

bully for bollywood

With 'Lagaan,' the Indian Movie Industry Is Poised to Cross Over

By Nita Rao

Lo! Across rainless acres parched by drought swaggers Captain Russell, a Machiavellian British fop, to the ascot born, with his Freddie Mercury overbite and muttonchops. "You tea drinkers!" a native hisses, for this is colonial India, 1893. The Captain smirks, then challenges the townsfolk to cricket. If the English win, land tax is tripled. If the villagers win, the tithe is erased. Now farmer Bhuvan, righteous dreamboat of the populists, rises up to defy his oppressor. Now wistful Elizabeth twirls her parasol, while plucky maiden Gauri simpers and pouts. Cut to a glittery song-and-dance extravaganza, all kaleidoscopic, choreographed confection. Viva Bollywood, Bombay's Hindi movie cosmos, the biggest film industry in the world! Viva *Lagaan*!

India's first Oscar nominee for Best Foreign Film since Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* in 1989, *Lagaan* (opening May 10) transcends the generic pageantry of Bollywood's masala moviemaking. Scripted in Hinglish (half-Hindi, half-English), the movie runs an epic three hours 45 minutes, but cannily leavens stock plots of caste discrimination and political tyranny with six frothy musical numbers and a love triangle

that recalls the sugary *Sweet Valley High* novellas. *Lagaan* was written and directed by former model Ashutosh Gowariker and produced by swoon-inducing megastar Aamir Khan, who also plays Bhuvan. A \$5 million-plus price tag makes it the costliest Bollywood production of all time. It became India's top-grossing movie last year, clearing \$15 million in ticket sales. With *Moulin Rouge* director Baz Luhrmann declaring it "David Lean meets Busby Berkeley," *Lagaan* could be the film that hoists Bollywood from the cult fringes of American pop culture toward a wider acceptance by the Western mainstream.

In the current issue of *Vanity Fair*, Bollywood topples porn as "Pretentious Film-Snob Reference of the Month." *GQ* had sanctioned Bollywood even earlier, with a splashy profile of Indian It Boy Hrithik Roshan, whose cleft chin and skimpy tank tops have made him "the most famous person you have never heard of, one of the biggest movie stars in the world." Later this month, the Cannes Film Festival screens its first Bollywood film—the period romance *Devdas*.

Hollywood, another industry oiled by dalliances with Next Big Things, seems similarly infatuated, judging

from a recent barrage of smoochy homages to Bollywood. Last year's splendid indie gem *Ghost World* opened with goth temptress Thora Birch's earnest gyrations to the obscure, kooky 1965 musical *Gumnaam*. A remix of the Hindi-movie hit song "Chamma Chamma" accompanied *Moulin Rouge*'s "Sad Diamonds" sequence. Mira Nair also paid tribute in this spring's *Monsoon Wedding* with sweetly cornball courtship scenes unspooled to Bollywood serenades from the '70s and '80s. This summer, ringmaster of theatrical excess Andrew Lloyd Webber will premiere *Bombay Dreams* on the London stage. The musical was inspired by Hindi film songs Weber heard at a Bollywood awards ceremony at Nassau Coliseum two years ago. Shekhar Kapur, Indian director of the luminous, Oscar-nominated biopic *Elizabeth*, is co-producing. And come fall, in *The Guru*, blond beauty queen Heather Graham is rumored to lead a Bollywood-inspired dance ensemble in a dream sequence scored to "You're the One That I Want" from *Grease*.

With its vaudevillian panoramas and abiding zest for heavy mascara, can Bollywood sustain its emerging communion with the American enter-

tainment industry? "We're not going to see Bollywood on MTV, but it's definitely penetrating," says DJ Rekha, who launched Basement Bhangra night at S.O.B.'s and is founder of the Bollywood Disco party that debuts May 15 at Opaline. "It's being accessed now by people who've never accessed it before, in dance music. I think we're going to see more films that reference it in the same ways that the Hong Kong films influenced filmmakers."

"It does break a lot of rules, but *Lagaan* was always intended for the mainstream Indian audience," says producer-star Khan. He admits, however, that the filmmakers scattered winking allusions to Western music and literature throughout the movie. "But we're not limited to an influence that is purely Indian. That's the emotional key."

The studio lots called Film City in Bombay, or Mumbai as is now proper to say, are a synthetic carnival, where on a budget of a mere \$300 million (less than the combined production costs of *Titanic* and *Waterworld*), more than 800 masala movies, almost all musicals, get made each year. Barely any reach American theaters (the Loews [See page 46]

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State Theatre in midtown screens a different Bollywood feature each week), but a good number are exported straight to video stores in neighborhoods with established South Asian communities, like Jackson Heights in Queens, or any of the 50 or so movie houses across the country that exclusively screen Bollywood films. India makes more movies than any other nation and nearly doubles the 500 films Hollywood churns out annually. Films run a minimum of three hours to give moviegoers who subsist at or below poverty level maximum value for their money. Intermissions are routine. Ten million Indians go to the movies every day. Globally, Bollywood boasts annual grosses of \$3.5 billion. Export revenues are predicted to jump an additional 120 percent by 2006.

Masala, by definition, is a scorching amalgam of fiery cooking spices, and on the lots of

Film City, that translates into soap opera, calculated mayhem, and recurring narratives lifted from the Hindu mythologies of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Here Salman, Aishwarya, Shah Rukh, and Kareena—preening royals of frippery—overcome the exaggerated plots, tight jeans, and hide-and-seek behind trees that drive Bollywood productions. Class conflict, redemption, and reversal of fortune are eternal themes. Kissing is not forbidden; it just hardly ever happens. Sex is taboo, but implied through soft-focus "wet sari" fantasies and rapturous frolics across meadows. Song-and-dance is still the thing; melodically raw ghazals, the techno pulses of bhangra, and the fizzy, fevered hullabaloo dances.

Bollywood's hallmark exuberance may be paling, however, says Lee Server, author of *Asian Pop Cinema: Bombay to Tokyo*, with a shift toward films that are more self-

consciously restrained and polished. "Those movies used to be the most phantasmagoric chorus numbers, where they'd really put everything and the kitchen sink into it," Server says. "Now they look identical to a J.Lo video. A growing sophistication has come there, an Americanization."

Indeed, Film City seems to be interpreting a whole new breed of Bollywood films through the gauze of Western consciousness. There is *Kaante*—a *Reservoir Dogs*-type heist caper starring Amitabh "Big B" Bachchan, the Godfather of Indian cinema—which has the distinction of being the first Bollywood film to be shot entirely in the United States with an American crew. And in *Mitr, My Friend*, co-director Revathy, a veteran Bollywood actress, challenges the masala formula by examining the struggles of an Indian American family living in California through English-

only dialogue and a 97-minute duration.

But lengthy running times remain the norm, and may prove an obstacle for wider distribution. "People used to be willing to pay money and sit in a theater all day," says New York-based film producer Tanya Selvaratnam, whose feature *On-Line* premiered at Sundance this year. "Now Western culture moves a lot faster, and people are not used to it." The melodrama that saturates Hindi movie productions is a further hindrance, according to Server: "I don't think it's as easy a mix as the Hong Kong genre," he says. "The gaudiness is not going to really sift into modern-day Hollywood, which tends to remain fairly naturalistic."

Still, Selvaratnam says there is no replacing the escapist gloss of a Film City drama. "There's great satisfaction in Bollywood movies because people don't cry and scream and go to their rooms. They cry and scream and dance." ▣



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Bollywood Disco at Opaline

The tunes “Pyar Karne Wale” and “Raat Bah-kee” may not be as familiar as “Ring My Bell” or “Rock the Boat,” but these tracks sure get things shakin’ at the monthly Bollywood Disco bash. DJ Rekha—of the long-running Basement Bhangra affair at S.O.B.’s—is the force behind this great soiree, with the mix master and her guests dropping sounds of real-deal subcontinental disco stompers. The club is packed with ravishing rajas and ranis, and all rock the floor with abandon. It kicks off at 6pm with screenings of ’70s-era Indian flicks that give this party its name (and which are the source of the night’s tracks). Free samosas and kebabs, too!

85 Ave A between 5th and 6th Sts (212-995-8684). Subway: F, V to Lower East Side—Second Ave; 6 to Astor Pl.



Bollywood: where Bombay takes a bow

a close-up shot of India's freewheeling, frenetic, film culture/story: Habiba Noor

WELCOME TO BOLLYWOOD! Welcome to the thriving industry that provides musical and cinematic entertainment for nearly a quarter of the world's movie-going population. Welcome to a world that's made its mark back in the center of Empire: Last year the editors of the prestigious *Oxford English Dictionary* recognized it as a new word worthy of English-speakers the word over. The entry begins: "Bollywood, n. Humorous blend of the name of Bombay and Hollywood..."

Though the term Bollywood defines Indian cinema by a reference to the center of the American film industry; Bollywood films are distinctly Indian, cinematically and musically. Typically a string of about six music videos with a tenuous and often predictable storyline, these films are the most watched films in the world. Millions of cinemagoers watch Bollywood's output throughout Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and, with the ever spreading south Asian diaspora, in Europe and North America. Suddenly, Bollywood is making it big on the world stage with the popularity of films such as *Monsoon Wedding* and the Oscar-nominated *Lagaan*. With *Moulin Rouge*, heavily influenced by Indian cinema, and Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, *Bombay Dreams*, there is no doubt that the West is starting to feel the Bollywood buzz.

Approximately 800 films come out of India each year, as against a mere 500 in the United States. More films are actually produced in Tamil, the official language of the southern state Tamil Nadu (spoken by more than 70 million people worldwide) than in Hindi, based in Bombay. Still, Tamil films have not received equal recognition in the international film and music arenas. The remaining films come from various other regions in India, and are produced in as many as 17 other languages. Generally, the Bollywood films and music have maintained cultural dominance over the subcontinent, which includes Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Afghanistan.

Bollywood is first and foremost star-driven, with the music being only the secondary attraction. It is no secret that the actors are all lip-synching to India's top voices, or playback singers. These singers are known and revered by the Indian masses, yet they typically take second place to the stars. The lip-synching flap involving pop star Milli Vanilli would never have happened had the audience been Indian. Unlike the case with Broadway performances, stars for musicals in India don't have to have the looks, the moves, and the voice all in one: it's assumed that no one performer is likely to have more than one

of these gifts. Though the actors may draw the crowd, the combination of a good story with great songs is what brings audiences back to see the film over and over again.

The Evolution of Film Music

For centuries, music has been an essential element of life in India. Music marks the rhythms of life—birth, religious festivals, marriage, death. Music, according to Anand Bhonsle "engulfs our lives... (It) has always been integrated with our movies. A movie without music will fail." The son of legendary playback singer Asha Bhonsle and nephew of the record-breaking singer Lata Mangeshkar, Bhonsle sees the evolution of Bollywood music as a function of technology, global trends, and most prominently, the individual music directors of the films who ultimately define the trends for the masses. The early Bollywood films allowed filmmakers and music directors to explore how they could merge Hindu epics, Hollywood musicals, folklore, and classical theatre. From the early days of musical "talkies," the songs were more Indian-based and traditional. Music directors based their songs on the wealth of musical traditions that had been flourishing in India for years. Given that few people owned phonographs, there was not much exposure to music from other parts of the world. The music director Shaker Jaikeshan, who was particularly moved by music of the Middle East and Spain, initiated the first international music orchestrations. Rooting these "new" sounds with traditional Indian music, Jaikeshan, according to Bhonsle, "created huge waves." Soon after, in the mid 1950s and 60's, music director O.P. Nayar pushed this fusion further by combining Punjabi folk music, a culture and language shared by both India and Pakistan, with music from the West. The most popular Bollywood producer in this period, according to Anand Bhonsle, was the late R.D. Burman. As a lover of jazz, rock, brass, and artists like Sergio Mendez and Carlos Santana, Burman created a sound that combined these elements with the Indian voice that continues to be among the most listened-to Indian songs.

Producer A. R. Rahman has ventured beyond India more seriously than any of his predecessors. Rahman's early musical education was vast: he studied Western classical music at Oxford, toured with Zakir Hussain, and collaborated with musicians like Michael Jackson, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, and, most recently, Andrew Lloyd Webber. Grounding himself in film music

through the Tamil film industry, Rahman has been Bollywood's strongest musical presence in the last several years. He has given films the sounds that have catapulted the music into the new millennium. After seeing one of his songs choreographed on Britain's Channel 4, Webber requested a meeting with Rahman and invited him to score the music for his new musical *Bombay Dreams*, slated to open in London's West end this year.

Over the last 60 years, Bollywood's film music has transformed itself from the classical to the anticlassical. Coming from a part of the world that prides itself on one of the oldest classical-music traditions in the world, contemporary film music lacks the strict adherence to structure in which the classical traditions take pride. Bollywood music is, in many ways, the antithesis of classical. It is far from high art; and if it attempts to be such, chances are it would lose its mass appeal. "When you hear an Indian song it may begin with a classical note on a sitar and tabla," Bhosle explains. "One song can have elements of flamenco, brass bands, and a uniquely Cuban mix. This mish-mash of various instruments gives it the flavor of pop music unique to India." Unlike its classical counterpart, the lack of adherence to structure and form gives a film's music director an opportunity to perform some unique musical experimentation, which makes Bollywood music studios true laboratories of sound.

Musical Experiments

As in all laboratories, the potential for disaster can be stronger than the potential for success and innovation. Suri Gopalan, founder of Raaga, an Indian music and movie chain store whose greatest sales are in Bollywood film and music CDs, acknowledges the improvement in overall production value of Hindi film songs. Still, he says, "of all of the hundreds of films produced, typically three or four are outstanding soundtracks." (Gopalan would include the music from the aforementioned *Lagaan* among the top soundtracks of 2001.) Muzaffar Ali, director of the 1981 classic story of a courtesan dancer, *Umrao Jaan*, says, "Nowadays, all films look alike and sound alike; the music is interchangeable. People who would like to be innovative are put under pressure by the producers to repeat themselves." According to him, long gone are the days where a film director, lyricist, and composer would "get lost in a film" for about a year, ready to produce a masterpiece with a strong film identity.

Given all of this great potential and enormous production rate, why are there so few masterpieces coming out of Bollywood? In the last several years the motivation behind making a film has been to keep people coming to the theatres—not exploring this rich laboratory for art's sake. Movies are churned out primarily with the intention of bringing in cash, at home and abroad. With the pressures of working on several films at a time, and a deep connection with India's notorious underground, the focus on filmmaking has been towards generating the blockbuster hit. Consequently, the artistic worth of each individual film declines. Commenting on Indian audiences, the India-based musician Gaurav Singh (from the Asian Underground Band Medieval Punditz featured in the *Monsoon Wedding* soundtrack) says: "The masses are not static. They have a brain and the ability to think. Recording companies don't encourage the brain to be used. Problem of Bollywood music being too repetitive. The fact [is] the labels don't want to experiment."

From the 'original fusion' to Beyond Bombay

For the new generations of South Asians, who make their music fused with genres such as hip-hop, reggae, drum and bass, and rock, Bollywood has proven to be one of the strongest influences on their own musical identities. New York-based artists like Karsh Kale grew up listening to the Saturday-morning South Asian musical programs in New York. "In many ways, Bollywood songs were the soundtracks to our lives," Kale recalls. "It was a part of our identity." Describing this music as the "original fusion," Karsh has pioneered, along with other artists from London and New York, his own type of fusion, drawing from his years of tabla and merging it with the contemporary electronica and drum and bass beats.

Walking down 74th street in Jackson, Heights, New York City's haven for Bollywood fans, you're bound to hear popular film tunes remixed by young south Asian DJs, giving these songs an urban bite. Young people—and not only south Asians—are dancing to these remixes in clubs from L.A. to New York to London to Bombay. This spring, DJ Rekha, founder of New York's five-year-old Basement Bhangra was planning to launch a new party, "Bollywood Disco." Rekha hopes that this will be a "a space for lovers of Bollywood. I see it as an international space more than anything because so many different kinds of people listen to the music worldwide." ☐