

Tamil actor Karthi shines, at last, in Theeran Adhigaram Ondru

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GRIPPING: The movie tells a well-researched story with gripping precision.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

It has been my firm belief that however good an actor may be, there is every possibility that he will get derailed in the hands of a bad director or if he is sucked into a bad script. In India, we have both – and in plenty. Someone with enormous potential like Nandita Das could never reach the skies only because she never got a helmer of considerable calibre. Would Smिता Patel and Shabana Azmi and Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri have become what they did had they not got someone like Shyam Benegal to mould them – of course with excellent scripts – into eminence.

Tamil actor Karthi is the latest example of what I am saying.

A little over a decade ago, I saw Karthi in Ameer Sultan's Paruthiveeran – where he played a village ruffian in a plot that resembled Romeo and Juliet, and set close to the temple town of Madurai. There was nothing out of the ordinary in the film, but I was amazed by this debutant actor who – unlike most others of his ilk who seemed to think that looking wooden was the in-thing – was very, very expressive. He had a nice face, quite handsome indeed and as good looking as his brother, the more illustrious brother, Surya.

But then – call it his bad luck, he never appeared to get a director who would take him out of his comfort zone of playing the downtrodden ruffian or a movie which that had a different kind of plotline.

And when Mani Ratnam's Kaatru Veliyidai came recently, I had a lot of hope in seeing Karthi in a different kind of avatar. It was so, all right, but Karthi's mannerisms remained the same. As an Air Force officer with a huge anger issue, he continued to roll his eyes (something he had done in picture after picture), and exhibit a whole lot of characteristics which had once endeared him in Paruthiveeran – all which he has been repeating in film and film, like Naan Mahaan Alla, Koman and Madras. Frankly, if Mani's movie was awfully disappointing (especially coming as it did after his riveting O Kadhal Kanmani, with some fine acting by Dulquer Salman and Nithya Menen), its leading man did not lift my sagging spirits either. He did not fly, really no, not in Kaatru Veliyidai.

So, I had no great expectation when I recently walked into the auditorium screening H. Vinoth's latest cop story, Theeran Adhigaram Ondru that had Karthi in khaki. He has played policeman in an earlier work, and there have been so many cop pictures in Tamil that frankly I could not think of anything different which Vinoth could possibly offer.

But, surprise of surprises, the young director (who did earlier give us a reasonably clean film called Sathuranga Vettai came out with something which was dramatic without being too exaggerated.

Based on a true crime story that rocked Tamil Nadu and some other southern states in the 1990s and early 2000, Theeran Adhigaram Ondru is all about Rajasthan's notorious Baawariya tribe plundering and killing on lonely highways. These masked men were brutal to the last word; they did not just rob, but also murdered men, women and children in cold blood. Unlettered and unsophisticated in this game, these men (their evil resembling that of the thugs who operated for 600 years in 19th century Bengal and other neighbouring areas until Lord William Bentinck finished them off) left behind their fingerprints – which eventually help Karthi's Theeran to eradicate their menace.

Wonderfully researched with inputs from the very man, the then Inspector-General of Police, S R Jangid – who led the assault on the Baawariya criminals – Vinoth presents a neat movie, high on craft, and narrated with gripping precision. There is never a dull moment here, and the plot progresses with admirable finesse, taking us to several places in Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and the sands of Rajasthan, where the final battle is fought between Theeran and the murderous gang.

The film picks up additional stars, because Karthi has finally come clean of some of his boringly irritating manners. For one, he has stopped rolling his eyes! There is something very genuine about him in Vinoth's work, and Karthi's subtle and somewhat softer persona get all the prominence they deserve.

However, the movie is almost 160 minutes long, and Vinoth's idea of infusing this essentially cop-chase-baddies story with a romance (with Rakul Preet Singh's Priya) jars. And so does that awful item number watched by the thugs that reminded me of a similar song in the 1975 Sholay. These are bad digressions, which take one's attention away from the main focal point. Also, the temptation to transform the hero into a superman robs the work of some authenticity. Watch the scene where Theeran races into the heart of the hostile desert – alone without a gun – pursuing about half a dozen notorious guys. Now which police officer will do this. I am sure Jangid would not have dared! This is where the script tends to slip.

It is time that Tamil directors (including well-known ones like Mani Ratnam) get rid of romantic interludes and songs/dances. Imagine, if Vinoth had just stuck to the cop and dacoit plot and told us all about it in under two hours, Theeran Adhigaram Ondru would have been far more effective and much more memorable. And Karthi's image would have been flying even higher.

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