

## *The Boyz of Bollywood*



### *Kaizad Gustad's* **Bombay Boys**

**These boyz mix it up, sort of, in what seems to be India's first gay indie**

BY ANDREW GROSSMAN

Writer-director Kaizad Gustad's **Bombay Boys** (1998) is, of course, not the first Indian film to deal "seriously" with the politics of [homosexuality](#). (I stress "seriously" because Bollywood has for long been crowded with a backwards parade of swishy queens, sequined [sissies](#), and other unenlightened, "comic relief" stereotypes). Riyad Wadia's experimental short **BomGay** (1996) is far more angry, explicit and polemical than **Bombay Boys**, and [Deepa Mehta's](#) feminist [Fire](#) (1997) has received much more international exposure (or, if you prefer, international commodification). But while Wadia's film was a little-seen yet sensationally reported underground phenomenon, and Mehta's Canadian-lensed art film was designed at least as much for the prestigious international fest scene as it was for Indians back home, Gustad's **Bombay Boys** may be India's first gay indie film aimed at popular, domestic commercial audiences.<sup>1</sup>



Kaizad  
Gustad

Gustad, a writer<sup>2</sup> who had only a short film (**Lost and Found**, 1995) to his credit, expressly set out with his first feature to make a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, transnationally savvy film to set Bollywood on its head, to put to death the mediocre musical numbers, stock melodrama, and teary-eyed nationalism that are its archaic bread and butter. With so much riding on **Bombay Boys** — the liberation not only of Indian sexuality but of India's popular film industry! — it cannot surprise us that the film comes up a bit short on both accounts; indeed, it is unfair to expect such a revolution from this single, modest film, whose "out" queer politics are by international standards pretty mild. Though a surprise box office smash in India (Gustad became an instant celebrity) and an equal success at the Toronto Film Festival, I

cannot help but think that the reckless acclaim lavished on this film is more a celebration of the film's progressive goals rather than an acknowledgment of its artistic accomplishments.

Three overseas, English-speaking Indians arrive separately in Bombay to discover their personally respective but nationally common roots. Naveen Andrews (**Kama Sutra**) is the Indo-American Krishna, a Western-schooled actor seeking his fortune in Bollywood; Rahul Bose (**Split Wide Open**) is the Indo-Australian Ricardo, searching for his long-lost brother; and Alexander Gifford is the sexually repressed Indo-British Xerxes, searching India, presumably, for his gay self-identity (can it be a mere coincidence that the gay one is British?). Their journeys intertwine and overlap, and during sequences in which they go their separate but parallel ways, director Gustad employs jarring cross-cutting to remind us of their journeys' thematic parallelisms. Though this overambitious technique is obvious, and the self-conscious edits often evince little rhyme or rhythm, the effect is occasionally beguiling, and perhaps not too far removed from D. W. Griffith's primitive back-and-forth in **Intolerance**. Expository scenes in which classical violinist Xerxes joins the comically inept rock group The Bombay Boys, Krishna bluffs his way through a miserably choreographed Bollywood dance audition, and Ricardo sniffs out the trail of his brother are shredded together in a style so haphazard it is unclear whether it is intentionally experimental or naively yet charmingly crude.



Naseeruddin Shah  
and Tara Deshpande

The plot centers around mafia don/film producer Mastana (a wonderfully hammy, scene-grabbing turn by veteran heavy Naseeruddin Shah), who forces Krishna to star in his fourth-rate actioner **Mumbai Banditos**, a *Springtime for Hitler*-esque affair designed to lose and launder Mastana's dirty money. As we cut back and forth among the three boys' criss-crossing paths, the film's tone becomes reckless and uneven — the degree to which this unevenness is intentional on Gustad's part must ultimately be decided by the viewer. Slapstick scenes in which Krishna must wander through the film-within-a-film's absurd dance numbers, romantic interludes, and battles with mustache-twirling villains alternate abruptly with tender scenes in which Ricardo attempts to romance and rescue Mastana's moll, the suicidal Dolly (relative newcomer Tara Deshpande, whose intense performance outshines the three male leads). Likewise, Mastana is at times a comical ogre, even farcically beating his meek film directors bloody when they don't obey his commands, and at other times a monstrous wife-beater, whose mortal threats to Dolly are supposed to register as serious, heartbreaking drama. The comedy is also often crude and belabored — the scene in which a flustered Krishna must romance an ugly, bald-skulled male stand-in when his female screen partner is unavailable goes on for minutes after the joke has run its course. But while Krishna's **Mumbai Banditos** exploits satisfy the film's attempts at Bollywood parody, Ricardo's journey of discovery is single-mindedly tragic. The brother he searches for turns out to have died of a drug overdose. In a climactic long shot he discovers that the only remnant of his brother's legacy is a meager tombstone, as forgotten and discarded as are Ricardo's national-ancestral roots.

Oddly, in this whirligig film purporting to breathless energy and unpredictable emotion, it is the straight dramatic moments that come off best. For example, the scene in which heroic Ricardo repeatedly and masochistically climbs the staircase to Dolly's bedroom, inside which she is committing suicide and outside which her heartless bodyguards again and again knock Ricardo dutifully down the stairs, is uncommonly moving and for a moment cuts through the

film's schizophrenia. It is, ironically, a scene worthy of Bollywood melodrama at its finest — if we accept melodrama as a legitimate genre and not with the stigmatic value judgment it has in the West — and discloses the fact that **Bombay Boys** actually has more in common with the Bollywood films it parodies than it cares to admit. Furthermore, there are even a few musical numbers (although the music is inspired not by Indian pop but by Western rock and rap), and the film's high-gloss cinematography exploits the same heavy filters and overexposed lighting effects with which contemporary Bollywood is synonymous.

But while director Gustad does go in other technical directions, his parallel cutting techniques, combined with slow-motion, fast-motion, and colorful fade outs designed to separate his film from the starched Indian norm, unfortunately result in most of the film's individual scenes being cut short before they can organically develop. Each staccato scene is allowed to handle only one idea. For example, in a critical moment, Xerxes discusses his sexual identity with his openly gay landlord Pesi, played beautifully by Roshan Seth (whose many English-language films include **The Buddha of Suburbia**) in a dignified performance whose enraged swishiness seems politically defiant rather than comically stereotypical. Amid the neon lights of the gay bar they tentatively cruise, Pesi sarcastically instructs Anglicized Xerxes about his burgeoning sexual-cum-transnational identity: "You whites [Brits] have found a convenient place [India] to wash your dirt. Go to India if you don't know if you're straight or gay! Go to India if you don't know who you are!" But after this juicy exchange, we only get a thoughtful close-up of Xerxes puzzling through Pesi's dialogue, and instantly a "thoughtful" fade-to-red. Just at the moment where the content should be building, where the film should be developing its transnational awareness beyond the single aphoristic idea, where Xerxes should be surprising both Pesi and the audience by saying something not obvious about his sexual identity, an easy fade-out cheats us. We are left with a fallaciously "thoughtful" moment instead of an actually meaningful one, and we must bide our time until Xerxes finally does act upon his impulses, when he is ironically imprisoned under the remnants of British colonial law and suffers a contrived, TV-movie gaybashing. Surely a director as cinema-literate as Gustad could have invented a more original outcome to the dilemma of the closet than this.



Only after Xerxes has been arrested can Pesi say, "At least we know your preferences." Xerxes really hasn't discovered his sexuality by himself, but rather his sexuality has been "discovered" for him by the law. Though sexually curious, he can only be *sure* that he is gay when the law tells him he shouldn't be. But while this theme may be valid, I am not sure why Xerxes had to go all the way to India to find this out, particularly since Indian anti-sodomy statutes are patterned after nineteenth-century British ones. Furthermore, I don't see what this has to do with Xerxes' journey of transnational identity, the film's ostensible theme; it seems disingenuous, if not simply wrong, to suggest that one can discover one's "true" sthere are little or no qualitative differences between the sexual identities one travels across. Indeed, because the film's construction of urban Indian gayness is totally Western anyway — club

scenes and the closet and so forth — why doesn't Xerxes just stay in Britain? While the film purports to explore cultural exchange and provide a more even-handed view of East-West relations than are typically found in nationalist, xenophobic mainstream Indian films, it turns out that Xerxes' self-discovery has little to do with India *per se*. While blissfully ignorant Ricardo, who wasn't around when his brother needed him, comes to understand the value of the familial culture he left behind, and method actor Krishna suffers the unique indignities of Bollywood, Xerxes' gay identity crisis is not really or necessarily defined by a specifically Indian culture. He could be thrown in jail for buggery almost anywhere, and nowhere in the film is there a substantial enough discussion of particularly Indian homophobia to convince us that *only* in India could he ever realize he is gay. In fact, far more politically pointed than the film's gay content are a few throwaway scenes on race relations, in which the boys become disheartened when xenophobic landlords refuse them, or when they read in a classified ad that prospective tenants for an apartment should have a "wheatish complexion. Though a button-pushing Indian indie, the film is clearly not radical in the manner of **Bandit Queen** (1994) or **Fire** (1997). Nevertheless, released in the alarmist wake of the arsons and extremist terrorist attacks surrounding showings of **Fire** in India, a number of cuts naturally had to be made, although in a sense it is surprising the film passed censorship at all. After the film's release, Gustad penned a vehement, bile-spitting essay in which he describes the cuts the censors demanded of him. Apparently, scenes of drug-taking, profanity, and even a scene in which a lizard's tail is comically severed upset the censors as much as the gay content. Still, the one gay love scene — Xerxes goes home with a closeted yet preposterously handsome guy from a club (are there no ugly young people in India?) — had to be trimmed so that the scene featured only *one* of them shirtless (the moment the other's shirt begins to rise, there is a sudden cut). But censorship aside, because the film's gay issues are folded not only into its transnational themes but an overall attempt to be hip, its treatment of gay identity is confused anyhow. At one point, our three heroes, two adamantly heterosexual and one gay, perform (tame) stripteases in regular underwear for a throng of sunglass-wearing old women to make ends meet. Because all three of them are sexualized here — and elsewhere, all of them are frequently shirtless or in underwear — the audience (or at least a male audience that already has preconceived notions about this "gay" film) sees all three as homosexual objects, as a group, even though taken individually two of them are unambiguously straight. On the one hand, this has the possibly liberating effect of confusing sexual identifications: while Krishna and Ricardo stripping may homosexualize them for a male audience, gay Xerxes is actually heterosexualized in the diegesis of the film since, after all, he is stripping for women. On the other hand, because everything in the film is trumped by transnational identity — Xerxes goes home to India to find a sexuality that for some underexplained reason he can't find in the West — the film's trendy gay content becomes not liberating in itself but just another token of the film's hip attempt to modernize and "transnationalize" popular Indian cinema into something other than three-hour song-and-dance epics.

Indeed, it becomes more apparent that **Bombay Boys'** primary goal is to critique Bollywood film conventions when the climax of the film puts aside the issues of Xerxes' gayness and Ricardo's tragically dead brother in favor of bringing all three boys together to decide whether or not they will rescue Dolly from the mafia don's villainous grip. Kidnapped by a Mastana desperate to finish his film, the three boys don ridiculous cowboy getups and under duress shoot the climax of **Mumbai Banditos**, while helpless Dolly watches on the sidelines. When the cameras have stopped rolling, the pistol-brandishing Mastana informs the boys that their duties have been completed and they are free to go — but will they back down, or will they finally fulfill their cinematic obligation as film heroes and rescue the damsel? Much to our surprise, they run away, galloping on their cinema horses happily and shamelessly into the cowardly sunset, forgoing poor Dolly to demonstrate that this will not be a typical Bollywood ending. But while this self-impressed ending is subversive narratively, the film's overall themes remain too whimsical and disorganized to threaten any but the most fundamentalist of viewers. Gustad, in challenging Bollywood norms, has created more of a pastiche than a polemic, a film whose disparate moods and cobbled themes may actually improve upon repeated viewings, but whose chronic lack of focus makes it nearly impossible to assess as an intentional work of art.

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## NOTES

1. **Bombay Boys** was originally filmed in English, and has been dubbed into at least 4 Indian tongues for domestic screenings. The English-subtitled DVD incarnation of the film, released by Eros Entertainment, has been dubbed into Hindi.

2. Gustad had previously published a book of short stories, entitled *Of No Fixed Address*.