

AN UNCOMMON MAN

You may choose to like or dislike his choices, but you can't ignore him. A string (think ten) of unusual movies later, Abhay Deol, who turns 34 this month, has found sure footing in Hindi cinema with unexpected acceptance from the audience and grudging respect from the industry. He inspires deeply opposing reactions, but that doesn't bother him in the least. SITANSHI TALATI-PARIKH discovers the man behind the actor

I HAD A PREMONITION ABOUT THAT SATURDAY, BUT I didn't anticipate that meeting the hottest Deol in town would involve a star-crossed sequence of errors. Lost in Aram Nagar Colony, in the innards of distant Versova, trying to navigate around bungalows that had no order or system, unable to get the girl answering the phone to give me usable directions, I reached harried – unforgivably – three minutes late, only to find him busy in a conference with director Navdeep Singh for his first home production, Basra.

Apparently, while trying to get his own production house rolling, he'd forgotten about our interview. Looking rather bemused, he started talking rapidly...for nine minutes, and then requested a five-minute time-out while he finished some critical Basra-related work. Meanwhile, I tapped my nails on the wooden table, back firmly facing the curious eyes in the production house, checking out posters of Dharmendra's films that populated the walls and watched the minutes become the better part of an hour confirming that I would miss my friend's wedding in the bargain. After being at the receiving end of a couple of sardonic comments about time and responding with rather genuine profuse apologies (yes, I believe him), he emerged to give me a full, uninterrupted 40

minutes of quality time. Am I surprised that at the end of it all it was a great interview?

Of course, the dark clouds that loomed hadn't begun to pour yet. I got back home only to discover to my intense horror that only the first nine minutes had saved on my voice recorder – all else had, by some inexplicable black magic, vanished. The curious dead cat had got my tongue and made me roast in hell. Munching vigorously on humble pie, I returned to the now-familiar Aram Nagar Colony a few tense days later on another professional rendezvous with the refreshingly easy-going actor-turned-producer. This time around, he didn't keep me waiting and my recorder behaved itself. We ate some bitter chocolate to thaw the ice in the air.

Curiosity killed the proverbial cat and made Abhay Deol famous. It took a while, but now everyone wants a piece of this man who doesn't fail to arouse interest. He's not a misfit in the sense that he's an abnormality; *au contraire*, when you meet him, he's pleasantly normal. It's his choices that have made for fevered coffee-table speculation, and the fact that you always wonder what new oddity this unconventional Deol will roll out. He's been called that so many

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Abhay Deol: raising the bar for himself

HARSH MAN RAJ/MW

times, it's almost a cliché. Maybe that's why the lanky actor, who always prefers to keep a surprise up his rather hairy arm, has chosen to do a movie that seems so incredibly mainstream. The upcoming *Aisha*, loosely based on Jane Austen's *Emma*, co-starring Sonam Kapoor and produced by Anil Kapoor, is worth watching, if only to understand why someone like Deol would star in it. A perfectly normal romance, there is no angst, no odd-ball character, no debauchery; nothing really that makes it something he would ideally gravitate towards.

It makes you suspicious, wondering if all along, these strange choices – a superhuman character in *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd* (2007), a lovable thief in *Oye Lucky, Lucky Oye* (2008), a contemporary Devdas in *Dev.D* (2009), a failed writer and middle-class government engineer caught in a web of deceit in noir film *Manorama Six Feet Under* (2007) – were all an act, until he found a director and producer willing to cast him into the 'safe' and common mould. Deol looks unabashed, as if you would be ridiculous to question his choices, firmly crediting script over banner, any day. His other release this year, Dev Benegal's *Road, Movie* (an Indo-American production which has already got rave reviews on the international circuit) about the experiences of a guy driving his truck through a desert, makes this statement a fact. Deol happens to be a part of *Road, Movie* merely because Benegal was willing to wait to accommodate the former's busy schedule – it is a twist in the actor's fateful tale. Now, where Deol goes, the banners and author-backed roles follow.

Dharmendra's nephew has had to live with being told, rather matter-of-factly, that his movies don't stand a chance. But patience, grim determination and a slow pace of success later, when people started to (albeit grudgingly) accept him as a bankable star and the industry began looking up to him as a leader in experimentation, you find that Deol can't help but be a little smug. Success breeds confidence, and he admits that being on the other side of the bargaining table, seeing the way the chips have fallen has given him the right to be self-assured – to talk with the knowledge that people are itching to hear him (he was a speaker at the prestigious TEDIndia – Technology, Entertainment, Design – international conference last year); and to walk with a sense of renewed purpose. And a part of that purpose is being a catalyst for change. "You need to take the few early steps – paving the road for others to drive upon. And more importantly, I have to do things that appeal to me as an artiste/ actor, that's where the honesty will come from. The audience will follow – after all, people always gravitate towards those who are sure of themselves, and those who do things with integrity."

While he may claim an avid fan following, there are those who have not seen his films, and therefore have not really come to recognise him as an actor of repute. *Road, Movie*, for instance, is a film that he admits can go either way with the audience. "It is a step in an unexplored direction and I don't know how people will react – the foreign audiences have really appreciated it, but will it be a film that appeals universally? I don't know. With a good release, though, it stands a chance." At the same time, he is not comfortable with the idea that his films – and therefore

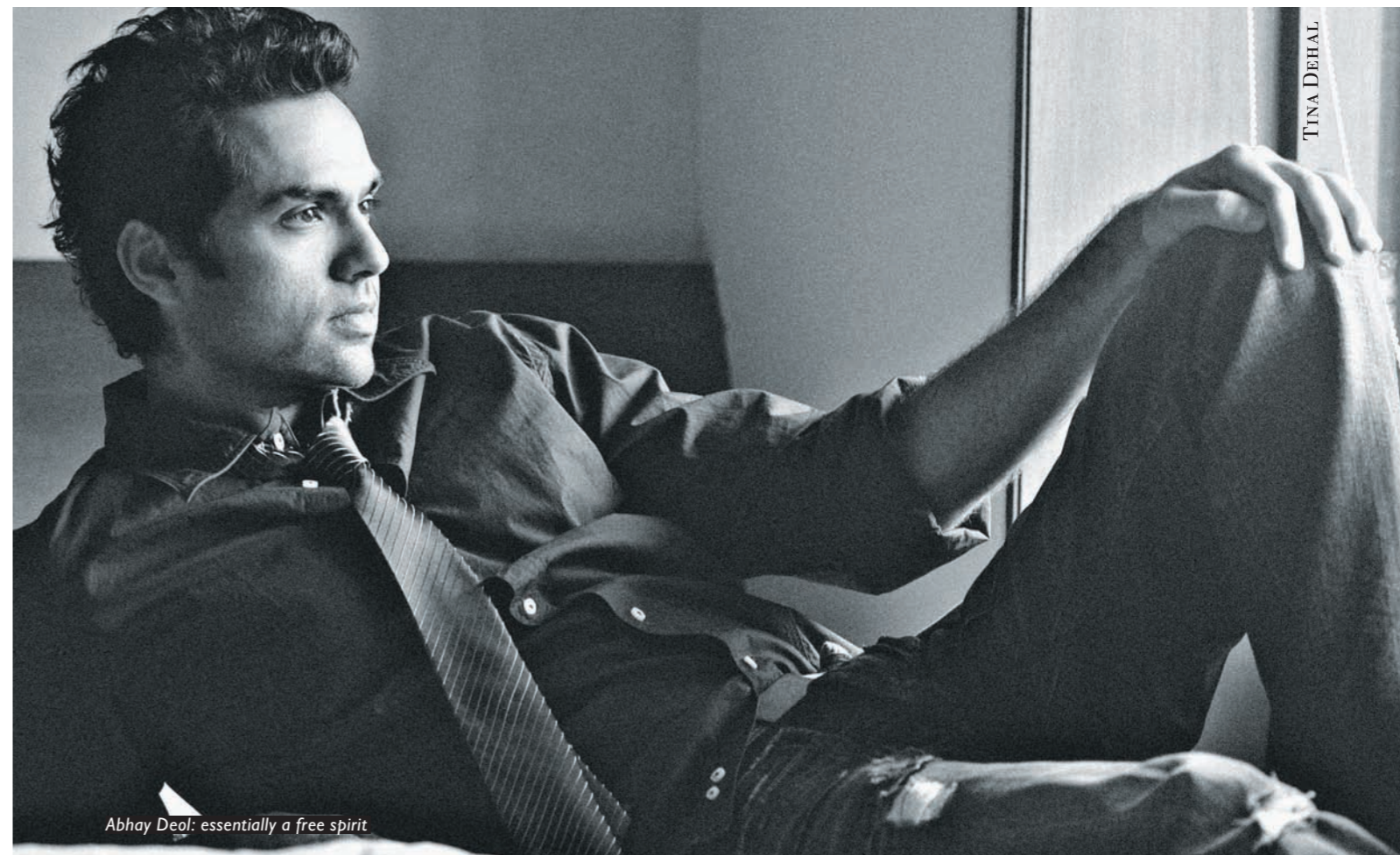
he – may appeal to a niche, intellectual audience. "I have never looked upon an audience – particularly the Indian audience – as being dumb or looking for escapism. I consider my audience to be smarter than I am. If I didn't, I would be taking my audience for granted. Whether realistic or not, it keeps me on my toes, and raises the bar for me personally."

Talking about being realistic, you can't see this Deol raging on screen, warding off goons and doing a merry jig around trees (though *Honeymoon...* proved that the boy has magic in his tangoing feet). Subtlety, not melodrama is his artistic choice. Where at one time, cousin Sunny Deol's angry histrionics may have held the day, today, the multiplex audience is more forgiving towards actors who believe in the power of nuanced performances. In real life Abhay Deol is a casual and prolific talker, but his on-screen characters tend to emote with expressions rather than voice: minor inflections are expressively reflected on camera. "I prefer to use facial expressions when I am acting. There are actors who will want more dialogues simply so that they can have longer screen time. I tend to cut my own dialogues – if something can be said in one line, why do you need five? Our face and expressions are magnified on the big screen, so less is always more."

'Beta engineer *banega'* is what most Indian parents would think and that's exactly what Deol's parents hoped for. Growing up in the same house as legendary star Dharmendra and his sons Sunny and Bobby Deol, the younger Deol came into his own on stage in Jamnabai Narsee School, as early as age five, but remained ambivalent about his future as an actor. "My family wanted me to do whatever I wanted and give it my 100 per cent, though they would have liked it if I became a doctor or a scientist. Growing up in the '80s, it was like that. The kids in school would make fun of me, because I came from a family of actors. When people

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around me proclaimed, 'He'll be a good actor,' I would find it deeply offensive, thinking, 'How do you know that; how do you know I may not have other interests?' I hid the fact that I wanted to act. I used to be good at drawing...I thought I would take up graphic design." It seems that for longer than should be necessary, Deol has been fighting being moulded according to people's expectations, even if those expectations were a part of his own dream.



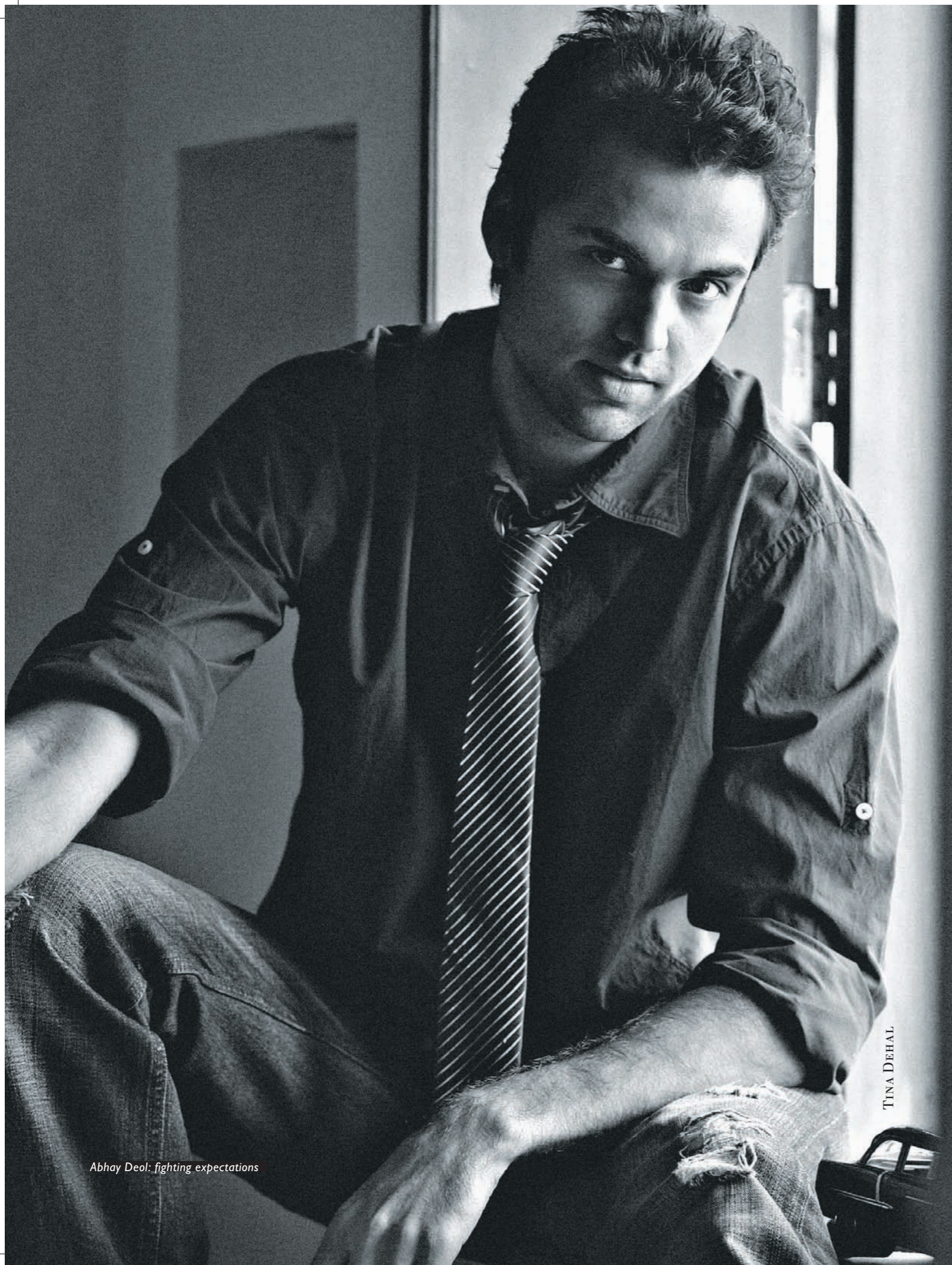
Abhay Deol: essentially a free spirit

What the kid that refused to conform actually did was study theatre in Los Angeles, USA, and contrary to expectations, it wasn't an easy road into movies. "Initially, I wanted to work with everybody, to do that commercial film so that I would get the money to do a non-commercial film. I hate those labels – 'commercial', 'non-commercial'. But it conveys the message. Nobody wanted to take a chance on me because I was a flop actor. And, before *Socha Na Tha* (2005, Deol's debut film directed by Imtiaz Ali), there was no interest in me either." Despite dogged determination and a good show of bravado, Deol's chosen path came with its own share of insecurities. "You want to navigate the system, you need support. You don't want to end up as someone on the periphery. I decided then that whether hit or miss, I would let my work and its consistency speak for itself. You can only be insecure if you have something to hide or if you doubt yourself. I'm pretty truthful and honest, so my insecurities kept going out of the door. Those that remained were about my career as a whole, because it is a bigger entity."

Forbidden Films (it's hard to miss the defiant air in the choice of name) is a production house that he started after the painful realisation that many of his films failed because of bad marketing. "There has been a struggle working with first-time

producers and smaller film-makers – it's difficult because even while making the film, money runs out. And when it comes to releasing the film, there's no money left for marketing. Then, the producer lacks the clout to distribute it well. That works against a good product and it kept happening to me. For instance, *Oye Lucky, Lucky Oye* and *Dev.D*, backed by UTV, fared better than Shemaroo which didn't manage to successfully market *Manorama Six Feet Under*. These are lessons I have learnt." He believes that none of the Indian film producers – whatever they may claim – really know how to market a film internationally. And therein lies a huge untapped audience. "Starting my own production house was merely to give films, directors and stories that I believe in a chance to survive. I don't plan to star in all the films I produce – but I am acting in the first one, *Basra*. Production is a lot of work, and being new to it, it's a learning process." And this coming after shooting three films back-to-back (*Oye Lucky...*, *Dev.D*, *Road, Movie*), which got this avid traveller (who prefers luxurious European jaunts to backpacking trips) so burnt out that he had to take a few therapeutic months off to do a welding and metal-work course in New York.

He has chosen wisely to not be bothered by what others think or how they define him, particularly by the recent



Abhay Deol: fighting expectations

TINA DEHAL

incident reported about him being at loggerheads with the *Aisha* producers on being dissatisfied with his role. "Almost everything that is reported is a rumour or not true, though I'm not saying everything is false. I'm private about my life...and there are times when I say what comes to my mind, in a particularly casual fashion, which gives my words the leeway to be twisted." With a sheepish grin he remarks, "And sarcasm doesn't work really well with the media." Like others before him, Deol has fallen prey to people's opinions based on the quirky characters he has played, his oddball choices and industry buzz. "I do feel that I am misunderstood as a person. There are things I have heard about myself...it all comes back to you. People think that the stars don't know, but they know about these rumours. You are in the public eye, working with different people, a lot of times you could be the one being difficult and it's there for all to see, and other times you could be justified in what you say, but people will still feel that you are being difficult, because of all that's perceived of you and because you are in such a position of power."

Or the times when there are determined probes into this highly eligible bachelor's love life. With no real face to attach to the girl(s) on his arm, Deol inconveniently finds himself linked up to anybody he works with or has been seen talking to. Professional hazard it may be, but he's often in the incongruous state of being too honest and too private all at once. "Once while in New York, I made the mistake of saying, 'I'm dating a few girls, it's not like I don't have a social life,' and that got blown totally out of context! In New York it is natural to date casually; while in India I naturally tend to get more protective, I don't want to have to answer to anybody...questions like: 'How did you meet, how's

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it going, are you serious, are you getting married?" I mean, who are you to ask me that? Why should I answer? And tomorrow if the two of us are not together, they will write about what might have gone wrong. Sometimes your personal life takes a beating when your professional life starts to go down; then they judge you, and judge your partner for leaving you."

And so the 'ladies' man' tag has found itself surely attached to his broad shoulders. His voice escalates in volume just enough to suggest that this is a touchy topic (no pun intended). "If you call me a ladies' man, then, on one level yes, there's nothing wrong with flirting. I like the opposite sex, I always go out of my way to charm someone and talk to someone; but at the same time, I'm not one to sleep around! I'm not looking to settle down right

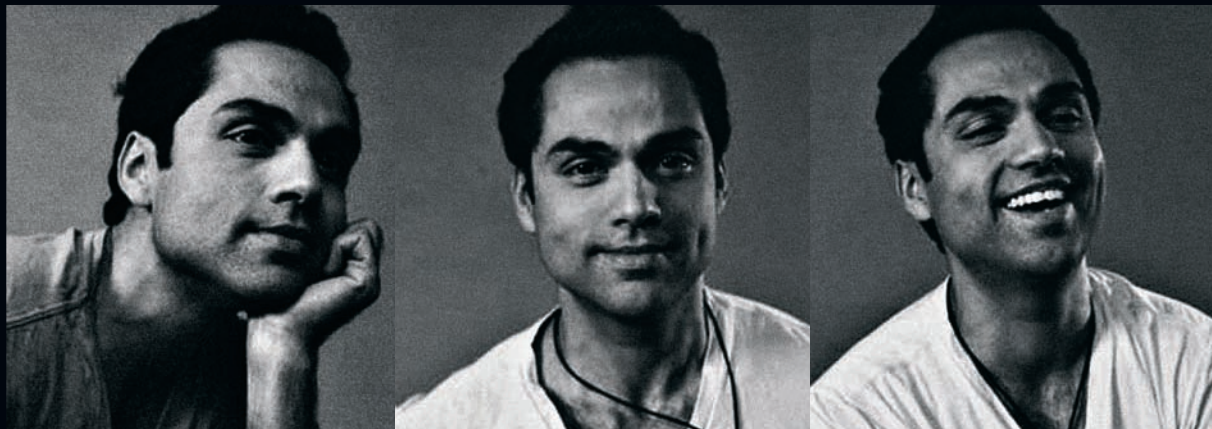
now, but I'm also not someone who will sleep with anything in a skirt! For me, more than a relationship, companionship is very important. In our day and age, it is much harder to be in a committed relationship for very long." Experience talks, having battled work pressures simultaneously with relationships, leading him to conclude that it's one or the other at this stage in his life. "Right now, I've barely got my foot in the door - I'm not even settled in right now. So I've had two successes behind me, big deal! Two more flops and I will be in the same position I was in two years ago. It's not like I have cemented myself in this industry - that won't happen for a very long time - but at least for the next couple of years I need to put in the energy and get close to having, if not my toe, then perhaps, half my body in the door. Then I'll be happy and take a break. I understand that it is important for me to have a life outside of work..."

He may be playing the field, but he isn't riding the high horse of fame to charm a girl. Meeting him, you understand he doesn't need to. He's not anything like the dark heroes he plays; he's not the Dev folly. "I am a positive person, happy in my personal life, and I'm not very competitive. I tend to gravitate towards those girls that don't give me any extra attention just because I'm famous. For example, there was one who wasn't very polite to me because she assumed that I would have star-like airs, but over the course of a few meetings, she opened up to me, when she realised that I'm just a normal guy. And immediately, I was attracted to her because she valued the right things. Of course, there is a lot of attention because you are famous..."

One would imagine that living with a handful of movie-star Deols would have got him used to fame. "It's true, I've grown up with that and I'm wise to it. I think that's why I did my own thing when I started out. The fame bit is important to me simply because it helps me get the money to make the movies I want to make. Beyond that, it doesn't define who I am. And I won't ever let that happen. It's not about getting the launch or a platform or a silver spoon up your butt or whatever; it's really not being taken in by fame and glamour, because once you get taken in, it comes and it goes, it is not permanent. The only thing permanent that you have is the work you have left behind."

Maybe we are quick to judge people who are not of the common grain. Someone who has chosen - more accurately written - his own path, who one would imagine to be opinionated and as stubborn as a mule, is actually quite reasonable about his opinions. "One of my philosophies is that I know that I don't know. I'm entitled to my opinions, but am not rigid about them to the extent that you can't convince me otherwise. You have to accept that you can make mistakes; sometimes you can become so subjective that the objectivity is gone. I need someone to turn around and give me a slap across my face! I respect that, as long as it is justified."

And being open to other people's opinions is having respect for individuality. This gets him steaming. "We are constantly told, don't do this, do that instead. It is crazy. I totally believe if you have faith in your artist, if he/she has already delivered, give them a chance. The one thing we lack in our industry is individuality. Which is why all the films, actors, actresses look the same! Because they are all aiming for the same thing - who



can dance better, who can fight better. That is why we have more flops than hits. It still baffles me how people see formula and depend so much on it. There is a formula, for sure there is. But the ones who break tradition, get famous.”

He finally leans back – barely having paused for a breath – and you feel like you have travelled the long, rough road to the beginning of success with him. Only you haven’t. “I’m happy, but just because you are happy doesn’t mean you stop. You can be greedy and want more.” There is a deep throaty chuckle, Kevin Spacey-like dimples flashing, reminding you that despite having reason to, he doesn’t smile enough. “I want to go the distance in making a movie that has universal appeal. I want to communicate to the world, not just to India and Indians. It’s not just about boy meets girl, it’s not just about comedy; there’s also global warming, genocide, political assassinations, social workers, adoption...”

It’s also about microcosms that have macrocosmic appeal. “While I’m a Mumbai kid, I understand village mentality because my family is essentially from the Pind, in Punjab. I’ve been brought up with a certain set of traditional values and culture, and I want to have my own take on Indian culture. There’s a huge gap...and film is the medium you can bridge it with!” Lucky Singh (*Oye Lucky...*) and Dev (*Dev.D*) were two such curious characters rooted in North India, with a nationwide appeal. “With *Dev.D* I knew I could take a classic novel, which even my grandfather knows, contemporise it, and have it appeal to a 16-year-old today. It’s the same thing that Sarat Chandra Chatterjee was trying to say in 1917, that kids today are trying to tell their parents. Why are they rebelling? Why are they obsessing? While Chatterjee didn’t like his own work, and I cannot identify with Devdas, it does have universal appeal.”

With the same angst of a person struggling to find his rightful place in the world and triumphing in the end, he is more like Satyaveer Randhawa in *Manorama...* than any of the characters he’s played. Yet, he gravitates towards all his roles, albeit unconsciously, because they share a common strain – a debauched spirit that masks a principled person. The principles

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can shift from determination to fixation with a thought, the debauchery can be rakishness or trivialisation of a socially accepted moral code – but they entwine into the personality of a person who simply goes with what he believes is right.

This is what makes his characters likeable despite their flaws, and this is what makes Deol interesting. Lucky Singh’s sincere eyes belie his actions, the deeply dimpled smile is innocently impish – and you feel that there is a possibility of redemption – in fact it should be no other way. Taller than you’d imagine at six-feet-and-one-inch, and skinnier than you’d expect, clad in pale blue denim and a casual tee, the Darcy-like personality leaves you with the same impression. “Is he as hot in real life?” asks a friend. He may not be your average candyfloss poster boy, but you would be foolish to ignore him. Self-assured, flippant and with an unintentional air of cavalier disarray, the actor is a ‘project’ – someone a girl would automatically get attracted towards, to ‘fix’. And that is just dangerous territory, because as defined by his sometimes wayward, often laid-back attitude, Deol is essentially a free spirit. Dressed (defiantly?) casual at a glittering fashion soirée, he is equally at ease being his own companion, as he is exchanging pleasantries with the best looking girl there. He can be perfectly charming, should he choose to do so and that would be within the constraints of what he defines to be a laid-back friendship or relationship. He would revolt against shackles of any kind, expectations, demands and a desire to be moulded into someone who conforms. And yet, he believes, “commitment-phobic” is not the appropriate term for him. “It’s just that I am not at that place right now,” he explains earnestly. This Deol isn’t misunderstood; he’s just waiting to be understood. At the right time and place in his life. **❶**