

Girish Karnad

Interview by AHMED RIZVI
and NANDAN NILEKANI

After Basu Chatterjee's 'Swami', Girish Karnad is much in demand as a 'character actor' in commercial Hindi cinema. But he first made his mark as a playwright ('Tughlaq', 'Hayavadana') and as one of the pioneers of the new cinema movement in Karnataka. Karnad maintains his varied involvement in theatre and cinema—as a writer, an actor and a film-maker. He has just written his fifth play and is planning to begin work on his next feature film



Debonair: We may as well begin with a question that is worrying a lot of people sick. To put in a sentence: "Why is Girish Karnad selling out?"

Girish Karnad: (*laughs*) Yeah, all of a sudden everyone seems to be plagued with this question of what the hell I'm doing in commercial films. It's gratifying to have so many people who have your interest at heart, who come and tell me that I was quite bad in 'Ratnadeep' or good in 'Aasha', but how come a nice guy like me is here, anyway.

Look, what am I supposed to do if I want to make a living as an actor? Either I depend on certain people to give me roles in all their films, people like Shyam Benegal and Basu Chatterjee, which is quite unrealistic—I mean, I wouldn't do that in my films, take the same people—or I quit acting and take an office job or run an ad film agency the way Shyam is doing, or just sit around. The point that nobody realises when they tell me to stick to direction is that I cannot make six films at one time the way they do in commercial cinema, and that barring Ray there is nobody in India who can be purely a director and yet stick to one film at a time. I wouldn't

fit anywhere as a director if I did anything other than what I'm doing, which is one project every few years. The two year gap after 'Ondanandu Kaladalli' is absolutely intentional. I'm planning my next film now.


Deb.: But doesn't this tend to mix you up? Doesn't it have a corruptive influence on you?

G.K.: It certainly does have a corruptive influence on many people. In most cases you can't segregate two interests; they fuse and then you can't get back to whatever you had been doing. In my case... (*pause*) well, I can only say anything on my work by the sole yardstick open to me, which is the degree to which it has satisfied me. The films I make, or the plays I write. I've just completed a play called 'Hittina Hunja' (which means a cock of flour) which I think is the most exciting play I've ever done. One is of course never fully satisfied in that one always hopes to do better than whatever one has done in the past. 'Anju Mallige', which I wrote two years ago, was criticised badly by the press, but I still like the play. I think there is something in it that is open to anyone who wants to

read it. 'Ondanondu Jaladalli' too, which was the film I had made on martial arts in Kerala, when I look back on it I see that I could have put in more work than I did, but it is still something I am quite fond of.

Deb.: How do you manage to prevent being corrupted?

G.K.: In my case the question hasn't really arisen because I have never taken the commercial cinema seriously; it's been more like a windfall. I can understand someone who has always been an actor, always wanted to act. He might stick on, even if he has to do lousy roles with bad directors. I've never worked towards acting the way I've worked towards being a playwright or a good film-maker. One has to be totally aware of the technique of the medium, one has to have seen or read the



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classics, worked very hard to acquire the discipline. Acting is something that I was forced to do when I started—that was when Pattabhirama Reddy told me that there was nobody he could afford for 'Samskara' so why don't I act the Brahmin—and today it is something like a windfall. I'm going along with it as far as it will take me. And, of course, for the first time in my life I'm saving money.

Deb.: There's this particular contradiction about your acting. Many people believe that you really are quite bad as an actor. But there is that peculiar stratum of film society—that swinging, sophisticated type, which is easily intimidated by "intellectuals"—these people have conferred on you the role of one of our truly talented

actors. Do you sense this difference?

G.K.: What I think you are asking me is, why does 'Stardust' think I'm a talented actor (*smiles*). I don't know, I guess it is perhaps the age-old connection that exists between a successful actor and an artistically acclaimed actor—this is so everywhere. Then again, a sympathetic role always fetches artistic plaudits, a complex role is less easily understood and therefore less easily appreciated. For instance, most people thought I was better in 'Manthan' than in 'Nishant'. The complexities of that school master in 'Nishant' are more difficult to understand. These were the same people who didn't like Anant Nag in 'Ankur'—you can see how good he was in that film.

Deb.: Do you have any particular audience in mind for whom you perform? At what point do you relate with the people?

G.K.: I have never written anything, or made anything. . . . (*pause*) Well, let's put it the other way round—whatever I have done, I have done for a large audience, I have wanted it understood by a large audience. It doesn't upset me that people tell me I have written a bad play, but when they say that they haven't understood a word of it, *that* would really upset me. This is not to take a theoretical standpoint. I'm stating, and accepting, what has always been for me a fact.

When I wrote 'Tughlaq', for instance, it was deliberately in the Company Natak style, with murder and thunder and suspense and everything. It is in no sense an intellectual play, but I have said that I wanted to say nevertheless. I do want to do that kind of thing, because ultimately what makes someone like Dostoevsky great is that he worked within a popular milieu. In films I might admire someone like Resnais, I might see 'Charulata' four times and admire Ray's calibre in his ability to see dramatic possibilities in this story. But what really impresses me, sends me reeling, is the work of someone like Akira Kurosawa, or

Hitchcock or John Ford. You just look at that work and you say "Oh my God! What a sweeping, wonderful canvas!" These people have produced something worthwhile within the popular tradition. And that is what I have always strived towards doing, it has been my aim.

Deb.: Is that the reason why you have never tried to do a contemporary film or written a play documenting the times you have lived in and experienced? You work on either themes based on legendary myths ('Hayavadan', 'Hittina Hunja') or historicals ('Tughlaq'); I think the only time you ventured on a contemporary theme is the film 'Kaadu', and even there you created a world that was quite impervious to outside influences. Barring that last moment when the police come, the feud is entirely within the village.

G.K.: (*Pause*) Well, obviously you're right in that I've never dealt with contemporary themes. You had better ask the literary critics why that is so, but speaking for myself, that somehow fits into the form that I work within. I'm told that a playwright like Tendulkar for instance, has written plays that he had not consciously planned, plays that just "flow". Well, nothing flows like that for me. My theme is a consciously executed one, where everything, the whole development, has been worked out over several drafts and a lot of work.

In all the plays I have done, it is the idea of the basic theme that has come to me first—the mythical tale in 'Hayavadan' and my recent 'Hittina Hunja' which is based on an old Jain legend, on the conflict between brother and sister who are incestuously drawn towards each other as a conflict that is merely an extension of the one of the British National Front—this is the fundamental structure. Once I get the structure I then think about it, the possibilities open to interpret the theme. I sometimes take *years*; both 'Anju Mallige' and 'Hittina Hunja' had been brewing for years. And then



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gradually it takes shape, coloured by my own feelings, my anger, my involvement with the environment around me, and then the interpretation of the play comes to me and I write it. I begin with the assumption that one does not have to depict a contemporary situation to speak about it or to reflect it.

Deb.: But then doesn't this create some sort of ponderousness in your approach?

G.K.: It does irritate me, that although I get upset, or react quite violently to things around me, I can't give it an instantaneous form. What I feel becomes merely a reaction—I feel angry, upset and I talk about it. But that is not theatre, not for me. This is hardly to say that the two are not interconnected in some ways. They are, and where they are, the plays show it. At least I hope they do.

Deb.: You once said, many years ago, in an interview, that you were "terrified of failure." Do you think, looking back over the years, that you have fulfilled some of that promise—created a substantial body of work?

G.K.: No, I don't think so; I mean one always hopes that one has not produced what one is capable of producing, that your true masterpiece is still to come. Which is actually why one keeps writing, or making films.

Certainly my initial reaction to what I make or write, immediately after I do it, is one of disgust. "Oh God, another thing that's second rate".... Because the criteria of first rate, if you really go by the best in the world, is really very high indeed. If you are willing to compare yourself only with Peter Schaffer or John Osborne, then it's no problem,

but if you think of Ibsen or Chekov as playwrights that you would like to emulate, or even a play like 'Mrichakatik', then first rate is really something fantastic. So one naturally feels that one has failed to come up to that standard.

It becomes even worse in cinema when you compare yourself with the very finest, because the greatest film-makers the world has seen are your contemporaries. You can meet them if you like. They are not Shakespeare, whom you can put on a pedestal. Bergman, Kurosawa... Coppola of my own generation, or Kubrick. Here the sense of having failed happens every time. I've often had to take myself in hand and tell myself that "OK, I'll do better yet, I must not give in to failure. Not now..."

Deb.: It occurs to me that almost none of the criteria you employ for your work or your thinking are immediate ones, which could emerge from personal crises. Your consciousness spreads the world over, into the literature of the past; you can compare your work with that of Dostoevsky and say that "Well, yes, I haven't done so well this time" meaning that the next time you hope to be even better than Dostoevsky. Do you think that you are a better writer than John Osborne?

G.K.: When I compare myself with these people—it's quite true, I do compare myself, and it's a lot more stimulating than worrying about some of the essentially petty points that many critics are in the habit of raising—but when this happens it is not so much a value comparison as one of a comparison of possibilities, the utilisation of the canvas open to me, the effectiveness with which I've made use of it. I can see how good these people are, these first rate writers and film-makers, I can relate to them. And when that happens, I can, and in fact subconsciously do, compare what I have done with what I can personally recognise without the help of a literary critic telling me, as the ultimate in that form. That sort of

thing is inevitable. But if you have got the impression from what I've said that I'm about to replace Dostoevsky then I've not made myself clear.

Deb.: You have, but the point is that these yardsticks suggest themselves to you naturally, which is unusual, isn't it?

G.K.: Yes, but the validity doesn't decrease for that.

Deb.: Your recent films give the impression that you have come a long way from the days of 'Samskara' and 'Kaadu'. Do you feel that way?

G.K.: The movement that those films sponsored has deteriorated to such an extent that I would naturally have come out of it, as I have. Even after I did 'Kaadu' and then followed it up with Karanth to make 'Vamsha Vriksha' the essence of the parallel film movement in Karnataka did not gain a hold. It was only after Karanth made 'Chomana Dudi' that the parallel cinema really emerged. But now what is happening is it's crawling with badly-made small budget films; not just that, sheer racketeering is replacing any pretensions to art. I'll give you this example, which you must quote. Each film-maker in Karnataka is given one and a half lakhs for a small budget, seriously made film. Now three film-makers got together, made three films with three scripts, but the scripts were such that they could be shot at the same time, with the same cast, using the same costumes, and even in some places the same shot was used in all the films. So, for practically the cost of one film, they made three. Naturally, they pocketed the surplus, and then didn't care as to whether the films were released or not. They had made their money.

Consequently, everyone is howling in Karnataka that the subsidy should be discontinued because it is only spawning bad films and the whole movement is deteriorating. We find to our horror that almost all the small budget films fail to make the money spent on them. The idea of a small



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budget film is that it is possible to chart out a minimum market for your film, anticipating a moderate run in the larger towns, and to budget the film within that minimum sum. It is not an entirely fail-safe method, but in 80 per cent of the cases it works, as I can tell you with experience. But now it isn’t working. The excuse given is that the big distributors are ganging up against the small film producers, which is true. They are ganging up, but if you go to search for the true cause of the failures, you will find that in most cases it is the racketeering and absolutely poor quality of the films that are made.

Deb.: But hasn’t this degeneration showed in your own films as well? I’m referring to ‘Godhuli’ and ‘Ondanondu Kaladalli.’ ‘Godhuli’ was really quite gross, and that character of Paula Lindsay was absolutely trite—especially that point where she quarrels with the priest and then kills a cow to eat beef. The film was a very touristy depiction of Karnataka, it just wasn’t of the genre of ‘Samskara’, though superficial similarities in the puritanism existed. And even ‘Ondanondu Kaladalli’—a swashbuckling saga of the age of the martial arts in Kerala.

G.K.: ‘Godhuli’... I think you’re exaggerating. I don’t agree about it being gross. Did you see the Hindi version or Kannada?

Deb.: Hindi.

G.K.: Then I can imagine it striking you as such. I’m not trying to defend the film, mind you. That film came to us as a package offer—the producer wanted the story filmed, so he offered it to Karanth and myself. It wasn’t my film in that sense, you

see, so I can be much more open to this criticism. But ‘Ondanondu Kaladalli’ certainly was something of an attempt at seriousness. What do you have against that film?

Deb.: Right from the beginning it was touted as a “commercial” film! Secondly, that character played by Nag, the very intention was that of a filmic hero, certainly a first-time character in your films, though ‘Tughlaq’ shows this character. I’m not criticising the film, I’m merely making a statement that the intention and the very form it took is in itself a corruption.

G.K.: Yes, the film is a commercial one, yeah. But I nevertheless wanted to, and did, make a lot of subtle points about the film and the characters. I consciously avoided making the comments on the characters too intellectual, because the film wasn’t intended to make sociological comments, but I said what I wanted to...

Take that point of the very last shot in the film, where the other man is walking out of the village, and he comes to the palace, and he sees his former mistress in front of the dead body of her husband. There is this brief moment of silent confrontation between the two, and he finds that he can’t look at her; he avoids her eyes and goes out. So he can kill his master, he can do everything but he cannot face the woman of the house. He cannot own up to himself, he is faced with guilt. These are the sort of things I have tried to bring in, subtle comments about the people, the society and its hierarchical values.

Incidentally, (this is just a by-the-way comment) neither ‘Godhuli’ nor this film made any money for me at all. I don’t know how precisely they ran, but both were financially disastrous, at least for me. In fact, I had just completed ‘Swami’ and two films for Benegal, ‘Nishant’ and ‘Manthan’, and it was on my earnings in these films that made it possible for me to work at a stretch. After the failure of ‘Ondanondu Kaladalli’ I decided to get into commercial cinema as an actor—

‘Swami’ had by then become a super hit, and I had got many offers by them. The two years I have spent after ‘Kaladalli’ are merely to recover from the exhaustion of that entire effort. So if your question was trying to equate the connection of my apparent rejection of the ‘Kaadu’ and ‘Vamsha Vriksha’ legacy in favour of a more commercial attitude to my work with my joining commercial cinema, then you’re quite wrong. It was the other way round.

Deb.: What do you think of the way the commercial Hindi cinema functions?


G.K.: Bizarre, I tell you, it’s bizarre. I was under the impression that it was the star system that created this chaos, the problem of getting dates, etc. But I find that it isn’t that, it’s the financing system. Nobody trusts anyone, so the producer who wants money to continue the film has to constantly sell it to his distributors during the process of making it. So he makes a small portion, shows it to them, gets Rs 15,000 from each, somehow makes it a lakh and then goes ahead to shoot another few sequences and then goes back to the distributors and gets another advance...

The consequence is that in the case of the small producer, it is the distributors who decide on the sort of film it will be. “Add another song” or “No advance this time” or “We want more fighting” and the fellow has to damn well do it or sink. Consequently, one finds that the film is turning out to be in no way the sort of film you were told about. Nobody has a script, barring someone like Basu Chatterjee, and so it becomes, as Moushumi Chatterjee told me recently, a situation where you are told of “one film when you are approached, another film when it is shot, and a third film bearing no resemblance to the earlier, when you finally see it on the screen.”

Deb.: Do you see anything like a viable alternative emerging to it?

G.K.: It’s obviously a problem, because everywhere things are getting difficult every day for film-making. On the one hand

you have the commercial cinema for what it is, and on the other you have a completely government-controlled cinema. Films Division has made documentary films their monopoly, which has resulted in many film-makers trying their hands at feature films even before they have made any documentaries. And then there is the Film Finance Corporation that has some of the most stringent conditions perhaps ever devised for film-making. Many of those conditions are totally idiotic. I mean, what is the FFC there for? If it is purely for money making films then we *don't* need the FFC, there are enough individual producers who are willing to finance such films. I have never gone to the FFC because people think that my films will recover money, and I manage to get better terms than the FFC offers. The FFC first wants a guarantee, then



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they want negative rights and then they want guarantee against distribution also! I think it is ridiculous—look at this whole incident of Mani Kaul getting a decree for some three lakhs for 'Ashaad Ka Ek Din.' What is the state supposed to encourage anyway?

Deb.: What do you think of the quality of the films that have been spawned by the New Wave? You were very much a part of that whole movement once, so have you opted out or just moved away from it all?

G.K.: The problem with that movement today, in fact what is partly killing the movement, is that everyone thinks he is a Satyajit Ray and that his first film is going

to be a massive success. As a result a lot of people are coming to small budget films, because it is possible to make small budget films, without any work behind it. It's depressing how badly some of these films are made. This is when, instead of doing the whole movement some good, they act as a deterrent to creation. With the result that you cannot have any confidence and say that this film needs to be supported. It's not a question of bad films, note. Anyone can make a bad film. Benegal can make a bad film, Mrinal Sen can make a bad film... but what you can spot here is the man who has worked at learning how to make a film, and similarly you can spot the man who comes because he managed to get FFC or some producer to put up money, and who has absolutely no conception of shooting or anything or even the drive to produce work of any calibre. It is then that you begin to feel depressed, because then there is no sense in saying that "This is the film that needs to be supported by the government or the state." Small budget cinema has now become a racket for amateurs.

Deb.: You seem to have the shrewdness to make the best of any situation before it degenerates into mediocrity or racketeering, don't you? I mean, you started with Kannada theatre, you were instrumental in the beginning of the small budget Kannada cinema, you started as part of the new wave. All this is more than a mere question of talent. Did you spot your opportunities or was it all just a startling coincidence?

G.K.: That I am shrewd is one way of looking at it. But the point is... I mean, I was just able to spot a lot of opportunities that nobody before me had seen. The fact that small budget films could be made in Kannada, the subsidy could be used to make small films—when 'Samskara' was made everyone thought it was a freak, because it was banned and then it got the Gold Medal. Then Karanth and I went on to make 'Vamsha Vriksha', 'Kaadu'... it

was only after Karanth made 'Chomana Dudi' that people caught on to it, that other people started picking up the concept. The concept wasn't invented by me, it was already in practice in Ray's films. But I was, as you would say, shrewd enough to see the possibilities here.

Even the now-famous Kannada theatre just was not there when I started writing plays. Except for Sri Ranga, nobody wrote plays seriously till I started writing them, with 'Yayati' and 'Tughlaq.' Now I would say that if according to you it was a sense of timing and realisation that, yes this is the medium of today, it was shrewdness, but then it isn't necessarily a bad thing if that is so. Kannada theatre is today flourishing with very rich writing from the last ten years.

If shrewdness doesn't purely mean opportunism, and the ruthlessness that has you seeing to your survival and the failure of others, then certainly I make no apology for it.

Deb.: And are you now being shrewd enough to look to the future? How do you envisage it?

G.K.: I don't. I've always been far too occupied with what's been happening now to look to the future. For the first time in my life I think I can reasonably feel that money is not going to be the big problem in the future. Hopefully, I can do what work I want without worrying too much about the financial returns it will yield, which is a major relief, as you can imagine.

I'm planning a film now I'll hopefully start in a while. Meanwhile, if 'Hittina Hunja' is staged that will be something positive. I'm still primarily a playwright, you know, and I think that any judgement that has to be made of me by posterity will not be based on my acting, or all my other activities, or even the films I make, but on the plays I will have written. These five plays I have done are quite simply the most exciting, the most stimulating things I have ever created. At least for me. □