

Can magic reverse Yash Raj Films' fortunes?

From a production house that could do no wrong to a banner that is in desperate need of a hit, Hindi film industry's most consistently performing entertainment conglomerate Yash Raj Films is going through a bad patch, to say the least.

As Yash Raj Films readies to unveil its second release of the year 2008 - 'Thoda Pyaar, Thoda Magic' - after the box-office debacle of its first offering 'Tashan', the stakes cannot be any higher.

'Thoda Pyaar, Thoda Magic' that once again brings together Saif Ali Khan and Rani Mukerji on the silver screen will be an acid test for veteran Yash Chopra and his son Aditya, who helms this film along with producer-director Kunal Kohli.

A Yash Raj loyalist, Rani essays the role of an angel sent to earth to unite four orphan children with their legally-appointed guardian played by Saif. The film is conspicuously similar to Hollywood blockbuster 'Mary Poppins'.

But Kunal has gone on record to say that it is not a rehash of 'Mary Poppins'. The director, however, did admit that it is not an absolute original and stated that it is inspired by Shekhar Kapur's hit film 'Mr India', which was inspired by 'Mary Poppins'.

While YRF productions are usually associated with great music but the few tracks of the film that have been released so far are not so impressive.

Given that the corporation has got more thumbs down than ups over the last two years, the film's box-office performance will be a deciding factor for the course ahead.

The banner has committed to pump in Rs.3.5 billion into filmmaking over the next year. Though this is not big money when compared to the moolahs that corporate houses like Reliance Entertainment and Indian Films are pumping in, Yash Raj still commands undying loyalty of A-list stars like Shah Rukh Khan and Amitabh Bachchan.

But the flops have been piling up and with their latest release, 'Tashan', not living up to the hype, the banner's supremacy has been severely undermined.

Most damagingly, the promotion and distribution strategy of the film which starred formidable crowd puller Akshay Kumar and Saif and Kareena Kapoor has come under criticism.

For a production house that is known to have its finger on the pulse of the nation, it is getting more and more difficult to gauge what audiences want.

Perhaps that is why the company is now spreading itself out. They recently announced its multi million dollar joint venture contract with Dubai Infinity Holdings. The partnership will bring Yash Raj Films to Dubai and will build a large scale entertainment district dedicated to the film brand.

The Yash Raj Films Entertainment District will comprise of theme park, a movie palace, unique hotel concepts and many other unique Indian genre entertainment concepts. All the components of the Yash Raj District will be themed around the Yash Raj banner.

There will of course be a lot to tell. Yash Chopra had set up this banner in 1979 after breaking away from his brother's production company B.R. Films. He scaled unheard of heights with films like 'Daag', 'Deewar', 'Trishul', 'Vijay', 'Mashaal', 'Chandni' and 'Darr'.

His son Aditya kept the flag flying high after debuting with 'Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge'. Starring Shah Rukh and Kajol, it was one of Bollywood's most complete entertainers.

But over the last 10 years, while commercial success has come in fits and starts for Yash Raj Films, it is hard to pick one exceptionally good cinematic offering which is unforgettable.

Films like 'Hum Tum', 'Veer Zaara', 'Dhoom', 'Bunty Aur Babli', 'Fanaa' and others are wholesome entertainers, but would not make for memorable cinema.

Somewhere around 2005 onwards, the banner has been floundering. 'Neal 'n' Nikki', 'Kabul Express', 'Ta Ra Rum Pum', 'Jhoom Barabar Jhoom', 'Laaga Chunari Mein Daag' 'Aja Nachle' and this year's 'Tashan' have eroded the banner's brand equity.

Though the promos of 'Chak De! India' were pulled out of theatres because Yash Raj Films felt that there was no point in promoting a sports-based film, it surprised all and sundry by becoming a blockbuster. In fact, this Shah Rukh starrer was the only saving grace for the banner last year.

Half way into year 2008, the banner is pegging its hopes on 'Thoda Pyaar, Thoda Magic' to turn things around.

Their next release will be 'Bachna Ae Haseeno' starring newcomer Ranbir Kapoor in a film that once again sounds disappointingly predictable. The banner will also enter animation with 'Roadside Romeo', for which they have a tie-up with Disney.

Before the year rings out, Yash Raj will play its one last trump card, which is Shah Rukh romancing a pretty young starlet in 'Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi'. Wonder why it already feels like a yawn.

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