

Film Review: 'Viceroy's House' ***.5



Viceroy's House

Direction: Gurinder Chadha

Screenplay: Gurinder Chadha, Paul Mayeda Berges, Moira Buffini

Cast: Hugh Bonneville, Gillian Anderson, Manish Dayal, Huma Qureshi,

Michael Gambon

Length: 106 minutes

Rating: 12A

With Indian independence from the British Empire now inevitable, this historical drama charts the story of the planning for the Partition of India, into what is the Republic of India and Dominion of Pakistan today, in 1947 after over 300 years under British authority.

Set against the backdrop of the extraordinary magnificence of the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi, today the official residence of the President of India but formerly the Viceroy's House, we follow the last Viceroy of India, Lord Louis Mountbatten (Bonneville), his wife Lady Edwina Mountbatten (Anderson) and the Chief of Staff in India General Hastings Ismay who all live upstairs there during the transition of power. We also meet Indians Jeet Kumar (Dayal) and Aalia Noor (Qureshi) who live downstairs in the great house and are caught up by the unfolding events that will forever shape the future of their lives and their country.

Of course, conflicts exist in abundance with division the most common theme. Outside Viceroy's House, with the breaking of a united British India into two new countries to the religious separation of its citizens, and inside, with the collision of

Western and Eastern cultures to the hierarchy of the ruling and serving class. Physical conflict between the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim Indians, however, arise in both the inside and outside worlds.

We study the relationships of Louis and Edwina Mountbatten and Jeet Kumar and Aalia Noor that are placed under pressure from the small domestic issues to the large national problems affecting both sides, from those who make the decisions to those who will be affected by them. Viceroy's House is therefore more 'Downton Abbey' than 'Gosford House', with the focus squared more on historical significance rather than its influence on the characters individual stories, although there exists a fine line of difference.

Viceroy's House also investigates the idea of foreignness and its impact on the unfamiliar. Lord Mountbatten has been charged with an almost unbearable responsibility to complete an almost impossible challenge. Under the intense media presence, he has to face the uphill battle of drawing the opposing sides to the table including Jawaharlal Nehru, the future first Prime Minister of India, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder and future first Governor General of Pakistan and Mohandas Gandhi, the leader of the Indian independence movement.

Understandably, Mountbatten finds the exceptional circumstances of the state of affairs ever more overpowering; the stalemated negotiations, the government interference, the burdensome protocol, the unknown culture, the intolerable atmosphere of summer heat and background noise.

When deception and manipulation are discovered behind the scenes along with the rioting and fighting already breaking out in the streets across the country, Mountbatten accelerates the date for Indian independence to alleviate the violence but subsequently sacrifices the time allocated to the planning

process. Viceroy's House, later the Rashtrapati Bhavan, becomes an equally important personified character with its 340 rooms and 320 acre estate an overbearing omnipresence in the film and to the Viceroy.

As the largest displacement of people in history, the Partition of India forced the migration of 14 million citizens. Painting a portrait of two worlds in one nation, Viceroy's House is confidently directed by Gurinder Chadha who delivers this epic story on an equally vast scale, featuring ravishing cinematography from Ben Smithard and a suitably lavish score by A. R. Rahman.

Although made to appeal to a widespread audience who may be unfamiliar with the whole story, Chadha does not hold back on the horrific violence which erupted amongst the people of India in a time of colossal political upheaval, weaving archive footage and fictional drama together to present an accurate depiction of the uncontrollable chaos.

Faithfully honouring the cinematic masterpieces of David Lean in that golden age, Chadha presents a visual feast with genuine passion during one of the most momentous events in modern history.

Viceroy's House from BBC Films is in cinemas now.

Image courtesy of BBC Films