

Maharaja: Vijay Sethupathi gets the film flying



GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN

Vijaya Sethupathi is not a star. He is an actor who has the guts to don any role, and he does this with a touch of brilliant conviction. As a gangster in *Vikram Vedha* (based on the folklore Vikram and Betal), as a sweet old man in *Orange Mittai*, and as a middle-aged kidnapper in *Soodhu Kavvum*, he sparkled. In his latest outing, *Maharaja*, he is a doting father who gets into revenge mode when his "Lakshmi" is lost. And who is Lakshmi? A large garbage can that saved his daughter when she was a baby.

Each scene in this Tamil work is gripping with Sethupathi's performance, which sometimes resembles American icon Marlon Brando's portrayals. The Tamil actor, who essentially works in south Indian language movies (with some dabbling in Hindi), carries the titular role with tremendous natural ease. Directed by Nithilan Swaminathan (who made the critically acclaimed *Kurangu Bommai*), *Maharaja* is rip-roaringly witty in the first half, with Sethupathi's face telling the tale of a man who feels wronged after his wife and daughter are struck by a truck that seems to have lost control and crashes into a shop where they have been sitting. The woman dies, but her daughter Jyothi (played by Sachana Namidass) lives, having been shielded by Lakshmi!

Obviously, Maharaja dotes on the dustbin, and when three men enter his home and run away with Lakshmi, the aggrieved man walks into a police station to file a first information report. There are hilarious scenes at the station, with the cops absolutely perplexed over Maharaja's insistence on lodging a report. I think only Sethupathi, who essays a barber, could have carried out these scenes with such alacrity.

It is quite natural for the policemen to wonder why Maharaja is so anxious to get his Lakshmi back, and when he refuses to leave the station unless his dustbin is found, the men in uniform begin a search for the piece of what they consider trash.

It is into this plot that Swaminathan introduces Anurag Kashap's Selvam, who is one of the men who stole the can. The scenes at the police station are intercut with stories about Selvam and his family and the tragedy that befalls them. Although the movie has been written with a lot of care, I still found some confusion in the way it has been wrapped up.

Somehow, the writing lacks clarity, a bane with Indian cinema. Scripts are hardly given the importance they deserve. However, *Maharaja* is undoubtedly worth watching for Sethupathi's scintillating performance.

The writer is a senior film critic

