

Movie Review: 'Before the Rains'

by Beth Wood

Breathtaking panoramas of southern India and cinematic strokes of artistry fill "Before the Rains." Noted cinematographer and director Santosh Sivan captures memorable images of Kerala, his home state. Set in 1937 against the backdrop of Indian opposition to British colonialism, the film revolves around Henry, an English tea plantation owner and his right-hand man, Neela.

'BEFORE THE RAINS' - Linus Roache, left, and Rahul Bose star in the drama 'Before the Rains.' CNS Photo courtesy of Alphonse Roy. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) For all its loveliness and attempts to be profound, this film is as predictable as a soap opera, albeit in a colonial setting. It is saved by its beauty and well-etched performances.

Rahul Bose is wonderfully believable as Neela - or T.K., as the ex-pats inexplicably call him (as if Neela is hard to pronounce). He is excited by his boss' plans to expand from tea to spice export, but remains loyal to his village and homeland. As he helps Henry with the massive work of building a road to the plantation, Neela's inner struggle mirrors the larger political battle as his people peacefully demonstrate for independence. Bose's expressions convey an array of emotions with a subtlety that the script itself does not.

His performance is almost matched by Linus Roache as Henry, who is warm and generous to Neela, but clearly in charge. A Britisher, Roache this year joined the cast of TV's "Law & Order," as assistant district

attorney Michael Cutter. Years and thousands of miles away from that role, Roache makes Henry - laid-back on the surface, a control freak inside - at once likable and smarmy.

It is Henry's attraction to the plantation's house-worker Sanjani (Nandita Das) that puts his spice-kingdom dream in jeopardy. Das brings the same luminous beauty to this role as she did in 1996 to her part of Sita in Deepa Mehta's "Fire," but with more maturity and strength. As an Indian woman in the 1930s, Sanjani has no choice or power in her life, but she refuses to quietly submit to that painful fact.

The talented Jennifer Ehle does a lot with the little she has to work with as Henry's wife and mother of their son. For a movie that decries the subjugation of women, its relegation of the female leads to such secondary roles is baffling.

Inspired by a segment of the 2001 Israeli three-part film "Yellow Asphalt" by Dan Verete, "Before the Rains" is Sivan's English-language (though occasionally subtitled) directing debut. His bright and vivid cinematography in "Bride and Prejudice" is probably his best-known work in the U.S. In "Rains" - from artistic portraits of people behind rain-specked glass to vast views of hundreds of men building Henry's dream road - Sivan's camera-work is masterful. It's a shame, then, he didn't have a better script with a few twists and turns.

"Before the Rains." Running time: 1 hour, 38 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

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