



'No one promises there will be gold at the end of the road'



The legendary director Mani Ratnam gives Arthur J Pais a peek into his filmmaking

Mani Ratnam — who has made films in Hindi, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam — is one of India's most prolific filmmakers.

The master filmmaker, who has an MBA from one of India's prestigious Management School, almost ended up being a management consultant.

When you accepted the Jaeger-LeCoultre Glory to the Filmmaker Award at the Venice Film Festival, you reportedly said, 'I can't be flippant and causal about filmmaking anymore.' What did you mean by that?

Each new film is like the first film. It is a new story and there are so many ways of telling it. You have to find a pitch that is right for this one and discover a way to narrate it at that pitch. You have a sense of what you want, but it is not a sharp, complete, clear vision. It is an abstract notion, which you try to bring to focus with your team. You have to jump in, hit the ground, find your footing, get into a stride, (*strut and stumble a bit maybe*) and go for gold. No one promises there will be gold at the end of the road, but you have to believe you will find it. You have to carry the entire team... purely by the faith they have in you and your convictions. You have to deliver.

The only difference is that in your first few films you are not weighed by external things (*like your track record*), so you are

less inhibited. But with a few recognitions and an award like this on your head, it is like a first film with excess baggage... So, I can't afford to be casual. There are more eyes looking sharply at you.

Your films have tackled a variety of subjects over the years. What are some of the other themes that attract you?

Themes that attract you also scare you. It is not as though you can find a movie with every theme that attracts you. There are so many you find impossible to convert into scripts. Sometimes it takes years before you are able to etch it into a film. They look like huge mountains in front of you... But to find a path within it and be able to be able to reach it (*to whatever height*) requires courage, luck and bull-headedness.

You have said, 'For me, emotional integrity of the character is the soul of the film.' How do you make your characters emotionally stronger?

All elements start at the script stage. That is the foundation. That has to be well defined and strong... But from the script to the film, there needs to be a leap. It has to come alive; it has to gain flesh and blood. The viewer should be able to reach and touch the characters. This is where the actors make the difference. After the script, the single most important element in filmmaking is the performance. It can make or break the credibility of the film... The written word in the script is not

sacrosanct. It is the essence of thought at that point. How the essence is conveyed is important. There are no rules at this stage. It is the collective search to find something honest.

Some observers have said it is not easy to decide from your films where you stand politically. Is it intentional?

My friend, a writer, would say that you should be able to depict the hunger of the tiger and the survival instinct of the deer. That is creative writing... The advantage of the creative field is that you can be in different shoes and think like someone else. It is a huge liberating zone. You don't have to impose your personal beliefs and views on everything... A filmmaker can make two films from the two opponents' views and both can be done with conviction.

You once said you offer a celluloid picture of what you see, and hope that the audiences also see that picture; it is left to them to decide what to do with that picture. Do you still believe in that?

I think a filmmaker makes films on things that fascinate, intrigue, shock, or worry him. He makes films he can laugh with, cry with, films that bring out the child in him or on things that trouble him. It is a sharing of views. Films that share instead of preach; films that make you think or emote than the ones with an obvi-

Looking beyond Bollywood

When filmmaker Mani Ratnam walks the red carpet at the Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council Film Festival along with his wife Suhasini, also a filmmaker, he will send out a strong signal — regional Indian films need to be showcased at South Asian film festivals.

"Though some of the film festivals, including the MIAAC, do show some regional films, the big emphasis is on Bollywood," says Joe Prabhakar, who promotes concerts across America featuring South Indian artists. "This time we were able to persuade the MIAAC to not only show the Tamil film *Raavanam*, but also have a dialogue session with the guests from Chennai."

Joining Ratnam and Suhasini will be New Jersey-based filmmaker Arun Vaidyanathan, whose Tamil film *Achchamundu! Achchamundu!* has travelled to many film festivals in India and abroad. The two films and the follow up event are part of the MIAAC's Chalo Chennai segment.

Though *Raavanam*, the Hindi version of *Raavanam* did not do well at the box office, the Tamil film did comparatively better.

"It is still a much talked about film," said Prabhakar. "Besides, Ratnam and ... not to forget Suhasini, who wrote the Tamil dialogues and pitched the script, are not here just to talk about *Raavanam*. They will be talking about regional cinema and their own films."