

'Before the Rains' gets mixed reception in US

'Before the Rains', director Santosh Sivan's English language debut drama set in 1937 India, has hit Washington to mixed reviews with one calling it a 'beautiful film' and another branding it 'a hodgepodge in the Raj'.

Though set in a small village in Kerala in 1937, 'the film's concerns resonate far beyond that very specific time and place', says Kelly Jane Torrance in the Washington Times calling it a 'beautiful film about some very ugly emotions.'

It may all sound like the stuff of melodrama, but Sivan has made something much more real and human, she says. 'Serving as his own cinematographer, Sivan has also made something stunning.'

'From the sweeping looks at the landscape to the energetic shots of marching Indian nationalists to the achingly personal moments between lovers, every shot in this film is luminously composed,' says Torrance.

But Adam Bernstein of the The Washington Post found it just 'a hodgepodge in the Raj - a predictable patchwork of forbidden romance, English arrogance, a gun given as a gift, suicide, corruption, deception, rising Indian nationalism and a short-lived chase through the jungle'.

According to him, Sivan, a veteran cinematographer, won justifiable praise for his 1999 Tamil-language film, 'The Terrorist', about a young woman sent on a suicide assassination mission. But the seemingly larger budget of the film presented by Merchant Ivory Productions 'seems to prove that more does not always mean more'.

'The new film has several Merchant Ivory hallmarks, namely convincing use of period clothing, cars, hairdos and music. And Sivan - given his terrific eye for cinematographic detail - uses far more restraint than expected in the use of plush landscape to establish mood,' adds Bernstein.

The Chicago Tribune branding it a typical Merchant-Ivory formula says: 'The movie's not awful. It's merely disappointing.' But it also found some 'good stuff'.

'The scenery is absolutely stunning. The vistas - of forests, villages, mist-topped mountains - are spectacular, and the camerawork is unerring,' it says, adding: 'This is all to be expected, as director Sivan, who also photographed the film, is best known as an accomplished cinematographer.'

In an accompanying piece in the Washington Times, Torrance cites US television star Linus Roache, who plays an ambitious plantation owner in the film, as saying that this is a character with whom it is difficult to sympathize but adds that he had a way to make the man human.

'I grew up in the south of England, and some of my mother's friends ... were ex-Raj from India,' he says. 'They had a certain love for life and there was a certain character they embodied that I remember very clearly. That was my touchstone for where I went with the character.'

During his break from acting, Roache has been to India periodically, he says, spending three months there at one point. He had a specific purpose for his trip - to attend a retreat hosted by American guru Andrew Cohen, whose 'evolutionary enlightenment' philosophy came out of his study

of Buddhism and Hinduism.

Director James Ivory, one-half of the Merchant-Ivory legendary filmmaking duo - the other half being producer and director Ismail Merchant, told Torrance that a producer whom he and his editor knew showed him a cut of the film.

'I was impressed by the sweep of it and the authenticity of it,' he says, and so he lent his production company's name to the release.

Ivory was born in California and grew up in Oregon, but his first films were documentaries about India.

'One of them I made without even going to India,' he told the Washington Times. 'It was an interest of mine that developed, in Indian art and music and life.'

Ivory's films explore the world of the outsider, and he notes: 'That theme wouldn't have been so important to me if I hadn't starting working in India. There you feel you do stand apart.'

That interest in India led to a meeting with the Indian-born Merchant and a lifelong collaboration.

'We always wanted to do the same thing. Not always the same thing, but we had a common goal,' Ivory says of the partnership. 'It's certainly not easy now. He was my absolutely closest artistic collaborator.'

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