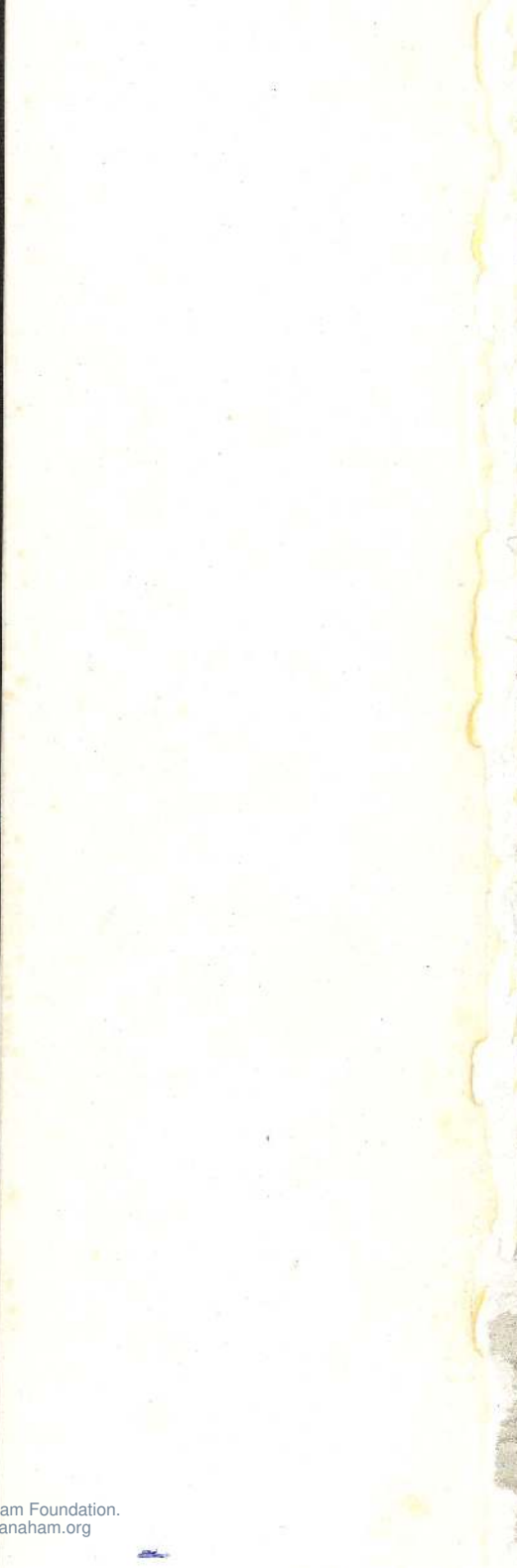
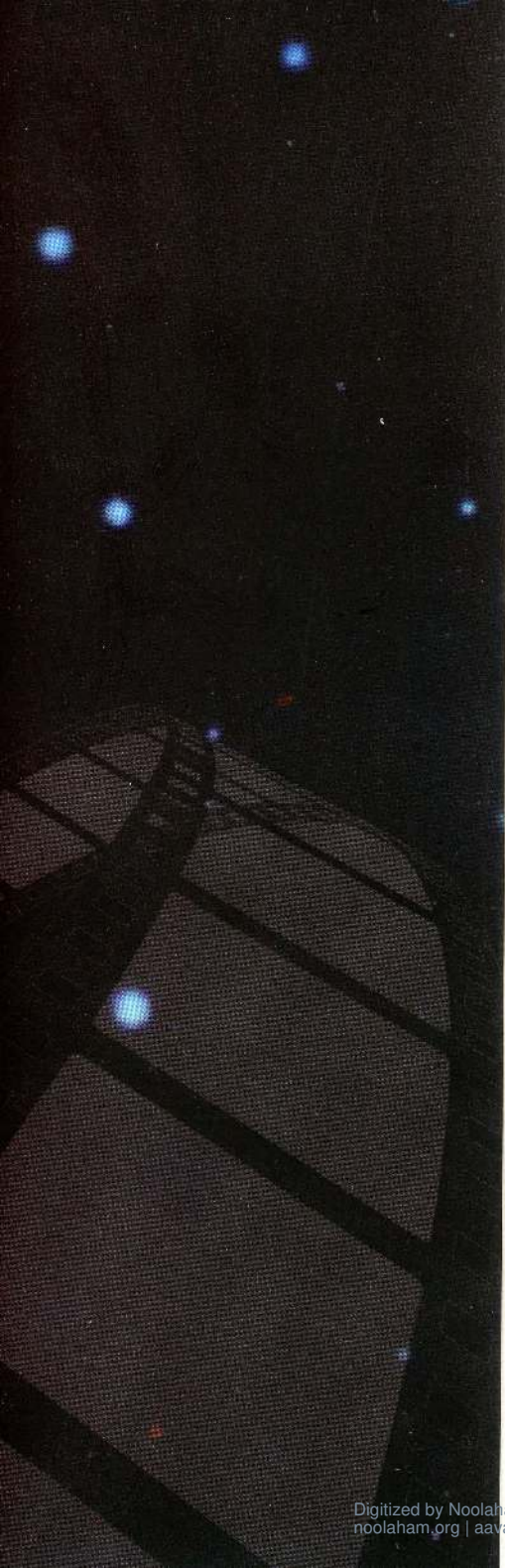


**K. S. SIVAKUMARAN**  
**ON**  
**FILMS SEEN**



**K. S. SIVAKUMARAN**



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## THE AUTHOR'S BOOKS IN ENGLISH

1. Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka - 1974
2. Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka - 1992
3. Sri Lankan Tamil Literature and Culture (Part 1) - 2017
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K. S. Sivakumaran has a General Degree from the University of Peradeniya and a Master's Degree in English from the University of Madras.

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**K. S. SIVAKUMARAN**

**ON**

**FILMS SEEN**

**K. S. SIVAKUMARAN**



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## PREFACE

This is a collection of my newspaper columns on some of the films I have seen outside Lanka. There are reviews and comments on 58 films only. Some of my reviews published before 1990 could not be traced. Some comments on a few Sinhala films appear in my Facebook Timeline and elsewhere.

The purpose of this book is to enable film buffs who could not have had an opportunity to see some of the films to gather information.

I thank the editors of the newspapers for having encouraged me to write on literature and films.

My thanks are due to respected Mr. Sirisumana Godage, Mr. P.C. Dayananda and Mr. Upali Leelaratne for coming forward to publish this book.

I sincerely hope many readers would like to read about my way of interpreting the films I have seen.

Thank you

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May, 2017





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## UNDERSTANDING THE FILM

### A. Language and structure in cinema

(*Culture page - The Island - July 25, 1990*)

Understanding the film medium has become an essential prerequisite. Usually most of us see a film purely for entertainment. The entertainment value in all arts is always there, but its emphasis vary in terms of its purpose. The purpose again is manifold. If we take the film medium as an art form, we find that there are basically three kinds of films: The entertainers termed commercial films, the 'arty films', which are creative and personal statements of filmmakers, and the 'middle cinema', which is neither too arty nor too crude as a banal commercial film. Therefore viewing a film can be in many ways. But the real enjoyment of seeing a film can be derived only if we understand the medium thoroughly. Cinema too is a functional art meaning that every component in the film has a definite purpose.

I do not pretend that I have understood the film medium thoroughly, but with the experience I had recently watching over 200 good films beginning from the silent cinema to films made as late as 1989 and with instruction by people in the field in a five week course on film appreciation, I wish to give briefly in these columns what I had understood for the benefit of our readers.

In the first instance, let us briefly see how Language, Structure and Meaning evolve in cinema.

The properties of the Language in the film are said to be the picture, the sound and the editing of these two, with lighting, acting etc.

As for structure, the film itself is considered as a structure made of the elements of language. In other words, fragments of picture and sound are arranged in a particular order.

As the third step in the process comes the meaning of the film. The meaning is what it expresses. It is indeed the function of the film.

Thus we see that structures are functional. If we look carefully, we win notice in fact that structures are a law of nature. This has been explained by the ancient Greeks and others very much earlier.

Natural objects have structures which are functional in the sense that they derive their logic from the mode of existence of the object.

This can be applied to an animal, fish, a tree or a human being. We must also note the fact that, - that any element of a structure which become unemotional have a tendency to break down. Remember Yeat's line 'things fall apart when the centre cannot hold' which has a bearing here too. Similarly the film too should be functional in every respect.

It isn't clear to most of us that the functional aspect is evident even in artificial structures evolved by human beings. For instance, we have verbal communication, which follow the logic of meaning of the sentence. A sentence is considered as a structure made of vocabulary.

Similarly, a house or a railway station or a political structure like the constitution of a country, or a social structure like caste or family are artificial structures.

The idea of structure applies to works of art in particular. As we know as students of arts and letters that



works of art have sometime complex structures because they express complex meanings, which objectify the nature of human feeling.

To most of us it is obvious that form is not separable from the content. In other words what is said (content, meaning, function) in a work of art is not separable from the way of saying it. (structure or form)

It must be clear to us that we shouldn't think of structure and function as two separate things. They are in fact two aspects of the mode of existence of an object, of an event, of an act of communication or of a work of art.

## **B. Language of film**

*(Culture page - The Island - August 1, 1990)*

Last week, we noted briefly, how the nature of film can be understood in terms of language, structure and meaning. This week, let us touch on 'Language of Film'. To make it clear, let us first identify the elements that form the language of film. They are : VISUAL SHOTS (fragments of visual pictures), SOUND SHOTS (fragments of sound picture) and EDITING (a system by which the fragments are combined to form a whole - the 'continuous' film)

We all know that a visual shot is only a fragment. It is not a complete picture, like, for instance, a still photograph or a painting. A picture in a film is however a movie or a moving picture. Again we know that in a movie, we use the camera to photograph and record and reproduce the physical movements of a moving object. It is this quality that is referred to by various names: Cinema Kino, Kinema, movies, moving pictures etc. Therefore shots are really

'made by a camera'. That is why the camera is the very base of the cinema.

Similarly the sound shot is a fragment of a sound picture. It is not a whole sound picture in the sense that a music programme would be a whole sound picture. In the same way shots are made by a camera; sound, shots too are 'made by a microphone' and recording systems. Again in the sound recording machine is the very artistic basis of cinema.

We now come to the third physical element of the language of the film-editing. Editing is the process of joining visual shots and sound shots in a continuity for continuous seeing, hearing and understanding by spectator.

It should be mentioned that it is the continuity that is also the basis of scripting. This script, therefore, provides the basis for the shooting process, which is discontinuous.

In fact, scripting, shooting and editing are aspects of the same process of making a film.

Thus we see that the process of making a film is to create for perception by the spectator, the image of an event: by juxtaposing visual fragments and sound fragments (relating to that event) in an editing order that makes (some) sense about the event to the spectator.

### **Visual Shots**

Let us now see, what the 'visual shots' in a little more detail. Although what we see around is in three dimension, the camera reduces the three dimensional objects to two dimensional shapes. A shot therefore remains a two-dimensional visual composition, although the perspective lines, lighting and reflective movement of the objects create the illusion of three dimensions for the spectator.

The grammarians of the cinema have detailed to us that the following elements, taken together, constitute the visual composition of the shot:

1. Distance of camera from objects.
2. Height of camera from ground.
3. Movement of the camera and its speed.
4. Lighting.
5. Lenses.
6. Colours.
7. Relationship of frame outlines with elements contained within the frame outlines.
8. Changing graphic relationship within the shot due to camera movement and subject movement.
9. Special textures of the picture.
10. Camera speed.
11. Duration of the shot.

So much for the visual shot. As for the sound shot, we note that the following sounds can be recorded and used in film composition.

Human speech, natural sounds, music-vocal and instrumental, and say other kinds of sound real or artificial.

We must also understand that the source of sound can visually be on screen or off screen.

## **Editing**

Finally, we come to editing.

It is learnt that the following technical methods are

used for joining shots in editing: cut/ dissolve/ wipe/ fade out/ fade in/ any other optical devices.

The devices work in cinema because they reproduce nature processes by which, in actual life, we see and hear fragments of visuals and of sounds and make sense of them.

For editing continuity, we can join together picture fragments and sound fragments in any order which makes sense to the mind.

In sum, the language of cinema, has in fact developed techniques of reproducing process of the working of the human mind.

The experimental makers are constantly developing and discovering these new methods.

### **C. Film and other languages**

*(Culture page - The Island - August 8, 1990)*

As a corollary to our first two pieces in this series, let us look at the films and other languages this week.

Language, as we know, is a symbolic system through which we communicate. Again we know that a symbol is something which stands for something else. With this understanding let us now consider the basic properties or the symbols of the following languages, which are used by human beings, for narrative purposes.

#### ***Verbal languages :***

The basic symbol here is the word. It is both abstract and general because it is either a sound as in speech or a scribbling as in script. This has no relationship with what the word stands for.

***Drawings:***

The basic drawing is less abstract and less general than language proper because the shape of the drawing

- \* a tree for instance
- \* is somewhat like a tree itself.

***Photographs:***

The photograph is less abstract, less general and specific. The photograph of a tree has in it all the visual details of the tree. But it has no movement.

Now let us come to the 'film' itself.

Film is the least abstract, least general, most concrete and most specific of the languages. For example, a camera shot of a tree shows that specific tree (tall or short), the specific leaves, foliage (sparse or thick) and so on, down to the last visual detail.

This life-like quality of the image may be called 'photo-phonographic realism'. The film also creates the further illusion that the spectator is 'in' the same space where the action is taking place.

The life-like illusion of film-created by photography was called earlier as bioscope, biograph, vitagraph etc.

If we sum up, what we have been talking about up to now, we can note the following points:

The film is not an abstract language. Therefore it has no equivalents to abstract concepts of verbal language.

***Eg: man. run. hat.***

Words in cinema expressed in say commentary or dialogue would always make the film more general and abstract. The words are used to reduce the specificity of the

visual image and hence for making the meaning of the audio - visual image more abstract.

Incidentally animation films are based on drawing and not on live action photography. Animation is always performed to live action photography, whenever film has to make quick, abstract statements. This is so in regard to still photography too.

It is obvious that all elements in the ensemble of film are 'photographed' in the sense realism is brought about. However, music which is abstract is not photographed. But whenever music is introduced in a film sequence, it alters the realistic style of the film, lifting it from the plane of realism to the higher plane of surrealism. This is how it is used in a feature film.

In educational and training films, which always attempt to keep at a level of realism, music is used very sparingly or avoided.

#### **D. The role of the spectator in film**

*(Culture page - The Island - August 15, 1990)*

As we try to understand the film, we must also understand the role played by the spectator in viewing the film.

It is obvious that we perceive films through two primary sensory organs - the eye and the ear. The language of the film (please refer to the three previous pieces in the series), is edited in such a way that it is in consonance with the process of the working of the human mind.

Film is therefore, a 'natural' language, which one understands on the basis of one's normal sensuous faculties

of seeing and hearing. This is why most of us, who know nothing about the 'language' of the film are able to understand the film easily.

We many therefore say that the camera and the mike are always at the psychological centre of the scene. They are the eye and ear of the spectator.

If we take a concrete example, the spectator is indirectly asked to perform three roles in relation to the characters who move the plot in the film. Let us say the spectator is asked to concentrate on two characters - A and B in the film. The spectator will have to be an observer with varying degrees of interest in A and B, from distant to the very close interest. This is role one of the spectator. Role two : the spectator should be a medium through which A and B communicate with each other.

Role three : performing certain functions on behalf of A and B.

The spectator by thus involving himself, is mentally 'in' in a scene in the film. As a result he is unable to maintain his distance from the film experience. For many people film is a very vivid experience. It 'happens' to them. This is really the strength of the film medium. At the same time there is a social danger occurring through the film. That is to say, that when a film is used for negative, evasive purpose. By this one can understand why there is a magnetic attraction towards popular or commercial films. It also gives a clue to the secret of fan clubs and worship of film stars.

However, we must note another deviation too:

Following the lead given by Bertolt Brecht in theatre, some modern filmmakers, especially Jean-Luc Goddard (Frenchman) uses devices in film construction which forces

the spectator to alienate himself from the psychological 'centre' of the story on the screen and see the film rather than as reality.

### **Use of Film**

At this point let us note what the uses of film are :

If film is a language, one could think of many ways in which language would be used for various kinds of communication, which would result in many kinds of films for many kinds of spectators, for many kinds of purposes.

1. to provide several hours of imaginative amusing or intelligent (or for some people stupid) entertainment.
2. to receive aesthetic pleasure of an order as high as that which is obtained from works of art in other media.
3. to enable some people to speculate with large sums of money.
4. to carry out political or any other propaganda.
5. to record and preserve historical events.
6. to provide public information service on matters affecting the community or sections of the community.
7. to instruct people in the use of machines, tools and weapons, and in the best methods of carrying out plans and operations.
8. to teach children in the classroom and students in the lecture hall as adjunct to the other matter used by the teacher.



9. to provide livelier background to the education of children and students by recounting their school work to the wider world for whom their education is prepared.
10. to educate and enlighten grown-up people in terms of general interest, people affairs and of local and social interest.
11. to assist scientists and technicians of all sorts to keep abreast of new discoveries and technologies and to explain new processes and technologies.
12. to bring people to understand each other.
13. to bring instruction and information and education to people who cannot read or write.
14. any other conceivable aspect of human communication.

## **E. A filmmaker explains**

*(Culture Page - The Island - August 29, 1990)*

The best way to understand film is to work with a reputed filmmaker and learn the practical side to filmmaking. Theoretical knowledge can only help one to understand the film not totally.

We have reputed filmmakers in our own country some of them are internationally recognised. Lester James Peiris, for instance, has not only worked as a journalist, but also as a creative writer and critic before he emerged himself into a professional filmmaker. In larger sense therefore, it is

the practitioners who should be able to tell us what the film medium is all about. There are number of books, magazines and periodicals explaining the medium. Therefore, in such a context, it is presumptuous to talk about understanding films in these columns.

However, we conclude this series with views by Lankan born Indian filmmaker, Balu Mahendra. We met him in late June in Madras. He is among the noted filmmakers in India, following a film policy of middle-cinema.

*Excerpts :*

***Q. How do you set about filming a scene or a sequence?***

***A:-*** A creative decision is taken commanded by the requirements of my script or requirements of my scene. Suppose that I'm going to shoot a scene in a bed room. I have generally decided that the scene is going to have a night effect. But I have the option of lighting it up any way I want, keeping it as night. But what kind of night effect I will give depends again on the mood of the scene, which kind of light and shade will enhance or add to effectively bring out the mood of the scene, then I follow that pattern. This is generally my approach to my script, I just don't arbitrarily place scenes wherever I want. If they are placed in a particular context in a particular surrounding it is essentially after I have given a thought to it and after I have been guided by the requirements of the scene itself. So photography plays a tremendous role in translating ideas into cinema. What happens in most of the commercial cinema is that only when you see a light burning or an electric light burning in the frame, you know that it is night. Otherwise there is no difference between a day scene or a night scene.

***Q. If the cinema is a moving image, why is that in some films there are no fast action?***

**A:-** There are two or three movements in film: psychological, narrative, geographical etc.

Because the audiences are used to or terribly conditioned to a different kind of cinema where everything is artificially speeded up and create a kind of artificial speed. This feeling of non-movement is there. Since you are already conditioned to fast speed, you feel that the film is slow. But I do admit that there are some 'arty' filmmakers who wantingly leave a sequence to drag for no reason. This is something that some of the 'minority' filmmakers fail to understand.

***Q. What is the function of the shot?***

**A:-** When a shot is trying to say something, it should be said effectively. Once it is effectively said, the shot has no business to stay on the screen, not even one frame more. This has to be properly understood. But sometimes even after making your point, you consciously allow the shot to hang on, because you are trying to creatively use that extra footage later. But if this reason is also not there and if a shot is hanging on the screen much longer than what is required, it is horrible. It is nothing but ignorance. Unfortunately even in the so called acclaimed arty filmmakers, I find this flaw. And I really don't know whether it has something to do with their character. The director's character or personality is reflected in the films. The basic thing is that the shot has a definite function. It is trying to say something, and once you have said it the shot should go, unless there is a valid reason. The

viewer sees the film essentially through the camera of the director on a physical level. But the function of the camera is not to just to function on physical level only. The camera is functioning as the eye of the viewer. That is on a very elementary level. The camera should function at its highest form as the eye of the mind, not eye of the body. There, creativity begins in the cinema. This is the highest advantage we have in cinema and which is not available to theatre or anything else.

***Q. Do you think the director is the most important person in filmmaking?***

***A:-*** I belong to that school of thinking. He is the master of the medium. It is like this: the moment the architect finishes his blue print he has created his building. His creative part is over. But it is one thing to write a script and another to create on the spot of shooting a film. A script is only a starting board for a creative director.

***Q. What do you mean by the terms commercial or mainstream cinema, middle cinema and minority cinema?***

***A:-*** Commercial cinema is the mainstream films which are usually box office hits. Films are produced purely as business arrangements to make a fast buck or double. Minority cinema has higher motives than mere money making. At lowest level it has to get back the money invested. It is totally uncompromising cinema. It is divorced from commercial requirements. The middle cinema is not compromising to commercial requirements and it is not too arty and places it between the two extremes. The minority cinema makes a personal

statement. The director makes his film to make a statement. He wants to share his thoughts in a creative way.

***Q. What do you think acting should be for the film?***

**A:-** To me if the director and the cameraman can create a doubt in the mind of the audience that they have gone and shot the film without the actors realising that they are being filmed. Then it is that acting that would be the highest form of acting in a film.

***Q. Do you take many shots and then edit or is it invariably single takes that you use?***

**A:-** While shooting, I won't take any other shots which I won't use. Major cutting part is at the script level itself. I follow it up at shooting stage. I plan well ahead as perfectly as possible, economical. Simplicity is essential for effective communication.

***Q. Do you brief your actors before you start shooting?***

**A:-** I give their parts of the script. I don't brief them. To those artistes with whom I move closely, I casually mention the storyline. But only to Archana I read the script, because she is a serious student of the cinema working under my guidance. I ask them to use as a base of what I demonstrate for their acting. I allow them to interpret the characters according to their imagination. When a director is working with an artiste, his judgement determines as to whether the performance is right for him as per sequence!

There is also the factor where the artiste is equally important at that moment where mental decision is

employed. If an actor wants one more chance to depict a particular scene, then the director gives him a chance. Later he sees it in the moviola and edits suitably.

## **F. Lankan-born Balu Mahendra talks about films**

*(Culture Page - The Island - October 10, 1990)*

One of the respected middle cinema filmmakers in India today is Lankan-born, Balu Mahendra (Balanathan Benedict Mahendran). He is an old boy of St. Michael's College, Baticaloa and Jaffna College, Vaddukoddai. He was a draftsman for the Survey Department till late 60s, after which he joined the prestigious Film and Television Institute at Pune, India to study cinematography, during 1966 - 69. He passed out with distinction and his graduation film 'A view from the Fortress' was adjudged the best film of the year by his teachers.

Since Balu was interested in photography for a long time, doing a course in cinematography was an added point for him. He was also a stage and radio actor while living in Sri Lanka and a member of the editorial board of a 'little magazine' in Tamil called 'Thenaruvi'. He wrote short stories as well. His father had been one of the finest mathematics teachers in this country. All this contributed to Balu's professionalism. Although he did a course in cinematography, he in fact followed the course on film direction as well. So, when he came out of the FTII he knew that he was going to make a mark in the field of Indian Cinema.

But to break-through the world of mundane commercial cinema, competing with stalwarts in the system was a difficult task. Because his wife was with Indian connections, he was

able to steer through the formidable atmosphere. Mere claim as a Sri Lankan would not have been that easy, despite the fact that he was a Tamilian.

Balu Mahendra's first film was not a Tamil film, but one in Kannada called 'Kokila'. He has now made about a half a score of films, but had served as a cinematographer to films made by others. Such films like 'Mullum Malarum', 'Pallavi Anupallavi', 'Sangaraparanam' etc. have been filmed by Balu. Among his own films, the award winning 'Veedu' (Home) and 'Sandya Ragam' (The evening Song) are non-compromising minority cinema, he claims. And all his other films like, 'Azhiyatha Kolangal', 'Moodu Pani', 'Moontram Pirai', 'Neengal Kettavai', 'Yatra' etc. are categorised under middle cinema, he says.

We met Balu Mahendra in Madras late June. Here are excerpts from the conversation we had with him.

### **On Serious Tamil Films:**

It is unfortunate that when compared with other regional films produced in India, the films in Tamil have not made an impression. Except perhaps for 'Ealavathu Manithan' (The Seventh Man) made by Hari Haran (who incidentally is a product of the FTII, Pune). John Abraham's 'Agraharathil Kazhuthai' (An ass in the Brahmin dwelling place) and Jeya Bharathi's 'Kudisai' (Hut), all other films had been products of business orientation.

Balachandar's 'Thanneer Thanneer' (Water, Water) was an exception. But K. Balachandar came from a bad Tamil theatre. Contemporary Tamil theatre in Tamilnadu is awful. It apes bad cinema. He was never ever able to come out of the photographed stage plays. His stories are highly melodramatic.

Bharathirajah came out into the village, but his films are highly contrived. Story, sequence, performance all too loud. His approach to the command of the medium is poor.

Mani Rathinam's craft is sleek but what is he doing with his draft? His films may be box office hits. But so is T. Rajendar's films. Mani can make better cinema.

His wife Subashini is a better director. By way of themes values, simplicity, understanding of the medium, command of the script, photography, purposefulness etc., she is a better film director. Even as an actress she is reasonably good. I was the cameraman for Mahendran's 'Mullum Malarum'. He was totally new to the medium. He was guided by me in all departments in making that film.

### **On acting :**

Acting is a very important element in cinema. If performance goes wrong, the whole thing goes flat. To me the best actors and actresses in the Indian cinema today are Nasurudin Shah, Shabana Azmi, Smita Petel, Kamala Hassan, Om Puri Shobha, Archana and Mamooty. Sri Devi hadn't yet had a chance to exhibit her ability to act. She is a thorough professional. She has the ability to grasp and reproduce. She has a tremendous ability to give a convincing performance.

Casting should be guided by demands of the script. I saw Ramu Kariat's 'Chemeen' for the second time recently and was appalled by the crude production of the film. He had taken an Anglo Indian girl to play the heroine Karuthamma. She was too glamorous for the role.

### **On background music:**

As Satyajit Ray defined, the background music in



films should be 'unheard music'. Middle cinema uses background music to good use. It should be part and parcel of the story. It should be used judiciously to enhance the role of the character and to understand the character. I never use lip songs. My characters do not open their mouth and sing. I use songs only in the back-ground. Ninety percent of the Indian cinema is photographed theatre and songs.

### **On political films:**

I had never been interested in making political films. If I do make one it will be a blunt film. I am interested in human relationship. I have sent a proposal to make a 13 episode TV film based on Tamil short stories, but it has not yet been accepted.

### **On use of colour :**

The use of colour is one thing that is screwed up in Indian films. Most of the cameramen and directors use colour for the sake of colour. They don't know that colour has a creative and psychological function. Colour can be used very effectively to accentuate a theme. With due respects to colour, I must also say that it has a tendency to glamourise. We have to be absolutely alert to deglamourise or decolourise. So even in a colour film I avoid colour as much as possible. Even when I use nature as backdrop, I see nothing clashes with that except when I want it for psychological reasons or intentionally. I am very conscious of colour selection and the materials.

### **On seeing through a camera:**

If the director is also a cameraman, then it is a tremendous advantage. Stayajit Ray handles his camera, I feel that the only way to watch an action while it is taking

place for a film is through the camera, because it is what that is going to come through.

### **On eroticism:**

I do admit that I have a kind of an acceptable and pleasing and humorous eroticism in me, where I feel it is healthy and wonderful. There is nothing wrong about it. All important filmmakers have depicted their own childhood and growing up. It is universal.

## **G. Of films in many languages**

*(Muse Page - Daily News- September 23, 2015)*

Why do we watch a Movie/Film/Cinema? For that matter, why do we read fiction/flash fiction or even theatre/drama? It is for entertainment you would/may say. Right.

But it is not merely for sheer entertainment or to while away the time. At the same time, more serious minded people among us would like to be entertained in a fruitful manner, meaning that they look for artistic qualities in what they perceive. There are experts in particular fields of interests who are critics who expect certain standards in what they perceive. As against the dictionary meaning of criticism, such critics are not mere condemners, but appreciating the finer points in a workout and politely point out the shortcomings or defects in such works and thus hold a balance in their judgment. That's why their candid opinions are welcomed by the creators of such works.

The perceivers of art are sometimes excited by the discovery of critics of things that did not strike them at first. The enlightened viewers or readers and the critics identify themselves with the characters in a film for instance and

are engrossed in experiencing the same pleasures or pains. They learn how the characters resolve their problems and so on. They find what they could not do are achieved by the characters and are thrilled by their actions.

The above are some points discussed in an essay found in a book on cinema in general and reviews of mostly on international films seen at international film festivals. The Book is in Tamil and titled 'Mukkiya Cinemaakali Parriya Suvaiyaana Kannoddam' (tasteful Look on Important Films).

The book is published by Manimekalai Prasuram in Chennai and has short and useful information on outstanding films of the recent past. Apart from the European continental films, reviews of two Sinhala films 'Yuvathipathy' and 'Saroja' and a Tamil film made by a Lanka born Arunthathy who live in France are also included. The name of the film is 'Mukam' (Face). There is also a brief article on Lankan Tamil Films, and comments on a few Tamil films made in Kodambakkam in Chennai.

Other articles are on: What is a Documentary? The changing approaches in film criticism, film criticism, training in Film Appreciation, a book in Tamil on the art of cinema, a journal in Tamil on film criticism, pen portraits on Roger Manvel (a pioneer British film authority and critic), two Indian Tamil film actors Archana and Sivakumar. Adoor Gopalakrishnan's 'Kathaa Purushan', B Narasinga Rao's Telugu film 'Daasi', Film Direction by Indian women, contribution by three Tamil women in film direction, Tapan Sinha's creations, Regional films of India, 'A man for all seasons', Ingmar Bergman, 'Leon', 'Marana Sinmaasanam' (a Malayalam film), Netherlands Film Festival in Colombo and Iranian film 'Saara'.

The video presentation of Chinese, Burmese, and American films are critically viewed in the book.

The remaining reviews are on films the writer has seen in International Film Festivals held in Indian capitals - New Delhi, Chennai, Bangalloru and Thiruvananthapuram. Such films as Meera Nair's 'Perez Family', French films (Guardian Angels, at Chance, Son of Gagon, Le Peril JeJune, Between the Devil and the Deep Sea, Jeya Ganga, (made by French Indian Vijay Singh). and many more not listed here.

## **H. First in a series of books on films**

*(Books - Daily News- May 25, 2004)*

While the outstanding Sinhala language films made in Sri Lanka have earned respectability and appreciation in arty cinema of the world and thus deserve to be proudly called indigenous Sri Lankan cinema, most films made in Sinhala and Tamil in the island are far from greatness.

This is understandable, because there is hardly any quality films, as in yesteryears, created in any part of the world at present. Hollywood, Digital Video, Action, Technology et al, have taken over artistic sensibility. There is no more serious cinema in a European style.

One should recall the pioneering efforts made in Sri Lanka to make film making a viable enterprise and a thriving industry in our country. However stupid, alien, melodramatic and hotchpotch earlier Sinhala and Tamil films had been in the past, it is ungrateful to dismiss the pioneering brick-building that members of different communities in our little island, had made in the past.

To put the records straight, a Sri Lankan writer in Tamil has compiled a little book which gives at least a few forgotten facts about the making of a Sri Lankan cinema. He is Thambyayah Thevathas a teacher, broadcaster, translator and author.

As a translator of the Sinhala fiction of K. Jayathilake and Karunasena Jayalath the author should write this book in Sinhala as well for the benefit of the majority of readers in Sri Lanka.

Some of the big names in the production of Sri Lankan films mainly in the Sinhala language are mentioned and brief write-ups on each one of them are included in this 245 page book printed in Chennai, India. The book is the first in the series that the writer hopes to publish in succession specializing in filmography rather than critical evaluation. Thevathas has already published two other books on Sri Lankan Cinema. They were *The Golden Age of the Sinhala Cinema* and *The Story of Tamil Cinema in Sri Lanka*. The 40 pen-portraits of artists and businessmen featured in the book include the following: S.M. Nayagam, Henry Chandrawansa of Kerala origin, Sri Chittampalam A. Gardiner, B.S.Krishnakumar, W.M.S.Tampoe, T. Somasekaran, K. Gunaratnam, M. Vedanayagam, Jabir A Cader, Lenin Moraes, Joe Devanand, A.V.M. Vasmam, Helen Kumari, A.J. Vincent, M. Masthan, Rukmani Devi, V.P. Ganeshan, K. Thavamani Devi, Mohideen Beig, A.S.Rjah, S.N.Danaratnam, V.S.Muttuvelu-Ranjani, R.Muttusamy, Anton Gregory, M.K.Rocksamy, Robin Tampoe, S.Ramanathan, K.S.Balachandran, M.S.Anandan, Eelathu Rethinam, K.P.K.Balasinham, V.S.Thurairajah and K. Venkat.

## SINHALA FILM

### A. **Madhu Samaya**

(*Culture Page - The Island - January 26, 1991*)

I saw a preview of a Sinhala film, apparently made before the murder of the actor turned politician, Vijaya Kumaranatunga, and completed later was shown at the Elphinstone theatre.

The main attraction is its subject : a psychological drama of conjugal relationship.

Incidentally the director K.A.Wijeratne seems a newcomer. If this is his first film one should certainly welcome his understanding of the cinematic medium. The use of silence is effectively exploited in this film, *The Honeymoon*, which aspect is seldom seen or applied in local Sinhala or Tamil films. This is a plus point in favour of the director. Again editing is judiciously put into effect, so that the tempo of the dramatic element in the film is not lost. Mercifully there was only one song, and it was permissible judging by the context of the story. Music by Kheamadasa synchronized the theme of the film.

The film stars Malini Fonseka, Lucky Dias, Neil Alles and others, besides enigmatic-looking Vijaya.

I am inclined to judge a film by certain standards only. In that respect this film is, amateurish and basically, an average and 'slightly better' than the crude copycat productions. Perhaps, one could not expect a truly elitist film in our country for several reasons which are obvious: the cost of production, audience reaction etc. However, the film under review could not escape from its mundane melodrama.

I must single out the performance of the late Vijaya Kumaranatunga. His role is indeed minimal on the screen, but he creates a huge image for himself in the film by his mannerisms and character building. Despite having been a popular actor, he has also been a serious actor. There was personality portrayed in his mere presence. He played the role of a robust, healthy, loving and passionate lover at the beginning.

Later he slowly turned into a psychologically and sexually handicapped jealous and introvert husband. The transitions in moods were remarkably portrayed by Vijaya and his guilt - feeling at the end too was convincing.

Malini, who acted as glamorous Sinhala girl opposite the Tamil mega-actor, Sivaji Ganeshan in 'Pilot Premnath' seemed a different actress in this film with her poignant and pointed performance.

Lucky Dias who impressed the telefilm audiences in 'Yasorawaya' was satisfying in his role which is almost stylized - meaning stereotyped. Neil Alles and the actress who played the role of the character Sujatha were alright.

I would have liked it better if the film had more visuals than wordy, although I enjoyed the meaningful dialogue, despite my inadequate knowledge of the Sinhala language.

Madhu Samaya is an interesting film.

## **B. Kelimandala - Power Politics and Decadence**

*(Culture Page - The Island - June 12, 1991)*

'Kelimandala' is an adaptation from a novel by an acclaimed contemporary woman writer. An experienced man of the cinema and a former teacher had adapted the novel to

suit the cinematic medium. The film itself is directed by an ace cinematographer and filmmaker. Anoja Weerasinghe, H.A.Perera and Veena Jayakody are the main players in the film.

The filmic action as such centres around the personal lives of the three characters who come to the center stage. Their personal lives as such do not evoke an interest or curiosity with the viewer per se but it does only when it is shown against the backdrop of a political climate. Because a public figure like a politician is involved, naturally a concern in his life is aroused. His tragedy or his rise and fall therefore, assumes importance.

In my opinion, the film attempts to do just that. It doesn't go beyond showing the protagonist in a political milieu and what it does show is to place him in a large political context and it subtly delineates his individual flaw. At the same time the film with great care touches on many things that go to the making of a politician, who enamoured by the power that he inherits, falls an easy victim to the very same power, because he fails to hold grip with it. Power corrupts.

Here is a story of a man who takes up to politics not on his own wish, but to satisfy his father who wants him to follow the tradition of the family, irrespective of the apparent changes that are taking place around him.

An unwilling, intellectually-oriented and a humanist, is virtually dragged into politics, which he does not treat seriously. However encouraged by his close associates and by the assimilation of aristocratic attributes both from his own family and that of his wife's family, this man tastes the glory that is power, little by little. But the dramatic conflict comes when he tries to outwit the political norms



by even revolting against such norms and behaving naive in consonance with his true nature.

But that is only at the surface level. Pressurised by political requirements (as for instance the demand to help his voters to get employment), and personal requirements (his Dilemia in relation to his mistress, for instance), he really turns into a victim of the circumstance.

### **Director's Attitude**

I think the filmmaker is viewing this politician in sympathetic terms. Having not read the novel, I do not know how the novelist has created her characters. But our concern here is to see it as a film as interpreted by the director.

One should applaud the director for treating the three characters - the politician, his mistress and his wife as three persons with individual character traits and thus not allowing the degeneration of their own individual characteristics. That is to say that the three characters referred to are until the last, three individuals with distinctive character traits.

Anoja Weerasinghe remains steadfastly firm in her relations with H.A. Perera and openly acknowledges the relationship to his wife and the public until she is cowardly killed. Veena Jayakody while remaining an aristocratic woman also prepares herself to change when a necessity arises. Her son wants to turn the ancestral home to a tourist hotel. She is also firm in establishing her right to her husband and takes vengeance in getting rival killed. H.A.Perera regains his innate nature of the feeling for the fellow being having been a politician for sufficient number of years, tasting the bitter side of ruthlessness.

## Engrossing

Cinematically speaking the film succeeds to a great degree in having the viewer engrossed. This is achieved by short sequences, tight editing and natural juxtapositions of flashbacks. The film effortlessly beats the time barrier in going to and from of the past. The use of colour is befittingly and tastefully executed. The identification of the political party with a kind of yellow colour is striking because it is an unusual colour not used by political parties in this country.

The shots of the villa, its interior, the office, the political meetings and the picturisation of the involvement of the people, the youth, the clergy, the hypocrisy, the hopes, the disappointments are all handled in terms of the requirements of the film. It is not overdone.

The politician finds solace only in his former lover and presently his mistress. But that too is suspect because he is gradually conditioned by forces that are stronger, which make him a hardened man of pretense. He falls a terrible victim of the circumstances. He is really impotent having showed little resistance to the forceful winds that sweep him into the top and then suddenly drop him down.

But Anoja Weerasinghe is consistent to the last and falls only at her death. Her's is a positive and a mature woman's stance. She loves the man despite his betrayal and even when he unreasonably makes her to be his mistress and give her a daughter.

She dares to have her baby and goes on living despite the scandal the society stirs.

All the four children of the politician are the products of the near contemporary times as such they have their own

values vis-a-vis their parents. One of his daughters even visits his father's mistress and communicates with her. They are prepared to accept and make no fun of their father's secret affair with his old flame.

The assistants who stood by the politician for a very long time turn against him only when the politician loses his grassroots. In this and in other sequences the characters grow with the times and show maturity.

The development is shown remarkably well in the film.

The acting by H.A.Perera in the role of the politician is slightly stagy but we remember the fact that he is playing the role with remarkable sensitivity.

Anoja Weerasinghe's playing, though not exceptionally grand, is nevertheless very good. She communicates her feeling through all languages. The caressing of her lover is one of such languages.

D.B. Nihalsinghe has understandably not made a committed political film. But a film which has as its content the making and fall of a politician vis-a-vis his personal relationship. It is a good film.

### **C. Umayangana - A stylistic first film by a Lankan**

*(Leisure page - The Island - March 3, 1992)*

The only Sri Lankan entry at the recent IFFI '92 at Bangalore was 'Umayangana' (The goddess) produced by Patalee Chitrapata last year and yet to be shown to Sri Lankan audiences.

Ananda Fonseka, brother of Malini and Damayanthi, had written the script and directed by film. Aply assisted

by Suminda Weerasinghe (cinematography) and Bernard Regionald (editing), Ananda has managed to produce a stylistic first film, meaning technically a better film, than most of the run-of-the-mill Sinhala commercial films. The music by Premasiri Khemadasa also contributes to the overall result of the creation.

Although the story of the film is unconvincing, yet one could willingly suspend belief and watch the film.

Ananda Fonseka began his career as a still photographer and later worked as Assistant Director on many projects, we are told.

Our readers would like to know what the story is about. Here is a summary, courtesy the brochure published during the festival.

Mudali (Joe Abeywickrema) is a wealthy man living with his daughter (Malini Fonseka) Elizabeth after his wife's death. Elizabeth elopes with her English tutor. Sixteen years later, her husband dies leaving her and her daughter (Damayanthi Fonseka) Theja in poverty. Elizabeth writes to her father, who immediately brings them home.

His brothers (Jalath Manoratne, Somi Ratnayake and another popular small-screen actor, whose name, I am sorry, I cannot remember) disapprove of his taking back his daughter, as they are interested in inheriting his wealth. They fight with Elizabeth and Mudali, and kill Elizabeth.

Theja who was witness to the murder but is struck dumb with shock, is kept in a mental asylum. She becomes possessed by the spirit of her dead mother and takes revenge on Mudali's brothers.

Sriyantha Mendis plays the role of a youth in sympathy with Theja.

Thus, 'Umayangana', a colour film running to nearly two hours, was a film that could please lovers of the macabre and horror genres. Although this kind of films do not entertain me, I sat through the film because of the fine performances by actors like Joe Abeywickrema and Jayalatha Manoratne. And also the contemporary style of film making, where the camera is usually fixed in a particular position for a fair length of shooting time and thus recording all the subtle movements and nuances of the shots in question.

Diminutive Damayanthi and her brother Ananda were among the Sri Lankan contingent at the Festival. She drew the attention of many visitors to the festival by her typical wearing of the Kandyan saree and costumes. They also held a press conference.

Compared with other regional films of India and films made in South-east Asia, 'The Goddess' might not be a high - quality film, but it has its point in drawing the attention of the viewers from the west, who prefer exotic happenings, and these were amply provided in this film.

## D. **Mandakini**

*(A tour de Force via camera-Sunday Observer-September 29, 1999)*

Courtesy the Sri Lankan Community Social Club in Oman, I had the opportunity of viewing a new Sinhala film yet to be released in Sri Lanka at the Stars Cinema in Ruwi, a shopping district in Muscat, capital of the Sultanate of Oman.

The theatre was full with Sri Lankan expatriates at a special morning show on Friday, September 24 to see Mandakini in which dialogues were both in Sinhala

and English. The director of the film, reputed filmmaker, H.D.Premaratne himself was present for the occasion. Ambassador T.B.Maduwegedera was the chief guest at the showing.

Here is an impressionistic review of the film:

Admittedly H.D.Premaratne's Mandakini (the Milky Way) is a well-crafted entertainer of the highest kind.

The 'grammar of cinema' or the 'moving image', as we understand the terms, is discernible in most parts of this brand new film shot in colour in both beautiful Sri Lanka and Panoramic Australia at a cost 130 million rupees.

What do we mean by the term 'grammar of cinema'? It really means, the language of the film. The elements that form the language of the film are: Visual Shots (fragments of visual pictures) and sound shots (fragments of sound picture) and editing (a system by which the fragments are combined to form a whole - the continuous film)

With this knowledge let's try to figure out what the film is all about.

Mandakini's cameraman captures the Australian mega-city, Sydney that is, in some awe-inspiring shots. The viewer is taken along to major spots or landmarks in the city. Those who have not been there have the fortune to witness a slice of materialistic life experienced by a select Sri Lankan in Down Under. Contemporary technical virtuosity is in plenty in this Sri Lanka co-production.

The producer of this Sinhala film and the assistant director, Kit Sri Karunaratne, is a Sri Lankan expatriate now living in Australia. He works for the information Technology Services at Sydney Opera House as its manager. Therefore his contribution to the making of the film is considerable. That speaks for the technical excellence of the film.

But can form alone would do?

No. And there isn't sufficient meat in the film as to call it a film having a wholesome content.

Incidentally, my friend and veteran Sinhala journalist and film critic, Benedict Dodampegama has supplied the idea for the film for which the director himself has written the story and dialogue as well. I had the fortune of working with Ben in the USIS, Colombo in the early 80s.

Mandakini has a flimsy, if I may call it that, storyline. It has a facade of pretence masquerading as a sociological study of the Veddahs (Sri Lanka) and the Aborigines (Australian).

Of course, there are visible shots of the Veddahs and civilized aborigines, a university backdrop, a keynote address by a Sri Lankan professor on the subject of ethno-studies. And that's about it all.

The film is a slow moving set of montages depicting the lives of three people, mainly and a family of four. It is not a story of triangle of love either.

Rather it is a 'brief encounter' or intermezzo between a visiting Sri Lankan married woman to Australia and a Sri Lankan playboy student studying in Australia. She is the wife of the professor who is to deliver a keynote address at a conference in Sydney. This Lankan don is preoccupied with his studies at the risk of not paying sufficient attention to his wife, who had been a student of his. So there is a case for the wife to be indiscreet.

The unsuspecting professor does not know the affair until the last moment (highly melodramatic!). The wife is also not seriously interested in this good-looking boy as to fall in love with him. But she is fascinated with his

personality and is a little amused and curious about him and has a slight infatuation for him.

The boy represents the fast motor racing, ostentatious, vainglorious living. He has a macho figure and is in the prime of youth with an urge to merge. The woman takes a ride with him unwillingly at first and later falls for him as a recluse from the boredom she experiences with her husband. But only for a short time. It is a picnic for two people in a romantic setting and congenial surroundings, thus satisfying the juvenile dream-world existence.

The student is a flamboyant machofigure who seeks thrills and almost believes that he is really in love with this woman and establishes a pathetic scene which is at once comical and full of bathos.

The husband is full of pride and gently accepts the hospitality extended to him by Australian dons in his researches and is contented. He is in a way self-centred and hence there is way open for the wife to seek new pastures. But true to her eastern traditions, she comes back to her husband. And there is a possible reconciliation between them, the film doesn't say it but keeps you guessing with a positive feeling.

It is true that there is subtlety and suggestions in the film in few places to bring forth the dramatic irony to the viewer, but the expressions demanded from the actress in particular, were in wanting.

Sabitha Perera, as the wife, has in fact a few lines to speak. Therefore a lot was expected of her to add tension in the film, but she is too cool and inexpressive. I think that she is a wrong choice as a protagonist.



Ravindra Randeniya, on the other hand, has a mouthful of both dialogues and speeches, especially with Australian counterparts. He manages to hold his frame with some distinction.

But I thoroughly enjoyed the part played by Pradeep Senanayake as the playboy of the western world. He is dashingy handsome as Tony Curtis was in his prime days. In some ways he is like the Hollywood actor in his comical stances. Here is an actor who fits in for the matrix chosen.

The best performance, however, comes from versatile Asoka Pieris as the Sri Lankan expatriate in Australia enjoying the comforts of the affluent country.

Janaki Kurukulasuriya as his wife plays the role of half-Western and half-Sri Lankan propensities. I think she also articulates well.

The music is functional.

And the film as a whole is not a failure. But I had high expectations from an able filmmaker like H.D.Premaratne (his *Seilama* was artistic). A truly artistic film would have been appreciated very much.

*Mandakini* is unashamedly a commercial film that entertains.

## E. **Sankranthi**

*(As I like it column - The Island - February 28, 2007)*

At the international Film Festival of India (IFFI) 2006 in Goa, I also saw a Sinhala film and a few other films from many places in different languages. I was happy there was a

film from Sri Lanka. Anuruddha Jayasinghe has directed this film, which is a second venture in his directorial efforts. I have not seen his maiden film. I understand that he had made short films earlier. I missed seeing or meeting Anuruddha Jayasinghe in Panaji. His film is called Sankranthi (The Tender Trap). The film screenplay is by Nimal Senanayake with Ruwan Costa handling the camera.

This film is pleasingly filmed and directed and therefore it is above the average anachronistic type of film making in Sinhala. In recent times more and more cinema conscious and knowledgeable directors and players have come to the scene. This is refreshing to note.

Sankranthi might be considered an off-beat psychological film. The story centres around an ageing but somewhat eccentric professor of what they call 'parasitologist', his attractive wife who had a dubious past and a disciple of the old man. No, it is not an eternal triangle of love that is depicted. On the contrary it is a designed programme of fathoming the human in an atmosphere of tension. The relationship between a woman and a man is subject to an analysis. There are Dr. Gerard (played by veteran actor on the stage, screen and small screen W. Jayasiri), Pam ( a well known glamorous actress who could also bring seriousness to her roles, Sangeetha Weeraratna), Sunimal (Bimal Jayakody) to bring sparks into the ambit of conjugal relationship. Besides them there are veteran actor and dramatist of the 1970s, Hemasiri Liyanage and Giriraj Kaushalya doing the acting honours.

The researcher is seen setting a tender trap by his abnormal behaviour of encouraging his wife and assistant into amorous escapades. This he believes is an experiment to proceed with his thesis relating to primordial instincts

and feelings. But the chain of events that follow unravels many things the viewer would witness. One may have to 'suspend belief' to comprehend the motif. Nevertheless it is an interesting belief.

### **Swedish Films**

Henry Meyer's film *Four Weeks in June* is a very touching film from Sweden. It's a study of the interaction of people with diametrically opposite mental makeups. A Jewish woman in Sweden, a young woman criminal and a Polish carpenter interact in this finely tuned drama of love transmitted in a most unexpected manner. I liked the ingenuity of the director.

Sandra could be tempestuous but she looks the girl next door, not particularly attractive or seductive. For stabbing her boy friend, she is sent to a remote place for community service. There she meets an attractive ageing Jewish woman who is also mysterious. Both women live in the same apartment. The younger woman is tough at the start but reaches true womanhood with the calm and cool older woman, who also has a revealing past, converting Sandra with affection.

The Polish carpenter is also intriguing with his own past. The lust he has for her is reciprocated by Sandra who tormented him on previous occasions with her total denial of his subtle moves.

The film ends in a melodramatic or shall we say happy mood.

Another Swedish film was *Falkenberg Farewell* directed by Jesper Ganslandt. This is his first feature film. I didn't like it for its 'negative capability'. It's all doom

and fruitless engagement with life of youngsters - typical of a decaying civilization in some parts of the west. It would be a tedious task for me to narrate the story for your benefit because halfway through it I was dismayed over the sequences of the film.

## INDIAN FILMS AMONG WORLD CINEMA

### A. Archana : Tamil Cinema's thinking Girl

*(Sunday Island - July 15, 1990)*

Dusky, dark, dove-like and wide-eyed Telugu speaking Indian film actress from Madras, Archana (21) is a starrer not only in South Indian films (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada) but also in Hindi 'minority films'. Twice National Award Winner as the best actress in India for consecutive years in 1988 and 1989 and once the best actress in Telugu regional film awards category, she also starred in the best Hindi film for 1989 made by a Bengali director.

In 1988, she played the lead in Sri Lanka born Balu Mahendra's 'Veedu' (Tamil) and in 1989 in B. Narasing Rao's 'Dasi' (Telugu) and bagged her awards. 'Nirikshana' made in Telugu and dubbed in Tamil as 'Kannae Kalaimanae' gave her an opportunity to win the regional award. One of Bengal's new directors Buddhadeb Das Gupta made a film called 'Baag Bahadur' in Hindi with Archana in the leading role and this film was adjudged the best Hindi film for last year.

As Balu Mahendra (one of India's foremost cinematographer and a frontline 'middle cinema' director) under whom Archana is grooming herself as a potential film maker besides being the main player in his films, says Archana looks like 'the average girl next door'. But she is also a charming, sensitive, intelligent actress who has the ability to grasp the nuances and finer points to portray a character with ease and with purpose.

We met her in Madras end of June and had a very stimulating conversation with her. She speaks Tamil very fluently and is able to enunciate in English her thoughts when spoken to her in that language.

Archana is the celluloid name given to her by Balu Mahendra, when she started acting in his own films. Before that she had acted in a few Telugu and other films numbering ten or twelve. But with Balu Mahendra, this twenty two year old versatile actress has made six films. They include 'Veedu', 'Neengal Keattavai', 'Sandhiya Ragam', 'Chakkra Vyuham'.

Daughter of a Telegu stage actress Archana had formal training in Bharatha Natyam, Kuchchipudi and Kathak. That accounts for her shapely figure and graceful movements. Who perhaps contributes to her standing as an innovative and disciplined actress is the fact that she had passed out as a graduate in acting from the Adayar Film and TV Institute in Madras. The largest and the most prestigious of these institutes in India is the one in Pune, near Bombay in the state of Maharashtra.

Archana came into the limelight seven years ago with Balu Mahendra's films. The very fact that she had been chisselled into a 'performing artiste' than a mere 'glamorous star' by Balu Mahendra had made other middle-cinema and personal cinema film makers to take note of her. Buddhadeb Das Gupta, Narasing Rao, Saji (an upcoming Malyalam film maker who made Piravi which won six national awards in 1988) and Shankar Naag, (who made 'Ondhu Muththina Kathae') used Archana as the main player in their films. Archana is currently acting in two Telugu films. 'Matti Manushalu' directed B. Narasing Rao and 'Chakkra Vyuham' by Balu Mahendra.

How does she understand the character she is asked to play, we asked, 'one should be able to grasp and comprehend the emotions, sentiments and personality of the character, no sooner the director mentions the role of the character', she replies and that is what she does she adds.

'Good acting, can however come about only in a good film and cannot independently function', she explains.

Archana is realistic in that she does not want to confine herself to only acting in films where creativity is the main concern. Being an artiste who has made acting her career, she wants to live by acting. Therefore, she says she has to act in commercial films too. Again not all 'masala' films, but selective. For instance, she is starting as a glamour and 'Oomp girl' in a Telugu movie called 'Chakkara Vyuham' by Balu Mahendra. This film is yet to be completed. This columnist saw a 'rush' of a dancing scene. Something like a cabaret number, where the usual unglamorous Archana is giving swirling her hips to a western orchestration.

Expressing deep gratitude and an admiration for Balu Mahendra for discovering and using her talents, Archana does not hesitate to say that 'should like to act in films made by others too, but it is easier to interpret a character in Balu's films than with others who do not care to give the freedom for the artiste to show a little more dimension than otherwise told to do so'.

She considers Shabana Azmi, the late Smitha Patel, Nazrudhin Shah and Om Puri and Kamala Hasan as sensitive film artistes in India today. In the largely commercial cinema world of Kodambakkam, a few seriously interested film people are gradually emerging. Among the new generation of actresses, Archana is head and shoulders above her contemporaries, because she is also a disciplined, sensitive artiste under the right guardianship and direction.

## **B. Mani Rathnam and Sinhala youth audiences**

*(Gleanings column - The Island - August 1, 1990)*

In a significant that despite occasional outbursts against what we call 'South Indian trashes', generations of Sri Lankans, Sinhalese not excluded, have appreciated the songs, action and antics of Tamilnadu film people. Ever since 'Chinthamani' (40s) with M.K. Thiyagarajah Bagavathar and Aswathama, 'Chandraleka' (50s) with Ranjan, M.K.Radha and T.R.Rajkumari and films by MGR, and others, south Indian films had gone well with at least some sections of the sinhalese community. They were not just yet influenced by strong nationalistic feelings. But what is phenomenal now is that among the enlightened cine audiences in this country at present are few of my friends who know exclusively Sinhala. They know a little English but not Tamil at all. Such friends admire Kamala Hasan, the actor and the new film director, Mani Rathnam.

Mani Rathnam, incidentally is a brother of G. Venkateswaran (popularly known as 'GV') who is one of the key distributors of films in the south (India) and a high-ranking official in the film business. Mani Rathnam is married to film actress Suhasini. The latter is a niece of actor Kamala Hasan, and daughter of another actor Saru Hasan. Suhasini studied cinematography in the Film Institute in Madras, but was made use of as an actress. She was good in acting too. (Her role in 'Palaivana Cholai' and 'Sindhu Bhairavi' were laudable). Recently she presented a 13 episode serial on Madras 'Doordharshan', TV Films entitled Penn (Woman), where in each episode a story by a wellknown writer on the theme of women's point of view was dramatised. She herself acted in the last episode, which



this columnist watched while he was in Madras recently. Suhasini proved a better film director than her husband. But that is another matter.

Mani Rathnam, as a film director is marvelously slick and contemporary. His 'Mowna Ragam', 'Agni Nakshatram' and 'Nayakan' have attracted many filmgoers, who did not much care for Tamil films. This columnist noticed that even in such places like Bombay and New Delhi, Kamala Hasan and Mani Rathnam are being received well, particularly after their Hindi versions were presented.

Here is a brief note on the profile of Mani Rathnam.

Unlike Balu Mahendra, Hari Haran and Ashok Kumar, just to mention a few names of the products of the Pune TV & Film Institute, Mani Rathnam had no formal training in film direction.

His maiden film venture was 'Pallavi Anu Pallavi', a Kannada film made in 1982. Ace cinematographer and avant grade Tamil film director Balu Mahendra handled the photography for this film. It won the Karnataka state award for the best screenplay. He followed it up with a Malayalam film called 'Unaru'. This is reported to have been a failure. But his 'Mowna Ragam' with new generation players like Revathi, Mohan and Karthik, in Tamil, Mani Rathnam made a mark. This film was shown in the Indian Panorama in 1986. So people who matter saw this film there. He made an impact. My colleagues in the 'Divayina', and 'Navaliya' had seen this film and were all agog in knowing about Mani Rathnam. The film in colour and excellent photography with tight editing was a film about the gradual awakening of understanding between a newly married couple. The girl herself was an outsider from the orthodox Brahmin conservative surrounding.

## Newcomers

His next film 'Agni Nakshatram' had newcomers like Amala (daughter of an Irishwoman and a Tamilian father), Nirosha (daughter of a Sinhalese mother and a Tamilian father), Pirabhu (son of the famous Sivaji Ganeshan) and Karthik (son of a character actor in Tamil films, the late Muthuraman). Extremely tight in execution, playfully romantic and musically swinging (Ilayarajah), this film had some traces of the 'West Side Story', but it pulled through engrossingly because it had an element of suspense, expose of the corrupt political system and the peculiar embarrassing episode of bigamy.

However, it was 'Nayakan' that made Mani Rathnam a filmmaker to look up to. Some people even criticised the film as saying that it was a copy of 'God Father II'. But it is not. It was a film about a slumlord of the underworld of Bombay. His rise and fall. It was based on the real life story of Varadaraja Mudaliar, who was charged with crime and imprisoned. Kamala Hasan, in the lead role was marvellous. His role in a similar film called 'Sathiya' and his acting in films like 'Pushpak Vimana' (made in Tamil as Pesium Padam) and Apporva Sahodararhal prove that he is one of the finest Tamil actors in India. He acts in Hindi, Telugu and Malayalam films too. His acting is Chaplinesque says Ben Dodampegama, a well known Sinhala film critic. Some others say that he combines the acting of Marlon Brando, Robert de Niro and Sivaji Ganeshan.

Mani Rathnam has in Kamala Hasan, an understanding actor to help his middle cinema make its way, Mani is a commerce graduate of the University of Madras and possesses a master's degree from Bombay Bajaj Institute in Accountancy Management. He gave up his professional career to become a film director. He is on his way to success.

### **C. Tamil telefilm transforms tableaux**

*(Gleanings Column - The Island - October 17, 1990)*

With the inception of the state television Rupavahini in the early eighties, a popular vehicle for communication through drama was conceived and telecast - thus the birth of what is commonly referred to as Teledramas.

Instead of calling it telefilm or teleplay, the synopsis writers in English called this kind of dramatic entertainment 'teledrama', probably because they thought that a photographed stage or radio play is really what a play for the television is. And invariably all the players came from the radio and stage media to appear before the television cameras.

However, already established filmmakers like D.B.Nihalasinha, Thissa Abeysekera, Vasantha Obeysekera, Dharmasena Pathirajah et al made an attempt to make their TV productions close to the cinema. Although Parakrama Niriella was basically a dramatist, he understood the film medium as well. Hence, his 'Yasorawaya' appealed as a telefilm.

P.Wikneswaran, who has produced more than 500 programmes for the Rupavahini has directed more than 35 plays and presented photographed Tamil stage plays numbering over 15 for the TV, besides producing a number of radio plays for the Tamil service of the SLBC.

#### **Rupavahini's First Teleplay**

In fact the first ever telefilm (in any language) made for the Rupavahini was by P. Wikneswaran. He is presently the assistant director in charge of the Tamil programmes over the state TV. This film was called 'Katpanaikal Kalayavillai'

(Imagination - not disturbed). Its story was from a radio play by Jeyamohan and was first telecast on June 27, 1982. Prior to that however was a studio production of a stage play called 'Kannadi Varpuhal' (The Glass menagerie-Tennessee William's play) directed by K. Balendra. This was shot in December 1981 and telecast on March 18, 1982.

In was only after Wikneswaran's effort did the late Dhamma Jagoda show on TV the stage play 'Parasse' on October 19, 1982. And the first Sinhala teledrama, telecast on December 7, 1982 was Lucien Bulathsinhala's 'Somage Sihinaya'. This was followed by the Sinhala serial teledramas beginning with the popular 'Dimithu Muth' by D.B Nihalsinha.

Among the well received productions by Wikneswaran were 'Nijangalin Dharisanangal' (Visions of reality). This was telecast in 1983. Wikneswaran wrote the script and Shanthy Satchithanandan, architect and author in Tamil of a book on women's liberation played the main role. She was among the best performers selected by a jury for the Wijaya-Rupavahini Awards.

Wikneswaran's telefilm called 'Uthayathil Asthamanam' (The setting of the sun as it rises) based on a script by Indumakesh was shot in the north when everything was conducive. This was telecast in 1984. Currently, his neo-realistic production of hill country life, called 'Malayoram Veesum Katru' (The wind blowing by the mountainous range), based on a story by K. Govindrajah is being shown on Rupavahini on Mondays at 7.00 p.m.. This is the second serial Tamil telefilm to be shown over Rupavahini. The other called 'Kaalangal' (Times) by Matala Karthigesu was also on the lifestyles of the hill country people.

### **Current Tamil Serial**

Shot entirely on location in the hill country, 'Malayoram Veesum Katru' depicts the lives of the estate people in naturalistic terms', but certainly with an undertone of realism. The class distinction and status consciousness among the plantation workers are clearly brought out in this film.

Some authentic performances by Rajapandiyan and Thanaratnam in particular add dramatic element in this telefilm. Newcomers Chandrakanthan (son of Tamil stage and radio theatre people Shanmugam and Rajeswari) and Angela George too are convincing. Besides them there are experienced Ramadas, Frank Pushpanayagam, Manimekalai, Selvam Fernando and others who contribute to the effectiveness of the attempt that had been under severe constraints. Piyal Ranjit and Rohana Samaraweera handle the camera. Music is by Mohan-Rangan who excel in electronic compositions.

P. Wikneswaran is the only TV award winning director among the Tamils in this country. In a competition held by the National State Film Corporation in 1981, his 'Gramathin Ithayam' (Heart of the Village) was considered the best film script and awarded a prize. It was not a shooting script of a film but a scenario.

This script has now been published with marginal instructions to help shooting it as a film. It can also be used to make a telefilm. Even as a piece of writing, Vikneswaran's effort is marvelously good. His dialogues employing the Jaffna dialect, his treatment of love relations between a low-caste boy and a high-caste girl, his insight and expose of the psyche of self interested trade unionists, the portrayal of even minor characters realistically, and the idea of division

of labour without any social stigma, are all progressive and relevant. This book priced at Rs.100/= is very useful to future telefilm writers as it serves as a guide as well. It was officially released on September 9, in the presence of Tamil newspaper editors, media people and the state minister P.P.Devaraj.

### **Career**

Starting his professional career with the SLBC as an operational assistant (meaning a disc spinner in the cubicles of the studios and recordist of programmes) Vikneswaran graduated to production of dramas, announcing and news reading.

In his scholarstic days, he had been a sportsman, actor and lover of the arts. Hailing from a family of music and arts enthusiasts, Vikneswaran had the knack of doing something worthwhile and with freshness.

An unassuming but with an inclination to voice moral indignation, he had always showed the willingness to learn from all concerned on matters of interest to him. He is particularly interested in film and drama and had written a few short stories.

Vikneswaran has a sense of the cinematic medium and hence he is capable of showing the distinction between a stage radio drama and a teleplay telefilm meant for the small screen.

### **Training Abroad**

The authorities should know that there aren't enough trained people among the Tamilians here to undertake excellent TV productions. There aren't sponsors to finance productions which are very expensive. The allocation of

time for Tamil programmes on Rupavahini is limited. There is hardly any specific logistic support like technicians, producers for Tamil programmes. Whereas the actors, directors, script writers and other technicians who produce the appreciable Sinhala teledramas are all experienced and some of them foreign trained, the Tamilians who do all these things are hardly trained people. Tamil drama itself is very weak. Although the folk tradition is flourishing, the naturalistic theatre is generally weak not only here, but even in Tamilnadu. This is why Tamil teledramas had not shown any standards except those produced by Vikneswaran. Therefore within the limitations placed, he had shown remarkable sensitivity to the medium. If opportunities and financial backing is given, he can produce equally good telefilms. It is heartening to hear that Vikneswarn has now been selected to go for some training in west Germany.

Meanwhile, why not send people both within and outside Rupavahini for some training at least at Asia's best training institute at Pune or even at Adayar in Madras, so that a clear understanding of the medium and its needs are fulfilled. Over to you, State Minister P.P. Devaraj.

#### **D. International Film Festival of India 1991.**

*(A report from Chennai - The Island - 1991)*

The ten day International Film Festival of India for 1991 concluded in Madras on Sunday with the screening of maestro Satyajit Ray's latest film in Bengali 'Shaakha Proshakhaa'. A total of 51 films in the cinema of the world section were shown. Most of these films had been screened at one or the other prestigious film festivals around the world.

The inaugural film, 'The last Butterfly' and Claude

Chabrol's film 'Dr. M.' were shown for the first time in a festival. The British playwright Tom Stoppard has made his own film version of his well-known play 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead'. This film yet to be released on the global commercial circuit. So is the French package of very interesting films.

Apart from the latest film festival winners from all over the world, the panorama of the latest Indian films in various regional languages, South Korean films, David Lean's films, a retrospective of early Tamil films to mark 60 years of Tamil cinema, totalling 151 films had been shown in the film festival organised by the directorate of the IFFI. Director Deepak Sandhu, the co-director-Malathi Sahay and the deputy director Sunit Tandon and a number of other officials from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the National Film Development Corporation, the Tamil Nadu Government - all directed the festival to a successful conclusion although some misgivings had been expressed from some quarters.

Deepak Sandhu told that if the festival lacked much excitement, it could perhaps be attributed to the fact it was non-competitive.

The commercial screenings of international films was encouraging she said.

The National Films Development Corporation organised a film market to coincide with the international film festival.

There were about 13 international film festival directors and quite a number of notable Indian filmmakers, critics, Indian and international, were present at the festival.

Half a dozen film people from Sri Lanka were also seen around. They included Anoja Weerasinghe, who was



popular with the foreign delegates especially, Parakrama Niriella, whose film 'Siri Medura' was shown at the festival, Bandula Gunawardena, State Film Corporation Director Sangadasa, film directors Arjuna, Dharmasiri Gamage, Amaranath Jayatilaka, journalists Ashley, Padmakumara, B.C.Perera and financier Buddhi.

## **E. World Cinema in Chennai**

*(Culture Page - The Island - February 13, 1991)*

A feast of award - winning foreign films numbering more than sixty was the highlight of the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) held in Tamilandu capital Madras in January.

These films were featured under the 'Cinema of the World' category. These 'Classic' films were screened in the Madras University Centenary Hall between January, 10<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>.

Among the films I had seen, a few deserve notice in this column for the benefit of our readers.

Let's view them in alphabetical order.

### **Australian**

John Power is an important Australian filmmaker. His films include Billy and Percy (1972), The Picture show Man (1977) and A Single Life (1985). His new film 'Father' was made in 1990. It is a powerful drama concerning a former Nazi army man. I think that the case of a Nazi point of view (even though it is not palatable) is presented in an English language film for the first time. In that sense there is semblance of balance in the treatment of the story. A notable

feature in the film is the playing of the role of the daughter of the Nazi man (who is torn between her love for her father and terrible doubts about his past), by an English woman novelist, Carol Drinkwater. She was present at the IFFI and held a press conference. One of her recent novels is 'An Abundance of Rain' (Penguin Paper-back). She has a 20 year acting career to her credit and learnt the art of acting at the Drama Centre in London. She is presently writing a novel depicting the post 1986 Fijian coup situation, focussing on the dilemma that has since been existing between Fijians and Fijians of Indian origin.

The other Australian film I saw was 'The Golden Braid' made by Paul Cox last year. I must admit that I didn't like this film at all. It is all about fetishism. Paul Cox, as most of our readers would know, is a Dutch who lives in Australia. Essentially a photographer, Paul Cox is better known for his film 'Island' (1989) in which our very talented actress Anoja Weerasinghe had acted. Incidentally Anoja is billed to act in 'Homecoming' which Paul Cox will be making next.

Paul Cox has made 'The Journey' (1972), 'Illuminations' (1976), 'Kostas' (1978), 'Man of flowers' (1983), 'My First Wife' (1984), 'Vincent' (1987) and 'Island' (1989).

A Latin American film from Columbia caught my fancy. It is a typical Third World film, made by Victor Javiria. This is his first feature film and it's called 'Roderigo D. No Future'. It shows the bleak and precarious existence of working class youth on the streets of Medellin. The music by German Arrieta is funtional.

One of the charming films I saw at the IFFI was 'Cross My heart' (1990) made by Jacques Fansten. This French director had worked as an assistant director to Claude Chabrol, the famous French filmmaker. Fansten has written

a book on Michael Simon and made a number of successful telefilms.

I would call 'Cross My heart' a superb children's film and at the same time a noteworthy adult film. A moving story is told with fun and empathy. The film is a superb portrayal of the mind of children, who face confrontations in their own terms and even execute solutions to problems more effectively than the adults.

Also from France was another film called 'Cyrano de Bergerac' made in 1989 by Jean - Paul Rappeneau. This director was earlier a successful screen writer. The films he has directed include 'La Vie de Chateau, Les Maries de l'an II, Le Sauvage and Tout Feu, Tout - Flamme.

### **Poetic**

I enjoyed the film 'Cyrano de Bergerac' primarily because of the poetic exuberance in the dialogue French is indeed a language of poetry. Even in English subtitles, the rendition comes out well keeping me elevated into a state of heightened intoxication.

But what is the film about? Here is what an introduction says:

'The film is based on Rostand's classic play on the heroic 17th century swordsman poet whose oversized nose made him into a caricature that hid the complex and devastatingly tragic predicament of the man behind the face. Unable to physically appear in front of the woman he loves, he attempts to win her heart by his poetry which is presented by another man, with inevitable tragic results...'

"My Fathers' Glory" (1990) by Yves Robert was also an enjoyable film focussing on a child, who discovers the wonders of nature in the country side.

## Critic

Film critic, screen writer turned director Jean Charles Tacchella made the film 'Dames Galantes' in 1990. This film is set amidst the 16th century religious wars. A man's love interest with courtly women are shown in the film which I didn't like much.

'Tacchella founded an avant-grade cinema club which became the cradle of the New Wave', we are told.

From Italy came 'Moments of Love' by Gianpanco Mingozzi, who was an assistant to Frederico Fellini the internationally known filmmaker. This film made in 1989 was amusing and entertaining. It is a fusion of fantasy and reality combined in terms of lust, love and good relationship. Philip Noiret, well-known French actor plays the role of a dreamer.

## New Zealand

For the first time ever I saw a film from New Zealand. It was called 'An Angel at My Table' made by Nane Campion in 1990. Her earlier films were Peel (1982), A Girl's Own Story (1983), After Hours (1984), Two friends (1986) and Sweetie (1989).

This film was a cinematic adaptation of the three part autobiography of New Zealand's distinguished author Janet France. The actress who played the role of the New Zealand authoress, Kerry Fox was in Madraas. She held a press conference. This is her first full-length feature film.

A Portuguese film made in 1989 by Manoel de Oliveira was uninspiring except for the musical score by Alejandro Masso. The portuguese colonial war plus the epic story of Portugal is shown in 'Non or the Vain Glory of Command'.

South Korean director Shin Seung Soo's 'The Rooster' (1990) was one film I enjoyed. A brief comment on the film appeared in our last week edition of the 'Culture' page. Among Soo's other films were Moon Hunter (1989), Holy Night (1987) and Red Actress (1989).

### **Erotic**

One of the funniest, erotic and heartwarming films was 'Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down' (1989) by Pedro Almodovar from Spain.

The director is a prolific author and a journalist.

This film won the award at the Berlin film festival and Victoria Abrie and Antonio Banderas are lovingly real in their enactment of hate and love.

### **Lankan Entry**

Also shown in the World Cinema was our own 'Siri Medura' (1989) by Parakrama Niriella. 'He was an active member of the first organised Street Theatre Group in Sri Lanka. His first play Chekkuva won 7 major awards in 1976 at the State Drama Festival. He has produced two major TV films and two single - episode telefilms, one of which Kadaima (The Boundary) won Transitel prize at the Prize Future International TV festival in Berlin 1987. In 1981 he made a short film. The First and the Last Siri Medura (The Mansion) is his first feature film.

'Siri Medura' produced by Bandula Guanwardena won an award at the Festival of Three Continents, Nantes. Sri Lanka's Versatile but hardly noticed by the film journalists actress Anoja Weerasinghe plays the leading role in the film.

Anoja, Parakrama and Bandula held a press conference in Madras. Please see last week's piece on IFFI, for what

the Lankan trio told the press, I was happy to be with them at the 'Trident', Madras, along with Ranjit Kumara of the Lake House. Besides four of us who received hospitality by the directorate of IFFI, there were Dharmasiri Gamage and his wife, Amaranath Jayatilake, Ashley Ratnavibushana, Padma Kumara, Amarasena, Baddhi, Sangadasa and his wife, Nadeeka, Arjuna and his family B.C. Perera A. Ajantha Ranasinghe. All Sri Lankans enjoyed their stay in Madras.

### **Switzerland**

A film from Switzerland was 'Angels' (1990) by Jacob Berger, who has made *America* (1983), *A name for Har Desire* and *Primtemps Chinocs*. This again involves children. One among them is the leader of a group of urchins in Barcelona. He controls the love affair between a black prostitute and a white man whose mother was an American poetess. I didn't much like the film because thematically it was nothing new. We have seen and read about people falling in love with prostitutes and they in turn really falling in 'love'.

### **Indian in U.S.**

'Salaam Bombay' (1987) was a documentary made by Bany Alexander Brown. His first feature film is 'Lonely in America' (1990). This film was interesting because it involved Indians in the USA. The players in the film were Ranjit Chowdly, Adelaide Miller, Triloh Malik and Robert Kesler.

This film presents the problem of immigrants in America. They face mental conflict. Producers of the film Trilok Malik, and Phil Katziman held a press conference in Madras.

When asked that 'Lonely in America' looks like an Indian film in English and appears to be a straight lift from a Hindi movie, Malik replied that it could happen in the life of any young man. It is just like a villager going to a big city.

Another interesting film I saw was one made in Yugoslavia in 1989 by Ademir Kenovic. The director majored in English language and literature from the Philology faculty of Sarajevo University in 1974. Kuduz is his first feature film.

This is a story of love and tragedy, and altering human relationship is convincingly brought out in the film. The female player Snegana Bogdamovic is stunningly beautiful.

### **Satyajit Ray's**

Finally, the closing film in the 'World Cinema' category was the Bengali film 'Branches of the tree' by one of the greatest film directors of the world, Satyajit Ray. This film the latest by Ray was made in 1990. This film the latest by Ray was made in 1990. This is a film that deserves greater notice and comments, but due to exigencies of space I wish to merely say that it is perhaps one of the best contemporary films ever made, depicting the inner layers that are enmeshed in the facade of the bourgeoisie lifestyle of Asians in big cities. The direction, acting, photography, music, editing and the message are all contributing to satisfying elan.

When this we wrap up notes on the 'Cinema of the World' category at the IFFI. Next week let's have a look at the Indian Panorama.

**F. The 22<sup>nd</sup> IFFI - Familiarisig facets of life through films** (*Culture Page - The Island - February 6, 1991*)

The inaugural function of the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Film Festival of India (IFFI) was held at the Madras University Centenary Hall on January, 10.

The Tamilnadu former Chief Minister Dr. Muthuvelu Karunanidhi (A Tamil film script writer whose 'Manthri Kumari', 'Parasakthi', 'Manohara' etc. rekindled the love of Tamil language with their sociological approach to even historical romances in an alliterative language) was the chief guest.

One of the notable Hindi film actresses, who hails from Tamilnadu, Hema Malini assisted him in lighting of the lamp ceremony.

Suhasini, well-known Tamil, telugu and Malayalam film actress (she is also the wife of Mani Ratnam) compered the inaugural function in English and Tamil. Suhasini is a graduate of the Adayar Film Institute in cinematography, but excelled in acting in such Tamil films as 'Palaivana Cholai', 'Sindhu Bhairavi', 'Nenjathai Killathe' etc. Recently she produced a high quality telefilm series for 'Doordharshan' entitled 'Penn' (woman) featuring the woman as a centre, adapting from short stories written by contemporary Tamil writers on feminist themes.

Suhasini's husband Mani Ratnam is the brother of G.Venkateswaran, who is an influential producer of Tamil films and a key personality in the distribution market. Mani Ratnam's film 'Anjali' was shown in the 'Indian Panorama' section of the IFFI. But this correspondent felt that contrary to expectations it was a loud, gaudy, sentimental and melodramatic film. But his other films like 'Nayakan',



'Mouna Ragam', 'Agni Nakshatram', 'Geethanjali' were slick presentations.

A total of 151 films from 40 countries participated in this festival. Many of these films had already won international acclaim and awards at other festivals.

This festival was non competitive. They were classified under the following sections: cinema of the world, focus on South Korea, Indian Panorama (Best Regional films), retrospective of early Tamil films, homage to five film makers - V. Shantaram, Shankar Nag, Arundhati Devi, Manohan Krishna and S. Mukerji, a retrospective of early David Lean's films, the film market, tribute to Robert Altman, Ion Kwon-Tack retrospective and film marketing.

The Indian Panorama was inaugurated on January 11 with Lankan - born Balu Mahendra's 'Sandhya Raagam' (Evening Melody). The Union Minister of State for information and Broadcasting. Mr. Subhodh Kant Sahey was the chief guest at this function.

A number of foreign delegates among the 2500 invitees including Sri Lankan personalities were provided hospitality at the five-star hotel 'Trident', 18 kilo metres away from the venue.

The films were shown at the Madras University Centenary Hall, (world cinema, press conferences and forums were also held at this venue). Kalaivanar Arangam (a theatre built in the memory of the late Tamil comedian and social reformer N.S.Krishnan), Devi theatre complex and other theatres.

This correspondent concentrated on viewing the regional Indian cinema. As such some very good foreign films were missed. A number of films were shown

simultaneously. Among the well-received foreign films but missed by us were Ryszard Bugajski's film 'Interrogation' (Poland), Bernardo Bertolucci's 'The Sheltering Sky' (UK/Italy), Felix de Rooy's 'Ava and Gabriel' (Netherlands).

### Early Films

The following early Tamil films were shown. Avvaiyar (S.S. Vasan), Chandralekha (S.S.Vasan), Velaikkari (A.S.A. Samy), Malaikallan (S.M.Subbiah Naidu), Thillana Mohanambal (A.P. Nagarajan), Manomani (T.R.Sunderam), Meera (Ellis R.Duncan), Konchum Salangai (M.V.Raman-father of Vijayanthimala who stars in this film), Ealai Padum Padu (Javar Seetharaman), Maya Bazaar (Chakrapani), Kannagi (Jupiter Somu), Kathalikka Neramillai (C.V. Sridhar), Marma Yogi (K.Ramanath), Paasa Malar (A. Bhim Singh), Iru Koadugal (K. Balachchandar), Mangamma Sabatham (S.S.Vasan - Vyjayanthi Mala's mother Vasuntaradevi and Ranjan act in this film), Andha Naal (Veena Maestro S. Balachchandar directed this film), Karnan (B.R.Pantulu) and Sampoorana Ramayanan (A.P. Nagarajan).

The Platinum (60 years) jubilee of the Tamil cinema coincided with the IFFI. Randor Guy (his real name is Rangadurai) brought out a short history of the Tamil cinema in English.

### Foreign Films

Most of the foreign films were anti-war films - the horrors of war and aftermath. Marital relationship and sexual themes were common. The South Korean films depicted sex just as in western films.

India continues to be the most prolific filmmaking country in the world. Last year the country produced 940 feature films, despite tough competition from TV and video. However, it is revealed that a body of film literature about its national cinema has not been adequately built.

A seminar on Indian film literature was organised on January 17. The Director of the National Film Archive Mr.B.K.Nair conducted the forum with S. Krishnasamy author of 'Indian Cinema', brother of famous dancer and authority on Bharatha natyam Padma Subramanian and son of famous film director of yesteryear K.Subramanyam.

Others included Randor Guy and our Dr. Wimal Dissanayake.

Parakama Niriella's 'Siri Medura' was shown in the world cinema section, MEP parliamentarian Bandula Gunawardena, who produced this film, Anoja Weerasinghe and Parakrama Niriella held a press conference on Jan. 16 at the media centre.

## Answers

Answering questions mainly from the Indian journalists they said that in Sri Lanka, what they described as 'Oneman' censorship was deploring and that the National Film Corporation was not functioning properly in promoting film industry in Sri Lanka. They also said that in Sri Lanka the star system does not operate and that the Film audiences are literate and appreciate good films.

Anoja Weerasinghe said that the ratio of good films produced in Sri Lanka is 2:10. She also announced that she is billed to act in another English film titled 'Homecoming' directed by Paul Fox in whose film 'Island', Anoja has acted. She is an actress trained in drama and theatre in UK.

Parakrama Niriella said that explicit sex films and horror films are not produced in Sri Lanka. He is now involved in directing his second film, also produced by Bandula Gunawardena.

## Background

It was observed that sufficient background briefing and publicity material on the Sri Lankan entry 'Siri Medura' had not been provided by the appropriate institutions in Colombo. Film Corporation Director Mr. Sanghadasa was in Madras during the festival.

The deputy high commissioner for Sri Lanka in Madras, Mr.V.K.Valsan and his wife hosted a dinner at Taj Hotel on Jan. 17 to meet Sri Lankan and other film personalities. Sri Lanka connected south Indian film stars Radhika and Nirosha and almost all the people who went to Madras during the festival faithfully attended this function. A notable absentee was Arjuna (a Lankan film director, now settled in Madras.)

At the 22nd International Film Festival of India held in Madras number of foreign films were shown.

They were from Algeria/France, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Czechoslovakia, Czechoslovakia/France, U.K, Denmark, France, France/Canada/ Italy, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Italy/ UK, Japan/ Canada, Malayasia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Switzerland/France, Syria, Turkey, UK, UK/Argentina, USA/France, USSR, Venezuela/France, Yugoslavia and Zimbabwe.

Most of the directors of these films were new. Among the well known names were Paul Fox (Australia), Luc

Besson (France), Claude Chabrol (he produced 'Dr.M' from Germany, Bernardo Berolucci (Italy), Andrzej Wajda (Poland). Karel Reize (UK), Oliver Stone (USA), Alan Partner (USA), Woody Allen (USA), and Tom Stoppard (UK).

At this festival a retrospective of South Korean filmmaker Im Kwon-Tack was also held, beside the focus on 11 other South Korean films by other filmmakers.

I saw only two South Korean films. They were very interesting in that they were both Asiatic in treating intimate bonds in Asian lifestyle and western in exhibiting uninhibited physical relationship. Technically they were contemporary.

The films I saw were Shin Seung Soo's 'the Rooster' and Bae Yong Kyun's 'Why had bodhi Dharma left for the East?'

We learn that the director of 'The Rooster' had made an award - winning film in 1985 titled 'Dream of the Wrestler'. Among his other films are 'Moon Hunder' (1986) Holy Night (1987) and Red Actress (1989). 'The Rooster' is a story of a middle -a get married man's relationship with a young girl. What he cannot enjoy at home, he experiences it with this girl, who earn additional income working in a massage clinic. At surface level the story might suggest Lewdness the human relationship in intimate terms is well brought out in this film.

Even the other film about an unconventional Buddhist monk's past present and futuristic experiences were pictorially convincing.

Among the early David Lean films were Blithe Spirit, Brief Encounter, Great Expectations and Oliver Twist. Three films by Robert Altman - A Wedding, A Perfect Couple Vincent, and Theo - were also shown at the Madras festival.

In homage to five Indian film-makers, films made by V. Shantaram, S. Mukerjee, Arundhati Devi, Manmohan Krishna and Shankar Nag were screened. I enjoyed Arundhati Devi's 'A Vacation', This was a Bengali film made in 1967 in black and white. The film tells the story of a girl who enjoys a brief moment of happiness with a young man before she dies of leucaemia. Except for her brief encounter with this man, her life had generally been morbid and lonely.

Two Kannada films featuring Shankar Nag were totally absorbing. He was a superb actor who died last year. 'Accident' was a film which he himself directed. The other film was 'Once Upon a Time' directed by Girish Karnard.

'Accident' tells the story of an investigative reporter and his confrontation with powers that be and their offspring. It is an exposure of the corruption, crime and cover-ups. Shankar Naag plays the role of the journalist and directs the film.

The other film was scripted and directed by Girish Karnard (of 'Utsav' fame, Rekha starring film). This is a story of medieval Karnataka. Shankar Nag plays the role of a mercenary warrior convincingly.

In the 'Cinema of the World' category, I saw the following films: John Power's Father (Australia), Paul Cox's; The Golden Braid (Australia), Victor Gaviniás Roderigo Dr. - No Future (Columbia), Jacques Fansten's Cross My Heart (France), Jean Paul Rappeneam's Cyrano de Bergerace (France), Jean-Charles Techellas James Galantes (France), Gianfranco Mingozzi's Moments of Love (Italy), Jane Campion's An Angel at my Table (New Zealand), Manoel De Oliveira's No. nor the Vain Glory Command (Portugal), Pedro Almodovarus, Tie Me up, Tie Me Down (Spain), Jacob Berger's Angels (Switzerland), Alan Parker's

come See The Paradise, Barry Alexander Bravus Conoly in America (USA) Admiral Kenovics Kuduz (Yugoslavia).

## G. Hindi Films come of Age

(*Culture Page - The Island - February 20, 1991*)

The best of recent Indian films were shown last month at the 22nd International Film Festival of India held in Madras. Among the screenings 19 films coming under the Indian Panorama section 12 falling into the mainstream category, 10 in the retrospective section and 12 in the non-feature genre were shown at the festival.

The feature films were in Hindi (8), Bengali (1), Malayalam (4), Kannada (1), Telugu (1), Tamil (2), Manipuri (1) and Kabri (1), languages.

Short notes on Satyajit Ray's Bengali film 'Shakha-Proshaka (Branches of a Tree) and Mani Ratnam's 'Anjali' were published in our reports in the previous weeks.

The following films were shown in the mainstream section : Dil (Hindi-Inder Kumar), Ghayal (Hindi-Rajkumar Santoshi), Ek Apak Sa Ek (Marathi-Sachin), Dhadakebaaj (Marathi - Mahesh Kothari), by Abadhan (Bengali-Dilip Mukerji), Kari Dije Kinlam (Bengali - Biresch Chatterji) Puthu Vasnatham (Tamil - Vikraman), His Highness Abdullah (Malayalam - Sibi Malayil), Karthavayam (Telugu - Mohan Gandhi), K. Mithina Hare (Kannada-S.V. Rajendra Singh Babu). Of these films I saw only 'Dil', I liked it. Madhuri Dixit and Handsom Khan are lovable pairs.

Among the non-feature films. I saw were 'Figures of Thought' (Arun Khopakar), Kutty Japanin Kulanthaigal (Chalan Bennurkar), 'Una Mitran Di Yad Pyraai (Anand

Patawardhan), 'Man Tais of Assam' (Charu Kamal Hazarika) and 'Ustad Amzad Ali Khan' (Gutzar) and 'Aar Koto Din' (Sashi Anand). They were all excellent.

Here are brief comments on the films I was able to see in the Indian panorama section:

Sukumaran Nair's Malayalam film ('Aparahum') (The late Afternoon) is a film, I didn't much like, because it had no clear cut direction and the person who played the character role of a dreamer was unwarrantably immobile and flat. It is a story of a misdirected youth who is only a dreamer.

'Disha' (The up-rooted Ones) is a Hindi film by Sai Paranjpye. It is an enjoyable film full of vibrancy, humour and purposeful acting. Some of the best players in the Hindi Screen - Om Puri, Nana Patekar, Shabana Azmi and others act in the film. Rajshree Sawant, an actress on Marathi stage appears in this film convincingly. I had occasions to speak with Sai Parangpye (One of India's notable female directors) and Rajshree at the hotel we stayed in. The directress had spent her early childhood in Australia. Her father is a Russian and the mother a Maharashtran. The photography by Madhu Ambat is remarkable. It is a film about the people who keep flooding into the 'City of no return', which is Bombay.

Another aesthetically satisfying Hindi film is 'Dristi' by Govind Nihalani. The film explores significant moments in the life of a modern, urban elite couple. The eleven sequences 'are bridged through visual montages supported by Kishori Amonbaisragas'. Beautiful Dimple Kapadia, Sensuous Mita Vasishth, expressive Shekhar Kapoor and others play difficult roles admirably. Unusually long (171 minutes) but still dramatically engrossing this was one of the unforgettable films I had seen in the festival. Govind



Nihalani's first feature films. 'Aakrosh' won the Golden Peacock at the International Film Festival in 1981. Govind and Mita were in the hotel with us and I enjoyed conversing with them.

The Manipuri language film 'Ishanou' (The Chosen One) by Aribam Syam Sharma is an interesting film which includes folk music and dance. It's about estrangement in a family and the wife leaving the husband and daughter aside to become a nun.

Kumar Sahani's Hindi film 'Kasba' is a better intelligible film than his other film 'Khyal Gatta', which I saw in Pune last June.

Mita Vasishth is convincing in this film too. It is a story adapted from Chekov and centre around a daughter-in-law who is Promiscuous and gains the upper hand in controlling the family's assets. The villain of early Hindi films Shatrughnan Sinha is also appearing in the film.

I had seen the Kannada film 'Mane' by Girish Kasaravalli last June in Pune. A very modest and sensible person Girish chatted with us on films in general at the hotel.

The players in the film include Naseeruddin Shah (perhaps one of India's Best actors today. Others include Kamala Hasan and Om Puri). Deepthi Naval and Rohini Hattanigadi act in this film. It's not only a family drama between two couples and their relatives, but also a deep study of characterisation, with Mane (Home) as the central point.

'Matti Manushulu' (Men of Clay) is a telugu film by B.Narasimha Rao, whose 'Dasi', I had seen earlier in Pune. Archana (of 'Veedu' and 'Dasi' fame) and Moin Ali Baig act in this film. This film is about workers in a building site. Two working class couples, the other woman-eternal triangle.

The wife with a child is left helpless. She dies a destitute on the streets of the city, leaving her child an orphan.

The conversation I had with Moin Ali Baig was fruitful. He is an actor on English and Telugu stage in Hyderabad.

A boring but cinematically noteworthy Hindi film is *Nazar* (The Gaze) by Mani Kaul. It is an adaptation from a Dostovsky fiction. Mani Kaul is a director who can be understood only after the viewer surrenders himself on herself totally to accept the director as the near God of the celluloid.

The Malayalam film 'Ottavadi Pathaihal' (The narrow footpaths) by C. Raghakrishnan, is an interesting creation. The director has a philosophical interpretation of his film, which is about mercy killing. Revathi ( a hot favourite among many Sinhalese youth cinegoers) Madhu and Kaviyoor Ponnana..act in this film.

Lankan-born Balu Mahendra's Tamil film 'Sandhya Raagam' (the evening Raga) is about old age. Archana, Chokkalinga Bhagavathar and Santhanam play their roles very well.

'Thazhvaram' (The Valley) a Malayalam film by Bharathan features Mohan Lal (a superstar in Malayalam films) with Mamutti. It has four characters to tell the story in a rustic background. Nemesis and humane feelings are the theme.

Another enjoyable Hindi film was one with a long title 'Thodasa Roomani Ho Jayen' (Let there be a wee bit of Romance). It is by Amol Palekar. Aneceta Kanwar (a very talented actress) and Nana Patekar give superb performances in this film which is a musical. It celebrates the triumph of romance and hope over a despair.

Finally, 'Vembanad' (A lake in central Kerala). It is

a Malayalam film by Siraprasad. It is an experimental film combining both reality and fantasy. It is a subtle presentation of the 'Macho' or male chauvinism.

Due to exigencies of space, I have merely given the barest information on the films I had seen at the IFFI in Madras. There were many films I had not seen because invariably good films were shown simultaneously at different places.

Let me conclude my reports on the festival by suggesting that our Ministry of Culture should organise a number of film festivals covering various regions of the world. This columnist also wishes to thank the Indian High Commission in Colombo for extending an invitation to him to attend the film festival.

## H. The Films of Aravindan

*(Impressions on the Passing Scene Column-Sunday Island-April 5, 1992)*

One of the finest film makers in India G. Aravindan died on March 16 last year in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala state of India. A retrospective of his early films and his latest film 'Vastuhara' all made in Malayalam were shown at the IFFI, Bangalore in early January.

Aravindan, a Malayalee, while working for the Rubber Board of Kerala, as an executive used to make cartoons for magazines. The well known Malayalam weekly 'Mathrubhumi' serialised his popular cartoon serial 'the Small Man and the Big World' for 13 years at a stretch. It can be recalled here that Satyajit Ray too was a cartoonist and illustrator at the beginning of his career.

Aravindan made his first film 'Uttarayanam' in 1974. It won him the National Award for the best film on national integration. In 1977, he won the National Award for the best direction for his film 'Kanchana Seetha'. I saw this film in Bangalore, but did not like it very much, because it was uninteresting and amateurish in filming the sequences. But certainly his film 'Chidambaram' (there were dialogues in Tamil too) was a truly artistic film. It was judged the best feature film at the National Awards in 1986.

Aravindan's other films were Thampu (1978), Kummatti (1979), Esthapan (1979), Pokuveyil (1981), Oridathu (1986) Marattam (1989) and Unni (1989). His latest film 'Vastuhara' received a National Award for the best Malayalam film in 1991.

## Mystic

The late Aravindan, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Madras at the 1991 IFFI was interested in painting, cartooning, theatre and music. We learn that he was actively associated with Thiravarung a leading theatre group in Kerala producing plays with emphasis on folk and classical traditions. Aravindan was well versed in Carnatic and Hindustani classical music. His use of Carnatic music using Tamil Thevaram rhythms in films like 'Chidambaram' and 'Vastuhara' can be noted here. Incidentally, Aravindan scored the music for 'Yaro Aval' directed by Pavitran and 'Piravi' directed by Shaji.

Aravindan was honoured with a Padmashri in 1990.

Aravindan was born in Kottyam in Kerala and he graduated in Science. He had a multi-faceted and multi-layered artistic sensibility. Writing of Aravindan, Vasanthi S. Says: 'What Aravindan brought to Malayalam and Indian

cinema during the last two decades is a sensibility of himself - mystique of a human-being involved in capturing oneself and one's environments in tapestry of art'

In appearance too, Aravindan looked a mystic, with a grey long beard and long hair. His countenance full of love but placid at times. His eyes were sparkling with something to communicate. He would not talk much 'I believe in supernatural powers, in the mystical - these phenomena are very real', Aravindan said. Elaborating, he further said 'I can never be an atheist at the same time I cannot believe in a God sitting and supervising all of us from heaven concretely. I believe in the spiritual, the mystical. These phenomena are very real'.

Having been a forest ranger, Aravindan once said: 'I enjoy making movies that are in communion with nature'.

## Silence

V.K.Adhavan Kutty, a Malayalam critic observes that 'Aravindan is known, or even notorious, for conveying his ideas through a certain silence both in life and in cinema. He lived and worked through a process of silent understanding and making the non-receptive, restive'.

This point of silence is underlined by another commentator, Vasanthi S. as follows: 'He captured life in mobility and immobility. He gave a new and vibrant meaning to silence. Silence spoke, speeches froze, images in long shots went on a pilgrimage, camera became an observant seer noticing nuances of crannies in gullies'. She also adds: 'Aravindan is one of the few Indian film makers who retrieved visual in film from morass of verbal discourses and the oppressive vigour of the narrative and placed it in a position of primary importance. In Aravindan's movies, it is

visuals which speak, images in stasis or flow which capture artistic sensibilities of their viewers'.

Incidentally Shaji N. Karun, who visited Colombo in early March was earlier a superb cameraman before directing films. His masterpiece 'Piravi' is a film I have missed seeing. And Shaji is a product of the Poone Film Institute. He has handled the camera for most of Aravindan's films. Shaji N. Karun has won the maximum number of International Awards and National Awards for his film 'Piravi'.

### **Transcends**

Aravindan's latest film 'Vastuhara' (The Dispossessed), made in 1990 is a beautiful film of love transcending petty ethnic prejudices. I enjoyed seeing it and would recommend to everyone who love the human kind. The filmstars, north and south Indian players Mohanlal (a reputed Malayalam actor like Mamuty), Neena Gupta (a well-known Hindi small screen and theatre actress. We met her in Bangalore and had a very interesting conversation). Neena has acted in an Oriyan film 'Adi Minnansa' (A rare solution) featured at the Bangalore Festival, Neelanjana Mitra (an English teacher and Bengali actress) and Padmini (a talented Tamil actress of yesteryear). The music is by Salil Chaudury.

Sunny Joseph bundles the camera with a sense of purpose, relevance, context and artistic sensibility. It is a beautiful film of growing relationship. It is a story of rehabilitation of refugees of race riots, intermarriage and deep affection and love.

Aravindan's 'Chidambaram' starring the late Smitha Patel, one of the few marvellous actresses in the Hindi cinema, is about a Tamil worker and his newly married wife in an estate in Kerala. This is a remarkable film for the

emotions it evokes. The viewer begins to share the tragic experiences of the protagonist and learns to understand human behaviour.

Aravidan together with Gopalakrishnan and Shaji and other young Malayalam film makers has raised the Kerala cinema to be universal rather than regional.

## I. **Indian Films - part of world cinema**

*(Passing Scene Column - The Island - March 29, 1992)*

This column presents today some of the most important happenings in the Indian Cinema, called out from the 'Festival News' edited, designed and produced by DAVP for the directorate of film festivals India dated January 14 and 19, 1992. Since the impact is greatly felt in this country it is better that we acquaint ourselves with the chronological history of the Indian films.

Production of India's first talkie, Alam Ara (1931). Introduction of playback songs in Indian films (1935). Release of Kisan Kanya, India's first colour film produced by Aardeshir M. Irani (1937) Prabhats Sant Tukram wins awards as one of the three best films at the 5th International film festival in venice (1937). Silver Jubilee celebrations of Indian cinema which includes the silent films (1939). Release of India's first feature film in English. 'The Court Dancer' in the US (1941). Death of Dadasaheb Shalke, father of the Indian Cinema (1944). Gemini's Chandralekha sets a new record in box office collections. Sohrab Modi's 'Mrza Ghalib' wins President's Gold Medal for the best feature film (1954). Satyajit Ray's 'Pather Panchali' wins the President's Gold Medal and a coveted prize at the Cannes

International Film Festival as 'the best human documents' (1956). Raj Kapoor's *Jagte Ragho* wins Grand Prix at Kavlory Vary international festival (1956). Tapan Sinha's *Kabuliwela* (Bengali) wins Silver Bear at the Berlin film festival for music (1957). Satyajit Ray's *Aparajito* (Bengali) wins Golden Lion of St. Mark at the Venice Festival (1957).

V. Shantaram's '*Do Ankhen Barahath*' wins President's Gold Medal, a Silver Bear at the Berlin festival, Samuel Goldwyn international film award and the best foreign language film award from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (1958). Nargis Dutt wins the best actress award at Karlovy Vary International film festival for her sterling performances in '*Mother India*', which had also won Oscar nomination (1958). Sagar Sangame (Bengali) wins President's Gold Medal and special award at Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (1959). Satyajit Ray's *Jalshagar* (Bengali) wins silver medal at the Moscow festival (1959)

Satyajit Ray's '*Apur Sansar*' (Bengali) wins the President's Gold Medal. It was also adjudged the best foreign film by the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures (1960). Heera Moti earns special mention at Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (1960). Satyajit Ray's '*Two Daughters*' win the grand prix at the Melbourne film festival and Selznik Golden Laurel Award for international understanding (1960). The film and TV Institute in Pune was set up in 1960.

Dilip Kumar wins Diploma of special honour from the Czechoslovak Academy of Arts, Prague for his role in *Ganga Jamuna*. The film also wins the silver bowl at he Boston Festival (1961). '*Anuradha*' wins the President's gold medal (1961).



S.V.Range Rao wins best actor award for his role in Narthanasala (Telugu) at the Afro Asian film festival (1964), Satyajit Ray wins best Director award for Mahanagar at Berlin film festival (1964). K.A. Abbas Ghekar Aur Sapna wins Presidents Gold Medal and special award at Karlovy Vary (1964). Establishment of National Film Archive of India in Pune (1964).

'Arohi' (Bengali) wins silver medal at Locarno film festival (1965). Satyajit Ray again wins best director award for 'Charulata' at the Berlin film festival (1965). Hamara Ghar wins special jury prize at the festival of children's films Czechoslovakia (1965).

Shakespeare Wata wins awards both at Berlin and Gizon (Spain) film festivals (1965). Waheeda Rahman wins best actress award for her role in Guide at the Chicago film festival (1965). 'Nizam Saikete' (Bengali) wins best acting award at the New Delhi International Film Festival (1965).

Satyajit Ray wins special award of Honour at the Berlin Film Festival for Nayak (1966). Prithviraj Kapoor wins special award for 'Aasman Mahal' at Karlovy Vary (1965). Chemmeen (Malayalam) wins President's Gold Medal (1965) Sunil Dutt's 'Yadeen' wins Grand Prize at Asian Film Festival Frankfurt (1967). Dhak Ghar wins golden plaque at the Chicago film festival (1967).

Hatey Bazare (Bengali) wins silver trophy at Phom Penh Festival (1968). 'Gopi Gyre Bagha Byre' wins silver award for best direction at Adelaide and Auckland film festivals (1969). Mirnal Sen's Bhuwan Shome wins gold medal at the Venice Art Exhibition (1970). Kunku (Gujarati) wins a special award at Chicago film festival. T. Pattabhirama Reddy's Samskara (Kannada) wins President's Gold medal (1971). Satyajit Ray's Seemabaddha (Bengali)

wins President's Gold Medal for the best feature film (1972). Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Swayamvaram* (Malayalam) wins President's Gold Medal for best feature film (1973). M.T. Vsudevan Nair's *Nirmalayam* (Malayalam) wins President's Gold Medal best feature film.

Mirnal Sen's *Chroous* (Bengali) wins *Swarna Kamal* for India's best feature film (1975). B.V. Karanth's *Chomana Dudi* (Kannada) wins *Swarna Kamal* as India's best feature film (1976). Girish Kasaravalli's *Ghataharaddha* (Kannada) wins *Swarna Mahal* for best feature film (1978). Biplab Roy Chowdhury's *Shodh* wins President's Gold Medal (1981). Mirnal Sen's *Chaal Chitra* wins special award for best actor Dhritiman Chatterjee at Venice festival (1981).

## J. **Ray's 'Agantuk' mirrors human behaviour**

*(The Island - April 22, 1992)*

The latest film of the respected international filmmaker Satyajit Ray is the Bengali film 'Agantuk' (The Stranger). In this film the Indian maestro himself has handled the music, screenplay, story and direction. The film is produced by the Indian National Film Development Corporation.

I saw this film at the Bangalore IFFI. It is a colour film running to two hours and has subtitles in English. I enjoyed the film thoroughly because it has an element of suspense, drama, humour depiction of 'conditioned city life', and many more ingredients plus the 'cinematic' treatment of the story. It is indeed good cinema and perhaps the best effort so far of Ray.

The trend in international cinema now is to show elements of drama in visual terms. Most films are now

turning to indoor shooting and leaving the camera stationary. But the strange thing is that the viewer does not get himself tired of listening to the dialogues alone, because he is simultaneously provided with visuals which record subtle nuances of human behaviour.

Satyajit Ray's 'Agantuk' is like a detective story at a superficial level; but it is also a human drama full of pathos, irony and humour. It also surveys the depth of human emotions in psychological terms. Ray proves again that he is a master of 'realism' as opposed to 'naturalism'. Realism in the sense that an analysis of cause and effect is executed through the behavioural patterns of the characters.

Barun Raha has handled the camera, obviously with the direction of Ray under controlled lighting and sound.

Unlike the glamorous 'stars' of the Holywood (exceptions are Nazurudin Shah, Shabana Azmi and a number of trained actors and actress), the Bengali performers are 'actors'. In this film too Bengali players like Dipankar Je Mamata Shankar, Bikram Bhattacharya, Utpal Dutt and Dhritmann Chaterji show their talent effortlessly.

One has to agree with the Indian commentator, Ravi Dehpande that 'from his very first film "Patter Panchali" to the recent "Agantuk", in a career spanning nearly four decades Ray has with masterful strokes explored man's predicament through a world view which is essentially humanistic.'

'Agantuk' is the story about the arrival for a forgotten uncle visiting a happy family of three people, after so many decades. The uncle returns home, his place of birth only as a brief stopover on his way to other foreign lands. He had been a wanderer travelling to all parts of the world. His

surprise visit to his only relative in India, creates suspicion in the family. It is the denouement of this mystery and the unfolding of the typical human behaviour.

I know that Satyajit Ray has his critics, who want him to be a committed film maker. But little do they realise that Ray is a progressive humanist purveying social contexts.

'Agantuk' is a beautiful film for the discerning cinegoer.

## **K. Oh! Calcutta**

*(Gleanings Column - The Island - February 20, 1994)*

One of the daring theatre and film entries of the 60s was the late Kenneth Tynan, who wrote for the London Observer. He uttered a four letter word in the then staid BBC's, 'The Critics' programme in a heated discussion. He also euphemistically staged a play titled 'Oh! Calcutta' where the players appeared on the stage nude. Well, all this has nothing to do with the real Calcutta, the capital of the West Bengal State in India, except the fact that one utters in indignation the sorry state of the metropolis, which is the second largest city in the world, as 'Oh! Calcutta' and 'Oh! the haughty Bengalis!'

It is true that West Bengal has produced some of the cream of the intelligentsia in India - religious leaders, philosophers, poets, writers, film directors, musicians, dancers, artists etc., but it is also true that the Bengalis are a set of proud people - justifiably. But should they be haughty, loudmouthed, emotional and discourteous to anyone who cannot speak Bengali?

I was like a fish out of water on the Bangla (that's how they call their land) soil not knowing either Bengali or Hindi.

The younger generation and the not-so-educated people refuse to speak in English. And only the highly educated people born in the 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s speak English. They speak well, but their 'a' sound is like an 'o' sound.

Bengalis are sweet-loving people. All their food has sugar added and they are delicious. They also eat a lot of fat foods and invariably they are oily. While the Brahmins in other parts of India are pure vegetarians, the Bengali Brahmins eat a lot of fish.

Calcutta is a large city, but it is not so attractive as New Delhi or Bombay or Madras or Bangalore. The streets are dug all the time. There are tram cars, double-deckers, auto-rickshaws and man-pulling rockshaws too. How can a Communist State tolerate the rickshaws still prevalent in an enlightened state? The bus service is not efficient as you find it in Tamilnadu for instance.

There is absolutely no respect for traffic regulations. It's chaotic. You get plenty of goods and quite a lot of Assamese, Biharis, Bangladeshis, Nepalese, Chinese, Burmese and Bhutanis trading in this sprawling capital.

There are three excellent English language newspapers published in Calcutta. The long-standing 'The Statesman', 'The telegraph' and the 'Amarita Bazar Pathrika'. The latter has been revived after a break of non-publication.

Although there is greater freedom given to women in West Bengal, one doesn't see them very much on the streets.

If you are going to Calcutta by train from Madras, you can either go by the Howrah Mail or the Coromandel Express. The train journey is interesting because it goes through Tamilnadu, Ardhra Pradesh, Orissas and West Bengal - a distance of nearly 2000 kilo metres.

Since my purpose of the visit was to honour the invitation to attend the 25th International Films Festival of India, I didn't have much time to move into the outskirts of Calcutta, but we had the fortune of seeing the legendary, Mr. Jyoti Baru, the Chief Minister at close quarters when he gave the delegates a grand dinner at a five- star hotel. All in bourgeoisie style!

### **L. Four notable Malayalam films screened at 25th IFFI**

*(The Observer - February 28, 1994)*

At the recent 25th International Film Festival of India held in Calcutta, 18 feature films and 19 non-feature films were shown in the category 'Indian Panorama'. Some reputed Indian film makers like Mirnal Sen, G.V. Iyer, T.S.Nagabharna, A.K.Bir, Ghoutam Ghouse, Shyam Benegal and Adoor Gopalakrishnan had their films at the festival. Out of the five Malayalam language films at the festival, I saw four of them.

The four films were: Deivathinte Vikruthikal (Lenin Rajendran), Gowri (Sivaprasad), Hayum Mullum (K.P.Sasi) and Magrib (P.T.Kunihi Mohammed). I liked best the last mentioned film.

'Magrib meaning dusk or reprieve is a film on the relative shift in the frame of references ruling the familial relations in a traditional community having specific cultural ethos, that of the Muslims in South Malabar.'

This was the first time, I watched the Muslim cultural traits in any South Indian Film. If not for any thing else, at least for boldly and realistically portraying aspects of life of the Muslim community, its director should be congratulated.

He is an award - winning actor also. He has written the story and directed it with Madhu Ambay handling the camera. The director has worked abroad with a French Company for a decade.

After seeing the film one has to agree with how the film had been described in the Indian Panorama published by the directorate of film festivals, New Delhi.

'The film follows a simple prismatic narrative style. Set against the ups and downs of an ancestral Muslim family spanning over half a century, it subtly builds the bitter sweet experience of the family members and their interactions, arising out of concrete situations, with the result that Razaq's (a convict lunatic confined in the asylum for many years) freedom is shattered and he is left with the desolate silence of the asylum.'

I liked Gowri directed by Sivaprasad. This director, incidentally is not only a product of the prestigious Film and Television Institute of Pune but also had been an assistant Professor in direction. His feature films are Purvooravas Sairendhri, Vembanad and Gowri.

Gowri is a slow - moving analytical film of the human mind and emotions. Unconventionally the protagonists are middle aged and they are lovers of an understanding type. She is married to another who torments her and refuses to divorce her. They have a grown up daughter too. The lover too is a married man but his private life is not explained much. The new lovers meet after a lapse of five months and both are two top executives in two big companies. The delicate movements and moments of these lovers are subtly captured by Sunny Joseph with his camera and the directorial touches are masterly at some places. I also liked the acting by Dr. Meenakshi Soman as the woman and that of Prechandran

as her lover. To conventional viewers this film may be a shocker, but it is an exploration of some aspects of love.

Deivathinte Vikruthikal (The ways of God) is set in a coastal town in North Kerala. The French were ruling Mahe for 230 years and were leaving Kerala in 1954. However, a Francophone culture prevailed and some of the natives chose to leave for France, but not Alphonso, 'a man who chose to suffer a slow, tortuous life in his little village, Mahe, in preference to fortunes and pleasures away from it.' Raghuvaran plays this role and opposite him Srividya. She hates her husband's dogmatic attitude of remaining poor. He is a magician who has no income. Their children too brought scandal to them. Even if he tries Alphonso cannot disassociate himself from his native place. The film is described as one that 'reveals what is now described as authentic ethnicity.' However the film failed to convince me, as if it had lost a sense of direction, particularly the talents of Madhu Ambat's in photography had become irrelevant in many places.

The director Leuin Rajendran had previously directed 12 Vena (the Summer), Chillu (The Fragments), Meenamasatile Sooryan (Mid-Summer Sun), Swathithirunal, Puravitham (the Past), Vachanan (the World ) and now this film.

K. P. Sasi, a political cartoonist and a product of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi made his first documentary film in 1982. He is a committed socialist. His Ilayum Mullum (Leaves and Thorns) lacks subtlety and artistic presentation, although it is an excellent documentary on harassment to women by chauvinists in Kerala. The note on this film says that 'in this film are the harassment and indignities suffered by women, even in Kerala, which is



quite emancipated in many respects. It is like a celluloid case-study of the microcosm.'

Apart from these four films, there was Vidheyan (The Servile) by one of India's great filmmakers, Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Unfortunately I couldn't see this film, which is adapted from a story by Paul Zachariah. And there was a controversy about it in which the director is reported to have distorted the story and had given Hindudtva bias, thinly supporting the Hindu fundamentalism of the BJP, in India. But I cannot say anything about this since I haven't seen it.

A product of the film and television Institute, Pune, Adoor Gopalakrishnan has made several award - winning films: Swayam Veram (One's own Choice), Kodiyattam, Elipathayam (Rat Trap), Muha-Muham (Face to Face), Anantaram (Monologue) and Mathiluhul (Walls).

## **M. Bhagavad Gita made into a film in Sanskrit**

*(The Observer - March 14, 1994)*

A Tamilian Brahmin, who is in his 60s is making films for the past 40 years. Strangely he made films in Hindi, Kannada and Sanskrit and not in Tamil. His Himsageetha was described as a film with musical tapestries in bright colours. He is also reported to have made four off- beat films in Kannada on shoe - string budgets.

Being a simple man, wearing verti, a banian and bare - footed and bearing a broad forehead, half- gray beared and a konde and with a smiling face, he walked about the venue of the recently held Calcutta International Film Festival with his daughter. People acknowledged him with respect. He was G.V. Iyer.

His purpose in film making is to explain philosophy through cinema. His Sanskrit film on the Advaita philosophy, Aadi Sankaracharya, attracted the attention of many. His latest film Bhagavad Gita was shown at the festival. This was also in Sanskrit. The title means 'The Song of the Lord'. Readers will at once recognise that the Bhagavad Gita is a sacred book of the Hindus.

The great Indian epics the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are the main springs of Indian culture - they include literature, values, ethics, ethos and the like. They are akin to the Greek epics, The Iliad and The Odyssey. Mahabharata right now is shown on the small screen over MTV here and it is in Hindi with Sinhala subtitles. It depicts a war supposed to have been waged around the 6th century BC between two groups of brothers - the Pandavas and the Gauravas in northern India. Kurukshetra was the battlefield. The Pandavas consisted of five brothers and their cousins were known as the Gauravas. They were 100 in number.

Lord Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, helped the Pandavas to win the war. He was the charioteer for Arjuna, the great warrior of the Pandavas. At the battlefield, Arjuna was reluctant to attack his cousins and was bewildered. It was then Krishna who instructed to Arjuna to do his duty as a warrior and not to look for the consequences. That upadesha was the Bhagavad Gita. This is a philosophic poem in Sanskrit in 18 chapters. It is learnt that nearly 400 translated versions of the song in various languages are available. They were rendered by diverse hands.

It is said that against the backdrop of the universe the film deals with the conflict of all conflicts the conflict within oneself. In the film the allegorical aspects of good and evil are dealt with.

G.V. Iyer took two years to complete the film. He wrote the draft script for the film 12 times, and used the last one to shoot the film. Nearly 40 per cent of the film had been shot in the Himalayas, at about a height of 14,000 feet.

The Indian Panorama of the 25th International Film Festival (IFFI) became richer with the screening of G.V.Iyer's Bhagavad Gita.

## **N. A panorama of recent Indian films**

*(The Observer - April 4, 1994)*

While one was enthused by a feast of some of the best films in foreign languages with English subtitles screened at this year's IFFI in Calcutta, one was not sufficiently saturated at the fare dished out in the Indian Panorama, although one must agree, that the themes and styles were varied, and that in itself was all the more reason, one welcomes, such film festivals.

There were 18 feature films in Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Manipuri, Oriya and Sanskrit. Films in Telugu, Tamil, Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi etc, were out.

Although I could see only four of the five Malayalam films, I have gleaned a lot of information on the films I missed and I am sure this will be of interest to our readers.

Let us take five of such films this week for comment. *In custody, Khabhi Haan, Kabhi Naas, Pattang, Anukampan, Aratan and Samban Wangma.*

*Abratan* is an Assamese film directed by Dr.Babendranath Saikia.

The director himself has written the story and screenplay. This is a film depicting the liberation of a young woman named Jayanti from her family, occupational and other bonds and finding solace in the love of a degenerated man who comes to terms with life with Jayanti, who restarts her life with him.

The director is a Ph. D from London University in Physics with a Diploma from the Imperial College, London. Dr. Saikia was a reader in the post - graduate department of Guwahati (capital of Assam) University. He is an author of 14 books (short stories, novels, radio plays and film scripts). The Sahitya Academy in India and other institutions there have awarded him with prizes for his literary contributions. We learn that his plays have been telecast in India and abroad. He has directed six films in his mother tongue and they have been screened in Indian and foreign film festivals. Dr. Saikia edits *Pratik* and *Safura* two publications.

'Sambal Wangama' is a Manipuri film directed by K. Ibohal Sharma.

This is yet another film from the North East region of India. The director himself has written the screenplay and handled the camera. He is reputed to be a pioneer of cinema in the state of Manipuri. His film (*Inagi Ningthem*, apart from winning many medals in India itself, has also won the Grand Prize at Nantes (France). He has participated in many international film festivals.

This film is a 'story of love, of tenderness narrated filmically. The culture of Manipur villages is revealed with great sensitivity. According to this region's belief, cousins marrying is considered immoral conduct. But here there are many doing that and are outcast from the society. Their

offsprings also repeat their parents' guilt and so the story tells us.

*Patang* : This is a Hindi film directed by Goutam Ghose.

The director hails from Calcutta, but he is a well-known cinematographer of quality Hindi films. However, his first feature film was in Telugu called *MaaBhoomi* on the Naxalite movement in Telengana. His film *Dhakai* about the exploitations of tribal people earned him foreign awards. At the Venice Festival, Naseerudin Shah (one of the best actors in India today), won the best actor's prize. This was for his performance in Ghose's film *Paar*, Ghose also received the National Award for best Bengali film for his creation *Antarjali Yatra*. This won the Grand Prize at Tashkent. There are several other awards to his credit.

The film *Patang* features two best players in the Indian cinema - Shabana Azmi and Om Puri. It is a film of human relationship revealed against the backdrop of the small town and the mute and constant death. It is a crime story realistically captured with a criminal operating at railway stations. We also learn that the nexus amongst the criminals, politicians, the nouveau rich and bureaucracy - all of it unfolding against the backdrop of the 'constantly flying of kites'.

*Kabhi Haan Kabhi Naa* : This is a Hindi film directed by Kundan Shah. Kundan Shah is a notable telefilm and wide screen Director. His films are in Hindi. A graduate of the Pune Film Institute, he has worked for well-known directors like Saeed Mirza. His film *Jane Bhi Do Yaro* received a National Award for best feature film.

His new film *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Naa* is about three young people in love. They are members of a musical group. They go through the sweet ups and downs of life. Newcomers Shah Rukh Khan, Suchitra Krishnmoorthy, Reeta Bhaduri and also the indomitable Naseerudeen Shah act in this reportedly enjoyable Hindi film.

*In Custody*: This is an English film directed by Ismail Merchant.

Also shown at the festival was a film made by an Indian in English. This was shown in the 'world cinema' section. Based on a novel by the Indian woman writer in English, Anita Desai, who has herself written the screenplay with Shahrukh Hussain, *In Custody* is again credited as an interesting film by Ismail Merchant.

The cast in the film includes such famous names as Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azmi, Ompuri, Neena Gupta, Tinu Anand and Sushima Seth. They speak and act in English.

The story is about a dying famous Urdu poet and his admirer who helps to keep the poet's works preserved. The plot is simple, but the manifestations are strong and it is a director's film.

Ismail Merchant first directed *The Creating Woman* in 1961. With James Ivory he made *The Householder*, *Autobiography of a Prince*, *The Europeans*, *The Bastonians*, *Heat and Dust*, *A Room with a View*, *Maurice*, *Howard's End*, and *The Remains of the Day*—most of them reputed novels in English. *Ismail Merchant's telefilms are Mahatma and the Mad Boy and The Courtesans of Bombay*.

The regional films of India in the respective languages and also in English give us some ideas and scenes of the multi-cultural contexts prevailing in that country.

## **0. A selection of Indian films**

*(The Island - May 22, 1994)*

An Indian of international repute is Ismail Merchant. Thirty-three years ago he made a fine film called 'The Creation of Woman'. He wanted to make films set in India and chose the English language. James Ivory became his partner.

They made their first film called 'The Householder'. Then came notable films like 'Autobiography of a Princess', 'The Europeans', 'The Bostonians', 'Heat and Dust', 'A Room with a View', 'Maurice', 'Howard's End' and 'The Remains of the Day'. All of them are adaptations from famous novels.

Last year he made 'In Custody', which was shown at the recent (Jan '94) International Film Festival at Calcutta.

Anita Desai, the well-known Indian writer, from whose novel this film was adapted and Sharukh Hussain, have written the screenplay for this film. The music of Zakir Hussain and Sultan Khan is a feast. Some of the best actors and actresses in the current Indian cinema are acting in this English film: Shashi Kapoor, Shabna Azmi, Om Puri, Neena Gupta, Tinnu Anand and Sushma Seth.

The story is about a famous Urdu poet, who has two wives. This poet Nur leaves his possessions in the custody of a teacher who interviews him just prior to his death.

'In Custody' is a film of pure art.

A film in Bengali by a Tamilian, Ashoke Visvanathan is titled 'Sunya Theke Suru' (Return to Zero). It begins somewhere in the late 60s in Bengal. It is a story of an academic named Dr. Bhishmadev Sharma, who has involved himself in underground political activities. He

later undergoes several experiences and returns to musing his nostalgic past.

The director is a stage and film personality both in English and Bengali.

'Kabhi Haan Kabhi Naa' directed by Kundan Shah is a stylistic entertaining Hindi movie. It is set in Goa. The key players are Shah Rukh Khan and Suchitra Krishnamoorthy. The boy is found of music. The guitarist in his band is in love with the lead singer Anna. But Khan is also passionate about her. So, it is a triangle of love. You can easily guess the rest of the story. All three go through a journey of sweet ups and bitter downs of life.

The director, Kundan Shah has made several TV serials, documentaries, campaign films and promotionals. He earned the national award for best feature film for his 'Jane Bhir Doyaro'.

'Chinnari-Mutha' is a film made in the Kannada language, and it is directed by T.S. Naghabarana. This is a story of an orphan who works as a bonded labourer. He runs away from the village and finds himself in a big city. There, he is discovered as a potential athlete. He is trained and becomes a champion.

The message is that 'Every child is full of potential. Tapped at the right time, harnessed for the right purpose and monitored in the right path, it is possible to awaken the achiever inside the child, leading to great heights of excellence.'

The director T.S. Nagabharna had worked with B.V. Karanth and Girish Karnard, noted filmmakers. He is now a leading filmmaker in Kannada language.



**P. The Indian film connection**

*(Sunday Island - January 26, 1995)*

The ten-day International Film Festival which concluded in Bombay recently not only served as an Index of world culture via the cinema, but also as a true representation of regional and sub-cultures of India. India has had its impact on us in many fields, particularly in the field of culture.

The cinema, despite other attractions in the entertainment field, still has a magnetic hold on the masses in any part of the world, and more so in India and Sri Lanka.

Hindi film songs are universally appreciated for more than a half century.

Sri Lanka beams a Hindi service over the air and plays Hindi music even in other services of the SLBC. The different TV channels in Sri Lanka shows Hindi videos and Tamil videos.

Indian film festivals are periodically held in Colombo and Kandy. Some of the acclaimed Indian film makers like the late Satyajit Ray, Mirnal Sen, Mani Kaul, Shyam Benegal, Ritwick Ghatak, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aravindan, Ghoutam Ghosh and many others are household names among the elite filmgoers of Sri Lanka.

The Indian film is truly international and at the same time indigenous. Universal in themes and all embracing in emotional and intellectual expression.

Most Indian and Sri Lankan films have many things in common: the 'masala' element. However, a few films are excellent works of art. While establishing themselves as truly either Indian (with regionalistic characteristics) or Sri Lankan (Particularly the Sinhala films of the maestros in

the field), such films transcend the indigenous barriers and attain a standard appreciated by anyone in any other part of the world.

Most of India's and a few of Sri Lanka's films have been adequately honoured in international film festivals and other retrospectives and showings.

Satyajit Ray of Bengal was widely acclaimed as one of the best film directors in the world, and Sivaji Ganeshan of Tamil Nadu is considered as one of the best actors in the world by discerning cinegoers. Ilayarajah of Tamil Nadu had the rare privilege of conducting in London Philharmonic Orchestra. Similarly, the Subramaniam brothers had blended the music of the East and West in symphony music. Ravi Shankar, Uday Shankar, M.S.Subulakshmi and other great musicians and dancers of India, who were well-known globally came through films. Some of the best, critically acclaimed English films had been made by Indians and others with Indian connection.

The filmmakers in Bengal, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Bihar and other places have created some outstanding films. A few of them are also internationally known. Satyajit Ray, Minal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan are well-known among local filmgoers.

Our own Lester James Pieris, D.B.Nihalsinha, Vasanta Obeysekara, H.D. Premaratna, Dharmasena Pathirajah, Dharmasiri Bandaranaike, Gamini Fonseka, Wijaya Dharmasiri and Amaranath Jayatilaka are a few, who have made serious films. Lester is known globally.

Although it is difficult to mention any Sri Lankan Tamil filmmaker of the same calibre, at least half a dozen Tamil filmmakers from India had directed a few notable

films. Sri Lanka born Balu Mahendra, Mahendran, Hari Haran, Mani Ratnam, K. Balachandar, Kamala Hasan are names that come easily to mind.

Culturally, the Indian subcontinent beams a beacon light to the rest of the world, depicting eastern values and ideals. Sri Lanka too forms a part of it, while being distinct. Indian and Sri Lankan films depict the sub-continent lifestyles.

### **Q. Bandit Queen - a True Story**

*(Mirror Magazine - Sunday Times - February 25/March 2, 1996)*

Bandit Queen, a Hindi film made by Shekar Kapur, a notable actor and director, drew the largest crowds at the Siri Fort Auditorium 1 in New Delhi during the 27th International Film Festival of India recently. It was screened under the category of Indian Panorama.

There were several reasons for this stampede. Firstly the film had been subject to a big controversy in India, its director was featured on BBC, TV, it was adapted from a true story and recent happenings in India, it was the story of a low-caste woman who took to the gun to avenge those who tortured her and sexually assaulted her, it had a few long-shot frontal nudity scenes of the bandit woman, etc.

At the launching of the film director Shekhar Kapur disclaimed talk that he film had been drastically cut by the censors. Despite the publicity it had received, the film had many problems as well.

Poolan Devi, on whose life-story this film was based, had a tough time with the producers. Both were to go to courts.

Later however, they seemed to have come to a compromise. Poolan Devi herself was present on the stage with Shekhar Kapoor.

'This is a true story of an Indian girl, who is kidnapped in her teens by bandits and who becomes the leader of the bandit gangs. She is deceived and defeated by other high-caste bandits who gang-rape her for three days. She gets away-forms her own gang and descends on the villages, where she was raped and takes vengeance. Her gang kills 20 males in the village. The Indian government sends an army of police in pursuit. She is subdued and decides to surrender. In 1983 she ceremoniously gives her weapons and goes to jail in Gwalior. The film ends with the surrender and the acclaim of the crowd that had gathered to catch a glimpse of this late 20th century Indian Robin Hood' (IFFI Brochure).

To me this film seems highly pretentious, although it boasts of depicting caste - consciousness in India. Some visuals by Ashok Mehta are commendable. The story and screenplay has been by Mala Sen, who had had much exposure earlier in Indian magazines. Seema Biswas, Saurar Shukla and Rajesh Vivek are included in the cast.

Bandit Queen is like any other average box-office Hindi film and compares poorly with some of the other regional films shown at the festival. Sometimes, it is not quality but sensationalism that scores a point at such festivals.

**R. Nirbachana : tragic story of the poor in Oriya**

*(Movie Scene Page - TV Times and Entertainment-  
Sunday Times - March 17-23, 1966)*

Oriya is the language spoken in the Indian state of Orissa and it is akin to Bengali. At the 27th International Film Festival of India (IFFI '96) in New Delhi in mid-January, an Oriyan film was also shown.

Titled Nirbachana (meaning The Hustings) it was directed by Biplab Ray Chaudhuri. He has made award winning films in both Oriya and Hindi, apart from notable documentaries.

Although the film lacks entertainment value, it has its stark reality in conveying to the viewers a typical village style life and the drama involved in a single incident.

The story in brief:

It is about a few farmers in a village where the feudal set-up prevails. In India there were the feudal lords called Zamindars some years ago. The peasants in this village preferred to work in the fields belonging to the Zamindar.

This overlord sought to be elected in an election and went to the extent of bribing the voters. Exploiting the situation, the village headman chose a beggar, a TB patient, to be a voter for the Zamindar thus adding revenue to his kitty.

He has five votes in his family. But the beggar's condition was worsening. So the father and son and the headman family took him to the hospital so that he could live up to election day. On their way, a dynamite was blown up by workers in a quarry. The beggar got killed while headman and his son escaped death. It was a tragic commentary on the poor.

## S. **Kavita Joshi in the art of filmmaking**

*(The Island - April 19, 1997)*

Kavita Joshi is an enterprising young woman, who specialized in English from Delhi University. Not only that, she followed a course in film direction at the Pune Film and Television Institute. Her Diploma film is titled *A Brief Journey*. This was shown at the IFFI '97. A short film in English and Hindi, is in a way a feminist film. It tells the story of revenge taken by a woman against a man who defamed her.

Kavita Joshi wrote the screenplay and directed this 22 minute filmlet.

There is a young woman, who has a slight aberration. She works as a secretary to an ageing adolescent. During her six months tenure in office, this man had seduced her. Having slept with her, he summarily dismissed her from work.

One day, this guy is seen in a park. The woman confronts him and at gun point drives him into a car. She promises that she wouldn't do any harm to him, but only would like to talk with him. They drive off in the car. He tries to escape, but the young woman manages to tie his hands and blindfold him.

Then she begins to humiliate him. The man becomes a weakling. The woman gains strength. The man ultimately breaks down.

The woman makes the man rub his face in dirt and walks away.

The camera is functionally handled by Manoj Peter. The players are relatively unknown - Divya Bhatia, Mandeep - and yet they play their respective roles sensitively.

**T.     **Avvai Shanmugi-highly entertaining colossal cinema****

*(The Island - July 5, 1997)*

Tamilnadu, belatedly though is in the limelight now, as far as the world of the tinsel goes. Never has a Tamil film been recognised as India's best film until this year when a Tamil film *Kaathal Kottai* (fortress of Love) carried away three awards, in the National-wide Contest. Hitherto some Tamil films had been reckoned in the category as best out of the regional films produced.

What it means is that commercial minded Tamil films are improving in all respects of the cinema. Already in technical aspects it excels than any other films made in India.

Some artistes like Kamala Hasan, Rajini Kaanth, Mani Ratnam, Ilayarajah and A.R. Rahman had been well received in North India. Vijayathimala, Waheeda Rehman, Rekha, Hema Malini, Sri Devi and Prabhu Deva and other South Indian stars have acted in more Hindi films than in Tamil or Telugu films.

Paradoxically it is the North Indian beauties like Nagma, Kajol, Tabu, Kushbu, Manisha Koirala and others who are dominating the South Indian films now.

Among the talented actors in India today is Kamala Hasan of Chennai. He is a versatile dancer (Both Bharata Natyam and other contemporary Western and Eastern gyrations), singer, script writer, and a brilliant actor. His acting in most films are Chaplinesque.

Although he has acted in some cheap commercial films, he is a natural player, bringing out emotions in the right balance. Although belonging to a talented Brahmin family of actors (Saaru Haasan, Suhasini, for instance), he has a

progressive outlook. He is not educated in a formal sense but is widely read and is very familiar with the contemporary Tamil literary trends.

Kamala Hasan is always willing to learn. He and Revathi (another sensitive artiste who has acted in quality Hindi films as well) are the only two regulars who attend the international films held each year in various megacities of India.

Among his great films, the noteworthy include, Moontraam Pirai (directed by Lankan born Balu Mahendra), Varumayin Niram Sivappu (K. Balachandar), Nayakan (Mani Ratnam), Guna, Indian and Avvai Shanmugi.

Avvai Shanmugi, directed by K.S.Rvi Kumar is to be released shortly by the National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka. It is a colossal production in colour and tastefully done, with the state of the art technical devices. It is an entertainer, with a touch of comedy, love, action, dance and lively music (Deva) and a lovable portrayal by Kamala Hasan as a father in a woman's disguise.

As most films, Indian films too draw inspiration from foreign language films. Krammer vs Krammer, Mrs. Doubtfire and what not can be traced in Avvai Shanmugi. But it is not an adaptation of these films.

Besides Kamala Hasan, there is Meena, Hera, old timer Gemini Ganeshan, Delhi Ganesh, Naaser, Manivannan in supporting roles. The acting is appreciable, but sometimes the actors, shout at the top of their voices and jabber fast, a characteristic, in Hindi, Bengali, Telugu and other films, too.

The outdoor photography is excellent. The music is a fine blend of the Carnatic, wrap, gharana and other folk tunes. There is rhythm and tempo. The dances are



graceful, with occasional erotic gyrations. The costumes are suitably designed by Kamala Hasan's present wife. The rich photography, fast-moving action, fisticuffs, eroticism, rituals, dramatic ironies all combine to give you a lighter - vein classy entertainment. It is by no means a serious film. But you will enjoy it with your kids. The antics of Kamala Hasan as a woman will remain in your memory, at least for sometime. The story-line the narration through action reveals itself. I enjoyed *Avvai Shanmugi*. So will you.

## U. Cultural contexts that are varied

(*Daily News - July 28, 1997*)

As an invitee of the International Film Festival of India, I attended the IFFI '97 at Thiruvananthapuram the Kerala capital in mid-January. Being starved of good regional films of India, leave alone outstanding international films in my country I have used this annual invitation for the last 7 years for the purpose beginning with the Chennai festival in 1991.

Among the regional films screened in the Indian Panorama this year I managed to see *Adajya* (Assamese), *Desaadanam* (Malayalam), *Kathapurushan* (Malayalam), *Kraurya* (Kannada), *Nayantara* (Bengali) and a few minutes of the first reel of *The Making of the Mahatma* (English). The reason why I couldn't see the other films was obvious. I had to make a choice among simultaneous showings in the World Cinema category.

I also saw *Karuvelam pookkal* (Tamil), which was not part of the Indian Panorama, but shown elsewhere in the city during the festival.

## Impressions

Let me give my impressions of these films as a Sri Lankan who is trying to understand the varied cultural contexts in India as depicted through the medium of quality cinema.

Since Tamil is my mother tongue, let me begin with the Tamil film *Karuvelam Pookkal*. The script and direction is by a noted contemporary writer in Tamil, Manickavasagam, who writes under the pen-name *Poomani*. I had earlier read his *Pirahu* (Afterwards) and considered him an avant-grade writer depicting the sordid life of a section of the down-trodden, backward class of people in Tamilnadu.

The blurb in the brochure produced by the National Film Development Corporation, who with Doordharshan has produced this film states:

'Rooted to the black cotton soil in Tamilnadu, Poomani recreates with intense sincerity and authenticity the life of the rural poor. His works are a lucid record of the hopes and aspirations of the poor.' I agree, as this is evident even in his maiden effort as a filmmaker.

Cinematically, **Poomani** succeeds in picturising the tragedy inherent in the story with the aid of Thankar Bachan (Cinematography), B.Lenin - V.T.Vijayan (editing) and Radhika and Naser (acting).

It is obvious that **Poomani** objects to urbanization of the rural-setup, industrialization, the cut throat business competition among the industrialists alluring the simple, uneducated village folk, particularly the children, child labour and exploitation, casteism and all other kindred subjects, which the sociologists tell us are all bad, and above all he depicts the human tragedies (the two suicides) as a matter of

fact happenings, in the larger context of exploitation. The message is clear, but the creativity expected in a medium of art is less evident, as the script blatantly lacks subtlety. However, I liked the film for whatever its worth. It was like reading a progressive faction (fact+ fiction) via images.

From Tamilnadu, let us turn our attention to the neighbouring Kerala, where I noticed that the Malayalam language uses a few words found in Sangam Literature and the nuances of speech are akin to Sri Lankan Tamil spoken in some parts of the north and east.

Desaadanam (Journey to Wisdom) by Jayaraj shows another aspect of the Dravidian cultural contexts. Though Malayalam is heavily Sanskritised, the lifestyle of the Kerala people are not far removed from the Tamilian life and style. And here in Sri Lanka, one could trace abundant doses of Kerala influence both among the Sinhalese and the Tamils.

The Director, Jayaraj (he told me he first made a crop of commercial films and had graduated to making serious films), has a rationale why he made this film.

'Desaadanam', essentially means journey in search of Truth or Wisdom. This Indian is followed by vary many saints and religious teachers. However, the whole process of severing one's connection with the family in the services of God or Humanity is painful and tortuous to the dear ones'.

He adds: 'My film shot on the beautiful river Nila probes the dilemma of a family which is otherwise deep-rooted in its traditional beliefs. The river Nila flows with time, but the life on the riverside hamlet is in a state of freeze'.

Mercifully, the film is not sentimental or melodramatic, but it moves you in a restrained sort of way. Here too, the editing by the duo B. Lenin - V.T. Vijayan and the melodic

compositions by Kaithappan and the measured, architectural, and meaningful shots by M.J.Radhakrishnan contribute largely to the feelings of an aesthetic cinema. As far as acting is concerned, I admired the subtle performance, particularly of Vijayaraghavan and Unnikrishnan Namboothri.

Amidst contemporaneity, lights and shadows of powerful religious holds were evident in this film and that speaks for another aspect of modern India.

The next Malayalam film is by the master, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, I had seen his *Swayamvaram* in Colombo in the late 60s and was astonished to see a different type of a South Indian film. I had also seen some of his other films, particularly *Mathilukal*.

Adoor's *Kathapurushan* (Man of the Story) has subtle political overtones. It is a periodic piece between the late 30s and 40s but the interpretation is clearly from the point of view prevalent very much later. Adoor has the capability to tell a story through effective images and experienced he is in the art of film making, the film appears a very simple and effortless art. And that is the hallmark of the genius.

However, I wouldn't say that I liked this film very much for its content as I had liked it for other ingredients in the film - music, acting and photography. But this is not to say that the film let me down. On the contrary, I found myself at home with the Keralite lifestyle.

Still in South India, let us move on to a sophisticated filmmaker I admire - Girish Kasaravalli, the Kannada film director. I liked his earlier film *Mane* for its superb structure and elegant cinema. His new film *Kraurya* (Cruelty) is an entertainingly told story of an elderly woman of previous vintage and living into the present day commercialised world.

Full credit goes to Renukamma Murugodu, who plays the role of Granny. In fact the film is a story of a story teller, not to mention the sensitive playing by H.G. Dattatreya and Vijaya Ekkandri.

Girish has with him his able and artistically - blending cameraman S.Ramachandra, whose shots are brilliantly captivating and apt. I should not fail to mention that the costumes in this film are by Vaishali, Kasaravalli's wife. Music is provided by L. Vaidyanathan.

The film has its own comment on the role of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata. And the director's statement is as follows:

'Like the Gradma's tale of Pandava, what is this journey all about? Without the legs of Dharmar, is the Karmic journey and endless roll seeking solace elsewhere?'

Realism, Fantasy, Poetry and human predicament are mixed in right proportions and rightly so with entertainment flourishing and bubbling out of childhood innocence. Girish Kasaravalli's film is also a portrayal for religious based orthodoxy, but not overplayed as in the Malayalam films mentioned above, and again it depicts some aspects of the South Indian culture. The cultural contexts of the areas where the Dravidian languages are spoken, are not very dissimilar.

Shifting the focus now to North-East India, Assam, I was pleasantly surprised viewing the film by Dr. Santwana Bardoloi, whose maiden full-length cinematic feature is *adajya*.

If the regional camera of India had fascinated me, a Sri Lankan, the cavalcade of some of the best films from the International Cinema simply overawed me. It is another tale.

## V. Indian regional films in Tamil

(As I like It Column - The Island - February 2000)

Let's take two Tamil films that were shown at the IFFI 2000 for your information. The films were *Aadum Koothu* directed by T.V.Chandran and *Sringaram* directed by Sharadha Ramanathan.

In *Aadum Koothu*, Cheran is the producer and actor, while the screenplay and direction rests with T.V. Chandran, a notable Malayalam filmmaker. The director's Malayalam films include *Kadavaseehan*, *Padam Onnu Oru Vilappam*, *Danny*, *Susanna*, *Mangamma*, *Ormma Kalalunday Irikkanam*, *Ponthan Mada*, *Alicinte Anweshanam*.

This film is a little complicated in terms of time and space. It's a film about reality and fantasy. It's an imaginative film that is fascinating for the curiosity that it evokes.

I shall give you what the director had in mind in directing this film in his own words rather than my interpreting the film as I understood it:

'*Aadum Koothu*' works at different levels and times. The film unfolds from the ordinary life of a college student, Manimekala, a sensitive village girl who suddenly begins to see what others don't.

'Things get further complicated when she begins seeing a film from the bangle her cousin and bridegroom-to-be presents her, a bangle made out of black and white film waste.

'The film that unrolls is about a Dalit (low caste person) woman, a nomadic performer, who is hunted, humiliated and tortured for not succumbing to the desires of the local landlord decades ago .... This vision takes her on

a journey into the narratives of this Dalit woman and many others whose lives are entangled with it. It is a story that proceeds at three different times - lines. A film director tries to make a film out of the situation. But his attempt is foiled by the violent intervention of the landlord, which leads to the suicide of the heroine and the film being abandoned. The young filmmaker is forced to resort to extremist means to render justice.

'At the third level, the film is about Manimekala, who herself is filmmaker now, excavating the different layers. Vellaiammal, faces an encounter that helps her to understand herself.

'These narratives, making three different periods in history, entwine to tell the story of oppression and defiance, of love and search for it, of expression and its rebellions.

'It is also about art, sacrifice and its indomitable spirit of rebellions. A film about the enterprise of film making itself'.

I liked the acting of Cheran as the cousin and young filmmaker. He has a stamp of his own in his style of acting. The photography of Madhu Ambatt, a leading cinematographer of India and the acting of a black beauty. Navya Nair, are plus points in the film.

Madhu Ambatt has produced and filmed *Sringaram* while Sharada Ramanathan has directed it. The screenplay is by Indira Soundararajan. The decor and cinematography in the film is excellent. Carnatic music plays an important role in this film as it is a film of temple dancers. The reputed Lalgudi Jayaraman has composed the music for this film.

Aditi Rao Hyderi, Manoj K. Jayan, Hamsa Molly and Sashi Kumar and Chandrasekar act in the film. I liked Chandrasekar's acting as the watchman.

I think the director is interpreting the evolution of the Bharatha Natyam in her own terms. There is a tinge of feminism as depicted through the heroine in the film. She is a dancer who rebels with a cause.

How does the story go? Let the director explain:

'In the year 1920, Madhura is born into a family of temple dancers - Devadasis in a remote village in Tamilnadu. She is initiated as the chief temple dancer on her mother's renunciation of the title, and participates in all temple activities, including rituals, temple dancing and the local village governance.

'Madhura feels increasingly uneasy with the demands of the local patriarchy represented by the village princely landlord known as Mirasu, and defies the system within the construct of her own artistic and feminist sensibilities.

'Kama, the second Devadasi and Kasi, the temple watchman, represent contrasting world views to both Madhura and Mirasu.

'The film is set in a context when three phenomena face transition in a climaxed interplay: the nationalist movement, patriarchy and art. In Sringaram (Dance of Love), this interplay throws up an exploration of the aesthetics and means of emancipation from the physical to the abstract'.

From the above and apparent academic stance, one could figure out that the director could be bracketed as an 'intellectual'.

Says she: 'This film is an expression of my cumulative impressions of art and feminism that is quintessentially Indian .... The Devadasi epitomised the music, dance, poetry, sensuality, nuance and metaphor of life that India has been'.

Both films were unusual for a Tamil audience.



**W. A Bengali film on conjugal relationship**

*(As I like it Column - The Island - March 21, 2007)*

At the IFFI (International Film Festival of India) held in Panaji, Goa, I saw also two Bengali films. Although Hindi films are widely known, regional films are not publicised due to the dominance of what is known as Bollywood films, meaning films made in the Hindi language produced in the business capital of India, Mumbai.

It was one of the masters of cinema, the late Satyajit Rai greatly influenced by the ten neo-realism found in the Italian cinema, that brought to the limelight in the world of quality cinema, the existence of masterpieces produced in India. Rai made films in his own language, Bengali. Although Bengali is a minority language in India, the region in the east of the country Bengal (which is known as Bangla by its people) is rich with indigenous culture, producing great giants, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore et al. The influence of Bengali culture is evident in adjacent states as well. Even in the neighbouring country Bangladesh (earlier known as East Bengal), traits of Hinduism and Bengali Culture could be identified. According to some scholars, the Bengalis are an admixture of Mongolian and Dravidian ethnicity.

I have been to its capital Kolkatta (earlier known as Calcutta) twice to attend the IFFI which used to shift from one megacity to another (New Delhi, Kolkatta, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Thiruvananthapuram). Since 2005, IFFI is held only in Goa, becoming the permanent venue at present. It was in late November and early December last year that the 37th IFFI was held in Panaji, the capital of captivating Goa which became a part of India only 50 years ago seceding from Portugal.

The mega city Kolkatta has a large population of Bengalis and a floating population of many language speaking people, particularly from adjacent states. The indigenous people feel strongly about their intrinsic culture, although many upper layers of society are largely Western-oriented having mastered the English language. The Britishers who ruled India established great schools and colleges in Kolkatta first. This was one reason perhaps of their superiority in education.

One thing I noticed was that the Bengalis were fond of sweets of all kinds, mainly their own delicacies. They also eat a lot of fish, Brahmins not exempted.

Their words are mostly stressed with the 'o' sound when we use an 'a' sound. For instance, if we say 'Bengali', they would say 'Bengoli'.

Among the filmmakers of Bengal, many names come to mind: Satyajit Rai, Mirmal Sen, Hrishikesh Mukerjee, Guru Dutt, Chitrananda Das Gupta (although he was generally acclaimed as a great film critic), Mani Kaul, Gautam Gosh, BuddhadevDas Gupta et al.

I enjoy seeing Bengali films especially for the realism in the films and the sensitive actors and actresses. Some of them have moved away from Bengal and are acting in Hindi films for greater recognition. Mithun Chakrobarthy, Sharmila Tagore, Ranee Mukerjee are just a few names. There were great playback singers like C.H.Aathma, Mukesh, Geeta Roy (Earlier Geeta Dutt) and others.

There are fine newspapers in English published in Kolkatta. 'The Age' is one such newspaper. I believe it is edited by M.J.Akbar. Anand Bazaar Patrika is a reputed press in India.

I felt that a little background of the Bengalis, as I perceived it, could help us in understanding Bengali films.

Although I am a lover of all humankind and feel for the underdog and the underprivileged, I like to see in films the lifestyles of the upper middle class and the sophisticated rich in various parts of the world as depicted in the cinema.

One such film was *Dosar*. Its meaning in Bengali is 'The Companion'. It was like an excellent thriller and full of mystery and at the same time a study in human behaviour with an undertone of compassion particularly in the antagonist in the story. The screenplay and direction is by Rituparo Gosh, a new Bengali director.

Let me give you the synopsis of the film as conceived by the producers.

'*Dosar* is set against the backdrop of urban and contemporary Kolkatta. Kaushik and Kaberi seem to have a content married life until one incident shatters the glass house of their matrimony. Kaushik's infidelity is brutally exposed. Love is put to the test. Loyalties are betrayed and duties are questioned. Kaberi is torn between love for her under-the-weather husband and coping with his unfaithfulness.

While the wife in Kaberi badly wants to see Kaushik healthy and happy again, the strong woman in her hates the fact that she is nursing the very man who had deceived her trust. All the characters deal with the complexities of their own lives while trying to understand the true meaning of what a 'companion' (*dosar*) really means in our lives. Every character is unique and has its own approach to real life'.

I liked best the acting of Konkona Sen Sharma, who portrayed the role of a righteous woman, yet giving credence to the Indian values of a married woman. The others - Prasenjit Chatterjee as the husband particularly - also played their roles convincingly. Aveek Mukhopadhyay and the

editing by Arghya Kamal Mitra add to the lustre of the film made in black and white. This enables the sharp contrast in images and psyche of the characters.

I would like to see the film again.

The director of the film Rituparano had previously edited a popular magazine in Bengali, *Anandalok*. He has made 14 films so far and 12 of them had won national awards in India.

## X. **Among the Kerala Movie Freaks**

*(Daily News - January 04, 2017)*

The International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) of the State in Southern India was held from December 9 to 16 featuring with an array of 185 cinematic creations, both new and old films of artistic value depicting contemporary social and personal issues from 62 countries. Obviously one could not see all the films at the festival screened in 14 theatres at various places in Kerala City, Thiruvananthapuram. I could manage to see only 13 films selected at random.

Most of the films shown had a political slant with left leanings and centred on torture, aftermath of war situations and the like.

It is impossible to review analytically each and every film I saw. Further, while the seats available were limited more than 3000 people from various parts of India flocked to see the films. I could not choose the films I wanted to see because there were very long queues. At my age of 80 years, I couldn't bear standing for hours to get a seat. The enthusiastic cinegoers were crazy to rush in. Some of them were seated on the floor and some stood standing.

So, what I could do was to go to a theatre where it was not crowded and watch whatever films I could see irrespective of their relative merits.

Some of the films I liked are, *Where are My Shoes* (2016) by Kioumars Pourahamed, *The Age of Shadows* (2016) by Jee-Woon Kim, *Maj-Rat Ketaki* (2016) by Santwana Bardoloi, *Aayiraththil Oruwan* (2009) by Sibi Malayil, *Strange Heaven* (2015) by Dariusz Gajewski, *illegitimate* (2016) by Adrian Sitaru, *Quick Change* (2013) by Eduardo W.Roy.

All these films were with English subtitles.

Let me now give you briefly what the above films were trying to portray with some of my impressions.

I like the Iranian film, 'Where are my Shoes?' best because I was personally interested in people affected by the Alzheimer's disease. It is a superbly edited and photographed film in colour. It is about an ageing man living alone even if he has immense wealth and all the comforts. But the tragic part of his life is he has an estranged wife gone abroad. He loved his only daughter. He could remember her only as a child. He could remember the past and forgets everything present. But the positive thing in the film is that whatever the doctors say of this incurable disease, happiness and restoration of love and understanding by the return of his wife and the child now grown up into a woman he gradually understands the present and becomes a normal person.

'The Age of Shadows' is a superb spy thriller with fast editing and panoramic view of Korea under the Japanese occupation involving a Japanese policeman's predicament in struggling to support the underground Resistance Movement and to save his life from torture by the invading Japanese army. I liked the playing of the Japanese army commander.

The backdrop is at the end of 1920s. The recreation of the setting is appreciable. There is a breathtaking sequence set on a train carrying explosives from Shanghai to Korea. The film is an epic period drama.

The Assam film is by a friend of mine Dr. Santwana Bardoloi, who was a regular visitor to the film festivals held in Goa, India. This is her first in filmmaking. And she has successfully brought a social awakening film involving disparities and caste among other differences in her State. The Malayalam has human interest story of philanthropist who was about to die. He tests a victimized bankrupt man in debt of the latter's genuinely expressed love towards the former and settles all his debts. Although it is a sentimental film, it tries to show the humiliation of the victim who borrows money from unscrupulous money lenders to settle the account that necessitated for the sake of his sister's wedding.

A Polish man, woman and a girl child immigrate to Sweden from Poland. The woman particularly is arrogant and aggressive and suspects that her husband has an affair with another Swedish woman. They are not in good terms and care less of their growing child. The Swedish bureaucracy finds the child is abused and ill-treated by her parents and take the child away to a foster parents. The ensuing drama is trying to prove that the Swedish regulations are harsh on a child that has a different culture. Her parents become normal and begin to love their child more. It is a film with psychological dimensions, as well as a depiction of diversity in culture.

'Illegitimate' is another psychological film and involves an attempt to abort a fetus conceived by incest relationship. It is a complicated drama but ends well.

## **A NOTE ON LANKAN TAMIL FILMS**

### **There's scope for regional Tamil Films**

*(Sunday Observer - March 10, 1996)*

In the northern part of Sri Lanka, films had been made in the Tamil language recently. These are short films, documentaries and feature films. Yet I did not have the opportunity of seeing any of these films so far.

Apart, from these, films are made in other parts of the world ( I am not referring to the Tamil films made in India) by Sri Lankan Tamils, depicting the Sri Lankan lifestyles. These films are understandably of good technical quality. I haven't seen these films either.

In reality, the quality of Sri Lankan Tamil films could be judged by taking into account all these films. However, we have to depend on the evaluation of the other Tamil films produced in Sri Lanka some decades ago. Such a condensed version of our evaluation appeared in the British journal, *Framework*, No. 37.

We learn that since the 1950s, more than 50 Tamil films had been produced in Sri Lanka, and of these only 36 had been screened. These Tamil films could be classified as follows: short films (16 mm), dubbed films from Sinhala, full-length feature films in Tamil and Lanka-India joint venture films.

Samuthayam (Society), and Paasa Nila (the Affectionate Moon) were made on 16 mm.

The Sinhala films dubbed into Tamil were: Kusumalatha, Kaliuga Kaalam, Naanku Ladcham,

Yaar Aval? Sumathi Engae? Oru Thalai Kaathal, Pani Malarhal, Ivalum Oru Penn, Ajasatha.

The 26 full-length feature films were:

Thottakari, Kadamayin Ellai, Taxi Driver, Nirmala, Manjalum Kungumamum, Venn Sanghu, Kuththu Vilakku, Meenavap Penn, Puthiya Kartru, Komaligal, Ponmani, Kaathirupaen Unakaha, Naan Ungal Thoalan, Vaadai Katru, Thentraluam Puyalum. Theivam Thantha veedu, Emalihal, Anuragham, Engalil Oruvan. Maamiyar Veedu, Nenjukku Neethi, Iraththathin Iraththam, Aval Oru Jeeva Nathi, Naadu Poatra Vaalha, Paathi Maariy, Paruvangal, Sharmilavin Ithayaragam. One of the above films, Theivam Thantha Veedu was made in 70mm.

With collaboration from India, the following joint ventures were made: Pilot Premnath, Thee, Nangooram, Mohana Punnahai, Vasanthathil Oar Vaana Vil.

Henry Chandrawansa, who made the first Tamil film, died while making another Tamil film called Geethanjali. It could not be completed.

Among the Sri Lankan Tamil films I have seen, the following could be considered as reasonably of some standard: Taxi Driver, Nirmala, Kuththu Vilakku, Ponmani, Kaathirupen Unakaha, Naan Ungal Thoalan, Vaadai Kartru, Aval Oru Jeevanathi, Naadu Poatra Vaalhka.

A critical evaluation of each of the notable films is avoided in this brief note where only statistics are given for the information of the uninitiated.

Certain realities should be taken into account in understanding the Tamil language films made in Sri Lanka.

There is no archive of films made. Most of the prints



have not been preserved. Many were destroyed by fire in the infamous Black July of 1983. The dialect spoken by the Jaffna Tamils is not understood by Tamils living in other parts of the country. The speed with which Tamil is spoken in the north of Sri Lanka is so fast, that it arrests clarity and enunciation. Since the number of Tamil-speaking people (this includes Muslims) living in various parts of the country is far greater than the number of people living in the north, they fail to grasp some of the meanings, when they see local films, which portray the Jaffna Tamil community.

What one can do, in these circumstances, is to make telefilms, depicting life in regional terms. I have a feeling that in the north, they are taking such regional films. Similarly, people in the east and in other areas can make such regional films for the television. In this manner expenses can be reduced and there will be a choice for the audience to watch it or leave it.

Technically, commercially and content-wise the range of experience depicted in Indian Tamil films is much wider than in Sri Lankan Tamil language films. They cannot compete with some of the average Tamil films created in Tamilnadu.

## REVIEWS OF INTERNATIONAL FILMS

### A. Sex and violence the paradox in films.

*(Gleanings Column - The Island - June 15, 1991)*

I am one of those aesthetically-minded people who feel that sex is less harmful than gory violence.

Sex is of course a chemical or biological reaction between persons who attract each other and it is part of the overall composition of what is known as 'love'. In a way, therefore sex is love. But violence is not love. It is hatred. It is destructive. It often leads to killing. Please do not get me wrong: I am not an advocate of indiscriminate or illicit or illegitimate sex. I am only talking of sex as depicted in artistic films.

What we see in our theatres today are films depicting gruesome violence. Scenes that are chilling, blood-curdling, and primitive kind of slaughtering as well as sophisticated murder. Such violent scenes in films help only to beget violence in society at large. This is evidenced by what is happening in this country for the past two or three decades.

Hard core pornography (really 'blue films') should not be allowed for public screening. But soft-porn or even copulation can be shown on the screen at this point of time, because in this 'age of transparency', exposure to sex is inevitable and therefore it is prudish to draw a curtain over physical expressions of love. Furthermore, why underestimate the sensitivities of the cinegoers of the 90s and censor films, which have not-so-harmful effects on the people who see them.

We must also note that there are some 'commercial' films or what is known as the 'middle cinema' (in any case

they are both not the same) which trade on sex but are also artistically made. So why not allow such films with 'A' certificate and censor gory or mawkish scenes in violent films.

People take to violence easily these days partly because of watching the diabolic calculated, awesome depictions in total disregard for fine and tasteful expositions in films. The craze for barbarous and violent scenes is also partly due to the advocacy of some radical and impotent political organisations that violence and destruction are the only ways to capture power in an easy way. People are also influenced by events shown on the TV. These are political events happening all over the world but they are not pre-meditated individual acts of terrorism as we often see in films. Of course, because of the global communication network one cannot shut one's eyes when such events are shown on the TV. And these are events in contemporary history of wars and armaments, which the civilised among us deplore. And they are passing scenes.

In films, however, the scenes are impressionistic. They are entwined with a story. It is dramatic and imaginative. So memorable.

Talking of violence in films, we learn about a film called 'The Silence of the Lamb', made by a Welsh actor Anthony Hopkins. We understand that the film is about an FBI agent on the trail of 'Buffalo Bill', a sexually deviant psychopath who skins his female victims in order to make himself a bespoke body-suit. Hopkins plays the captured serial killer, Dr.Hannibal.

New York Times critic Canyon James has condemned this film. He says that it is as nothing more than psycho-killer Stone's cranked up to suit an age, 'swamped in psycho-

babble and accustomed to seeing bodies explode in action-adventure movies.'

But what I cannot accept is what one of my favourite Holloywood directors, Martin Scorsese has said. His 'Deer Hunter' and 'Taxi Driver' with Robert de Niro were excellent but his latest film 'Godfellas' is described as violent as any sickening violent film. This once-leftist director has said, 'We need the catharsis of bloodletting and decaptitation like the ancient Romans needed it, as ritual but not real-like Roman Circus'.

Sophisticated sex if tastefully done, as in the sculptures in ancient Hindu temples (Khajeraho, for instance) is always welcome and soothing in a depressed society. The Hindus cared for the sex, the driving force as symbolised by the phallic symbol (Sivalingam) and Shakthi.

## **B. The Romance of Love : Two Films**

*(Gleanings Column - The Island - June 22, 1991)*

It might seem strange that as I gratefully linger towards the mid fifties, there lurks an irresistible desire to be romantic and nostalgic on felt experiences and acquired knowledge of romance.

The two films - one German, the other American - I saw last week (May 13 at the German Cultural Institute and May 14 at the American Centre) were beautiful and aesthetically satisfying and added an extra dimension to my romantic preoccupation.

The point here is that when a host of films claimed by discriminating cinegoers and critics as good entertainment

are available, our own National Film Corporation is determined to get only stupid and third-rate violent films for our literate and cinematically seasoned audiences. What a letdown and a terrible insult assaulted on all of us.

O.K. Let's come to what the two films Romanticise : Love is a many - splendoured thing.

First Paul Verhoeven's 'Heidelberg Romance' (1951). What is striking about the films is that despite 40 years old, it is still a neatly done film in today's context too. 'It is pure entertainment, a comic play without any dramatic spirit' says a GCI release, but to me it goes deeper than that and is a lyrical celluloid with good measure of 'dramatic irony' thrown in.

The film stars O.M. Fischer and other good looking men and women. The director of the film also plays a minor role as a detective. Man-woman relationship is subject to varying understandings and interpretations. That's what these two films are saying.

They call 'Moonstruck' (1987) 'a contemporary romantic comedy'. But here again, it was more than a comedy, because it has written it layers and layers of psychological insights over all acting, a kaleidoscope of colour, rhythm, and sight and sound all just in right proportions.

The film won six Academy Awards. Cher, the ravishing and inimically stunning beauty as an Italian American Cinderella steals the show.

The restrained cool performances of the elders, matched against the passionate Latin young lovers' rendition are a study in the characteristic anatomy of love.

I am sure you too would enjoy these films in your own ways if you happen to see them sooner or later.

## C. A Compelling South African Film

*(The Passing Scene Column - Sunday Island - February 02, 1992)*

A compelling South African film was deservedly billed to be the finale of the recently concluded 23rd International Film Festival of India (Jan 10 -20) in Bangalore, the capital city of Karnataka state, where ethnic violence reportedly engineered by the Kannadigas against the Temilians (ironically both are from the same Dravidian stock) on the sharing of the waters of the Cauveri river.

This was the first time a South African film had entered an international film festival in this part of the world. The film was called 'The road to Mecca' pregnant with meaning. It was also the first time a Cambodian film directed by a Vietnamese was shown in an Indian international film festival. The 500 odd delegates from all over the world who attended the festival also had the privilege of viewing films from other South Eastern countries. More about them later. Let's record our impression on the South African film for the present.

One of the internationally known dramatists in English today is the South African Athol Fugard. It was one of his powerful plays. 'The Road to Mecca' that has come to the screen now. Intrinsicly a dialogue drama, it has however, cinematic potentialities as well, as evidenced by this production. Incidentally it won the South African Oscar.

The playwright Athol Fugard, himself plays the male role with remarkable precision and magnetism. Besides him there are two more players coloured widow and her friend. Brilliant piece of theatre unfolding the dramatic content in a convincing manner. Although the metically the film was about a widow's courage to survive against unsurmountable

odds, it is also an analysis of the workings of minds. Eventually it is love and genuine feelings that transcend petty prejudices and hatred.

A teacher of drama Roy Sargeant has produced this film with a touch of poetic poignancy.

Incidentally, 'Mecca' is only a metaphor in the film and it has nothing to do with the founders Islamic centre.

'The Road to Mecca' has been co-directed by Peter Goldsmid and Athol Fugard. The latter had written a dozen plays on the horrors of 'apartheid'. His recent play is called 'My Africa, My Children'. Fugard's other plays include 'The Blood Knot' and 'A Lesson from Aloe's.'

Peter Goldmid is an award winning film critic, theatre director, TV director and screenplay writer.

For the benefit of our readers who have neither read 'The Road to Mecca' nor seen the cinemetic translation of the play, here is a summary of the content.

(Incidentally I was tempted to compare this film with another drawing room cinema, also adapted from a play by the 'Absurd Theatre' man the American Edward Allee's 'who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' made in the 60s. The film starred the legendary Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor).

'After a life of mundane conformity in her marriage, Helen (played brilliantly by Cathy) was a widow at 50. Ostracised by the small, god-fearing and bigoted community when she stopped going to church he found inspiration in building her own, beautiful Mecca, a magical sculpture garden of owls, peacocks, camels and pyramids. For 15 years in her world of self-imposed isolation, she works away with dedication. Helen's only friend is Elsa, (superb acting by the actress, whose name I can't remember'. Her speech is

akin to Sri Lankan accent), a tough - minded and rebellious school teacher who believes in Helden's Vision and assertion of individuality Elsa is embittered by her own crisis after an affair with a married man.

When she receives a letter from a depressed Helen - who fears the end - she makes the hot 500 mile journey to visit her in her crucial hour of need. While visiting Helen, Elsa confronts the village pastor (Athol Fugard). Marices, who only wants Helen to sign papers which will admit her to an old people's home. The bond of friendship between the two women is tested to the limit as Elsa fights Marices for Helen's freedom. (Festival news - IFFI '92 - Jan 18, Bangalore).

This column will review selected films shown at the festival later.

#### **D. Clint Eastwood as a director**

*(Gleanings Column - The Island - March 20, 1994)*

A hero on the celluloid of the Western genre, the Dollars Series fame, Clint Eastwood's newest directorial effort resulted in an over-whelmingly appreciable film. The film 'A Perfect World', an entry at the International Film Festival held in Calcutta, Jan 10- 20, was a popular film.

The English press all over the world, has reacted to this film already and naturally the reviews had been of mixed sentiments. Being a man from this part of the world, I cannot conceal the fact that I am sentimental at times, and this time I was touched by the relationship - a beautiful bond - between a charitable kidnapper and a childlike, but smart and intelligent boy- the victim.



The melodrama heightened rightly at the end, with the custodian of law (played in a cool, calculated and collective manner by Eastwood himself) who is humane, loses his cool, when his aide shoots down the kidnapper too soon, before the possibility of a good thing happening. He literally calls this hasty action in foul terms. As a person who sat through the film with involvement I too described the experience in the same way.

So the film though not an artistic creation in the European sense of the cinema, it has yet a very good 'well made' film, from U.S. And it is absurd to look down upon all American films, because the style of film making there is unique. Some of the best films produced in recent times have come from across the Atlantic. What is obvious in American film is that it is structured well to an extent that it sacrifices the delineation of characters gradually and in a cultural context.

The visuals - the outdoor photography, the domestic tensions, the gentlemanly appreciation of the culprit of the innocence of a child, the child's indifferent attitude towards the kidnapper at the start turning into awe and respect and in an agony of love or affection are all brilliantly conceived, composed and transmitted. And a critical but not a boorish audience reacted well to the film.

The part played by Kevin Costner as the softening of a hardened criminal is highly professional and endearing. Clint Eastwood desires to create 'A Perfect World', amidst an imperfect setup, but the solid reality hits strongly against his face. Nevertheless, his directorial effort comes unscathed in near perfection.

**P.S. :**

An Indian friend whose mother tongue is Bengali, and living in Colombo temporarily told me that we had been uncharitable to the Calcutta People in the 'Gleanings' column of Feb 20, in regard to their refusal to speak English.

He said that English, in fact, is widely spoken in Calcutta, and that I might not have met the resident Banglas in Greater Calcutta, but only spoken to people from various places, who converge in this great metropolis. It was possible.

**E. Derek Jarman : An iconoclast in British cinema**

*(The Island - August 1, 1995)*

Being a natural hetrossexual person, my immediate reaction in viewing the retrospective of the British filmmaker Derek Jarman, was one of repugnance and repulsion.

In this festival (June and July) at the British Council, 14 films were shown. The underlying theme in Derek Jarman's (1942 -94) films is a plea that to be a 'gay is not a crime!' It is an irony that he died of AIDS.

Jarman is a brilliant filmmaker as an artist and there is no gainsaying in the fact that true to the grammar of the cinema, his films are 'moving images' with biblical classical and contemporary allusions. One sees in his films, the whole gamut of the western classical culture strained into sardonic picturisation.

Context wise, he reverses the conventional appreciation of the body beautiful - the 'female form', into the aesthetic summation of the 'male-male' sexual pleasures.

It is homosexuality of the males and the dethroning of the importance of the 'female principle'. In a way all his films are anti-feminist. The woman is relegated to an inferior and negative position.

Deliberately slow in moving, the film, however, is a study of images - nature, male-male relationship, iconoclasm, antiestablishment and anachronism.

Jarman is a political animal too and violence and love is equated in his films. He interpreted classical works like Shakespeare's 'Tempest' and Christopher Marlowe's 'Edward II' in his own style, which is fresh, one must admit.

The function of music with special scores of occidental and compositions marvellously compensates the boredom and uneasiness one feels in the recurrence of man and man kissing and fornicating.

'Quirky, but disarmingly charming', Derek Jarman is described as one of the great magicians of the film.

Except for the artificially informed filmmakers and knowledgeable film critics, most of us have not heard of him, nor have we seen his films before.

At the beginning of the festival, a 31 minute black and white film was shown. Ken McMullen made this film interviewing Jarman. It gave in advance what was to be expected.

'Sebastiane' was a film with Latin dialogue and English subtitles, and is set in Rome in AD 303. This is a story of a martyr, amidst depressing orgy of male copulation and necking and kissing of the mouth.

'Jubilee' depicts the meaninglessness (to most of us) of the lifestyles of the punk people. It is a transportation of Queen Elizabeth I to the late 70's in British lifestyle. Again

violent murders and homosexual orgies had been the order of the day at which the queen becomes saddened. She is transported back to her period.

Borrowing the title from a painting by Ford Maddore Brown, 'The Cast of England', Jarman portrays 'a relentlessly bleak picture of England'.

'The Tempest' turns out to be mysterious magical play, but it is enjoyable in the conventional sense. As said earlier, the music in all his films are fantastically invigorating.

The magical charm in 'Caravagio' is a subtle portrayal in vivid and subdued colour, tight editing and opt music, the story of a painter, his lover, and his consort. This is a stunningly beautiful film of human behaviour.

'The Angelic Conversation' is primarily a film of techniques and was utterly boring to me. As the programme note said : 'This film's emphasis is on images processing (have from super 8 to 35 mm and from black and white into colour'. It was made 10 years ago, and now technical virtuosity has gained far more advantages. Jarman reverses the Shakespearean 14 sonnets (those addressed to a young man rather than the dark lady) read by a woman.

'Edgard II' is also an interesting commentary on the degrading of a woman, even if she is a queen. The king rejects her sexual advancement and has his bodily needs satisfied by his male friend. I felt very sad for Isabella the Queen, who is badly treated by the males there. There is an ironic twist at the end of the story with Prince Edward, the son of Edward and Isabella, putting his mother and her lover into prison.

Though Jarman parodies 'The Last Supper' in his film 'The Garden', there is a religious element in this film as well as his other films.

'Wittgenstein' traces the philosopher's life until the very end. This is an intellectually satisfying film.

'In the Shadow of the Sun', 'Pirate Tape', 'Psychic Rally in Heaven', 'Sloane Square', 'A room of One's Own', are basically personal, musical and image oriented films.

Derek Jarman is an iconoclast in British cinema, which is an important aspect of the European culture and his films are remarkably different from the Hollywood films and those classical masterpieces directed by famous American directors.

## F. **Erotica - IFFI 1996**

*(Sunday Leader - February 4, 1996)*

The delegates and the media people thronged the 2,000 - seat auditorium at Siri Fort, New Delhi, during the International Film Festival of India (Jan 10 - 20) when **Erotic Tales - II** was screened. There was a mad rush for seats and viewers sat on the floor to catch a glimpse of erotica on the wide screen.

**Erotic Tales - II** is one in the series shown in India for the first time. **Erotic Tales - I** was shown last year in Bombay during the IFFI. It included an Indian director. Mani Kaul's film.

The producer of the series, Regina Ziegler, said at a press conference that she intends making at least three films every year in this category.

'My aim is to make 66 films during the next few years.' She said.

She added : 'There is no violence in my films. The

**Erotic Tales** series is not sex films because they do not have explicit sex scenes.'

Germany, Italy and Poland contribute to the making of this series. Regina Ziegler's consultant is a defrocked American, who was also present at the press conference.

**Erotic Tales - II** is an amalgam of three short films: **Sweetie** (Italy/Germany) directed by Cingia Jourini with Stephanie Sandrelli as an agent provocateur, **Hotel Paradise** (UK/Germany) directed by Nicholas Rocc: **Devilish Education** (Poland /Germany) directed by Janusz Majewski.

Except for the last mentioned filmlet, there was no erotic feeling arising, at least as far as I was concerned.

There was the sweet looking and aesthetically beautiful bodied Renata Dankewicz in **Devilish Education**, who compensated for the disappointment one encountered in the other two filmlets. (She was present at the festival. I spoke to this Polish adolescent. She is more at ease in French than in English). Wilfred Adamek's cinematography is excellent, the music of Mozart by Jerzy Satorowzki was exhilarating. The direction was befitting the tale.

A programme note on this film describes the story as follows:

Sonia, the milkmaid grazes cows in the placid countryside, and her life changes after she bathes naked in the river. An artist appears the next day and shows her a painting he has done of her in the nude. During his elaborate seduction, she is introduced to the finer pleasures of love making high art Mozart and haute cuisine, while her puritan community tries to explain itself to the new Sonia. I enjoyed the brief eroticism in the film.

I cannot say the same for the other two filmlets. **Sweetie** is about Anna who is trying to stay young and sexy. She tried diets, tacrobics and love potions from a fortune teller. But every treatment has unpleasant side - effects. Then she gets a bag of magic sweets, from which each sweet will make her seven years younger. But she takes all the sweets and disappears herself.

Utterly boring. The enjoyable part of the film, however, was the music by Shchubert.

**Hotel Paradise** was also an unconvincing film; however I enjoyed the enunciation of Vincent D'Onotrio. In this film, a woman wakes up with a hangover. She is also naked, and handcuffed to a man she cannot recognize. Even worse, she is to be married to another man in a grand mafia wedding. She can't find anything but her veil. Her handsome bedfellow advises her to leave town. But she can't. This man recites, Thomas Hardy's poems. Freudian or other interpretations? I frankly don't know. It was a silly, film.

The IFFI (International Film Festival of India) also had a number of good films. **Delinquent, Beyond The Blue, Leon, A Judgement In Stone, Ulysses' Gaze, Jefferson In Paris, Deep River, Cry The Beloved Country, The Cradle Song First of July, A mouth By the Lake, In the name of the Father, Casino, The Madness of King George, The Scarlet Lettr, Hammer and Sickle** and also other notable films. There were a few Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian and Hebrew films that were enjoyable. More about them later.

*K.S.Sivakumaran was one of three Sri Lankans invited to attend the International Film Festival 1996 in India in Delhi. The others were Prof. Wimal Dissanayake and Ashley Ratnavibushana. Over 250 films were screened.*

## G. **Lust among equals**

(*Sunday Leader* - February 25, 1996)

American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel 'The Scarlet Letter' passionately recreates some aspect of life of the first settlers in the New World. Douglas Day Stewart took liberties, naturally, to adapt it to the wide screen. Alex Thompson captured the shots, frame to frame, in lyrical compositions, under the overall supervision of Roland Joffe, who directed the film. The result: a sophisticated, spectacular, neat, high-class cinema, with an exhilarating score by John Barry (who incidentally was the composer for 'Cry The Beloved Country', another masterpiece at the IFFI 1996, New Delhi).

The film is characteristically, superfine American cinema (please do not designate it as a pompous Hollywood film.) It is a treat to listen, watch and hear, a passionate, psychological, sociological and marvellously moving story unfolding on celluloid.

It is not only a director's film, but also a showpiece of remarkable acting by well known contemporary actors in the English screen. Demi Moore, Gary Oldman (he appears in *Leon* too, which was shown at the festival, playing a diametrically different role), Robert Duvall, Robert Prosky. The accent in speech is unmistakably British and thus easily understood. The delivery of profound lines in the script by Oldman, in particular, is mesmeric. I love the drama, the vision, the image, the light, the sound, the colour and the music and the meaningful editing by Thorn Noble, in this 135 minutes epic-like cinema.

Not surprisingly the director is a man from the theatre. But he is also a fantastic docu-film creator. Remember, The



'Killing Fields'? Yes, it's Roland Joffe. An Academy award winner, Joffe's other films are *The Mission*, *Fat Man and Little Boy*, *City of Joy* and *Super Mario Bros* films which we are yet to see. Why not the British Council or the USIS organise a Roland Joffe film festival in Colombo? As our readers would know, Joffe graduated in English and drama from Manchester University. He worked extensively in British theatre and directed some television series.

To those who are not familiar with the novel, the heroine is Hester Prynne. She is a free spirited impulsive woman. Her husband is believed to be impotent.

She severs the ties that bind her to this violent man. But she is amidst a Puritan community. She commits adultery with a virile, masculine, intelligent and adorable preacher. This comes to light and society forces her to wear a letter 'A' for adultery. She wears it proudly.

This role is played by diminutive Demi Moore. Should I say more? Style, loveliness, and expressiveness. When she sees Gary Oldman in the nude bathing, I couldn't help but remember Lady Chatterly seeing Mellors in the manner in D.H.Lawrence's novel and the film version.

But more than Demi Moore, it is Gary Oldman's performance that is scintillating and professional. Again, the image of Burt Lancaster in *Elmer Gantry* came to my mind.

Going deeper into the film's thesis, one discovers, as enunciated in the programme note, 'that *The Scarlet Letter* expands on themes only touched on by Hawthorne, including relations between the European settlers and the native peoples of the American continent, and the self-serving allegations of witchcraft for which the Puritans were notorious.'

The film is really a successful examination of the 'violent clashes of cultures, a conflict between desire and the need for order, between passion and shame, between love and fear.'

As in almost all the films in the New Delhi festival love with a capital L is the overriding theme in the film.

## H. **Lust and Revenge**

*(The Island - February 22, 1997)*

Paul Cox, the Holland- born Australian film director has used our own Anoja Weerasinghe in his film **Island** (1989), and in his latest film **Lust and Revenge** (1996). Paul Grabowsky had composed scintillating and melodic Indian music recorded in Colombo. This was done before the film was shot.

I have seen only four of his films so far: **Island, Golden Braid, The nun and the Bandit and Lust and Revenge**. I didn't like them very much because the wholesome effect of these films was one of morbidity. But **Lust and Revenge** was emotionally satisfying.

'Music is the basis of creativity and film is more related to music and dance' says Paul Cox.

Nino Martinetti who handles the camera in a studious manner thus representing the nuances in the characterization.

Cox introduces male nudity in this film in a discreet manner, Nicholas Hope is statuesque. There are three women in the film played by Gosia Dobrovolska (a Polish actress, very seductive intellectually and also physically), Claudia Karvan (typically American rich Seductress role) and Victoria Eagger (as the sculptress).

The story line :

The loved and wealthy Georgina Oliphant has commissioned a sculpture. Her father George, is happy about it because he can get a tax deduction. Lily the artist welcomes the opportunity to create a work that will her recognition. Karl - Heinz, the artist's model, has long been frustrated by his wife Cecilia has joined a new religious group that practices purity of mind and body.

As they start working together things heat up. Georgina is on an anti-depressant that has unusual side effects. Kari-Heinz enjoys his work and Georgina as well.

The end of the fiscal year approaches and George finds he needs a bigger tax shelter so he asks for a bigger sculpture, Cecilia is the answer to the problem but she makes few decisions of her own. And the film is an expose of the real than in the name of art business cult and sex. I liked it very much.

This film was shown at IFFI 1997 at Thiruvananthapuram in January.

## I. **The French Connection**

(*Midweek Mirror - The Island - April 2, 1997*)

One of the Existentialist, but funny film shown at the IFFI 1997 was *Fantome Avey Chauffeur*. The English title given to it was *Ghosts in Transit*. Those of us who have enjoyed the acting of Philippe Noiret in the continental and Hollywood films in the late 50s and 60s will enjoy this film as well. Its director is Gerard Qury. We in Sri Lanka have not had the opportunity to see any of his earlier films.

This is a story about the relationship between a big industrialist and his chauffeur. They know each other for 15 years, but they seldom spoke with each other. They die, one day after another, but they are at a loss to know how it happened.

But after life too, they are uneasy. They are not equals. They don't become friends. They try hard to learn to coexist. The film is implicit in its statement of class relationship.

The other French films shown at the Festival were: *Irma Vep*, directed by Olivier Assayas, featuring Maggie Chenug, *The Jaguar* directed by Francis Veber, featuring Jean Reno, *Man/Woman/User's Manual*, directed by Claude Lelouch, featuring his life and *The Pupil* directed by Olivier Schatzky.

The film *The Jaguar* is about three different personalities. Wanu, Campana and Perrin. One evening they meet on a lift. Wanu is an Amazon Indian, with spear and ritual paint. He is on an assignment in Europe - to save the rain forest. Campana is his interpreter. He is a specialist in South American dialects. He too is at home in the jungle than in the city. Perrin had been leading a superficial life. But it changes with his contact with Wanu. Remember Jean Reno in *Leon* which was shown in Colombo recently? He is there in this film to keep you interested.

*The Pupil* is based on the novel by Henry James. The director is a famous filmmaker in contemporary France. In his words 'The story of a guileless tutor fascinated by his pupil slides us along the invisible wall erected between the world of childhood and that of adults, a wall penetrable only try those special beings touched by a particular grace.' The film is set in the late 19th century.

I liked *Man/Woman/User's Manual* for the sophistication in filmmaking and the psychological interpretation of the protagonists. This is the story of two men who were not destined to meet. Little by little, they become inseparable friends. One has everything and wants what everyone else has. The other has little but cherishes the little. For each man the other is a model, a user's manual. They are both in love, and the core of the story are women. Fascinating.

Claude Lelouch's wife, very attractive and intelligent woman, who speaks English very well, acts in this film.

At a press conference, the French director said:

'Whenever I watch a film which I have made, for the first time, I watch it as a critic and try to find out where I have made mistakes. It helps me a filmmaker.'

He expects his players to respond spontaneously to the situation in my film without becoming monotonous. He doesn't give the script to his artistes.

The French cinema is still alive despite Hollywood.

## **J. Miguel Littin and American cinema**

*(The Island - April 27, 1997)*

In the 60s and 70s, Latin American films fascinated the young students of that time. Glauber Rocha's films for instance. Particularly after the successful Cuban Revolution in 1950, 'Cinema of Protest', emerged as a particular genre in filmmaking. The practitioners of this kind of filmmaking felt they could change the world with their realistic portrayals of oppression, repression and revolutionary struggles.

But since of late, Latin American cinema has changed. There is now a humanistic touch, with protest subtly underlined.

At the IFFI 1997 at Thiruvananthapuram five Latin American films were shown.

**A Matter of Faith (Marcos Loayza), the Foursome (Fabio Berreto), The Ship of Dreams (Ciro Duran), Naked with Oranges (Luis Alberto Lamata).** Besides these films as a tribute to Miguel Littin, his **Shipwrecked** was also shown. This film director was present in the Kerala capital for the festival.

Miguel Littin is a famous Chilean artiste. He is a writer, dramatist and film-maker.

He says that 'only if you are able to recognize yourself in the past, is it possible to come to terms with the present.' His film produced in 1993, **Shipwrecked** tells the story of Avon. It is as follows:

'Avon returns to his country after 20 years of exile. He is searching for a lost nation, a lost understanding, and his lost ties with those who stayed behind. He enters the house in which he spent his childhood, turning down dark corridors and up winding stairs, searching for his father and brother.'

Universally hailed as the most brilliant filmmaker from Chile Miguel Littin (born in 1942) underlined humanism and compassion in his films, although he was a political activist.

President Allende made him the head of the Chile films, a national film production organization, in 1970. But in 1973 there was a coup d'etat. Littin had to emigrate to Mexico. He made a number of films. The Promised Land (1972), Sadino (1990) are notable among them.

At the press conference, Littin said, 'Political or social cinema was not propaganda, but an art reflecting the complexities of the human situation. Life was like a chess board, where every move appeared similar but had a different impact.'

His film **Shipwrecked** was not autobiographical, but a collection of the feelings of the hundreds who had returned to Chile after living in exile.

Littin said that his film 'does capture some of my experiences, but I have also drawn from experiences of others as told to me by some people'.

In his film, there was no ship that was wrecked. But it was a symbol of state of indecision.

While we are on the subject of Latin American cinema, here is a resume of some of the stories of other films from the region:

Bolivian film, **A Matter of Faith**.

Domingo a sculptor of religious statues, fumbles through life just barely surviving. He is offered a thousand times his usual fee for a statue of the virgin to be made for a gangster, known as the Toad, who is grateful for a successful year of stealing. Domingo has to deliver the statue to a remote town. He doesn't have a vehicle and he doesn't have the time, so he asks another man, Joaquin to drive him there in time for the coming religious celebration.

Domingo's simple faith clashes with Joaquin's cynicism, but that doesn't spoil their adventures on the way.'

Brazilian film, **The Foursome**.

'The screen-play is based on a novel by Jose Clemente Pozenato. In the early 1900s, two couples in Brazil set out to the country as pioneers. Angelo is completely

involved in his work and his wife Teresa, is disappointed in the marriage. She falls in love with her cousin Pierino's husband, Massimo.

They elope.

Angelo and Pierino gradually overcome the hurt caused by this betrayal, meet the struggles of pioneer life and finally fall in love with each other.

Quaestilho (The Foursome) is the name of a card game in which, sometimes, you must betray your partner to win.'

Colombia/ Mexico/ Venezuela film, **The Ship of Dreams.**

'Six Columbians hide away on a ship sailing to the U.S. One of them has an accident while the ship is at sea, and others are faced with a dilemma. Should they keep quiet so as not to jeopardise their pursuit of the American dream? Or should they save their friend's life by seeking the captain's help? Which is more important to them, the solidarity of their friendship or their individual dreams?'

Venezuelian film, **Naked with Oranges.**

'The story is set in 19th century Venezuela. An Indian soldier, called the captain, sees a white woman, poor and hungry. She had followed the dogs that trail behind the troops. A dim memory a dream of paintings and oranges, brings them together.

They are rich of the combat and flee, searching for a new life. The captain finds a good luck charm that will help in gambling, but there is still a price to pay.'



## K. Life and art captured in Chinese film

(*The Island - Express - May 3, 1997*)

Two Chinese films shown at the IFFI '97, *Red Cherry* and *Red Swan* proved to the world that the quality of Chinese films, both in content and form, have surpassed other film makers in the region, particularly South-East Asia, given the fact that freedom of expression even through art was restricted until a few years ago.

*Red Swan* clearly points out that the vicissitudes of life are closely tied to the changes in the art of ballet dancers.

The film centres around two ballets: the classical *Swan Lake* and the modern *The Red Detachment of Women*.

There are four friends involved in these ballets. The film really depicts the loves and frustrations of these people. They grew up together for nearly 40 years.

They first perform *Swan Lake* under the guidance of the famous Russian master Gusher. Later they choreograph *The Red Detachment of Women*.

The film is a visual beauty of dance and rhythm, brilliantly captured by the cinematographer Shen Xilin. The appreciable tempo of the film is largely due to the smooth editing by Wei Chunbao and Ren Zhong. Music is imaginatively interpreted by Ma Ding.

The players are relatively unknown to most of us in this part of the world: Xo Songzi, V. Tihonor, Xu Yyazun, Xing Muishan, Dong Zihizhi, and Lin Liankun.

The director of the film is Gu Rong. His earlier films *Peking Dutch Restaurant* and *Unwelcome Lady* had been mentioned by international film critics. Gu Rong graduated

from the Direction Department of the Central Drama Academy in China way back 1987.

The Chinese Embassy in Colombo can get down this film for the benefit of at least lovers of ballet.

## L. Cavafy : A Grecian Film

(*Film Notes - Sunday Leader - June 22 - 28, 1997*)

The cradle of western civilization also produced modern poets like C.A.Cavafy. He was born in Egypt in 1863. One can gather information on him in Lawrence Durrells' *Alexandria Quarter*. He called himself a 'poet of old age'. He did not like traditional Christian values.

He was homosexual. He abhorred patriotism. Such a man is an interesting subject for a film.

And indeed a film was made in colour last year lasting 85 minutes and shown at the IFFI 1997 at Thiruvananthapuram in January this year.

Iannis Samaragadis is the name of the director. We in this part of the world have not heard of him, but we are told that he studied film direction in Paris.

He has directed a large number of television films and fifty documentaries on literary subjects. There you are, lovers of literature and cinema, take note of the name of the Greek filmmaker.

How does Iannis Samaragadis portray Cavafy in his film?

Let me brief you with the stroyline.

The year is 1933, and the locale is Alexandria in Egypt.

The Greek poet Cavafy is ill. A young writer visits him. He is engaged in writing a book on the poet's life and work. He has come to obtain the approval of the ageing writer before publishing it.

The young man reads his manuscript. The poet is lost in memories of his life. Flashbacks of his childhood, his mother, their escape during the Arab uprising into Constantinople come into the scene.

In Constantinople Cavafy learned from his grandfather the history of his family. The city was enveloped with criticism. Cavafy learned the nature of his capacity to love.

In later life, he meets another poet, Mavroudis. His unrequited love for Mavroudis drives Cavafy to desperation.

The music in the film is exhilarating. The score is by Vangelis.

The cinematography editing and acting all round are appreciable.

I liked this film, so would you, if you are artistically inclined.

## **M. The making of Mahatma**

*(Midweek Mirror - The Island - June 4, 1997)*

Prof. Fatima Meer is the Director of the Institute of Black Research University of Natal in South Africa. Among her books is *The Apprenticeship of a Mahatma*.

It is a portrayal of the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in South Africa during the last part of the 19th Century. He had gone there in 1893 to settle a case for a wealthy Indian settled there. He was victim of racial bias. He

stayed in South Africa and struggled against racial apartheid and discrimination. He faced violence with non-violent-satyagraha. His non-violent attitude led him to constant search for the truth. His family had to face hardships on account of that.

In South Africa, M.K.Gandhi worked as a medical volunteer, an advocate (he was already a barrister) fighting for the rights of Indian labour, protesting the permit system, and fighting taxes on coloured people.

It is an interesting story describing some facets of the great Mahatma Gandhi.

Can this be made into a film?

The well-kown Indian filmmaker Shyam Benegal thought so. He made a film in English called *The Making of The Mahatma*.

Produced by the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) of India, and the South African Broadcasting Corporation, this 151 - minute film was shown at the IFFI 1997. I had the opportunity to see only a part of the film, but made it a point to see it in full later.

Artistically made, the film casts Rajit Kapur as Mahatma Gandhi and Pallavi Joshi as his wife Kasturi Bai. Ashok Mehta's shooting of the film is high class. Rajit Kapur plays his role sensitively and has a style. We get the impression that Mahatma Gandhi in his earlier years was very aggressive and articulate. Kavita Joshi, an actress, who normally plays serious roles in films, acts with grace and charm. Also in the film are Keith Stevenson, Paul Slabolepszy, Himat Devnarain and Strini Pillai. Vanraj Bhatia has scored the music. A note about the director: Shyam Benegal was interested in photography from his

12th year. He is a M.A. graduate. He worked in the field of advertising. Then he made documentary films. His documentary on the internationally known Bengali director Satyajit Ray is a classic.

With the resurgence of good Indian cinema in the 1970s, Shyam Benegal too made his grade. He has made 18 feature films, two feature length documentaries, four tele-series and innumerable short films.

Shyam Benegal is now in his early sixties. He is an interesting person to converse with. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1976 and the Padma Bushan in 1991.

The Making of Mahatma won three national awards: the best English language film, the special Jury Prize for the director, and the best actor ward for Rajit Kapur.

The Indian High Commission in Colombo may consider having a Shyam Bengal Retrospective in our country.

## **N. A Film from Kazhakstan - Prisoner of the Mountains** *(The Island - June 21, 1997)*

She is indeed a bewitching beauty. A seductive lass. She is playing a beautiful role as a Muslim girl in the mountainous region of Kazhakstan. It is a love story amidst war. And it is near contemporary. Two countries Russia and Kazhakstan have jointly produced this film, directed by the award - winning Russian director, Sergei Bodvov.

The story is set during the present day Chechen-Russian war. Two Russian soldiers are held prisoners in a mountain village by an old man, Abdul Murat. (What a personality he is! strong, tall, calculative and flamboyant).

The old man's son is held as a hostage of the Russian army. He hopes to exchange these young prisoners for his son.

His younger daughter who combines both innocence and charm is kept as the watchdog of the prisoners.

The soldiers try to escape. One of them is killed, and the other chained.

Abdul's son is also shot dead during an attempted escape.

The surviving Russian prisoner is about to be killed. But there is an undeclared and subtle love between the Russian boy and the Chechniyan girl. It is very subtly conveyed in artistic terms. Beautiful instance of a good cinema. The girl tries to help him. But Abdul takes the soldier far from the village, putting an end to the chain of killings.

This film too is an anti-war film.

This what the director says: 'Life is short, the world is small'.

Why are people still fighting each other after thousands of years?

I don't know how to stop the war. It is easy to start it and difficult to end.

It is easier to kill a man than to love him. But we have to try.

Prisoner of the Mountains, is in my opinion, one of the most valuable films in cinematic terms, that were shown at Thiruvananthapuram in India, early this year.

The director, Sergei Bodvov studied films in Moscow. He graduated as a screen writer. Over 30 films have been made from his scripts. Since 1987, he has made about eight

films. His film *Freedom is Paradise* won the Grand Prix at Montreal film festival in 1989.

His film had won acclaim even in other festivals.

## **O. And the Moon Dances**

*(Film Notices - Sunday Leader - June 22 - 28, 1997)*

Garin Nugroho is a filmmaker from Indonesia. But never have his acclaimed first two feature films, *Love on a Slice of Bread* (1991) and *Letter to an Angel* (1993) been screened in his mother country. His third film, '*And the Moon Dances*' (1995) was shown at the IFFI 1997.

Nugroho, who has studied cinematography, is also a reputed writer in the Indonesian Language. He has a point to proclaim: Anything which is controlled or within limit is beautiful. He says that the title of his new film reflects a sexuality which is controlled.

The Moon in '*And the Moon Dances*' is the name of a woman, who likes modern ways. She meets Ilalang an ambitious young man who wants to be a composer. In fact he runs away from his father, who wants to dominate his life.

These two people of different backgrounds are in the pursuit of searching for the truth - true nature of the self. The couple had been meeting each other at the house of Waluyo, a maestro of classical Javanese arts.

Moon in a confused state of mind gives her life to Waluyo in a kind of ritual submission. But Waluyo dies. His death brings both sadness and enlightenment to all.

Moon decides to remain in his house and finds her identify as a traditional Japanese woman. Ilalang, still searching for himself, leaves.

It is a philosophical kind of film with the assertion of indigeneous culture.

**P. Red Cherry: a Chinese filmmaker's political undertones** (*The Island - July 12, 1997*)

Beijing boasts of some of the topmost film makers in the world today. Filmmakers of Chinese origin, not only from China, but also from Hong Kong, Taipei and other places vie with other Japanese and South East Asian film makers for major honours. The present day style of film making is different all over the world, partly due to new technology and partly due to change in the tastes of different audiences. Even those films which are shown at many international films combine both artistry and commerce. Some are the ways of the neo-realists and the quality cinema of the 50s, 60s and even early 70s. It's now multi-media culture. But what is good now is that it is very difficult to broadly categorize all films as either quality films or more entertainers, because the dividing line is very thin. There are many examples. That requires a separate piece.

Ye Ying is the name. He is a brilliant director from China. Passing out as a graduate from the Beijing Film Academy in 1986, he produced a film called, 'A long Deep Breath' in 1988. We are yet to see it. But eight years later, he directed an immensely stimulating political film, a study on Stalin's regime and after. The film has a poetic title : Red Cherry.

I saw this film at IFFI 1997, in Thiruvananthapuram.

Although the Chinese point of view of Russia under the spell of Stalin remains in the background, the story of



the film is really about a courageous Chinese girl, called Chuchu, confronted with the Nazis, who invaded Russia in the early '40s.

Those days the Russians and the Chinese had a close relationship. There was an international school, Ivanovo Children's School, where children of Communist leaders studied. Chuchu, Luo Xiaoman, Karl Zhang were students in the school. They were friends. They were really growing up developing their individual characteristics. They were talented individuals in the making.

Suddenly the German army invades Russia. Some of the children in the school are taken prisoners along with the Russian soldiers.

Zhang Li's camera captures the tense moments in studied depiction. It's a psychedelic painting of sadism, loss innocence and aesthetic visuals.

Chuchu, the Chinese girl is taken under the wing of a German General. He is a peculiar man. He is both an artist and a beast. At first this man was kind to the tender Chuchu. But later he wants her at odd times to use her for his artistic expression. His favourite pastime is tatooing.

One day, he has her tied down to a table and draws a fine tatoo on her back. What did the tatoo depict? She didn't know. Later, however, she discovers that the tatoo depicted the eagle of the Nazi. She tries to mutilate the skin, but fails. It's her agony and her dilemma in later years that the film portrays.

The film is a study piece for students of quality cinema. Its structure, presentation, the political undertones and the over all judgement in terms of its grading in contemporary cinema produced in various parts of the world,

are aspects the film critics of stature will sit and analyse at leisure.

To me, viewing this film among many other films in quick succession was a ritualistic experience. Hence an impressionistic insight of Red Cherry.

## **Q. Shakespeare and Love .....**

*(Times of Oman - 1999)*

A beautiful comedy on widescreen titled Shakespeare in Love was released in 1988 and it won seven academy awards including the best picture and best actress awards. The film was considered the 'most original comedy of the year'. Besides, over 80 critics acclaimed that this film was one of the best produced in the genre. The film featured Gwyneth Paltrow and Joseph Finnes as the main players. I loved this film and wrote a raving review for The Times of Oman then. I suggest that either the NFC of the British Council or the ICES show this film particularly for students, if the film has not been screened in Sri Lanka.

The film showed a semi-real (meaning taking real life events in Shakespeare's life) and artistically imaginative interpretation. Inspired by seeing the film a second time recently on the IFC (International Film Channel) TV, I was keenly interested in gleaning what Shakespeare himself has said or referred to love either implicitly or directly.

Here are some unforgettable lines on love by the English bard and greatest dramatist (of the 17th century) of all times : The Merchant of Venice : But love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit  
Romeo and Juliet:

Good night, good night parting is such sweet sorrow. That I shall say good night till it became tomorrow. When he shall die, take him out and cut him out in little stars. And he will make the face of heaven so fine. That all the world will be in love with night. And pay no worship to the garish sun see! How she leaves her cheeks upon her hand: Oh! that I were a glove upon that hand. That I might touch that cheek.

A midsummer Night's Dream: The course of true love never did run smooth.

Twelfth Night: If music be the food of love, play on: Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting the appetite may sicken and so die.

As you Like it: The wounds invisible that love's keen arrows make Oh!~ Wonderful, wonderful and most wonderful, wonderful! And yet again wonderful... after that Venus and Adonis: Love cometh like sunshine after rain.

The Gentleman of Verona : Alas, how love can trifle with itself.

The Winter's Tale: When you do dance. I wish you a wave of the sea that you might ever do nothing but that.

Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May.

And summer's lease hath all too short a date.

Quotes that Linger From Shakespeare to other greats.

Here are some quotations I gleaned for your recollection: 'Happiness is not a destination, but a mode of transportation' - Ashley Gruber.

'If you are stuck in the past, you will never have a future' - S.R.

'A thread runs through all things : All worlds are strung on it as beads: and men and events, and life, come to us, only because of that thread' - Emerson.

'If I were to begin life again, I should want it as it were. I would only open my eyes a little more' - Jules Renard.

'Experience is not what happens to you, it is what you do with what happens to you' - Aldous Huxley.

'You must be the change you wish to see in the world'-  
Mahatma Gandhi

'The best way out is always through' Rober Erost.

'What would the world be like if we were as quick to complement as we are to criticise'

Thiruvalluvar, a TAMILIAN thinker of the 3rd century AD almost said this when he likened complimentary words to ripened fruits and condemnation words to unripe fruits. 'For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walls up the stories of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments' - an extract from Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Hollywood movies are commercially produced and are good entertainers for most of the lighthearted viewers. We all know that, but exceptionally some great films that combine artistry and theme and technical virtuosity are also produced by great American directors. Some such films are produced in America by filmmakers from other parts of the world too. In recent times many Hollywood movies have attempted to escape from the usual Hollywood 'Masala' and enter into examination of human existence in a slightly realistic way.

Not all of them are 'realistic' or 'nonrealistic' or avant-

grade films like the Italian, French, German or former East-European or Scandinavian films from Europe or greats from Japan, India, China, Iran, Australia, Latin America or South East Asia. Even a few films from Sri Lanka are rated high at film festivals. Some of the films I see on the IFC and Sundance Film Channel really astonish me, because they explore hitherto unexplored human behaviour in all forms - sex included - in the medium of cinema.

I have chosen at random a few films that might interest you and they are available on the DVD (Digital Video Discs). I am not going to review them but merely give the basic information should you need them. In *Femme Fatale* dubbed 'Master of Erotic Thriller', Brian de Palma proves himself to be a superb craftsman. The film is available in English, French and Spanish. The French version has English subtitles.

The playing by seductive Rebecca Remijn Stamos is stunningly feminine and also 'machoistic'.

### **Unfaithful**

Most popular Hollywood films are 'thrillers', what they call a 'Steamy thriller', 'Unfaithful' depicts some aspects of conjugal life in some quarters in America. Everybody knows that what you see in Hollywood films is not the real America. But in the American cinema you see sex and violence in a measure that you don't see in real life.

Remember the film 'Fatal Attraction'? Well, the same director, Adrian Lyne has directed 'Unfaithful', which stars Richard Gere (now ageing) and Diane Lane, and the 'Now Youth', Oliver Martinez. This is a film portraying a middle-aged couple and their breach in trust of marital relationship. The woman is seen as an over sensitive passionate partner.

### **What Women Want**

This is a funny film centering advertising personalities and a typical comedy from Hollywood. It would satisfy the innate nature amongst most of us to yearn for the unteachable romantic glamour that Hollywood throws in. This is supposed to be a film about a man who really understands women in thinking how a woman would think and react to his women companions. The statements are subtle.

The man, Mel Gibson (the director who made the latest film on the life of Jesus Christ - Passion) is fantastically charming in modes and motifs. Helen Hunt stars as the protagonist and the film has a happy ending. It's in a way psychological too. Attractive Marisa Tomei, a very good actress is also in the film. I enjoyed the film for its healthy presentation. The main players were remarkable in their acting.

### **American Beauty**

One of the fine actors I like is Kevin Spacey. He is playing a brilliant role in this tragicomic film, directed by Sam Mendes. This film won 5 academy awards some years ago.

I saw this film in Colombo and there was a scathing critical response from reader A. Kandappah in the press. True, it was a challenging film for most of us who may be rooted in our own social values, but the medium attempts to portray certain traits in human experiences in a society that is far too permissive.

In that sense, the film is a fictitious account of not so uncommon lifestyle in the West. I appreciated the technical aspects of the film plus the acting of Kevin Tracy and also Annette Bening, when I saw it a second time recently.

As in literature in cinema and theatre too nothing is prohibitive in exhibiting human emotions, thoughts, and in fact all aspects of life. We can reject them or accept them. But the freedom to express should not be denied.

## R. Four Films from Germany

*(Midweek Review - The Island - January 31, 2007)*

'The Man from the Embassy', 'The House is Burning', 'Four Minutes' - films produced in Germany and another, 'In Bed' which was a co-production of both Chile and Germany were shown at the IFFI 2006. Seeing these I noticed that the Classical European Cinema has dwindled into a new genre influenced by many factors. However, I was happy that at least a few European films continue to depict the human condition governed by long years of philosophical, aesthetic and cultural experiences.

In this week's column I shall briefly inform and express my observations on the films mentioned above.

Let's take the film 'In Bed' first. This Spanish speaking film in colour has English subtitles. It was made in 2005. It's amusing and somewhat unorthodox. The film opens with a riveting and close up of a man and a woman having coital relationship and shot in different angles. This kind of thing is not unusual in the western cinema, but to me it was somewhat stirring. The story is confined to two characters and everything happens in the bed in a motel.

The curiosity arises because from the spare dialogue the couple utter we learn that they did not know each other before but had got into a motel room to have a sexual

encounter. They will be separated when the fire in them cools down. But the interesting part of it is that little by little they reveal their privacy and past. Despite the past they love each other.

The film is directed by Matias Bize. It's called 'En La Cama' in Spanish.

We move on to a very thrilling, exciting and an unusual portrayal in a film called 'Vier Minuten' meaning Four Minutes.

Directed by a promising screenplay writer and a relatively young (44) director, Chris Kraus, this German speaking film in colour made last year portrays a young rebellious girl named Jenny. She is a criminal and wouldn't care to kill even many others. She is imprisoned in a Nazi jail. Monica Bleibtreu plays this role brilliantly. It is fascinating for the love-hate relationship between an 80 year old piano teacher and a virago. Besides the young woman's intrinsic idiosyncrasy, there is an enthralling music feast as provided by Jenny herself, for she had hidden talents to outwit orthodox piano players.

The teacher discovers the girl's secret, her brutality and her dreams. Much against the brutal treatment towards her as a prisoner by one of the jailers and the verbal diatribe between the teacher and the rebel, Jenny accomplishes her assignment within four minutes, playing a fantastic composition with virtuosity. The teacher succeeds in transforming an off-centre young woman into a celebrated artiste.

The cinematography of Judith Kaufman and the editing by Uta Schmidt and most of all the music by Anette Focks would make you sit through this film filled with enjoyment.



One of the disgusting films I saw (disgusting because of my age. I could not swallow the degrading behaviour of present day western youngsters) was 'The House is Burning'. Based on his own story, director Holger Ernst has made a film probably cinematically authentic as the cinematography by Stefasn Grandinetti and Mathias Schoeningh pushes one to admire.

The film is really, as the director said 'search for love, acknowledgement, acceptance, a future. It is at once a warning and a promise.'

The young German players were astonishingly natural in playing their parts. They represented the present generation all over the world. The film depicts a conflict of generations, lost dreams and shattered lives. What disappointed me most was the violence and unbecoming behaviour and the resultant shattering of all values.

I think the synopsis of the story describes will the real crux of the film. For your benefit, I quote:

'One day, one night, a group of teenagers struggle to find their way in a world that offers them few choices. In 24 hours, Mike will leave for the army, following his father's footsteps. His last day around family and friends turns into a war of emotions. His girl friend Valerie, angry at him for leaving rejects him. As he grapples with her decision, his friends are making their's for a better life.

'Phil, a small time drug dealer, is working for the big score that will set him up for good.

'Terry is trying to enter a corporate world she's unprepared for but already understands the corruption the system asks for (columnist's note: she offers herself for sexual serving).

'Steve, who wants to free himself from his abusive father, decides to kill him and tries to get a gun.

'As the story unfolds, frustration erupts in a night of shattering violence, self destruction and self discovery".  
(Quote ends)

I would also add another apt description of the director of the film:

'A closely photographed, metaphorical kaleidoscope of characters on the brink of growing up, facing the need to build a future'.

An intriguing film featuring a genuine and lonely man that shows compassion to a female teenager is wrongly accused of paedophilia. He falls a victim of corrupt policemen, burglars and violent people. The film is titled 'The Man from the Embassy' (Der Mann Von Der Botschaft).

Directed by Dito Tsintsadze the story tells the predicament of a German Embassy official in Georgia. He lives an inane life until he meets a 12 year old girl Sashka who makes him laugh.

I liked this film very much for its poignancy.

## **S. Fascinating foreign films**

*(As I like it Column - The Island - February 14, 2007)*

This week I would like to inform and opine on a few more foreign films I found fascinating at the IFFI 2006. First, let's take the two films from Greece. They are Chariton's Choir (Chorodia Tou Haritona) and Lubi.

### **Greek films**

The first film Chariton's Choir takes us to the second half of the last century (1967 - 1974). Students of contemporary history would remember there was a directorship in that country during that period. In the backdrop of the political climate, something funny happens involving a schoolmaster and a teacher, both entangled in an amorous relationship. But that is not alone. There is the villain in the name of a National Guard Commandant. One could imagine how the latter would have dominated the scene with his mighty power. And yet it is funny. The storyline is just simple as that. But the entertainment part is well presented by the director, Grigoris Karantinakis. The designs and the costumes are suitably chosen.

Lubi is directed by a woman - Layiya Yiourgou. She is essentially a designer and graphic artist and this is reflected in her film. This film is about a mother, son and his girl friend. The Russian word for love, we learn, is 'Lubi'. The heroine's name is just that. This attractive Russian girl (played by Eugenia Kaplan) works for an elderly Greek woman as a nurse. Despite cultural differences and ingrained prejudices amongst the races, the son of the older woman falls in love with Lubi passionately and causes her pregnancy. The young man is not only possessive of her but also he doesn't want to get rid of her as she was wealthy compared to him. The human frailties are told with undertones.

### **Finnish film**

I must say that I was lucky to have seen a film from Finland. This was the first time. It was called Unna & Nuuk. Again the director of the film was a woman - attractive Saara

Cantell. She is a successful short film director having won several awards at the international film festivals.

This is a fascinating film for a different reason: mythical beliefs. Maybe this film could be considered having trends of 'magical realism'.

I think it would be better to give an edited version of the synopsis of the story as enunciated by the director, than my attempting to confuse you with my understanding of the film.

Here is the edited version :

Unna feels a stab of pain in her chest. She senses that her beloved grandfather is in danger. She calls over at her sick grandfather's bed in the hospital. He tells her that a gift had been passed on to her to cure his sickness, as she has 'shaman blood'.

He reveals to her how to find the book of shaman and magic drum which would help her to find a medicine for her grandfather. If she would beat the drum three times, she could move to another place and time.

Accordingly her adventure takes her to the Finnish Stone Age. Incidentally she meets Nuuk, the son of the original tribe's shaman. The hammer and axe people who recently immigrated there kidnap the kids. But the young ones escape from their captors and trek through the wilderness towards, Nuuk's home village. However the two young people couldn't find a common language to speak with each other. Unna learns to survive in the Stone Age, even though she couldn't find a cure for her grandfather.

If you could suspend belief and enjoy this film like a child, you're amply rewarded. Imagination and dreams make our lives worthy of living in these days of uncertainty.

### **Danish film**

Coming from Denmark is a film called 'A Soap' (En Soap), again directed by a woman - Pernille Fischer Christensen.

This is a pathetic story of a transsexual. Veronica is (his) her name. She dresses herself as a woman. She has no companion except her dog. She prefers to watch a romantic soap opera on the TV. Veronica meets her neighbour, Charlotte in the apartment. She is a little older than Veronica. She has moved away from her boy friend. There is tussle between Charlotte and Veronica in not knowing each others predicament. They clash all the time, Veronica is the victim all the time. Slowly but surely they understand each other and they build up a bond of sincerity and understanding. Their turbulent story is reconciled by human understanding.

To me it was a moving film without overtly sentimental.

The director is an award winning important Danish filmmaker.

Such films and more are examples of the exploration of experiences of people caught up in changing situations and conditions.

Let's view them with our own understanding and reading as weeks go by.

### **T. Five French Films**

*(Leisure - As I like it Column - The Island - February 21, 2007)*

I watched five extraordinarily interesting French films at the IFFI 2006 in Goa. Three of them were by women who interpret life in their own fashion. And the other two were

by men young and old. Each seemed to have a world view and their imaginative faculties bring about the display of experiences, we in this part of the world seldom experience; but such experiences are not isolated from the universal commonality under different human conditions.

The five films in my order of preference are : *Je Ne Suis Pas La Pour Etre Aime* (Not To Be Loved Here) directed by Stephane Brize; *Petite Jerusalem* (Little Jerusalem) directed by Karin Albou; *Le Petit Lieutenant* (The little Lieutenant) directed by Xavier Beauvois; *Selon Charlie* directed by Nicole Garcia; *Les Oiseaux du Ciel* (Birds of Heaven).

### **Not to Be Loved Here**

I liked this film primarily because it features the belated realisation of happy moments in an otherwise drab life of a just retired police officer. He had become stony of emotions until he met an enigmatic - almost middle aged - woman who seemed to love him more than anyone with whom she had come in contact. For him life and love begins only then. The actor, Patrick Chesnais, who plays this part is remarkable in bringing about a kind of mystery that envelops him as shown in his countenance. He is a worthy character for a psychological study.

Equally intriguing is the character of the woman played by Anne Consigny. She is also different to him as she is joyous even when she is restrained. In that sense they are typical of their mental and psychological setup and yet they are attracted to each other. It is the woman that initiates the friendly and deep relationship although the man was reluctant to be normal. He melts slowly and hesitantly and she is passionately loving, shedding away her outer cover of posing as an ordinary girl next door.

It is fascinating to observe the subtle nuances that the young director applies in making the characters interesting persons involved in unsaid or underclared love and passion. It is in a way an attraction of opposites although the affair was a brief encounter. The frenzied tango and the lively music enhance and recreate an atmosphere of romantic love, which would end in non-fulfilment.

I liked the film very much for its artistic merits as well.

### **Little Jerusalem**

I liked this film for the conflict it presents in an 18 - year - old girl, Laura. She is Jewish and is strong in her religious background. And yet she desires to be out of the confines as she is a student of philosophy and wishes to explore vast horizons. She lives with her sister in a Jewish quarter in Gay Paree. But her struggle between the clash of cultures and her sister's attempt to spark new fire in her relationship with her husband presents a dilemma for her.

Fanny Valette as the girl, and Elsa Zylberstein as her sister are ravishingly attractive in their acting and looks. It's an upper middle class story and hence European elitism is visible. There is another aspect to the story: A coloured man forces himself on Laura and a bitter ad passionate relationship develops there. That is also interesting.

The director was born into a Jewish family of North African origin. That accounts for the meeting place of different cultures.

### **The Little Lieutenant**

The director of the film Xavier Beauvois had worked for the acclaimed Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveria

and the French director Andre Techine. Therefore he should be taken notice of his attempt because he had captured the Cannes Film Festival's Jury Prize.

However, I was not much interested in the film but don't go by my bias. It is best if I give what the film is about by drawing excerpts from the handout given at the Festival in Panaji (Goa).

'A new police officer wants to tackle crime head - on, that he joins a plainclothes crime unit in Paris, even though it means leaving his wife behind in Normandy. Most of his new colleagues look at the work as just a daily grind, but he impresses the woman Commandant who takes a motherly interest in him. His work takes a dark turn when the unit investigates a murder. His passion for the case and his partner's disinterest in it lead to a tragedy that rocks the department.'

We learn that the director was not that interested in crime, per se, instead preferred to chart the personalities inside the station and the cyclical nature of the job.

In my opinion, the film is a sociological study of some of the people serving in the investigations of crime. Those involved in criminology and justice could benefit from the film.

### **Selon Charlie**

A leading French actress and theatre personality also directs films. She is Nicole Garcia. Her surname suggests that she is of Spanish origin.

Remember Luigi Pirandello's celebrated play *Seven Characters in Search of an Author*?

Well, *Selon Charlie* is about seven characters in



movement in the Atlantic coast searching themselves, they come together, miss each other, brush against each other, crash into each other. When they part none of them will be the same. Evidently the film has sufficient meat for an expose in dramatic terms. And it does that. One would enjoy the film if one wants to relax cerebrally and emotionally and see how the world goes by as the characters come and go.

### **Birds of Heaven**

Birds of Heaven is a story of Ivory Coast (Ghana?) Africans by an anthropologist turned filmmaker, Eliiane de Latour. It is a satire and clinical insight into the workings of minds of people who belong to the developing world. The players are Africans. Their language is not English although they speak in corrupted English. As a non Westerner I found this film a welcome venture in portraying some of the idiosyncrasies that most of us nurture in our minds.

Here again, what matters is not my review of the film but telling our readers what the story is about.

In a Spanish port two Ghanians, Shad and Otho, work illegally and hope to get back to their native land. But a police raid separates their fates. Otho who was driving a cab without a licence is deported and he returns empty handed without gaining anything from the West. He is ostracised by everybody in his native land. He struggles against dishonour. He is not fooled by the liberal West and its cruel pretence that money can solve anything. He wants to build using local wealth and make himself part of the world.

Shard runs from the authorities and goes to England. He meets a white girl there. With her he realises his dreams. He recounts himself through metaphors of the heroic, from

Sundjata Keita to Martin Luther King or Bill Gates. He returns to the capital Abidjan. He readies himself for his marriage when Otho attacks him.

This film is a fine study on the mindset of most people around the world who seek greener pastures in the West.

However, I personally like the organised way of living in the west and there are many good things we could learn from the westerners, even though we may discard the negative aspects of their culture.



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