

Celluloid Nights

Starting this month, Movies Under the Stars, a collaboration between the NCPA and the Film Heritage Foundation, will bring some of the greatest movies of all time to the big screen for members of the NCPA. We talk to Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, founder of the Film Heritage Foundation, about the magic and madness of the medium.

By Vipasha Aloukik Pai

Shivendra Singh Dungarpur knows great cinema. “I don’t think I ever went to sleep without watching a film,” he says in an interview about his upcoming collaboration with the NCPA. This is not a confessional but a matter-of-fact statement made by a man who has spent much of his life watching, making and restoring films. The director, archivist, winner of multiple National Film Awards and founder of the Film Heritage Foundation has just returned from Cannes, where his foundation’s restoration of Malayalam director Aravindan’s 1978 movie *Thamp* was selected for a world premiere at the prestigious Cannes Classic section of this year’s edition of the film festival.

Buster Keaton in
The Cameraman

An exclusive series for members of the NCPA, Movies Under the Stars, which entails a monthly screening, is an initiative to bring back the magic of cinema by watching classic movies the way they were meant to be watched—as part of an audience and on the big screen. At its core, it is a celebration of some of the greatest movies ever made. “It is going to be a casual evening where we watch a film together, then sit back and discuss it. We have chosen classics like *The Cameraman*, *Singin’ in the Rain* and *Some Like It Hot* because the idea is to watch something that has had a lasting impression on all of us, a cinematic experience of which all of us have some memories,” he says. For now, the screenings will be presented at the Little Theatre but after the rains, the plan is to take it forward under the stars and into the lawns of the NCPA.

The right venue

“Right through my struggling days,” says Dungarpur, “when I began my career, the NCPA used to have regular screenings. Here, we would get to watch world cinema. It was one of the most important institutions where a whole generation of people came and watched films. You experienced a film together and afterwards you talked about it as you went across to Marine Drive and then walked on to Churchgate.” The NCPA has been hoping to recreate this experience for its members by screening classics in an informal, relaxed atmosphere.

The selection of films by Dungarpur and Teesha Cherian (Director of the Film Heritage Foundation and Dungarpur’s wife) is comprehensive and attempts to cover several significant genres. “The first one—Buster Keaton’s *The Cameraman*—is really the beginning of cinema, which is comedy. Then we have *Double Indemnity*, which is one of the great works of the film noir movement of the 1940s. We have *Notorious*, a Hitchcockian classic filled with romance and suspense,” he says. Also on the roster is the eternally romantic *Casablanca*, that unforgettable musical, *Singin’ in the Rain* and the brilliant Billy Wilder comedy, *Some Like It Hot*. With folks who have a history of experiencing cinema at the NCPA, the prospect of this is evocative. Dungarpur says, “I have people calling me up and saying: I saw *Singin’ in the Rain* at the NCPA so many years ago! It is so lovely to see it back again, especially with the monsoon coming.”



Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*

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Each screening will begin with a short introduction to the film. “It’s very important to set the context of when these films were made. For example, with *The Cameraman*, there will be a short talk on the history of comedy or with *Notorious*, since it was shot in various ways, we intend to discuss that. And then, of course, after the film, it’s great to just have a conversation with some tea, coffee or wine,” says Dungarpur.

A true genius

While Charles Chaplin remains one of the most important figures in the history of film, it is Buster Keaton who is now considered by many to be the true genius. “Keaton doesn’t emote as much as Chaplin, but he is a *phenomenal* filmmaker, a

Gene Kelly in
Singin' in the Rain



A scene from *Some Like It Hot*



phenomenal technician and a *phenomenal* acrobat. There is nobody like him,” says Dungarpur.

Part of the appeal, and the reason why he was called The Great Stone Face, is his seemingly unchangeable deadpan expression. Dungarpur agrees. “As a kid, when I saw him on my grandfather’s projector, I was fascinated. He is nearly run over by a train or he is running behind cars or being chased by boulders and he would just have that one expression.” Hilarious, yes, but when one considers that he not only performed his own stunts but also thought of and planned all those impossible sight gags, he becomes a cutting-

edge engineer, a great mathematician, a sharp-eyed cinematographer and, above all, a server of visual epiphanies. And armed with a face that Orson Welles found beautiful and Dungarpur calls stunning, Keaton is indeed phenomenal in every sense of the word. American film critic Richard Corliss summed it up perfectly when he wrote, ‘The Keaton deadpan is stoic, heroic and as thoroughly modernist as a Beckett play or a Bauhaus facade.’

Keaton’s career trajectory, from his vaudeville days and early flash-in-the-pan success in silent films to sudden personal and professional decline is beyond the scope of these pages. Though it needs to be said that, as many might believe, the advent of the talkies was not the problem—Keaton was in possession of a deep, natural baritone. The studio he entered into a contract with, MGM, was the problem. *The Cameraman*, his first project with the studio, was also his last great film. In addition to that, Dungarpur sees in it the value of a historical document. “It is really the essence of any of the films made in that period because it is about where he wants to place the camera and how he wants to shoot. It gives an insight into not just that film but into that whole era, of how they shot their films and what went behind it. That’s why we want to give people an overview of that time and that period,” he says.

RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (SINGIN' IN THE RAIN);
JJS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (SOME LIKE IT HOT)

When one considers that Buster Keaton is not only the performer but the creator of those impossible sight gags, he becomes a cutting-edge engineer, a great mathematician, a sharp-eyed cinematographer and, above all, a server of visual epiphanies

The biggest influence

To steer the conversation back to Dungarpur's grandfather's projector, I ask him about the formative years of his love for films. "I had very indulgent grandparents," he says. "My grandfather had his own projector and projectionist. Every day, the projector would be pulled out and I would run into this room which was called *thanda* room because this was in Bihar and that was the only airconditioned room. These films were all kept in a glass cupboard and I would open the cans of film, smell them (they smelled like vinegar) and take one to the projectionist."

To the young boy, to see the projectionist thread a film upside down, have it come straight up and be projected felt like magic. "I had a great mix between my grandfather and grandmother. My grandfather watched Chaplin, Keaton, Wilder, John Ford, Howard Hawks, among others. He used to have his drink in the evening and watch a film. My grandmother would go to cinema halls to watch English films, and I would go with her. They once drove from their place all the way to Lucknow in an open Lancia to watch *Gone with the Wind*. They were crazy about films," he says. What is that idiom about the apple and the tree? Years later, before the advent of DVDs, Dungarpur would often travel across the country to catch a retrospective where he would watch movies back-to-back.

There is a certain magic to watching movies on the big screen. They become larger than life, literally and metaphorically. A lifetime spent watching movies and Dungarpur still feels the same way. "When I go to the cinema hall, I become a child. I watch [the movie] in exactly the same way I watched when I was a child. The gaze, that look, the screen, the projectionist...it's almost like a *Cinema Paradiso* moment for me," he says. The Oscar-winning Italian film, about a friendship between a young boy

Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, pictured here at the Cannes Film Festival



and a projectionist in a small Sicilian town, is also part of the line-up. "I met Giuseppe Tornatore, the director, in Bologna and I had the opportunity to talk to him. The relationship between the little kid and the projectionist is the story of all of us, the story of everyone who went through that era when we had to buy tickets in black and watch the first show on the first day. This is the most important film for anyone who loves cinema."

Dungarpur's mentor, director and self-confessed film buff Martin Scorsese, in an ode to Fellini published last year in *Harper's Magazine*, called curation "an act of generosity—you're sharing what you love and what has inspired you." With Dungarpur, we are, without a doubt, in safe hands. A passion project befitting hardcore cinephiles and true-blue neophytes, if you haven't experienced these films, then watching painstakingly restored versions on a big screen is an obvious choice. If you have known and loved these films, then this is an opportunity to revisit the magic. After all, as Dungarpur says, "Cinema, when it was created, was for sharing experiences together. To be in a community, to be with people, to share what you watch and to watch something larger than life." ■

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The Cameraman will be presented as part of Movies Under the Stars on 22nd July at the Little Theatre.