

showbiz

The pen and the pal

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Criticism gets people snarling. And downright on the defensive. Men are strange creatures who are so enamoured of their images that they happily wallow in narcissism. Artists are particularly touchy, and those who make motion pictures or star in them are even more so.

Francois Truffaut, the legendary movie critic who went on to become a master auteur-director, was once banned from the Cannes Film Festival. In a gripping biography of his, Antoine de Baecque and Serge Toubiana write: "Shortly before the opening of the Cannes Film Festival, he (Truffaut) published an article in the April 20, 1957 issue of *Arts* predicting the worst academicism. On May 15, when the festival was almost over, Truffaut drove home the point, once again in *Arts*: 'You are all witnesses in this trial: French cinema is dying from its false legends'. The following week, he delivered his final blow: 'Cannes: a failure dominated by compromises, schemes and faux pas'. According to Truffaut, the French film industry was producing 'too many mediocre films'; too much of that 'quality cinema' he had been denouncing for nearly four years, restricted to narrow formulas, manufactured artificially in obsolete studios, with polished screenplays and actors, fossilised and flaunting a haughtiness and scorn for novelty and youth."

Truffaut provoked an outcry in the film industry, and in 1958, the Cannes Film Festival refused to give him a Press accreditation. But that could not stop him from entering Cannes and attending the Festival.

Truffaut had his sweet revenge the following year, when he returned to the Festival with his first feature, *The 400 Blows*, and won the Best Director Prize.

A few years ago, the French film industry decided not to hold Press shows before a movie opened.

This way, it felt, it could get its first weekend box-office jingling — unhindered by unfavourable comments. But French critics were not to be beaten. They bought tickets, saw the first show and published or telecast their reviews the following day.

Tamil cinema has been equally averse to criticism. There are no Press shows for Tamil movies, and usually newspaper reviews take a day or two or even longer to appear. Bhama Devi Ravi's column in the Chennai edition of *The Times of India* does appear a day after a film hits the screens, which is usually a Friday.

But *The New Indian Express's* Malini Mannath does not file her piece before the following Monday.

In a scenario where a movie makes its moolah during the first weekend and invariably from urban multiplexes (towns and villages, or B and C centres as they are known in the industry parlance, make little difference these days), delayed reviews give producers, distributors and exhibitors precious breathing space, especially since audiences in cities keenly follow media remarks.



Mani Ratnam's latest tri-lingual *Raavanan/Raavan* suffered also because the films in Hindi, Tamil and Telugu were ripped apart by critics, though justifiably so.

Sadly, Amitabh Bachchan went on the defensive, very foolishly citing bad editing as a reason for son Abhishek's poor acting. The man could have remained quiet and dignified — like Ratnam has been.

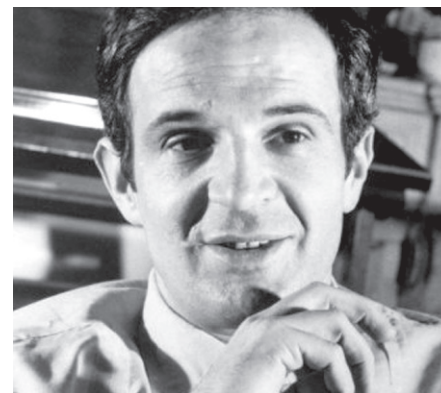
There has not been any word from him, though he does not take criticism lightly.

He refused to meet or talk to me for

many years after I had panned his *Bombay* (1995). However, in 2000, his *Alaipayuthey* impressed me, and I wrote precisely that. Ratnam called me, gave me an interview and it was all hunky-dory between the two of us after that.

Now, with my unflattering write-up of *Raavanan/Raavan*, I dread the kind of reception Ratnam will extend to me.

There have been others who have been livid with me. When I wrote that Shaji N Karun's *Swaham* had most people walking out of the



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theatre at the Cannes Film Festival, he was extremely annoyed, even though I was merely reporting a fact.

Nandita Das, who has always been a friend of mine, could never understand my mild criticism of her performance or movie. When I wrote that I did not find enough pain on her face during her reunion after many years with her daughter in Mani Ratnam's *Kannathil Muthamittal*, and even added that it was purely a directorial lapse, she was upset.

"How can you do this to a friend", she shot at me over the telephone. As for her debut effort at helming, *Firaaq*, a single critical sentence in an otherwise laudatory review of mine got her agitated all over again.

It is not easy being a movie critic, for artists are terribly allergic to censure, and friends easily turn foes.

I have tried telling people that they must understand I have a professional obligation, which is separate from the friendship I may share with them. And as long as my reviews do not slip into a nasty, personal attack, actors and directors should have no problems.

In this context, I can well understand Shyam Benegal's displeasure (though he did not mention it to the critic concerned) at a review that asked him to put his megaphone aside and take up gardening! That Benegal chose to ignore this merely indicates his confidence in his work and ability.

Mannath, who can be strong with her views, follows a simple formula to avoid unpleasantness. She feels it best not to mingle with the movie fraternity. It can be embarrassing to run into somebody you may have been unkind to in your columns, she quips.

Yet, Truffaut was very friendly with many of those who were not exactly his favourites. He had managed to maintain a splendid rapport with directors and actors. Often, his admiring interviews of directors/actors came soon after some of his harshest reviews of their work.

But, then everybody is not Truffaut. More importantly, he lived in a different era when a Festival like Cannes could turn around to honour him, completely erasing his caustic commentaries from its memory.

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