

# An ode to Bollywood

ARTHUR J PAIS on Nitin Kakkar's *Filmistaan*

It might have missed an award or two at the NYIFF, but Nitin Kakkar's *Filmistaan*, an ode to Hindi films and a celebration of a bond that could transcend nationalities, was a clear favorite at the festival. It received sustained applause for several minutes after the show, and more applause followed when the audience was reminded that it had won the best Hindi film National Award in India.

Some viewers in New York said if there were a people's award, Kakkar's movie would have run with it.

"I consider a film successful only when it reaches an audience," said Kakkar.

The film has indeed found a distributor and could be out in the multiplexes in India within weeks. But making the film and raising money for it was far from easy, the first time filmmaker said: "Especially when you have no stars in it

years and though the latter worked as an assistant director, he was also looking around for meaty character roles.

Several key actors in the film are also from the prestigious National School of Drama — alma mater to generations of word-class actors from Naseeruddin Shah to Nawazuddin Siddiqui — Kakkar added.

He said despite many offbeat films doing well at the box-office in recent years, producers were not interested in his project mainly because of lack of glamour and star power.

"But there are people who say, 'Let us make a Bollywood film,' he said, adding, he found one such backer from Mathura.

"In India nobody really reads a script," Kakkar said, "script narration then becomes very crucial." He narrated the story of his project with a condom joke and everything began to fall in place.



Filmistaan

and the usual popular ingredients."

The film has actors Sharib Hashmi, Kumud Mishra, Gopal Datt, and Inaamulhaq in key roles.

It tells the story of a Bollywood buff, Sunny (Hashmi), who is working as an assistant director, but continues to fantasize about becoming a movie star. He is thrown out at every audition, but won't give up his passion for the movies.

When Sunny goes with an American crew to remote areas in Rajasthan to work on a documentary, a terrorist group from across the Indian border kidnaps him to secure the Americans as hostages.

The twist comes when Sunny realizes that the house in which he is confined belongs to a dealer in pirated Bollywood films, which he brings home every time he crosses the border.

Soon, an unlikely friendship and bond develops between the two ending in a thriller like climax fraught with unforeseen consequences for the bad guys.

The movie might have cost the fraction of an average Bollywood film, but it does not look like a film made on a shoe-string budget. And with its pulsating sound track and appealing performances, it becomes an instant winner.

Kakkar, who also wrote the screenplay of *Filmistaan*, said that he knew Hashmi (who played a small role in *Slumdog Millionaire*) for

years and though the latter worked as an assistant director, he was also looking around for meaty character roles.

He echoed those thoughts in discussion with journalists and audience members at the New York screening of his film.

In New York, he also said he had been thinking of making a film about the possibility of friendship between ordinary Indians and Pakistanis for years.

In one of the poignant scenes in the film a very old hakim talks about his yearning to see Amritsar where he had grown up. And Sunny talks of his grandfather who continues to talk about his Lahore years.

Kakkar recalled how his own grandfather, who had migrated from Lahore, had continued for years talking about Lahore and his desire to visit the city of his youth.

Small-budget films like *Filmistaan* are rarely shown widely in North America. But if any distributors had watched the applause the film received in Los Angeles and New York, he might change his mind and look for a sleeper hit.



The Only Real Game

## More than a game

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from Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi — a princess, writer and playwright and a fierce critic of Indian Army role in her state — who died two years ago.

The film has been dedicated to her, and her presence in it is a key element.

However, her son Somi Roy, a film archivist and New York resident, who has not yet seen the film, says her mother withdrew her support for the project and thought the filmmakers had not understood the tortured history of her state.

Though he was associated with the film and later maintained a distance, he said he had not been shown it.

"I was distressed to learn that the film also has interviews of my late mother M K Binodini Devi and is also dedicated to her," he said. "While her presence and name may play well with audiences in India who may be led into thinking she is a willing participant in the film, my mother's request was that she not be featured in the film. This was communicated and been discussed before so I have asked for the removal of the dedication and those sections that feature her."

But Bank, an Oscar-nominated filmmaker (*Last Dancer*, *Harlan County*), said Binodini never communicated her displeasure or made the request she be not part of the film.

"Anyone who sees my film will see how happily she is involved in telling this story," she said. "Roy is making the protest but his mother is not around to clarify..."

Roy said, "I was — and still am according to our contract — one of the producers of the film. Our agreement was for the film to be shown to me before it went out, so I could make sure that all the friends, family and supporters I gathered there to make the shoots, as well as the baseball camps there possible are protected in Manipur. As I have not been shown the film I cannot say for sure what is in the film and what is not. But there is concern from State officials coming to me now that I have not seen the film as I had assured them would be the case, and that there might be frames in it that are not acceptable and may put people who took part in it in jeopardy."

He said, "Moreover, my mother felt that she had interviews of her grabbed 'hobe-hobe laklaga namsinkhi' as she put it, meaning, they came in a great hurry and imposed it, which explains why she not only not sign any release, but specifically asked that she not be included in the film. This was a request I conveyed to our group on several occasions. To then, knowingly, dedicate the film to her not only misrepresents her wishes, (it) will mislead people in India and, especially, in Manipur into believing that she supported the film. This is unacceptable. I find it cynical, manipulative and exploitative of my late mother and her standing in India."

Bank said she would gladly take the film not only to Indian film festivals, but also to the people in Manipur: "Binodini gave a great embrace to the film right from the start and she had a very positive and affectionate attitude towards it."

The filmmaker also said her film told a larger story and could appeal to anyone across the world.

She said, "There are neighborhoods in America that are facing their own wars, dangerous situations caused by drugs and crime. Baseball, in our film, provides an experience that is opposite to frustration and fear. It brings together the people, gives them a vision, in addition to providing entertainment and fun."

But Roy is not satisfied.

He said, "I find it very offensive that one would attempt to sell the film to audiences in India this underhanded way. It undermines the intelligence of the people there as well as here, in addition to damaging my mothers integrity and memory. I mean, how easy do they think people are over there to think they can get away with this so easily?"