

Game Show and Tell: "Slumdog Millionaire"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 27 January 2009 16:00

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SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE

Admitting that you have serious reservations about *Slumdog Millionaire* is a bit like admitting you have reservations about ice cream and rainbows and Malia and Sasha Obama - who would *dare?*

So after being entertained yet underwhelmed by director Danny Boyle's Indian spectacle over the Thanksgiving weekend, I was more than willing to give the film another shot; surely the problem was less the movie's than mine. (I did, after all, see it as the second-half of an afternoon's double feature, and following a heavy lunch, to boot) I'm happy to report that I had a *lot* more fun the second time

around. Directed with dazzling energy and style, *Slumdog Millionaire*

is a stunning sensory experience - Chris Dickens' editing and A.R. Rahman's score are particularly excellent - and the central romance that felt half-baked on a first viewing felt far more resonant after another. I no longer begrudge the film its staggering critical and popular success, and considering its participants' humbleness and graciousness during this award season, I won't begrudge its inevitable Best Picture win at the Oscars. But I

still

have serious reservations.

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The slumdog of the movie's title is Jamal Malik (played, in the oldest of three incarnations, by Dev Patel), an impoverished young Indian who has landed on his country's version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*

, and who is one question away from a grand-prize victory. This miraculous circumstance, however, doesn't sit well with a pair of detectives who, during the movie's opening minutes, beat Jamal, hang him from the ceiling, and administer electric shocks in an attempt to discover how the young man is cheating. Eventually, the torture ends, and Jamal's interrogators sit him down to explain just how an uneducated orphan from Mumbai knows the answers to so many quiz-show stumpers; the film's flashback narrative - much of which involves Jamal's relationship with his brother, Salim (Madhur Mittal), and his search for lost love Latika (Freida Pinto) - details the precise instances when Jamal learned whose face is on a hundred-dollar bill, and who invented the revolver, and what Lord Rama holds in his right hand, et cetera.

It's an exceedingly clever storyline - Simon Beaufoy's script is based on Vikas Swarup's novel *Q & A*

- and it allows Boyle to perform wizardly tricks with time, locale, and narrative order. The sequence that finds Jamal and Salim, as pre-teens, tumbling down a hill and morphing into teenagers is a beautiful cinematic shortcut, and Boyle lends marvelous vigor, tension, and subtle comedy to the scenes in which the boys make their living ripping off tourists at the Taj Mahal, and in which they're on the run from a villainous Fagin in Ray-Bans, and in which Jamal is sweating it out on the

Millionaire

set. And I'm not sure there's even a

frame

of the movie that isn't well-composed; in look, sound, and pacing,

Slumdog

is pretty damned extraordinary. (I'm thinking Boyle would have to run over Academy president Sid Ganis with his car to not win the Best Director Oscar.)

The movie is *so* expertly paced, in truth, and its romantic and dramatic hooks so effective, that it's easy to see how viewers can glide past the inconsistencies and downright idiocies in

Slumdog

's plot. But I was put off by distracting questions of logic from the outset: Why on earth do the cops torture Jamal and

then

sit him down for a quiet discussion? Is that just how it's

done

in India? You're never provided with a satisfying rationale for this, but the film's setup leads to just the first among many confounding issues that seem intentionally ignored here. (Those who live in dread of spoilers may want to avoid the next paragraph.)

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Why does Jamal need the audience's help in answering the second question - "What is the official slogan of India?" - when the three incorrect answers are *so* incorrect that both the host (an exquisite Anil Kapoor) and the audience laugh at them? Can Jamal be *that*

dense? Why, when the pre-teen Jamal jumps into a pile of excrement, does he emerge looking like he fell into a vat of Willy Wonka taffy? Why does Salim turn into a back-stabbing bastard, and why, with equally little motivation, does he have his change of heart? How is it so simple for Jamal to infiltrate the home of a notorious gangster? Why is the game-show host such a prick, and wouldn't a Jamal victory be great for India, for ratings, and consequently, for the host? And not for nothing, but if

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?

is a taped broadcast, how can everyone be watching the climactic episode

live

?

I was no less vexed by these questions on a second go-around, but knowing that answers wouldn't be forthcoming, it was certainly easier to enjoy the movie regardless of its frequently questionable plotting. And there's a *lot* to enjoy. From the gorgeous cinematography to Patel's heartfelt romantic ardor to the built-in suspense of the game-show sequences - you're reminded that the show became a worldwide sensation for *really*

good reason -

Slumdog Millionaire

is an engaging, visually rich, and oftentimes thrilling piece of work. Whether it leaves you with reservations or not, it's a feel-good movie that's likely to make you feel downright great.

For reviews of Frost/Nixon and Underworld: Rise of the Lycans, see "[Wolves](#)."

For a review of Revolutionary Road, see "[Scenes from a Marriage](#)."

For reviews of Notorious, Inkheart, and Paul Blart: Mall Cop, see "[Rap, Flap, Crap](#)."