

SPLIT WIDE OPEN

Cast : Rahul Bose, Laila Rouass, Farida Mulla, Shivaji Satam, Ayesha Dharker
Director : Dev Benegal



Once again, Rahul Bose comes up with a stellar performance as the hustler in *Split Wide Open*.

The film is about Bombay and its underbelly. It weaves around different relationships -- between KP and his adopted sister Didi (Farida Haider Mulla), between television show hostess Nandita (Laila Rouass) and her guests, between US-returned student Leela (Ayesha Dharker) and her wealthy businessman-father Shiv (Shivaji Satam).

Just like Nandita's show, *Split Wide Open* -- where the faces of the guests are always hidden in darkness -- there is a play of light and shadow throughout the film. None of the characters are totally black, not are they totally white. KP is ruthless when it comes to selling water, even to hapless slum-dwellers, but he will do anything to put a smile on his adopted sister's face. The whole world believes that his interest in Didi is nothing more than sexual, but his love turns out to be the purest of all.

Shiv, the epitome of a 'dirty old man,' has redeeming qualities and his moments of vulnerability. Even Didi, the little beggar girl with innocent big eyes, does not seem so innocent when she prefers the good life that the wealthy man bestows on her to KP, who is ready to lay down his life for her.

Split Wide Open could have easily degenerated into a vulgar film, full of explicit scenes and expletive dialogues. But sleaze, as shown by Dev Benegal, has never looked more respectable. Subtlety and restraint are certainly his strong points.

There is a gay priest, but not once is the word 'gay' mentioned. There is child sexual abuse, but all you see are moments of tenderness. There is even incest, but you end up pitying the characters more than hating them.

In fact, the only scene which seems superfluous and out-of-place is the one where KP and Nandita are shown getting physically intimate. It seems contrived. As in *English, August*, Rahul Bose gives in to the temptation of roaming around with not a stitch of clothing on him.

The brisk pace of the film (editor: Renu Saluja) is complemented by an impressive soundtrack (music: Nitin Sawhney) and superb acting.

Bose is in good form here, effortlessly switching from a mean water-seller to a caring brother. Playing Nandita should not have been too tough for Laila Rouass. She comes up with a flawless performance. Shivaji Satam, too, is excellent. Ayesha Dharker has a short role in the film. But then, an actress of her calibre is not constrained by the length of a role -- she is simply brilliant.

The winner though, is Farida Haider Mulla. She is not unlike any of the girls we see selling flowers on the streets -- beautiful, innocent, happy with the small things of life. Not once does it seem that she is emoting for the camera. Perhaps we'll never see her in a film again. But her haunting eyes will keep asking you questions for a long time to come.

All we can say is that *SWO* -- the film and the TV show inside the film -- doesn't pretend to be anything else. It is an expose on the darker side of Bombay.

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