

Sikh Gala Ups the Cool Quotient at Cipriani, NYC



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Published: Mon, Sep 21, 2009



This past Saturday evening, September 19th, Cipriani on Wall Street was the scene of some fantastic stargazing, awesome live music, fabulous food and great dancing. Really? You ask... Wall Street, bhangra, Bollywood and chaat are possible, all under the same roof? Yes indeed, and thanks to the best party this side of Amritsar, the Sikh Arts Heritage Gala — also known as the closing night of the Sikh International Film Festival. The two-day festival covered several touching features, poignant documentaries, as well as lovely short films and took over Asia Society, Cipriani's and even Leela Lounge for a weekend of Sikh pride, class and courage.



The Gala started around 7 p.m. with attendees being greeted by the who's who of the Sikh Arts Foundation at the entrance of the imposing and visually stunning Cipriani venue on Wall Street. Upon entering, those guests who wished to partake were treated to a famous Cipriani signature drink, the Bellini, which consists of champagne mixed with peach nectar and juice. Talk about making a delightfully great entrance! Then, the merriment continued to the right of the venue, with a silent auction offering everything from beautiful bronze artwork to fantastic jewelry, to paintings and even airline tickets to India, courtesy of Jet Airways.

It was while perusing the offerings of this rich marketplace of sorts that I met the lovely Singh Twins, Amrit and Rabindra, who directed and produced one of the features shown on Friday evening. Through 'Nineteen Eighty-Four and the Via Dolorosa Project' the Singh Twins managed to make a spiritual connection between the Sikh massacres of 1984 and the stations of the Passion of Christ, in a touching and insightful piece told through their beautiful artwork. When I asked what inspired them both to become painters, they answered "We always have done everything together, since we were children, so this was a natural decision to take as twins". Their natural laughter and wonderful sense of matching style — seen here as visions in blue — paired with their beautiful spirit, truly made for a wonderful time spent speaking with the Singhs.



Then, I was fortunate to run into Tibetan filmmaker Ngawang Choephel, who was one of the judges for the documentaries in the festival. His film 'Tibet in Song' played in the AAIFF recently. While catching up on his latest developments, I learned that Choephel was incarcerated by the Chinese government for nearly six years on charges of espionage. I have not seen the film but simply because of his courage and strength it is certainly an effort worth watching. Will keep you updated of any showings and screenings.

The venue was jam packed with celebrities and great personalities of the Sikh community in and around NYC, so I might be missing some names and forgetting to mention others. Please bear with me and know that it was out of excitement and lack of time, and not disrespect or degree of





importance. I did congratulate Safina Uberoi on her touching self-portrait as a woman of dual nationalities — half Australian, half Punjabi — titled 'My Mother India'. She looked striking in an all black outfit accented by red details and a large rose in her hair. I also caught up with Dr. Sarab S. Neelam, whose film 'Ocean of Pearls' debuted at the Sikh Film Festival last year and is now seeing a wide theatrical release in the US. He pointed out how proud he felt to be at the Gala at this time.

But the party continued on the opposite side of Cipriani's, with a full chaat bar, as well as a luscious sushi spread, gourmet Chinese snacks and a fruit table to cleanse the palate. And this was all before the lavish sit-down dinner, which came later, after some dancing and wonderful entertainment courtesy of RDB and Nindy Kaur. While kicking it up Bhangra style, I ran into actor Samrat Chakrabarti, just back from his resounding success at the Toronto Film Festival. Chakrabarti was named by The Toronto Star as one of the six breakout talents to watch in films because of his charming turn in the film 'The Waiting City' also starring Radha Mitchell. Hip elegance is what we have come to expect from Chakrabarti and indeed, he did not disappoint in a grey suit with tuxedo detailing and fashionable leather shoes.



Respected journalist Aseem Chhabra — one of the judges for the short films — pointed out that he found the winning short 'Unravelling' by Kuldip Powar, to be a 'Fascinating story but also visually beautiful' and that he had also truly loved the touching story behind Michael Singh's 'Prisoner's Song' about a Sikh soldier captured by the Germans while aiding the British in their battle, during WWI.



DJ Kucha wrapped up the evening at Cipriani with some catching Bhangra beats and I briefly caught up with Pooja Kumar, the 'Bollywood Hero'-ine of the year! She looked absolutely radiant and gorgeous in a sequined sheath by Sir Alistar Rai. You'll be able to see more of her lovely talent in the upcoming MIAAC film festival at the beginning of November, where not one but two of her films will be screened. The lovely Payal Sethi and Pooja Kohli, those wonderful women behind FilmKaravan, also have a few fabulous films coming our way this fall, through their KaravanKollective film program, of course.

When I left around 2 in the morning, I continued dancing all the way home, probably to the great amusement of both my Punjabi taxi driver, who turned his cab into a Roadside Bhangra-mobile in my honor, and of my fellow New Yorkers. But I didn't care as the evening was a resounding success. Balle balle, till next time!