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(Sydney)

It is with disappointment that I left the theatre in Sydney after seeing Prasanna Vithanage's award winning film "Akasa Kusum". Although the film has the outlook of a good movie (due to a reasonable script, technical excellence and the director's ability as a storyteller) its short comings are glaringly obvious. It certainly lacked depth and seriousness for an art movie.

Vithanage had boldly attempted to tackle a myriad of issues ranging from the hardships and woes of an ex-actress, misfortunes of her daughter, her economically struggling siblings, a complex mother-daughter relationship, the decline of cinema, rise of third rate tele-drama, infidelity, pregnancy outside marriage, abortion, HIV, being pregnant while infected with HIV, Colombo night clubs and to the general decadence and the economic struggle of the society.

In the end the filmmaker had not tackled a single issue convincingly and ends his film in typical soap opera style without knowing how to bring to a logical end the issues he was dabbling with.

According to the director, Akasa Kusum fulfils his ambition of making a film based on his own profession ie filmmaking. To achieve this he had chosen the story of an ex film star the glamorous Sandya Rani, now living a secluded life and struggling to make the ends meet.

According to Vithanage the character of Rani has shades of Sri Lanka's celluloid prima donnas. Quoting his words- "they were the objects of our fantasies and the creators of our dreams. But when they reached a point where they were unable to fulfil our intangible needs, they were discarded - replaced by a younger, more stimulating model".



4 It is not hard to accept this as the commercial reality of the industry and there is nothing unusual or sinister about this. What is he lamenting about? It looked as if the filmmaker himself was confused in his motive and wasn't sure how to "market" his faded star or how to deal with her personal "tragedy" (her closely guarded secret). He had merrily and possibly had forgotten that he was making an art movie.

The cardinal mistake committed by Vithanage lies in the subject matter itself and the clumsy manner the material has been processed as a storyline. The filmmaker had never wanted to be close enough to his subject. To me it looked as if he had deliberately diluted his work to appease the average filmgoer.

Akasa Kusum Weak and Unconvincing



Harasgama) now grown up, emerges from nowhere to haunt her past- the only noteworthy phase of the film. Malini seems to be losing her capacity to show emotion- an essential strength for character portrayal. Perhaps playing the lead role is not her forte anymore.

Shalika (Dilhani Ekanayake) the glamorous young actress and her amorous adventures are inserted to show the degradation of marriage and the temptations a young actress (including Sandya Rani during her youth) could be exposed to as part of their profession. These episodes do not add any value to the story. The director would have done better if instead he had focussed more on the central story- the mother - daughter relationship which is the essence of the film.

There were too many gaps in the storyline when narrated by the mother (by flashbacks) and the daughter (by letter to the mother). Priya tells us that after being abandoned by her mother, the father never married and looked after her lovingly and died due to neglect. In the mother's flashbacks we are told he has been "bribed" for a forced separation. There is also fleeting reference to the daughter (Priya) and the father spending some 15 years in Lebanon- presumably father seeking greener pastures unusually with his young daughter in that part of the world. We can presume that they must have been financially okay which does not add up with Priya's life style and in what she does to make a living. Shalika's story and the karaoke / night club scenes could have been curtailed and more running time allocated to tie up these loose ends.

The episodes relating to Mallika (Kaushalya Fernando) the poor sister of Sandya Rani who appears from time and time to borrow money from her sister is well done. It shows Sandya

Rani's social standing and the economic struggle of the family- and the dependence of the family on Rani despite she too is trying to eke out an existence by renting out a room for couples and by odd catering.

Vithanage had made some monumental blunders in cast direction. Casting of Kumara Thirumudura (who no doubt is good in roles that suit him) as the boy friend / partner / "sugar daddy" (their relationship was not clear to me- was he a wealthy man seeking female company?) of the young, attractive and westernised Priya (Nimmi Harasgama) and possibly the father of her unborn child is a big mistake. The filmmaker must have banked on the obvious misfit in the physical appearances of the two to show the intensity of Priya's deprivation and to get our sympathy for her dissipated life. But this casting has clearly not worked. Perhaps a younger, a trendy looking actor would have made that liaison a bit more palatable.

Equally damaging is the casting of a very young girl to play the cameo role of a young Sandya Rani before she embarks on her career and the circumstances that separate the mother and the daughter. We are told that Rani's potential film star quality has been spotted by a producer by chance when she (frequently) visits her father who works in a film studio as a light boy. We are also immediately told that the producer was not aware that she was already married and had a child. The producer (Nadarajah Sivam) stereotyping the Tampoes and the Gunaratnams insists that he can promote her to stardom only if she was a "virgin" (implying that she should be single) and as a precondition she must separate from her husband and the child. This whole episode including casting of a very young girl as a married woman is unconvincing. It is impossible to think that she had a child. The director was in a mighty big hurry here. Vithanage could have concentrated more on the circumstances that separated the mother and the daughter to make it look plausible. Rani says that it was her father that forced the separation almost bribing her husband - sponsored by the producer. The whole film falls apart here as he has not got this pivotal moment convincingly.

Vithanage has used dance or song scenes from third rate commercial films of seventies starring Malini Fonseka with Gamini and Vijaya as "library shots" to show the highlights of Sandya Rani's career during her hey day. These scenes might appease the average film goer and certainly the die-hard Jothipala fan but adds nothing to the film apart from providing proof of Rani's dodgy credentials as an actor. Is this all what Rani had contributed or achieved having sacrificed a precious child and family?

A redeeming aspect of the film was the acting of Nimmi Harasgama as Priya. She was clearly the best actor in the film. Moving from Ira Mediyama days Nimmi also had improved her Sinhala diction and I could not find a flaw in her acting. In