

The school of hard knocks: Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*

By Hiram Lee
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Directed by Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan (co-director: India), written by Simon Beaufoy, based on a novel by Vikas Swarup

Slumdog Millionaire, directed by Danny Boyle (and co-directed in India by Loveleen Tandan), took home the Golden Globe award for Best Dramatic Picture at the ceremony held January 11. Boyle, whose previous work includes *Trainspotting* (1996), *28 Days Later* (2002) and *Millions* (2004), also received the award for best directing. *Slumdog Millionaire* has been the subject of a great deal of praise, earning a place on many lists as one of the best films of 2008.

The film opens with a multiple-choice question posed to the viewers: “Jamal Malik is one question away from winning 20 million rupees. How did he do it?” The possible answers provided by the film are “(a) He cheated (b) He’s lucky (c) He’s a genius (d) It is written.”

The story proceeds from there, with Jamal Malik (Dev Patel), a young man from the slums of Mumbai, in police custody following his appearance on the Indian version of the “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” game show. By the end of the first day’s taping, Jamal has succeeded in answering all the trivia questions except one, winning several million rupees in the process. He is set to answer one final question at the next day’s taping to win the top prize of 20 million rupees.

Believing the young “slumdog” could not possibly know the answers to their questions, the game show’s producers report him to the authorities for cheating. He is tortured, but will not admit to any crime. Unable to break him, the police investigator (Irrfan Khan) plays a tape of Jamal’s performance and asks the young prisoner to explain how he knew each answer.

They go through the questions one by one. Jamal

recounts key stories from his childhood, traumatic incidents during which he also, by chance, learned facts or bits of trivia that would provide him with the correct responses on his future television appearance.

The most interesting and satisfying section of the film treats Jamal’s early childhood in the Mumbai slums. One aerial shot, in particular, makes a strong impression as the camera pulls back revealing an impossible number of shacks with rusted tin roofs. One is staggered by the wretched conditions, the number of the dwellings and how close each one is to the next.

In another of the film’s stronger moments, the predominantly Muslim community is invaded by Hindu-chauvinist thugs. The horror of the moment is communicated with feeling, although the film lacks social and historical context regarding Hindu extremism in the country.

These images, and others showing an orphaned Jamal and his brother Salim living in makeshift tents on a landfill or sleeping in empty railroad boxcars to avoid a rainstorm, are significant and valuable. They have clearly made an impact on many viewers, despite the serious limitations of the film’s approach.

While living on their own in the streets, Jamal and Salim meet a young girl named Latika. She will become the love of Jamal’s life. When the three are taken into a cruel orphanage, the two boys escape, leaving Latika behind. Jamal’s efforts to reunite with her are the primary focus of the film’s second half.

The Jamal-Latika love story, while often moving, is clearly and regrettably styled as “one for the ages.” The film lets us know, in no uncertain terms, that Jamal and Latika are destined to be together. This often takes the sting out of the would-be lovers’ difficult circumstances, as Jamal hustles on the streets to survive and Latika (Freida Pinto) becomes the prized

possession of various wealthy men.

Whatever strengths the stories and images presented in the film's first half may possess, the spectator soon realizes that its central concern is not with the plight of those forced to live as "slumdogs" in extreme poverty or the gangster milieu in which Jamal's brother Salim eventually loses himself, but rather with fate, destiny and "true love" which, of course, conquers all.

One also has definite reservations about what Jamal's game show appearance is meant to communicate. There is a populist sentiment at work in depicting his victory over the game, with its mean-spirited host mocking Jamal's intelligence at every turn. No, the film suggests, Jamal isn't the product of higher education, but a *real* education in the real world out there on the streets. Just watch what he can do. He will outsmart your system and get his 20 million rupees even if all the odds are stacked against him.

As an expression of social anger and resentment, such a view may have its place, but the implication that serious knowledge and education are not necessary for someone like Jamal to make his way in the world, much less fight against his condition, is lazy and retrograde.

During his time on the show, Jamal becomes a kind of folk hero to viewers and even receives the blessings of the poor. Even worse, the film no longer suggests so much as comes right out and declares that Jamal's destiny is to win the money and get the girl. One sees the impossibly happy ending coming from several miles away.

As the "slumdog millionaire" reunites with Latika, as he must, in the film's sentimental final sequence, the filmmakers do away with any pretense of seriousness all together. As the final credits play out, Jamal, Latika and perhaps a hundred or more extras take part in a Bollywood-style dance number.

This gaudy celebration strikes a very false note. One is left to wonder at the nature of this conclusion. Jamal is a millionaire now. He got the girl. All is right in the world. One can't help thinking, however, as the newly christened millionaire dances his way into a happy ending, of the countless other Jamals in those Mumbai slums who apparently did not have destiny on their side. What's to become of them?

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