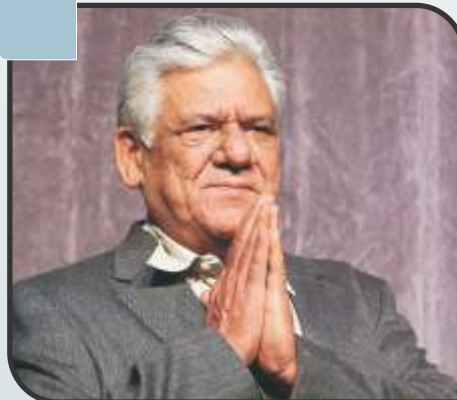
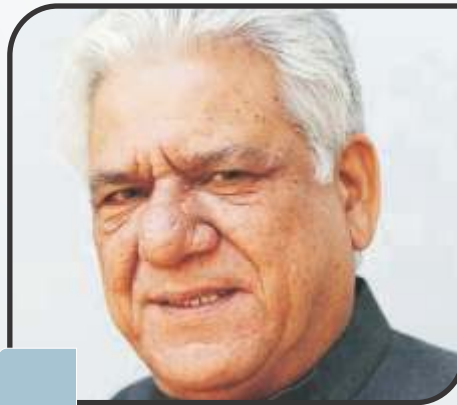


Govind Nihalani

on his association with

Late Shri Om Puri



When Om Ji passed away, the questions I was asked most often by the press about him were, "How was he as an actor?" and "What was different about him as compared to any other actor?" As a film director when you work with an actor, he's always like a new chapter for you. I instinctively feel whether the actor can pull it off or can he be pushed to the limits. Thus, in this relationship, we both explore our potential, I as a director and he as an actor. That's the kind of relationship I shared with Om. I never thought about what separated him from the rest. Every actor has his own unique personality, sensibilities & methodologies. This is why you can't compare an actor with the others. Ultimately what counts, is, what you as director and he as an actor achieves together.

In my opinion, if you're an actor, you should be like a beautiful wrist watch and not like a grandfather's clock. If you look at the wrist watch, it has a

beautifully designed dial that displays the precise time, you can depend upon. But at the same time it also has a complex mechanism below the dial. It has several springs, gears and micro parts. We can't even hear any "Tick Tick"

a formidable challenge for an actor to convince the audience of his agony without the assistance of spoken words. Om was an emotional person and any serious actor would be emotionally involved with his role. In "Aakrosh", the hero of the film is being blamed of his own wife's murder but in story, the hero's wife has been raped and killed. The opposition lawyer is trying to turn the case on Lahanya accusing him of murdering his own wife. Lahanya had several scenes with his defense lawyer, played by Naseeruddin Shah. Om (Lahanya) was silent. He had to express agony through watching / recalling in his own mind the images of his wife being raped and murdered. He would get so emotional with those visuals and the traumatic memory that his eyes would

get bloodshot and tears would start falling. Of course, I had to edit out those parts of the scene because they were too intense and emotional. We had to do a lot of retakes because the scenes got too emotional and that wasn't the requirement. It was Om's first film. As an actor when one is just breaking into cinema, it is difficult to possess complete control over emotions because of the lack of experience, but whatever he did, he did it with honesty and simplicity. He did not manufacture emotion nor caricatured it. He was not an intellectual but used to do the things with instinct. A lot of times he himself didn't know what he would do once the camera rolls. These were his early days. Gradually he refined his technique and acquired emotional control. I was fortunate to witness his cinematic journey from the early stages. He was extremely good at emotions such as helplessness, anxiety, agony, anger, rage and emotional empathy. He didn't even have to work a lot for that. He was instinctively good at it.

One of the reasons for his exemplary performances was his purity of heart. We all have heard that acting is reacting. So when you see a scene

while it functions; we see only the end result. But if we bring the watch near our ear, we'll hear its "Tick Tick". Every actor who prepares for a role has his / her own way of doing so. For example, he / she thinks about voice modulation, body language, gait, gestures and so on. Then there are rehearsals. When an actor performs, whether on stage or in front of the camera, all his preparation must remain invisible. Hence, in my opinion, a good actor's preparation and effort for his acting, should never leak into his performance. Some people overdo it. They over calculate and over prepare and the result is that you can hear the "Tick Tick" in their performance. To keep the whole effort, the whole machinery of preparation silent and invisible, is the most distinguishing quality of any great actor and Om did possess that.

In "Aakrosh", Lahanya, a tribal youth, played by Om, didn't have even a single dialogue, not even a word. It was





where two characters are talking, you just watch Om's reactions and you would feel the depth of emotions he was capable of expressing. He never took short-cuts. When the role demands different shades of emotions, the best way is the hard way.

In "Tamas", Om's character, Nathu, is very concerned about his wife who is pregnant for the first time. He has also killed a pig for which he was paid five rupees. The dead pig is found outside a mosque and that has created a situation of communal riots in the town. The confused Nathu feels guilty of triggering the riots which may endanger his wife and unborn child's life. He is unable to handle the situation. Nathu's concern for his wife takes another level as his fear turns into panic. In such a situation, what would an actor do? He has to depend on his resourcefulness and a director has to trust his actor, and that's exactly what I did. I put him in a lonely space, in a jungle and told him that the situation was that his wife was about to give birth and he was desperate to find a safe place and there was nobody around. I told him, "Do whatever you like", and what he did was so heart-rending.

Sometimes some people become the icon of the time in which they live.

Look at Om's life, he was born in 1950, our country had just been freed (1947) from the British rule and that was a period when India entered a new era

after overthrowing the colonial rule. People had dreams of freedom, justice and happiness. But there were problems too. So many people lost their homes, families were separated, Kashmir was attacked, China war and wars with Pakistan etc. Hence all the dreams we dreamt of were interrupted. There was disappointment and helplessness. It was a difficult time. During this time, parallel cinema was born in our country. It expressed the angst of our society during that period. The young film makers were charged with the zeal to usher in change and every movie was made with the intention to make a difference. Filmmakers were not alone, there were writings, novels, poems and plays written. There was a sense of determination to do something constructive among artists, musicians and filmmakers. It was a vibrant time. Om was an impressionable growing



young man during this period. I think his sensibilities that developed during this time integrated really well with the movie "Tamas". He was able to identify with every experience depicted in "Tamas". The fact is that whatever happens at some point in your life affects your current actions. With his heart-rending scream at the end of "Aakrosh", Om became the icon of his time. Subsequently, if one looks at his body of work, he really represented the spirit of the time in which he lived. When one thinks of Gandhi, you immediately think of the history of Independence. When you think of Om, the spirit of post independent India comes alive.

However, one should remember that an actor does not choose a role, it's



taken to him. But an actor's contribution to the role is his manifestation of it. Hence when one thinks about partition, one thinks of Om. Om's contribution to cinema is not only due to his sincerity or emotional temperament but also owing to a bigger story that he personally went through during that period and had all the memories attached to that difficult period. It is because of those experiences that he so successfully represented those characters in front of you. Om is one of those rare actors who become an icon of one's times. For example, like Dilip Kumar is the icon for romance in the history of Indian cinema. Making an actor the icon of his time is done by the audience and not by the actor. It is because he is oblivious of that fact, he's doing that unknowingly. People who watch his films and the critics who review his work place him in that place of recognition. It is a proud moment for us that an actor like Om Puri was with us.

There is a story behind the last scene of "Ardh Satya". We were shooting in a location which was supposed to be a girls' hostel. I told Om to get ready for the scene but in reality, I had no idea about how I was going to end the scene. Hence, I proposed to do a mechanical rehearsal and I asked Om not to emote but to do it just mechanically. Om started and slowly he started becoming emotional and there was silence on the set. Everybody stopped working and just started watching him. Om kept on speaking and I let him go on. I had asked Smita (Smita Patil who played his girlfriend) to respond to him in her own way, with no particular instructions from my side. Om's intensity was palpable, and you could feel his vibes on your skin. During this rehearsal, as he went into that mode, Smita got really involved in it and she raised her hand instinctively to touch him but did not touch him and just stopped short by few inches. I asked Smita to do the same thing in the final take. This is how I got the final gesture to end the scene.

