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MOVIE REVIEW

A Timeless Tale With an Indian Spin

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER
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At least as far back as 1927 and "The Jazz Singer," movies were telling the story of an immigrant's son who angers his father by breaking with tradition to pursue a career in popular music.

In a new century, the old story is retold by Anurag Mehta in "American Chai," which opens today in Manhattan (at the Angelika Film Center, Mercer and Houston Streets, Greenwich Village) and Los Angeles.

But this time the roots of the generational conflict lie not in a New York family of Eastern European origin but in a New Jersey family of Indian background.

Written and directed by Mr. Mehta and starring Aalok Mehta, his brother, as Sureel, this modest film turns a good-humored, sometimes satiric eye not only on the elders and Indian ways but also on college students and their rites. Mr. Mehta makes merry with the sociology of his subject and has the courage and originality to let the ending grow from character rather than cinematic convention.

Sureel, a senior in college, where his domineering father thinks he has been studying toward a career in medicine, has actually been training for a career in music, dating a non-Indian woman and playing with a band that dreams of winning a major competition.

In the role of the father, Paresh Rawal brooks no contradiction. He censors television and insists on no dating, no parties, no R-rated movies. Sureel is to become a doctor, and his father makes clear that when the time comes, he will arrange a marriage for him.

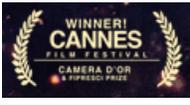
Sureel and his Indian friends and roommates share this background. They have all been told that engineering, pharmacy and medicine are the only acceptable careers. Meanwhile, shaking their heads at the old ways while being constrained by them, these students are trying to enjoy college life in the traditional American way: drinking, dating and partying, preferably with American girls, because the Indian girls have also been reared strictly.

Sureel's life, which has always been torn between two worlds, is about to become even more complicated. He is rejected by the band (which nevertheless likes his fusion music); starts his own ensemble; falls in love with Maya (Sheetal Sheth), a beautiful student from a similar background; and, of course, enrages his father on the eve of the band competition by confessing that he has really been studying music all along.

"American Chai" may not tell a new story, but in its understanding, often funny way, it

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tells a story whose restatement is validated by the changing composition of the nation.

"American Chai" is rated R (under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). Aside from a couple of vulgarities, the film includes a discourse on male arousal.

Directed by Anurag Mehta

R, 92 minutes



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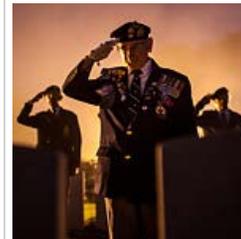


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