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GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN

ime was when Indian cinema thrived on music and melody. Movies were considered incomplete or uninspiring if there were no songs and dances. In fact, some of them had over a dozen songs each. There came a phase in the West as well when musicals became popular: The Sound of Music, My Fair Lady and Mary Poppins were runaway successes. And then there was a huge hiatus, but now, of late, songs and the sounds of musical instruments seem to be sugar-coating even some of the most hardened gangster flicks.

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At the recent 77th edition of the Cannes Film Festival, an out-and-out movie about a vicious goon, *Emilia Perez*, was hopping and skipping to the beats of rhythm and rhyme. Created by the French legend Jacques Audiard, the film about a vile drug cartel big man desperately seeking to change his gender came as a liberating sense of joy, effusively rich with songs and dances.

Audiard, a master of myriad movies with gems like A Prophet, Rust and Bone, Dheepan, and so on, has used Spanish this time to narrate a story that is awe-inspiring. How could cruelty and sadism turn into kindness and compassion? We have to watch Emilia Perez to understand this.

The film got Audiard the Jury Prize (the festival's third most prestigious honour). Not just this. The festival jury, headed by the *Barbie* helmer, Greta Gerwig, honoured four of the women in the movie with the Best Actress trophy. Well deserved, I must say. The blend of transgender woes and some extremely lively drama were both energetic and uplifting.

Shot mostly in France and some of it in Mexican cities, *Emilia Perez* begins with an aerial view of crowded, bustling streets, which are hotbeds of crime and criminality. The camera takes us to Rita (Zoe Saldana), a young attorney who defends murderers and helps them escape the noose. Interestingly, for all the seedy stuff she does, her introduction is nothing less than glamorous. She is dancing in the market square with a whole lot of actors, and the number has all the

zing in it.

Not much later, Rita is taken to meet an ace criminal, Juan "Manitas" Del Monte (played by transgender star Karla Sofia Gascon). Juan soon changes his name to Emilia Perez and ropes in Rita for a complicated surgery that will make him a her. Pumping himself with hormone therapy, Juan decides to leave behind the life of crime in what looks like a remarkable reformation.

Emilia, who had built an empire on blood and gore, says goodbye to all this. To firm this change, he fakes his own death and translocates his wife and kids to Switzerland with the help of Rita. The whole operation is conducted with such secrecy that even the wife and children are bliss-

fully in the dark.

But Emilia is sad to be separated from her family, and she makes plans to bring them back to Mexico, where she is now living. This is not easy, though. Emilia is still a wanted criminal, and what follows is an often hilarious series of episodes punctuated with songs and dances. "I am your aunt," she tells her kids when they finally meet. What is more, both Emilia and Rita embark on a journey to cleanse Mexico of crime.

Repentance and atonement come packaged in exhilarating musical numbers, with the camera interpreting these scenes with verve and vitality. Despite a plot that is overwhelmingly about crime, Audiard's work throws up profound questions about life, mind, body and soul. In these, we notice Emilia's dilemma—about spirituality, about morality, and about tinkering with Nature.

I wonder whether *Emilia Perez* would have been possible without someone like Gascon. She is fantastic in the titular role; credit goes to Audiard for discovering her. In her own words, she was an actor before becoming an actress and a father before becoming a mother. Obviously, she brings a great deal of authenticity to her character, which adds to the richness of the story. Eminently watchable.

The writer is a senior film critic, who has been covering the Cannes Film Festival for 30 years



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