

✓ ***The Kite Runner* (12A)**

18th May 2009

Director: **Marc Forster**
USA 2007

Running time : 128 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Khalid Abdalla** (Amir), **Atossa Leoni** (Soraya), **Shaun Toub** (Rahim Khan), **Homayoun Ershadi** (Baba, the father), **Sayed Jafar Masihullah Gharibzada** (Omar).

SCRIPT: **David Benioff**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Roberto Schaefer**. EDITING: **Matt Chessé**. MUSIC: **Alberto Iglesias**.

Based on a book whose principal character commits a callous act on top of a cowardly one, requiring expensive location shooting (China standing in for Afghanistan), and having dialogue most of which has to be subtitled, this cannot have been an easy proposition for any potential US backer. So DreamWorks, by no means a fringe Hollywood player, is to be congratulated on its faith and judgement, and indeed was rewarded by the film's box-office success.

If you are unfamiliar with the story, it is set in Kabul both before and after the Soviet invasion, and concerns a young boy and his friendship with another child, of lower caste, who exhibits considerable skill in running down fallen kites whose strings have been cut by opponents during flying contests. These events more resemble WWI dogfights than a Sunday afternoon in the park, and are a prominent feature of the Afghan calendar.

All does not proceed happily, however, and it is not just the arrival of the Russians. There are complications and ironies that I shall not try to go into here, for fear of giving away too much. Suffice it say that our hero leaves Afghanistan with his father, only to return many years later for a shot at redemption.

The Kite Runner is a fine achievement, no question. It plays like an authentic foreign language movie, in its acting styles and pacing. The only giveaway of its American-ness is the visual CGI splendour of its aerial photography over Kabul and the Pamir Mountains. The director, Marc Forster came from the harrowing executioner film *Monster's Ball* via *Finding Neverland*, another film about childhood, and is at the time of writing completing work on the new Bond. Quite a trajectory, and quite a range, without implying journeyman credentials: there is a sensitivity and taste in these films, as well as

a readiness to take risks (I cannot speak for the Bond).

What strikes one most watching the early scenes of the film – and this is true also of *Persepolis*'s Tehran, pre-Islamic Revolution – is the extent to which Kabul appears like any other semi-developed Asian city, such as one might find on the Indian subcontinent. The standard of living is relatively high, the freedoms manifest (symbolised by the kite-flying), religion is kept at a discreet distance from daily life. There is as much wrongdoing as under any other system, of course, but it helps if the bullies are not in charge. This is very pertinent to the plot of the film, as it happens.

But one cannot escape the feeling of an immense national tragedy taking place before one's eyes, as we end up in a city resembling that of *Osama*, and this impression over-arches the unfolding personal drama. It is an aspect which, if it is accurate and well-researched, in my view embodies one of the essential charms of world cinema in opening up a window on foreign lands and histories.

Pending the emergence, or re-emergence, of an Afghan national cinema we will have to content ourselves with the vision of outsiders, not necessarily filmed locally, like this one. (*Osama* was an Iranian film, previously shown by the Film Society.) *The Kite Runner* may have one or two softening elements, to avoid depressing viewers too much, not least an upbeat ending, but as an example of Hollywood decision making it must rank alongside the more enlightened.

David Clare