



Chiasso, Cinema Excelsior

18.15

Friday, 2 February 2018

**THE VICEROY'S HOUSE**

2017

107 minutes

Directed by **Gurinder Chadha**

Starring: Hugh Bonneville, Gillian Anderson and Manish Dayal

In south Asia, the partition of 70 years ago has a similar resonance to the Holocaust in the memory of the two (eventually three) nations that came out of it. Between 1 and 2 million people are thought to have died; about 15 million left their homes to cross the new borders – a great migration of Muslims to the new state of Pakistan, and Sikhs and Hindus into truncated India. Mass violence and death, startling cruelty, hunger, disease, homelessness: all these accompanied India's liberation from British rule.

These questions underlie the plot of a new film, the historical drama *The Viceroy's House*, which embeds the fictional story of a love affair between a young Hindu man and a Muslim woman in the context of the last days of British rule. The year is 1947. Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India (1947) and the first Governor-General of independent India (1947-48), has been dispatched to Delhi by Clement Attlee's Labour government to get Britain out of India as speedily as possible. He soon decides that he needs to bring forward the date from June 1948 to August 1947, otherwise the country faces a civil war which diminishing British forces can do nothing to prevent. This gives him less than six months. Failing to persuade the Congress and Muslim League leaders to agree on the constitution of an undivided India, he proposes a plan to divide the country roughly according to religious identity. Nehru and Jinnah accept, India and Pakistan celebrate their independence, carnage erupts.

The film takes its title from the 340-room palace designed as the vice-regal residence by Edwin Lutyens and now occupied by the Indian president, forcing the film to use another almost equally grand palace in Jodhpur for its location work. There are some opulent scenes and a few nice performances, particularly Gillian Anderson as Edwina and David Hayman as the house's Scottish major-domo.

The film's "Mussolini moment" [imagine a film about the Holocaust where a character pulls open a drawer, pulls out a document and reveals that 6 million deaths aren't the fault of Hitler but of ... Mussolini] occurs when the unfortunate English lawyer who has been commissioned to draw the new boundaries, the sweating, exploited Cyril Radcliffe (Simon Callow), returns from the Punjab to Delhi to say it can't be done in the few weeks he has at his disposal. It's all too complicated, he tells Mountbatten's chief of staff, Lord Ismay (Michael Gambon), who then pulls from his drawer a secret map, prepared under Winston Churchill's guidance, which has the border already drawn.

#### Critics' comments:

- Notices by film reviewers have been muted but reasonably kind – *The Guardian* gave it three stars. Notices by historians, or indeed anyone who cares about the events portrayed, have been damning. In an angry piece for the Guardian, the Pakistani writer Fatima Bhutto accused the film's British-Indian director, Gurinder Chadha, of seeming "to take pleasure in laying the bloodshed and brutality of 1947 at the feet of two particular villains: Muslims and Jinnah". It was, she wrote, the product of "a deeply colonised imagination ... [a] servile pantomime of partition". Chadha denied the charge of anti-Muslim prejudice – persuasively, I think – but to my mind she and her fellow writers on the film, her American husband, Paul Mayeda Berges, and the English screenwriter Moira Buffini, have committed just as great a sin, which is to take a breathtaking liberty with the historical record. (from *The Guardian*, adapted)

- One intriguing detail that Chadha and her screenwriters do tackle is recently unearthed evidence that Winston Churchill secretly drew up partition plans long before Mountbatten, in a bid to protect British oil interests and protect India against Soviet interference. This teasing historical footnote is briefly addressed, but never fully explored. Churchill's poisonous relationship with India would make an interesting stand-alone film, but a much darker one than this. (from *hollywoodreporter.com*)