

amplifying emotion



*Award-winning Australian director of films *Moulin Rouge!*, *Romeo + Juliet* and *Australia*, Baz Luhrmann arrived in India expecting a “creative adventure”. In the midst of dipping his fingers into paint, warding off curious eyes, responding to over-enthusiastic banter and driving a bike through Rajasthan taking photos, SITANSHI TALATI-PARIKH gets an insight into his artistic mantra*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY APARNA JAYAKUMAR

AN ELDERLY INDIAN GENTLEMAN (PROBABLY inebriated) asks Baz Luhrmann at a recent art soirée, about the size of his pants. Luhrmann replies politely and retreats to probably punch the wall or take a deep breath. He has, in the correct manner of famous people especially of international origin, been generously accosted. His voice is scratchy from replying to the same – or inane – questions, his face is showing more lines than it should from smiling politely to profusely talking strangers, and he is undeniably tired. It is not surprising then, that he chooses a late start, armed with coffee, the morning of our meeting. “Not all of it is joy,” the veteran director admits, “Some of it is overwhelming. But something keeps telling me to ‘surrender’ and be in the moment.” An agreeable disposition and genial self-deprecating humour on his surprisingly slight frame make him a very real person who likes making larger-than-life movies that tend to hit the spot.

It is a creative visionary’s brush that picks up on the nuances of life, emotions and true-to-life characters with a flourish to create the ‘big’ film – full of flavour, drama, vibrant colours and melody – whether it is the garish realism of *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), the Parisian kitsch of *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), or the ochre-hued drama of *Australia* (2008). “It is amplification. You take realistic human emotions, realities or problems but you use an expressionistic canvas.” And this is what led to what is popularly known as Luhrmann’s Red Curtain Trilogy (*Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Romeo + Juliet*, *Moulin Rouge!*) – the concept of an “overtly theatrical musical work”.

Australia announced a departure from Sydney-born Luhrmann’s previous musical format and moved towards a more sweeping epic form. “There is no way that *Australia* is of the then-current naturalistic vernacular. It is heightened, much like *Gone With The Wind* is heightened. Instead of music, I tried using landscape to amplify emotion. It is operatic in that sense. Naturalism is like looking through a keyhole and you are apparently looking at reality; but this form is where words fail us – sometimes we just can’t express in words what it is like to truly be exalted or truly be in love or truly lose your child over a cliff.” Instantly, in the mind’s eye appears the stunning

visual of the herd of cattle racing towards the brink of a cliff pounding a dust storm. “What may seem to us to be a small event, to a person in the village, it is operatic at that point of time. ‘You-can’t-marry-that-boy-moment’ internally feels like *Tosca*. As an artist you want to use devices to help the audience empathise. And that doesn’t mean just reproducing the way it apparently is. I try not to show the way things *are*, rather the way things would have *felt* for the character.”

The once-aspiring actor has often given credit to Hindi cinema for influencing his cinema. “India has always been an extraordinary serum for my soul. Fifteen years ago – it is quite serendipitous – I made a production of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1993) set in colonial India. I was really fascinated by the connection between the Elizabethan spiritual world and the Hindu spiritual world. The production is very distinctly making those visual translations in the time of the Raj – the lovers are all European Raj characters and the Hindu spiritual world plays with them.” It went on to be a hugely successful show, winning the Critic’s Prize at the Edinburgh Festival. He recalls the defining moment being his visit to India at the time, with his award-winning production-designer wife, Catherine Martin, where in Rajasthan, they saw their very first Bollywood movie. Unable to remember the title or the cast – except that it was about two brothers going to Oxford University, and fighting over the same girl – Luhrmann found it remarkable that there was, “intense tragedy, next to very broad comedy and then a burst of song. Two thousand people were spellbound, including us who couldn’t speak the language, for three hours. What we got out of that was the value of exaltation. In that sense Bollywood films are Shakespearean. Different people can have different experiences at different levels. That sensibility became the Red Curtain Trilogy and has stayed with me ever since.”

Characters and sensitivity to their emotions is a trait that can be traced back to his youth working at a gas station observing people. At 47, he admits, “I’m addicted to people. And, it’s shocking, but I’m just getting started. I haven’t begun to meet all the people and haven’t begun to make all the movies. Maybe one day I’ll make a really good film, won’t that be good?!” There’s a light chuckle. “People are derided for it...being enthusiastic is



uncool, so I would think, be as uncool as you possibly can. There is nothing sadder than getting to a certain age and sleepwalking through life, marking time until the curtain falls. I don't want to surround myself with that energy."

His own vigour (despite the weariness) is paramount, and you would expect him to have enthralled us with more work than he has. He has a bunch of projects lined up, including that of a cinematic production of *The Great Gatsby*. "There is no such thing for me as lying on a beach and saying, 'The cocktail's good!' Creativity has always instinctively been for me the pursuit of a rich and extraordinary life, out of which creativity grows, as opposed to the pursuit of a successful career. I did that, and all of the Red Curtain came out of the instinctive urge. It has to be personal to begin with. For instance, I love Paris and Bohemia, hence *Moulin Rouge!*" The first *Harry Potter* film was offered to him: recalling that, he mutters, 'Idiot!' and smacks his forehead in mock disapproval at missing out. "That might have been a brilliant career choice once, but the work I do comes out of my life's journey. Recently, I lost sight of that. So between films I'm doing things just like this."

And this is exactly where we are. At the newly-opened Le Sutra art concept hotel, Bandra, Mumbai, that has a mural painted by Luhrmann and Australian artist Vincent Fantauzzo. Appalled by the recent negativity in Australia that he's afraid will mar the formative years of Indian students,

Luhrmann decided to partake of this "creative adventure" to use the artistic medium to speak out in a way that politicians cannot. "It is a genuine leading experiential artwork, what we used to call in the old days, 'a happening' and a platform to express the positivity to counter the negativity. As old as India is, it is young again. It is youthful, it's finding new creativity – Australia connects with India on that level. Without getting too clever or complicated, it was adventurous for us, but also symbolically and creatively a positive gesture. So far it has been intense, and it hasn't let us down."

Whether it is playing himself on an American TV show, directing a ballet, painting a wall or making a film, Luhrmann has never been judgemental about 'high' and 'low' art. "It is just expression...the adventure in pursuing it and the personal gain in your internal journey. What does it *do* for you?" While painting the mural – quipping that he merely held the can of paint – he finds that he has, "received the invisible lesson – one that you don't know where to look for." Accustomed to a zillion people following his directives, he suddenly found himself floundering with the language barrier, helping young children paint the embroidery on the mural. "There aren't 15 people here to say 'Yes Boss!' I was reminded what directing is – to know what you want and engage people and help them release their fear, be the very best they can be."

"Creativity has instinctively been for me the pursuit of a rich and extraordinary life, as opposed to the pursuit of a successful career."

Mark Anthony Luhrmann, "a tiny kid with an Afro", was very young when he ran away from his father, whom he describes as a "loving disciplinarian". The long, "crazy" hair, left Luhrmann with the derisive nickname 'Baz', which he decided to defiantly hold on to, particularly after it was used affectionately by his father, a little before he died. His brand, Bazmark, has a crest with a motto, 'A life lived in fear is a life half lived'. It defines the way Luhrmann thinks – against a formula that's any but his own and one that is constantly being redefined by life's experiences. "As you become successful in any way, little switches have turned where you increasingly become disconnected with yourself and you think you're doing stuff, but you are not. It's harder to not be your brand. You get tired...of stepping outside your comfort zone. Being here is awesome, but it's not like I'm 25 and haven't gone to India before and it's not like stuff isn't thrown at us. But the effort, already, has given me hundred-fold back. I could leave today and know that I have been woken up in a way that I wouldn't have had I not stepped outside my comfort zone. You tend to regret not finding out." 📌