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MOVIE REVIEW

# Young, Professional and Conflicted

By STEPHEN HOLDEN  
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Krutin Patel's film "ABCD" (the initials stand for American-born confused desi), is the second movie released this year to explore the internal tug of war affecting upwardly mobile young Indian-Americans brought up in this country. Desi is a word for someone of Indian extraction living outside India, and "ABCD" a slang term of amused disparagement applied to those who deny (and sometimes attempt to cover up) their backgrounds.

The movie, which opens today at the Quad, is a better and more serious film than its forerunner, "American Desi," a comedy that opened here last March. The earlier film lightly explored the internal conflicts besetting an obnoxiously arrogant student, contemptuous of his Indian background, who is brought up short when he goes away to college and finds himself assigned to share living space with other, more traditionally inclined Indian-Americans.

The central characters of "ABCD," Nina (Sheetal Sheth) and her older brother Raj (Faran Tahir), are both successful young professionals (she works in advertising, he in accounting) and both struggling with similarly conflicting impulses. Nina, who is beautiful, volatile and sexually promiscuous, is by far the bigger rebel. In full revolt against the strait-laced Hindu culture of her widowed, devoutly religious mother, Anju (Madhur Jaffrey), Nina is a willful, hot-tempered piece of work who treats her boyfriends like dirt.

When Anju pressures Nina into accepting a blind date with Ashok (Aasif Mandvi), a handsome young Indian with whom she used to play as a child and who has recently arrived in the United States, Nina violates convention by instantly sleeping with him. Once he falls in love with her, she puts him through the wringer. Nina finds herself deeply torn when her former fiancé, a wealthy WASP yuppie who broke off their engagement because his parents disapproved, stages an aggressive campaign to win her back.

Meanwhile Raj, who is more respectful of tradition, has been engaged for two years to the patiently devoted Tejal (Adriane Forlana Erdos), a Hindu traditionalist. But underneath his apparent serenity, Raj seethes with discontent. And when Brian (David Ari), his best friend and office mate, receives a promotion Raj feels he deserved, his composure cracks, and he frets that racism might have been the cause. Raj's self-doubt is made worse by his attraction to Brian's replacement, Julia (Jennifer Dorr White), a crisply matter-of-fact American woman.

Unlike "American Desi," "ABCD" doesn't make light of its characters' conflicts, nor does it try to resolve them with feel-good formulaic solutions. The screenplay plods a bit, especially in the scenes of Anju moping about her suburban New Jersey home and talking to her dead husband. But the movie is sensitively acted. In her flamboyantly emotional performance, Ms. Sheth dares to make her character insufferable much of the time. Mr. Tahir's Raj conveys a dignified suffering that deepens throughout the film and becomes quite touching once the character decides to follow his heart.

Directed by Krutin Patel. Not rated, 105 minutes.

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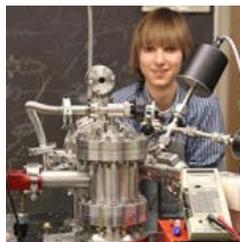


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