



The indie filmmaker who shared space with Ratnam

Arun Vaidyanathan quit a plush job to make films, reports
Arthur J Pais

After the screening of his film *Achchamundu! Achchamundu!* at the Shanghai International Film Festival, director Arun Vaidyanathan was stunned to see some 800 people waiting for a question and answer session with him.

"In India, most film goers are out of the theater even before the end credits start rolling," he says. "But here about 70 percent had stayed for the Q&A." A woman even gave him a rose, saying she was very touched by the film.

"It just shows that a good film can touch people's lives anywhere," he says of his first feature film, which was made in New Jersey, his home for many years. The film is about a pedophile painter and an Indian immigrant family that is endangered.

Once a programmer at Oracle, Vaidyanathan has been making short films since 2005. "The arts and movies fascinated me since my young days," he says. "In 2003, I decided to follow my first love. I quit my plush job and started studying filmmaking at the New York Film Academy."

Many of his short films were shown at festivals, but *The Séance* brought him the best exposure two years ago. It won the Independent Film Channel's Media Lab award and was shown at prestigious events.

"After looking around for money for the project (*Achchamundu! Achchamundu!*) for over two years, talking to people after showing my short films... I somehow put together about \$900,000, part of which was used to release it in India," Vaidyanathan says.

Many told him the film was too intense and it dealt with a taboo subject. "Writing, directing and producing a film is easy," he adds. "But selling a film is very tough."

While in America, many distributors shy away from independent films, in India, Vaidyanathan says, distributors don't understand that you need a lot of money to promote a film. "People talk about making films like *Paranormal Activity*," he says. "People ask me why I don't make films for \$10,000... People forget or just do not know that distribu-



Achchamundu! Achchamundu! is part of the Chalo Chennai segment of the MIAAC Film Festival

tor Paramount (which picked up the first *Paranormal*) spent \$20 million to promote and market it. The second film was produced by Paramount... it was made for about \$3 million... and it spent another \$20 million on print and publicity."

Vaidyanathan and the co-producers decided to distribute it themselves. "Even our best wishers thought it would be a miracle if the film ran for three days," he says. "It ran for 54 days each in three Chennai theaters. Even we were surprised. The press embraced us and the mature audience helped with the word of mouth."

But there was hardly any showing outside Chennai. "We did not have the infrastructure to have it released statewide," he adds. However, now that it has been sold to Sun TV and other ancillary rights are being purchased, he feels he might breakeven.

The film, which has been seen at many film festivals, was awarded the Best Homegrown Feature Film at the Garden State Film Festival.

"Film festivals are a fantastic avenue for filmmakers," he says. "We will get

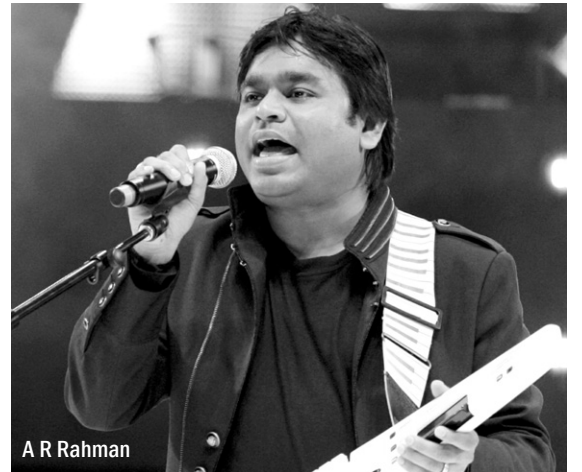
some 25 percent of our investment back thanks to the tax cut from New Jersey because of the award... If not for film festivals, most of the gems would not have found its way to big screens... The sleeper hit *Paranormal Activity* was found in Slamdance (a film festival in Utah)... Shanghai Film Festival, which is not only one of the top film festivals, but also Asia's biggest, gave a jump start to *Achchamundu!*"

"One of the best things for any filmmaker will be finding his/her own style," is his message for aspiring filmmakers. "There is no need for any filmmaker to think how can I form my own style. It is within each filmmaker. As long as the filmmaker follows his instincts and doesn't compromise on the storytelling, his/her style will be automatically found in the creation."

"Trying to mimic any celebrated filmmaker is not going to help your career," he blogged recently. "Any genre is fine as long as the movie is interesting, ground breaking and unique!"

Several of his short films have been shown at the Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council Film Festival. "And now I feel honored to walk the red carpet with my feature film," he says. "Just imagine, my film is being shown along with Mani Ratnam's *Raavanan* at the festival."

A golden collaboration: Ratnam and Rahman



"When I sit with A R Rahman to discuss a tune, both of us are thinking alike," filmmaker Mani Ratnam says. "We are not thinking that this song should be a big hit or it should win an award. What we want is to create a song that enhances the story telling. He instinctively understands what a director wants."

The collaboration with the Oscar and Grammy-winning composer has created memorable film music starting from *Roja* to his latest *Raavan/Raavanan*.

Rahman, who became a national icon with his music for Ratnam's *Roja*, says occasionally the film and the music refuse to take off, like the Tamil film *Iruvar*. "We worked hard on composing the music with the flavor of the 1950s through early 1970s... but we did not get enough appreciation," Rahman said.

But in most cases, even when a Ratnam film does not do well, the music soars. Rahman has won many awards for his score in Ratnam films.

Rahman loves to have at least one song in Rahman's voice in his films. The *Dumbara Dumbara* song in *Guru* was recorded in another singer's voice, but Ratnam insisted that it be re-recorded in Rahman's voice, and even warned that the number would be dropped if Rahman didn't sing it.

"Many times I long to compose soft songs," Rahman said. "But there are hardly any filmmakers who like lingering songs. Mani sir enjoys soft songs and knows how to use them best. I wonder who else would have okayed a tune like *Kalvare, Kalvare* (*Raavanan*)."

Many directors think their job is done once they have signed a composer. "But with Mani sir, right from our first film together (*Roja*), it has been a collaborative effort," Rahman added. "He has always appreciated the importance of the background score."

—Arthur J Pais

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

◀ M5

ous message are the kind that I prefer. A painter brings across his impression on a canvas and we perceive it individually. Films are similar.

You reportedly thought of quitting cinema at 40, but that 40 has never come. The temptation of the next film is greater, you were quoted as saying. What were the most

exciting things you had in *Raavan*?

If you have to explain at the end of a film what you found exciting about it, it means... I have not effectively passed on what excited me. *Raavan* gave me some of the liberty that I have been talking about. It gave a chance to view something from a perspective that had not been seen too often. *Raavan* is painted dark in the epic. This was an attempt to explore the dark-

ness.

There are several versions to the Ramayan. The Kambha Ramayan deals with Raavan in more than one shade. It looks at him with all his strengths and weakness. What fascinated me was something that was written centuries back being relevant to this day.

How do you deal with failure?

I think what you learn very fast from life

is to take downs with the up. You do something because you believe in it. You think it is relevant and unique. Sometimes those may not be enough. So you learn and move on. As long as you know that you have given it your best effort, you are OK. No one promised that it would be a bed of roses, but that can't stop you from attempting things. You just have to say it in a language and fashion that will take it to more people.