

# Casting Glory

Honey Trehan on working with Vishal Bhardwaj and how casting directors like him are just facilitators of a director's vision

EKTAA MALIK

FOR SOMEONE who's helped shape the careers of many a star, Honey Trehan comes across as unassuming. There's little to suggest that he's one of the top casting directors in Bollywood right now, credited for finalising the cast of almost all of Vishal Bhardwaj's projects including *Maqbool* (2003), *Omkaara* (2006), *Kaminey* (2009) and *Talvar* (2015). Trehan also happens to be the one who introduced Diljit Dosanjh to the Hindi cinema space. We caught up with him on the sidelines of the Habitat Film Festival where Trehan — with his unruly curls, hipster clothes and flashy white sneakers — created quite a contrast to the batik and ajrakh prints that seem *de rigueur* at such "arty" Delhi events.

Born in Tarn Taran, Punjab, Trehan's family moved to Allahabad in the early '90s, where Trehan completed his schooling. "While growing up I had no exposure to

theatre or world cinema. But I was intrigued and attracted to the stage. In Allahabad, Vageesh Kumar Singh, senior faculty at the National School of Drama, had come to stage *Panchtantra ki Kahaaniyan*. He said, 'Come to Delhi if you want to do theatre. I reached Delhi soon after that,'" says the 47-year-old.

Once in Delhi, he was introduced to the city's theatre circuit. But it was not acting that attracted him; it was directing. Since the beginning, Trehan was happy to just call the shots. He joined Barry John's acting course in late 1997. "Barry sir used to split the class into three-four groups of six-seven people each, and then make us improvise and enact stuff. In my group, I would write stuff out and make the others act. Sir would get very angry. 'Do you want to sit in my chair?' he'd scream. Later though, he told me that creating something came more naturally to me, and that I should pursue it. I then directed my first play, *Kafan* (based on the story by Munshi Premchand), I was about 18-19 years old then," he says.



Photo: Abhinav Saha

## MAN OF THE HOUR

(Left) Honey Trehan has done casting for most of Vishal Bhardwaj's films; Saif Ali Khan in *Omkaara*



Trehan reached Mumbai in 2000 when a friend offered him his flat in the city as a stop-gap option. "I thought that I'd have to go to Mumbai at some point or another, so why not then?" he says. There, he chanced upon Vishal Bhardwaj. The two got along well, and he eventually assisted him on *Makdee* (2002). It got him his first screen credit as casting director. "In 1992, Tigmanshu Dhulia got the first credit as a casting director for *Bandit Queen*. For

*Makdee*, I was assisting Vishal sir, when he insisted that I get the credit for casting as I had worked on it," says Trehan. His unusual casting for Bhardwaj's films garnered a lot of appreciation and soon enough, Trehan became a sought-after casting director.

Some of Trehan's choices might be seen as non-conformist by the industry in general. He cast "non-conventional" looking people like Deepak Dobriyal in *Omkaara* as Rajju, Soham Shah as the corrupt police of-



ficer in *Talvar* and Amol Gupte as the negative lead in *Kaminey*. But casting, Trehan insists, is all about the character and fleshing out the vision of the writer-director.

"The characters need to speak to me. I never go by star value. If I understand the character well, I know I'll get the casting right," says Trehan, "If a character gets etched in public memory, it's not because of the casting. It's because of the well-written part and able direction. Saif's casting as

Langda Tyagi was path-breaking for him and it worked wonders for the film, but credit needs to be given to Vishal, for the hardwork he put in with Saif and how Saif responded to it. I take no credit for that. I am just a facilitator of the director's vision.

Not all projects have been a cakewalk. *Kaminey*, Trehan stresses, was exceptionally tricky. Shooting in the Mumbai rain and Gupte not agreeing to the role were just the initial problems. "Many times Vishal sir and I were not on the same page. I wanted to cast Amol Gupte as the negative lead in the film. This was after *Taare Zameen Par*."

"I called Gupte and said that I wished to cast him as the villain in the film. He abused me, 'Kaun bol raha? B%\$#@D?' and banged the phone down," says Trehan, "I called again and insisted, sir, *ek baar mil toh lo* (at least meet me once!). He warned that we'd end up fighting if I visited him. But I was adamant. Our meeting, scheduled for 10 minutes, lasted three hours. He read the script and asked, 'What now?' I told him auditions!" says Trehan.

It's been a busy few years for Trehan. He's worked on Abhishek Chaubey's *Udta Punjab* (2016) and he's been a co-producer for Konkona Sen Sharma's *A Death in the Gunj* (2017), besides doing the casting for Nandita Das's upcoming *Manto*, whose first promo was unveiled at Cannes this year. But Trehan is, perhaps, most excited about his own film which is in the works. "It's been written by Vishal sir, and is also being produced by him. I am directing it, and it stars Deepika Padukone and Irrfan Khan. Hopefully, we'll release the film next year in January," says Trehan.