

Review – Slumdog Millionaire – Littleham Village Hall

Saturday 5th September

It never ceases to surprise me, just how inventive storytellers can be in the way they convey their tales. I am continually amazed by the carefully articulated structures and frameworks that writers use to present their stories, especially on film. Slumdog Millionaire is no exception.

The underpinning of the story is the Indian version of the popular TV show "Kaun Banega Crorepati?" ("Who Wants To Be A Millionaire") where the featured contestant is a young man who had grown up in the slums of Mumbai. Surprisingly, the contestant makes good progress through the show, answering all questions confidently and correctly. As each question is asked or answered, the film cuts to a part of the boy's life history where a specific situation has serendipitously, embedded in his mind the answer to the question being asked.

For example he is asked for the name of the person whose image appears on a specific American banknote, not something a child from the slums of Mumbai would be expected to know. There is then a flash back to a point in his earlier life where he has, through his own considerable initiative, obtained such a banknote, although, because of his lack of education, he is unable to recognise its value. At the time he is searching for a girl with whom he grew up and with whom he had fallen in love. She had been abducted by villains and prostituted on the streets of the city and was lost to him. He meets a friend who met a similar fate and who was blinded in the process. She had had to learn how to identify things around her, in particular money and knew exactly what should be illustrated on a banknote from America. The boy offers her the note as a gift when she asks him about the note's appearance. Although he cannot read, he is able to describe the image of a man from the note so accurately that his friend is able to correctly identify the note's denomination. She was also able to tell him where the girl, for whom he had searched for so long, was. Not surprisingly he was able to recall this significant event and the identity of the person on the banknote thus enabling him to answer the question correctly.

Throughout the television show, as each question was asked, the boy found incident and occasion in his past that miraculously had equipped him with the answers. As the film cut to these it was clear that many were harrowing, positioned as they were, in the slums of Mumbai. Here we saw how he and his brother, aged about six or seven, struggled against unimaginable odds, in an environment of the most awful degradation, to keep body and soul together. Their mother had been murdered in a riot fuelled by religious intolerance and from thence on they had had to fend for themselves. As the orphans progressed through their young lives, it was evident that the one brother who subsequently became the TV show contestant, had a surprising sense of right and wrong, a moral quality which was lacking in his brother, a brother who did not flinch from stealing from his younger sibling. They met a young girl who was growing in similar circumstances and the trio managed to survive on their wits by begging and working in the rubbish tips of the city. It was from these rubbish dumps that they were enticed away to a life of vice and corruption by unprincipled criminals,

The boy, now sitting in the TV studio managed to escape from the gang, reluctantly leaving his brother and the girl behind but he determined to rescue them. As it turned out, the remaining brother became part of the criminal organisation and went on to lead a life of murder and violence. Meanwhile, the girl was groomed as a courtesan with the connivance of the wayward brother.

The flashbacks from the TV show continued, enabling us to follow the contestant's life and search for his girl as he stumbled from one disaster to another along the way. Each such disaster equipping him with the knowledge that would subsequently secure him success in the TV show.

As the TV show progressed, the TV company, encouraged by the TV show host, believed that the contestant was somehow cheating. They could not imagine how an uneducated child of the slums was able to answer all of the questions correctly without cheating. So they corruptly engaged the police force to interrogate him to establish his genuineness or not. As can be imagined, this process started from the premise that the boy was a liar and a cheat. Consequently he suffered considerably at the hands of violent policemen who had no respect for a child of the slums. This interrogation represented another thread that ran through the length of this cleverly woven story.

In his life before the TV show, the boy eventually tracked down his girl with the apparent “help” of the unprincipled brother but no sooner had the two young lovers been reunited than the crooked brother claimed the girl for himself. This incident reinforced the schism that had grown between the two boys and considerable violence ensued. Violence that permeated the trio’s lives up until the time of the TV show. Eventually, the crooked brother saw the error of his ways and repented by facilitating the girl’s escape from her current cruel sponsor, giving her his mobile ‘phone in the process. It was this ‘phone that the contestant called when the “’phone a friend” lifeline was invoked in the TV show. Although unable to help with the question, the girl was able to confirm that she was alive and where she was.

Before the lovers were finally reunited the increasingly petulant TV host, now concerned that the considerable nationwide appeal of the contestant was distracting the viewing public from him as the presenter, contrived to lead the boy astray by suggesting a wrong answer to the penultimate question. Once again, the boy’s background and experience gave him the advantage. Although he didn’t know the answer to the question, he had learned not to trust anyone who tried to “help” him so he successfully chose another answer, the right one. He ultimately won the biggest prize and became a millionaire.

The lovers, still struggling to escape their past and their captors who were seeking revenge, eventually succeeded and celebrated the event with a quite surreal departure from the very down to earth style of the rest of the film. They joined dozens of dancers in a Bollywood style dance routine on the platform of a city railway station! Meanwhile, the other brother committed suicide and in the process, killed the villains that had been responsible for the fate of him and the girl thus releasing the lovers from their relentless pursuers. There was a weird contrived irony here, in that he chose to die in a bath of banknotes!

Not a film that I think I will remember for long although the mechanism used to tell the story may well stay with me. Described as a “feel good” movie, it was certainly not that. I am sure that there will have been folks watching it that will have found it very harrowing. It certainly succeeded in showing how awful life is for many people on this planet. That I will not forget.

Sir Lorn Stakes - Littleham, 7th September 2009