

Film



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Bhaji on the Beach Director: Gurinder Chadha

The most perceptive moment in *Bhaji on the Beach* comes when an elegant Chanel-clad visitor from Bombay (the otherwise under-used Souad Faress) berates Shaheen Khan for clinging so desperately to her fantasies of India as home. It illustrates, as does the Punjab version of 'Summer Holiday' that bubbles away on the soundtrack from time to time, one of the tragedies of our time — the problems experienced by individuals caught between two opposing, or even merging, cultures.

The premise of *Bhaji* is perhaps a little pat for comfort: a group of Indian women take themselves off for a Blackpool holiday, in many cases to escape from the men in their lives. The men follow, literally to the beach front. One woman is tormented by bizarre visions mingling Indian deities in hilariously irreverent contexts. Two boy-crazy teenage girls are chased by two local lads from a burger bar. A young wife and her child are pursued by an abusive husband. Yet another is taking time to sort out her life, having just found out she is pregnant by her West Indian boyfriend. There are enough problems here to keep a mini-series going, but scriptwriter Meera Syal compresses it all into a mere 100 minutes. Director Chadha has a nice eye for Blackpool tack, and the actors show a solidarity and feeling for the characters that make *Bhaji* a memorable experience.

WILLIAM DART

Disclosure Director: Barry Levinson

Barry Levinson's latest movie could be seen as something of a backlash, placing a man (the

unlikely Michael Douglas) as the victim of sexual harassment and a woman (Demi Moore) as the villain. Whether or not Douglas and Demi Moore strain credibility in view of their previous screen roles is a moot point, but *Disclosure* also works as an unsettling commentary on the paranoia and desperation lashing at the business world in the 1990s.

Most of the characters are trapped in glass prisons — Neil Spisak's resourceful office-sets with glass dividing walls are creepily effective. Bars, grids and grills are recurring images. Life is dominated by computer communication: the credits are fed out in typescript, the film is propelled along by e-mail communications, and it's the ubiquitous cellular phone that has a crucial part to play in the denouement. In one riveting scene, Douglas physically enters into the world of virtual reality to retrieve some material, only to confront a computerised Moore determined to destroy the evidence he wants.

Disclosure is not all stunning decor and high tech communications. Paul Attanasio's script, from Michael Crichton's novel, handles the constant bantering and bargaining with a crisp wit, and, in an excellent cast, Roma Maffia as Douglas's tenacious, street-wise lawyer ("She'd change her name to TV Listing to get it in the paper," scoffs one character) is one hell of an advocate.

WILLIAM DART

Go Fish Director: Rose Troche

Gone are the days when to be lesbian meant you had to hang yourself (Shirley MacLaine in *The Children's Hour*), turn dipso in a tweed jacket (Beryl Reid in *The Killing of Sister George*) or have lethal spikes shoot out of your

brogues (Lotte Lenya in *From Russia with Love*). Max, the foxy hero of *Go Fish* (played by Genevieve Turner, who co-scripted the film) is, in her own words, "a carefree, single lesbo looking for love". This is precisely what she does, along with a number of other women, for most of the film.

These women are totally 'out' and making their own decisions about life. From time to time an overhead camera catches a cluster of faces rapping on a variety of subjects, most hilariously on what might be the best word for the female genitalia ('honey-pot' is the general consensus). The film's freewheeling, often elliptical style, punctuating the narrative with potent recurring images, gives it a marvellous buoyancy.

There's no room for guilt — in fact, a scene in which one woman is berated by an assembly of political dykes for having sex with a man seems rather ironically intended. The women can be bitchy (Max in the coffee shop), flirtatious

(the coming together of Max and Ely) and they don't put up with no shit (Evy's confrontation with her family). Well, as the song says: "That's Life..."

WILLIAM DART

The Sum of Us Directors: Kevin Dowling and Geoff Burton

Harry Mitchell (Jack Thompson) and his son Jeff (Russell Crowe) are a sort of odd couple, united in their quest for love; but Harry is looking for a woman, Jeff for someone of his own sex.

The Sum of Us bubbles along entertainingly enough. Perhaps there are a few too many deathless quips ("Life would be pretty shitty without plumbers," is just one) and Jack Thompson's Shirley Valentine-style confidences to the camera very quickly get tiresome, but the film is undeniably general-audience-friendly.

The movie has already received some flak across the Tasman for its exteriorised view of gay life, and certainly all the minor characters are pretty ineffectual. Jeff's love interest Greg (John Polson) has a Mum and Dad sketched in broad enough strokes to go straight into *Fast Forward*; Harry's computer date, Joyce, spunkily played by Deborah Kennedy, is never allowed to come fully to terms with either Jeff's gayness or Harry's health crisis.

Where *The Sum of Us* touches the heart is in the black-and-white flashbacks that criss-cross the film. They tell the story of Jeff's Gran and her relationship with her lover Mary, right through to their wrenching separation in the last weeks of their lives. Alas, they make the rest of the movie look like the cutesy Broadway play it once was.

WILLIAM DART

Quiz Show Director: Robert Redford

A few years back, American mainstream cinema was obsessed with exorcising the shame and guilt that was the Vietnam War. Now it seems we should be equally horrified by an exposé of corruption in television quiz shows of the 50s.

While the shows are a curious phenomenon, is it at all surprising some were quite cynically 'rigged' for entertainment value, at the dictate of ratings and an unscrupulous sponsor (here played by a bristling Martin Scorsese)? Indeed,

it's an indication of the tremendous naivety of Eisenhower's America that they were taken so seriously anyway.

Quiz Show is a worthy enough film, although Redford as director manages more of a stinging critique of Yankee materialism in a minute-long scene in a Chrysler showroom than he does in the remaining 130 odd minutes of the movie. Apart from a virtuoso performance from John Turturro, as the Jewish nerd Quiz-King deposed by the charm-schooled Ralph Fiennes, the pleasures are fleeting: Paul Schofield in his first film role for decades, Barry Levinson as a egregious talk-show host and the snappy recreation of its period.

WILLIAM DART

Hammers over the Anvil Director: Ann Turner

Russell Crowe plays it straight in his second film of the month — and he's a hunky sight in the opening scene, frolicking bare-back and bare-butt with his horses in the river.

Developed from Alan Marshall's stories of the same name, Ann Turner's film gives us something of a teenager's rites of passage in the South Australian outback in 1910. We see everything through the eyes of the young and crippled Marshall, who is already an enthusiastic diarist — his idolising of the lusty East Driscoll and his crush on the soigné Grace McAllister. We see him with his peers and, with the batty Mrs Bilson (a marvellously theatrical Alethea McGrath), squatting in pigsties, hiding from her irate daughter, and getting together to smoke the cane she strips off the verandah chairs.

Hammers avoids much of the sentimentality which might have seemed part and parcel of such an Edwardian saga, helped to a great extent by Alexander Outhred's clear-eyed performance as Alan. An eye for period detail assists too, from the jollity of the Turalla Pig Fair, boyhood wanking in the long grass, and stinking out the Turalla Catholic Ball by scattering wattle seeds on the floor. Only towards the end, does it come a bit unhinged, as the minor *Lady Chatterly* sub-plot has its way. The outcome of the affair between Grace and East is brutal, shocking, and jars in a film whose strength lies in keenly observed understatement.

WILLIAM DART

The River Wild Director: Curtis Hanson

Can't you hear them saying in a Wilshire Boulevard boardroom: "Here's the perfect holiday film — *Deliverance*, family style"? A few years back, Curtis Hanson had a sweet

suburban couple terrorised by their home-help in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*. Now a new family is white-water rafting down a river with not one, but two psychotics in tow.

Of course it's a treat to watch Meryl Streep do her schtick (now adding sign language to her extensive list of exotic accents), but this is an assembly-line thriller with far too few twists.

In keeping with a film that has such a strong environmentalist agenda, Robert Elswit's camera makes the most of the Montana and Oregon locations. And if Jerry Goldsmith's lush score seems rather obsessed with endless variations of 'The Water is Wide', a pleasantly lean version of the folk song by the Cowboy Junkies at the end of the film atones in full.

WILLIAM DART

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