

Tokyo Film Fest to fete Hollywood icon Steven Soderbergh

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OUSTANDING: Tokyo film festival will screen three movies of Hollywood director Steven Soderbergh.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Many years ago, when I lived in Tokyo for a longish period of time to study contemporary Japanese cinema, I was amazed to find the enormous appeal Hollywood held among the people there. And this was not confined to the young, and I saw a large number of middle-aged and elderly Japanese in the serpentine queues which formed outside the theatres screening American blockbusters like Harry Potter, James Bond and the like. Sadly, the newest of new Japanese movies went begging for patronage, and it seemed so tragic to see just a handful of men and women at these shows! And some of the Japanese works were brilliant.

A few years ago, when I went back to Japan to cover the Tokyo International Film Festival, the picture had not changed with Hollywood still ruling and with the local fare struggling to attract footfalls. So, it does not seem out of place that the Festival, whose latest edition begins on October 24, has decided to fete an American director every year, supported by the American airlines.

This year, the honour goes to Steven Soderbergh, one of the most influential Hollywood directors. His debut feature in 1989, *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, won the Palm d'Or at Cannes. The movie became a raving success, and contributed immensely to the 1990s independent film revolution, a movement that helped small producers and directors to free themselves from the stranglehold of big Hollywood houses with their monopolistic designs.

And Soderbergh was just 26 in 1989, the second youngest helmer after France's Louis Malle (with his *Le Monde du Silence*) to win Cannes' top honour. The celebrated movie critic, Roger Ebert, dubbed Soderbergh "The poster boy of the Sundance Generation".

I remember *Sex, Lies and Videotape* caused a near stampede outside its screening venue during the International Film Festival of India, which that year was held in Calcutta. (Those days, the annual event moved from city to city.)

Sex, Lies and Videotape will be one of the three movies that will be shown at Tokyo – with Soderbergh himself presenting them and also interacting with the audiences. A gripping story of a man who records women talking about their sexual experiences, and how this mars the relationship between a husband and his wife as well as her younger sister, *Sex, Lies and Videotape* created a storm the world over – a world that was still not as sexually open as it is now.

The second film of Soderbergh to be screened at Tokyo will be *Traffic* – which fetched him the Best Director Oscar in 2000. *Traffic* is an engaging crime drama and examines the illegal drug trade from several angles – users, enforcers, politicians and traffickers themselves, and was adapted from the 1989 British Channel 4 television series, *Traffic*.

Finally, *Logan Lucky* – which came much later in early 2017. Soderbergh emerged out of a self-imposed retirement to direct and distribute this film, based on a script by an unknown writer, Rebecca Blunt. The work focusses on the Logan family in the US which plans a motorway heist and to escape being caught by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It was a thrilling movie that kept me on the edge of my seat.

Detective:

If there is one fictional detective who refuses to fade out of men's memory even after 130 years, it is Sherlock Holmes – who first emerged out of the pen and paper of the legendary British novelist and short story writer, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It was a novel, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), where we first meet Dr Watson, consulting detective Holmes' chronicler and companion – and of course the pipe-smoking, cocaine-snorting and violin-playing sleuth, whose home at 221 Baker Street in London is now a museum.

Not many would dare to replicate the magic and mesmerism of Holmes, not many would even dare to reproduce the halo and aura around the four brilliant pieces of detective novels and 56 short stories – each written with astounding lucidity, their mysteries wrapped up so neatly that they left no doubt in the mind of a reader.

Tamil film director, Mysskin (whose original name was Raja) said in a recent interview that his exposure to literature began with Doyle's short stories of Sherlock Holmes. His latest movie, Thupparivaalan (Detective) – with Vishal playing a private investigator and Prassana his friend and follower – is Mysskin's tribute to Mr Holmes and Sir Arthur.

Having gathered the guts to make a movie which is supposed to follow the celebrated sleuth, Mysskin commits his first blunder by casting Vishal. There is precious little that reminded me of Holmes when I sat watching him in the 159-minute Thupparivaalan, whose layers within layers of a plot were confusion confounded. And this never-ending jigsaw puzzle was aided and abetted by a camera that seemed as impatient as a hyper-active kid.

If the writing was convoluted adding to the messy narrative style, Vishal appeared ridiculous as the detective he was modelled on. His attempt to copy some of Holmes' methods – like for instance crawling on the floor to detect footprints or darting across gardens – appeared most clumsy, and certainly lacked the dignity and stature of the English detective. At least, Prassana, reprising Watson, was closer to the character that Doyle created in the late 1880s.

And Prassana is Mano, the sidekick of Vishal's Kaniyan Poongundran aka Sherlock Holmes – who, believe it or not, takes up the case of a murdered dog, the pet of a schoolboy, who is willing to donate his piggy bank savings to find the culprit. And our Holmes, sorry Kaniyan, who has just turned down a case relating to a missing girl that came with a blank cheque, grabs the small coins!

But Mysskin has bigger things coming on. An evil corporate conspiracy lies behind the dead dog, and the mastermind of this is not Professor James Moriarty but Kathir/Devil (essayed by the one-time hero, Vinay Rai). And the game begins with murders committed with the kind of ingenuity (in one instance an artificial lightning is created on a rooftop to kill a man on his birthday, and his son dies as well) that will leave Doyle and Holmes swooning in shock.

Really disappointing to the core.

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