

Film Review

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DOTS: A Multitude of Solitude



Loneliness comes to persons in all age groups, and cultural-linguistic backgrounds. No wonder we had lonely hearts clubs back in the 30s, 40s and 50s. A joke that did the rounds in the 50s and 60s went: A man sent an application for membership to a lonely hearts club, attaching the mandatory photograph. He got a reply two weeks later that read, “Thank you for your application. Returning your photograph. We are not that lonely.” These clubs gave way to Pen-friendship clubs that sprang-up all over the world in the 50s and 60s. My classmates in school started one when they were 14-15 years old. It was called the Bombay Pen-friendship and Correspondence Club. These lasted out till the 80s.

And then came the IT revolution, which allowed you to communicate, with friends or strangers, as yourself or incognito. Variations of this theme dot the web in 2020, as social media and dating sites, and are

thriving, lockdown or no lockdown. You could be communicating with a real person, a fake identity or a robot, as kind of dots connected by technology. But are these connections meaningful? Do they help in overcoming loneliness and providing solace to those who have undergone or are undergoing loss of a loved one? Are strangers better listeners and safer confidantes than friends or family? Then, again, what if you have no friends or family? Is it preferable to let strangers remain strangers, even after sharing intimate secrets with them? Can we think of an Internet-based stranger-stranger hook-up service for a one-time two-hour slot as the equivalent of a one-night stand? DOTS begins with very interesting premises, and ventures forth to democratise its theme in terms of locale, age, language and professions. The choice was between having one couple go the whole hog (90-95) minutes, leaning towards

her earlier film Tashi, or tackle multiple issues using a multitude of characters, more in the vein of Kathaah@8, her last outing. Writer-director Shilpa Krishnan Shukla decides five couples are a fairly representative choice.

Professions of the chosen ten vary, from a retired history professor turned organic farmer, to an IT professional, to web designer, an art gallery owner, a lawyer, a sculptor, a chartered accountant and so on. Since, in order to get connected, they have to fill-in a form first, indicating what sort of person they would like to match-up with, it is not surprising to see that the couples seem to be from the same age-group and more or less conforming to the indicated preferences. Their conversations differ, their concerns vary, their expectations are dissimilar, yet they are photographed in pretty similar frames: the standard video-chat format, with either picture-in-picture or split screen. Incidentally, all of them seem to be from middle-class back-grounds, though a piano in one case suggests upper-middle class identity. One does wonder why weren't some of the characters from noticeably different strata of society? Perhaps Shukla is most comfortable dealing with a milieu that she seen closely. Only one girl leaves the frame, once, to bring a bottle of wine, which she cannot open (brilliant attention to creative detailing).

Since the film is heavily dialogue-driven, with straight cuts, and only a handful of indulgent escapades (a short Malayalam song; some abrupt fade-outs, fade-ins; jerky moves towards the camera), saying more about the content might prove to be a spoiler. Yet, I can share with you that the subjects the couples talk about include homosexuality, lesbianism, death, heart-break, unrequited and undeclared love, nothingness, even lies. Barring one narration that takes you by surprise, there is nothing shocking, abusive, offensive, aggressive or even hilarious. The

Keralite couple does manage to make us chuckle, but that's it. All the characters arouse sympathy, even empathy, which is too much of a good thing. What? No imposters? Predators? Foul-mouths? Opportunists? Manic depressives? More than necessary time is spent on the couples dealing with sound/microphone issues in the beginning, though it must be said that such issues do crop-up quite often in real life. Aren't two hour interactions too long for such activity? Wouldn't 60 or 90 minutes be a better slot? That would tie-up nicely with the length of the film too.

All the actors speak mainly English, but for the Keralite couple, and the Hyderabad pair, who revert to Hindi time and again. A couple of lines in Marathi are also in order. Besides Kerala and Hyderabad, other places mentioned are Singapore (where Shukla lives), Dubai, Mumbai, Pune, Indore and more, though no other languages are sampled. Artistes are uniformly good. Sometimes, you can see that they have rehearsed only too well. Clarity of speech, even when they are groping for words, is of a high order, where performance sometimes overshadows spontaneity. Too much of head movement, including routine shaking of heads, distracts sometimes, considering it is a mid-close-up that is used throughout. Editing by Mathew Jenif Joseph is linear, with the cut picking-up where it had left the earlier couple, and time is judiciously apportioned between the cast. The film did not need music at all; having said that, the keys and chords are used softly, with discretion (music by Vineeth Paul, sound mixing by Sinoy Joseph) and faded out before they become obtrusive. Colours are bright and lively, with generally competent work by the DI colourists Krishna Kumar and Devanshi Desai. Forward movement of the actor causes light variations in the LGBT character's frames, on a couple of occasions.

DOTS does not address any new issues. It does not even offer solutions to the issues it raises. Is there catharsis at least? Yes and no. Hope? Optimism? Yes and no. Do the DOTS join in any strong, permanent way? No. But there are pointers and arrows, more than DOTS, all through the five encounters. At

the end, you would have eavesdropped on five private conversations, over 93 minutes. And, maybe, picked up five lessons, on tolerance, sublime love, missed opportunities, compulsive inhibitions and sharing-caring. There is a multitude of solitude out there, millions of lonesome souls, wounded and wilting. Who have you befriended today?

Title: DOTS

Duration: 94 minutes

Language: Multilingual

Country: Singapore

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Director: Shilpa Krishnan Shukla

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