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Published by Anonymous on Feb. 02, 1999

MOVIES

Movie Making's

High-tech, high budget film teaches a well-researched lesson in metaphysics

Archana Dongre, Los Angeles

Breaking decades of reluctance on the part of movie investors to fund "New Age" films, the ^{us}\$85-million production, "What Dreams May Come" hit the theaters October 2, 1998. With it opened a new genre of high-tech metaphysical films in the American mainstream, bringing New Age (largely Hindu) sensibilities to the silver screen. Twelve million people saw the movie its first month. Despite mixed reviews, it rapidly gained "cult" status--meaning a movie with intense appeal, but to a limited audience. In its first two months it has grossed \$60 million and is expected to break even with distribution outside the US.

The movie: "What Dreams May Come" is based on the book of the same title by Richard Matheson [see page 24]. On the surface, it's a love story between Dr. Chris Nielsen (played by Robin

Williams) and his wife Annie (Annabella Sciorra) that transcends death. Chris dies in a car accident and leaves his body in the hospital. He senses, but is unable to clearly see a guide sent to help him with his transition. Initially he is trapped on the lower planes, able to see people, but unable to communicate and not aware that he has "died." The movie follows him as he attends his own funeral in his astral body and later attempts to contact his wife through automatic writing. Finally he accepts that he had indeed died a physical death. With the help of his guide, he escapes his earthbound existence and enters the next world, the astral plane of Western metaphysics (the Svarloka of Hinduism or the bardos of Tibetan Buddhism). There he lives contentedly, learning, for example, how to fly from place to place, and waiting for his wife to join him at her appointed time. Tragedy strikes when Annie commits suicide, and Chris is told she has also entered the astral world, but is stuck in a hellish place (the Naraka of Hinduism) of her own creation from which she cannot be rescued. Not accepting this judgment, Chris sets off to save his wife. He finds he cannot awaken her from her state of insanity, and decides to stay with her in hell rather than return to heaven--a magnanimous decision which

soon delivers them both back to heaven. In the movie's closing moments, both have reincarnated and meet on a pier as small children. In the book, she reincarnates in India, he in America, with the destiny to meet and marry at age 30.

Movie art: A simple summary like this does no justice to the movie's artistic brilliance, which on its own makes it worth seeing. Every scene is framed as an exquisite painting, and when the special effects kick in for heaven and hell, the impact is awesome and terrifying. Star Robin Williams quipped that he was "fascinated by the idea of using computer technology to create something other than an explosion or a raptor." The special effects are not just state-of-the-art, but groundbreaking. [see page 23]

"None of the existing techniques used in visual effects and computer graphics seemed to supply us with the tools that would enable us to bring this visual to life," recalls Nick Brooks, who worked on the special effects. "It was very clear from our earliest conversation with director Vincent Ward that 'What Dreams May Come' would require us to

develop images that no one had ever seen before. Thus began the process of educating ourselves in the artistic method of Friedrich and the vision of light that drove Monet to paint." He said, "In previous movies, audiences used to exclaim, 'What amazing visual effects.' Now they will say, 'What a beautiful scene.' In this film, all the technology has been used not to create an existence for itself, but as a vehicle for creativity."

Eastern connections: For Hindus, the plot bears a striking resemblance to the "Final Test" at the end of the ancient Indian classic Mahabharata [see inside front cover]. As the righteous King Yudhisthira enters heaven, he learns that his brothers and wife are not there. He asks Indra, God of heaven, where they are, and is then led, just as was Chris, into the deepest regions of the Naraka Loka. Finding his family suffering there, he selflessly decides to stay with them rather than return to heaven, just as did Chris, because his presence gives them comfort. Upon making this sacrifice, he and his entire family suddenly enter the heaven worlds. Neither the producers, Simon and Barnett, nor author Matheson were aware of this story. They did know about the similar Greek

myth of Orpheus, who--almost--rescued his wife Eurydice from Hades.

Hindus seeing this movie have wondered, "Where did this come from? How did all our Hindu beliefs get here?" The answer is, "indirectly," because producers Stephen Simon and Barnet Bain and author Richard Matheson have little knowledge of Hinduism. What they are familiar with is Western metaphysics, much of which derives from Theosophy, which in turn derives from Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism. This metaphysical stream has also been fed from time to time by visiting swamis, Americans traveling to India, input from similar tribal religions (especially the Native American) and the revelations and insights of American-born mystics and psychics. "What Dreams May Come" includes not only the common principles of karma and reincarnation, but occult knowledge of the inner worlds not commonly known, even by Hindus.

Moviemakers: Simon and Bain are no amateurs in the movie business, having numerous mainstream film successes behind them. But they are also

anything but your stereotyped cigar-puffing Hollywood producers. "I meditate daily for 30 to 60 minutes," says Simon, whose father, Sylvan Simon, was a movie producer in the 1940's. "One day a week, I spend alone with Bain. We discuss issues of our profession and personal lives, and then we spend half a day in meditation. When we founded Metafilmics in 1996, our express aim was to produce movies that entertain, but with a metaphysical undercurrent to pose questions about the essence of being human, but without answering them, to leave it to the audience to find answers in their own thoughts, feelings and emotions. We want to look at ancient mysteries, the myth of creation, Atlantis, Egypt, Mayan Civilization. One of the projects is a romantic comedy titled 'Between Lives,' which depicts souls choosing the parents for their upcoming incarnated selves. The main messages I want to convey are that we create our own reality, and also that we take responsibility for everything that happens in our lives."

Simon doesn't want his movies to get labeled as reflecting one religion or another. From that point of view, the metaphysics of "What Dreams May

Come" are equally acceptable to the Buddhists, the Shintoists or any of the tribal religions. Personally, he believes in reincarnation, karma and the imperishability of the soul. "We do not belong to any particular group. We are not scientologists. In our movies we want to feature tolerance, empowerment and enlightenment," he told Hinduism Today. Simon elaborated on his favorite theory of creating our own reality. "Life is an illusion in which we learn lessons. Everything around us is created through our thoughts, beliefs, emotions and feelings. We take responsibility for what happens." Simon believes not in impact causation, but resonance causation. "Resonance of what you create internally will send ripple effects in the world, and that reality comes back to us," he explained. "I believe that I also have a higher consciousness which co-creates reality."

"The biggest challenge for our movies is cynical people," Simon responded when asked about obstacles. "They look for ulterior motives, and will go running into the night having seen a spiritual or metaphysical theme. They do not believe that people act out of mere compassion and kindness."

All the metaphysical work deals with decency, compassion and kindness. However, there is a growing number of people in and around the world who are not cynical, who do believe in basic decency of humanity and who do not want a steady diet of violence. 'What Dreams May Come' is the first mainstream metaphysical movie that deals in an uncompromised way with metaphysical thought."

Nationally the print reviews for the movie were negative, while those on radio and television fared a little better. Many, if not most, reviewers regarded all the metaphysics as just clever fantasy, corresponding to no reality at all [see sidebar p. 22]. "Cynics did not respond to our films," agrees Simon. "But despite reviews, and by word of mouth, twelve million people did go to see the movie. There are also people who were not interested in metaphysics, but were entertained by the film."

Simon lives for a higher fulfillment than box-office receipts. He relates, "Within a week after the film's release, a family from Milwaukee,

Wisconsin, called me, to tell of their 17-year-old cancer patient daughter's last week of life, and her desire to see this movie for its theme of afterlife. We sent a video crew to the hospital room, and after her whole family saw it together, the father reported that she completely changed her way of looking at death and had a peaceful attitude until she died two days later. That is our definition of success, I would not trade another \$100 million at the box office for the way that girl ended her life."

With Sydney Coale, Los Angeles

Did They Get It?

Audiences are mostly clueless

By Sydney Coale, Los Angeles

"What Dreams May Come" has not exactly found its niche with the American movie-going public, reflected by its modest box office receipts, though it did rank second in ticket earnings in its opening week. Is it drama, love story, metaphysics or a bit of all three? The majority of critics did not like the movie, some dismissively so. While the film was beautiful, they complained that the characters

were not effectively drawn, the story was overly sentimental and that there were too many inconsistencies. Such a reaction is not unexpected from East-Coast critics. They are reluctant to give good reviews to metaphysical movies for fear they will be seen as "soft." Other critics simply dislike Robin Williams cast in anything but a comedy role. Only a handful appreciated the accurate metaphysics; most regarded the entire next-world story as a pretty fantasy.

In the US, the movie appears to have found an audience among the spiritually-minded "Generation X," those born between 1961 and 1980. They felt a strong connection to the film's deeper layers of meaning, and were moved. Among them, Lisa Lashley, an executive at Sire Records in Los Angeles was "surprised that a major movie studio would tackle reincarnation, illusion and reality." Lashley practices yoga and meditation and believes in reincarnation. She especially liked the actors' assuming new forms as children in the afterlife. She said it showed us that the "physical forms are temporary," the spirit eternal.

Hinduism Today correspondent Archana Dongre could locate few Hindus who saw the movie. One Hindu Students' Council activist told her, "My brother went to see the movie yesterday, and left half way through because it was so boring. I have no intention to see it." A similar negative response came from her college-grad nephew, who goes to two films a week. "The reviews are bad, and I do not feel like seeing it," he said. Her married Hindu friends told her their leisure hours were better suited for the Indian cultural entertainment available every weekend in Los Angeles. For others, the thought of watching "what happens after death," even told through the vehicle of an endearing love story, or to get a lesson in metaphysics, was not their idea of entertainment.

Rudhraraju Subramanyam Raju, a pharmacist and devotee of the Sita-Ram temple in Chicago, saw the movie and told the staff at Hinduism Today's editorial offices, "I was puzzled. It looked like they were showing something about Hinduism, and maybe making fun of it. It was all about what we believe." His daughter explained it was not an insult, and encouraged him to calm down and enjoy the movie. It is, in fact, unfortunate that

many Hindus have missed this unique movie.

I generally loathe treacly, light, romantic movies. Many big budget movies are formula or "high concept" films that studios deem safe, i.e., they rely on a tried and true formula that makes money. "High concept" movies revolve around one single concept, usually one that can be summed up in a punchy sentence at a meeting with producers. There are elements of "high concept" in "What Dreams May Come." You can almost hear someone at a production meeting saying, "It's about this guy who dies and then chases his troubled wife all the way to Hell ... very nineties."

I was moved, however, by its story of love that transcends death. This was as close as movies usually come to depicting a more profound connection than mere romance. While the Christian websites quibble over whether earthly marriage transcends death, this film unashamedly explores a love between two individuals that is in essence spiritual love. Why not use the love between a man and a woman as a vehicle to

explore this? Soul mates are, after all, eternal, whatever form they take in whatever lifetime. It serves as a metaphor for the energy that connects all of the universe.

Creating Worlds

Moviemakers pioneer cyber-art form

By Sydney Coale

Using sources as varied as the fantastic religious art of Hieronymus Bosch, the neo-romantic art of Gustav Dore, the haunting landscapes of nineteenth-century German painter Caspar David Friedrich, and his own dreams, production designer Eugenio Zanetti wove together these "archetypes from the collective unconscious" into powerful and poetic visual representations. The computer technology is so state-of-the-art that producer Bain said, "I don't think we could have told this story earlier."

It took three years to film the special-effects shots of the world after death. The result is a magical place in which the artwork seems to live and

breathe, and a breakthrough movie where the language created by the art is indispensable to the story.

It is obvious why producers Simon and Bain chose Zanetti. Not only has he won an Academy Award for art direction, he has a life-long interest in Sufi mysticism and meditates daily. "All religion," Zanetti said, "is about unity with the multiplicity of the universe." He then quoted the Sufi poet Rumi, "God is closer to you than your jugular."

The challenge in "What Dreams May Come" came in fashioning each character's heaven or hell as the creation of his or her imagination. Somehow, Zanetti had to make each manifestation of heaven or the underworld unique to the person experiencing it. In this vision of the afterlife, it is your fondest dreams or your greatest fears that await you after death.

MOVIES

Matheson's Metaphysics

The author explains "What Dreams May Come"

By Archana Dongre, Los Angeles

Why does Hinduism Today want to interview me?" That unexpected question opened our interview with *What Dreams May Come* author Richard Matheson. It soon became apparent that despite all we saw in the book which reflected Hindu thought--its explanation of cremation, for example, is as clear and accurate as any Hindu commentator has offered--Matheson, like the movie's producers, was genuinely unaware of the degree to which "*What Dreams May Come*" is an exposition of Hindu metaphysics. And like the producers, Matheson isn't comfortable with attempts to place the movie in any religious tradition, even though it also reflects the metaphysics of Buddhism, Shintoism, Taoism and numerous tribal religions.

Matheson, now 72, has produced popular books since the 1950s of science fiction, fantasy, mystery and horror, several of which have been made into movies. He has also written for television. He likes research and maintains an extensive home library to help him develop his

various themes. What Dreams May Come has a bibliography at the back--unusual for a work of "fiction." Many of the 87 books listed are metaphysical classics. Some are quite rare.

The book, even more so than the movie, is awash with occult details understood by few people. "As a Pisces," Matheson explained, "I have been fascinated about parapsychology, metaphysics and the supernatural ever since I was a teenager. The concepts in the book are derived from my wide range of reading." He is perhaps too modest, for his dramatization of the soul's departure from the body, for example, or of the lower realms of the astral plane, reveal considerable mystical understanding and experience. He writes cogently about the energy (rather than material) nature of the heaven worlds, the auras of people, the law of karma, the rules regarding reincarnation, down to the details of choosing one's parents. Even such obscure knowledge as the several bodies (kosas) of man, the acquisition of energy in the heaven world by breath rather than food, and each man's self-creation of the lower worlds by his own thoughts and actions is neatly conveyed in the course of his drama. He claims no special training

in metaphysics, has never been to India, nor visited any of the Hindu temples in California. However, like many in Hollywood, he consults a Vedic astrologer, "not for prediction," he said, "but for compatibility and character analysis."

When Ron Bass wrote the movie script, major changes were made, and to see the movie and read the book is a lesson in the difference between two art forms. For example, in the book, the children do not die. Ann commits suicide a few years after Chris' death leaving behind her children, a fact that doesn't catch the reader's attention. In the movie her abandonment would have been far more prominent and likely invoke the reaction, "She deserves to stay in Hell." Despite that logic, Matheson felt the predeceasing of the children in the movie created too many characters for the afterlife sequence, with resulting confusion and lack of focus. However, he has no major qualms about it. "They did what they had to do."

Matheson was raised in the ways of Christian Science. "But," he said, "when I was in college, I

would visit a different church every Sunday. God is love. I do not want to brand my religion. It is just that I evolved my own set of metaphysical beliefs. Christianity has become 'Churchianity.' It does not have what I need. I believe that what you think becomes your world. When we pass on, we take positive and negative things with us. You have to expiate the negative things."

The movie carries Matheson's ardent convictions about karma. "Examine your life; nothing is lost," he admonishes. "When you are alive, that is the only time when you accomplish, grow and evolve." Matheson insists, "You cannot do it in afterlife. There is no scope for achievement there. You can only examine what you have done and not done."

Matheson feels good about the total affect of the movie. "I know someone whose teenage daughter used to threaten suicide, but after seeing 'What Dreams May Come,' she changed her attitude. It will be a great service if the movie impacts positively the troubled teenagers of America."

With Sydney Coale, Los Angeles