

Talking with titans

You watch *Mad Men*, the trailer of the film *Million Dollar Arm* – which has been on television for quite sometime – will hit you big time. Yes, Disney somehow expects the fans of Don Draper – *Mad Men*'s conflicted man with a serious sex addiction problem – to throng theaters to catch him in a different avatar in the film.

Jon Hamm – *Mad Men*'s Don Draper – is the lead character in *Million Dollar Arm*, playing the role of a sports agent who sets out to look for baseball pitchers in India.

The film is based on the true story of two former cricket bowlers who learned to pitch for baseball and were finally picked by the Pittsburgh Pirates. I saw the film at a press screening, and it opens in the United States May 16, a week after its opening in India.

It is a feel-good movie, and works through all the right notes and formulae that one expects from a Disney film. But it is also so underwhelming, suffering from a heavy *Slumdog Millionaire* hangover. A R Rahman tries to recreate his musical magic, but almost always ends up imitating the loud souring score of Danny Boyle's 2008 Oscar winner.

At one point, when the song *Ringa Ringa* starts to play, the *Slumdog* obsession is way too obvious.

The three main Indian actors – Pitobash Tripathy, Suraj Sharma (from *Life Of Pi*) and Madhur Mittal (who played the older brother in *Slumdog*) – are likable and charming. And the film also has New York-based actor Aasif Mandvi as Hamm's assistant.

I am sure *Million Dollar Arm* will do well at the box office. It has all the crowd-pleasing elements, plus it is a summer release with a baseball theme – that always works well. But I wonder who will be its audience – young kids who watch baseball, or adults or perhaps women who are attracted to Hamm? I guess we will have to wait and see.



Jon Hamm, Madhur Mittal, Suraj Sharma and Pitobash Tripathy in *Million Dollar Arm*.



Last week I was tied up with the New York Indian Film Festival – an annual event organized by the Indo American Arts Council. I am the festival director and spend many months each year handpicking the films along with other members of our committee. Then we enjoy a week of sharing the films with our audience. Sometimes there is a lot of stress as well.

This year, I enjoyed two events we had

programmed. May 8, we screened four short films (three documentaries and one narrative short) directed by Gurinder Chadha. The British-Asian director was at the festival for the 20th anniversary screening of her iconic film *Bhaji On The Beach*, and we also played her last film *It's A Wonderful Afterlife*, a comedy about food, killings and ghosts. *Afterlife* never opened in the US so it was good to show it, but the real treat

was her short films – *I'm British But*, *What Do You Call An Indian Woman* *Who's Funny*, *Acting Our Age* and *A Nice Arrangement*.

I saw the films years ago at a film festival organized by Sakhi for South Asian Women, and I always wanted to revisit the films. They look at South Asian life in Britain with a lot of humor and pathos.

The most fun part of the evening was a nearly hour-long conversation I had with Chadha about her inspiration to make the films.

Chadha was a journalist before she started making films. In the late 1980s there was a burgeoning South Asian music scene in the United Kingdom – anything from the remixes of Bally Sagoo to the many *bhangra* sounds and the rebellious vocal of Joi Bangla.

Chadha wanted to capture that energy and also show what it means to be British to many South Asian immigrants in the UK. She applied for a grant to the British Film Institute, and with that money made *I'm British But*.

She acknowledged that she had no training in film and sees a lot of flaws in the film. But her advice to young filmmakers was that they should follow their passion and make films if that is what they want to do.



Anurag Kashyap speaks about *Ugly*.

The next day I held another engaging conversation, with Anurag Kashyap, who was a guest at the festival with his new film *Ugly*. We spoke about violence in his films, and he revealed some interesting things.

Kashyap said he actually does not like violence, and recalled that when he was 19 years old he fainted seeing a roadside accident. He includes violence in his films, he said, to wake up the audience who get very complacent.

And he also pointed out that he rarely shows onscreen violence. Most of the violence in his films happens off-screen, and that frightens the audience more since their imagination goes wild.



With Gurinder Chadha