

G - January 1995

## **ONE MORE BENEGAL - ENGLISH AUGUST BAGS INTERNATIONAL HONOURS.**

### **DEV BENEGAL**

The Americans found his brand of comedy resembling the French. The French thought his film was extremely American. The German press haven't stopped talking about its strong cinematic quality. The Italians found his style 'magical'. Dev Benegal and his English August have already taken the international imagination by storm. Now, with three awards and masses of critical appreciation under his belt, he is awaiting the Indian audience's reaction to his film with bated breath. (It is to be premiered at the International Film Festival in Bombay in January). "Awards are fine but I desperately want audience acceptance," he says earnestly.

**How was the idea of filming Upamanyu Chatterjee's 'English August' conceived ?**

It was my complete identification with the main character of the book that finally led to this decision. The book is all about my generation of youngsters who are constantly taking part in a universal culture. They are trying to come to terms with the Indian way of life even while following western influences.

We may not think of it consciously but the conflict is always there. I know from first hand experience that one doesn't have to be a foreigner in order to feel alien in India. For instance, when I went down south to film my documentary, I needed an interpreter to talk to people. It left me asking myself, 'How am I then an Indian?' **English August** is all about this.

**Considering the essence of the book and most of its humour is found in the mind of the protagonist, how difficult did you find it to film ?**

It required thinking but I did come up with the solutions. I used all sorts of cinematic equivalences to portray Agastya's (the protagonist) thoughts.

**What sort of cinematic equivalences ?**

(Laughs) I don't want to give all my secrets away....I used voice-overs, interior voices etc. I also exteriorised certain scenes that go on in Agastya's mind.

**How much did you deviate from the actual story while filming the book ?**

A lot. Actually, when Upamanyu and I sat down to write the screenplay, we kept

the book aside. We have retained the theme but that's about it. New characters were added to the film. Then there is the character of Mandy Bhatia - a Punjabi who's dying to be American. He is a minor character in the book but in my film, he becomes a major character. He exteriorises all that is in Agastya's mind.

**Considering you screen tested hundreds of applicants, what made Rahul Bose click with you, for the role ?**

See, Agastya's character was the most important one. Besides, his is the sort of character that readers tend to conjure up a picture of, in their minds, on reading the book. So I had to be careful not to destroy that image. Why did I choose him? Well, like Agastya's Rahul Bose is half Bengali....Seriously speaking, it was his voice which won my approval the most. Besides, his screen presence is very good.

**You have worked with a lot of amateur actors in the film. Did that pose any problem ?**

No. Before actually going on the sets, we had a three-week workshop, where we explored all the characters and rehearsed hypothetical scenes. That way, boredom didn't set in with the actual scenes, yet the actors began to feel at home with the characters. We would have informal rehearsals. For instance, while having lunch, we would rehearse the dinner scene, casually.

**How much do you let your actors improvise on the sets ?**

Improvisation results from confidence and I am extremely confident of the cinema medium. Why only actors, I allow everyone from the production designer to the sound recordist, space for improvisation. I did not read the script even once while actually shooting the film. I decided exactly what I wanted, but after that I tossed the ideas to the unit and let them react. Films have to happen naturally, they must come from the heart. I never decide on the positioning of the camera and lights beforehand and then ask the actors to move in the restricted area. I always perform the scene with them in the entire space and only then place the camera and lights.

**What genre would you say your film comes under ?**

Let me clarify once and for all that it is not an art film. I have meant it to be an entertainer - witty, irreverent, enjoyable. I am not interested in homogenous cinema. All our films, especially art films, are homogenous. They have one language, one strain throughout. My film uses five languages - English, Hindi, Marathi, Telugu and Bengali. I would say **English August** is a subtle comedy.

**Have you drawn on any other filmmakers' influences in making the film ?**

The film is influenced by Satyajit Ray to a great extent. As well as by a host of

western directors. It also draws on the Italian neo-realistic trend of using a lot of locals and non-actors...

**Judges at the Festival of Three Continents have commented on your original style and use of new images.**

Yeah. A lot of credit for that goes to my production designer, Anuradha Parikh. The role of a production designer is important in creating a 'look' for the film. We wanted completely different images for the film.

**When you talk of an 'image' used in a film, what do you exactly mean ?**

I mean the colours used, the frames...We have used colours from the true Indian colour palette. The film is divided into three worlds. Agastya's public world, his secret world in his bedroom and his private world which he shares with his friends. We used music, lighting, pictorial fragments, to create these worlds.

**Have you experimented with your music as well ?**

Definetely. I insisted that the music shouldn't be Indian, nor Western, nor fusion, nor jazz. In short, I drove my composer D.Wood crazy. We used Indian percussion instruments, the bansuri, the synthesiser. The result, I am told, is mind blowing.

**You have been told a lot of complimentary things. How does it feel to achieve international acclaim ?**

Great. But it is more important to get distributors. (Laughs) And also to get the audiences to come and see your film. It was particularly difficult to rafe in foreign audiences. I remember I used to actually walk up to people on the streets in the US and ask them to come and see my film. They would be so taken aback that they would obediently turn up for the show the next day !