

cinema



* Madhavan and Kangana Ranaut play an unusual couple in *Tanu Weds Manu*; the actor with his real-life wife Sarita (right).



Wedded to quality films

After flitting through small roles on television and in cinema, Madhavan has become known for his eminently watchable performances.

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Madhavan is friendly. This is the nicest thing about this actor. He is willing to take your calls or return them, is affable and communicative. He is an interviewer's delight. When I recently spoke to him, he was shooting in Tamil Nadu's Karaikudi, for Linguswamy's *Vettai*, along with Arya, Sameera Reddy and Amla Paul. To be made in Tamil and Telugu, the movie will have Madhavan playing important parts.

Born and raised in Jamshedpur (this is why the south Indian actor's Hindi diction is good), he studied electronics, represented India as a cultural ambassador in Canada, went to Britain as an NCC cadet and trained with the Royal Army,

Navy and the Air Force, but could not join any since he was not old enough.

Probably life had penned something else for him. After flitting through small roles on television and in cinema, Madhavan oozed romance in Mani Ratnam's *Alaipayuthey* (Tamil, 2000). With actress Shalini (pity she does not act any more) first as a lover and later as a husband, Madhavan's Karthik helped weave an almost ethereal love story, set in Chennai's suburban trains and stations (Does this remind you of David Lean's *Brief Encounter* with Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson that unfolded with trains as a leitmotif?).

The film was a mix of light, breezy frames that later merged

into seriously sombre flashes with the married couple squabbling, the sudden death of the wife's estranged father heightening the strain between the two young people.

In the 2002 *Kannathil Muthamittal*, again a Mani Ratnam canvas, Maddy, as Madhavan is popularly known, hit the critic's eye with a performance that was very different from the one as Karthik. As the father of an adopted girl, who insisted on meeting her biological mother in Sri Lanka, Madhavan essayed Thiruchelvan with the pain and pathos of a parent in sheer dilemma.

Was it right on his part and that of his wife to have told the girl about her real mother? Would the mother take away her daughter?

Would the girl return to the parents who had adopted her — emotionally? Will she still love them? These questions troubled Thiruchelvan as he went through the fear of losing a daughter he had come to adore. Maddy conveyed the angst with admirable conviction.

Movies that followed, like *Rang De Basanti* (Hindi), *Guru* (Hindi and Tamil) and *3 Idiots* (Hindi), hardly provided a fair platform for him.

Well, then came *Tanu Weds Manu*, a sweet love story, brilliantly contrasted between the male and the female leads. Portrayed by Madhavan and Kangana Ranaut, Manoj Sharma or Manu and Tanuja Trivedi or Tanu lifted what was arguably a plot that was dangerously close to films like *Jab We Met*. Manu runs into an already-engaged-to-be married Tanu at a friend's wedding, and finds himself falling in love with her.

In a kind of see-saw affair that sees Tanu dithering on the precipice, Manu, the doctor from England, shows typical European sensibilities in dealing with her and her tantrums. The way he walks and talks and his responses and reactions aptly suited the character, who had been living in London for 12 years. In some ways, he seemed to have imbibed the qualities of a thoroughbred Englishman.

Though *Tanu Weds Manu* was coincidence-driven, excellent performances by just about every member of the cast pulled the film through. Of particular interest were Madhavan's skills, where he marvellously combined a strange mix of very British veneer and typical Indian characteristics.

During a telephone interview, he had a few interesting points to make. "It is always the script that draws me to a movie. But more than this is the passion with which a director is willing to put everything he has into making that one film.

"When Anand Rai told me the story of *Tanu Weds Manu*, it certainly appealed to me. But when I saw Rai's dedication and passion, I was completely bowled over. He gave me a large non-refundable

advance, and said that nobody else could possibly play Manu. At that point, he did not even have a producer on board.

"I am even willing to ignore a director's track record. I did that on a couple of occasions: Vikram Kumar's *Yavarum Nalam* and Rai's *Tanu Weds Manu*. Rai's last work was a box-office disaster, though it got good reviews. However, I do look at the producer, the script and the co-stars. These do matter along with a director's commitment to a see a movie through", Madhavan averred.

In the case of *Tanu Weds Manu*, Madhavan recommended Kangana, because as he said, "you cannot be from a city and hope to essay a small-town girl. She comes from a small town, and she turned out to be just right for being Tanu. The language, the nuances and the postures — all these emerged from her in a very authentic way".

Yes, indeed, casting can make all the difference to a film. David O Selznick waited an eternity before he found his Scarlett O'Hara for *Gone with the Wind*, that turned out to be an immortal classic, painting a moving picture of the American Civil War and how it affected the lives of blacks and whites, and how it changed not just the course of the nation's history but also that of many individuals, including Scarlett's. It is said that shooting was already in progress, and Selznick was yet to find his dear Scarlett. But one particular evening, as Atlanta was "burning", watched by Selznick, his brother, if I am right, walked up and proudly announced, "David, here is your Scarlett". It was Vivien Leigh, and Selznick knew the moment he set his eyes on her that she was the woman he was looking for.

In an important way, Madhavan found his Tanu in Kangana for Rai's work.

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