

I PREDICT

Vinay Pathak and the fine art of making dimaag ka dahi. Movies, too.

FIRST CITY in (and with) one serious Mumbaiyya guffaw. Demonstrating his many roop, bahut pehloo. Is story mein “melodramabaazi” hai, sobriety hai. Aur comic relief hai. What happened this one day close to Lokhandwala, was nothing short of paisa vasool. Here’s how it rolled...

One early morning on a TGIF in an unusually freezing Mumbai (the one weekend I thought I could go without Delhi essentials - those darn things called warmers! Equal parts bundled up baby and Egyptian mummy), is when the rendezvous happens. Takes place. Occurs. Acts out. Unfolds. Because with this one, it’s all about the performance/act/playacting. “If there’s a play in the script, then I’m your player.” In so many words.

SCENE ONE

The real moustache

Enter Vinay Pathak. Shades. Armed with fruits. (“A box full of fruits! A fruitful box! Stop!”). And a crazy sense of humour.

“Opening shot! I loved the opening shot of *Manorama Six Feet Under*. Have you seen that film? Not because I’m in it! Heh heh. I get goosebumps when I see it! The way he captures the magnanimous land, time, space. And the realness of Abhai with the tan and the moustache. The real moustache. And the voiceover starts about anecdotes and his life and storytelling, and that Yana shot and the bike smashes through her. Fantastic! What an opening shot!”

SCENE TWO

Radio Moscow, Vividh Bharati, Voice of America, Sri Lanka, Radio Nepal

Vinay’s running late. The last SMS-update after a warm ‘Welcome to Mumbai *nagri*’ reads ‘Coming up. Five minutes’. And sure enough, in seven and a half, there he is. Just a little out of breath after running up the six floors (“*Cardio subah hi ho jaata hai*”). And now chewing on the fruits slowly (“my platter”), dispensing wisdom, “There’s a fruit in here that’s not even a fruit. Cucumber... *Meri dadi kehti thi ‘Din ka kheera heera, aur raat ka kheera, peeda*’. It’s a very Ayurvedic concept.” Building a solemn moment. “I felt shitty and guilty about making you guys wait, and so I said, ‘I’m going to cut the fruits myself today’. So now you’ll have to put me on the cover? Right?” He likes the photographer’s glasses. Almost

A RIOT

to distraction. “Ab picture *ki shuruat hui hai aur item song nahi daalein toh kaise chalega?* Hello!” and takes off on the long story (“Anecdotes are what I’m all about”) of how “One whole lifetime happened in my one Diwali vacation!” Charting out his “enormous” family tree, back in Bihar where he grew up, “You know, how in peoples’ homes, when there is a wedding, everyone comes, from different places... *bua ji, yeh woh, phalaan, dhimkaan*, one week of chaos, *sab chale gaye, chalo album dekhte hain*. For us, that was normal! *Sannaatta toh kabhi suna hi nahi...* My dad has eight brothers, my dad being the eldest. So I have seven uncles, the youngest uncle of mine is younger than my elder sister. And I think my mom and my grandmother were pregnant around the same time! Twice! They must’ve exchanged notes. ‘How do we stay fit? Let’s do it together, sister’. Oh! It was like, ‘Why can’t you guys have differences and the brothers part, *yaar?*’ Come on! Cooking for everybody together. Ouch! And no take-outs, okay? Back then? Take-outs *se toh better hai apna restaurant khol lo, hai na?* They should’ve started charging, my mother and all the women. ‘*Achcha bhaiyya aapke huye...*’ I’m going off on a tangent. Again. But I have a huge family! I can’t just mention them and move on! They’re huge!” *Raging Bull*, an imposing backdrop just a while ago, now recedes into the background, simply because you cannot take your attention off Vinay for one nanosecond, “**You know, now everyone talks about Hindi cinema being a big part of our lives and all that. But it’s not a new thing. I remember how my dad grew up loving Meena Kumari.** He asked me for a book on her and I’ve been looking and looking for this book all over the place. And finally my dad found it himself. On the net! Hello! Another uncle is a Sulakshana Pandit fan! (*makes a face, mimes why?*) I’ll tell you why... she’s Pandit, we’re Brahmins from Bihar. Silly reasons to fall in love with a woman he’s never going to see in his life, leave alone touch! You name the cliché, and I have it in my family. It’s life. My life... This other uncle was a Dharmendra fan, and it was very obvious, *woh roz sau dand belte the, dole shole, aur upar lole* (*makes a d-uh expression*). 6 feet tall. He would say things like, ‘*Eeth leke aao, bachchon, main*





todke dikhata hoon'. He used to study in college... My sister... a maverick radio player, magic touch on her fingers. At any time of the day, day or night, she could find and play Hindi *filmi* songs on radio. She knew the times of Radio Moscow, Vividh Bharati, Voice of America, Sri Lanka, Radio Nepal. *Matlab tyun tyun (mimes turning radio knobs) aur bas gaana shuru, 'Mera gora ang lai le'*. Now they talk of radio jockeys! So, I would never think it's traumatic to see bizarre stuff, I was living it!" And what, pray, cliché was Vinay? "I was observing. The observer cliché."

SCENE THREE

It was like organised
crime

Vinay's on a green tea spree ("No health diet. I'm not starving myself or anything. I can burp right now if you like."). He orders another round, as our tête-à-tête warms up. "I got into movies when I think I was seven. And they became everything. To the

point that by the time I was in college, that took on new meaning! Russian dubbed films, B grade films dubbed, C grade Hollywood flicks, European films. I remember watching these semi porn flicks, because the libido's kicked in and we've just discovered ourselves. And it's not just about movies anymore! I was studying in Allahabad university. And you know, back then, in Allahabad, there were 22 cinema halls. Which meant 44 movies, at least. No repeats! *Ek thi ji Her Nights. Har saal banti thi ji. Iske alaava maine Allahabad mein kuch nahi kiya.* In all my three years of BA, I must've gone for classes twice, I think. I used to take my exams, because otherwise, I'd fail. *Aur fail ho jaayenge toh dande padenge. Dande nahi bhi pade toh daant padegi. Daant nahi bhi padi ji toh paise aane bandh ho jaayenge.* And I used to score marks also. See, the smart thing I did was I studied in school. And if you study upto Class XII, then BA happens easily in India. This is my belief." The boarding-school-in-Ranchi story's filmi too. "Now, first and third Sundays, we were allowed to go the nearest town. Only by written permission from parents or guardians. Of course, that's not going to happen. So, what do you do? You create applications! There were some 12 or 13 of us, and we used to go together. *Aur raaste mein hi plan ban gaya. Chaar-chaar ka group ban gaya. Tu chala jaa Sujata, hum rehte hain Sandhya.* (These were names of cinema halls. Ogay?). It was like organised crime. We buy tickets, watch the movie, in the interval, we buy tickets for the next show, finish the movie and rush. Meet at Punjab Sweet House at the *gol chakkar* and exchange tickets and rush to the next show. We were always running as soon as the picture ended. *Matlab log sochte honge ki hamesha kaise inki train chhoot jaati hai? Phir uske baad ek khoobsoorat pehloo aaya hamaari zindagi mein jab Sujata ke maalik ne ek mini Sujata bhi khol diya. Kuch 100-200 seater ka, only English movies.* So I saw all my *Omen, Spy Who Loved Me, Rambo*, all the Hollywood movies, there. *Iske baad hum thode angrezi speaking ho gaye. 'I am going to watch that new movie today'. Kitne logon ne suna aas paas? Matlab Kaatilon ke Kaatil dekh ke nikle hai aur ekdum kya phaatoo movie hain. Aur phir hum English type ho gaye.*" And "everything" left an impression, "I saw a film called *The Lacemaker*, which had one nude scene and that was the poster they made. But. It was a *fantastic* film. I saw it again at a international film festival in Delhi recently. It was set in WWII about a woman and man thrown together to save themselves from being killed. She's left her husband and kids and he's left his wife. They have to maintain this pretence of being husband and wife, and the layers start to shed between a man and a woman. And how the war and everything happening there, the trauma, becomes secondary to a *magnanimous* thing called a relationship. What a beautiful film! After the movie, I told my friend Vinod, 'Yaar, main phir se aa raha hoon yeh dekhne'. And he said, 'Kya yaar. Dedh minute ka scene hai!' And I said, 'Nahi yaar. Kuch baat hai, I'll watch it again'. And he would say, 'Saala tu image bana raha hai apni.' When I saw it at the film fest recently, that's when I thought, 'Yaar, main toh tabhi bada smart tha!'

SCENE FOUR

There are scripts that could be worse than drugs! They're bad for you, son

Vinay has a flight in less than two hours. There're cheques to be signed, bank to be visited, Mumbai traffic to be tackled, precious SMS-invites to be read out ('Wanna party tonight, baby?'), and photographer asides to be performed ('*Isse zyaada khoobsoorat nahi lagoonga main, theek?*'). Besides lunch ('But I'm still eating my fruits!'). "I wanted to be a pilot and I wanted to be a teacher. And yes, in that way, I wanted to be the hero." An after thought, "I still want to be a teacher, in fact. Damn!" We've lost Vinay for a bit. Earth to Vinay. "Yeah. But. You talk about playing the lead? Would any actor have those ideas? Hello! See, it's *storytelling!* And every actor would want to be the *storyteller*. I'd be a hypocrite if I'd say I don't want to be the integral part of the storytelling, no no. Unfortunately, we only know one kind of integral storytelling in Hindi cinema, and that's the hero. But thank god things are changing. *Khosla ka Ghosla* has no hero..." Speaking of which, "Thank god for such talent! Jaideep Sahni and Dibakar Banerjee. I wanted to do Khurana, because it was *such* a fantastic role, and Boman has proved why... You know, I think Ranvir should get credit for what he made of Bunty, because he put in his heart and a certain honesty in the body which made Bunty Bunty." Green-grey eyes edged with the spark of his personality, gleaming, Vinay gets into it, "There has to be the 'why' to the story. There has to be a purpose, I better have a reason. Otherwise, why are you narrating this story? If I'm going to tell you the story of Premchand's *Do Bailon Ki Katha* today, I better have a point. Maybe it can be *Do Computeron Ki Katha*. If there's no vision or purpose, it's not for me. Just that." Oh, and he says no to drugs, though, "There are scripts that could be worse than drugs! They're bad for you, son. They'll kill you. Believe me... But, okay, I say no to repetition. I say no to a deliberate escape from originality." And those that survive the test this year, post *Mithya*, include, "*Oh My God*. Saurabh Srivastav. New director. He was working with Ram Gopal Varma. Me, Divya Dutta, Saurabh Shukla. *Straight: Ek Tedhi Medhi Love Story*. Me and Gul Panag and some more *tedhe medhe* actors. Written by Parvati Balagopalan. *Raat Gayi Baat Gayi*. Saurabh Shukla. Rajat, Neha, Irawati, Anu Menon (Lola Kutty), fantastic actress! *Mumbai Chakachak*. Sanjay Jha. Produced by Popcorn... *Aur mere saath kaam kar rahe hain cine jagat ke mashhoor kalaakar Rahul Bose! Dekhna na bhoolle, 3 se 6, 6 se 9, 9 se 12.* They used to distribute pamphlets in olden days, no? *Aur uske baad*. Oh, let me check time. *Pata chale aur uske baad meri flight miss ho gayi.*"

PHOTOGRAPHS BY POOJA MAKKER



SCENE FIVE

Everything was poignant and shitty at the same time

Vinay wants to “get with” the story of my life, or he wants to goofy trip again (“My greatest regret? That I didn’t grow up with Naomi Campbell in a jungle. Because she’d have to lose her virginity some day. And so would I. And we wouldn’t have a choice. Damn! Life can just screw you!”). But, instead, despite, we cut to a time, decades ago, in New York, when a business major finds himself sitting in the audience, minutes before a play’s about to start. Fixated. “When the calling of your life comes, it doesn’t come in a melodramatic Rajnikant monologue. It comes and stays with you.” Peter Shaffer’s *Equus*, it was. “The first real professional play I saw. I sat in the audience and it was a very black box setup. All the characters dressed in black, semi-circle. Then the horse-masks and the actors. Stark faces. Stark costumes. A proscenium space. I’d read the play because we had play analysis in our MBA. And I was mesmerised. Just the anticipation of waiting for it to start. *Kidhar se kya hoga? Phatega poster niklega hero. Kuch toh magic hoga...* I’m stunned by this empty space for 50 minutes, and there was nothing happening! But I’m just thinking to myself, ‘*Yaar, kabhi bhi shuru ho sakta hai.*’ Theatre-wise, I was not so literate. I’ve seen better and greater plays since then, but that experience was overwhelming... And such a dark play, so I guess I have a thing for dark, hmm?! (*arches one eyebrow to effect, hook-like*). I remem-

ber every second of it. John Cameron had adapted it very well. It’s a very English play, middle class play. He brought in more elements into it, being a huge, gay, proud man. He cast the protagonist as black, his parents were mixed, and the therapist was a woman. The racist dynamics. I understood all these things much later, of course. When I thought about it and studied theatre... I knew this is what I want to do. It’s like I’m onstage and doing my stuff, and you’re sitting in the front row watching me, and our eyes meet, but I don’t see you. There is this glaze over my eyes. You know? It’s amazing!”

Vinay dropped his MBA midway and took up drama soon after. That one statement-of-life however, is loaded, “I was scared shitless. So nervous! I didn’t tell my parents I was studying theatre for four years. How *could I? Beta gaya hai America MBA padhne, job karega*, I was doing it with scholarships and jobs and everything; they couldn’t afford my education. *Aur woh saala sab chhod ke drama padh raha hai!* When my dad first found out, it was a month away from my graduation, because that’s when I told him. And he said, ‘*Achcha. MBA nahi kar rahe hai? Theatre mein degree hota hai kya? Toh, bhai, kya naukri milega aapko is degree se?*’... Very valid straight question. Of course we can laugh about it, and I do. But I couldn’t say anything to him. He’s right, he was right. We’re a third world country, he’s from post-Independence, *ki is baar tankha milegi toh jacket khareedonga*. And that’s who we are. Today, we are so self-reliant *ki jacket aur*



tanka kya, designer samaan khareedte hai hum. But he, he belongs to that time, he belongs to the era of post-Independence India. Why do you work? You work because you have to find a job. Earn money. Run a house. A family. Why are we doing this? We have a different answer. We're a promising, progressive country, *yaar*. Developing nation. But my dad belongs to that generation which says, 'What the f***? This is a degree which doesn't give you a job! And so, what's the point?' And what could I say to him? 'You don't know anything. I can do this because I didn't study in a third world country, oh my father. This is America, and America helps you to dream. Then you can screw yourself, or kill yourself, if you don't find your dream, of course... I was living that dream when I came to Bombay. Or trying to live it. Or whatever... I'm not even trying to explain myself. Everything was poignant and shitty at the same time...'

SCENE SIX

But what was the question again?!

"It's very, very hard to act in front of a camera, let me tell you. And it's almost impossible to act well. That's what I think."

Flashes of Shaymol in *Khoya Khoya Chand*, Mr Chojar in *Aaja Nachle*, Prakash in *Johnny Gaddaar*, Brij Mohan in *Manora-*

ma Six Feet Under, Bharat Bhushan in *Bheja Fry*, Asif Iqbal in *Khosla Ka Ghosla*; all of them Vinay Pathak, and none of them Vinay Pathak, run through my head. And he analyses it, sifting through a few unopened envelopes in his office, thinking aloud, "It could be self-destructive... There's Vinay Pathak. A guy. Or whatever. (Okay, guy. No whatever.). And this guy is playing this other character. If it affects the actor, and the actor affects the character, good, great, it's expected. But the character can affect the human being, the person. And you're not ready for that. Because no drama or acting school in the world teaches you that. How you're supposed to be yourself. At home. When you're at home, practice in front of the mirror, you're told. Or observe things and people around you, learn the nuances of different people, and how *they* behave. But what about the guy? The person? How does he behave? They don't tell you that... So, does he need to be at work constantly then? That's so draining. But that's what it is. It's a craft. Until the day you die. And then there's retirement finally!"

An immediate distancing, "Sounds heavy, huh?", and Vinay does a quick vis-à-vis on theatre and cinema. "See, in theatre, there's a process. Whether you like it or not, whether you're aware of it or not, there is a process. That you meet at such and such time everyday for this period of time for rehearsal. You get into the act, the frame of mind, the character, *jo bhi hai*. Everybody's by default a method actor in theatre... Cinema is a different challenge, a bigger challenge. What you have to bring in, into



that moment, is beyond compare. In theatre, you can practice and practice and reach that moment, even if you're nowhere close to begin with. The illusion of the moment you create onstage, the inner psyche coming out, it's more credible in cinema. Tale-telling in cinema and theatre, are two entirely different things. If you're sad or angry onstage, you *have to* do something physically. Express something. You can be still for two minutes, but after two minutes, you have to act, the audience will otherwise say, '*Isko kabz ho gaya hai kya?*' In cinema, the anger or sadness could come through by the panning, the camerawork, the top angle, the trolley, the music, the scene where it's come from, where it's cutting to, all of that could make that the scene of the film! And you wouldn't be able to do anything about it, as an actor. It's a director's medium, and there you are! But what was the question again?!" A shrug and a particularly succulent piece of *mausambi* later, "They want me to glorify theatre all the beeping time!

But why glorify it? It is glorious to begin with. Why this need? The other thing about being this developing nation is that the less money there is in something, the more the glory seems to be, the romance is much more. *Kisi ne theatre nahi kiya toh iska matlab woh lesser mortal hai.* That's the general opinion and attitude. And I don't think that's right, it's not correct. Forget about just and fair and all of that! They are so so different, I can't say enough about it." And so, he won't. But we find out that Vinay loves the movies enough to watch one every night. "*Haan*, almost. I run out of movies sometimes... I go for

late night shows, I watch them by myself. Why torture other people for company?" Chilling out hangout space for Vinay also includes browsing in the Crossword store at Juhu, with his daughters (Vasudha and Sharinee, five and three). Looking for Hindi *sahitya* perhaps ("*Padhne ka time nahi milta hai*"), interrupted by "Papa. *Susu*". As for music, "I'm a whore", says Vinay, clarifying, under pressure, "Old Hindi film compositions. Jazz. *Ghazals. Qawwalis.*"

AND CUT

Vinay's great-mad-magnificently-insane company as we ride in his car to the airport. Off-skewed on the time somewhat and tele check-in's shut now ("Grr!"), but he's in his element. All of them, actually! "I love *sattu ka parantha*. Have you ever tried it? I make it very well." "You're a Leo too? Get out of town!" "*Kya kya bol diya maine? Edit kar liyo!*" And I ask him,

'Do people expect you to be funny all the time?', And he answers straight-on (a first for this entire morning!) "Yes, they do. But I don't take the pressure anymore. I used to when I was young and stupid. When I've done so many other things I wish I hadn't... Age is such a huge factor in who you are at that given time, you know. **Who you are at 25 and at 35 is drastically different... I'm 40 now. And the gap is bigger...**' Course, these are my experiences. It's not the only truth." Vinay's production unit (which is what operates out of his very busy Jogeshwari office, where we meet), Lemon Tea Productions formed with a short film he'd planned and made a couple years ago. 'Twas called *Fourplay*, but Vinay's not punning this time, "Yeah, it was a short film I made. Very short. Fiction that I wrote, produced and directed... Last day of shooting, we were asked, '*Yeh bill kiske naam pe banana hai?*' Me and my partner, we were sipping lemon tea, and we said, 'Lemon Tea Productions *likh de*'. That's how..." And if he were to make a film today, "There might not be *anything* funny about it..."



If I make my film. I love laughter. I love satire. But. I might not choose to make that. It might not be the way I express myself." What would be an ideal starting point? "*Pata chala mujhe kisi ne pachas crore de diye!! Toh bhai wah! Lekin...* Huge budgets don't excite me. I don't think a budget will make me think about the film I wanna make. It'll be story specific, for sure. I'll tell you a story, another anecdote. I guess. (Boy, I sound intelligent! I'm loving myself)." A chivalrous farewell (never thought I'd be using that adjective like, ever!) later, Vinay shies away from the popularity question, even as the airport has begun to buzz, as he pushes his strolley towards 'Departure', "Response? I'm going to be the serious diplomatic actor now... (*clipped Brit accent*) I don't think I was averse to it. You put so much into it, your heart and soul, and an actor deserves the applause. That's what we live for. (*mimes retching*)... I'm gonna be on the cover or no?! *Nashpaati kaat raha tha main subah. Ki First City ko khilaa-onga.*" ■