

## Movie Review: WARIS SHAH

### With an Interview of the Film's Producer, Manjeet Maan

By **ESTER MOLAYEME**  
Special to *The Epoch Times*

*Waris Shah*, winner of India's National Award, and India's official Oscar entry, is an all star production featuring the life of Waris Shah, the 18th century poet, philosopher and singer of Punjab, India, who lived between 1720-1798.

During that era, music was prohibited by Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb, and his successors, in the belief that music constituted a distraction that removed man away from God. Anyone found singing was sentenced to death.

As a disciple of Baba Makhdoom, Waris Shah was instructed to fulfill the last wish before his Guru's execution, writing the epic love story of *Heer Ranjha*. Waris Shah's version of the story is the most popular, and is known today as *Heer Waris Shah*.

**"Music is Fire that Burns No One"**

During his travels in undivided India (now Pakistan), Waris Shah was accused of committing the ultimate sin of singing. To his defense, Waris Shah argued that no sin was committed since "music is fire that burns no one" and as a consequence became instrumental in re-popularizing music in undivided India.

One of the unique and interesting features of the movie is the use of beautiful poetic dialogue. Several songs touch on issues of destiny, spirituality, righteousness, standing by one's honor, and following one's heart. The film communicates diverse expressions of love through body gestures, smiles, and kind acts, all without touching. This cultural aspect of Indian life is commonly found in Indian movies.

Gurdas Maan, in his remarkable performance in the leading title role, wrote and sung most of the film's songs. He mesmerizes the viewing audience by virtue of his charisma that impacts many hearts. His melodic voice and poetic exchanges add to the depth of his character. Gurdas Maan received the Best Actor Award at the Berlin Asia Pacific Film Festival for his interpretation of Waris Shah.

The lead actresses Juhi Chawla and Divya Dutta perform with feeling and conviction.

Several energetic dance sequences portray people of that historic period rejoicing to rhythmic music, wearing colorful costumes and beautiful jewelry.

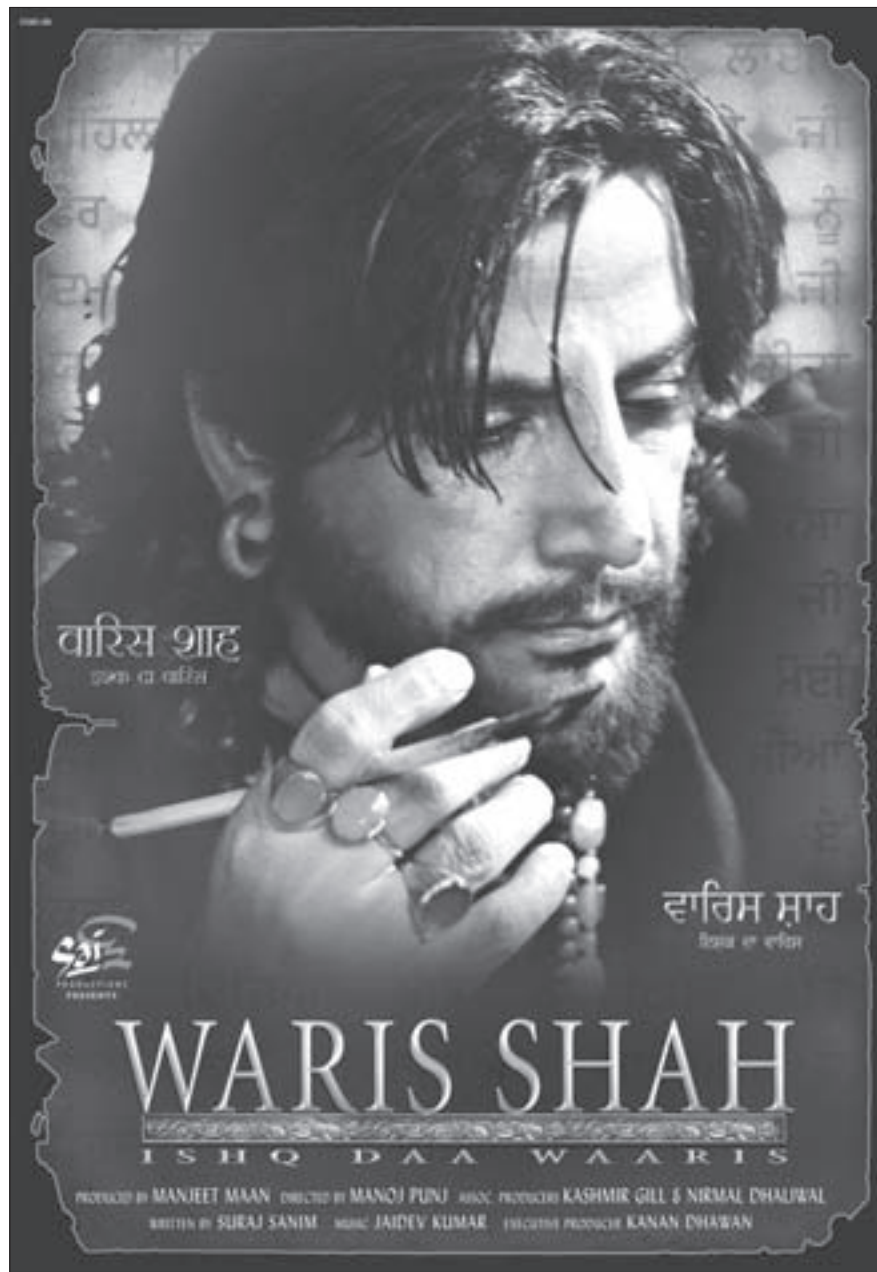
Breathtaking cinematography by R.A. Krishna adopts clever camera work capturing extreme wide angles, long zoom shots, and close-up picturesque images of people and scenery. Krishna went through extreme efforts to represent the exact desired colors of the set and characters.

For this period movie, a specially designed set was constructed in the Roopnagar district of Punjab reflecting the 18th century township and mosque.

Following is an interview with producer and costume designer Manjeet Maan. She holds the highest cinema award in India, and is a two times National Award winner. Manjeet Maan is the wife of the feature's leading actor and singer, Gurdas Maan.

**Ester Molayeme:** Could you tell us what the movie *Waris Shah* communicates about the poet and his vision?

**Manjeet Maan:** "The film conveys a message of love and harmony. It also underlines the importance of music in bringing harmony to society, and its role in taking the faithful closer to God, all this while chronicling the life and times of Waris Shah."



**LEADING ROLE:** Gurdas Maan as the poet, singer, and philosopher, known as Waris Shah.

**EM:** How were the main actors selected?

**MM:** "Gurdas Maan is a very famous Punjabi singer having performed all over the world. His stage shows are total sell outs. Gurdas has worked in all movies of Sai Productions apart from outside films."

"The lead actresses Juhi Chawla and Divya Dutta have worked as a team in the past films of Sai Productions and were naturally considered for their verve and Punjabi looks. Both speak the language well and understand its nuances."

"Juhu Chawla is a former Miss India and worked in Hindi Mainstream cinema for the past 17 years. In her career she has worked with all major actors of Indian cinema. Divya Dutta is also a very famous young actress, she has played second-leads and leads in scores of Indian films."

"Juhi Chawla and Divya Dutta have worked in over 100 films each."

"Juhi Chawla and Divya Dutta have won Filmfare and Zee Tele Cine awards for various films, while Gurdas Maan has won national award for *Des Hoya Pardes* and *Shaheed e Mohabbat Boota Singh* and the Best Actor award at the Berlin Asia Pacific Film Festival for the year 2006."

**EM:** How does director Manoj Punj's work in this movie compare to his past work?

**MM:** "Late Manoj Punj is a three times national award winner. He had a penchant for story telling, detail in acting, and a very personal brand of direction."

"Manoj Punj had directed films like *Shaheed e Mohabbat Boota Singh* (Martyr of Love Boota Singh), *Zindagi Khoobsoorat Hai* (Life is Beautiful), and *Des Hoya Pardes*."

"In *Waris Shah* Manoj relied more on the wide angle in the film to give a wider picture to his audience. In his earlier films, the characters were much more dramatic. In *Waris Shah* the principle character is subtle, although the other two characters are very dramatic in their approach. The film had a very complex story to tell in the sense that while writing the story

of *Heer and Ranjha*, Waris Shah himself becomes a part of his own creation. Manoj Punj handled these complexities well. His earlier films were simple linear stories."

**EM:** How were the costumes selected and made?

**MM:** "Along with my team of researchers I delved deep into archival material at various museums like the National Museum, Patiala Archive, and Lahore Museum. The team realized that Persian silks were not only famous but available freely during the period and used by commoners."

"A finer quality was used by the royalty, so Persian silks were used to dress the two female actresses, with Zardozi (gold embroidery). The costumes for *Waris Shah* were mainly cottons dyed with vegetable dyes and dark colors which were in vogue during those days and in consonance with the class of people Waris Shah belonged to."

"The hand sewn shoes were made of calf and camel leather and polished with vegetable oils, as was the fashion during the times. The polish used in those days was actually burnt wax for the shoes used mostly by males. Females wore either soft leather shoes or shoes made of cloth with leather soles. The costume designer ensured the original techniques were used to get the exact results."

"Even the sticks that people carried varied widely in those times according to the person's status. These were specially researched and designed appropriately according to the characters in the film. Ornaments and jewelry were another area of concern, relying upon the archival material of the Mughal era available in India."

"The headbands – the Pagris were either round or with a cut in between. Days were spent in the National Museum of Delhi and several other Museums of Punjab with the team of researchers to get the trend right. Vegetable dyes were used to color these in rose, red, and black."

"The costumes put each character into a proper perspective like Waris Shah, who uses silks initially and then changes over to cotton as he moves towards Sufism. The Qazi (The Governor) uses the

finest silks, the girls use Persian and murshidabadi silks. Sabo's brother is a trader and uses the best of clothes in the town. The turbans and the sticks that each one carries signify the character's status."

"The costumes convey the status of the character, his/her lifestyle, profession, and are specific to the time and region addressed in the film."

**EM:** What was the approach adopted for the choreography?

**MM:** "Formation dancing has been a tradition in Indian folk dance which the choreographers stuck to. The verve and speed of Punjabi dance is effectively conveyed through the dance sequences of the film. In group dances the choreographers relied mostly on formations and rhythm while in individual dance sequences like Sabo attempting to entice Waris Shah, the choreographer relies more on mannerisms and not speed or verve. Facial expressions in this sequence take prime position rather than the physical movement. In yet another sequence, Waris Shah performs a Sufi dance, with rounds or circular movements, as is the tradition even today."

**EM:** How was the music created and what types of instruments were used?

**MM:** "Jaidev Kumar is the prodigal son of great Panna Lal Kathak and composed music for scores of films. For this film he relied mainly on Indian traditional music instruments which were used during that period. A careful look at the film would show the different kind of tabla prevalent during that time."

"All instruments used are traditional Indian music instruments, specific to the region dealt with in the film. Some of the instruments used were the tabla, dholak, harmonium, sitar, veena, taanpoora, and ektara."

**EM:** Considering the budgetary and climatic concerns, what challenged you the most in the making of this movie?

**MM:** "The creation of the period, around the 1750s, during which Waris Shah created his magnum opus. The set, houses, streets, mosques, gates, walls, arches, single roof houses, courtyards, indoors, matching properties, costumes, ornaments, footwear, weaponry, musical instruments, were the main areas of concern."

"Compared with our earlier films, this film was a mammoth task. First, for the detail that it demanded; second, for the seriousness and sensitivity that was required by the content we were dealing with, and then the control over drama to be achieved. The character of Waris Shah has been deliberately underplayed by Gurdas Maan. Our earlier films focused mainly on social subjects. This was a period film with a difference."

"It is an independent feature. The total budget of the film was two million dollars. It took nearly three months to shoot the film at a stretch. The climate was hot as the summer season had begun. Added to the temperature were problems like maintenance of the set for continuity, as the paint on sets would develop cracks very fast and the touch up had to be very discreet and matching."

**EM:** What would the awarding of the Oscar mean to you?

**MM:** "An Oscar award for an Indian film would be a huge incentive to the Indian film industry which churns out nearly a thousand features every year. It would show a great respect and long overdue recognition on the international stage. To us individually, it would be a great honor and recognition of everyone's effort."

#### TRIADA:

*The Bulgarian brothers and classical guitarists shown above will be performing at Trinity Lutheran Church in Manhattan Beach.*



Courtesy of the Beverly Hills "Concertos Pomeridiano" recital series

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Compiled by **BETH LAMBERT**  
*Epoch Times Los Angeles Staff*

January 20

**MANHATTAN BEACH** – *Triada*, a trio of Bulgarian brothers, will be performing classical guitar at Trinity Lutheran Church. It is part of the series of previews to the "Concertos Pomeridiano" concert series in Beverly Hills, for which each concert takes place the day after the preview. Trinity Lutheran Church is located at 1340 Eleventh Street. The performance will be at 2:00 p.m. and is free, although donations are appreciated. For more information, call (310) 937-7275 or email jeninger@yahoo.com. Information is also available at <http://www.palosverdes.com/tlcmusic/tlcmbs2.htm>.

January 19

**SANTA MONICA** – Films for Peace will be showing *Hidden in Plain Sight*, a documentary of the US Army's School of the Americas in Conyers, GA, which has been attacked for human-rights violations by some of its graduates. There will be a discussion following the film led by Hector Aristizabal, a victim of torture in Columbia who now counsels victims. The showing will take place at Cafe Bolivar at 1741 Ocean Park Blvd. The showing begins at 8:00 p.m. Come early if you want something to eat; food service ends at 7:00 p.m. There is a suggested donation of \$5. For more information, call (310) 452-9681.

Ongoing through February 18

**HOLLYWOOD** – In his play *Safety*, British playwright Chris Thorpe explores the alienation of modern society as it becomes increasingly desensitized to the war and violence constantly depicted in modern media. Performances take place at the McCadden Place Theatre at 1157 N McCadden Place. They are at 8:00 p.m. Thursday through Sunday. Tickets range from \$15 to \$20. For more information, call (818) 780-0661.

Ongoing through February 17

**POMONA** – *Dance of Dawn* will be on display at the Cal Poly Pomona Downtown Center Gallery. The exhibit features the work of George Flett, who assembles parts of the costumes for traditional Indian dancers. The specific dancers he works with near Spokane have revived an old style of dance called the Prairie Chicken Dance. The Cal Poly Pomona Downtown Center is located at 300 West Second Street. Hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 12:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., with hours on the second Saturday of each month lasting until 9:00 p.m. Exhibits are free of charge. For more information, the center can be reached at (909) 469-0080, or under exhibits at their website at <http://www.class.csupomona.edu/downtown-center/index.html>.

Ongoing through February 18

**PASADENA** – *Defiance* by playwright John Patrick Shanley is playing at The Pasadena Playhouse. The play begins when Colonel Littlefield invites black officer Captain Lee King to his home to discuss building tensions. Unexpected events turn their conversation to a deeper exchange that touches all those involved. The Pasadena Playhouse is located at 39 South El Molino Avenue. Showings are some Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 8:00 p.m., Thursday through Saturday at 2:00 p.m., Saturday at 4:00 p.m., and Sunday at 2:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. Tickets range in price from \$31 to \$41. The box office can be reached at (626) 356-7529. Information is also available on their website at <http://www.pasadenaplayhouse.org>.

Ongoing through March 24

**POMONA** – *Rudy Autio: In the Round* will be on exhibit at the American Museum of Contemporary Art (AMOCA) in Pomona. Autio was trained in drawing and painting from an early age, which has influenced sculptures like those on exhibit at AMOCA. AMOCA is located at 340 South Gary Ave. It is open Wednesday through Saturday from 12:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. and every second Saturday until 9:00 p.m. Admission is \$3 for adults, \$2 for students and seniors, and free for children 12 and under. The museum can be reached at (909) 865-3146. Information is also available on their website at <http://www.ceramicmuseum.org>.

Ongoing through February 3

**SAN MARINO** – *A Chinese Garden Preview* is open at the Huntington Museum. The "work in progress" includes Tai Hu rocks, hand-carved stone bridges, a lake, a stream, a waterfall, oaks, camellias, and pines. The Huntington Museum is located at 1151 Oxford Road. It is open Tuesday through Friday from 12:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Admission is \$15 for adults, \$12 for seniors, \$10 for students, and \$6 for youth ages 5 to 11. Admission for children under age 5 is free. For more information, call (626) 405-2100 or go to the museum website at <http://www.huntington.org>.

Want to include your event in the "Calendar of Events"? Please send us an email at least two weeks in advance of your event to: [scalevents@epochtimes.com](mailto:scalevents@epochtimes.com).