

## WEEKEND

## IRRFAN UNPLUGGED

Films, music, philosophy, books — **Ranjita Ganesan** explores the many shades of the talented actor

**I**rrfan Khan has the soul of a wandering Bedouin. Even as he straddles successful careers in Hindi and international cinema, the *Jurassic World* star yearns more and more to be closer to nature. Recent projects have helped the actor, known for his melancholic eyes and penchant for nuance, fulfil this aspiration.

While shooting in the deserts of Rajasthan this year, he spent a happy month without reading newspapers, and made friends with birds and camels. Another upcoming film sent him into the lap of the hills in Chittagong, Bangladesh.

Enviably, the people in these places appeared to him to be content living in less modern ways. "Sometimes you feel life is better when you have no agenda."

At Irrfan's well-appointed home in Oshiwara, however, there seems to be a pressing agenda. Members of his entourage hang around, waiting for orders, as he finishes one meeting after another. When he is ready for the interview, 30 minutes after the scheduled time, his sonorous voice precedes him.

He steps out of a room dressed in slim-fit jeans, blue T-shirt, and a khaki shirt on top, looking carefully dishevelled. His brown hair is slightly overgrown, and a single green stud gleams on his left ear. He looks younger than his 49 years. A slender Apple laptop, film scripts, a packet of loose tobacco and rolling paper crowd the centre

table. Stills of *Qissa*, his 2014 work, flicker on a projection screen.

This cannot have been the scene of a just-concluded script-reading because Irrfan is careful not to schedule those in the afternoon. "And not after lunch either," he says, with a sheepish grin. "Once, I went into deep slumber and was so embarrassed. Sometimes there is nothing to discover in the narration, so I get bored."

It is clear the man has a sense of humour. When he laughs, the impact reaches his eyes and temples. He is a patient interviewee, giving more than the 10 or 15 minutes celebrities usually offer to journalists. His responses are often philosophical, and his meditations on acting especially confirm his drama school origins.

"But people always talk only about his acting," his wife Sutapa Sikdar rues. "He has a whole other side too. He loves music." Irrfan is an admirer of The Doors' Jim Morrison, and the Kurdish singer Aynur Dogan. He likes to discover artists through musical films such as Cuba's *Buena Vista Social Club* and *Crossing the Bridge* by Fatih Akin.

As a viewer, he prefers documentaries over fictional tales. It has been an enduring desire to do a film where he is immersed in music. A forthcoming work, *The Song of Scorpions*, took him close but not all the way. It is based on music but his character does not play any.

With a mysterious faith, Irrfan declares,

"I think I am about to get something related to music. It is just in the periphery."

Irrfan is a believer in serendipity, saying he listens to the "signs that life gives". Several important career decisions were born from this, as well as an innate desire to attack ennui.

The eldest son in a family that descended from the Nawabs of Tonk, he was raised in Jaipur. Unlike his uncles, Irrfan's father did not inherit farms or villages but started a tyre business.

Acting was hardly seen as a profession where he grew up. Much of his comfortable childhood was spent being bored in classrooms. During the summers, he would visit cousins in Tonk, observing bullock carts and exploring "haunted" mansions for fun.

After Class X, young Irrfan took up some field jobs that might have helped him go overseas, but two months in, he abandoned it.

Soon, the films of Dilip Kumar and Naseeruddin Shah piqued his interest and he saw it as a sign to try acting. "But I was not going to land up in Bombay, I wanted to learn the craft." He knocked instead on the doors of Delhi's National School of Drama (NSD) and lied about having done 10 plays, a prerequisite for getting in.

He would meet several important people there: his writer wife, Sutapa, for one. Fellow student Tigamanshu Dhulia would go on to direct him in television and on the big screen. There was also Professor Robin Das, whose advice he still carries with him: a good actor lets his emotions go but still keeps an eye on which light is on him.

Irrfan's process begins with searching for an entry into the story and the character. Some roles are easy to grasp because they are simple or very clearly envisioned. Some others, says Irrfan, need him to find a physical model.

After initially struggling to essay the character of the athlete-turned-bandit in *Paan Singh Tomar*, he began channelling his father's demeanor and mannerisms. *The Namesake's* Ashoke Ganguli was a mystery to him until he met writer Jhumpa Lahiri's unobtrusive father.

"He makes major character revelations with the smallest of gestures," Gabriel Byrne, his co-star on HBO's *In Treatment* had told *The New York Times*. Irrfan's drama teacher Das says he spent time among people as well as alone on campus.

Das directed him in a production of Jean Anouilh's farcical play *Fighting Cock* where he played a man confronted by his betrothed's father. Instead of loud movements, Irrfan chose to make subtle

ones. "I asked him if it was difficult to act caricatured. He said it felt odd. In the run-through, I saw his way worked beautifully as comedy."

Irrfan later moved to Mumbai to work in television. A role in *Star Best Sellers*, directed by Dhulia, won him accolades. In 2002, when Irrfan was toying with TV production, a big break came in the form of *The Warrior* by British film maker Asif Kapadia. This, he believes, was another sign to turn to cinema. Dhulia filmed the student politics drama *Haasil* with Irrfan the next year.

The international movies in his filmography are by far outnumbered by Indian titles but they have brought him recognition. *The New York Times* has written of his "soulful gaze", while a *Guardian* writer called him a "dependable actor" who is "head-turningly handsome".

Playwright Adam Rapp, who scripted the episodes of *In Treatment* in which Irrfan starred, says he is among the greatest actors alive today. LEGO, the toy maker, introduced Simon Masrani, Irrfan's character in *Jurassic World*, in a 2015 collection based on the film.

Apart from the testimonials for his acting chops, directors such as Mark Webb of *The Amazing Spiderman* and Ang Lee who cast him in *Life of Pi* have praised his interesting face.

This is drastically different from his early days in Indian films when his looks were routinely termed unconventional. "It was mostly used as a condescending thing. To show I don't belong here," observes Irrfan.

As a young aspirant, he had doubts about being accepted as "a hero", but focused on references like Rajesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan who succeeded despite their unusual looks. The old label does not bother him now. "The day I become conventional, something inside me will die."

He dislikes comparisons with the other Khans of Bollywood.

The image-conscious celebrity in him surfaces only once when he asks to be shown his photographs before they are carried. He is boyish almost, otherwise, putting his legs up on the white sofa, and occasionally folding his arms behind his head.

More recently, Indian film makers are imagining him in lighter, romantic roles. Shoojit Sircar's *Piku* most notably cast him opposite the statuesque Deepika Padukone. Before that, Irrfan played the reticent Saajan Fernandes who turns into a tender lover in *The Lunchbox*.

America's new hunger for bringing diversity to its television and cinema too spells good things for Indian artists, he notes. "They don't require that Peter Sellers cliché anymore. Neither Hollywood wants it, neither are we interested in doing it."

So far, he has met demands to speak English with British and American accents, as well as the more confounding French-Canadian-Indian accent for *Life of Pi*.

His appreciation for language seems deep. "Every language has its own peculiarity, its own flavour, and its own appeal."

He picked up Bengali and Punjabi for roles in *The Namesake* and *Qissa*, respectively. With certain scripts, as in the case of *Piku*, he called for a reading because the writing seemed to have a unique rhythm to it.

With *Maqbool*, he memorised each line as is because any improvisation took away from it.

Next up, Irrfan will appear in Nishikant Kamat's *Madaari*, and share Hollywood screen space with Tom Hanks in *Inferno*.

He has interests in reading beyond film scripts, as evidenced when he tweets lines from the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, and

links to articles in the *Paris Review*. Anthony Burgess, Haruki Murakami and the Hindi writer Uday Prakash are among his favourites.

Irrfan rarely puts pen to paper himself though. There is not enough harmony between his thoughts and written words. "There are spelling and

grammar mistakes that I only notice later," he says about his tweets.

His elder son, Babil, is seemingly a skilled writer. "Even when he is accusing us over SMS, there is a kind of force and expression that we cannot ignore."

It was one such accusation that led the actor to move to the tony suburb of Oshiwara.

Irrfan looks decidedly less relaxed here than he had in his quiet, sea-facing Mudh Island home two years ago. If it were not for traffic, which lengthens commute, he would continue living far away.

Mumbai always struck him as a place obsessed with money. In the heart of the city, man and wild have no connection; a letdown for someone whose favourite childhood memory is walking in the forest with his father.

"When you are young you are fascinated by so many things. Some things drop, some stay. I can be without anything but I cannot be without nature," says perhaps one of the most natural actors in the industry.

(Below) Irrfan Khan with Tom Hanks in a still from *Inferno*; (bottom) Irrfan in *Madaari*

