

The Hunt For A Will Shah Rukh Khan Ever

by BHUVAN LALL of LALL ENTERTAINMENT

Almost two decades ago, while in film school in New Delhi, I began wondering if there would ever be an Indian crossover film? By crossover, I mean a film made in India, with Indian talent, which finds global audiences. My professor asked me what would I do after finishing film school. I replied, “to make films that the world sees, beyond India.”

Upon graduating, I continued my attempt to make the Indian crossover film. My career in the entertainment business took me around the world—to major film festivals and trade shows in Hong Kong, Singapore, Cannes, London, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and finally, Los Angeles, California.

In January of this year at the Bombay Palace restaurant in Beverly Hills, I accidentally met well-known Indian filmmaker Shekhar Kapur (*Elizabeth*), who had an interesting theory about crossover films and the future of entertainment. Settling down for lunch he professed, “If India and China come together, Hollywood has had it.” He went on to explain how the numbers were in favor of the two large Asian countries and then delivered his favorite line, “one day Spiderman will remove his mask and there may be an Indian actor underneath it.” The crossover mania turned on its head.

But the idea of an Indian film crossing over to Hollywood is not new. Even Shekhar Kapur’s uncle and mentor, Indian film star Dev Anand, had produced *Guide* with an English version for the international market, which was co-produced and written by Pearl S. Buck and directed by American director Ted Danielewski. Another serious and ambitious endeavor at reaching out to the international market by using mainstream Indian actors (Dharamendra and Zeenat Aman) and Hollywood film stars (Rex Harrison and John Saxon) was *Shalimar*,

Crossover Film From India Play Spiderman?



made by the gifted film director and writer Krishna Shah. Both films flopped miserably.

In 2002, following the success of Aamir Khan’s *Lagaan* in India and Europe and its subsequent nomination for the Academy Awards in the foreign language category, world filmdom began expecting a crossover film. Since *Lagaan*’s nomination, winning an Oscar is becoming a kind of obsession in the Indian film community. For a moment it seemed holding the Golden statue was the only key to opening the floodgates for the crossover film.

Foreign film nominees are selected from a list of films submitted by foreign nations and each country can only submit one film a year. It’s for this reason that several critics in Hollywood have argued that the Academy has failed to recognize the globalization of quality filmmaking. Unlike the Nobel Prize, the Olympics and the international film festival juries, the Oscars are determined by the sensibilities of just the members of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. The organization only has a select group of Indians, such as film producer Ashok Amritraj, as members.

In the history of the Oscars there is no mention of Indian filmmakers, including Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor or even Ritwik Ghatak, besides our actors and technical talent. Yet India has already produced two Oscar winners

and three Oscar-nominated feature films. Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray was awarded a special lifetime achievement Oscar and Bhanu Athaiya was awarded in the Best Costume category for *Gandhi*. *Mother India*, *Salaam Bombay*, and *Lagaan* were nominated for an Oscar in the Foreign Language category. India born filmmaker Ismail Merchant also had a short film, *The Creation of Woman*, nominated for the Oscars in 1960. Two Indian films, *The House that Ananda built* by Fali Bilimoria (1968) and *An Encounter with Faces* by Vidhu Vinod Chopra (1978), both produced by the Government of India’s films division, were nominated in the Documentary Film category.

Hiding behind the Oscars glitz this year was *The Little Terrorist* by Delhi-based filmmaker Ashvin Kumar, which was nominated in the Best Live Action Short category. The 15-minute short film may not have won the award but got the well-deserved nationwide release in cinemas in India.

So will the elusive crossover film from India emerge in the year 2005?

Well-known filmmakers of Indian origin working in the U.S. who have had some success in attempting to crossover projects are Mira Nair, (*Monsoon Wedding*), Gurinder Chaddha (*Bend it like Beckham*) and Deepa Mehta (*Earth*). Given her international reputation and critical acclaim, Nair’s next film *Namesake* will be

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OTHERS

Animation and video games are emerging segments. Indian animation rose to its highest levels in 2004, with dominance in the outsourcing arena. An increased number of downloads of games on mobile phones is likely to open new opportunities for video games companies. With wireless uptake in India growing at an explosive CAGR of more than 80 percent during the past few years, industry players have a new revenue stream and channel for selling their entertainment content.

Indian radio is expected to boom following regulatory corrections in the present license framework. Availability of a larger number of frequencies is expected to drive the segment by 22 percent annually during the next five years.

While the live entertainment segment is growing steadily, music, plagued by piracy, continues to grow at a moderate rate. Several noteworthy measures currently being undertaken by the Indian music industry including tackling piracy, growth in listenership of FM radio, and emergence of newer formats of digital delivery (especially mobile music downloads), are expected to drive the Indian music industry in the coming years.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Convergence is the mantra for the Indian entertainment industry during the next five years. Technology will drive the entertainment industry into the next decade, and its boundaries will be merged with those of the telecommunications and information technology segments, giving rise to a host of value-added features for consumers and new revenue streams for players in each segment. Mobile entertainment, with its ability to dissect the boundaries of time and space, will be the biggest growth driver.

And finally, content is—and will continue to be—the king of entertainment in the future. Securing content rights will reveal the strength of the players across all segments. The challenge will then be to have a regulatory regime that adapts to these advancements.

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worth watching out for as a crossover project. Mehta's *Water* to be released in Cannes could be another contender. Gurinder Chaddha's body of work is evidence enough that she has a feeling for the pulse of an international audience.

In India, the filmmakers like Sanjay Leela Bhansali (*Black*), Ram Gopal Verma (*Company*), Farhan Akhtar (*Dil Chahta Hai*), Karan Johar (*K3G*), Aushotosh Gowariker (*Swades*), and Sudhir Misra (*Haazaron Khawishh*) have already demonstrated their virtuosity and creative control over the cinematic medium. It would be interesting to watch if their next project appeals to audiences overseas.

Today in Hollywood many young Indian filmmakers are launching crossover projects co-starring Hollywood

and Indian film stars and planning to make films that will travel worldwide. India-born Hollywood film producer Deepak Nayar is the leader of the pack and has already blended mainstream Indian films with the classic Hollywood musical in *Bride and Prejudice*. Other filmmakers in Los Angeles, including Sonali Bose, Rashmi Goel, Anirban Roy, Dureyeshwar, Babs Subramaniam, Digvijay Singh, Piyush Dinkar Pandya, Krutin Patel, Vikram Yashpal, Dileep Singh Rathore, Bharat Bala, Sushil Tyagi and Priyanka Kumar, are busy mounting feature films set or shot in India with the world as their market.

Also in Hollywood is producer Brad Listermann, one of the first American filmmakers to experience Indian filmmaking style firsthand by being on the sets of Feroz Khan's *Janasheen*. He is the producer, writer and creator of *My Bollywood Bride*, a potential crossover film. The film stars his wife, Indian actor Kashmeera Shah, who explains her attraction to the crossover genre, "Audiences in the end want a good, entertaining movie. They come to the theatre to be lost for the next hour and a half in the lives of these peo-

ple on the screen and as long as it entertains them, we are fine."

Back at the Bombay Palace restaurant, Shekhar Kapur takes a call from a studio executive as he is approached to direct the next Bruce Willis film, *Solace*. It seems Kapur may finally prove his crossover theory himself for he could one day be directing a future edition of *Spiderman* for Universal Studios starring Indian superstar Shah Rukh Khan that would dominate the Academy Awards and travel worldwide.

As I walk away from my meeting with Kapur in Beverly Hills, the question is no longer "if there will be a crossover film from India, but *how soon* will that be?"

Bhuvan Lall is the President of Lall Entertainment and can be contacted at www.lallentertainment.com. Incidentally, Lall was an instructor at his own film school when Shah Rukh Khan, future Indian superstar, who was then just a college graduate, walked in to study filmmaking.