

Visually Poetic 'Patang' Delivers Images of Arresting Beauty

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – There are few things more difficult to pull off than elegant visual poetry. The line between pretension and artful provocation is a thin one indeed, and any director that attempts to construct a metaphorical mosaic runs the risk of looking foolish. Yet cinema would surely be a dull medium without artists that aimed for the stars, and that is precisely what Prashant Bhargava does in his debut feature, "Patang" ("The Kite").

After garnering favorable festival buzz at Berlin, Tribeca, Chicago and Ebertfest, "Patang" is the latest indie treasure to have a screen reserved at the AMC River East 21. This is the sort of gorgeously photographed picture that practically begs to be seen on the biggest screen possible. It stands as a reminder of what truly absorbs a viewer into a film. Arresting visuals and vivid characterizations will always be more entrancing than distracting 3D effects viewed through dim lenses.

Like Benh Zeitlin's "Beasts of the Southern Wild," "Patang" is a love letter to the resilient spirit of people who live in a particularly troubled part of the world. The Indian city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat has been rocked with religious violence and earthquakes, yet still continues to prosper as one of the country's fastest growing cities. During the January 14th festival of Uttarayan, citizens are sprawled on the rooftops while filling the air with a diverse array of kites. For a few years, Bhargava observed this festival while gathering stories about Ahmedabad's plucky inhabitants. It was through this extensive research period that Bhargava and his writing partner James Townsend ("Lucky Number Slevin") were able to form a trio of intersecting vignettes designed to take place during the day-long festivities. Just as Zeitlin allowed the personalities and life experiences of his non-actors to inform the details of their characters, Bhargava actively sought out townspeople who naturally fit the description of the script's ensemble. Dialogue was freely altered and improvised, thus resulting in untold hours of footage that Bhargava somehow managed to edit down to a brisk 95 minutes. The results are often spellbinding.



Hamid Shaikh stars in Prashant Bhargava's Patang.

Photo credit: Khushi Films

The director's background in graffiti art is apparent in the film's opening minutes, as a sea of faces, buildings, vehicles and other ordinary shapes blend together to form a dizzying montage fraught with anticipation. Amidst the swirl of imagery emerges Jayesh (Mukkund Shukla), a

businessman on his way to reconnect with family members on the eve of Uttarayan. He’s joined by his daughter, Priya (Sugandha Garg), whose grainy film footage shot with a handheld camera adds another level of visual intrigue. Her strikingly photogenic looks catch the eye of Bobby (Aakash Maheriya), a charismatic young man who shows off his kite expertise during one of the film’s many thrilling flying sequences. Instead of utilizing digital effects to capture a kite’s eye view of the landscape, Bhargava and his masterful cinematographer, Shanker Raman, view the action from the ground, thus allowing the audience to fully share in the characters’ excitement and frustration. The soaring kites often resemble microbursts of color, yet as the minds and hearts of the characters come into focus, their personalities are reflected in the movement of the kites themselves. When Bobby and Jayesh go head-to-head during a kite battle, the sound design takes an unexpectedly surrealistic turn, while remaining true to the visceral energy of the aerial altercation.

Beneath the smiles and hospitable gestures is a tragedy that continues to haunt the fractured family. After Jayesh sold the local family business and left town to find success elsewhere, his brother drank himself into an early grave, a devastating incident that Jayesh’s grown nephew, Chakku (Nawazuddin Siddiqui), isn’t willing to forgive. When Jayesh learns that Chakku works as a wedding singer, his sneering reaction certainly doesn’t help matters. Bhargava doesn’t pretend that these familial tensions would be able to vanish during a single blissful visit, yet he also avoids pushing the material into melodramatic territory. Late in the film, Jayesh’s compassionate sister-in-law, Sudha (the exquisite Seema Biswas of “Bandit Queen”) delivers a simple yet beautiful monologue about the choices we make when facing our past. Do we choose to hold on to memories of happiness, or do we let it slip from our grasp? Is despair worth carrying tightly in our clenched hands, even as it slices our palms to the bone? The answers to these questions may appear to be easy, but they are easier said than done.



The sky above Ahmedabad is filled with kites in Prashant Bhargava’s *Patang*.

Photo credit: Khushi Films

It’s interesting to see Bhargava’s film get its limited release a few weeks prior to the opening of Zeitlin’s widely celebrated indie gem, “Beasts,” since both films warrant comparison to the work of cinema’s great poet, Terrence Malick. Yet while Zeitlin occasionally relies on eloquent narration to convey some of his headier ideas, Bhargava allows his images to speak for themselves. His use of symbolism is all the more effective because of its subtlety. Since none of the film’s dangling plot threads are left neatly tied at the end, Bhargava wisely sidesteps any preachy message-making. Any attempt at closure would’ve felt inherently false. What the filmmaker does encourage us to do is reflect on the imagery in a way that empowers us to draw our own conclusions. To me, the kites reflect the film’s central theme, which is the strength of the family unit. It simultaneously anchors you and allows you to soar, and in the film’s wonderful final shot, it proves that even in its most tattered state, there remains hope that it will eventually be mended.

‘Patang’ stars Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Mukkund Shukla, Seema Biswas, Sugandha Garg, Aakash Maheriya and Hamid Shaikh. It was written by James Townsend and Prashant Bhargava and directed by Prashant Bhargava. It opened June 15th at AMC River East 21. It is not rated.



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