

Interview / Kathryn Bigelow

Kathryn Bigelow is a rarity in American cinema, not only because she has established herself as an important film maker in Hollywood that boasts of few women directors, but also because she works on action thrillers — a genre that is still considered by many to be a man's domain. A former painter, she combines cinema and art to bring a unique visual style to her work. Since directing her first film, set up in 1978, she has gone on to work on critically and commercially well received films like *Point Break*, *Near Dark* and *The Loveless*, dealing with characters as assorted as surfers robbing banks, vampires in the American heartland and bikers on a rampage. Here she speaks to **Vijay Jodha** about *Strange Days*, her new film, that looks at Los Angeles at the turn of the century.

What was your aim in making this film?

My interest was to bring the script that had been worked out by (co-producer) James Cameron and (co-screenwriter) Jay Cocks to the screen in a way that was uncompromising, as well as make a movie that was both accessible and has a conscience. I also wanted to show elements of social realism that were poignant and was very fortunate to have great material and a great cast for this purpose.

What do you think about the film in reference to re-

cent events such as the misconduct of the Los Angeles Police Department and the O.J. Simpson trial?

We wrote the script earlier and these events are obviously coincidental. It certainly mirrors the fact that the script was very prescient and to that extent it was very important for me to have the material on the screen. It is very curious how these two events concurrently unfolded.

Why did you choose Ralph Fiennes for the lead role even though he has a distinct non-American accent?

I won't say that the accent is not there, but I was very interested in him as an actor after seeing his work in *Schindler's List*. Then (Robert) Redford made a couple of scenes available to me from the *Quiz Show* as he was cutting it. This was before *Quiz Show* came out. He is one of the most extraordinary actors working in cinema today, capable of virtually anything. The kind of emotional complexity of the Lenny Nero character (who hustles virtual reality clips), was something that I wanted to achieve with the kind of ease that only an actor of his calibre can

bring off.

Was the script inspired from the Rodney King incident that sparked off the Los Angeles riots?

James Cameron came up with the storyline about a decade ago and presented it to me as an idea three years ago. At that point the Rodney King riots had just happened and I was involved in some of the clean up in Los Angeles. Certain emotions were common to all of us at that time. And as we began to develop the script, some of the incidents had become part of the cultural history of that environment. We chose those tensions that tend to put the city in sharp relief. And so it became part of the background and the social realism in the plot.

Your film starts with the premise that the system is in need of repair but ends up by showing that but for one or two bad eggs, the system as a whole is okay.

This is not something that we thought about very carefully. But by no means were we interested in indicting an institution, so in that sense you are accurate. The system is not something outside of ourselves that we can point our fingers at. It comprises of all of us. It is also comprised of individuals and in this case, as the film resolves itself, it ultimately

comes down to two individuals who have misused power and authority. We were not willing to make any blanket generalisations.

As compared to other science fiction films set in L.A. such as Ridley Scott's 'Bladerunner', 'Strange Days' seems to be less science fiction and more of a thriller?

Here it's a potentially plausible near future — a science fiction that corresponds to technology. It emphasises character and has more in common with film *noir* and less with science fiction.

Identity and especially double-identity is a theme running through all your films including this one. Is it a conscious effort?

It is probably more subconscious than anything else. I am very interested in characters that I can refine or transform into a child-like fire that grows. And the truth is, often that evolves into an alter-ego that propels the characters on an odyssey that ultimately transforms them. ■

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