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Paisa vasool!

Swapna Mitter

It was a city-bred, westernised Agastya Sen who had travelled to rural India in search of the real country. It is a simple but street-smart KP who comes to the city to seek his fortune. Agastya was educated, cynical and considered to be somewhat of an outcast by his family. KP, or Kut Price, is uneducated, eager to prove his worth and desperately in search of a family.



That was *English, August*, this is *Split Wide Open*. The director is the same -- Dev Benegal, who, in a way, could be called the pioneer of the small budget, sensible, urban film. The actor playing the central role is also the same: Rahul Bose. And, once again, he comes up with a stellar performance as the hustler in *SWO*.

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 shrouded in darkness -- there is a play of light and shadow throughout the film. None of the characters is totally black or 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.



Given the subject matter, *Split Wide Open* could have easily degenerated into a crass 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 looks 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 plays a television anchor in the film, something she is familiar with in real life. Still, she comes up with a flawless performance. Shivaji Satam, too, is excellent -- in the end, you are not really sure whether you are disgusted by him or you feel sorry for him. 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.

I'm sure there are people who will question this film: Is sleaze is all there is to Bombay? Is every character you come across in life is a pervert is some way or the other? Are morality and ethics forgotten words?



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. In fact, it is a much cleaner film compared to some others we get to see. A film that may not do well outside urban areas. But if you are reading this review, you should see it.

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