

Veer-Zara and Bombay's Bollywood

By Molly Lynn Watt

With all the things gone wrong in the world, have you ever found yourself wishing to opt out for an evening to see "Singing in the Rain" or "Sound of Music" for the first time? A movie that bathes your soul in sweetness and light rather than giving you a kick in the gut? A movie, even if set against a backdrop of war or gang menace, that you might leave with the feeling people love each other, life is good with music to sweeten your outlook, brighten the very skies above and obscure politics, at least for a night.

My husband, Dan, and I felt that way. We sought a film to brighten our skies, therefore we rejected a fourth viewing of Satyajit Ray's moving and significant and sad film "Patha Panchali" showing — again — at the Harvard Archive. Likewise we rejected all the American movie listings. (We'd already seen "Shall We Dance?" — the marvelous Japanese original and the recent Richard Gere triumph.) We noticed a small ad — Bombay Cinema presents "Veer-Zara" at the Capital Theater in Arlington. We looked up the write-ups to see what it was about. The movie has thousands of uncritical references on the Internet, it has opened all over the world and is discussed on English, Hindi and Muslim websites, with comments written from as far a field as South Africa and Norway. It is a phenomenon. But after reading the story synopsis we dismissed it as a soap opera.

We stayed home and read the Sunday New York Times instead. As luck had it, the Times magazine focused on films. I read the film director Mira Nair's memoir on Chai, that deliciously spiced Indian tea, then turned to the fiction writer Suketu Mehta's first person piece, "Bollywood Confidential."

He wrote that people watch Bollywood movies because the movies are "pre-cynical, Bollywood believes in motherhood, patriotism and true love." He claims westerners dismiss Bollywood as melodramatic, but asserts the movies are redeemed by including singing. "No blockbuster special effects, no interplanetary spaceships, no lone Americans single-handedly taking on armies of brown people — just singing, and respect to mothers." He further establishes that Bombay is a city with contrasts so extreme that only movies that make no claim to represent morality can do justice to it; a city where confronted by difficult moral choices — the loss of life or love — the protagonists burst into song. The recipe for Bollywood movies apparently includes between 4 and 15 songs. Where western moviemakers have almost abandoned musicals as films must compress onto home TV screens,

Hindi films are shown mainly in large theaters where sweeping vistas carry off the larger than life dreams.

Dan went to the library and took out Suketa Mehta's book Maximum City – Bombay Lost and Found. I turned immediately to the chapter on "Distilleries of Pleasure" and learned that Bollywood filmmakers are all big dreamers who make mainstream movies of collective dreams for a billion people. Hindi film directors detest the term Bollywood. The Bombay industry is older than Hollywood because the American Industry started on the East Coast before moving to Hollywood, and the Lumiere Brothers brought cinematography to Bombay in 1896 a few months after it debuted in Paris.

The Indian entertainment industry is worth \$3.5 billion – minor in relation to the global \$300-billion entertainment industry. But it is the world's biggest movie industry when it comes to production and viewers: 1,000 feature films, 40,000 hours of TV programming, 5,000 music titles exported to seventy countries. Mehta says that "every day, 14-million Indians see a movie in one of 13,000 theaters; worldwide, a billion more people a year buy tickets to Indian movies than to Hollywood ones. Television is galloping in." The country has 60 million homes with TVs, 28 million with cables, homes getting a choice of 100 channels. (Bill Clinton, on a visit to India, is reported to have observed that Indians have more channel choices than Americans.) Hollywood movies make hardly a dent in India, making up barely 5% of the market in India. Indian movies are dubbed or subtitled in a dozen foreign languages – French, Mandarin, Malay and popular with Soviets, Israelis, Palestinians, Dominicans, Haitians, Iraqis, Iranians. And Indian people living abroad take their families to a show to maintain ties homeland ties and cultural values.

Dan and I have often talked of taking a trip to Bombay. Instead, we zipped out to the Capital Theater in Arlington to see Veer-Zara. No senior discount, the charge a universal ten bucks. We entered the Capitol's largest screening room already packed with 3 and 4 generation families in a hubbub of talk and picnic baskets. In scanning the crowd, we eventually noticed two white faces besides our own, but they, unlike us, were enmeshed in a larger mixed family group. When, at 8:30 PM, the curtain opened for this 3 hour and fifteen minute show – no ads, no shorts, no trailers – everyone clapped and cheered. We were excited, too, as when we were children and our family took a night out to the cinema – a major event. We were not to be disappointed.

The story, well, the story starts in a jail cell and quickly flashes back to a girl – Zara - and a boy –Veer – meeting by accident, she – stunningly beautiful, he – gorgeously

handsome. Zara is crossing physical and as well as metaphoric borders taking her Bebe's ashes from Pakistan back to India, this, her last promise to her beloved Bebe – a person I take to be her ayah. This journey establishes the uncompromising virtues of bravery, independence and goodness embedded in her heart. The bus on which she travels topples off the edge of the road spilling passengers down the side of a ravine. All must be rescued. Zara is the last person rescued in a daring helicopter pick-up. It becomes immediately apparent she is a person deathly afraid of heights. Her rescuer is Veer, and the audience screams with delight as he dangles off the end of a rope to swoop her to safety. It is love, restrained and exuberant, at first sight, well, first clutch really as they sway in each other's arms against a truly sky-blue sky on a rope swinging from a hovering helicopter.

A couple of problems immediately become clear with cloudy complexity – Zara is already betrothed to a business client of her father's in an arranged marriage. She is Pakistani. She is Muslim. Veer, a Hindu, lives in a village in India. None of this bodes well for the restrained couple clearly trying not to be in love.

I won't give it all away, although the story is not even half of it. Suffice it to say – a young woman civil rights lawyer is key to its resolution. She believes in rightness, not riches, and her first case is this hopeless one of a man who has languished in prison for 22 years because he will not dishonor the woman he loves by explaining his innocence, well, really, by talking at all.

The scenes are lush and musical, streams of golden sun shine on fields of golden grasses, and meadows of marigolds, while mists rise from ponds to shroud the standing mountains in metaphors. You can taste the samosas, as you watch villagers pulse and dance with joy. Even the rainfalls, with bold allusions to "Singing in the Rain," are sensual, and you may find yourself yearning for a downpour to warm your heart. The story depends on a suspension of disbelief and we are delighted to oblige. It is a full-blown fairy tale of good values no longer in tact in the world, and the audience knows and loves the songs and the actors.

A back-story to this movie is that the director Yash Chopra used previously unused tunes by a premier composer for Bollywood, the late – by 30 years – Madan Mohan. And one of the actors, Lata Mangeshkar, 75 years old, sings nine of the songs to huge cheers by the packed audience. We join the clapping and cheering; we're smiling really broad grins.

At 11:45 as we stand outside at last waiting for a bus home. A woman in a sari stands beside me and asks, "have you seen

any other Indian movies?" I tell her about the Sayajit Ray's Patha Panchali trilogy. She'd not heard of it. She rattled off a dozen must-see Bollywood movies I should rent on DVD. I'd not heard of them. She tells me she has been coming to the Capital Theater in Arlington for 30 years to see Indian films. I also have been coming to the Capital for as long, but never noticed Bollywood movies advertised before this one. She asks, "How do you understand the movie in Hindi?" I reply, "subtitles!" "Oh" she laughs; she hadn't noticed the subtitles. We both laugh. "Well," she says, "this was the most expensive movie ever made - \$10-million." \$10-million sounded reasonable to my jaded American notion of movie costs. And although I've researched on the Internet, I have not yet confirmed her figure.

The next night I wanted to go see Veer-Zara again, but that would have been excessive. Instead I've been dreaming the songs and the waving fields of grain and the pulsing dance and the beautiful stars and colorful clothing ever since. I wish I knew the words as I hum and smile out loud. I wish I owned the CD for the singing or the DVD for the whole experience, but our TV screen is too tiny to hold its exuberance.

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