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Film Review: "Split Wide Open"

"IF TELEVISION shows happiness, then life is very sad," says the protagonist Kut Price a.k.a. KP in one of the scenes. That line, in a way, sums up the theme of director Dev Benegal's second cinematic attempt. (His film was the critically acclaimed "English August"). The story has been co-authored by Upamanyu Chatterjee and Dev Benegal.

"Split Wide Open" is a bold and strong statement on the filth and lawlessness that have wormed their way into the "city of dreams," Mumbai. Using KP (Rahul Bose) and TV hostess Nandita (Laila Rouass) as mouthpieces, the film deals with consumerism and globalisation, child prostitution, goondaism and the sheer struggle for existence in Mumbai. KP sells water (tap water to the poor, Evian to the rich!) to earn his living. He is on the payroll of the local water mafia. He has special affection for 10-year old Didi (played brilliantly by Farida Haider Mulla), who goes missing suddenly. Nandita, an expat Indian, hosts "Split Wide Open," a daring show that provides a platform for people to discuss their secret sex lives, their fantasies and their unusual problems. Nandita is attracted to KP and helps him in his search for Didi.

The film (with Hindi and English dialogues) holds attention throughout despite some glaring flaws in the script by Farrukh Dhondy. For one, Rahul Bose is jobless at one point, but strangely wears flashy shirts and can even afford a cell phone and a two-wheeler. Also, when he opens the chained taps for free supply of water, the local gangs leave him alone, whereas earlier in the film, he is beaten to pulp when he is caught cheating the water mafia.

Laila Rouass as Nandita is just perfect for the role. There are some effective cameos by Ayesha "Terrorist" Dharker, Sivaji Satnam and the author Kiran Nagarkar as Father Bono. But Rahul Bose is not convincing enough. He appears too polished for someone who is supposed to be living in the slums. Also, the film could have done with some tight editing (there are too many shots of the chained taps and the search for Didi seems to go on and on). However, director Dev Benegal needs to be lauded for crafting, for most part, an intelligent, compelling and thought-provoking film that will go down well with urban audiences.

SAVITHA PADMANABHAN

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