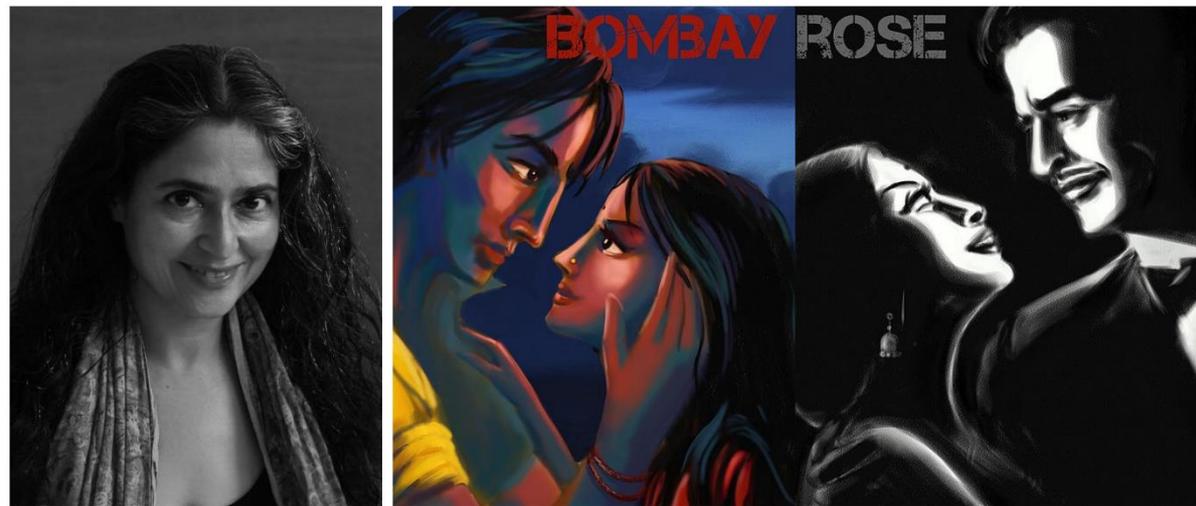


Film Review

Meenakshi Shedde

Bombay Rose: Rich Animation Treasury



It is incredibly difficult, given the explosion of the information age, internet, youtube, whatsapp, literature and more, to be wholly original in film. And animation film is a much more challenging medium by itself. Gitanjali Rao's absolutely dazzling debut animation feature *Bombay Rose* is like no animation you've seen before—and that's no mean feat. It sweeps you in its generous embrace and leaves you swooning. After opening the International Film Critics' Week at the Venice Film Festival, it was at the Toronto Film Festival. No doubt, it will have a long festival and arthouse life. And deservedly too: this India-UK-Qatar-France co-production is a six-year labour of love.

Indian animation is largely stuck in a limbo between mythological fables, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Panchatantra and cutesy kiddie toons of the Chhota Bheem variety. Arnab Chaudhuri's *Arjun: The Warrior Prince*, Shilpa Ranade's *Goopy Gawaiya Bagha Bajaiya* and Aditi Chitre's Nagaland animation film *Journey to Nagaland* are among the rare exceptions with fine, original styles. But *Bombay Rose* raises the bar very high. Above all, it is a very Bumbaiyya film—yet like nothing that Bollywood has ever seen.

Bombay Rose is the love story of Kamala (voiced by Cyli Khare) and Salim (Amit Deondi), two flower sellers on the streets of Bombay. Then it links a range of diverse characters via red roses—Bollywood star Raja Khan, ageing former actress Shirley D'Souza, Anthony, who is in love with her, and Laura

who was, as well. Where it differs from the average masala Bollywood film is in its fierce, razor-sharp intelligence, and a sharp awareness of socio-political events in Bombay and India. Its rich subtext includes many issues, including a powerful feminist undercurrent, Hindu-Muslim relations, migrants, same-sex love and child labour. And it is a passionate love letter to Bombay and Bollywood, warts and all – its working-class culture, seedy dance bars, Dadar flower market, jhopadpattis, a Bollywood hero, (Raja) Khan (voiced by Anurag Kashyap), who drives over a pedestrian, killing him, and more. It combines unlikely genres, hard social realism with exquisite love fantasies and dreamscapes of the imagination.



All of this is rendered in richly textured, original artistic indigenous visual and musical styles. Its computer-generated 2D animation has a hand-drawn aesthetic, and is instark counterpoint to the Disney and Pixar animation styles. In fact, Rao had the courage to walk out of a Disney negotiation earlier, when they wanted to ‘Disneyfy’ her original Indian style. The film’s visual style encompasses a wide range, from Bollywood stereotypes to Mughal miniatures to truck art. And in which other Indian film would you find music that includes haunting original music (Rewa, with lyrics by Swanand Kirkire, sung by Cyli Khare), old Hindi film songs (Dil tadap tadap ke, Yeh Mera Dil) a Mexican song (Cucurrucucu Paloma sung by Brazilian Singer Caetano Veloso), a Konkani song (Red Rose by Lorna Carneiro), Carnatic music by ensembles from Thanjavur and Mettupalayam, and a qawwali by Mukhtiyar Ali, all

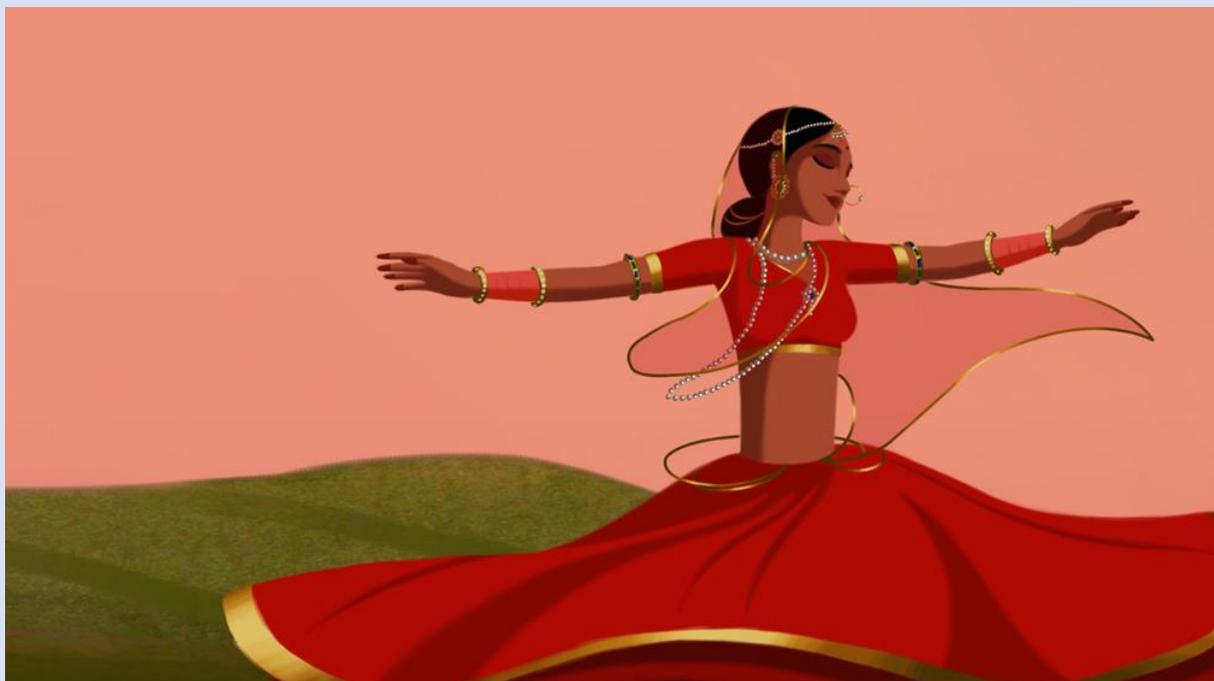
seamlessly flowing into one another? It's not just a question of knowing all this music, but the skill to use it aptly and evocatively. Rao is not just glocal—the local making her global—but multi-local, drawing from multiple, rich Indian and international traditions. You can see the roots of this film in her previous animation shorts, both of which were at the Cannes' International Critics' Week – *Printed Rainbow*, that won a slew of awards (2006), and *True Love Story* (2014) – as well as *Orange* (2002). *Bombay Rose* cements her international credentials. (Incidentally, she also acted in Shoojit Sircar's film *October*).



In fact, the film has so many layers and such rich subtext, that it calls for repeated viewings to mine its riches. This is one of those rare films that you can binge-watch all by itself. It is a film about Salim and Kamala, celebrating a Hindu-Muslim romance, politically daring in a time of right-wing nationalism. As a child, Kamala was forced to marry an old man by her alcoholic dad, so her grandfather flees to Bombay with both his granddaughters to give them a better life. Kamala makes sacrifices, even secretly dancing in dance bars, to fund her younger sister Tara's education. Salim is an orphan migrant from Kashmir, whose parents were shot dead by militants, who has also fled to Bombay. The film is also a tribute to Bollywood with Raja Khan, the Bollywood hero Salim adores, as well as old Hindi films, with lilting songs like *Aaiye meherbaan* (*Howrah Bridge*) and *Dil tadap tadap ke* (*Madhumati*). Tara's tuition teacher is Shirley D'Souza (Amardeep Jha), an ageing film star/ Bollywood background dancer. Indian cinema has never seen a character like her: an ageing Indian widow, an elegant, grey-haired, wrinkled, Christian, who dances stylishly alone

at home to Shammi Kapoor's *Baar baar dekho*, with a cigarette in one hand and a whisky glass in another. It is the fullness of her solitude that is such a revelation: she doesn't need a man to feel fulfilled.

The film is also a rumination on love, time and death, and of love conquering the other two. We see spirits of couples in a Christian graveyard, dancing over their own graves. There's a remarkable time-lapse sequence in which Shirley toasts her younger, black-and-white self in the mirror. There are symbols and layers and we wonder what they all mean. For instance Shirley serves breakfast and chats with her 'husband'—but he's just a hat and coat on a chair that looks like a man is sitting there—and when his hand moves, ah, it's only a movement by the cat, slyly rubbing itself on the sleeve!



Most stunning of all, is how quietly, yet boldly, the film celebrates a same-sex love story discreetly tucked away in its memories. Shirley was in love with Laura, another former Bollywood actress. A lot of things strike you only after the film, as you're busy absorbing all the riches that come at you pow-pow-pow while watching it. When did you ever meet a major character in an Indian film who is clearly bisexual? Shirley is or was married to a man, but she cherishes the lesbian affair she had with Laura, another Bollywood star, who, from their photos on the walls, cross-dressed as a man. Its only when you go home and youtube the song (*Howrah Bridge*, 1958) *Aiye meherbaan*, starring Madhubala and Ashok Kumar, you remember that it has 'couples' dancing in the background, who are all women: the men are female cross-dressers! What an intelligent screenplay (Rao herself), that takes a daring current leitmotif, drawn from old Bollywood films! In a way, the Christian Shirley reminds you Violet

Stoneham, the lonely Anglo-Indian teacher in Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane*, except that Shirley is far more feisty. Both Salim and Kamala have secret lives. Salim steals rose bouquets that Christians leave on gravestones, and sells them. Kamala is secretly also a bar dancer to earn money to pay school fees for her younger sister Tara. Kamala and Tara adopt Tipu, a deaf-mute child labourer, who has rescued a cat from being run over, and is called a 'billiwala hero'—as against Bollywood's murderer heroes. In doing so, Rao radically redefines Bollywood's hero as one who is compassionate.

It feels churlish to mention a double twist at the climax that seems a tad facile. Yet, while deeply tragic, it is one of great hope and redemption. The direction is assured. Gitanjali Rao wears multiple hats—as writer, director, designer, cinematographer, editor and associate producer. The brilliant animation is by Soumitra Ranade's team at Paperboat Design Studios. The screenplay takes on a lot of issues, with multiple transitions between reality and dreamscapes and between time zones. Asad Hussain's dialogues are sharp and finely observant (including for the marvellously realised pimp Michael, voiced by Makrand Deshpande).

The music is evocative, including the song 'Rewa', with outstanding, meticulous sound design by PM Satheesh and Manoj Goswami. Bravo to producers Anand Mahindra and Rohit Khattar of Cinestaan, and co-producers Charlotte Uzu and Serge Lalou of Les Films d'Ici (France). Above all, the film is a love letter to Bombay and its inclusive spirit. Mumbai? No way!

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