

Lights, Camera, Laughs

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Imagine an adult masquerading as an overgrown child in shorts; imagine the same man dressed in drag trying to fob off the lecherous advances of the film's villain; and then imagine him singing both the male and female parts of a duet.

All this was done by Kishore Kumar – the versatile genius of the Hindi film industry. The film was the 1962 laugh-a-minute classic *Half Ticket*, which to this date remains one of the funniest films made in Bollywood.

Like its song-and-dance routines, comedy has always been an integral part of Hindi cinema. Conforming to the *rasa* theory of *Natya Shastra*, the Hindi film-makers made sure that *hasya rasa*, like *shringar* and *veer rasa*, was always incorporated in their work.

Comedy was largely incidental to the main plot of the film; comic interludes, again like the songs, were mostly included as breaks and to provide “comic relief” to the audience. The comedy sequences would usually be there in the first half of the film before the second half with its intense melodrama led to its climax.

For the most part, the roles went to actors who specialised in these roles. From Gope to Johnny Walker, the performers were as well known as the leading actors. As soon as one saw their names in the credits one knew that there would be some comic entertainment.

Of course, each of these great comedians had an exceptional sense of timing which is absolutely essential for comedy. But they also had their distinctive styles, mannerisms and persona which were cultivated in film after film. Rajendra Nath with his striped underpants, Asit Sen with his sing-song speech, Keshto Mukherjee with his trademark alcoholic hiccups, Johnny Walker with his Neanderthal walking style, Om Prakash with his nasal and whiny drawl, Deven Verma with his lost and confused look and IS Johar with his sarcasm-delivered-with-a-straight-face – each comedian had developed a characteristic style. Then, of course, there was Tuntun,

whose one little shove felled strong men, and Manorama (as much a vamp as a comedienne) with her exaggerated facial expressions.

Comedy also brought with it song sequences: Johnny Walker wooing a dimple-cheeked woman under an office desk in *Mr. and Mrs. 55* (1955) with Jaane kahan mera jigar gaya ji, a cheroot smoking Gope wearing a Burmese longyi and swinging his rotund frame in the still popular *Mere piya gaye Rangoon* from Patanga (1949) and Mehmood and Shubha Khote in several films from the early 1960's.

Like Kishore Kumar, Mehmood was a star by himself who could carry a film on his own. From Guru Dutt's avaricious brother in *Pyasa* (1957) to playing the lead in many films in the 50's (and fondly remembered for his comic acts with the composer RD Burman in the 1965 film *Bhoot Bungla*), Mehmood became synonymous with comedy in the sixties. (his vivid description of a horror scene, complete with a creaking door, to Om Prakash in the 1966 *Pyar kiye jaa* is the stuff of legends). His pairing with Khote was especially popular; more so when her gullible father -- usually played by another comic such as Mukri or Dhoomal -- would be taken for a ride by Mehmood, who would occasionally disguise himself as an old man to hoodwink the family.

Apart from the performers who were specialist comedians, there were many mainstream actors who have given us brilliant performances in comic roles. Utpal Dutt and Amol Palekar in *Gol Maal* (1979), Pran and Ashok Kumar in *Victoria No. 203* (1972), Hema Malini in *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972), Om Puri in *Chachi 420* (1997) and, of course, Dharmendra and Amitabh Bachchan in *Chupke Chupke* (1975). In fact, Bachchan developed a typical comic style which he used to great effect in many films where he was not playing the angry young man -- and which some critics argue ended up making the comedian redundant.

Films such as *Bombay to Goa* (1972), *Chupke Chupke* and *Gol Maal* were unusual in that they were comedies. Unlike most Hindi films where comedy was an add-on to the development of the main plot, here the plot line itself revolved around a series of comic misunderstandings or adventures. There

are, unfortunately, only a handful of such instances in the Hindi film industry.

Fewer still are satires, especially political satires. The origins of comedy in Ancient Greece were in the political satire of Aristophanes. However, in Hindi cinema, apart from the cult *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* (1983) and Motilal's classic *Mr. Sampath* (1952), one can't really think of too many films which have used satire to make a statement on the social and political reality of the time.

Some of the comedies of recent years come with the prefix "so-called", and, barring a Govinda here or an occasional Aamir Khan-Salman there, cinema has little to offer on the comedic front. But the success of the *Munnabhai* series indicates that the audience, as always, is ready for a good laugh.

Not surprisingly, on music reality shows, one will always find a tot singing the Manna Dey-Kishore Kumar classic *Ek chatur naar* from one of the greatest Hindi comedies ever. Just six years after *Half Ticket*, Kishore Kumar teamed up for *Padosan* with Mehmood and a cast of other comedians such as Mukri and Om Prakash. Mehmood played a Tamilian music teacher to the leading lady in this 1968 film while Kishore was the eccentric paan-chewing music instructor to the hero.

The most memorable scene in the film is the contest where Kishore (singing for and hidden behind Sunil Dutt, the film's hero) bests Mehmood by changing the tempo and the rhythm of the composition. Watching that clip on YouTube may leave you a bit embarrassed about its references to colour, but still make you roll with laughter -- and remind you that not too long ago, there was indeed a golden age of comedy in Hindi films.

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