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Entertainment

'American Desi' Scores Many Firsts With Mar. 16 Opening

By MICHEL W. POTTS

Special to India-West

WESTWOOD, Calif. -- 'American Desi', which opened Mar. 16 in 35 select theaters across the country, including the Laemmle Grand Plex 4 in downtown Los Angeles, has been racking up a number of impressive firsts. It is the first film of its kind to be picked up for distribution by Eros Entertainment, it is the first Indo-American film to be screened in mainstream theaters and reviewed in the mainstream press, and on Mar. 14 it was the first film to premiere at the new Planet Hollywood in New York's Time Square.

Robert Earl, the president of Planet Hollywood, "personally flew up from Orlando to make sure the premiere went off without a hitch," Deep Katdare, the film's co-producer who played the lead role of Krishna Reddy, told India-West. "All in all, it went off fantastically."

For first-time director Piyush Dinker Pandya, all these firsts have "been very gratifying and exciting," he confided to India-West. "I've gotten e-mails from people who are happy to see their faces on the big screen and stories they can identify with, and they said they're looking forward to more stories like this."

With assistance from the Eros company, exit polling was conducted at the East Coast theaters where the film opened and, according to Katdare, 89 percent of audiences have given 'American Desi' a "definite recommend," and 83 percent rated the film as "very good to excellent."

Evenly split between male and female viewers, 55 percent of the audience was under the age of 25. And the day of its release, the film was reviewed in 'The New York Times', the 'New York Post', the 'Daily News', 'Time Out New York', and E! Online.

Though the reviews were mixed, "What we wanted to do with this film is try to get a cross-over appeal among mainstream filmgoers, that is, non-desis, and I think the reviews have helped to some extent to get that at the art house (where the film is screening)," Katdare pointed out

"A lot of younger second-generation South Asians who are not used to seeing Hindi films released by Eros Entertainment have picked up the mainstream newspapers and have seen there is a film called 'American Desi' and wouldn't have otherwise known about it but are attracted to this kind of film, because it is to some extent their story."

Pandya said he hadn't read all the reviews, "but I was in many of the theaters this weekend kind of eavesdropping and the response was pretty good, so I use that as my gauge as to what works and what doesn't work," he contended.

On the other hand, Eros Entertainment chief executive officer Ken Naz told Dean Goodman of Reuters news service he has been going through "literal hell" persuading "totally unmotivated" owners of Indian movie theaters to book his movie.

Indian audiences traditionally prefer big popcorn extravaganzas with song and dance routines, he said. Eros' biggest film to date in the United States is the 1999 Hindi-language release 'Taal', which grossed about \$2 million at the box office.

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Naz said there was a good chance 'American Desi' could break that record, but he declined to make any bold predictions. Yet he no doubt would probably be heartened by the response from some of the viewers who attended a Mar. 17 after-screening party at the Palomino nightclub here in Westwood.

While Pandya and Katdare were making personal appearances at many of the screenings in New York and New Jersey, actors Purva Bedi and Kal Penn were on hand to talk with film fans on the evening of the film's second day of screenings in Los Angeles, and India-West attended to solicit some reactions.

Krishna Shah, a veteran director and producer based in Hollywood who helped to found the Indians in American Media organization which supports young Indian actors and filmmakers, was impressed with Pandya's first effort.

"This is the third or fourth film I have seen that has the same concern about this clash of identity and the question, Who am I?" he said. "Sociologically, it was a very exciting, very funny movie, and I am happy that these people are telling their stories."

Rahim Manji, a Canadian-born college graduate with two degrees in theater, one from the American Academy of dramatic Arts, confided that 'American Desi' was the first Indo-American film he had ever seen.

"All the other films I've seen have been through my parents and they're all in Hindi, and I really don't understand the language a lot," he admitted. "So when a film like this comes along in English, I enjoy it even more."

He could relate to Katdare's character "in not understanding Indian roots, and not even liking it, because I used to do that when I was young, too," he said, adding that the conflict between Krishna Reddy and his father was particularly significant for him, "because the route I chose was different from the route my father had chosen for me."

Reema Khetan, a UCLA student studying psychology, thought the film "portrayed our generation really well, since "all our friends go through that every single day." she said.

Furthermore, "I could relate to the (Nina Shah) character a lot, because she was a really good mix of Indian and American (in that) she wasn't very conservative but she wasn't very liberal, either."

Vedant Gokhle, a graduate of Rutgers University, where the film is based, thought the film's script "was very good in trying to get that whole 'American Confused Desi' aspect."

Like Krishna Reddy, he recalled "not wanting to take part in the dancing, the culture, and thinking that you're not necessarily better than that, but that you didn't grow up in that environment and don't understand why people who aren't from America are so into that."

Keshni Kashyap, a film student at USC, thought the film "raised a lot of very important identity issues for young South Asians," and that Purva Bedi's performance "helped me to reflect upon what my priorities are as a South Asian woman."

Meanwhile, Pandya and Katdare have finished writing the script for their next venture, which they have described as an Indian 'Lethal Weapon', and are hopeful that based on the reception to 'American Desi' they will be able to raise money for an even bigger budget project.

"A good portion of our investors are either venture capitalists or investment bankers who were looking at the performance of their investment as an indicator as to whether they would be willing to put in more money on a bigger project," Katdare said. "So far they're very pleased with the exposure of the film."

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