

After vaulting the age barrier with the hatke romance in *Chennai Kumadman Balki* is back with another film on age difference. If that one had Amitabh Bachchan as a 64-year-old in love with the 34-year-old Tabu, this one has him as the 13-year-old son of real-life son Abhishek! t2 caught up with the *Paa* director...

The promos of *Paa* have created quite a sensation. Do you think all this hype about Amitabh Bachchan playing a kid will take the focus away from the father-son story of your film? These things will settle down. I understand why it has created so much of excitement. An icon of India is looking like a kid. It is as big as it gets. But it is settling down now. There are more exciting things happening in life. Then on December 4, people will go to watch the film simply expecting Amitabh Bachchan to play a 13-year-old. That's about it.

You are a man from advertising. Did you plan the promos of *Paa* — introducing Amitabh as the son of Abhishek — even before you came up with the script? Exactly! That's how I started. Then the story followed. And it was only after that did we find out about this rare disease called progeria where

a man ages many times faster than a normal human being.

**What was his first reaction when you told him that one-line idea?**

He thought I had said something wrong when I first told him the idea. I said: "Amitji you play Abhishek's son and let him play your father." He just looked at me and said: "Did I hear you right?" I clarified that I wouldn't be asking you to play father-son as you are in real life. Then he said: "That sounds damn exciting but how are you going to do it?"

**How did you get the idea of the Bachchans switching roles?**

I was watching them one day and Abhishek, on that one particular day, was behaving more maturely and Amitabh was up to some pranks. So, I thought to myself if I were ever to make a film with them, their roles should be reversed. It started like that.

**How did you stumble upon progeria?**

First, I wanted to do a fantasy



**Progeria patients don't become so tall. How do you substantiate that in the script?**

There are rare cases. Progeria comes in different forms. They don't become tall in the most common form of progeria, which is Hutchinson Gilford Syndrome. There are many other varieties. There is a form in which you do grow tall and your skin decays totally. Whatever be the case, all progeria patients look exactly the way Amitji is looking in the film. But let me be very clear here... I was not trying to make an exact replica of a progeria patient. I have gone to the extent of being very sensitive and getting all the symptoms and weaknesses of a progeria patient right but I would have never taken away his height. I didn't want it to become a gimmick. To make him a dwarf would have really come across as a gimmick.

And progeria is a little more open than that. There are only 40 cases in the world and there is no definitive pattern. There are aberrations in each of the cases.

**So you are not trying to create an awareness about the disease like *Taare Zameen Par* did with dyslexia?**

See, neither did *Taare Zameen Par* try to create awareness, nor does *Paa*. Awareness gets created by a sensitive use of the ailment in the film. Nobody goes out of his way to dedicate a documentary to progeria. This is a feature film. So was *Taare Zameen Par*. You don't go out of

AMITABH BACHCHAN IN *PAA*

BOLLYWOOD

BALKI ON MAKING A SON OF THE FATHER AND A FATHER OF THE SON



'I ROBBED AB OF AB'

film but then I thought that it should be a real film. I discovered progeria as a means to make this possible. A friend told me about progeria and put me on to a doctor. Then I read up on the disease on the Internet. I also discovered that I wasn't the first filmmaker using progeria. So I wrote the film as a father-son story and it just so happens that the son is suffering from an ailment called progeria. That's it.

**Was it difficult for Abhishek to play his father's father on sets?**

He got used to it. He could buy a bit because he was his father's sets, which he doesn't get much in real life. So that I think made him quite relaxed.

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**Did it cross your mind that you are robbing Amitabh Bachchan of the two things that have made him Amitabh Bachchan — the face and the voice?**

It was by design. I was robbing Amitabh Bachchan of Amitabh Bachchan. That's why it says "introducing Amitabh Bachchan". You can't recognise him as the Amitabh Bachchan we know in this film.

**Was it difficult for Abhishek to play his father's father on the sets?**

He got used to it. He could bully him a bit because he was his father on the sets, which he doesn't get to do much in real life. So that I think made him quite relaxed.

**Does it feel special that AB Corp agreed to produce the film?**

It's special because Amitabh Bachchan wanted to produce it. We were producing the film ourselves anyway. But he said, no way that he wasn't going to produce it. So it was a tremendous honour. But more than anything else the film was important for all of us.

***Cheeni Kum* was your first film. Any lessons learnt that came into play in *Paa*?**

I did *Cheeni Kum* exactly the way I wrote it. I discovered that a lot of people enjoyed the film as it was made. A lot of people enjoyed only the first half, a lot of people enjoyed only the second half. I had written *Cheeni Kum* as an ode to Amitabh Bachchan. I wanted him to do everything. I wanted him to run, I wanted him to deliver dialogues. I wanted him to be sarcastic... I just piled on. I just piled on in the script. I was very happy. Yes there are people who have told me that the first half was so cool and the second half was so Hindi film. And I tell them that I was

the first half cool, the second half with that. I was okay with it.

**Do you think first-time directors tend to make Amitabh Bachchan do everything, resulting in a film full of excesses?**

No, I wouldn't be as foolish as that. But what's the use of having Amitabh Bachchan if you can't do full justice to him? I won't do a film with him unless I have a superb idea or I can script a film around him. I did *Cheeni Kum* from the heart. If I were to do the film again, I would make the exact same film.

***Cheeni Kum* was about age difference. So is *Paa*. What's this fascination you have about age?**

I don't know. I think it's just an accident. In fact, it hasn't crossed my mind. Now that you tell me, it has.

**Francis Ford Coppola's *Jack*, starring Robin Williams, was also about a progeria patient, a man in a boy's head. Have you seen it? Is it similar to *Paa*?**

No it doesn't have a similar storyline. *Jack* has progeria. So does a character in *Blade Runner* and in *Benjamin Button* (reverse progeria). But *Jack* or the other films have nothing to do with a father-son relationship. It's like saying every film