

SCREEN

Edited by Clarence Tsui
claretsui@scmp.com



Deepika Padukone (left) and Shahrukh Khan (right) star in the Bollywood musical comedy *Om Shanti Om*. The film, shown as part of the HKIFF's annual Summer Pops event, has generated a buzz among film-goers. Photo courtesy of HKIFF

It is close to midnight and a steady stream of film-goers are emerging from the Grand Cinema. Even though it's a Sunday night, the exiting throng is bubbling with excitement over the movie they've watched, part of the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF).

"It's not unusual to see a full HKIFF screening, but it's surprising to see such a positive reaction from the audience," says Li Cheuk-to, the festival's artistic director.

The film being shown is *Om Shanti Om*, Farah Khan's no-holds-barred Bollywood musical that combines the trademark all-singing, all-dancing sequences with unfettered romantic melodrama.

"You don't often see film festival screenings generating such enthusiasm – people were really swaying and tapping along with the film," says Li.

Such fervour for Bollywood productions is behind the HKIFF's decision to showcase four Indian productions at the festival's annual Summer Pops event. A screening of *Om Shanti Om* will be followed by *Chak De! India* (in which Indian cinematic icon Shahrukh Khan plays a sports coach trying to form a group of hockey players into a formidable team); *Life in a... Metro* (a contemporary romantic comedy set in Mumbai) and *Omkara* (Vishal Bharadwaj's remake of *Othello*, set as a drama about a band of outlaws in Uttar Pradesh).

It's not the first time Bollywood productions have taken centre stage at the HKIFF. *Don*, a thriller starring Khan, was featured at last year's festival.

Li also points out that in 1998, the programme included a section on Song and Dance in Indian Cinema, which showcased 13 films – the oldest one produced in 1936. The films were shown to celebrate what he describes as "films which seek to shamelessly please audiences".

"It has always been the type of film ignored by the festival circuit. [Our efforts] have always been about introducing audiences to something new, in what we call world cinema," he says.

Hong Kong audiences could certainly do with more exposure to Bollywood productions, or some of the regional variations, such as the Tamil-language, Chennai-based Kollywood film productions.

While such films have achieved a

large niche in some overseas markets – particularly Malaysia, Singapore and, to a lesser extent, Britain and the US – in Hong Kong they have yet to become a cultural phenomenon. Even the biggest hits are unable to secure a general release in our cinemas. The attention generated elsewhere by Indian stars such as Shahrukh Khan, Amitabh Bachchan, Hrithik Roshan and Aishwarya Rai has not been repeated in Hong Kong. Local screenings, like that featuring the

Tamil thriller *Dasaavatharam*, organised by the Tamil Cultural Association, are rare.

However, some small Indian operators are active, among them cultural entrepreneur Anita Garg, whose company, Jade Group, has brought in films such as *Guru* (starring Bollywood's golden couple Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai); *Sarkar* (again featuring Bachchan alongside his father Amitabh); *Krrish* (with Roshan playing an invincible superhero) and *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (a comedy starring Sanjay Dutt).

It's an uphill task to get cinema operators interested in these productions, she says, adding that many are "not receptive" because "it doesn't make business sense to feature them".

The unconventional length of these films – *Om Shanti Om* and *Guru* both come in at just under 170 minutes, while *Krrish* is over three hours long – is another factor, says Garg. The length means fewer screenings per day and therefore less turnover.

"This is one of the reasons why the price of film tickets [at the Bollywood screenings] is much higher," says Larry Parmanand,

former president of the Indian Association Hongkong. "Cinemas here want to do five shows. If you do only three, you're paying double the rent," says Parmanand.

The Tamil Cultural Association, Jade Group and their local counterparts are selling tickets to their screenings at nearly twice the standard ticket price. Admittance to *Singh is Kinning* – a romantic comedy that the Jade Group will screen at Golden Gateway – ranges from HK\$120 to HK\$180 per person.

"Tickets here are usually HK\$60 to HK\$70 each – and on Tuesdays it could be HK\$30 or HK\$40. When you put that alongside HK\$180, even I'd think twice," Garg says.

Garg says her aim is for her films – Indian films in general – to have a more sustained run in cinemas, but so far this has eluded her.

"We hope to screen movies for a week, or every Sunday, so there would be a regularity," she says.

"If that happens, ticket prices will come down and more people will go to the cinemas," Garg says, adding that many of those who watch these films don't go to the theatres for that celluloid fix.

"When the films come out on [pirated] DVD two days after the

It's not easy for Indian films to find acceptance among local audiences

Gary Mak, associate director, Broadway Cinematheque

release at HK\$20, it's much cheaper than buying a ticket from us."

Driven by word-of-mouth, and given the nature of these sporadic screenings, Garg says her company is showing films on "a very ad hoc basis".

However well-received the films are at special events, mainstream Chinese audiences are slow to buy into Bollywood mania.

"If it's a film by Shahrukh Khan, a lot of Chinese will go – they are all crazy about him," says Garg. Her point is illustrated by comments made in Hong Kong blogs about Khan, who is described simply as "SRK", while the HKIFF's promotional material dubs him as "the Andy Lau of India".

However, films without Khan have not caught on.

"If it's not an SRK film, it's mainly Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans or Nepalis going to see these films," says Garg.

Gary Mak Sing-hei, associate director of art-house cinema Broadway Cinematheque, says "it's not easy for Indian films to find acceptance among local audiences". He cites the way mainstream commercial distributors overlooked *Lagaan*:

Once Upon a Time in India. "People tend to gravitate towards films from places like South Korea or Eastern Europe," he says.

Only a few recent films with Indian casts were screened at his cinema, Mak adds. For example, Paul Mayeda Berges' directional debut *The Mistress of Spices* – hardly the uber-kitsch musical one expects of Bollywood.

Garg, however, declines to second the notion that a Eurocentric slant among local audiences is running against her efforts to boost Bollywood's presence in Hong Kong.

"Maybe that would be too harsh a word to use," she says, but quickly adds, "although I do wonder at times."

It will be interesting to see if any of her concerns are evident at the HKIFF screenings later this month.

HKIFF's Bollywood Fever is part of the Summer Pops showcase – details at hkiff.org.hk. *Singh is Kinning* is screening tomorrow (9pm) and Sunday (6pm) at Golden Gateway, and Saturday (9pm) at UA Whampoa. For ticket details call 2366 7725



Akshay Kumar (centre) stars in *Singh is Kinning*. Photo courtesy of Jade Group

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Film studies: Olympics

Clarence Tsui

Organisers of the Beijing Games present it as embodying a universal ideal captured in the slogan, "One World, One Dream". But nationalism has always been a driving force behind the Olympics.

Nationalism also pervades many films made about the Games or athletes. The first that comes to mind is *Olympia*, Leni Riefenstahl's stunning eulogy to the 1936 Olympics. But the film is widely regarded as having given a mythical sheen to the proceedings, reflecting the Nazi regime's intention of making the Berlin Games a showcase of German might.

Kon Ichikawa's *Tokyo Olympiad*, a documentary on the 1964 Games, was lauded for focusing on atmospherics and the human side of the event rather than hackneyed celebration of athletic heroes. Unsurprisingly, the Japanese government – which financed it in the hope of showcasing the country's post-war renaissance – demurred at the result. It forced Ichikawa to shelve the 170-minute epic and return with a refocused 90-minute version.

Mao Zedong said explicitly (at the Yanan Forum on Art and Literature in 1942) that art was part of the revolutionary machine. In other words, it had a propaganda role. Films with a message had to be

made when needed. What better way of stoking nationalist fervour, to herald the Beijing Games, than with the story of Liu Changchun, the sprinter who in Los Angeles, in 1932, became the first Chinese athlete to take part in the Olympics?

In *The One Man Olympics*, Hou Yong's officially endorsed film about Liu's journey to America, he is shown as defying the Japanese occupiers' order for him to represent the puppet state of Manchukuo. Liu criticised cynical officials of the Kuomintang government for not helping him to travel to California. During a tortuous two-week journey across the Pacific, he trained ceaselessly, scolded his coach for dancing with an American woman, and showed his prowess in a sprint on the ship's deck.

Some twists and turns are fictionalised. But it's not the first time the life of a sporting icon has been reworked to fit a feel-good agenda. *Jim Thorpe – All American*, the 1951 Warner Brothers film starring Burt Lancaster, is a biopic of the native American athlete who won the pentathlon and decathlon at the Stockholm Olympics in 1912. He was then stripped of his medals, accused of being a "professional", having earned money playing American football a few years earlier.

The decision was only revoked in 1983, three decades after Thorpe's



death. *All American* does touch on, briefly, his struggles with racism and the film attempts to bring closure to the case by depicting him as an exemplar of American values with his pursuit of excellence.

What it does not dwell on is Thorpe's later years, when he struggled to make a living. He played native American chiefs in westerns and was so destitute he could ill afford medical treatment when diagnosed with lip cancer in 1950. His wife was quoted in the *New York Times* then as saying Thorpe "has often been exploited". This is not addressed in *All American*.

Similarly, *The One Man Olympics* ends in 1932, without showing how Liu – who became a top sports official in the People's Republic after 1949 – was banished to a cattle farm during the Cultural Revolution, and was rehabilitated only after the fall of the Gang of Four.

***The One Man Olympics* opens next Thursday**

Review – Going Out page 1

Also showing: Michelle Loo

Phoebe Cheng

It's not often that someone says no to a screen role because of what she's asked to wear – especially if it's in a romantic comedy. Michelle Loo Mik-suet, however, struggled when producers of *La Lingerie* approached her with what would become her big-screen debut – because it meant wearing only a girdle in one scene.

"Guess how many times I declined the offer [of the role]," she says. The Commercial Radio DJ says she's a liberal but is concerned about the effect of flesh baring on her public image.

She accepted the role after hearing the theme of the story: she plays the unmarried aunt of the film's protagonist, an underwear researcher played by Steph Tang Lai-yan.

Loo says she was moved by the character, a single woman who reviews her feelings about life and love.

According to Loo, wearing little was not the biggest challenge when shooting the film – rather, it was having to work in tandem with others.

"What you see on screen is the contribution of many people," she says.

Loo was cast in *La Lingerie* because the producers wanted her to bring her robust, no-nonsense

public persona to her character. The keen film buff says she's new to acting and her work on *La Lingerie* has shown her how difficult – yet enjoyable – acting is. "It was fun to work with [actor Wong] You-nam and Steph. I was involved in three scenes but there was a lot of preparation... I had to practise a lot on how to express the inner feelings of the character," she says.

"I want to try different things and this is a chance for me to gain more experience and exposure in a broader range of things."

Loo insists her parts in *La Lingerie* and *Lady Cop and Papa Crook* – a new film by Felix Chong Man-keung and Alan Mak Siu-fai which will be released next month – are a diversion, and that her radio career takes precedence.

"My job at the radio station is always my first priority. I won't take jobs that need me to work before 10am [when her three-hour show ends]," she says.

"I don't want other jobs interrupting my job at the radio station. Playing a role in a film is for fun but I'm not going to treat it as a life-long career."

***La Lingerie* opens tomorrow**

Review – Going Out page 1

