

INDIA COMES TO NEW YORK

By Sandy Mandelberger

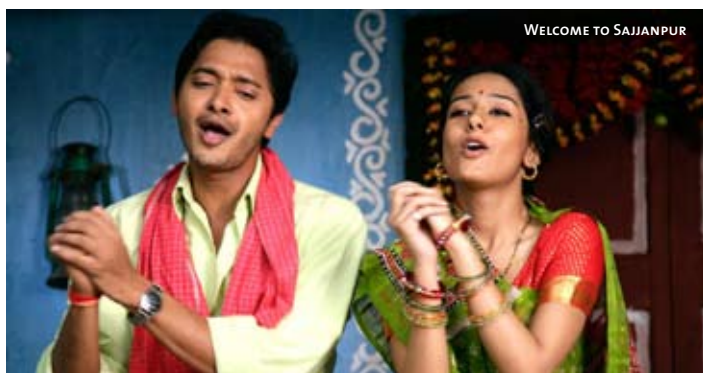
New York City prides itself as being the “capital of the world”, as it has attracted immigrants from all over the globe and set up individual communities within the city’s urban grid. For the past few decades, the communities of South Asia, particularly India and Pakistan, have become vibrant parts of the city’s mosaic, producing in their midst the finest curry dishes, sari shops and music concerts this side of Delhi and Peshawar.

New York opened up its gates to an influx of Indian cinema under the title of the **Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council (MIAAC) Film Festival**, sponsored by the Indo-American Arts Council. The ambitious programme of film premieres, seminars and chic parties focused not only on Indian-origin filmmakers living and working in the US, but also on a new generation of Indian filmmakers whose creative output represents a new chapter in Indian cinema beyond the conventions (and stylistic clichés) of Bollywood.

Although last year’s Oscar winner *SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE* could not really be classified as an Indian film, the success of the film and its showcasing of Indian acting, musical and technical talents has created a groundswell of interest in the ever-growing Indian contemporary film scene. This flowering was evident in some of the films showcased at this year’s festival.

The festival opened on November 11 with the premiere screening of *TODAY’S SPECIAL*, a New York-based comedy directed by David Kaplan and written by and starring Comedy Central star Aasif Mandvi (see *interview page XX*), accompanied by renowned Indian actors Madhur Jaffrey and Naseerudin Shah. Santosh Sivan’s *TAHAN*, set in the disputed territory of Kashmir, was screened as the Festival Centerpiece. The film tells the moving tale of a little boy and his pet donkey in militant Kashmir. It has won accolades at international film festivals and had its New York Premiere at the festival.

The festival’s closing night film, held at the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center, was *ANTAHEEN: THE ENDLESS WAIT*, starring two film luminaries discovered by Satyajit Ray – Sharmila Tagore (see *interview page xx*) and Aparna Sen – both of whom attended the special event screening, which also included the announcement of several film awards. Set in modern day Kolkatta, the film crisscrosses between the loves, passions and relationships of these two actresses. The program featured a mix of genres ranging from short films to documentaries to dramatic features. Music, a key element in Bollywood cinema, also was prominently featured in many of the festival offerings, albeit with a less kitschy tone than those found in the typical Bollywood spectacle.





Above: Madhur Jaffrey and Aasif Mandvi take questions from the audience after the New York premiere of TODAY'S SPECIAL.

Above right: Jess Weixler and Aasif Mandvi in TODAY'S SPECIAL

Left: Buddhadeb Dasgupta's THE WINDOW was shown as part of the Contemporary Bengali Cinema strand

debut. Set in the teeming metropolis of Mumbai, the story brings together a struggling gay lyricist, an aging prostitute (Bollywood star Manisha Koirala in a career-defining role) and her 12-year-old son.

Two programmes of note that attracted capacity crowds during the weekend were *An Evening with Mira Nair*, a screening of the celebrated director's short films, in conjunction with the new DVD release of her celebrated film *MONSOON WEDDING* (2001). *Contemporary Bengali Cinema* showcased the growing influence of Kolkata and the state of Bengal in the mix of contemporary Indian cinema. The festival highlighted five features and one documentary in this survey, including the latest works from such noted directors as Buddhadeb Dasgupta (*THE WINDOW*) and Rituparno Ghosh (*AFTER WORDS*); and newer talent Suman Mukhopadhyay (*FOUR CHAPTERS*), Sangeeta Datta (*LIFE GOES ON*) and Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury (*THE ENDLESS WAIT*).

The festival also provided various networking opportunities for visiting Indian filmmakers and industry to mingle with their American counterparts, along with fascinating seminar programmes that explored the range of themes, genres and challenges facing the Indian film community.

As an intensive on the new directions and concerns of contemporary Indian cinema, an industry that is defining itself beyond the Bollywood model, the **MIAAC Indian Film Festival** was a groundswell of information, inspiration and cinematic delights.

For more information on the festival's many highlights, visit: www.miaacfilmfest.org

Among the highlights of a jam-packed festival were several directorial debuts. *FOR REAL*, written and directed by Sona Jain, tells the story of a six-year-old girl whose idyllic life in New Delhi is irretrievably changed when her mother leaves and upon her return, the young girl believes her to be an imposter. *LIFE GOES ON*, a world premiere written and directed by Sangeeta Datta, focuses on the effect of a mother's death on her husband and children living in London. *TWO PAISE FOR SUNSHINE*, *FOUR ANNAS FOR RAIN*, written and directed by Deepti Naval, the acclaimed actress in films such as *MIRCH MASALA* (1985) and *FIRAAQ* (2008), who makes an impressive directorial