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'Midnight's Children' the rich story of seeking an identity

Sr. Rose Pacatte | May. 2, 2013 NCR Today

"Midnight's Children"

Indian/Canadian director Deepa Mehta's cinematic interpretation of Salmon Rushdie's 1981 Booker Prize-winning novel "Midnight's Children" is a vibrant epic that spans about 30 years and has a cast of thousands.

It tells the story of two baby boys who were born precisely at midnight on Aug. 15, 1947, when India gained independence from Great Britain. The nurse, Mary Pereira (Seema Biswas), a Catholic, switched the boys soon after birth, meaning that the child of the poor father would grow up in a wealthy family and the child of privilege would grow up begging from that family.

One night, a group of children also born at midnight on India's independence day appear to Saleem (Satya Bhabha). These "midnight children" support one another over the years, meeting at that midnight hour. Eventually Mary, who is a nanny is Saleem's home, reveals what she had done. The father, Mr. Sinai (Ronit Roy), is crushed and cruel. Mrs. Sinai sends Saleem to live with her sister in West Pakistan. In due course, Saleem and Shiva (Siddharth) are on opposing sides, the aggressive Shiva always wanting a birthright that is still being born.

"Midnight's Children" is a richly textured story about India's post-colonial era as seen through the lives of two characters who compete in a struggle to some kind of normalcy. The mammoth influence of India's colonial past and how the characters deal with it looking to the future is presented through magical realism. This technique is decidedly spiritual and creates a space where the characters can image what can be and what they are to do.

At the press day for the film, Mehta ("Water") explained many aspects of her filmmaking and the role color plays in defining emotions in the story. Red symbolizes blood and emotion; blue is the color of midnight; and green stands for fertility and hope.

"The color palate of the film is important," she said, "because color seeps into all of life, everything."

The biggest challenges to shooting the film, Mehta said, was the span of years, the huge cast, managing 16 main characters, and staging a massacre in a snake-infested swamp toward the end of the film with 1,500 extras -- and the mosquitoes.

The thing that attracted Mehta to the film, she explained, is that it is about "the journey of a person trying to find a home and an identity," noting that she made the journey from India to Canada. In today's world, she said, "we are always redefining ourselves, where we are from, who our families are, and this is a universal theme."

I asked about the story being again about two male characters representing human experience, and Mehta came back with, "But if you look, this is a film about women more than men. Saleem, in particular, is defined by all the females who surround him."

I enjoyed "Midnight's Children" despite its length. Mehta laughed when she said she started with a script, written by Rushdie, that was 270 pages long and had to reword it (one page usually equals one minute of film), ending up with a film lasting 140 minutes. The main difference between "Midnight's Children" and Richard Attenborough's Oscar-winning 1982 film "Gandhi" is that this new film is the inside looking out rather than the outside looking in.

"Something in the Air"

This French film won Best Screenplay at the 2012 Venice Film Festival, but I am not quite sure why. It tells the personal story of the filmmaker Olivier Assayas, a kind of semi-autobiography. It starts off well enough in a high school classroom in Paris 1971, when a teacher reads from Blaise Pascal: "Between us and Heaven or Hell there is only life, which is the frailest thing in the world."

From then on, the film follows the main character, Gilles (Clément Métayer), an aspiring artist who wants to make films, through the student-led demonstrations about politics and the general drug-haze idealism of the flower-child times in France. Gilles and his friends and acquaintances get through it, and the audience is not quite sure why it was all so important except as a moment of cultural history. Perhaps it is the filmmaker's belief that art can change, and maybe even save, the world. Whether this is the film to express that or not will be up to audiences. With English subtitles.

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