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THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

• Saturday, August 18, 2012 02:10 PM

Back to roots with a ballad

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16th August 2012 11:18 AM

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• "Ballad of Rustom comes from my own life and people in my life, my family," says the award-winning director Ajita Suchitra Veera.

Director Ajita Suchitra Veera, who spent her formative years in Hyderabad, recently bagged the Best Director award for her film Ballad of Rustom at the Osian's Cinefan Film Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema in New Delhi. Appreciated for her first full-length film, the director is elated and is looking to make more in the future. Settled in Mumbai, Ajita has a quick chat with City Express about her film, her future plans and her connection with Hyderabad

Tell us a little about yourself

I have dabbled in several things --- studied science, theatre, photography and ultimately, cinema, which happens to be my first love. I come from a very liberal family. My father is a photographer-artist and my mother has been the philosopher in my life. I have grown up watching world cinema classics, Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray, Hollywood classics, and several Hindi films Bimal Roy-Navketan's Cinema, of 50s and 60s. At home, we used to have conversations centered on cinema. So it was potent ground and cinema was always part of my life, but the decisive move to follow that path came in 2000 when I left my education in science and briefly did theatre, then finally joined the Film Institute Pune to practice the craft of making films.

Tell us a little about your film *Ballad of Rustom*

Ballad of Rustom comes from my own life and people in my life, my family --- we all have roots in the countryside although now we all live in the cities. It is a classic and contemporary film and it is about imagination, dreams, the passion for life, love --- hope and despair of a few people in a countryside township in India. I have come across people who hail from small towns and who often seem very ordinary, but they are extraordinary in many ways --- imaginative and very intelligent --- they can do several things. They are innovators and they learn from life. I have very deliberately shot the film on 35 mm cinemascope with sync sound since it was an intentional aesthetic choice for me as a director and I am very old school when it comes to cinema.

Was this your first film?

This is my first full length feature. Although I have done many shorter films all on celluloid 35 mm and 16 mm film.

How was your experience directing the film?

Absolutely wonderful. You live another life making a film and it is always enriching to experience that world. Also, cinema is a scientific, technical and aesthetic medium and that should be understood. It's not about merely making a film, but it is the ideas, philosophy and vision the director brings forth in cinema that make it richer and special. So, I have loved every moment of the time I spent in building my vision.

Did you face any difficulties during the making of the film?

Yes. I was using a very different technique of cinema, because of which funding my film was an issue. I spent almost three years trying to make financial arrangements.

What kind of different technique are you talking about?

There is a very poignant story in *Ballad of Rustom*, however I use certain devices which break the regular way of telling a story, which are perhaps new for Indian Cinema. These cinematic tools make the experience of cinema different and I love using the cinematic tools to create

different experiences. I don't believe in strictly delivering messages, rather I like the play of ideas, emotions, the human experiences, feelings, moods, associations, philosophies. According to me, one need not say everything in cinema. Also I have used a special technique called "Bleach by Pass" on the negative to create a very different look, which makes the colors desaturated and it creates a unique color scheme.

What about the star cast of the film?

They are all new and professional and they were chosen from across India after several auditions. There are also non-actors from Coorg in some roles where I shot the film and they have done a wonderful job.

When do you plan to release the film?

Soon. Perhaps, this year or early next year.

Did you expect an award for this film?

I think the award is special since it recognises the vision, philosophy, ideas and unique cinematic language I have used in Ballad of Rustom and that is rather important for unique cinematic expressions to emerge in India.

Our films should be diverse and not uni-dimensional for a vibrant film culture to emerge in India and I always wanted to be in India and make films here. I definitely did not expect an award though.

Are you a full-time director?

Well (laughs), I am a full-time director. It has been the case for a long time. But I also love to travel and music is my second love after cinema.

What plans next?

Another film. I have two films on the cards and very excited about them.

Tell us about your connection with Hyderabad

I was born in Hyderabad and lived my best years there. It's one of the most charming and beautiful cities in the world, with interesting history, and an ancient culture.

Message to your film viewers?

I would be very happy to screen Ballad of Rustom in Hyderabad and it would be interesting to engage with the audience.

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