

Million Dollar Arm and *Words and Pictures*: Two Australian directors in Hollywood, for better or worse

By Joanne Laurier
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Million Dollar Arm, directed by Craig Gillespie and written by Thomas McCarthy; *Words and Pictures*, directed by Fred Schepisi and written by Gerald Di Pego.

Walt Disney Pictures' *Million Dollar Arm* is a watchable, but highly selective and simplified account of how US professional baseball acquired its first players from India.

Directed by Australian-born Craig Gillespie (*Lars and the Real Girl*, 2007), the movie's predictable plot revolves around sports agent JB Bernstein (Jon Hamm), who is trying to breathe life into his languishing agency. Barely able to pay the rent, he and his partner Ash (Aasif Mandvi), pin their hopes on signing famed football linebacker Popo (played by former NFL player Rey Mauluga). When that falls through, JB searches for another angle—this time far afield.

In a moment of inspiration, JB determines that India, an untapped pool of 1.2 billion people, might be his salvation if he can find a Major League Baseball pitcher among the raw material of India's youth. The film's production notes state that in 2008 the real-life JB Bernstein staged a reality show in India to attract promising baseball talent in the hope of discovering the baseball equivalent to Yao Ming—the now-retired Chinese basketball star.

Filmed on location, the movie's Indian footage amounts to a colorful travelogue. JB invades cities like Jaipur, Calcutta and Bangalore with his contestant-seeking side show extravaganza. The Taj Mahal is inserted for added authenticity and the film's cameras superficially scan a hard-pressed, but effervescent population. It is convenient for the filmmakers to pretend that the populace is happy-go-Bollywood and wears poverty like a comfortable suit of clothes. Nonetheless, the country's

incredible energy shines through and provides something of a lifeline for the uninspired movie.

After auditioning 38,000 candidates, JB—with the help of the narcoleptic retired baseball scout Ray (Alan Arkin)—finds his “million-dollar arms,” Rinku (Suraj Sharma) and Dinesh (Madhur Mittal), two poor teenagers, whose backgrounds are barely touched upon in the film. JB's Indian handler and translator for the boys is the lively Amit (Pitobash).

In Los Angeles, culture shock is a source of both fascination and distress for the three. Their acclimatization is hindered by the fact that JB essentially treats them as assets maturing on a definite expiry date. They are being pushed to learn an alien sport in an alien country—or else. Even their pitching coach Tom House (Bill Paxton) knows the boys will fail, if it's “just about the business.”

But redemption is around the corner—literally. JB trades in his fancy sports car for a utilitarian van and his shallow model lover for the girl next door—his smart, caring tenant Brenda (Lake Bell)—who is studying to be a doctor. Spoiler alerts are redundant, as the film's ending is telegraphed early on.

Gillespie's *Million Dollar Arm* seems well-intentioned enough and delivers a few heartfelt, touching moments—and more than a few that are tired and rambling. The movie's scenes in India are its strongest, in terms of content and aesthetics, even if the filmmakers go out of their way to sanitize reality. Unfortunately, there is also a whiff of condescension about the movie's attitude towards India, as if it is natural for an American businessman to use the country to self-actualize. No doubt, this is not what the filmmakers consciously had in mind. It is, unfortunately, their intellectual default setting.

The actors seem to be more or less in films of their own.

As always, Hamm, Don Draper in *Mad Men*, but has a limited range. Lake Bell, a talented comic actress, barely makes it to first base; and not much is required of Arkin except the ability to nap. Paxton, a veteran performer, has enough skill to rise above the script and directorial weaknesses. The Indian actors do their best, but are fundamentally plot mechanisms for JB's life alterations.

In the end, what preoccupies the moviemakers is not the remarkable fact that it took only months to train two disenfranchised 18-year-olds from India, with little athletic experience, to become successful professional players. It is one of the more remarkable stories in American baseball history and deserves a better look at the talent, sacrifice and commitment that went into the transformation, primarily that of the Indian young men, operating far from their milieu. (Rinku Singh is a left-handed pitcher with the Pittsburgh Pirates organization and Dinesh Patel is a right-handed pitcher who also played with the Pirates organization. Along with Rinku, he was the first Indian national ever to sign a contract with a major American sports club.)

But as the title suggests, the film, a template of the American success story, is a paean to the ingenuity of entrepreneurs who scour the globe for human investments that can yield millions. And, it always helps to have a good woman who can turn, like water into wine, a cold venture into a warm family relationship, making the project worthy of the Disney feel-good movie assembly line.

Words and Pictures

*"Then, with unfettered courage
The poet looks at the future,
And the world, like a noble dream,
Lies before him, cleansed and purified."*

—Mikhail Lermontov

Veteran Australian director Fred Schepisi, known for *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993), *A Cry in the Dark* (1988), and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), laudably sets out to explore the role of art in his new movie, *Words and Pictures*.

The film is set in an elite American prep school, in which an English Honors teacher and recognized poet, Jack Marcus (Clive Owen), with a deep love of literature and language, attempts to rejuvenate a class of blasé Ivy League-bound students ("teaching in the era of the undead" to a generation that "has the most agile thumbs in history").

"[Novelist John] Updike handed you an image never before created," he passionately declaims to his charges. Between classes he attempts to engage his colleagues in complicated word games. His most amenable sparring partner is Walt (Bruce Davison). Jack knows the meaning and etymology of many words, but, as a human being, he has serious difficulties. He is an alcoholic, and therefore alienated from his son. His job is in jeopardy due to teaching methods that are wearing thin. He is fast becoming a has-been as a teacher and a literary figure.

Enter Dina Delsanto (Juliette Binoche), a well-known painter, who joins the faculty to teach Honors Art. Dubbed "the Icicle" because of her strictly no-frills personality, Dina is severely afflicted with rheumatoid arthritis, whose progression is affecting her ability to paint (Binoche actually paints in the film and her captivating works are on display). When she tells her students that "words are lies; words are traps," Dina throws down the gauntlet for a duel between "words and pictures," that is, between herself and Jack. In brief, their relationship starts in the realm of art, moves on to love, pain and rehabilitation. In the end, they discover the synthesis of words and pictures.

What is most interesting about *Words and Pictures* is that, at its best, it argues ardently for the "indescribable" power of art to "elevate" reality, permitting a view of the world that is "cleansed and purified" (Lermontov). Very few films today even mention the names of great writers—Shakespeare, Wilde, etc. ...

It is therefore unfortunate that when the film is not immediately dealing with the uplifting qualities of art, it is drowned in clichés: two imperfect beings who join together and overcome their imperfections, i.e., a storyline and its execution that are banal and predictable, in desperate need of artistic elevation. *Words and Pictures* is afflicted with a narrative that deadens the sharpness and freshness of the movie's main concern—that art has the capability to discover and represent the world anew.

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