

cinema



✱ Kamal Hassan and Trisha star in *Manmadhan Ambu*.

An actor named Kamal Hassan

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Kamal Hassan is one of India's finest actors, easily among the world's greatest. A method actor of immense calibre, Hassan has given some extraordinary performances. And the urge to excel was evident even when he was six. In *Kalathur Kannamma*, as the son of the characters played by Gemini Ganesan and Savithri, he was arresting, and toddled away with the Filmfare Award for the Best Child Artist.

It was much later in life — after several roles as a child and as an adult that were not quite memorable — that Hassan portrayed Prasanna in *Apoorva Raagangal* in which he is drawn into a torrid relationship with an older classical singer, essayed by Srividya. The film, helmed by K Balachander, reputed for socially striking cinema, was controversial to the core and way ahead of its times. It transported Hassan to a new high.

His fans would say there was no looking back for him since then. Movies like *Moondru Mudichu*, *16 Vayathinile*, *Sigappu Rojakkal*, *Moondram Pirai*, *Michael Madhana Kamarajan*, *Apoorva Sagodarargal*, *Guna*, *Thevar Magan* and *Avvai Shanmughi* helped him develop as an actor rather than a star. Playing a woman, playing a dwarf, playing a madman and an incorrigible lover, he stole hearts and won critical appreciation.

Even hardened critics could find little to pan him. Women swooned over him, and I still remember a huge blow-up of Hassan's photograph in Sarika's humble home in Mumbai's Juhu in the mid-1980s. He was still married to Vani those days, but Sarika was deeply in love with the south Indian actor who was yet to step into Bollywood. And she never hid that, not even from a journalist like me.

His two notable Hindi films, *Sagar* and *Ek Duje Ke Liye* took him into the Hindi heartland, but as a disillusioned/desperate lover in them he could impress only to a point, his diction largely impeding his natural

prowess. He probably realised a little later that it was best to stick to a language one knew well enough if one were to nuance with natural ease.

However, to me Hassan's best work till date has been Mani Ratnam's *Nayagan*, where he plays Shakhivelu Nayagar, a character inspired by real-life ganglord Varadarajan Mudaliar. As a Tamil don in Mumbai, he was brilliant getting right into the skin of a man who believes that he is above the law — if that facilitates him to look after the interests of his downtrodden brethren. It is only in the very end he understands that violence can only beget violence, and those who live by the bullet will die by it.

Hassan's emoting that shifted from the sweetly romantic (remember that song with his wife, *Nee Oru Kathal Sangeetham*?) to the phenomenally considerate to the wickedly cunning to the enormously affectionate, and to the brutally cruel underlined his magnificent talent. His terrible angst in the scene where he sees the grossly disfigured body of his son killed in a bomb explosion

is perhaps one of cinema's finest moments. Few have been able to express with such conviction.

Yet, Hassan could go wrong. And, he did. Two films may well serve as good examples: *Hey Ram*, a semi-fictional plot about India's Partition and Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, and *Dasavathaaram*, where he tries bettering Sivaji Ganesan's nine-role *Navarathiri* with 10 avatars. Both movies were horrible messes. While *Hey Ram* was directed by Hassan, he, I suspect, proxy helmed *Dasavathaaram*. With the camera refusing to turn away from Hassan, the films screamed out his narcissist tendency. Kamal was much too in love with himself to let the movies or the other characters in them make an impact.

It then seemed sad that a great actor like Hassan was letting himself sink into such a quagmire. Though of the two so-called superstars in Tamil Nadu, Rajnikanth has always been a greater crowd pleaser and puller than Hassan, the discerning audiences have always preferred Kamal. For, while Rajnikanth relied on sheer gimmicks to enslave viewers, Hassan got into the characters and acted them out. He used his body and face with great dexterity.

Rajnikanth had to flick the cigarette into the air and indulge in other forms of tricks to ride high.

I do not know whether Hassan misses mass adoration, but in his latest movie, K S Ravikumar's *Manmadhan Ambu*, Kamal's Major Mannar throws a mobile telephone in the air and nets it in his trouser pocket — a la Rajnikanth, with the instrument replacing the cigarette — attracting the loudest applause from the audience. Sadly Indian crowds seem to prefer circus to cinema.

Manmadhan Ambu is interesting in a way, for we see a Hassan who allows his own script to give the right kind of space to the other actors, including Trisha and Madhavan. Hassan enters the screen almost 30 minutes after the film begins, and in an effortlessly disarming style portrays the life of a man torn between duty to his cancer-stricken friend and professional ethics.

Forced to lie to his client (Madhavan), who hires him to trail his fiancée (Trisha) as she goes on a European holiday, the Major is pained when he is pushed to sully a woman's character, because her fiancé only wants to hear that, and will only pay the fee if he hears that.

We see traces of the old Kamal as he runs through the entire gamut of feelings. As a private detective, he admirably essays a detective plagued by guilt and saddened by his own personal tragedy. When he finds that he about to orchestrate another by dividing the lovers, he is distressed. Hassan infuses into his role the dilemma and dichotomy of the sleuth called upon to ruin a relationship.

Though *Manmadhan Ambu*'s basic plot of a suspicious guy wanting to keep an eye on the woman he loves is quite novel, it could have been far more engaging. The script begins to meander through a series of puerile situations, and soon the main theme gets all blurred.

Despite some lovely shots of Venice (where the climax unfolds in the labyrinth of canals, in the web of deceit and in the maze of characters), Rome, Paris and Marseilles, some splendid performances and a great looking Kamal, the work fails to fly high.

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