

Back to the roots

Toronto-based Theatre director and actress Brinda Muralidhar seeks a popular connect in India with her debut film



Saibal Chatterjee

Entertainment is the key for director Brinda Muralidhar. It is part of a strategy that she has honed in the course of her creative work at the Toronto-based not-for-profit theatre collective Kalaaranga Performing Arts, which has thus far produced 14 successful plays in Hindi and Kannada.

“Working in Indian languages in Canada, we have to create our own audience. So we seek to deliver engaging, thought-provoking stories with an eye on widening our reach,” says Brinda. “As a storyteller, my main motto is to entertain the audience while evoking their thought processes and tickling their funny bone,” she adds.

In 2012, after many years of stage production that, in her own words, ranged from “one-act plays” to “Bollywood musicals with racy dialogue”, Brinda decided to try her hand at filmmaking. The result is *Knot Not!*, a coming-of-age tale and family drama rolled into one.

It was, to begin with, intended to be a short film of about 20 to 30 minutes with only seven characters. But as Muralidhar interacted with the cast, friends and well-wishers, the story kept getting expanded until it took on the scale of a full-length feature film. Brinda is pleased with the final outcome. “My film,” says the writer-director, “has believable characters, and relatable situations. It showcases our inherent Indian values intermixed with Canadian values in a balanced narrative.”

For Brinda, *Knot Not!* is obviously a step in the direction of widening her horizons. It is an attempt to find an audience in India for a story narrated from the point of view of an expatriate. The film is a simple, conventionally structured 144-minute melodrama that she intends to release across Indian cities this year.

“I am in talks with prospective distributors,” she reveals. Given its focus on broad themes that Indians can readily relate to, it may not be difficult for the film to find takers in the urban centres of the country. Its empathetic exploration of the complexities of the immigrant experience is one aspect of *Knot Not!* that could resonate with younger filmgoers as well as their parents.

Brinda grew up in a theatre milieu in Karnataka — her father wrote and directed plays. She was also a member of the Kannada theatre doyen Prasanna’s Samudaya group before migrating with her husband Gunny Muralidhar, first to Dubai and then to Canada. Her theatre outfit works to get different Indian linguistic communities in the Greater Toronto Area — Punjabis, Bengalis, Kannadigas and others — under a single cultural umbrella. Her actors come from varied language groups.

Knot Not!, with dialogues primarily in English, tells the story of an Indian boy Mohan, who arrives in Canada for higher studies and befriends a local girl, Patricia. All is well until his parents, Srinivas Iyer and Padma (a role essayed by Brinda herself), arrive from India. His domineering dad wants Mohan to marry Lakshmi, the only daughter of his Canadian-Indian friend. But the boy has other plans and his refusal to fall in line with his father’s thinking triggers a series of complications.

“Marriage,” says Brinda, “is always a huge issue for Indians. This film probes that obsession and the knotty issues associated with it in an accessible manner.” The film turns the spotlight on the pressures that immigrants necessarily face when they land in a new country. “We still eat dal-chaawal at home, but the experiences that we have outside are completely different. Coming to terms with the cultural gap takes some doing,” says Brinda.