

FILM.

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When East meets West: as India and the west join forces, what can we expect?



Potentially, India means megabucks when it comes to film. With around 1,000 films released every year and an annual turnover of £1.5bn, it's already the world's largest film industry. However, Indian films make up a small fraction of the world's film spending and return meagre profits. It's the promise of things to come that's drawing western investment at a rapid rate; with a booming middle-class, increasingly interested in spending their disposable income on film-going, cinemas are popping up all over the place: 500 more are predicted for the next few years alone. Kishore Lulla, chairman of Bollywood giant Eros, claims the industry will be worth £10bn within a decade. Consequently, in 2006 Eros made history as it went for a listing on the LSE, and in 2007 several Indian film production companies listed on London's alternative investment market.

Though *Slumdog Millionaire* is the first high-profile collaboration of recent years, there is a long tradition of collaboration between Britain and India; a tradition epitomised by *Gandhi* (1982) and which both sides are keen to continue. There's a large audience for Indian films in Britain: Hindi films comprised 16% of releases in 2005, and both the UK and the US are sizeable markets for Indian films. In 2008 Minister for Culture Barbara Follett finalised a treaty in 2005, which encourages co-production. The scheme provides benefits such as tax breaks, funding and practical support for Indian film-makers wishing to work in the UK. India, too, encourages the union; western investment provides much-needed revenue for film-makers in India, where film costs have doubled in three years, and the Indian government has made it easier for corporations to fund films. Even Hollywood big guns are jumping on the bandwagon. In this month's Sight and Sound magazine, Danny Boyle reveals that whilst filming in India, Will Smith (owner of Overbrook Entertainment) visited twice for "business meetings".

So what can we expect? The glamour, cheese and predictability typical of Bollywood is only one facet. India has always had an art-house counterculture, but public pressure to produce films which offer respite from social hardship has resulted in Bollywood escapism becoming the formula of choice. More realistic films face problems of distribution. As expert Lalit Mohan Joshi explains: "art house cinema in the western world had the support of a distribution system as well as a regular circle of viewers no matter how small. Indian new wave cinema did not enjoy any such base". If the west can provide support for such films we will see an increase in artistic and political films, such as the acclaimed collaboration *Monsoon Wedding*. In return, India's breathtaking aesthetics, bright colours and huge crowds provide a setting which can fulfill the western audience's appetite for large-scale, technicolour projects. Additionally, a little escapism will undoubtedly be embraced as the west faces difficult times.

FILM: FROST/NIXON

DIRECTOR: RON HOWARD

STARRING: FRANK LANGELLA, MICHAEL SHEEN

REVIEW: DUNCAN PELHAM

RUNTIME: 122 MINS

★★★★☆

"When the president does it, then it's not illegal." It is this damning admission by 37th US President, Richard Nixon, that is the crowning achievement of the real-life Frost/Nixon interviews. Surprisingly enough, the film does not aim to provide any real political or historical insight into the events surrounding the break-in of the Democratic National Party. Nor does it intend to address Nixon's flawed moral outlook. In fact, the intensive focus on Nixon and Frost's characters – the clash of egos, their shared insecurities and the ensuing battle of wits – is where the film truly excels.

British chat show host David Frost undertakes the daunting task of interviewing the former President: the first attempt to publicly confront Nixon's disgraced stint in office since his resignation. Though initially in pursuit of television ratings, Frost is soon stirred to accomplish something greater: striving to entice explanations – even an apology – from Nixon.

If you're looking for an intricate dissection of the Watergate Scandal look else-

where – the docu-drama style is misleading. The purpose of documentary-styled talking-heads is, presumably, to add a touch of reality to proceedings, but comes off as mere self-importance. This occasional patronising lapse into mock-documentary seems out of place in a film that fires on all cylinders when at its most nerve-racking. *Frost/Nixon* is ultimately an immensely thrilling drama, and any pretence to be otherwise should be ignored.

The film picks up pace once the interviews are underway – a contest of verbal ability, stamina and strategy. In one corner we have Nixon, trained by his team to avoid any damaging blows. In the other, Frost throwing feeble questions, without aggression or urgency, while Nixon fends them off with rambling, self-indulgent answers. Frost's team stand ring-side, abreast the cameras; recoiling, cringing and intently fixated on the clock as their expensive 4 hours of interview time – costing \$600,000 – rapidly ticks away. It's tense viewing, a merit to Howard's direction in building such compelling dramatic tension from a premise that, at first,



seems so lacklustre.

We witness a showdown of epic proportions – a clash of male egos, sharing a longing to be loved and respected. We feel Frost's sense of unease as a creeping realisation surfaces that Nixon may exonerate himself. Early on, Rockwell demands to 'give Nixon the trial he never had'. And so the film delivers exactly that – reminiscent of high-tension courtroom dramas. Our protagonists' faces twist and contort under the constant scrutiny of close-ups – victory or

defeat is discernible in their eyes alone. The film displays a mischievous sense of humour, too, as they exchange blows, each trying to offset the other with unnerving off-screen remarks: "Do you fornicate?" Nixon smirks.

Langhella presents a sad portrait of a man ravaged by loneliness, self-loathing and the unshakable burden of a tarnished legacy. *Frost/Nixon* provides little political insight, but this film is, believe it or not, plain and simple escapism. And bloody good escapism at that.

FILM: VALKYRIE

DIRECTOR: BRIAN SINGER

STARRING: TOM CRUISE,

KENNETH BRANAGH

REVIEW: BROOKE

CHANDLER

★★★★☆

As *Valkyrie* begins, bringing with it the scenes of war and explosions typical of films of its genre, the classic picture of Nazi Germany is painted. The similarities, however, appear to end there. We find ourselves immediately swept up by frantic talk of conspiracy and high treason amongst Hitler's highest ranking officers, and lead through the motions of the final attempt made upon Hitler's life.

'Operation Valkyrie' was an emergency contingency plan approved by Hitler to protect the Nazis from potential threats. When the operation falls into the injured hands (or hand) of angered and dissatisfied Colonel Stauffenberg, he is able to edit and use it as a key weapon to thwart Hitler, with the unknowing permission of Hitler himself.

Enthralling as it all is, one can't help but feel that the decision to thrust viewers directly into the plot at this point was a little hasty. The opening scenes are lacking in any preface to the



soldiers' frustrations towards their 'Führer' or to why Operation Valkyrie was initiated.

Director Brian Singer can, however, be proud of his brave decision to cast Tom Cruise as Colonel Stauffenberg, despite Germany's protestations. Cruise demonstrates the colonel's determination and grit with a direct bluntness: an excellent, well-considered performance.

The film's most profound moments lie at the end, as those involved in the operation are brutally assassinated. In naming the soldiers, the film individualises and commemorates these Germans who served to renew faith in humanity and battle for 'a free Germany', and condemns history for forgetting them.

FILM: NIKITA (1990)

DIRECTOR: LUC BESSON

STARRING: ANNE

PARILLAUD, JEAN RENO

REVIEW: VICTORIA LLOYD

★★★★☆

Ordinarily, this would be a film to despise: the premise is far-fetched, the Pygmalion development of the central character contrived, and it has a couple of cheesy montage sequences accompanied by cheesier 80s synths. But its outmoded features are easily forgiven as director Luc Besson (*Léon, The Fifth Element*) provides a visually stunning action-thriller-romance with genuine subtlety and emotional integrity.

Anne Parillaud as Nikita, begins the film as an impulsive, violent drug-addict convicted of killing a police officer. A striking scene follows in which Parillaud brilliantly portrays a pitifully regressed Nikita, believing she's about to receive a lethal injection. Instead she wakes to find herself in a cold cell confronted with a decision: train as a government assassin or face execution. Nikita transforms into a classy, seductive hitlady. Her sensibility is also transformed, enabling her to fall in love but also forcing her to question the morality of her



actions. The film demonstrates a masterful balance between heart-racing action and psychological deliberations.

Parillaud successfully carries this challenging role from depraved teenager to sophisticated assassin. She maintains an essence of vulnerability throughout. Jean Reno is disturbingly humorous in his small role as "the cleaner" – inspiration for Besson's *Léon*. Jean-Hugues Anglade also gives a beautifully understated performance as Nikita's boyfriend.

It is a testimony to Besson's talent that a film with such potential to be substandard (as is its Hollywood remake *The Assassin*) should prove to be an outstanding piece of filmmaking.