

India Now!

Mani Rathnam

In this section, we not only celebrate the imagination and vitality of Mani Rathnam's cinema, but also his ability to bridge the intellectual gap between serious "art" and popular "commercial" cinema. Mani Rathnam makes movies. They are meant to entertain a vast public and, as such, employ the genre conventions his audience expects. They never talk down and never preach, but that doesn't mean they are without a vision of the world or fail to engage issues of great importance: interpersonal relations, examinations of what is good and what is evil, and even social commentary. Very few probably go to his films seeking enlightenment on this level (and there is no reason anyone should), but enlightenment on another level is to be had in abundance, if one allows it to be found in the joy of being delighted and entertained.



Rathnam, born in Madras in 1956, came to the cinema through his mother, the famous and important producer "Venus" Rathnam. Responding to the financial side of the family business, he took degrees in business administration and commerce, but was soon enough behind the camera as writer and director. His films are often dubbed into Hindi, but he works in Tamil and is a partisan of his home state; it is not by chance that the hero/anti-hero of *Nayakan* refuses to speak anything other than Tamil.

He has made intimate love stories like his first great success, *Mouna Raghav*, and films of epic dimensions like *Nayakan* and *Roja*, and huge, glossy comic romances like *Thiruda Thiruda*. Of course, the intimate films have spectacular aspects, in the same way the larger films never lose the emotional power of intimacy. In *Nayakan*, for example, the world of big-time gangsters is portrayed, yet one of the most beautiful shots in the entire film is that of a closeup of Velu after his daughter has betrayed him – the loneliness, the self-doubt, the disappointment of a man misunderstood for trying to do good, even through sometimes-evil means, is almost too private to bear.

If there were nothing else – and there is – there would always be the magic song and dance numbers so beloved by Indian audiences. These interludes can work in a number of ways. They tell us things about the characters impossible to reveal with dialogue; they comment on what has been happening; they indicate sexual desires the censor would otherwise forbid; or they provide an exuberant burst of colour and rhythm which allows the mind, heart, soul, and eyes to exult. MGM would really have made musicals had Mani Rathnam been there.

Rathnam has made 13 films since 1983. His new film, *Bombay*, is not yet finished, so we will have to wait until next year's Festival. We were tempted to show all 13, but that would have meant no other Indian films could be included. The four we have chosen not only represent Rathnam at his best, they also reveal the most varied aspects of his genius. As well, they are just damned good movies. And "movies" is the right word.

– David Overbey, Noah Cowan

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MANI RATHNAM



Thiruda Thiruda

Thief Thief

Mani Rathnam

INDIA, 1994

140 minutes ■ Colour/35mm (Tamil)
Production Company: **Aalayam**

Cinema (P) Ltd.

Screenplay: **Mani Rathnam**

Cinematography: **P.C. Sriram**

Editor: **Suresh Urs**

Music: **A.R. Rahman**

Principal Cast: **Heera, Anu Agarwal, Prasanth, Anand, Salim Ghouse**

Print Source: **Aalayam Cinema (P) Ltd., No-3 1st Cross Street, Seethama Colony, Alwarpet, Madras 600018, India. Tel: (91-44) 456-998. Fax: (91-44) 499-2766.**

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Mani Rathnam's newest film *Thief Thief* contains the essence of the master. It is magic. As the title suggests, this is a caper film, with big thieves finally outwitted by small-time crooks, more madcap than mean. The story is simple in outline, although Rathnam makes sure that unexpected surprises keep everything unpredictable.

A huge consignment of government money is stolen from a train and loaded into a truck. The small-time burglars and an orphan girl on the run get involved and soon the big (and nasty) crooks, the cops, and everyone else in the landscape are after them. The film rockets along, taking time out only for the charming (and, in one case, incredibly erotic) song-and-dance numbers that Rathnam stages with verve and humour. The score by *Roja* composer A.R. Rahman is a delightful fusion of classical Indian music and Western pop.

Although *Thief Thief* contains everything but *Mother Love*, Rathnam seems to have created it all anew. The romance: two guys, two girls would seem traditionally to break into two pairs, but Rathnam manages to keep one guessing as to who is going to end up with whom. The stunts are spectacular – and involve a hilarious running joke. If the merry quartet board *any* vehicle from bullock cart to train or truck, one can be sure that disaster will follow almost at once. But Rathnam delivers the expected in unexpected ways, so the joke is always fresh and always funny. One of the finest Rathnam virtues –

aside from his energy, elegance of direction and fresh approach to old matters – is his deep intelligence. Unlike most popular entertainers in every cinema in the world, he never underestimates his audience and never thinks of giving them less than his best. However much you invest in them, his films return that tenfold.

– *David Overbey*

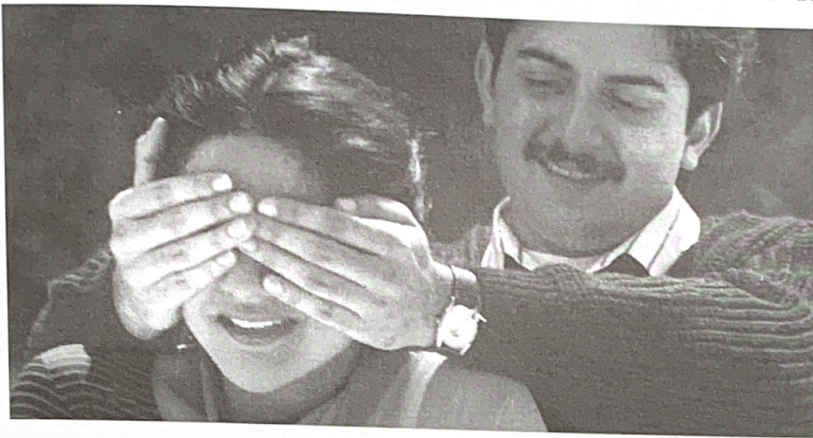
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India Now!

MANI RATHNAM

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Roja

Mani Rathnam

INDIA, 1992

137 minutes ■ Colour/35mm (Tamil)
Production Company: **Kavithaalaya
Productions Pvt Ltd.**

Executive Producer: **V. Natarajan**
Producer: **Rajam Balachander,
Pushpa Kandaswamy**
Screenplay: **Mani Rathnam**
Cinematography: **Santosh Sivan**
Editor: **Suresh Urs**

Art Director: **Thotta Tharani**
Sound: **V.S. Moorthy, Lakshmi Narayanan**
Music: **A.R. Rahman**
Principal Cast: **Aravind Swamy, Madhubala,
Pankaj Kapoor, Janakaraj, Nazar**
Print Source: **Directorate of Film Festivals,
4th Floor, Lok Nayak Bhawan, Khan Market,
New Delhi 110003, India. Tel: (91-11) 469-4920.
Fax: (91-11) 462-3430.**

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A rollicking, music-filled drama set in beautiful Kashmir, *Roja* was a turning point for Rathnam. It cemented his box office appeal – the film shattered box office records all over India, mostly with a re-dubbed Hindi version – and saw a new assurance behind the camera. But *Roja* was also dogged by media controversy due to its politically sensitive subject matter and imagery.

Rishi, a Madras-based computer scientist, and Roja, his feisty rural bride, celebrate their arranged marriage. But Rishi, called away on assignment to Kashmir, is abducted by freedom fighters determined to establish a separate state, who seek the release of their leader, Wasim Khan. Roja is forlorn and rushes madly from police to army to Khan himself, seeking her husband's liberation. Meanwhile Rishi, pumped with patriotic pride, tries to escape – in a five-minute tracking shot of indescribable beauty – and negotiate with his captors.

While Rathnam is squarely for Kashmir being part of the Indian state, he does not succumb to jingoistic, sectarian hatred: the Muslim "militants" here are revealed to be quite human and rational in their cause.

– Noah Cowan

India Now!

MANI RATHNAM



Nayakan

Mani Rathnam

INDIA, 1987

145 minutes ■ Colour/35mm (Tamil)
 Production Company: **Sujatha Film Ltd.**
 Producer: **G. Venkataswaran**
 Screenplay: **Mani Rathnam**
 Cinematography: **P.C. Sriram**
 Editor: **Lenin, Vijayan**
 Art Director: **Thotta Tharini**
 Sound: **Pandurangan**

Music: **Ilayaraja** (additional lyrics by **Pulamai Pithan**)

Principal Cast: **Kamal Haasan, Saranya, Janakaraj, Kartika**

Print Source: **National Film Development Corporation, Nehru Centre, Dr. Annie Besant Road, Worli, Bombay 400018, India.**
 Tel: (91-22) 494-7856. Fax: (91-22) 494-9751.

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Like every Mani Rathnam film, *Nayakan* is a total delight. It is derived from *The Godfather*, but is a lot more fun. Kamal Haasan's role combines Pacino and Brando; he balances his performance between moving sincerity and hilarious parody. The son of an assassinated union leader, Velu (Haasan), commits a murder and flees to Bombay where he is raised in the Tamil slum by a kindly smuggler, a good Samaritan, who teaches him that nothing done for a good cause can be bad. Soon, after taking on a corrupt policeman and other bad guys (they almost succeed in usurping land belonging to the slum dwellers and thus uprooting thousands from their homes), Velu is hailed as a nayakan, a hero of the oppressed. Over time, however, Robin Hood becomes a Bombay mafia kingpin. Ultimately, he is betrayed and killed. *Nayakan* makes serious statements about Indian society, but it also offers comedy, romance, elegance and exhilaration. *Nayakan* has all that, plus music and a certain loony charm.

— David Overbey



Mouna Ragam

A Silent Symphony

Mani Rathnam

INDIA, 1987

146 minutes ■ Colour/35mm (Tamil)
 Production Company: **Sujatha Productions**

Screenplay: **Mani Rathnam**
 Cinematography: **P.C. Sriram**
 Music: **Ilayaraja**

Principal Cast: **Mohan, Revathi, Karthik, V.K. Ramaswamy, Ronnie Patel**

Print Source: **Directorate of Film Festivals, 4th Floor, Lok Nayak Bhawan, Khan Market, New Delhi 110003, India.** Tel: (91-11) 469-4920.
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A Silent Symphony is a bittersweet melodrama, subtle and precise in execution. And, as it recounts the tale of a woman forced into a marriage she did not choose, the film also has an undercurrent of social meaning. Rathnam returns to this theme to anchor the beginning of his biggest box office hit, *Roja*.

As in so much of his work, here Rathnam frustrates genre as he works within it. Instead of being an evil tyrant, the male protagonist is a kind, gentle person who loves his wife because of, not in spite of, her independent spirit. She – not without her flaws – cannot bring herself to love him, having lost her heart in an earlier tragic romance with an assassinated revolutionary. Unable to procure an immediate divorce, they are forced to live a year together in the same house.

Technically, *A Silent Symphony* is less flashy than the rest of Rathnam's work but, in its gently modulated interior lighting and seamless use of music, we see a master developing his craft.

— Noah Cowan