

“Historic” Evening of Films for the Sikh Community



Published: Tue, Sep 22, 2009

Posted by: **Jitin Hingorani**



A wise man once said “those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” The three documentary films slated in the opening night program for the sixth annual Sikh International Film Festival were a history lesson in the making, focusing on everything from the plight of the Sikhs after the India-Pakistan partition in 1947 to Operation Bluestar, the Indian army’s militant attacks on the Golden Temple in 1984 which killed hundreds of Sikh families. More than 300 people packed the Asia Society auditorium in New York City on Friday, September 18th to screen Amrit and Rabindra Singh’s (affectionately known as “The Singh Twins”) semi-autobiographical art documentary *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the *Via Dolorosa* Project, director Navdeep Kandola’s *Flying Sikhs – The History of Sikh Fighter Pilots*, and the true gem of the evening, *My Mother India* by Australian-Sikh director Sufina Uberoi.

The Singh Twins, British-Indian artists who have pioneered British contemporary art through their creation of the Indian miniature painting, wrote, narrated, and edited the first film. Their most prolific painting, titled “*Nineteen Eighty Four*,” is an artistic response to the attacks on the Golden Temple 25 years ago. Through archival images, video footage, and details from this painting, the documentary delves into a rather simplistic comparison of their art to the Christian tradition of the “*Via Dolorosa*,” or “path of pain,” suffered by Jesus Christ leading up to his crucifixion. The short film was somewhat interesting, although it was incredibly subjective and did not take into account any other historical perspectives. However, the twins made no qualms about their biases saying “this is a very personal representation of the way we believe things happened in 1984.” So, more credit to them for making a controversial film to begin with and then tackling the sensitive subject through the medium of art.

The next documentary, which focused on the stories of the first Sikh fighter pilots in Indian and British aviation history, was produced by the Sikh Art and Film Foundation, the organization that hosts this annual film festival. The Foundation raised funds from prominent community members to pay for this project, and this achievement should be a feather in the organization’s cap. Although the film had some technical difficulties (the director finished the final cut just two days prior, and the film had to be converted to be shown on a DVD, so as to include subtitles for key interviewees), it was generally well-received by the audience. The documentary contained some fascinating interviews with the most prominent Sikh fighter pilot Hardit Singh Malik and his daughter Harji Malik, as well as powerful sound bites from historians and aviation experts. The best parts of the film, which actually had the audience in uproarious laughter, were the interviews with Mohinder Singh Pujji, now in his nineties, who vividly described an incident when he almost had to jump out of a flying plane to, ironically, save his life. Needless to say, Pujji never ended up jumping and lives to tell his story.

After the two documentaries were shown, NYU professor Dr. Ajay Singh moderated a discussion between the audience and the directors and producer of these films. The mostly-political discussion got a bit heated, at times, especially when audience members started recounting their own memories of the 1984 Golden Temple attacks. However, the panel was incredibly professional and open to constructive criticism.

The highlight of the night was the much-anticipated film, *My Mother India*, by probably one of the most humble, passionate, and well-dressed directors I’ve had the privilege of meeting. Sufina Uberoi traveled all the way from the land down under (Australia) to represent this humorous and poignant personal documentary about her family (more specifically her very white, Australian mother married to her quirky Sikh father) and the way in which the events of the

1984 attacks on the Sikhs in Punjab impacted their lives. Filled with masterful writing and heart-wrenching interviews (mostly with her mother), this tale unfolds beautifully, bit by bit, moment by moment, and I, honestly, did not want the film to end. But had it not ended, I would not have had the incredible opportunity to hear the director speak about her motivations and challenges during a post-film panel discussion. Uberoi spoke eloquently about what it means to be a Sikh woman and the responsibility artists have to make thought-provoking films. One of her most powerful lines (in reference to Sikh history) was, "we first have to acknowledge the truth, accept it, and only then, can we heal from it."

All in all, I had the privilege of watching some "history" in the making that night. Fifty films were submitted to the festival this year, but only thirteen were selected to be shown during the two-day event, which culminated with a decadent gala at Cipriani's on Saturday night. For a complete report on the buzz from that event, read up on E. Nina Rothe's blog.