

Winning them over with wholesome cinema

It is not very rare to find the talents of an illustrator and a writer combined in one and the same person. But here one has the unique phenomenon of two veterans in their respective fields, functioning in perfect harmony like twins, for the past three and a half decades. The Bapu-Ramana duo is today a household name not just in Andhra Pradesh but wherever Telugu people live. Beginning as an illustrator-story writer team and then turning into a film director-writer duo, they have contributed immensely to the enrichment of children's writing and satirical works and social themes, both in literature and through the medium of wholesome cinema. The latest venture of the team is about the life and works of the renowned Telugu poet of the 14th century-Srinatha, the title role being played by N. T. Rama Rao.

Born at Narsapur in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, as Sathiraju Lakshmi Narayana, Bapu took his law degree and enrolled himself as an advocate in the Madras High Court. But very soon his interest in illustration took him to the world of magazines. When he was hardly 12 his illustrations were published in a children's magazine. He worked as cartoonist for a daily in 1955, then joined the Press Information Bureau and later worked as Art consultant to the Southern Languages Book Trust. He has held more than 250 one man shows and one at the National Theatre in London in 1978.

While continuing with his work of illustration, Bapu entered the field of make believe in 1967 with "Saakshi," an off-beat film with no make-up or commercial ingredients. It was completely shot outdoors, and screened at the Tashkent film festival.

Since then Bapu has directed 38 feature films in Telugu, Hindi and Tamil. Among his films "Muthyala Muggu" won the best regional film award and got the best cinematography award for Ishan Arya at the national level. "Bhaktha Kannappa" got the best sound recordist award for S. P. Ramanathan. "Sita Kaiyanam" was shown at the Chicago film festival in 1978 and the same year at the London Film Festival. He participated in both these festivals. Ramana's writing, K. V. Mahadevan's music, K. S. Prasad's visuals and Ravee Nagaich's special effects combined with Bapu's deft handling and enriched "Sita Kaiyanam."

Bapu entered the Hindi film field with "Hum Panch" (1980) and till "Prem Pratigya" had directed eight films in that language. It was Bapu who introduced Anil Kapoor to films through his Telugu movie "Vamsa Vriksham."

On his entry into films, Bapu says, "I had no formal training. We took a simple story, "Saakshi" and narrated it in a realistic way. The audience could not digest it. Had the hero rebelled as in any formula films, perhaps they would have liked it. Cinema is a world of make believe and people expect more fiction than realism here."

"The Nagireddi-Chakrapani team made "Sahukaru" as its maiden venture. It was a purposeful film, but did not do well. Then they made "Paathala Bhairavi," which to this day runs to houseful shows whenever released. They gained lost ground. It was a fantasy film, but made with good taste. Cinema is no doubt meant to entertain the masses, but to lure them it is not right to incorporate violence and vulgarity in a film. We



Bapu directing N. T. Rama Rao and Jayasudha in "Srinatha Kavisarvabhowmudu"

The Bapu-Ramana director — story writer duo has endured for years in Telugu cinema. Their films steer clear of violence and vulgarity.

too have made successful and popular films without these ingredients and have proved the point. In such successful movies as "Mana Voori Pandavulu" and "Bhudhimanthudu" there is no trace of violence or vulgarity."

Of all the films directed by Bapu, the one that stands apart from the rest is "Vamsa Vriksham" for its rich visuals and straight narration of a difficult theme-story by the renowned Kannada writer Bhairappa.

Flair for mythologicals

In directing mythologicals or historicals, Bapu is second in none in today's film world. And this was precisely the reason why N. T. Rama Rao assigned him the job for his "Srinatha Kavisarvabhowmudu." Earlier they had worked together in only one film "Sri Ramanjaneya Yudham" (1974)."

Be it "Muthyalu Muggu" his biggest hit or "Goranta Deepam," "Vamsa Vriksham" or the recent "Pelli Pusthakam," to mention a few, his films are all generally heroine oriented. Bapu says "I feel no human being has the right to hurt another. Each has his or her own individuality. Men and women are equal in all respects. We have projected this belief in our films."

Being an illustrator Bapu draws sketches for each shot of his film. "In our country one rarely finds this but in Hollywood the idea of a storyboard is common. Even those directors who cannot draw sketches do rough work on the script. It makes the job that much easier, instead of planning everything only after going to the sets. That way you are wasting not only your own time but that of others too and also their money. Of course, some improvisations can be made on the spot, if necessary, but if we do this kind of homework, we can derive more ideas as we concentrate more."

Bapu's latest film in Hindi, "Prem Pratigya" (remark of "Vandichakram") did well and now he is directing "Paramatma" with Mithun Chakravarty and Juhi Chawla. This is a remake of his own Telugu hit "Budhimanthudu."

Awarded a doctorate by the Andhra University, Bapu's face lights up at the mention of the video films he has made for the primary school children of Andhra. In fact that can be termed the greatest contribution of this duo to the cause of literacy.

"Though NTR has worked with us in a film earlier, it was the video lessons scheme which he planned for the rural school children that brought us closer. At that time he was the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. For over three years we were totally engaged in the project. From Class I to Class III, we squeezed in the entire syllabus in 30 hours of video lessons. Our aim was not only to lure the children to schools but also to teach the teachers how to guide the little ones patiently. The lessons are being shown in Mauritius and in the U.S. too where Telugu families want to teach their children the language. We are yet to finish the rest of the portions for the children of Class IV and V.

Creator of comic characters

Writer of more than a hundred short-stories,

satirical works and film scripts, Mullapudi Venkata Ramana was born at Dowleswaram in East Godavari district. Before entering the film world he had worked as a film critic. He was the creator of the popular characters "Budugu," on the lines of Dennis the Menace and "Appula Apparao," household names in Andhra Pradesh. His extension of the character "Girisam" from the Telugu drama "Kanyasulkam" (written by Gurajada Apparao) brought him much fame. Writer of the political satire "Rajakiya Bhetala Pancha Vinsati," he received the AP State Sahitya Academy award for his collection of short stories "Seetha Kalyanam." Joint recipient of the Raghupathi Venkiah award along with Bapu in 1987 from the A.P. Government, he served as a member of A.P. State Film Development Corporation, on the advisory committee on film scripts and TV for the NFDC and was a member of the Children's Film Society.

Ramana began his film career with "Rakthasambandham" as a dialogue writer and wrote for many films before turning a producer, along with Bapu and some other friends. He chose an off-beat subject for his short story "Saakshi".

"Our second venture was an out and out comedy, "Bangaru Pichika." It failed at the box office. So to make a living, I went back to writing and Bapu to the field of illustration. After earning enough money, we tried our hand again at film making. But this time we attempted commercial subjects without compromising on aesthetic values. We made a successful film "Budhimanthudu" with Nageswara Rao, "Sampoorna Ramayanam" with Sobhan Babu, a silver jubilee hit, "Muthyala Muggu" with Rao Gopala Rao, Sangeetha and Sridhar. Commercial cinema provides pure entertainment to the people, we are here to entertain them in a healthy way."

Films are basically a visual medium. But does not dialogue dominate some of his films like "Muthyala Muggu" and "Andala Ramudu"?

"Even though I am a dialogue writer I feel a film should have less dialogue. But in a movie like "Muthyala Muggu" the role of Rao Gopala Rao demanded more dialogue. In "Andala Ramudu" all the characters are talkative. One can find dialogue only to the required extent in



The winning combination Bapu — Ramana

our films. Take "Vamsa Vriksham." The dialogue in it is very much limited. And in "Sita Kalyanam" it does not go beyond two pages. It has an essentially visual and musical screenplay throughout."

Qualitatively how do you feel about Telugu films?

"Young people should be encouraged. Only then will a qualitative change come about in the Telugu field as in Tamil cinema today. Young and new talent should be encouraged. On my part, if someone brings me a better story, I will keep mine aside and take it up. I did that when veteran actor-journalist, Ravi Kondala Rao brought a story. We made it into "Pelli Pushthakam" which won for him the best story writer award, for me the best dialogue writer award and for the film the second best film award from A.P. Government."

To what factors do you attribute the failure of classics like "Thyagayya," "Sita Kalyanam" and "Vamsa Vriksham"?

"After working hard the whole day the common people expect light entertainment. They do not want serious stuff. Of course we were aware of that when we launched the projects. We cannot blame the people's taste for the failure of the films."

But you tried to incorporate some miracles in "Thyagayya" to lure the audience?

"We did not invent them. There are such stories around the legendary figure. He sings "Naa Jeevanadhara" in Bilahari raga and saves a life. Some miracles have been attributed to him. We only made use of them. It was not intended to attract the masses."

About "Srinatha"...

"The script was written 12 years ago by the Gnanapeeth award winning writer, Dr. C. Narayana Reddy. NTR gave us the script and asked me to write it again. We acquired the rights of Sri Nori Narasimha Sastry's two novels on Srinatha.

"Kavisarwabhawma" and "Kavidwayam." I prepared a screenplay based on them. I told NTR that I had written it in such a way that even a layman can follow it easily when he sees the film. Mr. Ramarao agreed. He did not suggest any changes."

Ramana was awarded a doctorate by the Telugu University this year for his contribution to the field of arts and literature. The Bapu-Ramana duo was conferred the title of "Bala Bandhu" by the A.P. Children's Academy in Hyderabad, recently.

M. L. Narasimham

Effortless performance

It was easily understandable why Alarmel Valli is popular amongst the dance lovers, while one watched her performance at the Music Academy on Christmas day. After an invocatory item from "Natrinali" and Sankirnanadai Alarippu, she took

Music Academy

up the *piece de resistance* of the concert, a rare varnam in Manohari "Sami inda jalamelara" by the Tanjore Quartet. The sancharis depicting the lovelorn heroine's attempts to attract the attention of her beloved Lord Brihadeeswara came

across effectively.

Valli's slight and petite build facilitates her handling of the nritta, whether it is the tightly knit jatis, or leap across the floor or a pirouette, she seems to dance effortlessly. The total attire was simple and attractive; if only she could slightly reduce the floral decking up of her hair, it would be even more so. The post intermission session had Valli dancing a Padam in Kamboji, a Ragamaligai Tamil verse, the javali 'Apatuku' in Kamas and the Kuntalavarali tillana, all of which revealed her mastery of nritta and abhinaya. Nattuvangam by Shobana Swamy and vocal support by Prema Ramamurthy were good too.

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