

The bankable star

The poor initial response to the Akshay Kumar-Aishwarya starrer, *Action Replay*, has sent shock waves in Bollywood. Like Shah Rukh Khan, Akshay Kumar is generally seen as a 'super safe' bet at the box office. But the lukewarm response to some of his recent films has begun worrying his favourite producers. To be fair to Akshay, it's not his fault really. The films that bombed were not up to his reputation as a supreme entertainer. All eyes are now on *Tees Maar Khan*, which had a staunch SRK loyalist Farha Khan defecting to the rival Akshay camp in controversial circumstances!

True to character, Akshay himself is unperturbed. His strength has always been his gumption to believe in himself and dream big, and a Neopolitan con-

viction that nothing is impossible. I remember asking him some years ago when he was rehearsing for the Zee Awards show which I was conducting, where he saw himself going next in a terrain dominated by the Khans: SRK, Aamir and Salman. He pondered for a while with a wry smile and answered with a Chinese proverb: 'If you want to make the gods laugh, talk about your future'. And after a pause added, "I don't want to make the Gods laugh, I would rather have the last laugh." He has been having it for a few years now and how!

Akshay Kumar's climb to the big time has continued to baffle those who had watched him grow from a sports enthusiast to a chef. His father, who was once working for the Unicef had early visions of his son excelling as a sportsman. Maybe it had something to do with himself being a sportsman in his younger days.

Interestingly, the 'khiladi' tag had been part of Akshay's name long before he did a series of successful Khiladi films, from his days at Mumbai's Don Bosco school where he played cricket and a strange game called 'square ball'. Akshay took keen interest in martial arts to build his then frail body. Impressed by his aptitude for martial arts his father promised to send him to Bangkok to master it if he passed his board exams in the first division. "I managed 63 percent and my father bought me a ticket to Bangkok," recalls Akshay. "The ticket cost just Rs 1500 those days."

In Bangkok he had to take a job to sustain himself. His first job was in a restaurant as a cook, which "solved the problem of eating as well". At night he slept in the kitchen, where there was a TV and a video player. Every night he would watch Hindi films, especially those of Sridevi.

Expertise in martial arts didn't help him get a decent job in India. He went to Kolkata looking for a job. There he worked as



Akshay Kumar

a peon in a travel agency for a while! He did several odd jobs after that, including going door to door selling Unicef greeting cards which his father had arranged for. But it led him nowhere. "I knew I could work hard and succeed but I didn't know what I wanted to do."

A freak modeling assignment changed the course his life. He was stunned to earn Rs 4000 "for making faces before a camera in an air-conditioned room". It sowed the seeds of a career in the glamour world. The first step towards it was a glamorous name: from Rajiv Bhatia he

became Akshay Kumar. "I didn't do it at the instance of any astrologer," laughs Akshay. "It was the name of one of my favourite characters in an old film I had seen." He then went to Vaishnodevi and shaved off his thick moustache! He was now ready for the glamour world but needed an invite.

When the invite didn't come on its own he went in search of it. Curiously, he offered to be glamour photographer Jayesh Sheth's assistant for free in return for a decent portfolio, recalls Jayesh. Eight months later, armed with the impressive portfolio shot by Jayesh, Akshay signed his first film: Promod Chakravorty's *Deedar*. Even *Phool Aur Kaante*, which skyrocketed Ajay Devgan to stardom, was his for the taking but he had to give it up to stick by the *Deedar* schedule.

The turning point, however, came with *Khiladi*. The phenomenal success of the film gave Akshay the foothold he needed in the industry. He hasn't had to look back after that. Though it

took a while for him to be accepted as an 'actor'. With his phenomenal run of success he has worked to remove the chinks in his armour. He worked around his limitations, concentrated on well-written action flicks and then added comedy to his repertoire. His natural flair for horsing around helped him in this.

In spite of his bankability at the box office it took a while for Akshay to be counted among the kings of Bollywood. He resists to indulge in over-the-top exhibitionism was greatly responsible for this. Akshay's relationship with the media, like Ajay Devgan's, had been fragile until a couple of years ago. He hated the condescension of the critics who took pride in slamming him and the arrogance of the scribes in perennially projecting him as a Casanova. However, in the last couple of years he has softened his stand on the media understanding the virtues of high visibility.

— The writer is a senior journalist and former editor of Screen and Filmfare and former programming head of Zee Cinema.

the spectator Rauf Ahmed

A good actor, as said, must be an athlete-philosopher

Even in the dedicated community that makes up Bengali group theatre, he stands out. The director of his latest play calls him a miniature wonder. He is the only actor in recent memory who has had a festival dedicated to him. He is also perhaps the only actor whose name alone draws audiences to the theatre in a culture whose appeal historically has been the group, the play or the director. Currently he is part of/protagonist of ten different plays for different groups, playing Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb today and a Sherlock Homes incarnate tomorrow and most things in between. Most of his work has been highly acclaimed and all of them are doing the rounds in the local and national theatre circuit. DEB-SHANKAR HALDER tells Sayandeb Chowdhury why his work is play and what makes him play anything.

How did you get into theatre? Has it been Nandikar all along?

I did some acting in school and then definitely some more in college. I was at Scottish Church. I was into student politics full time. I seriously thought that politics is a way of service to the people. In those days, student politics still had that degree of idealism attached to it. Later it dawned on me that no party, not even those which call them ultra-Left, can survive without paying some kind of service to the establishment. So the usual heartbreaking happened. Then in course of time, theatre took over. And in terms of getting into it and making it my life, it's because of Nandikar.

When did it begin?

It was 1986. I was just out of college and like most wondering what to do with my life. Theatre was a liking but never intended to take it up as a profession. One day I chanced upon an advertisement saying that Nandikar was hold-

ing a training workshop for actors. I came and auditioned without expectations. But was selected. Some serious training followed. That training was so intense and so rewarding, it got me hooked into theatre completely. Since then, I have been a theatre activist and actor. I can proudly say that I have done every kind of work associated with theatre — from auditing, to backstage, to publicity — at Nandikar.

You never thought of any other profession?

I did as I grew older. I got a job as a school teacher and later in the government. But I did not take them up and one day I realised that I have passed that age where I could think seriously about other things than theatre. Theatre had engulged me completely.

When was that watershed moment in your growth as an actor?

That's difficult to pinpoint. From 1986, to till about the early 2000s, I was doing work mostly for Nandikar. Here I must mention the play *Football*. During the course of my training and after, around 1988, Nandikar brought back to stage its perennially popular play *Football* and while it was being performed, I played every part in the play including the one that the great Ajitesh Bandopadhyaya used to play; every part except that of Mr Rudrapasad Sengupta. He was always there, always our guide and leader. Not just for me, but as a case study in theatre learning, I think this is unique, of having played (in *Football*) everything between a face in the crowd and one of the leads in a single play. That experience gave me confidence and boosted my chances to play bigger and meatier roles in future productions of Nandikar. In the early nineties Nandikar brought to stage *Sesh Shakhatar* and *Feriwalar Mrityu* (Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*). In both, specially the former, Gautam (actor Gautam Halder) and I had great roles and cherished them thoroughly. These two plays along with *Gotrohin* (Miller's *View From the Bridge*), in which I played an effeminate character, brought the first taste of public adulation, acclaim and recognition. They are important landmarks in my career.

And then came *Winkle Twinkle*?

Yes, just before *Winkle Twinkle* happened, a few of us had come together to stage an ensemble play, in the wake of the Gujarat riots. It was called *Mephisto* — based on a novel by Klaus Mann. This was a first full play that I had done outside Nandikar, though it was a coming together of my colleagues for a cause.

Winkle Twinkle in that sense was the first play for a group outside Nandikar. Both Bratya (Basu) and Debesh (Chattopadhyaya) had really been persistent that I had to play the protagonist, the communist Rip Van Winkle who slept for twenty six years and woke up to find that everything he had fought for had been decimated by the Party.

Did the role remind you of your college days, your politics?

It did. Political activism was lodged inside me somewhere and when I rehearsed for that character which was written with so much empathy, I could feel what I had read about. It was like reading about love in poetry but once you fall in love you realise it's another game altogether.

***Winkle Twinkle* was a runaway hit and that too a controversial one**

Yes, it was much acclaimed, much vilified but much popular. Group theatre went to unlikely places with the play. Was the play really stopped from being performed in the hinterlands for its powerful anti-CPM message?

Some shows were cancelled at the last hour or cancelled on flimsy pretext after apparent threats from the local CPM. But on the other side I must say that we had been able to perform in places we never expected to. It worked both ways.

How difficult was it to convince Nandikar about *Winkle Twinkle* and your decision to continue with a career outside the group?

Initially it was tough because I have been such an integral part of the group. But Nandikar soon realised that if I need to grow as an actor, I must do plays for others as well. It's a mutual trust and respect factor. Even if I am doing seven or eight plays at a time for as many groups, Nandikar will always remain the place where I can come home to.

How do you manage to do several plays at a time? Do you follow a regime?

Not really. I wish I could follow a regime. But yes, I maintain certain logic and discipline and practice my parts well. But all the credit goes to my training and how well it prepared me for varied and difficult roles. But I have to keep a check on the number of plays I am doing and from next year, apart from two new plays I am already committed to (one being Tagore's *Gora*) I do not intend to do any new play.

Among your more difficult roles is

surely *Iye* — you alone on stage for over two hours. And now *221B Baker Street*, where you play a world famous Bengali economist obsessed with Sherlock Holmes.

Yes, *Iye* was difficult and very demanding. But a lot of people have liked the play. So it's worth it. *221B Baker Street* is my newest play — sharp, intelligent and sophisticated — with very high production values. I hope people like it as much as I do. My other current plays include *Kacher Manush* (an ageing hard-line Brahmin), *Aurangzeb* (Last Mughal emperor), *Shuopoka*, *Ruddhasangeet* (as Debabrata Biswas), *Missed Call*, *Furud* and *Madhavi*. Infact for *221B* also I had my doubts but Arindam (director Arindam Mukherjee) worked very hard to make it happen.

You seem to have a box office, that rarity in group theatres.

Well, I am told people look out for my plays and my part. Yes, that feels great but most importantly it gives the courage to do better and better and give your best. As a theatre person, you always test yourself and with each success, can get the courage to go a little further.... That is what drives all of us who are into theatre.

You and a few of your colleagues have brought a raw physicality, an effective energy and performativity to the stage, an aspect that seemed to have been lacking in older theatre practitioners.

I don't think so. What I have heard about Sambhu Mitra or Ajitesh or others, that they had their own energy, their own physicality that they could build into their characters. You know there is a famous saying that an actor has to be athlete-philosopher. He has to think and if need be, jump high on stage. Take Gautam (Halder) in *Borda*. He sits on a chair throughout the play but his part makes you feel that he is running across the stage. That's acting.

Ever regretted that had you been more into serials and films, perhaps life would have been a bit easier.

Well, can't say I am fully contented as far as my lifestyle goes. Now that I am bit well known I don't sit at home. I do act outside the stage and I am managing. And may be some lack in lifestyle is made up by the audience who give us love and support. That's great nourishment for actors.

Had you been in what you are here in West End, you would by now land a major role in British film... it has happened to so many.

Well, for that to happen here we have to change everything. I have been there and seen how it operates and I have no illusion about the fact that it will never happen here. But I am fine this way.

Sambit Saha



A clever homage to Holmes

By Sayandeb Chowdhury

Story Tellers' *221B Baker Street*, which debuted at the recent Airtel Lifestage Theatre fest is as much an engaging bit of slice-of-life play as it is a constant literary excavation.

The play is set in the house of noted economist Ankan Mitra, who has returned to Calcutta after a prolonged stint abroad to teach at a university. A pedantic, scholar and a proud man to boot, Mitra is as easily admired and admirable as he is easy to be disliked and detested. He is as much at home in the labyrinthine riders of econometrics as he is a keen observer of literary intelligence, especially those of the investigative genre. His schadenfreude, so to say, lies in him taunting those around him, more specifically his wife, with the fount of knowledge that he both lives for and swears by. No wonder his life centers on his many books and his own private Brubeck, Beethoven and Carl Off. His other obsession is one Sherlock Holmes, a nineteenth century investigator whose deerstalker hat and the meerschaum pipe never seems to go out of fashion.

One evening at a party at his house,

while discussing and teasing others over clues and clusters that make a detective story great, Mitra smells a conspiracy against him and identifies a potential murderer in each one of his three friends and his wife with logical, even if implausible reasons as to why they would want to get rid of him and how.

And thus begins Mitra's Holmsian descent into his own life and that of those close to him to uncover what he considers is a cold blooded and considered attempt at a murder. The end is revelatory.

Funny, dramatic and powerfully engaging, *221B Baker Street* seeks to uncover a crime with clues and logic from the most famous literary crimes in history. And the results are truly rewarding. Those who salivate at detective classics will find enough solidarity in this play. Even those who have read classic crime stories but are not obsessed with them will find this play clever enough for a revisit. Of course it's not faultless and few of the deliberations seem forced. But they are minor.

But most importantly, after a long time Bengali stage sees a play that is sophisticated without being specious and engaging without being bombastic and conspic-

tently entertains with good support from the high production values.

The play is held together by Debshankar Halder (see interview) in what is another pivotal role in this amazing actor's increasingly wide-ranging oeuvre. He is aptly supported by Surajit Bandopadhyay. The rest of the cast passes muster except Suranjona Bandopadhyay who is weak in the climax.

The play is audacious given the limited scope of the Bengali stage. Written and directed by Arindam Mukherjee, whose day job is to own a software company! Mukherjee later explained that he has taken such pain and hardship to produce a play only because he wanted to do a clever, urbane play in Bengali which will also have a high entertainment quotient. His group and he personally had to beg from friends and corporate bodies to put up the play and construct the ingenious and sophisticated two-tiered architecture for the setting.

Doubtlessly, Bengali stage needs more people like Mukherjee who are willing to think beyond the quotidian and can bring in the much-needed breadth of cosmopolitan air to the Bengali stage.



Produced by STORY TELLER, *221B Baker Street* stars Debshankar Halder, Suranjana Dasgupta, Bindia Ghosh, Arup Ghosh, Probal Sengupta, Debabrata Maity and Surajit Bannerjee. It is written and directed by Arindam Mukherjee. Lighting by Joy Sen, sets by Saumik and Piyali, sound design is by Abhimanyu Deb & Floor Managed by Debabrata Maity.

