

## FILM REVIEW

'Slumdog Millionaire' is a fast-paced but old-fashioned tale about the powers of hope and determination

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
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# Mumbai magic

**S**lumdog Millionaire's sweep at the Oscars can be interpreted in so many ways that it's hard to know whether to praise the film for its craftsmanship, denounce it as a blatant grab by Hollywood for a piece of the Bollywood movie market, or simply to sniff high-mindedly at yet another cinematic tradition being appropriated and transformed for mainstream Western audiences, in the manner of *Crouching Tiger, Sleeping Dragon* (臥虎藏龍).

What the movie might achieve in terms of fostering closer movie-making ties with India or in providing an opportunity for Bollywood stars to make a serious bid for a place in Hollywood remains to be seen. What is perfectly evident is that Danny Boyle has directed a magnificent piece of cinematic entertainment. It is perhaps not the groundbreaking work that some have made it out to be — Bollywood has been doing something similar for years, and for that matter, Hollywood did this sort of thing perfectly competently back in the 1930s — but there is an energy and emotional commitment to the characters in *Slumdog Millionaire* that kicks in right at the beginning of the film and simply never lets up.

*Slumdog Millionaire* is an old-fashioned story of the trials of true love in a mad, bad world, the strength of the human spirit, the power of hope, and the belief, against all the odds, that things will work out in the end. What it is not is a story about life in



the slums of Mumbai.

The film tells the story of Jamal and Selim, two roguish boys from these slums. Their mother is killed in inter-communal violence, they pick up with an orphan girl, Latika, and survive the many perils that life on the streets presents. Selim finds survival through participation in the gangland culture of the slums, and Jamal finds love with Latika. Needless to say, the path of true love never runs smooth. Ultimately it is through Jamal's participation in a game show that offers cash prizes for correctly answering general knowledge questions that he finally gets the chance of a lifetime and sets the impoverished of the slums from which he emerged dancing in elation.

This is a modern-day fairy tale, but set against a very exotic background of the Mumbai slums. The story, with its young and occasionally rather dense hero, who shines out like a beacon of goodness and light, as all around the strong feed off the weak, has a Dickensian feel. As with Dickens, while a world of intolerable hardship is portrayed, it is also kept at a distance, and even a scene where a young boy has his eyes put out is not the gut-wrenching scene it might have been. Our eye is fixed on whether "our young hero" will escape the same terrible fate.

The game show, which serves to anchor the many flashbacks of Jamal's life that have led him to this point, is a miniature of the film as a whole, with its

suave host Anil Kapoor (Prem Kumar) teasing and bullying Jamal for the delight of the audience, only to see that innocence will eventually triumph, not only in the game show, but also over poverty, corruption and moral turpitude.

The flashbacks provide plenty of color, and Boyle skillfully mixes the humorous with the shocking, walking a line somewhere between gratuitously horrific portrayals of slum life in the style of *City of God* (2002), and the blandly romanticized slum life of *Outsourced* (2006). Boyle also spins a rollicking good yarn, and each episode of Jamal's life does not simply serve to move the story forward, but is often a thoughtfully conceived scenario or charming vignette. These flashbacks are also accompanied by a boisterously carefree score by A.R. Rahman, which takes in musical styles as diverse as bhanga through to Italian opera, underlining the overall theatricality of the production.

While Jamal is the protagonist, he is far from being the most interesting character in the movie. This falls to his brother Selim, to whom it is given to express the more human ambiguities of motive and desire, and portray the grimmer choices of those not buoyed up by love. He is the counterpoint to Jamal the romantic, and his story, though kept in the background, grounds Jamal's in a semblance of the real world.

Jamal, Selim and love interest Latika are played by three different actors at different stages of their lives, but a remarkable degree of continuity is maintained, and there is no sense of disappointment when emerging stars Dev Patel (Jamal) and Freida Pinto (Latika) take over from the real slum kids who were used to play the roles in early childhood. The use of flashback allows us to continually compare the adult with the child, giving the character roles a greater integrity than a linear narrative would allow.

With his clever use of material, Boyle keeps the tone light without ever becoming fluffy or inconsequential, allowing the story to follow Jamal through the type of coincidences that would be ridiculous in any film that lacked *Slumdog's* clever script and tight structure. After all, what some people call coincidence, others call fate, and for all the Jamals of the world, perhaps there is a happy ending being written even as we speak.



Mahesh Khedekar, right, and Mohammed Ismail star in *Slumdog Millionaire*, directed by Danny Boyle.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SERENITY ENTERTAINMENT INTERNATIONAL

## Film Notes

### SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE

DIRECTED BY: DANNY BOYLE

STARRING: DEV PATEL (JAMAL), ANIL KAPOOR (PREM KUMAR), FREIDA PINTO (LATIKA), AZHARUDDIN MOHAMMED ISMAIL (YOUNGEST SALIM), AYUSH MAHESH KHEDEKAR (YOUNGEST JAMAL), RUBIANA ALI (YOUNGEST LATIKA)

RUNNING TIME: 120 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

## OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

### Dragonball: Evolution

This American adaptation of the Japanese manga is being released in Asian markets before hitting screens elsewhere. Justin Chatwin (Tom Cruise's wayward son in *War of the Worlds*) stars as Goku, a geeky student who must gather dragon balls to stave off the forces of evil and save Earth. Somewhere amid all the cacophony is a performance by Chow Yun-fat (周潤發), while James Wong of *The X-Files* and *Final Destination* fame directs. The film claims to have a budget of US\$100 million, but you wouldn't know it from its drab Web site.



### Damage

Directed by the late Louis Malle, this film was first released way back in 1992 to some praise. It's being shown here, uncut for the first time, to capitalize on the more permissive attitude of the Government Information Office's censors. Politician Jeremy Irons falls instantly in lust with his son's fiancée (Juliette Binoche) and from there it's all heavy breathing and heavy consequences, especially when Irons' wife (the Oscar-nominated Miranda Richardson) finds out what is going on. If it makes a bit of money, *Damage* could augur the release of a slew of uncut versions of sex-themed potboilers from the 1990s. *Basic Instinct*, *Showgirls*, *Color of Night*, *Body of Evidence* ... the possibilities are endless.



### The Librarian: The Curse of the Judas Chalice

The third entry in the popular made-for-cable *Librarian* series sees our bookish Indiana Jones-type hero Flynn Carsen (Noah Wyle) travel to New Orleans to battle a bad guy who wants to bring Dracula back to life. Naturally, such resuscitation requires the silver chalice made up of the 30 coins with which Judas betrayed Jesus Christ. Look up this hiChannel promotional screening at the Baixue theater in Ximending from tomorrow.



## A slice and a cut above the rest

Slasher gore and a little bit more mark the latest 'Friday the 13th' franchise as the scariest — and best — to date

BY ADAM GRAHAM

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, DETROIT

The *Friday the 13th* films were never high art. Most of them, in fact, are awful. Driven by a senseless killing machine whose motives had long-since lapsed, they are basically vehicles for little more than gratuitous nudity, gory violence and maybe a few cheap scares.

The series reboot is much the same, but it's easily the most effective — and scary — entrant in the franchise. The familiar elements are there — the flesh-baring teens, the rampant drug use, and yes, that hockey mask-wearing psycho named Jason — but director Marcus Nispel, who also helmed 2003's brutally efficient *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake, delivers the goods while cutting back on the campiness that turned the franchise into a winking

parody of itself. (He also lets Jason run this time, and it turns out a speedy Jason is far more menacing than one who could be outrun by a couch potato.)

By now, you know the drill: A group of teens go into the woods to have sex and smoke weed, and their plans are ruined by a goalie with a chip on his shoulder. They're picked off one by one — usually in order of who disrobes or dopes up first — leading to a showdown between the most virtuous teens and Jason himself. You can set your watch by it.

But this *Friday the 13th* brings the tone back to that of an actual scary movie, and doesn't soften Jason by offering him a sympathetic backstory. It swiftly boils down the action of the first three films (fun fact: Jason never donned his iconic hockey mask until the

series' third film) into a lean 97 minutes, and wraps up before overstaying its welcome.

Like its predecessors, no one will confuse *Friday the 13th* with *Masterpiece Theatre*. But for pure, bloody escapism, it's a slice to the jugular.

## Film Notes

### FRIDAY THE 13TH

DIRECTED BY: MARCUS NISPEL

STARRING:

JARED PADALECKI (CLAY MILLER), DANIELLE PANABAKER (JENNA), AMANDA RIGHETTI (WHITNEY MILLER), TRAVIS VAN WINKLE (TRENT), AARON YOO (CHEWIE)

RUNNING TIME: 97 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY



You know the drill.

PHOTO COURTESY OF UP