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(India)

A Sahara One Motion Pictures and Baldev Pushkarna presentation of a Lighthouse Films production. Produced by Bobby Pushkarna. Co-producer, Kavita Pushkarna. Directed by Madhur Bhandarkar. Screenplay, Nina Arora, Manji Tyagibrick; dialogue, Sanjev Dutta, Bhandarkar.

Madhavi - Konkona Sensharma
Vinayak Mane - Atul Kulkarni
Deepak Suri - Boman Irani
Rohit Kumar - Bikram Saluja
Gayatri - Tara Sharma
Pearl - Sandhya Mridul
Abhijeet Patnaik - Rehaan Engineer
Tarun - Jai Kalra
Anjali - Soni Razdan
Romesh Thapur - Nassar Abdulla

By [ROBERT KOEHLER](#)

Tapping into pop culture via celebrity glitz, showbiz politics and newsroom drama, Madhur Bhandarkar's final pic in a loose Mumbai trilogy, "Page 3," establishes him as one of India's most engaging and thoughtful helmers outside Bollywood. Director uses the saga of a gossip columnist observing the goings-on of the rich and famous to comment on the state of women, morality and justice -- the same concerns he vitally put across in "Chandni Bar," but with the kind of muscular, wide-ranging approach associated with Mani Ratnam. Pic has been a surprise national smash since its January bow, with more than 22 million admissions.

Young, Bangalore-born Madhavi (Konkona Sensharma, co-star of "Mr. and Mrs. Iyer") is settled into her gig on the Mumbai English-lingo daily, Nation Today, covering the latest parties, but she itches to write about more substantial matters, something that her firm but kind editor Deepak Suri (Boman Irani) regularly discourages.

Madhavi is like a Jane Austin heroine -- a smart young gal from modest beginnings who's able to sidle up close to society's power players and witness their rotten cores.

She comes into the orbits of both underwear model Tarun (Jai Kalra) and wannabe movie thesp Gayatri (Tara Sharma). Tarun could be her Mr. Right, while Gayatri, needing support, is invited to stay at the apartment Madhavi shares with outspoken roomie Pearl (Sandhya Mridul).

Business tycoons and Bollywood celebs mix and match at parties on private estates, while lonely wives often stand on the sidelines observing the action. Bhandarkar's camera is everywhere in these scenes, the ultimate peeping Tom behind the velvet rope. The sense the moviemakers are enjoying the pleasures while poking fun and, eventually, wagging fingers at such islands of conspicuous consumption in a sea of poverty, fills "Page 3" with a sense of outsider fascination and disgust.

Midsection ramps up the tension, with Gayatri confronting the casting couch and fleeing to safer havens in Delhi, while Madhavi gets a lesson in what it's like to be a real journalist from crime reporter Vinayak (Atul Kulkarni), who covers drug busts at coke-fueled parties.

Increasingly turned off by Tarun and the social scene's hypocrisy, and with her private life changed when gold-digging Pearl runs off to wed the elderly millionaire of her dreams, Madhavi becomes Vinayak's assistant, where she views Mumbai's desperate underbelly. A terrorist bombing on a busy street serves as a wake-up call, and when she finds herself back on the party beat one night and confronts the city's top cop, Madhavi's rage lets loose.

Suicides, bedroom betrayals and scandal make "Page 3" a frothy brew kept in line by good pacing and an interest in the real world. Sensharma handles, with as much subtlety as the material allows, her evolution as a heroine who grows more interesting as she sheds her innocence. She confidently leads a cast of mostly younger non-star up-and-comers, who themselves could very well be tomorrow's Page 3 celebs. Mridul is particularly amusing in the Eve Arden role.

Like Ratnam's recent, astonishing "Youth," Bhandarkar's filmmaking is full of surprises, and shows an interest in young lifestyles and concerns.

Madhu Rao's widescreen lensing soaks up the glamour, marred only by some uneven daytime shots. Sexual envelope is emphatically pushed, and ultra-hot dance numbers always happen within the context of the rowdy party sequences.

Camera (Quality Lab color, widescreen), Madhu S. Rao; editor, Suresh Pai; music, Shamir Tandon; background music, Raju Singh; lyrics, Sandeep Nath, Ajay Jhingran; production designer, Shailesh Mahadik; costume designer, Ashley Rebello; sound (Dolby Digital), Rajan Kothali; sound designers, Kunal & Pariksit; action director, Harish Shetty; choreographers, Longiness Fernandes, Andy Kumar.

Reviewed at Indian Film Festival, Los Angeles, April 23, 2005.

Running time: 139 MIN. Hindi, English dialogue.