

cinema

Out of focus

Despite a distinguished roster of roles, Aamir Khan falters when he proxy directs, contends

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Aamir Khan is one of India's better actors, though it is hard to bracket him with the likes of Soumitra Chatterjee or Naseeruddin Shah or Om Puri. One is not even sure if he is the best of the Khans.

Irrfan Khan can often take your breath away: in Michael Winterbottom's hugely disappointing 2007 work, *A Mighty Heart*, on the murder of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl in Pakistan, Khan as an intelligence officer was one redeeming feature.

Saif Ali Khan's Ishwar "Langda" Tyagi in Vishal Bharadwaj's *Omkaara* (adapted from Shakespeare's *Othello*) was a revelation.

Portraying a character similar to Iago in the play, Saif was brilliant, and I could not believe that he had this talent in him. I still remember how the crowds at the open square in Marrakech (where *Omkaara* was shown as part of the Festival there in 2006) went crazy every time Saif appeared on the giant screen.

I really have not seen that spark in Aamir, though his roles in Deepa Mehta's *Earth*, Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan*, Ketan Mehta's *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, Farhan Akhtar's *Dil Chahta Hai* and A R Murugadoss' *Ghajini* have been variedly interesting.

However, Aamir Khan begins to falter when he steps behind the camera or even when he takes charge of production (when I am reasonably certain he proxy directs). This is only to be expected. It is not easy to wear two hats for the same film.

Superstar Kamal Haasan is an excellent performer, but when he helms or proxy directs himself, the temptation to enslave the camera to him ruins the movie.

Directing oneself is no mean task, though some have done it effortlessly. We have seen Francois Truffaut (particularly in *Day for Night*) and even Woody Allen playing both parts in the same picture with extraordinary flourish.

Their helming ability has never interfered with their acting talent or vice-versa, and they have had the discipline and, yes, the humility, not to let one ride roughshod over the other.

But Khan has not been able to achieve this. Take his directorial debut, *Taare Zameen Par*. Ishaan Nandkishore Awasthi (played superbly by Darsheel Safary) is an eight-year-old dyslexic child, shunned by his well-to-do parents, teachers and friends.

Nobody understands his problem, and they all assume that he is a shirker who would rather bunk school and play with his pet fish. Until, a new teacher, Ram Shankar Nikumbh (Khan) joins Ishaan's school, and soon realises how unhappy the boy is and what really makes him so.

It seemed incredible that in this day and age, Ishaan's teachers from a presumably top school in Mumbai, where he lives, have no clue about dyslexia even after he repeatedly tells them about "figures that dance", one of the commonest symptoms of the condition.

And, come on, dyslexia is not a rare, hard-to-find disorder, and teachers, certainly in established institutions, are well aware of this.

But, then, the *Taare Zameen Par* script could not let thunder be stolen from Nikumbh, who had to transform Ishaan from a depressed, morose lad into a bubbly, cheerful student. So what if Nikumbh became the hero in the process, pushing the boy off the pedestal!



Taare Zameen Par changes tracks. The story about dyslexic Ishaan recedes to the background, and Nikumbh emerges larger than life, as a saviour of sorts, a kind of messiah. But, of course. You do not expect Mr Khan to play second fiddle to Master Darsheel. Sadly, somewhere along the line, Khan completely loses his thread of thoughts, and in the bargain the cream of his plot. The film, in the end, appears to be blowing the trumpet for the teacher, not the poor child.

The tale is not very different with the latest Aamir Khan production, *Peepli [Live]*, helmed though by Anusha Rizvi. Purportedly about the tragic issue of farmers' suicides, it soon turns out that the movie has more to do with rivalry among television channels and their popularity ratings.

The poor farmer, Natha (essayed with brilliant conviction by Omkar Das Manikpuri) plans to — in the face of extreme poverty, mounting debts and failed harvests — hang himself hoping that the Government would compensate his family for his death. Natha's brother, Budhia (also performed to perfection by Raghuvir Yadav), aids and abets this crime.

When television channels get wind of this, they descend on Peepli, the decrepit village where the brothers live.

With round-the-clock news channels hungering for sensation rather than substance, stomping on individual freedom and aggressively intruding very private spaces, Rizvi's work begins to look less and less genuine.

At least to the cause it had set out in the first place to uphold, namely

* The ensemble cast of *Peepli [Live]*, produced by Aamir Khan (above), and the actor-director promoting his earlier *Taare Zameen Par*: stories with lost threads of thoughts.

the plight of millions of Indian farmers.

For several years now, they have been committing suicides in their hundreds or giving up cultivation and migrating to cities. Even as I am keying in this column, the news of a farmer's suicide in West Bengal, the first in the state, trickles in. Caught in the vicious web of drought, crop losses and debt, they have had little help from the administration, and although *Peepli [Live]* does touch upon these, the attempt appears, more often than not, cursory.

In the end, I am left wondering what exactly Rizvi (or Khan perhaps) wanted to say. Did she plan to move us with the terrible misfortune that has befallen the simple farming community, in a nation where most people still depend on land for their livelihood?

Did she want to make her work a social satire with the box making idiots out of us? Did she want to hit out at politicians (see the way how one of them gifts a television set to Natha)? It is unclear, but like *Taare Zameen Par*, *Peepli [Live]* too quickly loses its focus.

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