

# cinema

## Yellow boots, but where's the thrill?

Anurag Kashyap's *That Girl in Yellow Boots* doesn't quite measure up to the buzz created by his earlier films,

writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

**T**here was a time when Indian movie men and women were seen rushing from one theatre to another during film festivals. Kamal Haasan, Revathy and Nandita Das were some that I remember running into at festivals.

Not any longer. At least, I have not been seeing them. In an important way, this is a reason why Indian cinema is not up there with world cinema. For our producers, directors and actors have very little clue about what is happening beyond Indian shores.

So, I was surprised — but very happy — to see Anurag Kashyap at the recent Venice Film Festival, armed with the brochure, queuing up for movies. He would invariably dash to the front rows in a hall. "I like to be right at the front", he told me when we bumped into each other at a queue. "This helps me keep my eyes riveted to the screen. I like to concentrate."

With his latest work, *That Girl in Yellow Boots*, screening at the Festival, Kashyap got a five-day invitation, but decided to be at Venice for a longer period to follow and savour the ebb and flow of world cinema.

Sadly though for Kashyap, his movie did not attract enough attention. At the first press screening, the hall was about half full. But a day or two later, at another showing, there were only five people. His press conference was also not well attended.

To begin with, I have no idea why *That Girl in Yellow Boots* was touted as a thriller. The film follows Ruth, a 20-year-old British girl from Brighton, as she flies into Mumbai looking for a father who deserted her, her English mother and step-sister 15 years ago. Armed with an address-less letter from her father in which he says he is keen to meet her — and no recent photograph of his — the girl's search in a metropolis of 14mn people seems ridiculously futile.

Scripted by Kashyap and his live-in girlfriend, Kalki



\* Anurag Kashyap lets the story meander in his latest film.

Koechlin (who also plays Ruth, and she appears promising, though her European looks from French parentage will limit her roles), the movie frequently distracts us from the main goal.

We are pushed into the by now well-known situations that foreigners face in India: the hassle of renewing a visa, the bribes that they have to give, the merry drives that autorickshaw wallahs take them on, and so on. Ruth being a woman and white, has even more hassles to cope with.

What, however, gets really to her is her coke snorting lover, Prashant (Prashant Prakash). He is chased by drug dealers, and when they cannot find him, Ruth becomes an easy target. She is battered and ends up paying Prashant's debts.

Ruth is also working as a masseuse in a seedy massage parlour to make ends meet.

She has two regular customers: An oldish Diwakar (Naseeruddin Shah), who comes in for a clean massage and soon develops an excessively possessive paternal feeling for her, and Lynn (Kumud Mishra), who has all the trappings of a pervert.

Despite a couple of excellent character sketches by Shah and Divya Jagdale (the forever chatting-into-the-mobile madam of the parlour) and a promising feat by Koechlin, *That Girl in Yellow Boots* (which Ruth sports sometimes) engages us only to a point. Situations often seem clichéd or manipulated, exposing the script's failings.

Unfortunately, Kashyap has not been able to come up with something as unusual as his earlier *Black Friday*. Based on the 1993 Mumbai serial bombings — believed to have been a revenge for the earlier riots in the city where Muslims were butchered — the movie was based on facts and talks about the aftermath of the bloody incident.

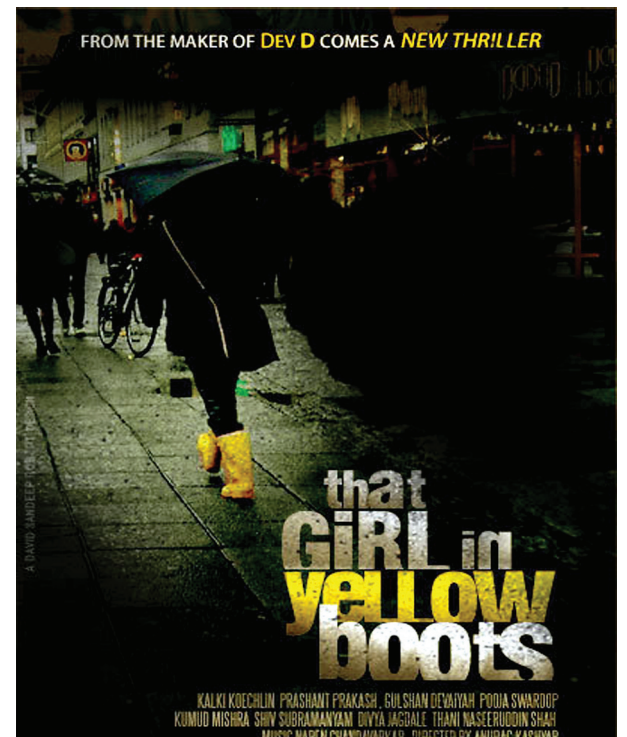
In a docu-style, the director plots the police investigation led by Deputy Police Commissioner Rakesh Maria. It is a gripping work aided by two strong performances, those of Kay Kay Menon as the cop and Pawan Malhotra as underworld don Tiger Memon.

*Black Friday* remained in the cans for two years, because the Indian Censor Board would not certify it. When it finally opened in 2004, it was rapturously applauded, and British helmer Danny Boyle was inspired to base a chase scene in *Slumdog Millionaire* on one in *Black Friday*.

Kashyap made a few more movies, but they have not been as stirring as *Black Friday*. His 2007 *No Smoking*, adapted from Stephen King's 1978 short story, *Quitters, Inc*, literally went over many heads. He told me just before I watched it that he had said a lot of things in it in a disguised, guarded fashion.

He was obviously smarting from the two-year delay in getting *Black Friday* released. The film about the John Abraham character being pushed into an unusually strange rehab centre to get him out of nicotine addiction was too sophisticated for an Indian audience, which is hardly ever encouraged to think by film writers and directors.

So Kashyap next experimented with something easier on the mind, and came up with *Dev D*, a modern adaptation of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's early 20th century *Devdas*, beaten to pulp by masters and minors. What was significantly different about this version was Kashyap's neat twist in the end that lifted the age-old story from tragedy and defeatism



\* A promotional poster for *That Girl in Yellow Boots*: the thriller tag is a misnomer.

to a refreshingly new high. He wove into it a strong woman character in Paro, sexually liberated and fearless in her commitment.

*Dev D* was at Venice last year. So too *Gulaal*, which he made soon after *Dev D*. Based in Rajasthan, *Gulaal* has far too many players ranging from nobles to students all caught in a web of greed, arrogance and bravado. Some of the scenes are brutal: a young woman professor stripped to her skin by students and imprisoned in a room along with an equally naked boy.

Exploring the dynamics of authoritarianism versus liberalism, Kashyap tries placing India in a certain perspective that many may not agree. Often abstract, the movie has a colour palette that reminded me of Wong Kar-wai's creations: the bizarre mix of hues.

It may be strangely coincidental that Italy (where Kashyap has been for two consecutive years attending the Festival) and its cinema were largely instrumental in pushing him to pick the megaphone. During the 1990s, when Kashyap was in Delhi studying to be a scientist, he was not an angry young man, but a depressed soul, who tried elevating his mood through alcohol and drugs. Probably, these did not quite work. When he finally emerged out of his stupor, he found himself in Jana Natya Manch, a Left-wing street theatre group, which men like Safdar Hashmi promoted and died for. Kashyap did several plays with the group. Yet, he remained restless and perplexed.

It was the 1993 International Film Festival of India which his friends forced him to watch that provided the balm for his restiveness. He saw 50-odd movies in 10 days, and one of them was Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*. It created magic in his mind. He said: "I saw movies from all different perspectives and in a way you can say that these films changed my life and it's meaning completely for me. Just that one movie festival (and that one film), and I decided that this is what I want to be a part of. In the next five months I was in Mumbai!"

With just about Rs5,000 in his pocket, the man with a mission to make something out of his life gone haywire reached Mumbai in 1993, only to spend several months on the streets, sleeping on the beaches, and, sometimes, under water tanks. Many failures later — which included 'no' for acting and aborted plays — he met Ram Gopal Varma who took a fancy for the young man and asked him to script *Satya*. This led to more writing: Kashyap penned dialogues for Mani Ratnam's *Yuva* and Deepa Mehta's Oscar-nominated *Water* among others.

However, it was *Black Friday* that put him in the spotlight, eventually taking him to Italy's Adriatic coast. At Venice, this year, I found Kashyap perfectly at home.

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