Fillum Star: Living the *desi* dream

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New York

The movie *Fillum Star: The Peter Patel Story* is a kitsch of a comedy, derived from the genre of "mocu-mentaries", hip MTV reality shows like *Road Rules* and *Real World*, and some good old Bollywood slapstick humor.

The movie is 76 minutes in duration, and was produced by Rohi Mirza under the banner of Brownpeople Productions Inc. It will be released by Net Effect Media Inc. on DVD across North America on March 19.

Fillum Star looks at two days in the life of actor Peter Patel, played by Rizwan Manji. In the movie, Patel has made a breakthrough into mainstream cinema by getting a role in a movie featuring Tom Cruise, and is gearing up for the premiere of his film. He instantly becomes a hero in the community. As the adulation pours in, the camera follows Patel around, interviewing him at each step, like a regular documentary would.

Comments from his family, girlfriend Poonum (played by Reena Dutt), acting coach Sunny (played by stand-up comic Aladdin), a jealous *desi* actor, and some supporters who are in "awe" of Patel are also included in the documentary.

Actors Reena Dutt and Rizwan Manji in the movie's Bollywood dance sequence

Aladdin (left) as Sunny Mehta, teaching Rizwan Manji's character how to act

The cast and crew members told *The Indian Express* that many of the shoots for the movie were scheduled with only a few hours notice. Director of Photography, Andy Brown, who is also one of the co-producers, captured some scenes in frenetic environments, creating interesting situations out of unplanned locations. "We made the movie for less than $25,000," said Brown.

In one improvised scene, the filmmakers had Manji ride a float in the India Day parade last August, and instructed some bystanders to scream his name as he passed by, to project the image of a celebrity invited to the parade.

The movie script was written by Rehana Mirza, a young, upcoming writer, whose screenplay *Far From Home* was a finalist at the Sundance Feature film lab program. Her play *Barriers* was recently staged in New York and San Francisco. Mirza said that she wrote the script after Manji gave her the idea on a subway ride. "I went back home and wrote the script that night," she said.

Fillum Star is interesting because it experiments in some areas uncharted by *desi* filmmakers, yet the movie lacks genuine sustained humor and substance. Some of the comic sequences, like the deliberately bad Bollywood dance number, smack of scenes seen in other *desi* movies.

Scenes with stand-up comedian Aladdin, however, are a cut above the ordinary. Manji's versatile acting is also very good, and he shows that he has got the mobility of expressions to take on more challenging roles. "In real life I too am naive like Peter Patel, so I could affiliate with the character," said Manji with a laugh.

Manji played Salim in *American Desi*, and was recently seen in *The Guru*. He has also got roles in *Too Tired to Die*, with Mira Sorvino, and *The Money Kings*, with Freddie Prinze Jr. Manji has appeared in TV shows like *The City*, *As The World Turns*, *One Life to Live*, and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*.

The end of *Fillum Star* is predictable and the filmmakers have pulled out all the stops when it comes to inserting *desi* feel good factors that expatriates have been known to enjoy in movies like *American Desi*. The movie's weak link is the unrealistic concept of instant stardom itself, which the movie *The Guru* tried to portray through a different storyline.

Yet, if one can suspend disbelief, then *Fillum Star* is not a totally bad bet for a lazy spring afternoon with friends who have gathered for a few laughs.

Rushdie to head PEN America

AGENCIES
New York

WHEN author Salman Rushdie was forced into hiding because of a death decree in response to *The Satanic Verses*, the writers' organization, PEN, was a leading supporter.

Rushdie was named president of PEN's American Center last week, and plans to help other artists in distress. "Of course, I'm very grateful for what PEN did, and it's nice to put something back in," he said. The author, who lives in New York, will serve a two-year term.

The 56-year-old Rushdie said that he has a couple of goals as president. One is to attract more young people to PEN, and another is to focus more on concerns within the US. "As a writers' organization, we've spent a lot of time highlighting abuses from all over the world, and now I think it's appropriate to look at what's going on in this country," he said. Rushdie worries about freedom of speech, especially since 9/11. He recalls speaking to a journalist who made some on-air remarks that got her "Dixie Chick'd" — a reference to singer Natalie Maines, whose criticism of President George W. Bush led to boycotts of the group's music.

He also cites harassment of Muslims, and people from Muslim countries. Rushdie said that last year an American stage production of *Midnight's Children* was greatly complicated when immigration officials resisted granting a visa to cast member Antony Zaki. "He was born in Pakistan, but had since become a British citizen. And he wasn't even a Muslim," Rushdie said. "But because of where he was born, it took the efforts of many to get him into the country."

'Killer' caught 20 yrs on

WASHINGTON DC: Mohammed Aslam, the alleged murderer of Indian diplomat Ravindra Mhatre in Birmingham, England, has been arrested in Pennsylvania. Aslam, 48, a Briton, was arrested on immigration charges in July, and was on the verge of being deported, when US authorities discovered that his fingerprints matched those of the man wanted in Mhatre's shooting. Aslam will remain behind bars in PA until a decision is reached.

The Kashmir Liberation Front claimed responsibility for Mhatre's kidnapping in 1984. His bullet-ridden body was later found on a farm. — PTI

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