



■ Director's Special

DEV BENEGAL -- Ravan & Eddie's next

If you've seen Dev Benegal's English, August and Split Wide Open, you'd know how far this brilliant filmmaker has grown within the space of two films. Watching Benegal's new film one feels one is in the presence of tremendous forces coming together in rapidfire motions that constitute the life force. The doomed, desperate characters of Split Wide Open are so real, we only have to reach out and touch their sullied hands to get affected by their pain. Happily, Dev Benegal's cinematic vision is not only about pain. It's also about the exquisite pleasures that align the clouds to make life worth living. In person, Dev Benegal who comes from a family of cinema buffs, is quiet and softspoken. He rarely laughs, though he isn't humourless. The unfair backlash which Split Wide Open received from a section of the press hasn't made him bitter. On the contrary, he's all the more determined to do things the right way. His way....

In spite of being about the power games that people play with each other, Split Wide Open is not a sex film. Then why was it released in Mumbai by a distributor who specialises in sleaze? Split Wide Open was actually distributed by 20th Century Fox. They have released the film directly in certain parts of the country. The new head at Fox wanted to take up a so-called arthouse movie in Hindi and see how far they could push it. It was 20th Century Fox who gave it over to the local distributor in Mumbai to facilitate a wider distribution.

Did you approve of the sub-letting of your film?

My producer Anuradha Parekh and I had no control over the matter. We left the whole business of distribution to Fox. But Gola Films went to town advertising Split Wide Open as a sex film!

I know what happened. Split Wide Open is not about being sexy. We protested about it. But there was little we could do about it. You have no idea how much agony we have gone through. It isn't nice to have your film being sold to the public as trash when it isn't that. The distributors and theatre owners start a refrain and keep harping on it. We can't do a thing about it. Their argument was, you don't have stars or anything else to sell your film to the public, so let's do it our way. We had no counter-argument to offer. It was better to focus on the bright side. At least the film got released. I hoped people would see Split Wide Open in the right spirit. On the whole, they have.

People expected one kind of film which Split Wide Open was not.

Do you feel the wrong kind of publicity went against the film's success?

Well it's very interesting to note that the film is among the top

3 arthouse grossers of all times in Hindi. That's what Fox tells me. This is the argument that is going to be flung in my face if I protest about the release tactics. In one weekend Split Wide Open did more business than English, August has ever done! After this, I have no say in the matter. The trade just muscles in. It's a classic instance of the rape and pillage of a movie by its distributors. Even when I see the hard facts and figures in front of me it still hurts me to see the sleazy slant given to the film in the posters.

Your film is really about redemption. After finding fame as a talkshow hostess the Laila Rouss character gives it all up. Why?

The change comes on her gradually. Somewhere down the line, she realises that the people and problems on her show are very real and that they no longer fall in the gamut of entertainment on television. The turning point in her life is when a woman tries to commit suicide on her show. She no longer wants to be part of all this.

Laila Rouss is perfect as the talk show hostess. And Rahul Bose is a revelation. But the reviews have been uniformly critical.

It's been a mixed bag, actually. Some have been good. Others have been scathing. And the scathing ones obviously hurt. I didn't want people to say it's a great film. But I wanted them to understand the film. Even if they didn't understand ten things in the film I wanted them to understand the basic attempt.

Critics were far kinder to your English, August when this is a much better film. Was it the sex that bothered them?

I have thought hard on this. I think everyone wants to look at life in our country with rose-tinted glasses. Suddenly there comes this film, that says all's not right with the world. But you won't believe the number of NGOs who have e-mailed me after seeing the film to say that the cases they deal with are ten times more disturbing than what I've shown in the film. These are all real instances.

The woman who tries to commit suicide on the talk show is a very well documented case. Our society is full of such instances of enforced normal marriages. The point is, what is normal?

What about the priest's character played by Kiran Nagarkar? Why is he so compassionately drawn?

We have many such case of pederasts. For me, he represents the last vestige of colonialism, the awesome command over the English language and so on. Kiran plays a priest who's a pederast. There's an interesting duality to his character. On one level he protects and shelters street children. On another, he abuses them physically because he has a weakness for flesh. As for being compassionate about the priest's character, don't forget he's the only character in the film who dies. He succumbs to AIDS.

Though Kiran Nagarkar is a writer, he's given a brilliant performance as the priest.

Do you know what some journalists in Mumbai wrote? That Kiran forced me to cast him in Split Wide Open because I wanted to film his novel. That's absurd. In fact, I forced him to act in Split Wide Open. He was to appear as a panelist in the talkshow in my film. We hadn't cast the priest until then. I thrust a page in his face and asked him to read a scene. He loved what he read and so did we. Instantly, we measured him and got a coffin made for the death scene. That's how he was in the film.

This is the sort of film that affects both the audience and the people involved with it. Shivaji Satam has said that after playing a paedophile he started feeling like one.

I don't think he meant it in that way. What he meant was probably that he was affected by the ambivalence of his character's sordid act, whether it was a stray act or whether he was a career paedophile.

Your hero Rahul Bose is a classic hero in the sense that he goes from abject degeneration to a state of moral redemption. Who are your ideal filmmakers?

My influences are a mix of American and French filmmakers. This sounds incredibly dated. But Orson Welles and Jean Luc Godard remain my absolute favourites. I have adopted the classic Hollywood genre into an Indian narrative.

Among the Indian directors?

Well, I like Satyajit Ray. He was great all right. But everyone is busy cloning his style. Ray's style has necessarily become the language for Good Cinema. I find this over-dependence on one role model to be alienating from reality. My films evolve from my own personal experiences and what I'm going through at a given time.

Your hero Rahul Bose has done nude scenes in Split Wide Open. How did you convince him to do it?

It didn't require any convincing on my part. Rahul knew and understood the essentiality of that sequence. In many ways, the character played by Laila Rouass lives out her fantasies in the lovemaking sequence, having fed on fantasies in her talkshow.

Well male nudity is unacceptable even in Hollywood cinema? Is it true Saif Ali Khan was offered Rahul Bose's role?

It was a different script altogether when Saif was supposed to do it. In that version of the script he was supposed to play an NRI. But then we turned around the script. Saif wouldn't have fitted into that.

And catch him doing the nude scenes!

Saif didn't want to kiss. But he's a dear friend. And I think he's one Indian hero with an international quality to his personality. I think he can become an international star. I've threatened to cast him in one of my future films. I haven't thought of casting Saif or anyone else for my next film Ravan & Eddie, as yet.

How faithful do you intend to be to Kiran Nagarkar's version of Ravan & Eddie?

My film will start where the novel ends. Kiran wrote an extraordinary novel. Then he wrote more after the novel about the two friends in their maturity when they join Bollywood. If this film works out, we plan to make a second film based on the novel. In fact we have announced our decision to make Ravan & Eddie in Split Wide Open, when you see a hawker selling the novel at a traffic light.

Subhash K Jha

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