

'Drona' - a superhero yet vulnerable and human

Film: 'Drona'; Cast: Abhishek Bachchan, Priyanka Chopra, Kay Kay Menon, Jaya Bachchan;
Director: Goldie Behl; Rating: ***

Goldie Behl dares to dream. He's back after a seven-year hiatus to let us know that 'Bas Itna Sa Khwaab Hai' was not where his 'khwab' (dream) ended. As a matter of fact, the dream begins now.

'Drona' is a feeling not quite overpowering but purposely underplayed and designed to bring the till-now-barred-in-Bollywood 'Lord Of The Rings' genre to our table.

On the storyboard 'Drona' must have sounded outrageously ambitious. It's a film that starts in the US, moves to the deserts of Rajasthan and makes an exit run into a never-never land where blue petals shower down on the screen creating an area of enchantment and incandescence without letting the spectacle dominate the characters.

As far as super-heroes go, the one that Abhishek plays in 'Drona' is somewhat unique.

Seething, scowling, wounded and wanting, Abhishek plays a knight in a shining armour, a romantic at heart and a warrior only by force. He glides across the screen doing some of the most gently persuasive old-world stunts conceived on this side 'Lord Of The Rings'.

The action often involves the leading lady Priyanka, who is quite good.

Behl with persuasive support from cinematographer Samir Arya builds a visual mindscape manifested in moving pictures that suggest a deep bond between the imagination and our traditional cultural representations of abstract art, from desert-based monuments to esoteric weapons that swirl across the breeze and kill only the evil.

First 10 minutes into this voyage to the realm of our Chandmama-Chandrakanta genre of fantasy literature, and we're hooked. From the point when Priyanka, styled like our first full-blown Lara Croft and dressed and made up to kill (in more ways than 'won') enters the frame, the film takes off with an emphatic elan that just stops short of self-congratulation.

Equally arresting is the sequence where our desi dude, superhero Drona, meets the arch-villain Riz, played by Kay Kay Menon, for the first time. The chaos that breaks out and the ensuing chase across the narrow cobbled streets of an unknown foreign country (Prague?) are handled with a delightful eye for comic book bravura.

All through the telling of this tall and stately tale, Behl displays a restraint that goes a long way in giving the product the feel of a fantasy well-conceived, but never over-drawn.

The technique carries the characters fearlessly and fluently. Besides Samir Arya's cinematography, which lends the colours of the imagination a hue of the home-grown, the art direction and the sound design suggest paces of a grace long-forgotten in our cinema where now, rapid fire storytelling is almost always equated with an entertaining cinema.

The dramatic conflict converges on Abhishek and Kay Kay Menon. The one silent, calm from

outside and torn and troubled from within. The other ultra-flamboyant and theatrical, doing what can be called a reincarnation of Mogambo from 'Mr India' and an indigenous version of Jack Nicholson's Joker from 'Batman'.

The theatrics that underscore the narrative's calm surface don't always work. Kay Kay's character goes way over-the-top into an atmosphere of irredeemable grotesquerie.

Fine actor that he is, Kay Kay gives the flamboyant villainy his best shot.

Abhishek displays a wounded pride and a lacerated soul through his eyes. He is also immensely adept at handling the action scenes and goes many steps ahead from his earlier films to under-perform the scenes with heart-warming sincerity.

Priyanka's styling and body language suggest a smouldering restless sensuality.

By the time we approach the climax, 'Drona' has established its claim at taking a confident stab at a genre never done before. What it fails to do is to take that genre into the highest realm of creativity where the characters would have instinctively become children rather than casualties of the mythology and fantasy that Behl embraces with ample affection, but not enough of that quality of connectivity with the audience that superheroes have always achieved with the audience.

At the end you feel an empathy for the sword-wielding Drona who can't fly through the air.

And that's what makes this superhero so vulnerable and human.

Watch 'Drona' for Abhishek's reined-in performance as a reluctant hero, and his crackling hissing, but ambivalent chemistry with Priyanka. And for the use of special-effects not to overpower but nourish the plot that strides across two continents and cultures with confident steps.

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