

THE HINDI AMERICAN

An American who acts in Hindi movies? And who's Indian except for his fair skin and blond hair? "I don't believe it" was the reaction of most people who met Tom Alter at the recent screening of diploma films arranged by Mr. Girish Karnad, the Director of the Film and Television of India, at Bombay. But these doubters do believe when they listen to Tom's fluent Hindi and hear of the Gold Medal he won in this year's graduation awards.

"I don't think it's amazing," says Tom. "I relate to Indians more than I do to Americans. I was born here and bred here, and my best friends are Indians. I learnt Hindi before I spoke English well. And I just can't imagine leaving India, ever." Someone asked him whether he thought he'd make it big in Hindi movies. "I know most producers may have to tailor their stories to fit me in. I might get roles like a British army officer, or a judge. But I'll accept any good roles I am offered, which have 'depth'. I've become part of this country now, and of the Indians and



their chemistry and culture. So whatever happens, I won't leave India."

Tom was born in Mussoorie, Uttar Pradesh, where his parents were missionaries. He did his schooling at the Woodstock School there. He often went to the States with his parents when they were on furlough, but always felt like returning soon, "because this was my scene." After school, Tom tried studying in an American Uni-

versity, but studying rubbed off on him. Then he came back to India and taught the children of Village Jagathri in Haryana for a while before taking up a job at his old school Woodstock.

Why did he join the Film and Television Institute? Tom said that when he found himself without a job in 1972, he decided to apply for the acting course in the F.T.I.

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Wasn't it a strange decision to make?" "Strange? I've lived in India nearly all my life and I don't think it's strange! I never used to see Hindi movies at Woodstock. But when I was at Jagathri I was the only foreigner there, and as there were no English movies showing, I got to see a lot of Hindi pictures. I gradually came to like them, and it became a sort of dream to act in them, one day. I was embarrassed to tell people I'd applied for the acting course though. . . ."

Tom was soon invited for the audition tests in Delhi, and was one of the few people to be selected from the 650 hopefuls who had flocked there to try their luck.

When he didn't get the telegram giving him the date

on which he was to report at the Institute, he began to wonder. He wrote to the Institute, and was told that the people there were waiting for clearance from the Home Department, because the government was obviously reluctant to spend astronomical sums of money on a 'foreign' student. Tom told me that he wished to make it clear that he got in only because he was essentially an Indian by birth.

When no news came from the Institute till the end of August, Tom couldn't restrain his worry. The first term at the F.T.I.I. had begun on the 1st of July. So he went down to Poona to try to meet the Director, who unfortunately happened to be in Delhi just then. But some people there assured him he had been accepted by the Institute, and only clearance by the Centre was needed. So back in Delhi, Tom went about trying to gather enough strings in his hand to get the magical clearance. He had decided to go to Britain and do a course in Physical Education, if he did not get into the Institute. One day, a friend of his told him he would soon be leaving for England overland. Tom was about to tell him he would accompany him, when he received the news that he had finally been accepted by the Institute. He joined classes on the 21st of September, and the term ended on the 30th!

Tom says the chaps at the Institute came to accept him very soon, particularly when they discovered he was not the usual 'pardesi' student. He says they were all friendly and helpful.

At the recent screening of Institute films, most critics agreed that Tom will make a fine actor. He has already bagged four roles—in Chetan Anand's "Saab Bahadur", Kamal Amrohi's "Aakhri Moghul", R. N. Shukla's "Mrig Trishna" and an untitled production by Kewal Kashyap. "All four are very good for a beginning. I only hope that the producers will find my performance satisfactory and not in mind."

What are we waiting for then? Roll out the red carpet—Tom, you "fillum-ad-dicts"!

—CHAITANYA KALBAG