KAREENA KOOPR IS A 

by Anupama CHOPRA

AREENA KAPOOR is a prostitute. Wearing a tawdry red, Rs 400 sari and six-inch cherry red slippers, she clutches provocatively against a doorway and blows smoke into the camera. Her eyes are a melange of melancholy and insolence as she warbles "Raina bedi jaye", a song from another Bollywood courtesan classic, "Amar Prem", in the red-light district, Kamathipura. "I'm a prostitute. It is coarse, both in content and texture. The budget—a little over Rs 2 crore—is minuscule by mainstream standards. It is the last place you would expect to find Kapoor, who made Rs 15 crore playing Khushi earlier this year. Khan has rhymed her name with "witty", and580 anonymous, she has worked the role by meeting prosti-

tutes and driving around Mumbai's "ghetto. She played variations of the same character—Rupa in Deepa Mehta's "Khushi", Nandini in Deepa Mehta's "Ardh Satya", Babita struggle to turn the awkward girl into a matured woman. She has been in well-publicised cat fights with actors like Bipasha Basu and Amisha Patel, and was famously quoted as saying that her "flops make their money". Even her new Abbas-Mustan thriller, "Dev", is said to have flopped, though Kapoor is said to be "having a blast". In "Deewani," she is a blonde. Kapoor is also butting heads with stylist Manish Malhotra, her character is half-Canadian and half-Hindi, and the first 40 minutes of the film, most of them flops, later, Kapoor is shedding the stereotype. Eager to carve a niche, she is "exploring all avenues in cinema". A fourth genera-
tion Kapoor, she was born a star but now is struggling to be an artiste. She is, as art house auteur Govind Nihalani puts it, "an actor awakened". A coming of age. Nor is it stopping her star status. The flops have not diminished her mod status. She is a woman more news than other heroines' hits".

So when Nihalani was casting for Dev, a police drama (he calls it "Ardh Satya for the new millennium"), Kapoor asked for a meeting. When Chameli was offered to her last year, she rejected the role without reading the script because it made her nervous. But this year, she read it and immediately agreed. She is working with Mani Ratnam and playing a widow in Deepa Mehta's "Maa". Kapoor has no life outside the studios. "I feel 50 years old." It is dominated by films. She finds reading in the past 20 days. I see a new pathos and maturity." But even Kapoor insists she is a woman more news than other heroines'.

And admittedly she is "having a blast". Kapoor is far from dry and morose. She is a young girl who grew up too soon. Kapoor was barely nine years old when she started accompanying older sister Karisma to film shoots. She watched her mother Babita struggle to turn the awkward girl into a saleable actress. Her own career incline was less steep—"Karisma sowed the seeds and I am bearing the fruit"—but she has experi-
cenced at least second-hand the capri-
cious cruelty of an industry where one's worth changes every Friday. "This place is beautiful, but it can also be unbearable," she says. "Sometimes I feel 30 years old." But Bollywood is her raison d'être. Kapoor has no life outside the studios. At home, the three women, all actors, naturally talk only films. Though Kapoor's closest friends are from her Welham School days, the conversation is dominated by films. She finds reading a waste of time and hardly watches television. In fact, she says she becomes insecure if she doesn't shoot even for a day. Next year though, she plans to take two months off for a holiday with her mother, whom she "worships".

With her sister about to get married, Kapoor says she can stop stressing about her and focus solely on her work. "No love or relationships for me." She wants very much to be a legend. And she is willing to spend a lifetime working towards it. Playing prostitute is only the first step.