

## Bollywood 'Oscars' Honor Baywatch Star Hasselhoff



By Claudia Parsons  
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India's movie industry handed out its version of the Oscars on Saturday at the Bollywood Movie Awards, which saw a veteran director take top honors and a U.S. actor best known for "Baywatch" named international star of the year.

Dancers in shimmering costumes, Indian beauties in saris and sultry heartthrobs sporting long black coats crowded the Taj Mahal for the occasion.

The Taj Mahal casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey, that is. The event was held in the U.S. East Coast gambling resort as part of Bollywood's bid to be a global force in cinema.

It was a fitting backdrop for a show that mixed the glitz of a major movie industry with the retro feel of variety-show dance numbers, the likes of which were long ago excised from the Oscars.

An audience composed largely of Americans of Indian origin cheered as veteran Yash Chopra was named best director for his film "Veer-Zaara," which also picked up the award for best film and best actor for its star Shahrukh Khan.

Rani Mukherjee, one of the few major divas to take the stage, won the best actress award for her role in "Hum Tum."

"The winner is the "Spielberg" of India ... Yash Chopra," said former Baywatch star David Hasselhoff as he presented the award for best film, referring to star U.S. director Steven Spielberg.

Bollywood has a reputation for colorful kitsch -- melodramatic plots, young lovers battling cruel fate, wicked villains and sentimental, but chaste, song-and-dance routines.

"Whether it's comedy or romance or action, films should touch your heart," Chopra said, explaining the appeal of his films and the genre, which despite efforts to expand its audience has so far made few inroads into the U.S. market.

### BIG CHEERS FOR BAYWATCH STAR

Though an array of stars including former Miss India Lara Dutta entertained the crowd, Hasselhoff provoked some of the night's biggest cheers when he picked up his statuette.

The Bollywood awards -- which resemble a slim-line Oscar holding what could be a torch or a bunch of flowers -- are chosen according to a popular vote by fans.

"Baywatch" and "Knight Rider," in which Hasselhoff co-starred with a car named Kit, may raise sniggers from highbrow critics at home but they are still going strong in India, and the actor said he had much in common with the escapism of Bollywood.

"I'm proud of shows like Baywatch and Knight Rider because it's about saving lives, not taking lives," he told

Reuters.

"It's entertainment, it's tongue in cheek, it brings the world together," he said, adding that the entertainment industry was a powerful force for good in the world.

"I think it's responsible for a lot of world peace," Hasselhoff said, adding that he was hoping to work in India soon on a project based on a series of romantic novels.

"I never knew exactly how to get there. Now I've got this (award) it's like my key to India," he said.

Bollywood churns out around 1,000 movies a year. But despite a fan base that extends to the Middle East and Europe, few films make money.

But Shammi Kapoor, who was given a lifetime achievement award, said better technology and funding were leading to more and more better films. "They're getting to be more topical," he added. "They aren't the happy happy movies of yesteryear.

Bollywood still has comic heroes and dastardly villains, however, and the awards paid tribute to both. Aftab Shivdasani turned up to claim his prize for best comedian, but the villain of the year, Abhishek Bachchan, was nowhere to be seen.

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