

global screen

SLUMDOG HAS ITS DAY



Danny Boyle

With his Oscar-buzzed *Slumdog Millionaire*, director Danny Boyle shines an international spotlight on Mumbai.

by SONA CHARAI POTRA



Dev Patel in the hot seat with gameshow host Anil Kapoor

So how did renowned director Danny Boyle—who has transported filmgoers time and again with the heroin bleak of *Trainspotting*, the zombie shrieks of *24 Days Later* and the claustrophobia of *Sunshine*—come to direct a little film that centers on the *desi* version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*?

It started out innocuously enough. “They sent a script. The agent said it’s a film about *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*? And I said, ‘What?’” recalls the 52-year-old British

director. “I almost didn’t read it, until I saw that Simon Beaufoy (*The Full Monty*) wrote it. And as soon as I read ten pages of it... sometimes you just know. And you shouldn’t wait until you get to the end, because when you get to the end, all the realities of filmmaking kick in. How will we cast? Will we be able to raise enough money? Who will distribute it? All that.”

And so began Boyle’s journey making a film that has become this year’s little-indie-that-could. A vivid, frenetic trip into

the dark underbelly of Mumbai, Boyle calls the film a loose adaptation of Vikas Swarup’s novel *Q&A*. “I’m a bit worried about (a) him not liking it, (b) him suing us,” he says, laughing. But his take also includes notes of *Maximum City: Bombay Lost And Found*, Suketu Mehta’s ode to the city. “I read that all the time,” he says, “and part of the time I thought I was adapting that.”

Slumdog Millionaire is a gritty, vibrant, alternately rapid-fire and lilting tale about Jamal Malik, a slum-dwelling kid who gets

hauled by the police on suspicion of fraud when he manages to end up one question away from becoming a millionaire on the hit gameshow. As Jamal (Brit TV actor Dev Patel) slowly unravels how an "uneducated" backstreet kid could have picked up the answer to each of those increasingly impossible questions, *Slumdog Millionaire* meanders through the winding gullies of Mumbai. In fact, 80 percent of the \$13 million film was shot with tiny, hand-held digital cameras – exploring the lives of street kids, the dons that exploit them, prostitutes, *police wallas* and even the burgeoning call centres. But it's the love story between Jamal and his childhood sweetheart (Freida Pinto) that gives the tale its pulsating heart.

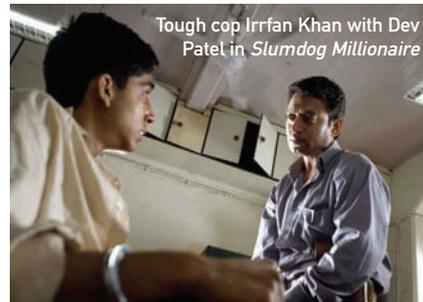
Delving into the controlled chaos of Mumbai's slums was an eye-opening experience for Boyle. "Directors are really about control and that's one of the things you try to do all the time: control experience and capture it," he says. "You can't do that there. It's like trying to stop the sea; forget it. You've just got to plunge in and go with it. So we put as many real slum-dwelling people in the film as we could get. I wanted to feel really involved in the city. I didn't want to be looking at it, examining it. I wanted to be thrown right into the chaos as much as possible. The place is just a tide of humanity."

With its seamy setting, Hindi subtitles and no-name leading man (though Anil Kapoor and Irrfan Khan play the gameshow host and the interrogating cop, respectively), the film was sure to be a tough sell to most audiences. So when the film's American distributor, Warner Independent, shut shop, Boyle was convinced his passion project was dead. "We were just one of a number of films in limbo," says Boyle. "We were shot, we were edited, we were very far down the line when we heard. And you just thought that's going to be it. We won't get theatrical release. We'll wind up on DVD, especially because we don't have a (Hollywood) star in it. It's got no platform, no profile, nothing. I remember thinking about what I learned in India, and I thought, 'It'll be okay. Just go with it, we'll see.'"

And, as it sometimes happens, things turned out to be more than okay. Positive buzz – and an audience award – at festivals

like Telluride and Toronto piqued studio attention, and Fox Searchlight picked up the film. It turned out to be a wise investment. The indie, which took nearly \$2 million in its first few weeks despite its limited release at a handful of theatres in the US, was an awards show darling, taking three trophies at the British Independent Film Awards (including Best Film and Best Director) and generating early Golden Globe and Oscar buzz.

But more so than lofty accolades, it's the film's disarming, determined, dirt-under-the-fingernails charm that will continue to drive moviegoers to theatres. "Never discount the power of word-of-mouth," says *Hollywood Reporter* senior writer



Tough cop Irrfan Khan with Dev Patel in *Slumdog Millionaire*

After failing to find a suitable actor in India, Dev Patel was cast as the lead role, Jamal, after Danny Boyle's daughter first saw him on the English TV show *Skins* and urged her father to take a look.

The production house, BIG Synergy, led by Siddhartha Basu, who produced the Indian franchise of the gameshow *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, also produced the gameshow sections of this film.

Boyle decided to translate nearly a third of the film's English dialogue into Hindi. The director fibbed to Warner Independent's president that he wanted 10% of the dialogue in Hindi and she approved of the change.

Composer A. R. Rahman planned the score over two months and completed it in two weeks.

The New York Times critic, Manohla Dargis called the film "one of the most upbeat stories about living in hell imaginable."

Mercedes-Benz asked that its logos be removed in scenes taking place in the slums. The company, according to Danny Boyle, did not want to be associated with the poverty-stricken area, fearing that it might taint its image.

Steve Zeitchik. "*Slumdog Millionaire* has tremendous appeal and it will continue to grow because people will be talking about it."

Critics are similarly gushing. "What I feel for this movie isn't just admiration, it's mad love," wrote *Rolling Stone* stalwart Pete Travers. "Brimming with humour and heartbreak, *Slumdog Millionaire* meets at the border of art and commerce and lets one flow into the other as if that were the natural order of things."

And while – with its A.R. Rahman meets M.I.A soundtrack – the film may be as far from a traditional Bollywood musical as you can get, Boyle couldn't resist the siren call of a good old-fashioned item number. "If you've lived and worked in Mumbai for eight months, you just can't leave without a dance," he says, laughing. "You can't. It would be like making a film about America without a motorcar. It would be wrong. It would be so fake."

Still, Boyle managed to ensure that his unexpected song-and-dance sequence fitted the soul of the film. "The key thing was whether we should put it inside the film linked to a question, or whether we put it at the end of the film, as it is," he explains. "So we decided to put it at the end of the film to celebrate love. And it's not actually a send-up of Bollywood. It's genuine, absolutely genuine. Their love of movies, and love of dancing, and their love of music is something to be celebrated – even though we may not be able to watch some of the films."

In the end, Oscar buzz aside, Boyle takes his India experience as a life lesson. "You're not there to teach anybody anything, you're there to learn about yourself," he says. "These people that live in slums are extraordinary – so generous, so resourceful. I want it to be something that they'll like, really. I hope they get to see it on a pirate copy somewhere."

Spoken like a true desi. And like any native son, Boyle rests assured that his beloved Mumbai will mend and thrive again, despite the recent tragic events that transpired there. "It's a city with a big heart that's been wounded, but it will recover," Boyle said at the British Independent Spirit Awards. "The human spirit is dominant. They will overcome; you can bet on it."