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London's 'Bollywood Academy'

The UK's first Bollywood acting school opened its doors for start of term Thursday with its first intake of eight pupils all hoping to be the next Bollywood superstars

BY PRASHANT RAO
AFP, LONDON

Far from the glitz of Bollywood, young hopefuls in a small film studio in London are honing their acting skills and dreaming of making it big, in the latest sign of Indian cinema's expanding reach.

In the west London suburb of Ealing, a young troupe of budding actors are improvising a scene as director Hemendra Bhatia casts a watchful eye over the proceedings from behind the camera, picking up on every detail, ready to pounce on any mistake.

His face gradually tensing, 22-year-old Hassan Khan screams in Hindi: "Why are you lying to me? I know you've been having an affair! Do you want a divorce?"

A moment of silence passes, and his "wife" Anu, sitting opposite him, replies coldly: "Yes."

As she gets up to leave, Hassan grabs her hand but, without giving him even a farewell glance, she pulls away and departs.

Behind him, Hassan's faithful former schoolmate Ranjit walks up to him and puts his hands on the broken man's shoulders, trying to support an old friend.

Before any of the trio have a chance to catch their breath, however, Bhatia steps in and dissects their performance — criticizing Hassan for talking too much, Anu for not pausing enough, and Ranjit for waiting too long.

"After several years," he says, referring to Hassan and Anu's make-believe marriage, "this is the final break!"

Bhatia then replays the scene, and the multitude of takes before it, on the television screen nearby so they can all watch, and learn.

Such is life at the Actor Prepares school — dubbed a "Bollywood academy" — where seven would-be dramatists are hoping to pick up the skills and contacts needed to break into Bollywood.

Six weeks into their intense three-month acting course, devised by Indian cinematic legend Anupam Kher, the group are working on acting for the camera, a module in which Bhatia, the school's international dean, specializes. And he is not letting them off easy.

The school is the latest sign of the growing international interest in the Indian film industry, and equally of Britain's interest in Indian cinema, thanks to its large south Asian diaspora.

In England alone, according to official estimates, there are around 2.5 million Britons who describe themselves as being of Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin — approximately five percent of the country's population in mid-2006.

Bhatia is eager that his pupils not conform to the Bollywood stereotype of melodramatic over-acting, and he even chafes at the very mention of the word Bollywood, seeing the link to Hollywood as demeaning to the Indian film industry.

"We are not brother to anyone or second to somebody, we have our own identity," he said.

He also stresses that the school is trying to give its students, who each pay US\$6,500 for a



Top: Actor Anupam Kher, center, speaks to students at the UK's first Bollywood acting school in west London.

PHOTOS: AFP

three-month course, a grounding in basic acting so that they can, if they choose, try and succeed in India or anywhere else.

His students have taken that on board, and are keeping an open mind as to where the course will eventually take them.

Hassan, in particular, has boundless ambition. "When it comes to acting, I believe acting is universal," he says.

"I believe at the end of these three months I'm ready, be it for stage, TV, film, and then I'm open (to offers), be it here in England, be it in America, or be it in India.

"If Bollywood comes calling, I'm running there."

Beyond that, he feels he has a higher calling: "There were no real British Asian actors that I could look up to. It's always had to be English actors, or Indian actors in India.

"I want to change that," he says, before adding with a wry smile: "I've got a lot of things I want to do right now, it's just about getting started."

His dreams are mirrored by the other students, most of whom said Bollywood was not a goal in itself, and were instead aiming at "making it" in film or television anywhere they could.

For now, though, that will have to wait — Bhatia is relentless, and shortly after Khan's scene, he is calling on the next group to re-enact it.

One student shows a shade of doubt as to the dialogue, and Bhatia pounces: "Didn't you listen? If you do not know, then you have already failed."

[TECHNOLOGY]

Microsoft's latest offering is more than Windows dressing

Windows 7 is less ambitious than Vista and its development is less rushed. Microsoft's new release promises to be one users will actually enjoy

BY TIM ANDERSON
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

I am writing this on Windows 7, the successor to Vista that was previewed at Microsoft's Professional Developer's Conference in Los Angeles earlier this week. Microsoft is keen to avoid a repetition of Vista's shambolic launch. Mike Nash, corporate vice-president, spoke at the press briefing about learning from the Vista experience, and the man in charge of Windows engineering, Steven Sinofsky, emphasized the rigor and discipline of the Windows 7 development process.

It appears to be working. Even in the preview handed out to the press, Windows 7 feels more polished and less annoying than its predecessor. The changes are not dramatic, but that is a good thing. Microsoft has left the core architecture untouched, so that software and devices that worked on Vista should still work.

Microsoft is also making Windows "quieter", in other words, reducing the number of prompts that interrupt your work. For example, too many applications now install themselves in the Windows system tray and pop up frequent notifications. Windows 7 lets you hide them or turn off their messages, returning control to

the user. You can also fine-tune User Account Control, the security feature that in Vista flashes the screen and shows a dialog whenever you change a system setting.

Windows 7 does have some user interface changes, the most obvious being a revised taskbar, which shows an icon for every running application. The Windows 7 taskbar has larger icons, full-screen application previews when you hover the mouse, and "jump lists": pop-up menus that control key features, such as starting or stopping a song in Windows Media Player, or visiting a favorite site in Internet Explorer. Application windows can be made transparent to see files on the desktop, and when you drag a window with the mouse, it snaps to screen borders: a small touch but one that feels natural.

Windows Explorer, the main tool for file management, has a new feature called libraries, which pulls together content from multiple locations and lets you treat them as one. For example, if you have some photos on an internal hard drive and others on an external drive, you can include both locations in one library and search it like a single folder. Applets like WordPad and Paint have been

refreshed, and now sport fat ribbon toolbars like those introduced in Office 2007.

However, it will not be the new features that make or break Windows 7, but rather its quality, compatibility and performance. Windows 7 is less ambitious than Vista, its development is less rushed, and provided Microsoft can dissuade its partners from overlaying it with third-party add-ons of lesser quality, this release promises to be one users will actually enjoy.

A Windows Explorer screen in Microsoft's new operating system, Windows 7.

PHOTO: AFP



New Vista far better than original

BY JACK SCHOFIELD
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

An early build of Windows 7 is now in the hands of thousands of software developers, who got code at this week's Microsoft Professional Developers Conference in Los Angeles. Major hardware manufacturers already have copies, but many more will get them at WinHEC, the Windows Hardware Engineering Conference, which opens in Los Angeles on Wednesday.

Microsoft is providing tonnes of information, so I hope they're paying attention. Windows, uniquely, has to work on PCs from more than 10,000 companies, and run well over 1 million applications for roughly a billion users. It has to handle everything from tiny handhelds to the large rack-based servers that run major corporations. Indeed, you can build your own PC and expect Windows to work on it.

It's no secret that too few suppliers paid attention to the last version, Windows Vista, which therefore got off to a bad start. Badly written software either didn't work correctly or kept bringing up pointless alerts from Vista's UAC (User Account Control) security feature. Some components and peripherals either had no drivers, or worse, had really bad drivers. Some PC manufacturers were slugging Vista systems with old software written for XP. Many other problems came from Microsoft's failure to deliver what had been expected — and when.

It took the best part of a year (and a lot of investment) to solve these problems, so that today, Vista SP1 is far better than the original — and far better than its reputation. To give just one example, the Windows Engineering blog points out that the number of applications and tasks that generate a UAC

prompt fell from 775,312 at launch to 168,149 in August this year, and the number is still falling.

Of course, changing Windows isn't like remodeling a boutique, it's more like redesigning a city. It involves moving well over 90 percent of the whole microcomputer industry, some of which is highly resistant to change. It takes time.

The good news about Windows 7 is that it maintains compatibility with Vista device drivers and software, according to John Curran, who heads the Windows Client Group at Microsoft UK. It will therefore benefit from Vista's problems in the same way that XP benefited from Windows 2000's.

What else it contains remains to be seen, because Microsoft has changed the way Windows 7 is built. With Vista, features were pretty much added through a "top down" process, which was uneven at best. With Windows 7, development is "bottom up," and teams are not allowed to add their feature to the main build until it has been both coded and tested. You may end up with fewer features, but the quality should be consistently higher.

Since builds are not "feature complete," it's hard to say what Windows 7 will include. We know that it will have a much improved UAC and better management of drivers and devices. We know it will have multi-touch features and gesture recognition. We know some parts will have ribbon interfaces. Windows is now being run by Steve Sinofsky, who was ultimately responsible for the ribbons in the hugely successful Office 2007.

Either way, it should do well. It doesn't matter if it's not a big upgrade on Vista, because 64-bit Windows 7 is a very big upgrade for the 80 percent of the market that is still using 32-bit Windows XP.