

Priyadarshi Pulikonda: 'I love playing the vulnerable man on screen'

Court actor Priyadarshi Pulikonda on his boy next door image, how low-budget films still have an audience and celebrating his Telangana identity.

Priyadarshi Pulikonda's recently released legal drama *Court: State Vs. A Nobody* is currently the talk of the town. The film, which dwells on the intricacies of a young romance getting entangled in legal drama, sees the 35-year-old play junior advocate Surya Teja.

The Hyderabad-based actor admittedly has a knack for lesser-known stories. *Mallesham* (2019), which follows the life and work of the titular Padma Shri-winning entrepreneur and weaver from rural Telangana, is an example. While he is known for his comic timing in films like *Jathi Ratnalu* (2021), it is the vulnerability that he brings to his characters — Gajula Saayilu in *Balagam* or Surya Teja in *Court* — which has made him an emerging face from the Telugu filmscape. In this interview, Priyadarshi speaks about his journey as an actor, what excites him and why vulnerability is his greatest strength. Excerpts from a conversation:

You come from a family of teachers. How did acting happen?

I was a curious child and was drawn to moving images. I was seven or eight when I watched *Sagara Sangamam* (1983). When you see a great film, it makes you feel powerful. That film made me want to be an actor. Learning cinema at the University of Hyderabad helped. I think people who don't come from the film fraternity should learn how films are made and how they work. I later joined a company that did visual effects for Telugu films, which was a refresher course for me. I came into films when digital filmmaking was nascent. At the time, people were making films by renting a Rs 2,000 camera that gave a feature film-like output.

How do you choose your roles?

There is no definitive process. Films like *Mallesham* (2019) or *Pelli Choopulu* (2016) spoke the language of youngsters. I relate to such stories. Essentially, if a story strikes a chord, I will take it up.

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In your films, you embody the boy next door image. Is that a conscious choice?

You always want to be the boy next door. That is where the quality of being relatable comes from. I love playing the vulnerable man on screen.

What is it about playing vulnerable men that attracts you?

Their representation in cinema is limited. These are the men who are fighting their own battles just by living their lives. My struggles as an artiste have made me a vulnerable person. As an artiste, you always hold a mirror to yourself and the world. So, playing such characters is satisfying.

In *Mallesham* and *Balagam*, your characters come from rural Telangana. Is playing characters from the region important to you?

The Telangana identity is important to me. Growing up in Hyderabad and following writers who come from the hinterland help me portray such characters. People like Venu Yeldandi from Sircilla

and Tarun Bhaskar from Warangal inspire me. Besides that, it feels nice to speak the dialect.

Court is a leap. You play an urban advocate. How did that happen?

I met the writer (Ram Jagadeesh) when I was working on a different project. We got talking about the intricacies of the POCSO Act. I think when stories are personal, they get creative and more empowering. Jagadeesh had one such story which he developed into an amazing legal drama. There was a certain integrity to my character.

The Telugu film industry is known for its big budget films. Is there space for niche low-budget films? Would you want to do an RRR (2022)?

Earlier, the perception was that low-budget films have no star-value but that is slowly changing, as the story becomes the star. When we look at Court, the returns it has brought was purely because it was a rooted, personal film. For the film industry to thrive, we need all kinds of cinema — big- and low-budget films. I do want to be part of a film like RRR, but I need to be deserving enough to do so. The practical aspect is whether I will be able to pull the weight of such a film in terms of revenue, considering I come from the indie scene. I do not want my producers to go back with losses. But, RRR, yes, some day.

Would you want to work in other regional film industries in India?

I look forward to it. When you see a Kannada film like Garuda Gamana Vrishabha Vahana (2021) or a Malayalam film like Sookshmadarshini (2024), or even some of the Tamil films, you understand that there are interesting perspectives.

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What are your upcoming projects?

I am doing a film called Premante with a new director Navneet Sriram. It has an interesting take on love and relationships. Mitramandali by debutant director Vijay is a light, humorous film. I think all my new projects are from people who come from diverse backgrounds.