in Venice (as the original play was) but in the badlands of Uttar Pradesh. The movie thus became hugely attractive to a circle far wider than one Shakespeare could have hoped for.

Given the tendency of the modern generation of film buffs, who could be easily bored by the costumes, conventions and conversations of an England long gone by, Bharadwaj cleverly avoided these and devised a ploy that worked: his Shakespeare abused in an Uttar Pradesh dialect, engaged in duels not with swords but with revolvers and rifles, and gifted silver waistlets, not silk handkerchiefs.

Othello's famous gift of an handkerchief to wife Desdemona changed into a stone-studded silver waistband that Omkara/Othello Shukla gave his lover/fiancée Dolly/Desdemona Mishra. Bharadwaj gave his characters names that either begin with the same letter as in the original version or, at least, sounded similar. Ishwar 'Langda' Tyagi was Iago, and Keshav Upadhyay or Kesu was Cassio.

A complete transformation of characterisation took place in Omkara. Othello, Iago, Cassio, Desdemona and the others are translocated in the betel-nut chewing, brutal Central India. And the movie was absolutely engaging.

Haider/Hamlet was the third in Bharadwaj's trilogy. A film punched with power, it narrated Kashmir's tumultuous story of political upheaval through Shahid Kapoor, Irrfan Khan, Kay Kay Menon, Tabu and Shraddha Kapoor.

Set in 1995 at the height of insurgency in the State, Haider follows Kapoor (Haider), an Aligarh student, who reaches Kashmir only to see his mother Ghazala (Tabu) in the arms of his uncle Khurram (Menon) barely weeks after her husband and another son had been whisked away by the army.

Haider is all the more upset when he finds out that his mother and uncle had desperately wanted the father out of the way. Baying for revenge, Haider soon becomes a pawn in the hands of different political organisations fighting for power.

Haider ends differently from Hamlet. While Shakespeare was writing about an aspect of history that had come to a conclusion, Bharadwaj tells us the tale of a land whose story is far from over. Kashmir is a still an ongoing issue.

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Manto goes to Cannes:

Indian actress-director Nandita Das has made it to the Cannes Film Festival with her Manto, a kind of biographical sketch of the radical Pakistani thinker and writer, Sadat Hasan Manto. This will be her second movie after the 2008 Firaq — a political thriller set a month after the terrible 2002 Gujarat riots in which thousands were butchered by marauding mobs.

Das's Manto will be part of the Festival's official line — which was announced in Paris a week ago by the General-Delegate, Thierry Fremaux.

Das had introduced Manto at Cannes last year with a short trailer. It stars Nawazuddin Siddiqui in the title role along with Rasika Duggal as the writer's wife. Ismat Chughat, Manto's friend and another radical thinker, will be essayed by Rajshri Deshpande. Rishi Kapoor has a minor part, and Tahir Raj Bhasin will be seen as the 1940's Bollywood superstar, Shyam Chaddha — who was Manto's confidant and inspiration for a number of stories he penned.

Manto will be part of A Certain Regard, which is usually a canvas for experimentally bold features.

Incidentally, India has not made it to Cannes Competition in many, many years.

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