

FILM

The Last Lear

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The Last Lear (English / Bengali/Hindi, colour, 120 mins) by Rituparno Ghosh is not an adaptation of a Shakespeare play. The narrative abounds in dialogue from Shakespeare's plays, and Shakespeare is built as a character in the film. On diwali evening, actress Shabnam (Preity Zinta) is reluctant to be present at her husband, Rajeev's film premiere. She pays a surprise visit to the house of a veteran stage and screen actor, Harish (Amitabh Bacchan), who is about sixty-five years of age. The house is fitted with closed circuit TV, and the actor's friend and caretaker, Bandana (Shefali Shah) feels the door bell is from a doctor. Bandana is quite annoyed at seeing Shabnam, and patient Harish was resting. Shabnam explains that she has come to return a book. At the toilet, Shabnam cries, opens a tap, and smokes to arrest the smell of perfumes. Bandana offers tea to Shabnam. Following an accident, actor Harish is bed ridden, and nurse Ivy (Divya Dutta) is tending to him.

There is noisy excitement in an auditorium, where a Harish film, "The Mask" is being screened, with action star, Palash (Prasenjit Chatterjee). A newspaper reporter, Niraj Patel (Jisshu Sengupta) seeks an interview with the director on actors. The scenario shifts to the past, where actor Harish during an interview insists on no discussions, only reactions. Harish recites verses from "The Tempest" and "Midsummer's Night's Dream". The reporter is unaware of Shakespeare's plays, and is chased out by Harish. In the present times when nurse Ivy wants to leave early to meet her boy friend, Shabnam volunteers to look after Harish. Bandana is stressed out. Doctors have analyzed that Harish's spinal chord is fractured. The patient is paralyzed, brain damaged, and with several contusions. He has loss of memory, and would not be able to see again. The past reappears linking the narrative. Film director, Siddharth (Arjun Rampal) rings the hanging cord bell at Harish's house.

Siddharth is making a film, and not a Shakespearean play. He offers a role to Harish. The actor of several stage plays, informs that he has never performed on radio. Harish quotes from Shakespeare, profusely, and has his sources of conviction. Acting becomes a compilation of best moments, and not a fabric shop where one could pick up the best. Harish performs Prospero from "Tempest". There are off-screen sounds of clapping. Harish feels the need to see an act on stage. He is convinced that cinema would not be good, as the actor may look like a fool amid the numerous visions and distractions. Opening a window, Harish screams at a man urinating on a wall. Later in the evening, film director Siddharth sends across the film undertaking letter, through a driver. Old photos hang in Harish's room.

The CCTV catches the street scenes. Harish plays a guessing game on the occupation of the passer-bys. More recitations follow as the street becomes a spectacle of pedestrians, processions, funerals, and circus clowns. Nurse Ivy continues with her duties, as the boy friend does not come, and was suspicious of her night duties. The inner precincts of Harish's residence keeps shifting from windows to computers. The past is further elaborated with the actual shooting of film, "The Mask", at a hill station. Harish remembers an interview on making of "The Mask". Outdoors there are tents, plastic chairs, cameras and

props, Harish has thirty-one years experience of acting on stage. The present is restored with Bandana speaking on the telephone, and an aquarium in the background. Rehearsals with Shabnam and Palash continue on the film set. Playing the role of Maqbool, Harish feels that for an actor hearing his lines is more fruitful than reading. Shabnam is unmindful and gets upset. In the mountain landscape, Harish recites from Shakespeare, and attempts to bring out everything from inside. On director Siddharth's insistence, Harish takes multiple takes on the edge of a cliff. He trips and falls, suffering serious injuries.

As an epilogue, the present and past keep intermingling. Nurse Ivy expresses gratitude for a dinner. Film hero Harish/Maqbool realizes that there is compassion in nature. Lines are cut from the screen dialogue—soliloquies are good in Shakespeare, but not in film. Making a film was not play reading. Shakespeare's plays were performed in broad day light during the bard's time. But Harish was being filmed, sometimes without his knowledge. For a stage actor, there was nothing called 'cut'—only time to put on costumes, and time to take off costumes. Two weeks before the staging of "King Lear" Harish who had learnt the play by heart, had left the stage, and never came back. Students visit Harish for autographs. Harish and Bandana play read. Shabnam confides that she had come to Harish's house, as she wanted a place to hide from her husband.

There are discussions on filming the dangerous sequence on the edge of a cliff. Risk was involved, but Siddharth felt that a stuntman would charge more than Harish's fees for the whole film. Again realistic cinema was not at the risk of killing someone. During filming, Harish is sometimes drunk, and begs on his knees for being retained till the end. He signs a bond undertaking that all action was the creative decision of the actor, and not under pressure. In an earlier shot on the cliff, director Siddharth feels that Harish does not look dead, even for a moment. The fatal shot is re-cloned for a perfect take. The takes are re-checked on computer monitors.

Viewers leave the auditorium, after seeing the film within the film, with congratulations and moist eyes. Actor Palash hugs Siddharth, and they decide to look up Harish. There is a brawl, when Siddharth interrupts a man urinating against a wall. Bandana had left her in-laws fifteen years ago, and was living with Harish. She had quietly done an abortion. A friendship develops between Shabnam and Bandana, and they hold each other's hands. Harish is in bed with eyes closed, and in bandages. He does not respond to Shabnam's calls. It is dawn, and one hears the sound of newspaper hawkers.

The relentless cut backs to the past, though supported by Arghya Komal Mitra's smooth editing, makes the film narrative light and some times incoherent. Abhik Mukhopadhyay's camera becomes overawed and static whenever confronted by recitations from Shakespeare. The multiple situations of the present and past add a fluidity to the visuals, but the visual frames do not arrive at anything aesthetic, since the numerous recitations from Shakespeare are forced, induced and without pretext or context. Rituparno Ghosh's shifting focus in the screenplay, makes "The Last Lear" to meander between clichés and archetypes. Amitabh Bacchan's acting is stupendous. The literal mortality of the film's title does not build up any progressive mystery. □