

ON THE BOYLE

Defying all odds - both in its low-cost production and rags to riches storyline - director Danny Boyle's film, Slumdog Millionaire, has become the UK's biggest ever sleeper hit
Words Alexandria Gouveia





Left Dev Patel and the gorgeous Freida Pinto
Below The young brothers, Salim (Azharuddin Mohammed Ismail) and Jamal (Ayush Mahesh Khedekar)

"You get a buzz off it!" exclaims legendary filmmaker Danny Boyle on Mumbai, the manic setting for his latest cinematic offering *Slumdog Millionaire*. No doubt he is also getting a buzz from his film's **xxx** Oscar win last month, not to mention four Golden Globes, 11 Bafta nominations and the Screen Actors Guild Award for best ensemble cast.

Mumbai is a city of ancient and modern contrasts with colonial architecture offset by the blinding poverty of the slums. One particular slum-dweller, Jamal Malik, has his destiny written in the stars, miles away from the corrugated iron roofs and filthy streets. In his quest to be with the woman he loves, Jamal, who has been working as a chai-wallah (teaboy) finds himself at the mercy of a two-million-rupee question on television show *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*

In what is Boyle's most gripping film to date, the 18-year-old orphan from the slums defeats all odds as he reaches the final question on the popular quiz



show. Jamal's prowess doesn't come from an expensive education, but from his tough life experiences and his indomitable search for his childhood friend, the "third musketeer".

A moving melange of horrifying drama, bittersweet romance and uplifting comedy, *Slumdog Millionaire* injects originality into an industry that's become saturated with high-speed action and futuristic fiction.

The film is an adaptation of Vikas Swarup's novel *Q&A* by Simon Beaufoy (the man behind *The Full Monty*). Beaufoy's knowledge of India and adept screenwriting combined with Danny Boyle's acclaimed directing ability saw *Slumdog* becoming one of 2009's most talked about films.

Boyle, whose illustrious credits include *Trainspotting*, *28 Days* and *The Beach*, was first choice for director, but the effervescent, spiky-haired director wasn't initially convinced by the plot. "My agent said it was about *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* I genuinely thought I didn't want to make a film about that," he explains gesticulating passionately. "The only reason I took on the project was because I saw who'd written it, Beaufoy," he continues. "I read it out of respect and after 10 or 15 pages, that was it."

Displaying an undisputed admiration for Beaufoy, Boyle was incredibly loyal to the screenwriter's script, yet his signature rhythm within each scene makes it his film. There was only one hesitation. The vivid scene in which young Jamal crawls through a cesspit en route to getting Amitabh Bachchan's autograph (in this scene played by Feroz Abbas Khan), was almost cut as Boyle worried it would draw comparisons to his infamous *Trainspotting* scene in which Ewan McGregor climbs into the lavatory.

Although Jamal is the protagonist, India is the star of the film. Even with the exposure of the slum's underbelly, Mumbai's inner beauty reigns supreme

with its tangibly strong communities, vibrancy, pace and colours. "You can't believe what you're getting on film because you don't go anywhere that's boring," Boyle enthuses.

The director captures the magic of India using a prototype system consisting of hard drives in backpacks and handheld lenses more befitting for tourists than film crews. "Realism is the foundation of everything I do," he says of his unstaged footage.

Sneaking into areas most directors wouldn't dare, Boyle and his team were kicked out of the Taj Mahal and red light district, but not before capturing amazing off-limits shots. Most of the movie was filmed in India's largest slum, Dharavi and nearby Mahm creek. The population in this area alone is estimated to be one million.

"I wasn't trying to find beauty in the ugliness," reveals the celluloid wizard. "We filmed a lot of it in the slums; we tried to do it in the real places themselves. We didn't dress stuff, we didn't add to stuff, we tried to show it as it really was."

Looking for actors who could deliver well in English and who fitted one of the three age categories - seven, 13 and 18 - proved challenging. The crew soon discovered many of the children who could speak English were educated in middle-class schools and were too polished. This didn't sit right.

"We originally went there thinking we'd have the little kids speaking English, but it was clear right away it would seem fake," explains Boyle. "They tend not to speak English until they're eight or 10 really."

When someone suggested the younger children speak Beaufoy's lines in Hindi, casting director Loveleen Tandan was brought in to help, fast becoming more than a translator. "I realised I was going to need her every day," explains Boyle, confirming his reasons for titling her co-director. "She guided me through the finer cultural complexities of life on the street." ▶



SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE TRIVIA

In case you find yourself in the hot seat

- Boyle hated the film's marketing campaign, featuring posters of the two leads grinning in a shower of confetti. He said: "You can't go in expecting it to be *Mamma Mia!*"
- Anil Kapoor, who plays Who Wants to be a Millionaire host Prem Kumar, donated his fee to Plan India, a Delhi charity devoted to raising awareness about child abuse, trafficking, education and rehabilitating deprived children.
- Shahrukh Khan, the host of the real Indian version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, turned down the role of Prem, saying the character was too negative.
- The train station used in two of the film's climactic scenes and final dance sequence is Victoria Terminus, the last enduring mark left by the Raj. It was also the scene of one of the terrorist attacks that took place in Mumbai on November 26, 2008.



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Above: Danny Boyle, the gorgeous Freida Pinto, Anil Kapoor, Loveleen Tandan, Dev Patel and Simon Beaufoy

Tandan’s knowledge and connection with the communities not only helped with authenticity, she made the process of finding the right actors more efficient. Quickly translating the script, she gathered kids from the streets, asking them to perform the toilet scene in their own language. The results were hilarious and the three child actors were found.

While the adorable young Jamal (Ayush Mahesh Khedekar) is from a middle-class background, Azharuddin Mohammed Ismail (Salim) who plays his brother, and Rubina Ali, (Latika), Jamal’s childhood sweetheart, were plucked from the slums. During filming, Ismail’s house was bulldozed by the council – a common occurrence in the slums – with the crew finding him asleep on a car roof.

Ismail and Ali have since been placed into education by the production team. “We’ve managed to get them into school and hopefully they’ll stay there until they’re 16,” beams Boyle. “The last time I went back they’d started to pick up a bit of English. Rubina, especially, talked to me in English, which is amazing, and Azza is really talented at drawing.”

Boyle’s biggest obstacle during the *Slumdog* project wasn’t gaining permission from Indian authorities, but finding an adult Jamal.

The role eventually went to Dev Patel, who has a small part in UK television series *Skins*. The role is Patel’s first film and his second acting role. “I couldn’t find somebody young enough for this

character,” Boyle explains. “And the young guys in Mumbai, because of the culture, tend to be really well built. They’re in the gym because that’s the look that’s expected.”

“I wanted a really ordinary guy. I didn’t want someone who looked like a hero.”

It was Caitlin, Boyle’s 17-year-old daughter who found the leading star. “Caitlin is a big fan of *Skins*. She suggested casting Dev, so I did,” says the 52-year-old. “We actually discovered that two of the Jamal’s had big, sticky-out ears, so you’ll notice in the film, a lot of it is shot from behind their heads.”

When it came to the film score, Boyle turned to AR Rahman. “He is a serious superstar,” enthuses Boyle. “If you can imagine Michael Jackson, Tom Cruise and Bruce Springsteen rolled into one, that’s what this guy is in India.”

Also on the soundtrack, British musician MIA’s *Paper Planes* chirps its way through the train journey scene. Boyle even integrated script notes from the lady-of-the-moment. “After recording, MIA watched the film and said to me, ‘I loved it, but how did Jamal actually get on the TV show?’ We’d previously cut that material, so we put that scene back in. It’s really good to get notes from people who’ve not already seen it. They say one thing to you and you think, ‘Of course. I’ve been too ignorant,’” explains Boyle.

With its unprecedented critical acclaim and awards success, the film almost mimics Jamal’s unexpected providence – not bad going for a partially subtitled film that’s set outside Hollywood with no A-list stars and centred around a TV show.

It would be impossible to give just one answer on *Who wants to be a Millionaire?* when asked the reason behind *Slumdog*’s richly deserved success:

- A: It is a true Boyle cinematic masterpiece
- B: It captures the beauty of its location
- C: It nurtures some of the world’s freshest talents
- D: It is written

Here at *Oryx* we’d add a fifth. E: All of the above. ■

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