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'The Extraordinary Journey of the Fakir': Film Review

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Courtesy of Sony Pictures Releasing France

Dhanush in 'The Extraordinary Journey of the Fakir'

THE BOTTOM LINE

A winsome if all-too-saccharine migration adventure.

Tamil movie star Dhanush toplines this adaptation of Romain Puertolas' best-selling book, about a man from Mumbai who gets lost in Europe.

At a time when the plight of immigrants has become the subject of heated political debate in Europe and the U.S., an extremely feel-good migration movie like

The Extraordinary Journey of the Fakir comes along as a rather pleasant surprise.



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Not that this upbeat triumph-over-adversity tale — about a man from the lower depths of Mumbai who goes on a most unexpected trip through the Old Continent — can be said to truly reflect current realities. But as a cheeky form of rags-to-riches wish fulfillment à la *Slumdog Millionaire* or *Lion*, director Ken Scott's border-crossing adventure, which stars Tamil-born Bollywood heartthrob Dhanush and was adapted from author Romain Puertolas' best-selling novel, is likable enough.

Journey mostly works thanks to Dhanush's radiant charm, with the actor adding humor and sincerity to a project that can feel too overstuffed and wacky for its own good — mixing magical realism, deadpan comedy, musical numbers and moments of tear-jerking drama. It's an unruly gamble, yet Scott directs with confidence and manages to bring his message home by the last act.

Made on a purported budget of \$20 million, the film was first released by Sony in France (where Puertolas' book was a local hit in 2014) and will roll out in other Euro territories over the summer. A U.S. distributor is yet to sign on, though it's easy to see how *Journey* could sit well with older viewers in art houses and on SVOD channels.

Carried by Dhanush's warm-hearted voiceover, with an animated map guiding the narrative's long and twisting route, the story starts and ends in the Mumbai slums. There, we're introduced to feisty little street urchin Aja (played by Hearty Singh as a child and Dhanush as an adult), who's raised by a hardworking single mom (Amruta Sana) and spends his days conning tourists or bystanders out of their pocket change.

The boy has an unusual gift for magic, and we soon learn it comes from his long-lost father — a Frenchman who spent some time in India and has since disappeared. When his mother passes away, Aja, who takes on the guise of a fakir and claims to possess special powers, vows to travel to Paris and reunite with his dad atop the Eiffel Tower, making his mom's dream come true. He manages to scrounge together the necessary resources, which involves swindling a gang of local thugs, then hops on a plane and makes it all the way to France. And that's where the trouble begins.

Written by Puertolas and producer Luc Bossi (*Mood Indigo*), the script swiftly jumps around locations as it tracks Aja's peripatetic journey from one country to the next. It all begins when he meets the love of his life, Marie (Erin Moriarty, *Blood Father*), at an Ikea store outside of Paris. But just before their big date, he passes out in a closet (the "Ikea Wardrobe" of the original book's title) and gets shipped away to the U.K. alongside a band of Sudanese illegals led by the friendly Wiraj (Barkhad Abdi, *Good Time*). From there he goes on to Spain, Libya, Italy and eventually Paris again, crossing paths with an assortment of characters — including a European starlet played by Berenice Bejo (*The Artist*) — as he tries to make it back to where he started.

The irony is that Aja actually has a valid passport — that is, until it gets ripped up by British police — but the color of his skin quickly places him in the same lot as illegal aliens trying to make their way into Europe. In *Journey's* best moments, such as a scene where Aja gets stuck in an airport prison in Spain, we see how his experience, however rough, is far less traumatic than those of the women, children and families who have crossed over from Africa and find themselves in bureaucratic limbo.

Yet Scott, who's perhaps best known for his sperm donor comedy, *Starbuck*, maintains a lively tone despite all the calamity Aja faces, tossing in lots of gags (including a droll take on the famous Ikea scene from *Fight Club*), a few dance sequences (one of them is straight out of a Bollywood flick) and a very saccharine outlook that can sometimes be too sweet for its own good. At its worst, *Journey* gives off the bland positive vibes of an in-flight movie, although it never shies away from the issues of poverty and displacement at its core — even if it tends to wrap them up all too neatly.

The film's true appeal lies in Dhanush's winsome turn as a down-and-out foreigner experiencing the absurdity of Europe, and its immigration policies, firsthand. As a product of the streets, Aja is savvy enough to get out of some sticky situations, while approaching life with a bright-eyed openness that allows him to hold out hope through the worst. He may seem too naive — as does this movie at times — but like the migrants he meets along the way, Aja is a hero by the mere fact that he survives.

Production companies: Brio Films, Vamanos Films, Scope Pictures, Little Red Car Films

Cast: Dhanush, Erin Moriarty, Berenice Bejo, Barkhad Abdi, Gerard Jugnot, Abel Jafri, Ben Miller

Director: Ken Scott

Screenwriters: Romain Puertolas, Luc Bossi, with the collaboration of Ken Scott, based on the novel 'The Extraordinary Journey of the Fakir Who Got Trapped in an Ikea Wardrobe' by Romain Puertolas

Producers: Luc Bossi, Jaime Mateus-Tique, Gregoire Lassalle, Genevieve Lemal, Saurabh Gupta, Gulzar Inder Singh Chahal, Aditi Anand, Samir Gupta

Executive producers: Mario Mazarrotto, Yamina Belarbi

Director of photography: Vincent Mathias

Production designers: Alain-Pascal Housiaux, Patrick Deschesne

Costume designer: Valerie Ranchoux

Editor: Philippe Bourgueil

Composer: Nicolas Errera

Casting: Marie-France Michel, Sebastien Moradiellos, Rachel Desmarets, Avy Kaufman

Sales: TF1 Studio

92 minutes