Vipin Sharma belongs to the school of actors who are resolute in devoting their craft to meaningful cinema.

A graduate of the National School of Drama, he began his career in film as an assistant to Ketan Mehta on ‘Mirch Masala’, and later went on to work with such celebrated filmmakers as Shyam Benegal, Anurag Kashyap and Sudhir Mishra to name a few. But undoubtedly, it was his unforgettable role in Taare Zameen Par as the cold-hearted, hypercritical father of Ishaan Awasthi, which shifted his career into overdrive.

Vipin was in Los Angeles for the screening of his latest film Dhanak at the Indian Film Festival, Los Angeles. An extremely congenial and down-to-earth man, he spoke to us about his experience working with child actors and his passion for good cinema.

We saw you and instantly said ‘Taare Zameen Par’. Do you get that a lot? (Laughs) Yes, I do. I actually had an imaginary title for a sequel – ‘Saare Zameen Par’. While shooting the film, I told Darsheel that we can shoot the sequel in Canada where there'll be a lot of snow. He got very excited about that and we both went and suggested it to Aamir. But Aamir wasn’t amused. (More laughs)

What was your experience working with Nagesh Kukunoor in Dhanak?
I’d wanted to work with Nagesh for a long time. I had his phone number, which I later realized was an old inactive one. And I kept sending him messages but never heard back from him. Then I bumped into him at a restaurant and told him that I’d been trying to get in touch and he was surprised. Luckily this was just before he was going to start Dhanak. And so he later called me and talked to me about the part of the children’s uncle. He told me that there aren’t any big roles because the kids are the main characters of the film. I said it doesn’t matter because I was more interested in working with him.

Tell us about the role.
The story is about a brother and sister who embark on a journey to find Shahrukh Khan, in the hope to restore the boy’s eyesight. I play their uncle – the elder brother of their father. This was an interesting script change when I came on board. It was earlier supposed to be the father’s younger brother. The children’s parents died in an accident and so they live with my wife and me. And we don’t have any kids of our own. So to me, they are like my own children, but my wife isn’t fond of them and doesn’t like that they live with us.

So in a way your role is the opposite of Taare Zameen Par.
Yeah, actually. Thank God!

Is it challenging as an actor to work with children?
Yes, it is quite challenging. Because when you are working on a film with children, you have to remember not to treat them the way we naturally do as adults. You have to treat them as equals. If you don’t do that, it will show in your acting and make it appear shallow. Plus children are so honest. So you have all these experienced actors ‘acting’ on the set, and these kids who are not acting at all – they are just being. It is fascinating to watch and learn from their innocence and purity.

**Audiences are always amazed when they see children perform so naturally in front the camera. It makes us wonder if sometimes it can be a lot of retakes to bring that out.**

“The trick is to not tell kids to act. Just let them be.”

Sometimes. Children have a mind of their own and they have their moods and their own agendas. Like I remember working with Darsheel on TZP on the ‘Bum Bum Bole’ song sequence. All the kids were dancing but he was not supposed to dance because the script said that he is just sitting there, not enjoying himself. But he was so upset because he really wanted to dance! And he is a terrific dancer in real life, having gone to Shiamak’s dance school and all that. So he wanted to show these other kids that he had much better skills, but he wasn’t allowed to.

That can be challenging at times. But the trick is to not tell kids to act. Just let them be.

**How was your experience shooting in the deserts of Rajasthan?**

Oh, it was hot! Peak of summer – in June. Most of my time, I spent sleeping under the shade of the trees in those villages. The coolness of that breeze is so amazing. And there was good food too. It’s Rajasthan afterall.

**Was there a particular film directed by Nagesh that made you want to work with him?**

If I had to pick one, I’d say *Iqbaal*. That one impressed me a lot.

I have a wish list of filmmakers who I want to work with in Bombay. People who I feel a like-mindedness with, who I can connect with.

**What is different about these filmmakers that draws you to them?**

“They are here to tell a good story with good characters. They understand the nuances and layers of acting – a lot of things which an average director may not understand.”

What’s common about these people is that they are not doing this primarily from a business perspective. It is not a commercial interest. They are here to tell a good story with good characters. They understand the nuances and layers of acting – a lot of things which an average director may not understand. People like Anurag, Sudhir Mishra and some others are doing that.

**What's in store for you next?**

I just finished a film with Sudhir Mishra called *Aur Devdas* in which I play the role of ‘Chunni Lal’. It has a political setting, so it has a different treatment of the same theme.

I’m a fan of Devdas too and it’s amazing how a small novella has been re-interpreted so many
times and still appeals to people over and over again. Oh, it is not small. It is still so moving. I watched the Devdas starring Dilip Kumar one night on TV, while we were shooting the film in Delhi. And I was just blown away by his performance and the whole film – the way it’s treated.

**When is Aur Devdas set for release?**
I’m not sure. It is in the editing stage right now. I reckon that it will be ready for release by the end of this year. I think it will be one of the best political films to have come out in a very long time.

Vipin Sharma was also seen in the short film *Safar (Journey)* which won the ‘Audience Choice Award for Best Short’ at IFFLA.