

Cut the cliché, make the cut

Last week, a festival in London showcased desi movies that go beyond the Bollywood formula to an encouraging response. Is 'independent' Indian cinema on its way to becoming a global cultural force?

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Walking through London's Highbury and Islington station to get on the tube, you will catch sight of a poster of *Kites*, the Hrithik Roshan crossover hit that never was. Taking the escalator as you come out at Oxford Circus, a purple poster advertises AR Rahman's concerts this weekend at the O2 and Wembley arenas.

To take public transport in London or to read the breathless reports in Indian newspapers about how Bollywood has made it in the West — that all it needs is the Indian version of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* to tip it over the edge and into the mainstream — it's easy to believe Indian cinema really has arrived. We're a global cultural force. Bollywood can and will take over the world.

And then you read articles calling Bollywood "an industry built on kitsch and cliché (where) acting ability often seems to languish in a distant fourth place". Written last month by *The Times*' man in Mumbai, these words sum up the Western attitude to Hindi films as overlong

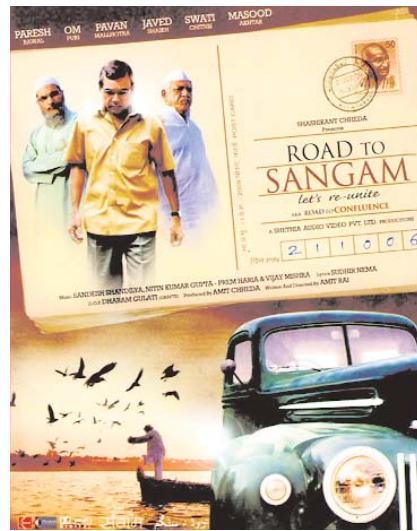
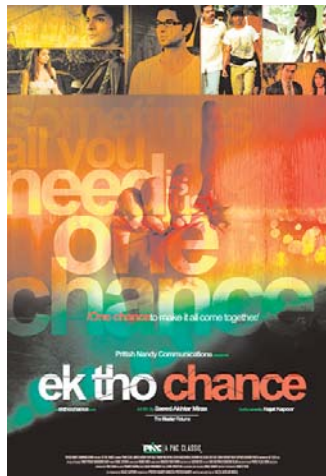
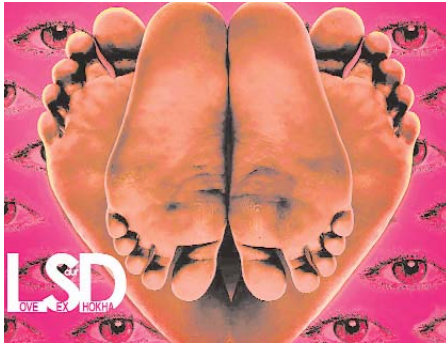
"We should not fashion our films into what we believe Europe would like to see. Because Europe doesn't give a damn"

kitsch-fests. The fact that even mainstream Bollywood movies have ceased to be three hour sagas, multi-genre or clichéd notwithstanding, the impression continues to be that Indian cinema is not to be taken seriously.

Cary Rajinder Sawhney put together the London Indian Film Festival — which ran from July 15 to 20 — specifically to challenge these notions. The festival screened six "independent" Indian films at various locations that ranged from central London to the diaspora-filled suburbs and the response has been encouraging. In the run up to the festival, full page features came out in mainstream newspapers talking about Dibakar Banerjee's *Love Sex aur Dhokha* — the opening film — albeit playing up the somewhat inaccurate "first Bollywood movie with a sex scene" angle.

"Bollywood has never really crossed over," says Sawhney, who programmes Indian films for the London Film Festival, has been involved with promoting Indian films in the UK for over 15 years and has wanted to set up this festival for as long. But why should it cross over, he asks. "It's a separate species of cinema. Why should white people bother when it's not made for them?"

The idea behind the festival, according to Sawhney, was to get critics interested in Indian cinema that went beyond the common understanding of Bollywood. Sawhney cites the example of Iranian films. As world cinema buffs know, Iranian films are exemplary in their ability to excite international audiences. What most do not know, however, is that the Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami films we are thrilled about are not what ordinary Iranians watch. They,



IT'S DIFFERENT: Movies like (clockwise from above) *Vihr*, *Last Chance Mumbai*, *LSD*, *Road To Sangam* and *Dev.D* are making international audiences sit up and take notice

like us, get their kicks from populist mainstream fare. "This isn't about art cinema," says Sawhney. "Adoor Gopalakrishnan is art cinema. This is about a whole genre that isn't being talked about. Not art, not new wave, but independent cinema."

That title, however, is problematic. Independent cinema is an American term to describe films made outside the prevailing studio system. In Mumbai, the studio system is a relatively new phenomenon. Yash Raj Films became the mass-production studio it is now less than a decade ago. The various corporate bodies that fund films came about in

the early 2000s. Before that, when an excitable diamond merchant gave some guy a briefcase filled with currency notes to make a movie, all films were independent. Even today, the films Sawhney is showcasing include *LSD*, produced by Balaji, one of the biggest studios in the country, and *Dev.D*, produced by UTV, a similar behemoth.

LSD's director Dibakar Banerjee, who was in London for the opening, defines independent cinema as those films that reflect "the independence of the director. If he does not have to bow to the wishes of a committee and their power point presentations, then you will have independent cinema." Importantly, he says that these films should be what Indian audiences want to see, not a cynical attempt to fashion our films into what we believe Europe would like to see. "Because", he says, "Europe

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doesn't give a damn."

This is indeed the real test of Sawhney's festival: will LIFF appeal to a larger audience than those that come from a South Asian background? Early signs are heartening. Mainstream media attention led to a good opening night. And later screenings, even those in the *desi* heart of Brentford in Hounslow, were reasonably well-attended — and not just by Indians.

According to Sawhney, the important thing is for critics to take notice of a new movement. The idea is for the festival to eventually become a venue for arthouse cinema distributors to come to find exciting, fresh, intelligent Indian films. Banerjee, whose *LSD* has not seen a release in the UK, hopes to find distributors here who will take the film to arthouse venues rather than releasing it through Indian distributors who would give it a two-week run in the Indian-dominated suburbs of Southall, Hounslow and Wembley.

Having said that, there have been past attempts at promoting alternative Indian cinema that came, were seen, and conked out. For example, *Filmi Fundas*, 'a festival of new Indian cinema' in London, managed editions in 2000 and 2001 before packing up. Then there was *Beyond Bollywood*, a part of the *ImagineAsia* festival in 2002 that showcased 'contemporary independent films' like *Bhopal Express* and *Kandukondain Kandukondain*. Even *ImagineAsia* itself, put together by Sawhney and billed as an 'eight-month celebration of South Asian Cinema', never managed a second edition despite being seen by as a "major achievement culturally, politically and even to some extent commercially" by its organisers, the British Film Institute.

Sawhney and Banerjee both recognise this. As Banerjee puts it, "This is only the beginning of a beginning. The festival is good, but it is the films that will change the tide. And it's up to us to deliver the films." But considering the sort of films that have found both producers and an audience over the last few years, finding films to showcase is one thing Cary Sawhney doesn't worry about. ■

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PERSONAL RECOMMENDATION

MALENA (2000)

Director: Giuseppe Tornatore
Language: Italian

Cast: Monica Bellucci, Giuseppe Sulfaro, Luciano Federico, Matilde Piana



First things first. Monica Bellucci has never looked more ravishing in a film. Now that we've got that out of the way, here are the other reasons *Malena* works. The film is set in a picturesque Sicilian town during World War II. Renato, a teenage boy who has a crush on Malena (Bellucci), discreetly follows her all over the town.

Malena's husband as well as most of the young men in town have gone to the front, leaving the attractive woman to fend for herself while a line of lecherous old men proposition her and jealous townswomen look down upon her and spread canards. Every stroll Malena takes through town turns into a spectacle, accompanied by the men's lustful looks and their envious wives' gossip. Meanwhile, young Renato keeps a voyeuristic watch over her as a self-appointed guard.

Narrated by Renato, *Malena* is a heart-rending and captivating story, if you manage to take your eyes off Bellucci, that is.

Tornatore, who also gave us the hit *Cinema Paradiso* years back, is a genius with the camera, bringing to life the old Italian town and all its characters. Giuseppe Sulfaro does a fabulous job as Renato, the horny teenaged stalker who spies on Malena's every move and indulges in erotic fantasies about her. Bellucci herself doesn't have much to say in the film, but she has plenty to show... and boy does she show it. Overall, a sentimental and mesmerising tale about adolescence and growing up.

WORLDLY WISE

IP MAN (YIP MAN) (2008)

Director: Wilson Yip
Language: Chinese

Cast: Donnie Yen, Hiroyuki Ikeuchi, Fan Siu-Wong, Xiong Dailin

If you're a Bruce Lee fan, this biopic about Lee's teacher Ip Kai-Man will leave you enthralled. Devoid of all the 'flying' stunts reminiscent of Chinese martial arts films like *Hero* and *Crouching Tiger...* *Ip Man* brings you the real deal, coupled with liberal doses of salt. Ip Man invented a style of Chinese kung fu called 'wing chun' and if the fights in the film are to be believed, it packs a punch, literally.

Set in the 1940s during the Japanese invasion of China, the film shows the kung fu prowess of the Ip Man, a well-respected persona in Foshan (Guangdong).

Time and again Ip Man is sought out by students eager to learn from him (he always declines) and by other masters keen to test their abilities, much to the disappointment of his wife.

Eventually, the Japanese come and the city falls to harsh times. Ip Man's skills come to the notice of a Japanese general and the rest is history (with a little distortion).

Donnie Yen mesmerises with his mastery on wing chun, moving smoothly, without breaking a sweat. He has to look good... this is the guy who taught Bruce Lee. While the story is predictable and no doubt exaggerated, the film was popular enough to spur a sequel (*Ip Man 2*). But if you're a martial arts buff, this one's as good as they come.



OUT ON DVD

KICK ASS (2010)

Director: Matthew Vaughn
Language: English

Cast: Aaron Johnson, Nicolas Cage, Mark Strong, Chloë Moretz



Do you think you can be a superhero? If not, watching *Kick Ass* may just change your mind. After a spate of superhero films, *Kick Ass* is as a refreshing look at the world of caped crusaders even as the action-comedy pays homage to comic book heroes.

Aaron Johnson as Dave Lizewski is the nerdy protagonist who orders a weird bodysuit online to dress up as a superhero and battle crime. But the real star of the film is Chloë Moretz as Hit Girl — a profanity-spewing, gravity-defying 11-year-old superhero who has a fetish for weapons. Also watch out for Nicolas Cage in an understated role as the superhero dad.

Young Chloë's violent, foul-mouthed role generated some controversy in the US. An 11-year-old assassin who has no qualms about giving thugs multiple stab wounds while insulting their mothers may come as a shock, but Mandy aka Hit Girl wins you over with her charm and a purple wig.

The film is a fast-paced barrel of laughs and features some breathtaking action sequences, but it's also a parody of the superhero genre and will leave comic-book lovers thrilled. Keep your ears tuned for the track *The Barber of Seville Overture* during the first action scene. It gives you goosebumps.

If superheroes aren't your thing, just watch it for the action. This one makes Jackie Chan and Sly Stallone look like amateurs in Disneyland.