



Water

An uncompromising condemnation of the dehumanisation of women by religion

REVIEWED BY DENIS SEGUIN, *GALA*

As intelligent as it is ravishing, Deepa Mehta's *Water* is a moving portrayal of impossible love and possible hope.

Fronted by an equally gorgeous combination of Bollywood stars Lisa Ray and John Abraham, cloaked in a historical drama set within India's widow caste, it tells the story of a young widow who falls in love with a man so far beyond her station he might as well be a god. But it would be simplistic to categorise *Water* as a love story, or for that matter, a tragedy. Indeed, two shocking revelations propel the film into an elemental exploration of the human need for gods.

Toronto organisers could not have asked for a more distinguished Opening Night Gala for their 30th festival. And Fox Searchlight, which has US distribution, has a perfect launch pad; critical accolades are already flowing in.

An entirely Canadian production, the fact it is shot in Hindi may lessen its prospects for a foreign-language Oscar nomination given that Asif Kapadia's *The Warrior*, also in Hindi, was rejected as a late Oscar submission in 2002.

The final chapter in the Indo-Cana-

dian film-maker's *Element* trilogy, *Water* addresses the role of religion in the lives of women, just as the previous films *Fire* (1996) considered sexuality and *Earth* (1998) covered nationalism. Set in 1938 during the rise of Mahatma Gandhi, the film holds resonance for today. The long gap between the second and third films was the result of the violent shutting-down of *Water*'s original 2000 production by Hindu fundamentalists. This new production, entirely recast, was filmed in Sri Lanka under an assumed title in 2004.

Under ancient Hindu scripture, when a woman marries a man she becomes half of him so that when he dies she is considered half-dead (this practice persists today in India, hence the fundamentalist outrage and the presence of a bodyguard at Mehta's side during the festival).

A funeral poses as a marriage: Chuyia, (Sarala) an eight-year-old girl, is being married to a dying man. By nightfall he is dead, his corpse burned on the bank of a holy river, and Chuyia is being prepared for her destiny. Shorn of her hair, she is placed in an ashram of fellow widows there to spend the rest of her days as a kind of human shrine to the dead man.

But the ashram is a travesty, ruled over by a massive gargoyle named Mahhumati (Manorma) who controls the lives of her fellow inmates. Smoking ganja supplied by the local pimp, she farms out the younger widows as prostitutes until they have lost their allure as moneymakers.

Water is everywhere in the film, not just as metaphor but as plot device. At the river, Kalyani encounters Narayan (Abraham), a young Gandhian idealist, and the son of Brahmins, the highest order in the Indian caste system.

Studying law, thrilled by the social revolution presented by Gandhi's politics, he is eager to reject centuries-old cultural boundaries. With Chuyia as the classic go-between, their impossible relationship gradually blossoms.

Mehta's purpose is not to follow the obvious path of doomed romance but to explore the effect of the relationship on the other people in the story; to look into faces that are for the first time seeing their world in a new and much harsher light.

Secondary characters, particularly the widows of the ashram, are allowed to breathe and develop, and hence carry pivotal importance.

Canada. 2005. 114 min

Director/screenplay
Deepa Mehta

Production company
David Hamilton
Productions

Backers
Telefilm Canada, Echo Lake

Canadian distribution
Mongrel Media

US distribution
Fox Searchlight

International sales
Celluloid Dreams

Producer
David Hamilton

Cinematography
Giles Nuttgens

Production design
Dilip Mehta

Editor
Colin Moodie

Music
Mychael Danna

Main cast
Seema Biswas
Lisa Ray
John Abraham
Sarala
Manorma