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Un-embedded at TIFF '08

A journalist ditches her press pass to take in the Toronto International Film Festival like a tourist

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2008

High Praise for "Yes Madam, Sir"

Wow. This afternoon I took in the world premiere screening of "Yes Madam, Sir," by Australian filmmaker Allison Doneman. It's the inspiring story of Kiran Bedi, India's first female police officer.

Bedi was raised by her mother and father, who broke ranks with his feudalist family and purposefully educated his 4 daughters (side note: one of them, Shashi, is now an artist living in Canada). Bedi was enrolled in tennis to help her stay fit, and, as the film lays out to learn the value of losing. In this way, tennis surely helped her to handle the adversity she would face constantly in her life's work.

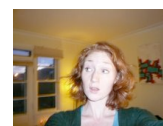
In 1972 Bedi enrolled in the police force. The film opens with the seemingly improbably story of a time, early on in her career, when Bedi fought back sword-weilding protestors with only a baton.

The film then moves onto her pivotal time at the Tihar jail, which is one of Asia's biggest and most notoriously corrupt prisons. She implements educational, spiritual and exercise reforms with the goal of having its inhabitants actually reform while serving time. It appears, though is unclear, that she implements regimented prayer. What is clear is that she puts in place an Vipassina meditation program (prisoners meditate for 10 days, no speaking allowed). Her reforms speak for themselves, and in 2002 the Delhi Prisons Act was changed and Tihar was officially recognized as a reform facility.

Yet, it is not such a clear-cut victory. After such success she was unceremoniously removed from the job as head of the prison and ends up taking a job as chief of police of a city outside of Delhi. She moves her family (mother, father and daughter. Her husband lives in another city) to the new city, and 14 days into the job her mother has a stroke and falls into a coma. Simultaneously, her powers as police chief are usurped by a minister who has three of her senior police officers seized. Bedi sees it as yet another way for the establishment to undermine her. After 41 days on the job, due to the health of her mother, Bedi moves her family back to Delhi.

The next assignment is at a police training academy-- another posting that was meant to make her go away. Instead, she turns the academy around, having buildings built for hundreds of incoming students and again implementing the Vipassana meditation practice.

About Me



M Wheeler

I am a journalist and news talk show producer based in Montreal. You can read my news writings at www.wheelerwritesthenews.blogspot.com. I have written arts columns for the Ottawa X Press and Maisonneuve Magazine, as well as writing feature stories for Hour (Montreal news/arts weekly), and XLR8R magazine. I have also worked in a daily radio news room for the past three years. This year I attended The Toronto International Film Festival as a tourist. You can read about it at www.unembeddedattiff08.blogspot.com.

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▼ September (16)

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And again, after proving her mettle, she is taken off of the job, and the same person who succeeded her at Tihar prison is again put into the police academy, seemingly to undo all the work she has done.

After this, there is one more surprise to the film which I won't mention because I enjoyed watching it unfold.

The film is a credit to Doneman's skill as a documentarist. After shooting for 6 years it could not have been easy to choose which moments would make it into the film, certainly leaving hours of footage behind. She chose wisely, and the result is a coherent and compelling 95-minute film that shows Bedi as a dynamic individual whose determination to succeed at her career leads her to implement forward-thinking policies in the places she works. She is improving, little by little, the lives of those she has power over while working in a system where power is only to be shared strategically.

But, as she herself notes, there is a cost to everything. Her successes at her assignments means she has no, or few, allies in the police force, which is a point well-illustrated by comments from retired high-ranking officials. Her lack of friends in high places means she has to fight to get her due.

She makes family sacrifices, as well. She lives a separate life from her husband, and her daughter seems well aware that her mother's ambitions come before most other things (although the two do have a playful relationship).

This was the one area of the film that gave me pause: it was clear Bedi is devoted to her parents, who insisted on breaking the chain of ignorance for their girls and encouraged them to reach for higher goals in life. Yet, it did not seem that Bedi was pushing her own daughter in the same way her parents had pushed her. It could be that she is and we just don't see it in the film, but I was left with a nagging feeling that Bedi had spent so much time working on her own career that ensuring her daughter had the same type parental support that she herself clearly benefited from.

Bedi is small in stature but her will power is other-worldly. She is a figure whose internal compass is unwaveringly strong as she faces the corrupt Indian police establishment. It is one of her greatest tools -- when she goes into both the Tihar prison and the police academy, she behaves as though she is working with an under-performing group and she sees their potential and is adamant they achieve it.

And, at the end of the film, it was revealed that Kiran Bedi had been in the audience for the screening. She and Doneman proceeded to answer a handful of excellent questions. One woman gave her a pin on behalf of Grandmothers to Grandmothers, a group of Canadian grammas working to support African grandmothers. Another man asked why Doneman had chosen to subtitle the film, although it was 90% in English, and did she not know that it was offensive? Doneman handled the question with grace, explaining that because of the different accents, test audiences had a hard time understanding it so

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she decided to subtitle everything. Another woman asked about Bedi's childhood heros, and while I thought the question was mundane, the answer was not. She said Mahatma Ghandi was a hero, as were her parents. She said she always wanted to make her parents immortal, and then walked the few paces over to Doneman and thanked her for finally making that happen.

All in all it was an exciting afternoon. The film was uplifting without sugar coating anything. Bedi is clearly one in a million, and I am thankful that Doneman has been able to create a film that shares her inspirational self.

LINKS:

<http://www.kiranbedi.com>

www.yesmadamsir.com

An old photo of Kiran and her sisters:

http://livinggallery.oneindia.in/v/album01-Living-News-and-Pictures/Kiran_Bedi_with_sisters_Anu_Shashi_and_Reeta.jpg.html

Posted by M Wheeler at 3:21 PM

Labels: Kiran Bedi, Megan Doneman, TIFF, Toronto International Film Festival, Yes Madam Sir

1 comments:

Arshad said...

High praise for Un-embedded! Love your blog. I feel like I am living the festival through you. WOW!

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