

Article Details

HEAVEN ON EARTH Premieres at TIFF'08

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Thursday, September 11, 2008 10:23 AM

Deepa Mehta's latest offering, *Heaven on Earth* is far from the depiction of paradise. On the flip side it captures stark realities of the immigrant experience, isolation and domestic abuse.



Set in Toronto, the film captures the journey of Chand who is played by Bollywood star Preity Zinta. Chand arrives in Canada from Ludhiana, India equipped with confidence and optimism. But her hopes of a happy married life soon swirl into confusion and desolation as the vibrance of India is replaced by coldness. She is unable to comprehend the harsh behavior of her husband, Rocky (Vansh Bhardwaj) or deal with a domineering mother-in-law (Balinder Johal). Her new house is full to capacity yet devoid of any warmth. Stuck in a loveless marriage, Chand escapes into an imaginary world - a world which is both grainy and colorless. Her only friend is a co-worker Rosa (Yanna McIntosh) who soon figures out that something is amiss. She offers a magical root, assuring Chand that the magic potion would make anyone fall in love with her. "Put it in whatever the bastard drinks," she advises. What follows is inspired by Girish Karnad's play *Naga Mandala*. A King Cobra comes to life in a human yet mythical form. Mehta was struck by the mind numbing stories of immigrant women in abusive relationships and uses imagination as an escapist route for her lead character. The audience may have problems connecting with this metaphorical level.

Even though it is set in the Punjabi South Asian community, Mehta maintains that domestic violence is a universal problem not specific to any community. Speaking about the response of the community Mehta says, "So far they've been fabulous. I love the fact that they realize that it's not something I've made up. Every community has abuse. I love the maturity of our community and am absolutely grateful. We are also responsible to put a stop to this. It is our moral and social responsibility." It remains to be seen how the strong Punjabi community in Canada will react to the film but given the success of all of Mehta's projects the film is sure to grab a lot of attention.

Preity Zinta is excellent with her Punjabi diction even though it's her first ever Punjabi language film. Vansh Bhardwaj, a theatre actor who has been performing *Naga Mandala* is brilliant in his transition from an abusive husband to a snake in a human form. Not just his demeanor but even his eyes become a lethal weapon in a startling performance for a first film. "He's superb, he comes from theatre," says Mehta. "because he comes from theatre, he has the discipline. The method of working is very internal, he goes right into the character with such depth."

Talking about her character in *Heaven on Earth* Preity Zinta says, "There's one dialogue I consistently say in the whole film, "Can I call?" She's lonely and the only person who is friendly to her in the film is Rosa. It's the only time I feel the phrase, "*What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger*," doesn't make any sense. All that abuse but you know this film is also about hope. Chand uses her imagination to find that strength within her and all of us have that strength."

Zinta adds, "It's all about your mind and the will to want to come out of your situation and it could be life threatening. So the film maybe dark and heavy but it also has a light at the end of the tunnel."

Mehta who keeps up the tradition of premiering her film at the Toronto International Film festival describes Zinta as, "incredibly disciplined, very bright and dedicated. Preity is a woman who is not only talented but she also has a social conscience and that really impresses me. She worked so hard it's not easy in -20 degrees, different way of working altogether and she got right into it." The film was shot in winter in Brampton, Niagara Falls and Punjab, India.

Ironically the lack of space in the lives of characters comes out very well in the film especially in contrast to India which is congested. In *Heaven on Earth*, Canada seems confined. A deliberate attempt by Mehta, it brings out the underlying theme of immigration especially for women who leave their families to come and live with joint families. "It's the claustrophobia of the country which isolates you completely that there's no room to breathe," reveals Mehta who says she went through the same experience being an immigrant.