

SUBI SAMUEL



■ by Anupama CHOPRA

KAREENA KAPOOR IS A prostitute. Wearing a tawdry red, Rs 400 sari and rouge on cheeks, she slouches provocatively against a doorway and blows smoke into the camera. Her eyes are a melange of melancholy and insolence as she warbles *Raina beeti jaaye*, a song from another Bollywood courtesan classic, *Amar Prem*. With a hint of cleavage and an exposed midriff, she is sexy but also achingly vulnerable. Later, when co-star Rahul Bose suggests painting her toe-nails red, she refuses saying, "Let them look dirty." This is Bollywood royalty slumming it

then got trapped in the candyfloss film ghetto. She played variations of the same character—*Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham's* Poo, a spoilt, westernised, clueless brat. Most directors, as Princeton historian Gyan Prakash notes, "tended to infantilise her, packaging her as daddy's little girl, all bubble and no fizz". Her last release, the insipid *Main Prem Ki Deewani Hoon*, even had her singing she was a "papa ki pari". But 15 films, most of them flops, later, Kapoor is shedding the stereotype. Eager to carve a niche, she is "exploring all agenda in cinema". A fourth generation 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".

taking lessons in classical dance, horse riding and sword fighting for *Bajirao Mastani*, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's ambitious period drama.

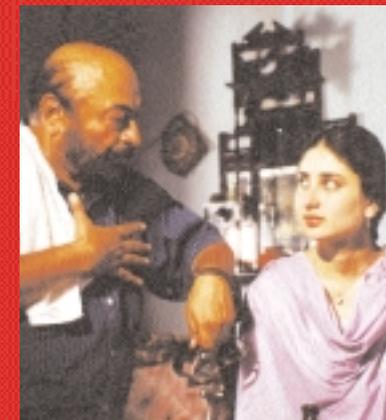
Which doesn't mean she is abandoning the masala makers. She "loves running around the trees". She is doing that and plenty more in Dharmesh Darshan's *Bewafaa*, in which she plays an adulteress. It is a lavish Rs 18 crore drama shot abroad extensively; her character is half-Canadian and for the first 40 minutes she is a blonde. Kapoor is also butting heads with stylist Manish Malhotra to create an appropriately high-glam look for her next Abbas-Mustan thriller. In *Dev*, of course, she is sans make-up. The aim is to "take risks, broaden hori-

free." Interestingly, the flops haven't kayoed her market. Despite the duds, she remains resolutely A-list, commanding over Rs 1.25 crore per film. Says *Film Information* Editor Komal Nahta: "She's the next diva after Aishwarya Rai. She is a complete actor. All she needs is one hit."

Her ability to move up despite failures makes her "the most hated person in the industry". Her brashness and overconfidence haven't helped either. 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 more news than other heroines' hits". But Kapoor insists she is a woman more sinned against than sinning. "The media has victimised me," she says. "They mistake my defensiveness for arrogance but they don't even know me." Those who do know her agree. "She is not diplomatic," says Malhotra, "but she is not vicious. She doesn't mean anyone harm."

STARRY HEIGHTS

The flops have not diminished her star status. Nor is it stopping her from trying to break the masala mould. The star who would be an actor is coming of age.



TALENT SEARCH: Kapoor is set to widen her repertoire by playing a prostitute in *Chameli* (far left), an adulteress in *Bewafaa* with Akshay Kumar and in Nihalani's *Dev*

and admittedly she is "having a blast".

Chameli is a small, edgy film about one rainy night in Mumbai when a businessman's car breaks down and he is forced to wait under the arches with 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 1.5 crore playing *Khushi* earlier this year. Which perhaps explains her enthusiasm. She has researched the role by meeting prostitutes and driving around Mumbai's red-light district, Kamathipura. "I'm a different person in this get-up," she says. "I'm so charged. I'm giving it everything I've got."

Three years ago, Kapoor made a deafeningly hyped debut in *Refugee* and

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 *Moon River* (Mehta has promised to take her to Cannes). Award-winning Bengali director Rituparno Ghosh, who praises her "unspoilt quality and classic good looks", is toying with several stories, and confirms that he wants to make his Hindi film debut with her. And later this year, she will start

zons and strike a balance". But even commercial filmmakers are talking about Kapoor's new avatar. Says Darshan: "There is a quantum leap in her input in the past 20 days. I see a new pathos and maturity."

Darshan believes Kapoor's "box-office experience has made her more alert". Which is a polite way of saying that the spate of flops—even Midas man Sooraj Barjatya's *Main Prem Ki Deewani Hoon* was a resounding bomb—have grounded her. Kapoor admits she signed films going by the maker's track record and not his script, and sometimes did films for the money. "Yes, I did give in to temptation, but I was only 19." At 22, she is playing smarter: "It's only the role now. If I like a script enough, I'll do it for

INDEED, underneath the startling good looks and haughty demeanour lurks a young girl who grew up too soon. Kapoor was hardly nine years old when she started accompanying elder sister Karisma to film shoots. She watched her mother Babita struggle to turn the awkward teenager into a saleable actor. Her own career incline was less steep—"Karisma sowed the seeds and I am bearing the fruit"—but she has experienced at least second-hand the capricious 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 50 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. ■