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Culture Flubs

OVER THE MOON DOWN UNDER

BY MICHAEL ATKINSON



SHOWTIME AT THE APOLLO: WARBURTON AND NEILL IN *THE DISH*

THE DISH

Directed by Rob Sitch

Written by Sitch, Jane Kennedy, Tom Gleisner, and Santo Cilauro

A Warner Bros. release

AMERICAN DESI

Written and directed by Piyush Dinker Pandya

An Eros release

A silk-stitched Aussie softball that suggests an insecure nation plagued with longing for global consequence, *The Dish* plays like a promotional film for a game of high-tech catch-up. Saluting itself, Rob Sitch's movie seems tranquilized so as to avoid the tension

required of either drama or comedy; it's one big feel-good. The titular, not-so-sexy apparatus is a radio telescope planted in the middle of a New South Wales sheep pasture, and no shot of its looming particularity comes without *Field of Dreams*-style musical beatitudinizing. Used by NASA to receive television signals from the Apollo 11 moon landing because it happened to be the largest dish in the Southern Hemisphere, the dish in the rural town of Parkes is now a piece of Down Under legend. Or so Sitch would have us believe, since nearly every character utters some banality about "being a part of it."

The back-patting begins with telescope manager Cliff Buxton (a somewhat stoned

Sam Neill) and includes NASA rep Al Burnett (Patrick Warburton), whose Clark Kent-like American professionalism clashes ever so lightly with the Parkes approach in what passes for the movie's only conflict. Meanwhile, the soundtrack runs up the sing-along list of late-'60s hits—good morning starshine yourself. Sitch tries to broaden his canvas with townspeople caricatures—busty matrons in bouffants, hapless administrators, gossipers wondering how Neil Armstrong relieves himself in space—but little distracts *The Dish* from ambling its sunny way toward the moment when, thanks to a glitch with a stateside dish, NASA asks Parkes to handle the climactic transmission of lunar frolic.

Harmless and affectionate, *The Dish* gives its clichés breathing room, and so a few are pleasantly surprising, particularly Warburton's horn-rimmed bullethead, whose thoughtfulness and calm shame the locals. (Warburton, *Seinfeld*'s uncomprehending Putty, also gave the season's great unsung comic performance as a palace boy-toy in *The Emperor's New Groove*.) Thin mush that it is, Sitch's movie does know how to capitalize on cosmic awe. It becomes compoundingly poignant to realize how we've almost forgotten about that august moment in July 1969 when, as Armstrong pronounced, for "one priceless moment" mankind held its breath. Its own movie, the copious original NASA footage can still sock you with radiance.

Defined, on the other hand, by its meticulously narrow ethnicity, Piyush Dinker Pandya's *American Desi* is a pure-hearted dissertation-comedy about Indian American culture smush—Hindu traditionalism versus backward-cap American pop life. Out of the gate, Pandya blows any opportunity for pungency, when anti-trad college boy Kris Reddy (Deep Katdare) escapes from his Old World family and arrives at school to find out that his three Middlesex roommates are also all Indian, an instance of bureaucratic profiling the film immediately disregards. After that, it's a little romance, a little Bollywood in New Jersey. Clubfooted but earnest, Pandya's movie never forgets about its second-gen issues, but never quite plumbs them, either. **V**