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Movie Review

Immigrants, Their Children Raised in America, in 'ABCD'

November 30, 2001 | KEVIN THOMAS | TIMES STAFF WRITER

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"ABCD" is an acronym for American-Born Confused Dashi (Indian), but there's nothing confused about this assured and fully realized first film by Krutin Patel, who was born in India in 1966 and emigrated to the U.S. with his parents at age 8.

The generation gap that opens between immigrant parents and their children, quickly caught up in American culture and values, has been explored many times, including by Indian American filmmakers, but "ABCD" possesses exceptional depth and perception. What's most refreshing is that it's not just another cultural-clash comedy, but a serious, even painfully probing work, though not without humor. Many people will identify with the personal and professional challenges facing Patel's people, obstacles intensified by the difficulty in forging a cross-cultural sense of identity.

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Patel focuses on the widowed Anju Mehta (the peerless Madhur Jaffrey) and her two adult children, Raj (Faran Tahir) and Nina (Sheetal Sheth). Raj is a handsome, hard-working Manhattan accountant; Nina is a beautiful executive at a New York advertising agency. Anju lives in a spacious suburban New Jersey home. Her children visit frequently, but she's lonely and tends to live in the past.

A woman of elegance and charm, Anju has a strong, dominating personality, and Raj is a dutiful son, allowing himself to enter an engagement for a traditional arranged marriage to a lovely, traditional woman (Adriane Foriana Erdos) he respects and likes but does not love.

Anju pressures Raj by her assumption that he is certain to receive an expected promotion and Nina by fixing her up with suitable prospective bridegrooms, ticking off their academic backgrounds, professional status and annual income. Nina has reacted to her mother with rebellion, masking her fear of intimacy with promiscuity and rejecting her heritage as much as possible. For all her formidable, old-country ways Anju is nevertheless loved by her children, and the siblings have a close, mutually

sustaining bond despite differences in temperament.

Nina is in denial over how much she's hurt by her ex-fiance's lack of courage in refusing to introduce her to his wealthy parents. The mother and father's expectations for him seem as high as Anju's are for her children--expectations that the former fiance Sam (Rex Young) assumes would preclude a wife of Indian descent.

But now Nina has by chance crossed paths with Sam 11/2 years after their breakup, just as she is being pursued by a childhood friend, Ashok (Aasif Mandvi), freshly arrived from India. Even if he's rushing things, Ashok, who is witty and has an idiosyncratic sense of humor, has made an impression on Nina, whose often rude veneer is actually pretty thin.

Meanwhile, just as things get tense at the office, Raj and Julie (Jennifer Dorr White), an attractive, direct and intelligent new co-worker, become taken with each other. Amid considerable, acute cultural observations, Patel deftly maneuvers both brother and sister into choices in their romantic lives--choices that will cause pain for themselves and others, regardless of the path they take. In short, Patel suggests that following one's heart may not be so simple after all--that there may not be a correct choice.

"ABCD" was made on a modest budget, but there's no sense of cost-cutting. It's polished without being slick; well-paced and graceful and brought alive by stellar performances led by Jaffrey, the unforgettable presence in numerous Merchant Ivory films, most notably "The Autobiography of a Princess" and the recent "Cotton Mary." Jaffrey, who is also the film's executive producer, has the knack of making Anju at once exasperating and lovable, amusing (intentionally and otherwise) and obtuse yet gallant.

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Patel sees his people in the round, and Tahir reveals the reflective Raj as thoroughly as Sheth illuminates the tempestuous Nina. The splendid supporting cast includes David Ari as Brian, who finds himself in the uncomfortable position of being Raj's longtime best friend but also his competitor in the workplace.

*

Unrated. Times guidelines: mature adult themes and situations, blunt language, some discreetly presented sexual situations

'ABCD'

Madhur Jaffrey...Anju

Faran Tahir...Raj

Sheetal Sheth...Nina

Aasif Mandvi...Ashok

An Eros Entertainment and Laxmi Pictures presentation. Director Krutin Patel. Producers Naju Patel, Krutin Patel. Executive producer Madhur Jaffrey. Cinematographer Milton Kam. Editor Ravi Subramanian. Music Deirdre Broderick. Costumes Naju Patel. Production designer Deborah Schreier. Art directors Rodrigo Guerrero, Robert Serrini, Jennifer Galvelis. Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes.

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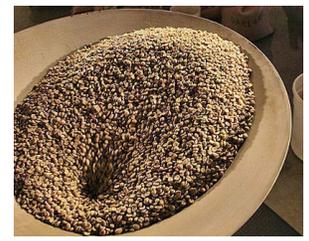
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