

**PLUS:** 'Bride and Prejudice' and the new wave of global filmmaking

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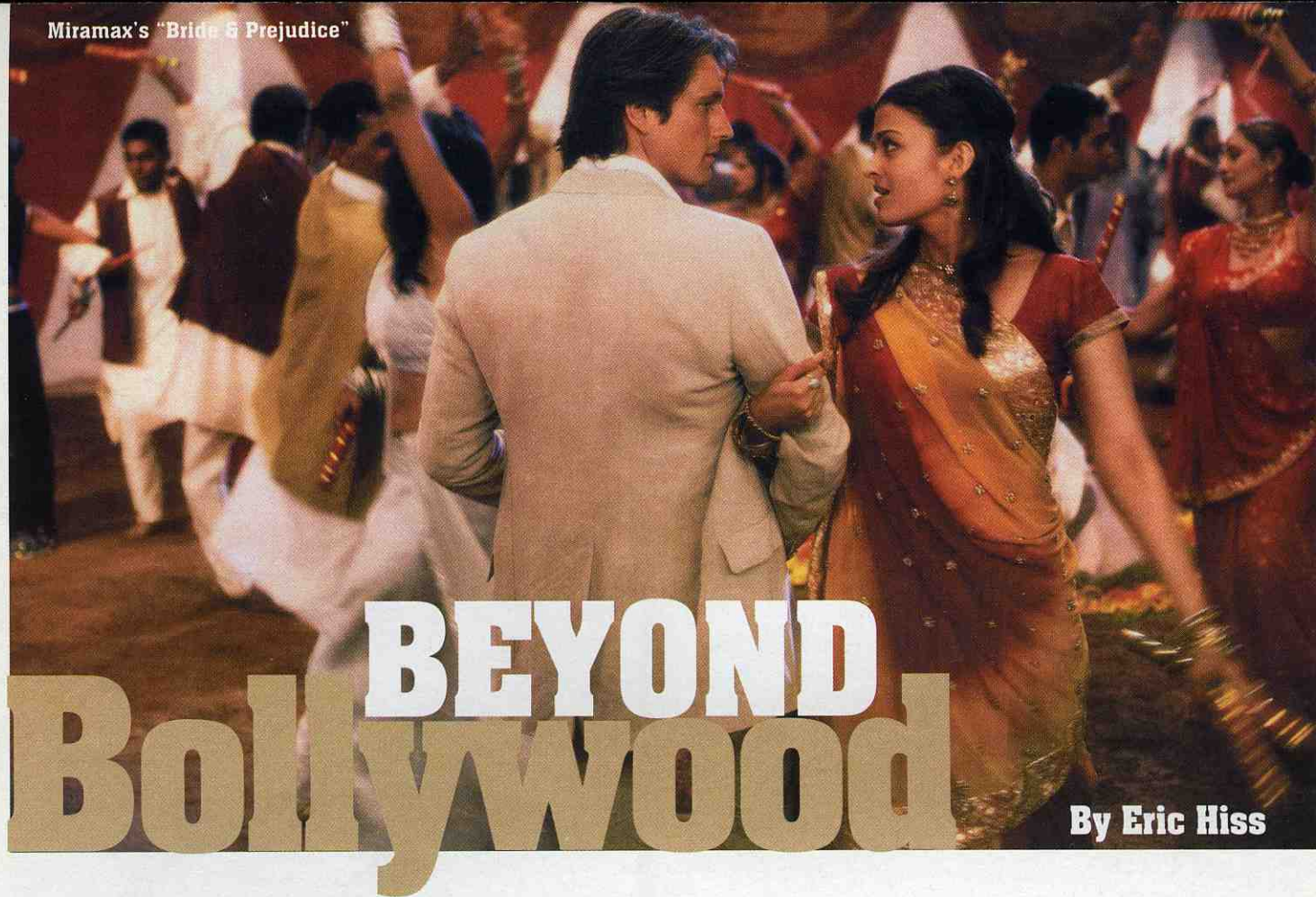
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# BEYOND Bollywood

By Eric Hiss

**C**hoose a random scene from Miramax's upcoming "Bride & Prejudice," and one might mistake the film for the latest Bollywood flick — a kaleidoscope of primary colors erupting on the screen as dancers in saris and silk whirl and posture like temple friezes come to life. But rather than some formulaic, pulpy musical churned out by India's film factory, the city of Mumbai (formerly Bombay), sequences such as these typify director Gurinder Chadha's approach to updating the British literary classic "Pride and Prejudice."

It's also the most recent — and most aptly metaphoric — project to herald an increasing marriage of Hollywood and Bollywood interests. Once worlds apart, both literally and figuratively, the world's two most prominent film industries now increasingly find themselves in bed together, playing co-starring roles in one of the most compelling developments in modern filmmaking.

A rising number of Indian location shoots by Hollywood productions, the rise of a global cinema lexicon by South Asian and diaspora filmmakers and a matching appetite around the world for Indian-inflected stories is fueling these new synergies.

One of the leading lights of this fresh wave is the U.K.-reared Chadha, who shot to stardom Stateside with her 2003 crossover hit "Bend It Like Beckham." The director has been lauded for her ability to tell universal stories through the eyes of immigrants, thereby bridging cultural gaps.

"I conceived 'Bride' as a global film; that's why it takes place on three continents, and I have all these different cultural influences," Chadha says from her home in London. "The character line about people moving from place to place, melding into a new culture — this for me is the most important cultural paradigm happening right now."

The numbers seem to back her up. "Beckham," which Fox Searchlight released domestically, took in \$32.5 million in

## Increasing synergy between Indian filmmakers and Hollywood is creating exciting new global opportunities

North America and \$76.5 million globally, while "Bride" opened Oct. 8 in the No. 1 position at the boxoffice in the United Kingdom and India.

Perhaps the most significant catalyst stoking the rising fortune of Indian-flavored films was Mira Nair's 2002 U.S. release "Monsoon Wedding," a \$2 million film shot in 30 days that washed away any doubt that South Asian subject matter could resonate with global audiences.

The film's success catapulted the director's cachet from art house to studio mainstay, but "Wedding" also whetted the appetite of audiences around the world for the engaging, provocative storytelling found in South Asian-influenced work like Nair's. She has since helmed Focus Features' 2004 release "Vanity Fair," starring Reese Witherspoon, and is set to begin production on the "The Namesake," a project based on the book by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri, which is currently circulating among both Hollywood and Indian A-listers.

"Wedding" also will be coming to Broadway in the form of a musical, with Nair tapped to direct.

"All I can say is, we've come a long way from 'Salaam Bombay!'" the New York-based Nair says, referring to her award-winning 1988 film. "There has always been a huge ocean of talent from India, and Hollywood is just waking up to it."

The success of Chadha and Nair has served to raise the profiles of other Indian filmmakers, including Rahul Bose and Santosh Sivan (who served as director of photography on "Bride"), as well as writer-directors Dev Benegal, Deepa Mehta, Manish Jha and Buddhadev Dasgupta.



Focus Features' "Vanity Fair"

Bose, an icon in India's art house world, is an especially significant figure in the evolution of modern Indian cinema. Best known as an actor and for his starring role in the 2003 U.S. release "Mr. and Mrs. Iyer," he doesn't sing or dance and works primarily in English-language films — in other words, he's definitely not Bollywood. His directorial debut about a Bombay hairdresser who reads minds, the 2001 production "Everybody Says I'm Fine!" was notably the first Indian film in English to secure Hollywood distribution.

On the Hollywood side of the equation, companies like Echo Lake Prods. are actively seeking projects with Indian directors. President Doug Mankoff says that his strategy is to work with foreign directors who want to make American films, and he's particularly interested in South Asian talent.

"There are some absolutely amazing filmmakers in India, and we want to develop long-term relationships with them for a few reasons: They are incredible storytellers, and there is a hunger here for different kinds of stories," he says.

Impressed by Sivan's 1999 production "The Terrorist," Echo Lake is now working with him on a project called "Kerala," along with executive producer Mark Burton, who also has an extensive track record working with South Asian filmmakers. The film, set to shoot next year, is about a clash of cultures between a British colonial and his farm hand in 1930s India.

Christina Marouda, director of the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, confirms a widening interest in these types of films and a trend toward working with Hollywood. "There are film companies that approach us looking for Indian directors who can do English-language projects, so I do foresee more co-productions in the future between U.S. and Indian film entities," she says.

Marouda points to recent changes in Indian banking laws, which have opened up financing opportunities for overseas and Indian productions, as an indicator that more joint ventures are on the way.

In rapidly developing India, another phenomenon — the arrival of the urban multiplex — is fomenting changes that bode well for Hollywood films seeking to penetrate the vast Indian marketplace, as well as for Indian filmmakers developing projects designed for urban audiences whether they are in Mumbai or Burbank.

"Bigger theaters in India are normally reserved for traditional Bollywood films," explains Steve Gravestock, programmer for the Toronto International Film Festival. "Now, smaller producers are salivating at the prospects that the multiplexes present. They clearly benefit smaller films, but that also means they'll be competing with Tom Cruise, too."

Of course, one just doesn't walk into a foreign market like India without first getting guidance from someone with expertise in the region. Indian-American Alpita Patel, a former WMA agent, is one such industry guru representing Indian filmmakers in the United States, as well as helping Hollywood interests navigate India's burgeoning possibilities.

"You just can't ignore a market where there are a half-billion people between the ages of 15 and 25," she says. "Plus, there is talent there — it's just underutilized. There are film directors coming out of India who can absolutely work in the Hollywood studio system, and the next M. Night Shyamalan or Alfonso Cuarón of India might very well be among them."

Other India-watchers, like WMA's David Taghioff, point to another area of rising cooperation between India's

film infrastructure and Hollywood: the services sector. Animation, special effects, production, postproduction and even financing services are increasingly available at more sophisticated levels.

"When you identify an area of the world that allows you to bring down costs and work with good people, things are going to happen," Taghioff says. "That's the case in India, where there are major Hollywood projects happening right now on the hush."

Filmmakers arriving in India will find a welcoming environment for the most part, particularly if they have a local partner. Piracy and corruption are still part of the landscape there, but working with well-regarded local outfits, such as Prasad EFX Labs and India Take One Prods. (which is currently filming an Albert Brooks untitled project for Warner Bros. Pictures), help stack the deck in an overseas filmmaker's favor.

Brad Listerman, writer-producer of "My Bollywood Bride," which wrapped earlier this year in Mumbai, encountered some cultural idiosyncrasies — including a local preference for afternoon call times and loud sets — but overall was pleased with the experience. "Some specifications for equipment are different there, but, for the most part, they have many of the same resources and a tremendous amount of quality technology," Listerman says.

But the biggest co-production story coming out of India is the film "Paani," named for the Hindi word for water. The project will be the most expensive production in India to date. The \$20 million sci-fi epic, set to begin filming next year, will be directed by award-winning Indian filmmaker Shekhar Kapur (1998's "Elizabeth") and executive produced by author/wellness guru Deepak Chopra and the production company set up by his son and daughter, Gotham and Mallika, respectively.

Some of Hollywood's biggest below-the-line names are involved in "Paani," including producer Barrie M. Osborne ("The Lord of the Rings" trilogy), scribe Andrew Niccol (1998's "The Truman Show"), Academy Award-winning set designer John Myhre (2002's "Chicago") and composers A.R. Rahman and Dave Stewart.

Set to shoot in Mumbai and Bangalore with a "Blade Runner" feel, the story leaps 20 years into the future when wars are fought not over oil but the lack of fresh water. Kapur enthusiastically calls the film "the 'Crouching Tiger,' of India," referring to Sony Pictures Classics' 2000 Oscar winner "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon."

Gotham Chopra says that their formula is simply to take some of the most-esteemed people from the West and bring them to India. "This proves our thesis," he says. "The industry is starting to recognize India as the new frontier."

"Bride & Prejudice" is scheduled to open in limited release in New York and Los Angeles Feb. 11.