

## “IT’S A WONDERFUL AFTERLIFE” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold  
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The idea of a film set in Britain’s Indian community about a mother whose obsession with marrying off her daughter leads her to murder holds all kinds of tasty black-comic possibilities. Unfortunately, *IT’S A WONDERFUL AFTERLIFE* (opening in select cities today) squanders that promise in favor of a would-be romantic laffer that emphasizes banal plotting and slapstick over any sort of edge.

Most of the slayings have already occurred when the movie opens, though we do witness the aftermath of the last, as a man who has been forced to gorge himself on spicy food is brought into a hospital operating room—whereupon his stomach explodes all over the attending physicians, setting up gross-out expectations for the rest of the movie that it never pays off on. Our way into the main plot is Detective Sergeant Murthy (*HEROES*’ Sendhil Ramamurthy), who’s investigating the case and is also an old family friend of Mrs. Sethi (Shabana Azmi). Little does he know that this doting mom is responsible for the string of “Curry Killings” he’s been investigating, having bumped off anyone who has offended her in her quest to find a husband for her daughter Roopi (Goldy Notay). Mrs. Sethi’s victims may be dead, but they’re not gone; they start hanging around as green-skinned, slowly decomposing ghosts only she can see, the culinary implements of their demises still attached.



Director Gurinder Chadha scored a hit combining humor and sports in *BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM*, but reconciling the whimsical tone she applies to *IT’S A WONDERFUL AFTERLIFE* (which she scripted with Paul Mayeda Berges) with its grisly subject matter is beyond her. It’s hard to believe for a moment that the warm-hearted, well-intentioned Mrs. Sethi we get to know could be responsible for four cold-blooded murders; there are a couple more deaths as the story progresses, but those are clearly accidents and unintended on Mrs. Sethi’s part. The ghosts don’t seem especially miffed at her either; after some token expressions of displeasure, they become a friendly if bickersome cheering section trying to help her get Roopi hitched—since

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once that’s accomplished, Mrs. Sethi will feel her life’s purpose has been achieved, and she can kill herself so that the spirits will be free to pass on to the next world. Um...ha ha?

Chadha is evidently too big-hearted to follow this material into the dark-toned territory it would seem naturally inclined for, opting for a sunnier, friendlier vibe. That wouldn’t necessarily be a problem if IT’S A WONDERFUL AFTERLIFE were more imaginative in its storytelling or cleverer in its comedy, but much of it is predictable and sophomoric. Of course, Roopi’s best friend Linda (Sally Hawkins, providing some much-needed spunk) is a New-Agey type with a sensitivity to the spirit world who gets the feeling there are unseen entities in the Sethi household; of course, the handsome Murthy winds up seeing past Roopi’s weight problem to fall for the charming young woman underneath. His fellow detective Smythe (THE FULL MONTY’s Mark Addy), however, has become suspicious of the Sethi women and tasked Murthy with spying on Roopi, and he tries to hide this as he courts her, and...but you know where all this is headed, right?

Notay is, in fact, a bright and sympathetic presence as Roopi, even as the script insists she be an independent spirit in certain scenes and tearfully despondent over her romantic situation in others, and makes her the object of fat jokes that seem rather gratuitous, given the movie’s prevailing theme of acceptance. Occasional one-liners and bits of physical business hit the mark amidst an unsatisfying menu of jokes that are either too obvious or too mild, and in certain cases just weird or out-of-place. Most noteworthy among the latter is a latecoming spoof of CARRIE that seems to have been edited in from a different movie—one that has embraced the story’s horror-oriented side more enthusiastically than AFTERLIFE has.

IT’S A WONDERFUL AFTERLIFE also occasionally hints that it’s going to burst into full-blown Bollywood extravagance, but never goes there either. There are no out-and-out song-and-dance numbers, just a few musical montages of the type that, like too much of the rest of the film, bear much more of a generic feel than a movie with this outrageous a premise should. To sum up in appropriately comestible terms: IT’S A WONDERFUL AFTERLIFE needed a lot more spice.



{comments on}

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