



FILM: **THE WHITE TIGER**

FDG RATING: 3.7 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Ramin Bahrani: *director*
Adarsh Gourav: *actor, Balram Halwai*
Priyanka Chopra Jonas: *actress, Pinky Shah*
Rajkumar Rao: *actor, Ashok Sha*

DATE: March 21, 2021

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE WHITE TIGER**

The White Tiger is a vibrant, rags to riches tale that takes place in modern day India. Or more correctly, it's about class disparity, servant versus master, with lots of corruption, bribery, betrayal in between. As one published reviewer said, "Do we loathe our masters behind a façade of love, or do we love them behind a façade of loathing?" This is just one of the questions that Balram Halwai, a poor, village-bred Indian boy asks himself when he manages to get a job as a chauffeur to a rich businessman in Delhi. Balram continually calls himself an entrepreneur, with visions of getting the Chinese to invest in his self-made business. He relates his life story to us as he writes an email to Chinese premier Wen Jiabao, requesting a meeting. Balram fervently believes that the Indian underclass is trapped in a perpetual state of servitude, like chickens in a chicken coop. The roosters in the coop see/smell the death of the roosters above them and know they're next but do not try to get out of the coop. However, that metaphor doesn't work for Balram who is determined to get to the top.

Balram belongs to a lower caste who are traditionally makers of sweets. As a child, he shows academic promise. He is the only student fluent in English and who can think outside the box, prompting a teacher to call him a "white tiger" — a rare beast in the jungle. He wins a scholarship to study in Delhi. Yet, his dream of getting a proper education is crushed after the death of his father. The family cannot afford to pay for Balram's living expenses in Delhi, and he is forced to work in a tea shop. But he believes that if he can amass money, he will be able to climb out of his caste.

He bribes his grandmother to give him driving lessons so he can get a job as a chauffeur for a wealthy business man's son, saying he will give her a portion of his salary. We watch him use his wit and cunning to climb higher, rung by rung, as he ingratiate himself to the business man's family. You could almost say the film is a mash up of Slumdog Millionaire and Parasite.

The film showed us how regimented the hierarchy of the caste system is, with little empathy for the lower classes. It was interesting to see the daily master-servant interactions that underscored the extreme superiority-inferiority relationship. It seems the hierarchy structure is deeply ingrained as we see a subhierarchy among the drivers/chauffeurs where senior drivers get better "living" spaces (defined by corrugated dividers) in their own pseudo village in the underground condo parking garage.

The businessman's son is a stark contrast. He and his wife have been living in America, are home for a visit, with plans to move to Delhi. They are very Westernized, especially his wife, Pinky, who has the personality of a wealthy New York socialite. They, however, treat Balram with at least a little respect while other family members tend to mistreat him and even threaten to murder him and his entire family if he were to conduct a betrayal. But the balance of power takes a dramatic shift after a car accident that kills a child.

The colorful lively culture mixed with an undercurrent of sarcasm and dark humor kept us entertained offering a lot to think about while Balram balances his tightrope of "straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, all at the same time" (published review). It's his formula for success as revealed at the beginning of the film.

We liked the film, the characters, acting, ambiance, cinematography, and especially the intimate insights into Indian master-servant relations. It was eye opening to realize the caste system still dominates 21st century India. Balram uses the system and its intrinsic corruption to his advantage leading to a somewhat satisfying end. According to one journalist's snappy summary, "the film hammers home a powerful message: Even the poor have a right to dream big and to realize that dream."

The White Tiger mastered a score of 3.7 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)



See you at the movies!

Adriane Dedic, adedic@pacbell.net

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