

## Blu-Ray Review: 'Four Lions' Subversively Pokes Fun at Terrorism

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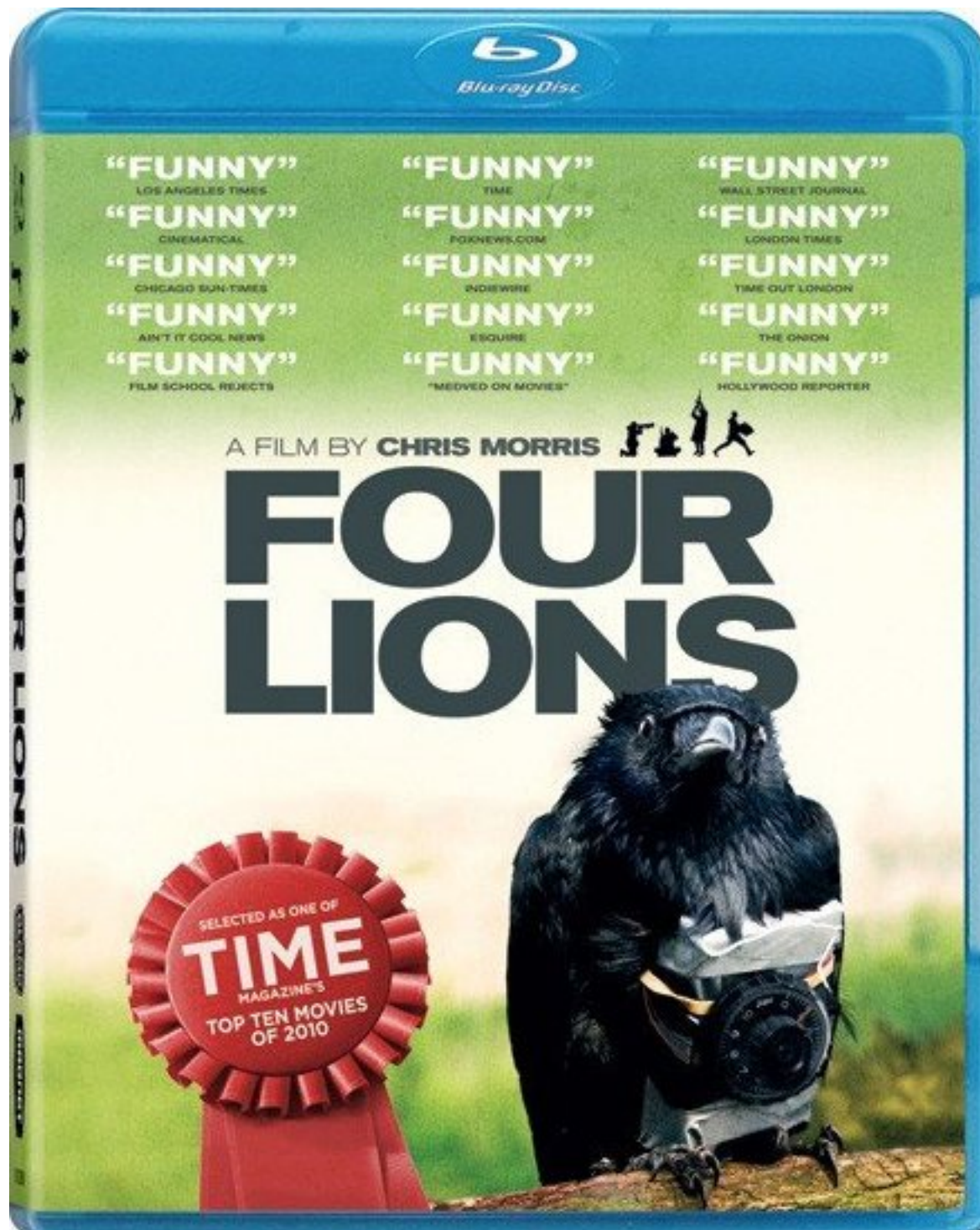
CHICAGO – In Dan Reed’s unmissable 2009 HBO documentary “Terror in Mumbai,” cameras captured the overwhelming carnage caused by ten young Pakistani men. They were obeying every word of their elders, heard in the film via phone correspondence. The terrorists gradually began to resemble wide-eyed kids, as they became dazzled by the lavish scenery in Mumbai, an environment that clashed with their sheltered existence.

It’s precisely the raw humanity and learned ignorance of these terrorists that make them so frightening, yet British satirist Chris Morris has utilized their fundamental absurdity to fuel his poignant, provocative and fiercely funny black comedy, “Four Lions.” As co-producer of the acclaimed mock news show, “The Day Today,” Morris has no interest in relying on safe comic caricatures to get a laugh. His goal is to subvert stereotypes, not reinforce them.



Blu-Ray Rating: **4.5/5.0**

The fresh-faced protagonist of “Lions” is a British jihadist named Omar (Riz Ahmed), who has many qualities one would attribute to the conventional hero persona. He’s a dedicated family man, a passionate rebel and a seemingly natural leader. When he finds himself momentarily racked with self-doubt, his wife comes to the rescue, encouraging him to realize his dreams. We’ve seen this scenario in countless other inspirational pictures before, but in the context of this plot, it is utterly chilling (and more than a little bewildering). The fascinating thing about Omar and his bumbling band of brothers is the degree to which they are fallible, conflicted and woefully misguided in their self-righteous crusade. As outrageously nonsensical as many of the gags may seem, they were largely inspired by years of research Morris put into exploring terrorist cells, and their various instances of monumental ineptitude that further prove the time-tested cliché that truth is indeed stranger than fiction. One of the funniest and saddest characters in the film is Waj (Kayvan Novak), who at first resembles nothing more than a plucky sidekick. Yet it becomes increasingly apparent that Waj is entirely dependent on allowing others to think for him. When he has last-minute doubts that his heart is truly in his work, Omar helpfully explains, “That’s your brain disguised as your heart.”



Four Lions was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on March 8, 2011.

*Photo credit: Magnolia Home Entertainment*

It's no coincidence that "Lions" has been repeatedly compared to 2009's comic masterpiece, "In the Loop," which skewered the British and U.S. governments with a similar level of foul-mouthed zeal. Both films were co-written by Jesse Armstrong, who perfected the art of observational humor in his side-splitting series, "Peep Show," which may stand as the ultimate farce about twentysomething manhood. Morris also worked on the "Lions" script with Armstrong's frequent collaborator Sam Bain, and the trio succeeded in making a film that will appeal to fans of contemporary British comedy, with its dialogue-driven scenes punctuated by painfully awkward silence. There are a few exchanges between the fiery Islamic convert Barry (Nigel Lindsay) and the slow-witted Faisal (Adeel Akhtar) that could've easily been performed by Ricky Gervais and Karl Pilkington. The use of Toploader's "Dancing in the Moonlight" is positively Kubrickian, evoking memories of "We'll Meet Again" in "Strangelove." Yet as in "Strangelove," the laughs in "Lions" have a tendency to get stuck in the viewers' throats.



Kayvan Novak, Arsher Ali, Riz Ahmed and Nigel Lindsay star in Chris Morris's Four Lions.

*Photo credit: Magnolia Home Entertainment*

"Four Lions" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.85:1 aspect ratio), and includes a solid amount of extras, though Morris is



disappointingly absent. He only appears in a brief talking head montage and twelve minutes of behind the scenes footage where he gives priceless directions such as, "Make it look like you're being attacked by invisible beings that you're trying to shoot and duck from at the time—then gratuitously roll over!" The disc could've greatly benefited from an audio commentary or extended interview with Morris. There are countless stories the writer/director could've shared from his multiple years of research, and the unbelievably true stories of morbidly funny idiocy that he uncovered along the way (some of which Morris shared in an interview with Hollywood Chicago).

Luckily, the disc does include 21 minutes of "research interviews" meant to represent the many hours of interviews with Muslim youth in Britain conducted by the filmmakers. Associate producer Afi Khan spoke with a group of young Muslim men about the racial intolerance they've experienced in their neighborhood, as well as their hopes for the future. Khan's short film is interesting, but subtitles would've been a welcome addition, since the murky sound quality and thick accents render some of it unintelligible. The most fascinating extra by far is an interview with 24-year-old Mohammed Ali Ahmad, after his arrest and imprisonment under the 2008 Terrorism Act, and before he was acquitted in 2010. He discusses how his dignity was stripped from him in prison, where even criminal inmates referred to him as scum. "Jihad is about striving to better yourself and defending your honor," he argues.

Though the disc's 19 minutes of deleted scenes aren't nearly as funny or quotable as the half hour of brilliant bonus gems from "In the Loop," there are still several highlights here to be savored. Many of the best bits are extended sketches briefly seen in the final cut, such as the outtakes from botched terrorist videos where Faisal attempts to preserve his anonymity by wearing a box over his head. A chase scene between the bomb-carrying terrorists and young street punks culminates in some amusingly subdued slapstick. And Lindsay gets a few more chances to shine, especially when he tests the dedication of a wannabe jihadist (Arsher Ali) by asking, "Would you hack off your own head and eat it?"

*'Four Lions' is released by Magnolia Home Entertainment and stars Riz Ahmed, Kayvan Novak, Nigel Lindsay, Arsher Ali, Adeel Akhtar and Benedict Cumberbatch. It was written by Chris Morris, Jesse Armstrong and Sam Bain and directed by Chris Morris. It was released on March 8, 2011. It is rated R.*



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