

cinema

Fact, fiction and a Raj romance

Tamil period film *Madharasapattinam* is a mixed bag of history and poetic licence, writes

Gautaman Bhaskaran

The past evokes nostalgia. The future, sometimes hope. Tamil director A L Vijay's *Madharasapattinam* blends these two periods to tell us the tale of a sweet romance set at a time when the sun was finally sinking over the once invincible British Empire.

The narrative begins in the Madharasapattinam of 1945 and runs till August 15, 1947, the day English quit India. We do not know what happened in the next six decades until we are brought face to face with an 80-year-old British woman, Amy, a picture of grace and dignity, but dying of a brain clot.

When doctors advise immediate surgery, but give her only a 50% chance of surviving the ordeal, she decides to travel to India to find her lost love, a wrestler who fought for fun and washed clothes for a living. Armed with just a black and white photograph of his and accompanied by her granddaughter, Amy flies out of London, much against her family's wishes.

The film cuts to Chennai, originally called Madharasapattinam or just Pattinam, with its filthy Cooum

River and Buckingham Canal (whose once crystal waters have now turned into foul smelling sewerage), chaotic roads, polluted environment and teeming millions, including cheats among them out to fleece particularly the foreigner.

Amy and her granddaughter are accosted by one such guy, who takes them on a merry ride as the old woman begins a desperate search for a young man she once knew, and who must have aged beyond recognition. How is she going to find him in this mad, bustling metropolis?

Vijay, also credited with the story and script, keeps his camera panning from the past to the present in extremely smooth shifts that leave no room for confusion.

The scene where the young Amy passes by the legendary Spencer and Company, which changes into today's Spencer Plaza on Mount Road, nay Anna Salai, is just marvellous.

So too is the transformation of the extraordinarily pretty Amy (played by Amy Jackson, Miss Teen World 2008) — curiously wide-eyed and feeling wonderful about life in Madharasapattinam — into an ailing, dejected woman in Chennai.

Art director Selva Kumar has tried recreating the old Chennai with its quaint tramcars and buses, road signs, coins and even Washermanpet or Dhobis Colony. However, the images often seem superficial, and the studio sets look, well, like studio sets. Such period recreation is not easy, and requires huge funds and a very talented art director. The production house, AGS Entertainment, seems to have had neither.

Vijay told me that it was very difficult to find the old footage or pictures of the 1940s Chennai. "We did not even know what the colour of the tram or bus was".

So, he went around talking to people, including the assistants of C Rajagopalachari (first Indian Governor-General of independent India) and poet Bharathi, who had lived then. Historians like S Muthiah were consulted, and movies like *En Manaivi* (1940, and whose hand-held camera graphically captured the old city) were seen.

But Vijay appears to have forgotten another old Chennai stalwart and renowned documentary movie-maker, S Krishnaswamy, whose work includes invaluable footage of vintage Chennai.

Vijay and Selva Kumar may have got the colours right, but somehow the trams, the buses and the Central Station do not look right. I felt that I was looking at some giant toys outside the station, and the scenes of crowd jubilation at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, when the country was freed of its colonial shackles, appeared to have been conceptualised and shot rather amateurishly.

The Central Station and Washermanpet, where much of the plot unfolds, witness a Raj romance between Amy and wrestler-washerman Parithi (essayed by Arya).

Daughter of the last British Governor of the Chennai Presidency, Amy finds herself attracted to Parithi after he stops



* Wooden performances by the lead couple Arya and Amy Jackson only draw attention to the inherent holes in *Madharasapattinam*'s plot.

her car from rolling downhill, though merely to save his donkey.

Although leading a highly protected life and living in the lap of silk and finery, she manages to mingle with the washermen and their families, highly improbable though then, given the turbulent days preceding Indian Independence. Certainly a flaw in the storyline.

Amy's sudden engagement to a British officer, arranged autocratically by her father and stepmother, creates further impediments to her blossoming love for Parithi.

Strangely, his community does not oppose the affair. Rather, it tries to get the lovers married. But the Governor and her fiancé would not let Amy "consort with a bloody native".

Madharasapattinam has other holes in its story. The writer forgets that it is not the East India Company he is dealing with, but the Empire, ultimately known for its rule of law. Even General Dyer, the butcher of Jallianwallah Bagh, was not let off scot free.

But here in Vijay's work, the Governor and his future son-in-law resort to atrocious forms of torture that include electrocution and letting dead bodies rot in a pond!

And why would the Governor want to build a golf course close to Independence, and right in the washermen's colony? The British in India at that point of time were exercised over issues like Partition. They were anxiously looking for an honourable way to exit the

subcontinent. Surely, torture and golf courses could not have been part of their agenda then.

To top it all, what was Amy doing all those 60 years before she thought of Parithi? And, pray, why did Parithi — who seems to have got rich in the intervening period — not try and trace Amy? It could not have been difficult to find the last British Governor's daughter. A long trail of unanswered questions.

Vijay has obviously bitten more than what he could comfortably chew. A period piece is a highly ambitious project. It is not just enough to build a few tramcars and buses, and a façade of a station. The narrative has to be structured with an eye to human behaviour as it was then.

Much of Vijay's work is a rip-off from *Titanic*.

Added to this are the singularly disappointing performances. Amy is passé, and her highly accented Tamil dialogues are difficult to follow, given the intrusive background score.

Arya is worse. Except for a well toned body, his face is absolutely wooden, and here is a poor, illiterate man being sought after by a virtual princess. Where is the excitement? Where is the passion? And, where are the emotions?

Perhaps director Vijay should stop attempting grandiose period cinema.

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