

# Rungbh

A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment and Criticism

\$5

Volume 1, Number 3



## O you

### **The Film and Video Issue**

#### **Women in Video**

Leila Sujir, Gita Saxena and  
Michelle Mohabeer

#### **Krishna, Kipling and Cutting Your Own Deals**

*Masala under review*

#### **In the Name of God**

Filmmaker Anand Patwardhan  
on Fundamentalism and the Secular State

#### **Interviews with Om Puri and Akesh Gill**

On the set of *The Burning Season*



# Rungh

and

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## Rohinton Mistry

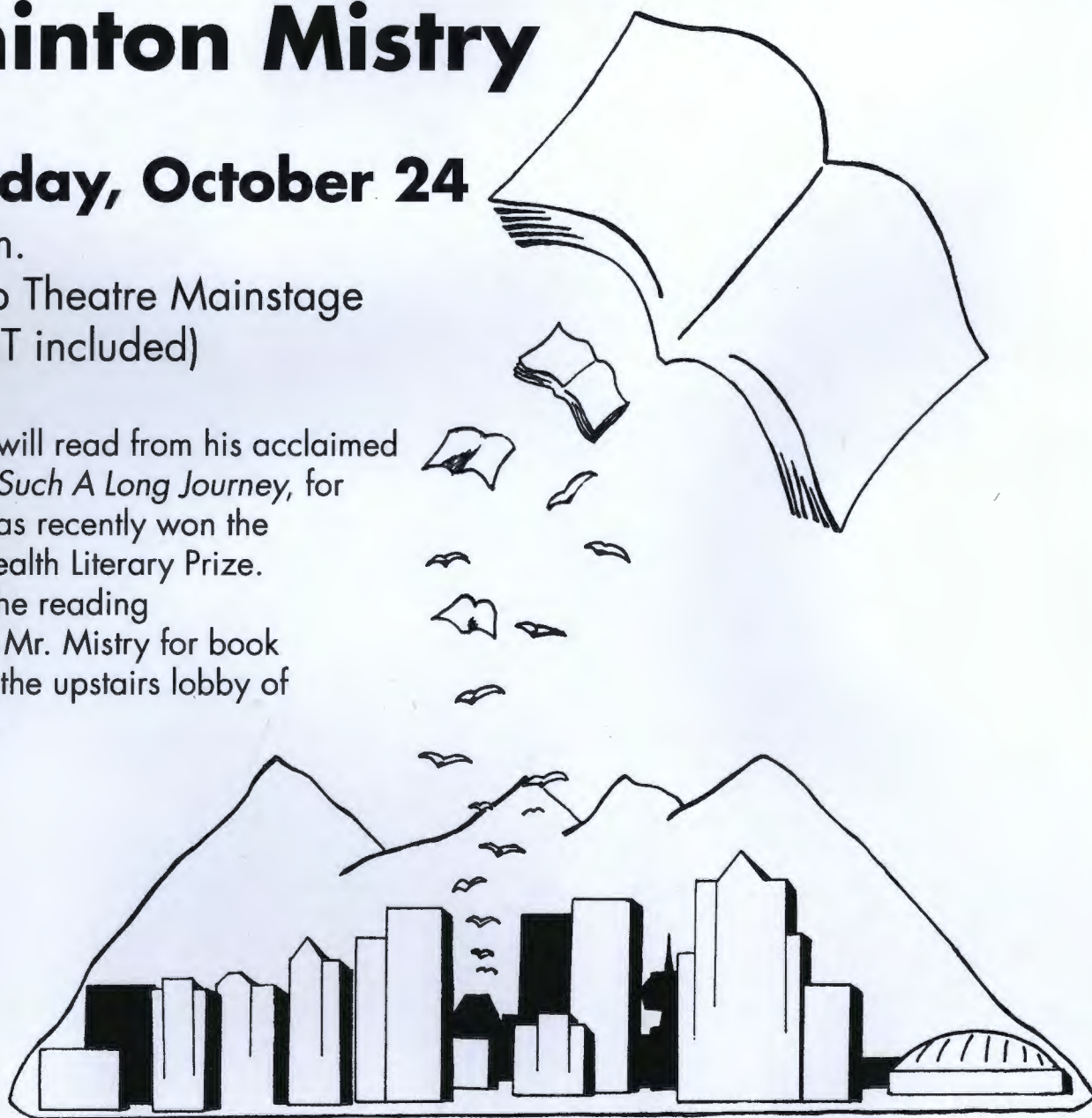
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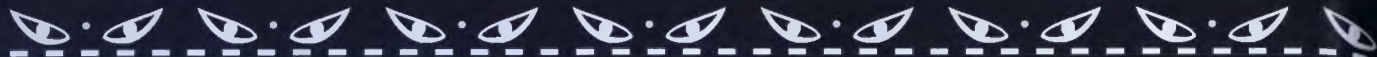
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# Rungh

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RUNGH is an interdisciplinary magazine committed to the exploration of traditional and contemporary South-Asian cultural production. It is a project of the Rungh Cultural Society—an incorporated, non-profit society.

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# Editorial

My friend Norbert is a thoughtful sort of person. The type who when asked a question will pause for a moment before answering. So when I asked him what he thought about the first issue of Rungh, paused of course, before answering. He told me that the interviews didn't really 'work' and then he told me his theory about magazines. He likened a magazine to an on-going conversation among a group of people who form a community. The community has writers who 'speak' and readers who "listen." If the conversation is good (pleasurable, sensual), then the community of speakers and listeners will grow. They will continue to share in a type of sacred trust. As for the interviews, they didn't 'work' because they seemed to valorize the spoken word in a glossy, art magazine format. Fair enough.

I thought about my conversation with Norbert as I travelled with Sherazad to Toronto and Montréal to launch Rungh. I quietly watched the people who attended the launches and I listened to their comments. They, the amorphous 'they,' loved the design and, for the most part, liked the contents. I recognized, as I had believed, that the Rungh 'community' consists of many speakers and listeners from different communities. The speakers are clamouring and insisting upon being heard (having had little or no voice) and the listeners (given the choices of voice available) are tuning in and out at will. I realized that establishing the sacred trust, of which Norbert spoke, between writer and reader would be difficult and I wondered why.

My answer to myself, in part, is that Rungh is groaning under the weight of the burden of representation. It is not a load that Rungh wants to either jettison or cavalierly side-step. It is a load which represents a trust that must be dealt with responsibly. Does that responsibility mean running two articles, one for and one against a topic? Does it mean that only people of South Asian origin should write for Rungh given the shortage of 'space' available to South Asian artists and writers in the dominant culture? Does Rungh have a perspective from which it projects itself into the on-going cultural debates? For me the answers are 'no,' 'no' and 'in part.'

I do not think that only people of South Asian origin should write for Rungh. Essentialism, while engendering solidarity and strength, also engenders prejudice and exclusion. A progressive politic should be inclusive in order to be meaningful. Such inclusion, however, must respect that there has to be a need for forums, such as Rungh, where certain communities can engage in dialogues and define themselves as opposed to being defined.

If Rungh has a perspective it is that Rungh's speakers engage in a process of 'othering' the 'dominant' and de-centering the centred. It is a forum in which South Asian writers and artists are not perceived as being exotic but rather as cultural workers engaged in the process of self-definition.

I stated earlier that Rungh's listeners are tuning in and out at will and I believe that this is related to Rungh's perspective. Whenever the perspective and the listeners' interests intersect, there is a tuning in. How to foster the intersection is a part of Rungh's challenge.

In a sense my conversation with Norbert (and with other listeners) was an intersection. He had listened to the first issue of Rungh and his interests in the art of writing led him to talk to me. It is these sorts of intersections which Rungh invites. Rungh has a community which is slowly declaring itself ("I read Rungh," "I write for Rungh.") and Rungh is a part of the South Asian communities (cultural and otherwise) which are defining themselves. Rungh looks forward to hearing from you and seeks your input in both defining the magazine and ourselves.



# IN THE NAME OF GOD

a conversation  
with

## Anand Patwardhan

by Ali Kazimi

*Anand Patwardhan is a leading independent documentary filmmaker from India. Making political—often controversial—films for the past fifteen years, Anand has won several prestigious national and international awards. During his five year stay in Canada in the late seventies, he directed **A Time to Rise**, along with Jim Munroe. This documentary about Indian farmworkers in British Columbia was produced by the National Film Board of Canada and introduced Anand's work to Canadian audiences. His latest film **In the Name of God** is a chilling exposé about one of the most critical issues facing India today: the rise of Hindu nationalism—which has resulted in bloody clashes and several thousand deaths.*

*The following is an edited version of a conversation that took place between Anand Patwardhan and Ali Kazimi during the Festival of Festivals in Toronto where **In The Name of God** had its Canadian premiere.*

**Ali** Where does the impetus for **In The Name of God** come from?

**Anand** Although the film began as a general film on communalism, the first part became focused on Punjab. It's called **In Memory of Friends**, which deals with the left movement in Punjab, and their fight against both state terrorism as well as Khalistani terrorism. When the 1984 riots took place in Delhi, nearly 3000 Sikhs were killed. I wanted to do something about that to point out the madness of those events, and to talk about what's happening in Punjab: the riots, the terrorism and the innocent people

being killed by both Khalistani separatists and the government.

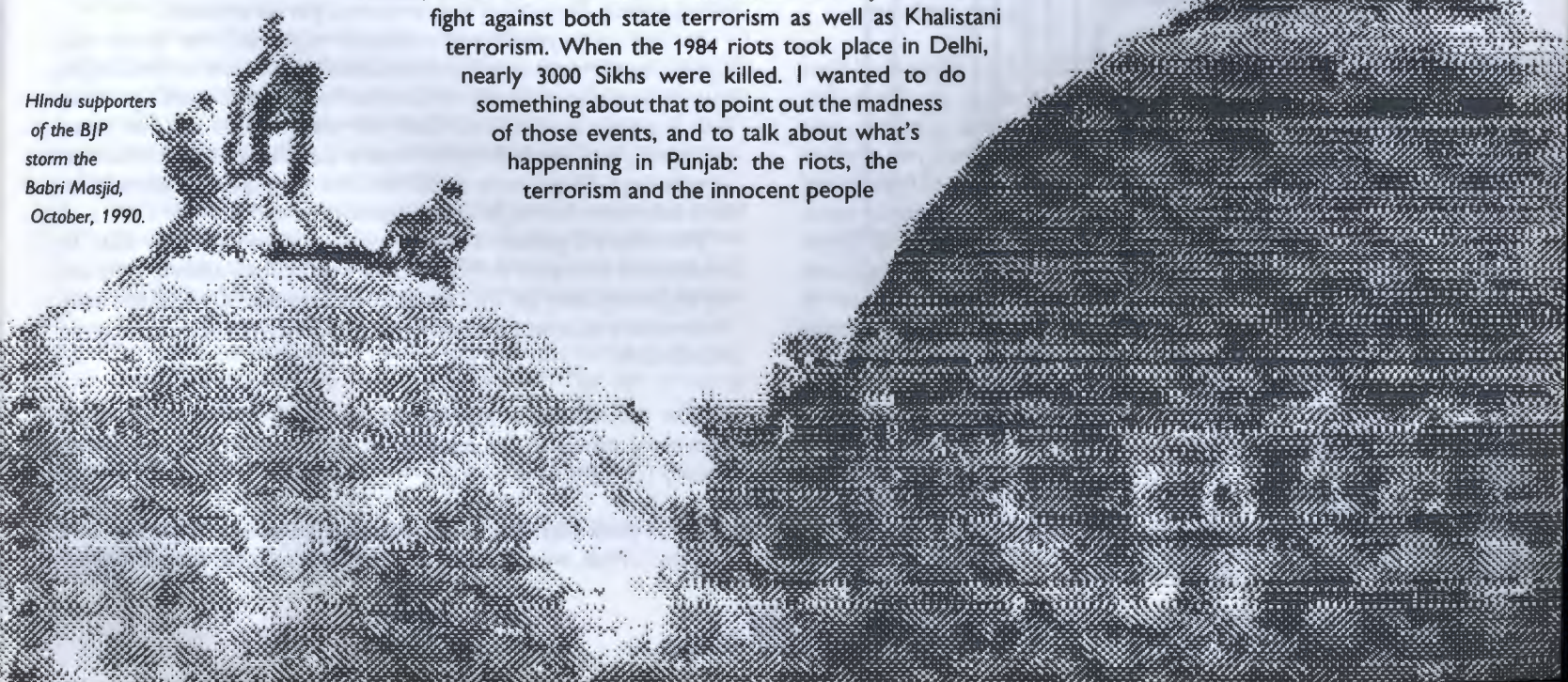
The left movement derives its inspiration from the thoughts of Bhagat Singh. He was born a Sikh but became one of the early communists, although there was no Communist Party at that time. He wrote a book called **Why I Am An Atheist**. He was hanged by the British in 1931 at the age of 23. The film focuses on his writing, because today the Khalistanis are saying that, "Bhagat Singh was a Sikh and, like us, he was a terrorist." The government is saying, "No, he was a patriot. He fought for the country." But in fact neither of them mention that he was a socialist. He didn't believe in 'country' in that sense. He believed in internationalism. So that's what I was trying to pose, the larger concept of being a human, of being an international person rather than a narrow religious identity.

**Ali** So after dealing with Punjab you decided to take on a broader issue?

**Anand** I'm not looking out to make films all the time, but there are things which are going on in my mind and when the pressure gets too much, then I have to do something about it.

In 1990, L.K. Advani, leader of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), travelled in an air-conditioned Toyota decorated as a religious chariot, followed by thousands of Hindu volunteers.

Hindu supporters  
of the BJP  
storm the  
Babri Masjid,  
October, 1990.







He trekked all across the country. The journey was supposed to end in Ayodhya [believed to be the birthplace of the Hindu god, Ram], where, on October 30, 1990, they would attack the [Babri Masjid] mosque and build a temple.

**Ali** Could you give a brief background to the parties involved in this?

**Anand** The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is connected to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu Organization), the Bajrang Dal and the RSS are all different names for an umbrella organization of Hindu fundamentalists groups. They have different functions: some have political functions; some have a more of a grassroots kind of militant function. But by and large, they are calling for a Hindu India.

So these people have been militating for the last few years to convert the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in north India. It is said to have been built by Babar [the first Moghul Emperor] in the 16th century. They now claim that the mosque was built at the birth place of Lord Ram, the Hindu god, and that Babur had demolished the Hindu temple and built the mosque in its place. They want to demolish the mosque and build a temple in its place.

**Ali** What was the reason for doing it now? The mosque has been there for over five hundred years?

**Anand** Basically, they needed an issue to mobilize the people and to increase their political base. They have, by and large, succeeded in doing that. The BJP had only two seats in parliament before 1989. On this single issue of the Ram temple they managed to increase their seats to 88 seats in the elections.

By forcing this issue further, they managed to increase their representation from 88 to 188. The BJP now forms the official opposition in the Indian parliament.

**Ali** One of the things that I liked very much about the film is that you deal with this event as a narrative thread. Then you explore the different levels of feelings and emotions that run across the strata of Indian society, right from street people in rural areas to high caste priests. What comes across to me is that the people who are being seduced by the movement are the urban middle and upper middle classes.

**Anand** The middle class has always been ripe ground for fascist propaganda to work. Even in Nazi Germany, it was the

middle class that was the backbone of the movement. The leadership of the Nazis came from that middle class. The working class, many of them were pro-left. They were defeated in the struggle because they couldn't organize and there was in-fighting. So, Hitler came to power because the socialists and the communists couldn't agree.

**Ali** It's interesting that you should bring this up. When I arrived in Delhi in the middle of October in 1990, it was the day before the Rath Yatra was supposed to come through Delhi. All the shops and many offices were closed by the local traders' associations in solidarity with the Yatra. All the streets, lined with BJP flags, were quite empty. There was a lot of tension in the air. I felt that it was very evocative of what I had read about of the rise of the Third Reich in Germany.

**Anand** Yeah. I made this film because there is a danger of fascism. If there was an equal struggle going on between two religious communities, you'd have bloody clashes on both sides but you wouldn't have the kinds of massacres that sometimes take place in India today.

The Hindu majority is an overwhelming 80 percent. If this majority becomes fanaticized by the propaganda of the BJP, VHP and others, there'll be genocide. So it is out of that fear of fascism that this film has been made, to warn people about the growth of fascism in India.

There is no question in my mind that all fundamentalism is bad. For example, I'm willing to defend the right of Salman Rushdie to write and fight against Muslim fundamentalists on those issues. However, in this particular film the reason for attacking Hindu fundamentalism in a stronger manner than Muslim fundamentalism is that on the Babri Masjid-Ramajanhomi issue, the Muslim fundamentalists are saying that they will await the court verdict. But Hindu fundamentalists are saying that they won't follow the court order; they want the temple at any cost.

What I'm saying is that the fight is not between Hindus and Muslims. The fight is between those who believe in a secular democracy and those who don't.

**Ali** As a filmmaker, what are your own views about this controversy?

**Anand** My study of the situation shows that for five hundred years this has been a mosque. There may or may not have been a temple. The fact is that the archaeological survey doesn't show that there was a Ram temple under the mosque. Even if there was, I wouldn't say that we should reverse five hundred years of history, and take back the mosque from those who own it now to put up a temple.

Because then tomorrow someone might say that there was something of historical importance under where I live, so I should get out. If this group of Hindus thinks that five hundred years ago there was a temple on that site, then why don't tribals say that three thousand years ago, before the Aryans came to India, there was no temple here. There were trees here that they used to worship, so let's tear down the building and replant the trees.

This whole argument of history is an endless one. You want to reverse the wrongs of the past. I think that's totally absurd. Who are my ancestors, after all? Are my ancestors Hindus? Or tribals? I think that we have to accept the times we are in, and work within that given framework.

**Ali** On the subject of history, do you think that part of what's happening now also has something to do with the way in which history is taught to us?

**Anand** I think that in general this whole question of wanting one's identity... Well, what is communalism? It is an assertion of identity



which is exclusive of other identities. You say, mine is the only identity which is worth having. Others are the enemy. That whole concept is what I'm challenging. It's happening all over the world, incidentally, not just in India.

Minorities in many parts of the world have to state their identities in order to resist getting assimilated into the majority in a dehumanizing, unequal way. I think the same applies in the Indian case. The eleven percent Muslim minority would probably not assert itself or its identity to any large extent if the situation had been one where there were genuine feelings of comradeship and love between the communities. So, regardless of your community affiliation, you never feel like you are somewhere else. You always feel this is home.

I think Indian society has also failed to make minorities feel fully a part of that society. It'll take much greater effort and understanding before that can happen. But as it stands now, the Muslim minority in India automatically identifies with India, not with Pakistan or some other country.

**Ali** I feel as an Indian Muslim, having gone through a very secular education at school and at university, I have always felt the need to strive for a secular sense of nationhood. However, I feel that one of the main obstructions to this sense of nation is the question of Partition. The scars of partition seem to haunt the country, but yet it's never really talked about.

**Anand** It's not resolved.

**Ali** In your film there are at least four or five references to Partition.

**Anand** A guy says that Gandhi should have been killed. Good he got killed because he supported the Muslims. He allowed partition.

**Ali** Then on the other hand you have this Muslim, who has been driving a rickshaw for forty years, since just after partition, and he has no desire to go to Pakistan. He feels that India is his homeland and it is his birthright to stay. This is where he is happy, and he lives in a Hindu neighbourhood.

**Anand** I think it is issues like this attack on the Babari Masjid which are forcing the Muslim minority to become more fundamentalist.

After the death of Gandhi in 1948, people were shocked into not having communal riots for quite some time. Almost a decade went by when there were very few riots, hardly any at all. In that decade, you could see that there was a growing reformist movement within the Muslim community. Because it is only out of a sense of security that a reform movement can grow from the inside of any group. The moment you have fundamentalists from another community attack you, the fundamentalists in your community become strengthened. The progressive people get ignored.

There were so many communists and leftists that came out of the Muslim community in the fifties and sixties. Today, many of them have gone back into the Muslim League or into other things because they started feeling threatened as Muslims, which they never did before.

**Ali** Do you think that part of this debate over secularism is the way in which secularism has been represented? The BJP presents secularism as a leftist concept.

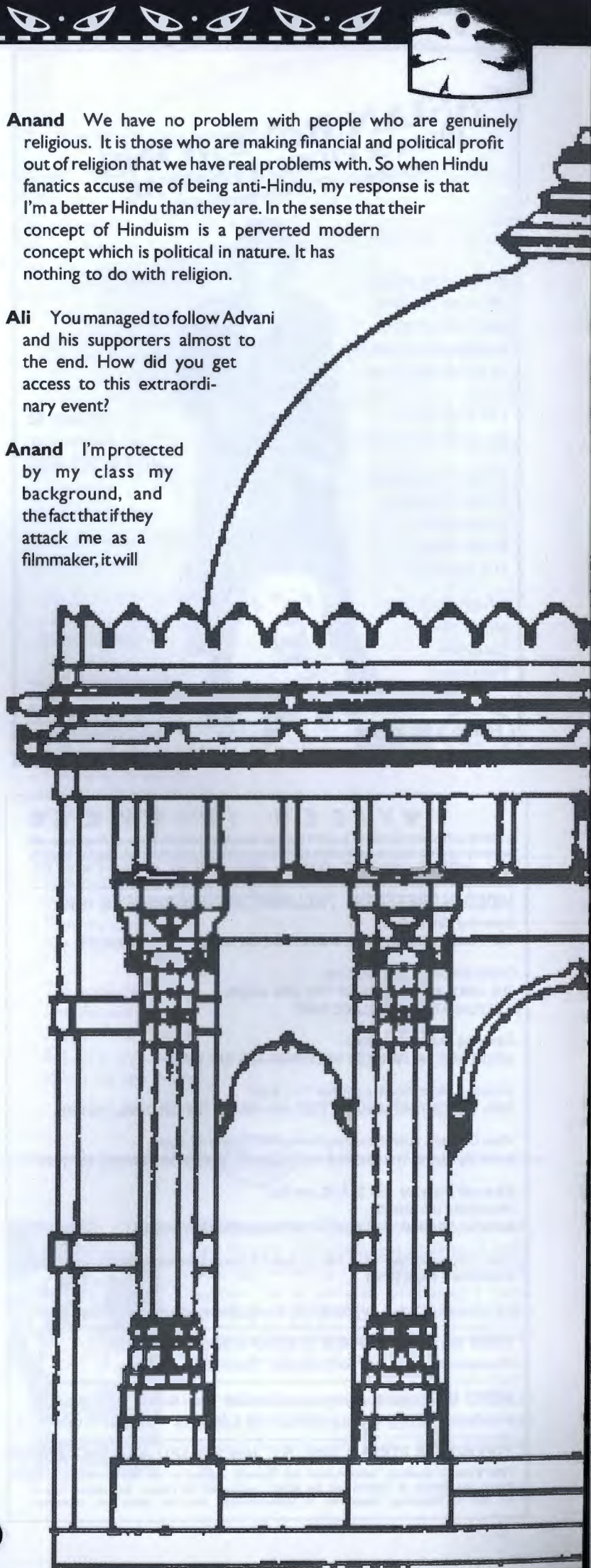
**Anand** They call me a pseudo-secularist.

**Ali** Secularism is equated with atheism. There is no sense of spirituality involved with it.

**Anand** We have no problem with people who are genuinely religious. It is those who are making financial and political profit out of religion that we have real problems with. So when Hindu fanatics accuse me of being anti-Hindu, my response is that I'm a better Hindu than they are. In the sense that their concept of Hinduism is a perverted modern concept which is political in nature. It has nothing to do with religion.

**Ali** You managed to follow Advani and his supporters almost to the end. How did you get access to this extraordinary event?

**Anand** I'm protected by my class my background, and the fact that if they attack me as a filmmaker, it will





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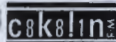
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be bad publicity for them. So I'm protected by that, while people of the working classes who are anonymous, ie. they are not protected. You see many people get killed and beaten up all over the country from time to time. But it would be foolish of them to do that to me, because it would backfire. They won't attack the film either because it will make it more controversial. Give the film more publicity and more people will see it. So their strategy is to ignore it., as we saw yesterday and the day before in Toronto. The VHP is in large force over here. L.K. Advani was in fact in Toronto, the same day that the film was being shown. But none of them came to the screening. And if they did, they didn't say a word.

**Ali** What about the distribution of the film in India? In the last six years there has been this massive surge in video technology and production. The VHP and the BJP seem to have a huge propaganda arm, which uses video extensively. Soon after October 30, when people got killed while trying to storm the mosque, I remember they made their own tapes about the event very quickly. There was a quick turn around time and tapes were distributed at incredible speed all over the country, claiming to show the innocent, government-ordered massacre that took place.

**Anand** The BJP forces have the best studio in India, Jain Studios. They have the money to make millions of copies. In fact they have made millions of cassettes of their tapes, and they get them out very fast through local branches everywhere in the country now.

I have been able to make and distribute five hundred video cassettes all over the country with relative ease and at a cheap cost. But that's a drop in the bucket compared to the propaganda that is done by the BJP and the VHP forces.

**Ali** Has the film been broadcast on television?

**Anand** Not in India. It has been shown on Channel Four in England. If the government recognized the value of films like these as educational material for secularism in India, if indeed they are sincere about secularism in our country, then they could show this film on TV. It would reach millions of people in one night. But they don't do that.

**Ali** In the film, there is a kind of undeclared power base within the government bureaucracy for the BJP. Do you think this has something to do with it?

**Anand** There is an upper-caste Hindu lobby within the administration in the government. It is true that in Doordarshan [Indian state-owned television], there's bound to be heavy influence from the upper-caste Hindu lobby to prevent such a film from being telecast.

**Ali** Who is your audience for this film?

**Anand** People in India across religious and caste lines. It serves a different function for each group that I show the film to. If I show the film to upper-caste Hindus, what I'm trying to provoke is self-criticism. That's okay, they have been the beneficiaries of privilege for thousands of years and they can't be self-righteous about it today. They can't continue to exercise that privilege and status quo and fight anybody who wants to change the system.

The film is in fact addressing the people of lower caste to say, look, for centuries the people who fooled you can't be telling the truth about this situation now. If they are saying someone is your enemy, examine it for yourself. Who is the enemy? Who has oppressed you for thousands of years?

**Ali** How would you characterize your films?

**Anand** I can basically see siding with the underdog, whether I'm that underdog or not. I identify with that underdog because of a sense of natural justice. So if I side with Muslims in a given situation in India, it's not because I'm a Muslim. Obviously, I'm all the time siding with people that I'm not. For me, I don't want to fight for only what I am because then I'll have to fight for being an upper caste Brahmin Hindu [laughs]. That would be highly ironic.

*The film ends with a hauntingly beautiful rendition of a spiritual poem by the 15th century Indian poet Kabir, who wrote extensively on the universality of the spiritual experience, and struggled to bring Hindus and Muslims together.*

*Saints, I see  
The world I see is mad  
If I tell the truth  
They rush to beat me up  
If I lie they trust me*

*Hindus claim Ram as the One  
Muslims claim Rahim  
Then they kill each other  
Knowing not  
The essence*

*With prayer beads and caps  
And brows of holy paint  
They lose themselves  
In sacred hymns but  
Know not their own souls*

*Many holy men I've seen  
Teachers of holy books  
Who acquire disciples  
Venerate graves  
But know not God*

*The world goes on  
Like this and yet  
They call me mad  
But Kabir says, listen  
Who's the one insane?*

**Rung**



**Ali Kazimi** is a filmmaker based in Toronto for the past nine years. He grew up in India, strongly believing in a secular democratic system. He is currently producing a documentary on a grassroots struggle to stop the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River in India.

*In The Name of God* will have a limited theatrical release at the Euclid Theatre, 394 Euclid Avenue, Toronto, from October 26 - 29, 1992.





MASALA Take One

# The Audience That Didn't Count



by Yasmin Jiwani

It was an unusual sight.

South Asians lined up outside a cinema in the middle of Vancouver's West End, an area defined by its proximity to the business centre, the beach, night clubs and numerous restaurants. It's an upbeat part of town, to be sure, but not one where the presence of a large number of South Asians is a taken-for-granted everyday occurrence...



Those of us who are privileged enough to have the means to go and see a film, particularly a film that was part of the Vancouver International Film Festival, were in that line-up. We were there for several reasons: to support one of the few South Asians who had made it to the screen in Canada, and to see what he had brought to public attention about our realities as a marginalized community in Canada. We had already heard about the film but nothing that indicated what it was about. So we came, and we brought our parents and grandparents, our aunts and uncles, our nieces and nephews. We brought our friends. We wanted to show the world that we too are a capable people; that we too can produce works that can enter the festival circuit. And that we too had a story to tell. Not that South Asians don't produce films. We all know that the film industry in India churns out eight hundred films per year on the average. But this was a film made by someone who was part of the diaspora, and who we hoped would articulate some of the experiences that have structured our lives in the west.

*Masala* was mesmerizing as a film. It was a collage of all those symbols, traditions and ways of being that are inherent in our culture and community. It was a melange of colour and sound. It was hypnotic. It had all the requisite elements to make it a popular hit—fast pace, an engaging plot, a clear violation of expectations; it had fools and heroes, gods and mortals, men and women, and most of all, violence and sex. It was as the *Rungh* [Vol. 1, Issues 1 & 2] article title suggests, "Leather, Sex and Masala." But it was a *masala* we were not prepared for. It was a *masala* that in the end, did to us symbolically what British colonialism had done to our ancestral land—it violated us, made a mockery of our sense of being, and betrayed us to the wider society. For it was a *masala* that combined the ingredients of an internalized racism mixed with a postmodernist discourse of identity, sexuality and race, all of which were re-cast in the ahistorical plane of Krishna's vision of himself and his reality. Differences dislocated from their social, cultural and economic grounding floated in the spectacular plane of unreality taking fantastic shapes and grotesque forms.

A quintessential symbol of this kind of dislocation and ahistoricism, is apparent in the

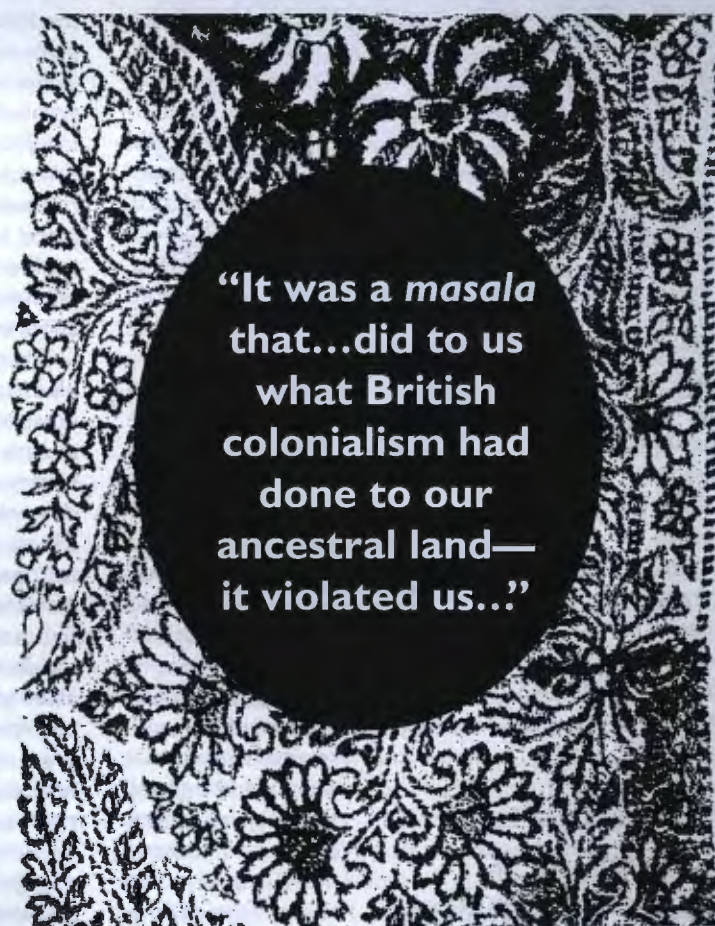
filmmaker's use of the god Krishna. Disconnected from the Indian subcontinent, Krishna the god becomes an alienated being, flying aimlessly around with no notion of control, and yet seeking to fulfil the prayers of his disciples 'across the black waters.' If one were to analyze the filmmaker's psyche, the key would lie in the portrayal of this god. Deprived of his dignity, his sense of being and mission in the world, Krishna the god drifts around and visits his disciple through the electronic medium of the VCR and its complement, the TV set.

our survival. We have turned to our own media because we are well aware of how the mainstream media casts us. We are continually bombarded with images of ourselves as a violent community; as immigrants, as refugees, as terrorists, as belonging to a 'backward tradition.' Our customs are scooped up by the western media and examined under white magnifying lenses. We become topics by virtue of our arranged marriages, our exploitation of women, our greedy merchants, and so on. Our differences are levelled by the media. We have become one in this land of white dominance.

But for Krishna, the maker of *Masala*, all of these things are reduced to the comic caricature of the woman who prays to the television set and who plagues her god Krishna to fulfil her wishes. Yes, religion has assumed a greater significance for us here than it did for some of us in our lands of birth. But why? Because in a hostile environment, we seek refuge in those places that will not condemn us. We cling to threads of community so that we can pull our disparate selves together—selves separated by the market-driven, colonially grounded culture we live in; selves compartmentalized by the private/public separation that splits our being.

As for sex, *Masala* sought to destroy old stereotypes of South Asian women who 'didn't do it.' But what replaces those stereotypes—the women who do 'do it'? Or is it the classic representation of those women who 'do do it' as vamps? For the audience that had eagerly lined up to see this film, the sex was a major issue. As one man in the audience put it, "sex is like money, you put it in

your bank account and don't tell anyone about it!" And a woman in the audience remarked, "I just want everyone here to know that not all women in the East Indian [sic] community are like that." But to the simple question that was asked (at the Vancouver screening attended by actor Saeed Jaffrey, and co-producers Srinivas Krishna and Camelia Frieberg), namely, why is there so much sex, Krishna declined to answer. Instead Saeed Jaffrey responded by saying that in marriage while women want a house, "men want a fuck." One couldn't expect a more appropriate answer from a cultural hedonist who appears to have no sense of the location of the South



"It was a *masala* that...did to us what British colonialism had done to our ancestral land—it violated us..."

For the rest of us, who have lived in this country for 20, 30 or 50 years, or for those of us born here, the import of the VCR and television set is anchored in the cultural and social reality that surrounds us. Excluded from participation in many of the institutions in the larger society, encouraged to retain our ethnicity but only in a privatized form, we have come to rely on the technologies of communication to maintain a symbolic connection to the 'homeland.' We use these technologies to see popular Indian films; we use the TV set so we can access information about the wider society, learn how to get by, learn the symbolic rules and strategies that will enable





Asian community in Canada, or for that matter in England. But if the issue is one of sexuality, then what kind of sexuality is being celebrated? The objectification of women in *Masala* attests to this in more than one way. It is heterosexual relations that are being depicted; sex as an integral part of a community's code of intimate relations is rewritten; it is cast into a distinctly western mould. You have fantasies about a woman, you sleep with her, and the next day, you toss her out or she tosses you out. And while that may be the case, it is only one permutation out of a range of combinations and permutations of such relationships.

The irony is that this expression of sexuality works on a superficial level. We are led to believe that Krishna's depiction of South Asian women destroys old stereotypes of women as being asexual, or sexual only under certain, patriarchal conditions. But *Masala's* portrayal of sexuality merely opts for the western definition of sexual 'liberation' (if one can define it that way). In the end, one is left with the impression that all women 'do it' and

Indian films. Given this background, the portrayal of sexuality in *Masala* should not have evoked such a strong response, save for one differentiating factor. Popular Indian films are consumed by and large within the community, in a privatized fashion, whereas *Masala* belongs to an arena that is clearly dominated by white interests and white audiences. Hence, sexual scenes in the film appeared to unveil parts of the community's code of relations, revealing the contradictions between community notions of *izzat* and actual social practices. But these practices were by association attributed to every woman within the film, and hence every woman within the community. At the same time, these contradictions were disclosed in a public setting—to a racist society that is quick to seize any representation that favours its interpretation of people of colour and their cultural traditions. There was no context provided, save that of Krishna's egotistical and self-centred universe.

And that is what we saw that night—Srinivas Krishna's vision—his notion of himself; his universe which is populated by greed, stupidity, mockery, and opportunism. Most people would expect just this. In fact, the current fad seems to be that filmmakers should have the unfettered

right to tell their own stories and transform their vision into celluloid. Some would go even so far as to say that the very act of making a film presupposes an egocentric personality—after all you have to think that your story is worth telling in order to want to translate it into images viewed by a public at large. But this red herring is synonymous to debates about freedom of speech—a line of argument used by white supremacist Ernst Zundel and others to preach hatred against different groups. Such a freedom presupposes an equal

society where everyone has the right to make the kind of statement or image they want. It presupposes that there are no structured preferences wherein one colour of skin is privileged over others. Difference in such an utopic landscape becomes just that—difference. And society becomes a cacophony of voices and visions competing in a marketplace, and accessible to all. The image is akin to the notion of this country as a mosaic wherein each part is valued as much as another.

The reality as we know it is quite different. Unequal power relations are the norm. The mosaic is in fact a hierarchy; the polyphony of sounds is in fact marred by some voices ringing louder than others, in some cases, drowning out or completely silencing yet others. Krishna's vision in *Masala* attempts to operate on an utopic level. The only element of unequal power relations within the film, and even this is trivialized, occurs in the incident involving racism where Krishna gets stabbed. A fitting end to a hero. The script requires that the hero die and it is through this great self-sacrifice that Krishna chooses his final exit. Other power relations are either repressed, neutralized or naturalized. In fact, Krishna and his alter ego, the god, are the only change agents in the film. Everyone else either remains the same, or has something done to them. They are passive agents, moved by forces around them and beyond them. They react rather than act. And of those that are permitted to act, as for example, the Sikh character, his actions are subsequently trivialized and made comical.

There is no change in Krishna's world. The South Asian community has remained the same except in the form of Srinivas Krishna. His forays into the dominant society, into street life, somehow make him the only change agent around. His leather jacket is his sign of 'being with it,' and his sexual exploits qualify him not only as hero but also as the modern renegade who seeks to dissolve a part of himself that he hates—his own Indianness.

## **We are continually bombarded with images of ourselves as a violent community...as belonging to a 'backward tradition'**

hence, all women are vamps. In part, this may have been what the audience was reacting to because when the issue of sex is examined within popular Indian cinema, the depictions are clearly separated by value-laden judgements that define a woman by her actions.

In popular Indian cinema, women are either positioned as self-sacrificing mothers, chaste, naive and romantic brides, or as the classic vamps. Violence within the framework of sexual relations is rife throughout contemporary



He is reminiscent of Kipling in this kind of ambivalence, for Kipling too hated the "Indian" part of himself. However, if we subscribe to Krishna's vision of the world, external change is impossible, the system just goes on. And change when it does occur, occurs only in the microcosmic plane of interpersonal relations, and within limited parameters, e.g. the women who 'do do it.'

This aside, what is more problematic about Krishna's vision is its location in this society. As the voice that has made it into the public arena, and as a voice from an otherwise silenced minority, it acquires 'the burden of representation.' *Masala* has the dubious distinction of being the only popular Canadian film that speaks about the realities of South Asians in this country. It is in fact thrust into the role of the reluctant ambassador; a position that many of us find ourselves in as we try to contest the definitions and stereotypes that the white society around us imposes on us. And as this reluctant ambassador, *Masala* does us more harm than good. If we did indeed have a cacophony of voices, then *Masala* would be an irrelevant film that one could either dismiss or commend only on the basis of its superb cinematic technique. But unfortunately, what we do have in the newly emerging tradition of South Asian diasporic films, (within North America), are basically those films that focus on the young male immigrant (e.g. *Lonely in America*, *Sam and Me*), and those films that confuse the issues of racism and ethnocentrism (e.g. *Mississippi Masala*), thereby giving more ammo to those that oppose our presence here.

As a marginalized community, South Asians in Canada have had their share of sufferation, (as the Rastas would say it). We have been maligned in the press, mocked, ridiculed, dismissed, and at one point, denied any rights. As immigrants and refugees, we have been told to be thankful to this great and benevolent land, notably to its white powers. But we haven't forgotten that even as refugees, those of us who were allowed into this country were 'the cream of the crop'—neither have we forgotten that the colonial destabilization of our economies in the homeland, and the destabilization of regimes in our lands of birth, have contributed to our diaspora. Our 'choice' to be here is a choice predicated on constraints and situations beyond our control. The last thing we need is one of 'us'

to condemn us yet again; and Krishna, by virtue of his colour, his culture, his positioning in this society as a racial minority, is one of us. This is about the only truism that *Masala* imparts to its audience: that the racism out there is what makes us turn inward; it socially constructs us as a racialized minority. And whether he likes it or not, whether he has a leather jacket or not, Srinivas Krishna is a South Asian, and as a South Asian, he just trashed his culture in a public arena which has no sympathy for the South Asian reality. As with the discourse of the mainstream media, *Masala* reduces us to a monolith, our differences become merely inflections in the great mix of symbols, customs and traditions; a mere fragment in the tiered mosaic that is Canada; we are one dimensional yet again.

Outside the theatre, throngs stood around discussing the film. White people milled around trying to find a group they could join. They wanted to understand why the film was so offensive to us; they wanted to discuss its rich texture; its melange of images; and its message. We stood around awkwardly. There was so much we wanted to say and yet were reluctant to say. We had witnessed the manner in which the filmmaker arrogantly dismissed those who had the initiative to say

something. Some of us were plain floored by the explicit sexuality. The film verged on being soft porn. Others among us were outraged. Having seen the manner in which objections were neutralized, we were at a loss in terms of how to vent our frustrations and anger; we felt voiceless.

Still people stood around, waiting it seems for the filmmaker to make another appearance. When Krishna stepped out, nobody did anything. They just didn't know what to say. Slowly, the crowd began to thin out, and people ambled back to their cars and homes. We knew we were an audience that just didn't count! It didn't matter that the grist for the image-making mill had been our culture, traditions and our ways of seeing the world, and that all this had been appropriated by one opportunistic filmmaker to make a name for himself. We were once again, the background and the props, just like a James Bond film, or one of Indiana Jones's adventurous exploits.

Rung

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**Film Stills** by Dugg Simpson.





## MASALA Take Two



# Cutting your own Deals

by Sanjay Khanna

Where were you when the Air India 747 hurtled out of the sky? Most Indian people I know remember where they were when they heard about the explosion—they remember the shock of the moment and, later, the feelings of betrayal and marginalization.

It was 1985. I was nineteen years old, nearly twenty, had returned from a spring French immersion course in Quebec. I was broke and had to live with my parents. On June 23rd, a couple of days into life with Mom and Dad, I picked up the Vancouver Sun and read about the 'Canadians of East Indian origin' who'd died off Ireland's southwest coast. Who were they...those of-East-Indian-origin people?

I turned on the television, watched the remnants of wreckage being lifted out of the water along with personal effects: dolls, pieces of fuselage, jewellery, pieces of wing, teddy bears, engine parts, purses, furniture. I saw photographs, weeping parents and interviews with those who told anecdotes about the victims.


For the first time in my life I began to see myself as part of a larger community. As a child, I'd avoided the children of Indian immigrants. I hated the social scene, the pressure to be someone I wasn't, the words Paki, Punjab, Hindu, Raghead, Carpetrider. To be in houses with so many people called 'Paki' would have been intolerable. Worse still, I imagined all the parents would be as impossible to deal with as mine were.

Yet when I became clearer about how I was perceived in the media, I began to feel a connection with community concerns in a way I hadn't imagined possible: I became increasingly disturbed by the media focus on the so-called intrigues of Indians in Canada: the Khalistanis, the terrorism, the Indian government spies, Brian Mulroney phoning Rajiv Gandhi, no official Canadian government presence at the Toronto memorial service. All distractions from the central, human tragedy. I remember the rage I felt. I remember feeling betrayed. Damn it! If I were to die in a plane at least they could call me Canadian!

Memories resurfaced. Being chased as a nine-year-old by Gene, who was twelve and a near juvenile delinquent (he called me "Paki," threw me to the ground, asked me to beg him to let go). Arguing with my mother, "I'm Canadian; I'm not Indian; I'll never have an arranged marriage."

Mother arguing with me, "You're not Canadian! You're Indian! You're not white! They'll never accept you!"





I remember the rage  
I felt. Damn it!  
If I were to die in a  
plane, at least  
they could call me  
Canadian!

There was a constant fear of attack and a constant debate about who I was.

There were no simple solutions. No clear way to deal with the issues, no easy way to make a statement: I'm this but I'm not that. How could there be?

Those statements are lies. We—all of us—are combinations of this and that.

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Just as *masala* is a mixture of spices, it is the premise of **Masala** that communities and individuals are combinations of this and that—whether they like it or not. The result is that **Masala's** characters are not clearly of one place or another: whether they are sure or unsure of their place in Canada, they constantly search for values they can live with or they constantly live with questionable values.

Krishna's **Masala** characterizes different people within the Indian 'community' in Toronto: Sikhs, medical students, priests, aunts, sisters, lovers, partygoers, entrepreneurs, who all have elements of foolishness in their personalities. Much to Krishna's frustration, this has led to claims that the film is sexist, racist and anti-religious—a misrepresentation of 'Indians' in Canada.

**Masala's** protagonist—also named Krishna and played by Srinavas Krishna himself—is a hurt, rebellious young man whose family dies when an Air India jet explodes in mid-air. Saeed Jaffrey plays three roles: Lord Krishna (who does what he can for his expatriate worshippers); Lallu Bhai Solanki, a wealthy sari-selling merchant and Krishna's uncle; and Hariprasad Tikkoo, a postal worker, nearly bankrupt, who is foil to Solanki, his cousin.

Tikkoo's daughters, Sashi and Rita, play significant roles: Sashi dates the white son of the Minister of Multiculturalism and can't stand Indian men; Rita tries to find her own way to her career and relationships, leaving a sexist, med-student Anil Solanki for Krishna. Grandma Tikkoo establishes a video relationship with Lord Krishna and gets him to intervene to save her son from bankruptcy. This the mischievous Lord Krishna does—to unexpected effect.

Intermixed in all this are Canadian multicultural politics, racist youth, sexual and musical fantasy.

And murder.

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On the phone to Amarillo, Texas, I ask Srinavas Krishna, director, writer and co-producer of **Masala**, about the kinds of comment he's received about the film.

"People use the film the way they wish," he says, "and it ceases to be my film."

I tell him that I sympathize with his concerns, but that I do not want to write an argumentative piece.

"Who told you to do that? Your editors? Go ahead and be argumentative."

I feel agitated by his energy because there is argument and anger in my attitude towards the anonymous murmurings of discontent.

"Why do all these accusations alight on me and my film?" Krishna says. "Why not **Basic Instinct** or some forty-million-dollar Hollywood picture that deserves it? Why me and my low-budget film?"

He's now clearly irritated. "People," he says, "search for a moral high ground wanting to

occupy the hill from which they can declaim." He becomes more blunt. "The origins of the discontent lie elsewhere, not in my film."

"Were you at the screening of the film at the Vancouver Film Festival?" he asks me. I wasn't. He continues. "After the film, there was a forum at which people ranted at me. 'I can't show it to my children,' 'Why is there so much bad language?'"

"It became bizarre. People on one side of the theatre would clap when one person said one thing; people on the other side would clap when another said something else. Arguments broke out. I was screaming and couldn't be heard. The moderator of the event became nervous as if he were wondering whether a riot would break out when you put a bunch of darkies in one room."

"After the film, the younger people came up to me and said, 'Don't listen to them, we liked the film.' I wondered where they were when the others were savaging me. They could have spoken up, they can become part of the debate."

"They went with their parents," I say. Srinivas laughs, but becomes serious. "They're stuck in some pre-Oedipal stage," he says.

I ask him about the notion of an Indian 'community' in Canada. "Before we are Indians, he says, 'we are Punjabis or Gujeratis or whatever. There's no pan-national identity. So I don't see a 'community.' When Italy won the World Cup, you could recognize the Italian community in Toronto. But an Indian community doesn't really exist except maybe as some kind of umbrella organization."

"The Air India explosion started a coalescence, but now even that is being subverted by those for whom it is the most important, expatriate Indians."

"My film picks up on that. People who aren't Indian can't imagine the power of that explosion on the psyche of expatriates. They have no idea."

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Rita Tikkoo is arguably **Masala's** most dignified character. When her sister Sashi tells her Indian men are "the slime of the slime, the dirt of the earth, the cockroaches in your kitchen sink," Rita considers this. Though she doesn't go so far as to stereotype all 'Indian' men this way, she is aware that she doesn't want to go out with someone as embarrassingly undignified as her boyfriend Anil, the med-student son of Lallu Bhai Solanki. She goes on to have a relationship with anti-hero Krishna, appreciating the novel energy he brings into her life. But she doesn't accept his violence or his characterization of his parents as 'losers.' More and more, she finds herself to be capable of wholeness, integrating the many sides of herself: her sexuality, her opinions



and feelings, her desire for a career of her own choosing, for family and community. At the end of the film, in her grief over Krishna's death, she does not force herself to explain what is inexplicable to her. She waits, gives herself time to feel.

Krishna, too, is searching for identity, relationships, sense of place. Before becoming involved with Rita, he picks up Anil from medical school. Leaning up against a red Pontiac Firebird, Krishna and Anil are accosted by Rita, who calls Anil a 'mother-loving, woman-hating, limp-dick, chicken-shit.' Afterwards Krishna confides to Anil, "As far as women are concerned, I've never been involved with Pakis." Anil retorts: "They don't fuck, eh?"

Krishna, open-minded in that he admits he hasn't dated 'Indian' women and doesn't know anything about them, calls them 'Pakis.' Testosterone-pumped Anil, the bore that he is, is only concerned with sex and conformity. Rita, who in Anil's experience presumably doesn't fuck, feels angry that her in-secret boyfriend has no determination of his own and offers her no support.

Three crucial issues arise from all of this: first, in Krishna's dialogue, how we as visible minorities feel about ourselves as women and men on our own and in relationships with each other; second, in Anil's dialogue, attitudes about women and the absurd community proscriptions on sexuality and information about it; third, in Rita's formulation, the possessiveness of 'Indian' mothers and attitudes about men: the expectation that men should 'have prospects,' falling in line professionally often to the detriment of their developing admirable human qualities.

Rita's psychedelic cinematic fantasy highlights the latter point. In her fantasy, she croons k.d.lang-like to Anil:

*It's time you were a man  
C'mon, boy, take a stand  
Why don't you listen to me  
Let your body be free  
And take flight*

As she flies away from him, she continues her challenge:

*You better think hard  
About doing some job  
With your goddamn life*

Later, in Hindi, she sings that Anil should leave the cares of the world and give his love to her.

How is Anil to escape Rita's 'pressure'? Conveniently, he falls into an arranged-marriage love-scene fantasy that is absolutely faithful to his on-screen life: the TV aerobics-

inspired masturbation, the dominance of his parents' wishes in his life, shown most profoundly when he rages at Krishna in his mom's car ("What you want is shit if you can't satisfy what everyone else wants.") A moment later, he says to Krishna: "Just because your family died on that fucking plane doesn't mean you get to cut your own deals." Anil can't even imagine being his own person after his parents die, let alone when they're alive.

Bahadur Singh, the peaceful Khalistani, is certainly as dignified as Rita. While Rita clearly has decided her home is in Canada, Bahadur Singh is equally committed to Khalistan as the home he must return to. His flaw is his earnestness. He's a genius who does bumble, but he's also hip: of all the adults in the film, he's the one most in tune to the needs of the young lovers Rita and Krishna when they ride in his taxicab ("Go ahead and kiss," he tells them. "Young lovers must not waste time.") Lord Krishna asks the irreverent question: "Why can't a god simply be a man?" His near abdication of his power triggers the explosion of the Air India jet and is symbolic of how the migration of Indians to Canada has removed for many the underpinnings of religious and social life that, in India, gave continuity to their lives. His flirtations with Grandma Tikkoo, delightful as they are (both in the range of expression on Tikkoo's face and the sublimated sexuality that surfaces when Lord Krishna mischievously suggests that he wishes she were younger), raise the issue of how much respect and caring we really offer elders and what we assume—in our belief that they have transcended sexual feeling—about their longings and desires.

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Whatever we assume about old people, we do know about the longings of youth. Or do we? When Krishna, searching for Rita, approaches Mr. Tikkoo during the religious procession, Tikkoo, upset that Krishna has slept with his daughter, says: "You never even spoke to me." Krishna responds: "I'm speaking to you now." To which Tikkoo retorts: "You should speak before, not after, you idiot!" Krishna pauses, bewildered.

It is the bewilderment of a young person who has been regarded as an outsider by his community, is offered little useful guidance, struggles to find his own way and voice, returns ready to begin a dialogue and is, in effect, told that by making his own choices, he has taken an irrevocable step and can no longer be accepted.

This is the precise position of many first-generation Canadians, ones who do not speak their mother-tongue, ones who received little guidance from the community on how to deal healthily with North American life

because their parents or others were unsure themselves. They go out on their own, wondering about the stereotypes they have received about Western culture, white people, women, drugs and rock'n'roll. They find out what they need to know, come back, and say, "Well, I believe, this, this, and this, and I don't believe that, that, and that."

And the elders say, essentially, "Too late. Go away. We weren't open to your discoveries in the first place. They're a threat to us and the young ones."

But are they? It's probable that the threat is the insecurity of a community that expects 'its' artists and filmmakers—which it only claims when they are successful—to represent them in a way that will necessarily ennoble them.

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I think that *Masala* relates in some way to each of us, as individuals, cutting our own deals, choosing how we want to live, create, destroy and present our stories.

If there have been complaints about the film, part of the reason is that it is one of the first of Canadian origin—along with *Sam and Me*—to receive a wide audience. It is not the film of a single community: such a film would nearly be impossible to develop and write because Indians in Canada come from multifarious backgrounds. This is why I doubt the claim that it is the filmmaker's responsibility to take on the role of pleasing everyone 'Indian' in Canada when India itself is divided, fractured, and erupting with violence (How can one please everyone in Canada when it's impossible to please everyone 'back home'?). Although the Air India disaster brought together many 'Indians' in Canada who had forgotten how their divisions kept them from understanding their profound similarities, the bonds of that experience are dissolving. We need to remember. And film helps provoke our memories. This is something Srinivas Krishna emphasizes. "*Masala*," he says, "doesn't represent community. It simply creates space to make more films, any kind of film anyone wants. And the fact that some asshole like me went out to do it, means others can too."

Rungh

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**Film Stills** by Dugg Simpson.



# Gita Saxena

## identity quest



Gita Saxena's work excites me, and I see in it the potential for political engagement and education.

In *Second Generation, Once Removed* (1990), Saxena presents the pain and conflict of being of mixed heritage. As Saxena struggles to define who she is, the audience is lured into the murky quicksand of identity politics. Using poetic and textual voiceovers, aura sculptures and lyrical landscapes, a deep sense of frustration, confusion and discomfort is evoked. You can't help but feel as though you are being wrenched apart, even as you sit comfortably in your chair and watch. In the end, we are reminded that in this country, when someone asks, "What is your nationality?" the question is not really about how our identities have evolved over time, but rather it is a reminder that we are not really Canadians. And while the question about 'nationality' might create confusion and paralysis for some, Saxena facilitates the audience's exploration of its identity by putting her own experience on the line. Forcing us to think about these things as she takes them on herself is a key element of her work. It is impossible to remain detached as one watches Saxena's videos.

*Bolo! Bolo!* (1991) is a component of a federally funded series entitled *Toronto: Living with AIDS Project*. The film speaks to the diverse South Asian communities about the problems of AIDS, a task that can only be considered extremely difficult considering sexuality itself is not openly discussed in these communities. Directors Saxena and Ian Rashid were motivated by the need for a culturally sensitive educational tool. The film brings together community members, activists and educators to discuss issues relevant to the South Asian community and the particular difficulties for South Asians who are HIV positive. Unlike much of the available educational information on AIDS, the message here is not a preachy one of abstinence but one that suggests that safety and responsibility can and should go hand in hand with sexual intimacy. A clinical, conservative stance is eschewed for one that openly deals with cultural taboos and the socio-political contexts in which AIDS exists. Throughout the film, sensual images of two men engaged in acts of love and desire are interwoven with information about the causes, treatment and impact of AIDS. Suddenly, 'the silent plague' is given human voices and faces, forcing each of us to confront our stereotypes and biases.

*Bolo! Bolo!* has not been without contra-

versy in Canada. One can turn on a television and watch heterosexual men and women simulating hot, steamy sex twenty-four hours a day. In Toronto, two South Asian gay men french kissing and talking about safe sex was deemed to be distasteful and because such scenes were depicted in *Bolo! Bolo!* the entire *Toronto: Living with AIDS* series was yanked from Roger's Cable Network in February, 1991. The type of censorship experienced by Saxena and Rashid over this film is a potent reminder to us of the homophobia and racism that runs rampant in this country.

Currently, Saxena has a couple of video projects in progress, one of them entitled *New Visions, New Eyes*. She describes it as a 'video poem' about travelling in India, and encountering a land never seen or accurately imagined from the unique perspective of a second generation Indo-German-Canadian. During a trip to Vancouver, Saxena invited a number of South Asian women to view this work in progress and to engage in critical discussion over the developing themes of the video. Opening the door to critical feedback in this way, Saxena was able to benefit from the input of audience members. At the same time, she attempted to de-mystify the process of creating video 'art'.

*New Visions, New Eyes* seems a natural step from *Second Generation, Once Removed*. It uses an elaborate weaving of vignettes and impressions, overlaying images, poetry, and sounds. It even plays on our olfactory senses (no, it is not a scratch and sniff video!) in order to create different moods. This video journey through India will amaze you. It runs you through a gamut of emotions—smiling with remembrance, feeling uneasy with the newness of it all, shifting uncomfortably in your seat, cringing with horror, or wishing for a quiet corner to cry.

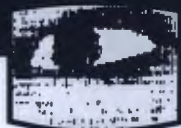
One of the hallmarks of Gita Saxena's work is the deeply personal approach that she has taken to questions and issues that concern us all. Not surprisingly, then, her work is always challenging, often controversial. Through it all, one is struck by the beauty, grace, and fluidity that characterizes her videography.

My appreciation of Gita Saxena's work lies in her ability to impart her personal experience in a way that never tries to escape from the reality of classism, racism, sexism, homophobia and the pain of fragmented identity which repredicates through our lives as we struggle to reclaim our voices.

Rungh

**Seema Ahluwalia**, is a founding member of the South Asian Women's Action Network, Vancouver, BC.





## PERSONAL JOURNEYS: PERSONAL VIEWS

MICHELLE

# Mohabeer

on the making of an exile  
and filmmaker

*The first boat load of indentured labourers (coolies\*) arrived in British Guiana (now called Guyana) in 1838 and from then on several thousand Indians crossed the 'Black Waters' (Kala Pani) to the new lands...Indians undertook the hazardous physical and spiritual journey for a variety of reasons. Lower caste Indians, sometimes existing in a state of virtual slavery in India, were glad to flee their landlords and creditors for the prospect of a new beginning...others were enticed by the fanciful tales of promises of plenty...Famine and civil war further swelled the number of indentures...The Indians occupied the old slave quarters and worked in the sugar plantations, inheriting many of the conditions of servitude of the previously enslaved Africans...*

Excerpt from **India and the Caribbean**,  
edited by David Dabydeen  
& Brinsley Samaroo

This is a version of the history of the country where I was born and lived until the age of twelve. My parents and I came to Canada in 1973. Immigrating at such a transitional age has left its scars on the psychic and psychological landscape of my personhood and sense of identity. I grew up in the predominantly white suburb of Mississauga with the experiences of living and surviving the racist era of Paki-bashing and a reactionary school system that streamed 'immigrant kids.' The additional layer of grappling with sexual identity by acknowledging to myself and oth-

ers that I thought I was lesbian, resulted in an even greater inner and outer exiled and marginal status.

### Piece #1

For many the feelings of being exiled in a hostile landscape can originate out of a sense of geographical displacement. On a more profound level, the feelings of displacement and dislocation from self and community are linked to the immediate material (cultural, social and political) and psychological (internal exile) environment created in the minds of dislocated people.

It is crucial to recognize that the position one occupies as an exile (whose status is measured by the external environment) can and will shift, depending on the relations to the external, material environment. Furthermore, the notion of a psychological or internal sense of exile can shift and be replaced and redefined.

### Piece #2

For many people of colour, the sense of an internal state of exile often represents distorted psyches, and a loss of self. This loss of self results from the experience, the legacies and the history of colonization. The construction of a race identity for people of colour is not static. A visible demarcation of race is the permanence of skin colour. The boundaries of self-expression are limitless and go beyond fixed notions of expected behaviour. When one lives in a racist culture and society, one's potential capacity and capabilities as a human being are explicitly and implicitly overdetermined by one's race. Some people of colour can succumb to the trap of believing that only certain ways of being or particular modes of expression are available to us. In an attempt to ease the pain of

displacement, we often attempt to seek validation and belonging through external forces such as our communities, families, etc. It is undoubtedly a manifestation of the exile's quest for home, both within and without, which drives us to seek this validation and belonging. This search, however, should not minimize the fact that both community and family can be sites of our self-perpetuated struggles. The quest for self-actualization and centre is intertwined with romanticized ideals of home—the sense of belonging and security that is culturally and socially inscribed to notions of home. As people of colour, we need to redefine and reconstitute ourselves on our own terms via the necessary journey(ies) through our psychic and psychological terrains. We must leave the scars and legacies behind, but always be mindful of where and how we came to be—with a transformational vision of self and community.

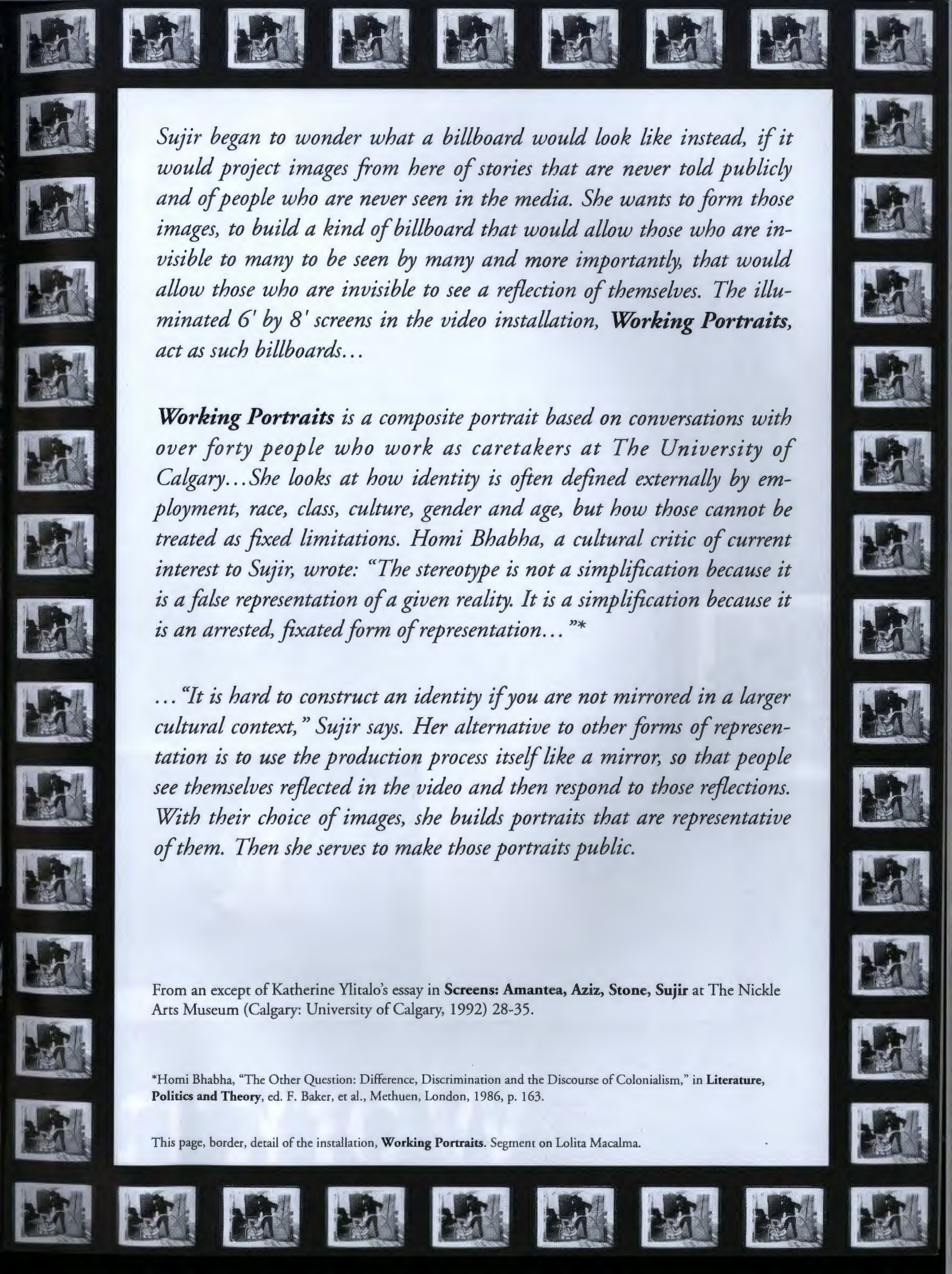
### Piece #3

For lesbians and gays of colour, the arena of sexuality is yet a further site of internal displacement. If skin colour is a visible demarcation of race, what then is a visible demarcation of a lesbian/gay identity? Part of my work as a filmmaker is to initiate and engage in a process of transforming the feelings of displacement and 'otherness' often experienced by lesbians and gays of colour. Film, then becomes the means by which both the filmmaker and audience can be engaged in such a process. The power of film lies in its ability to visually translate the complexities of what is both internal and external, visible and invisible in the lives of people.

Rungh

**Michelle Mohabeer** is a video artist whose current project, **About Face**, is informed by issues of displacement and exile; it centers on the psyche of the Indo-Caribbean diasporic experience. She is also curating a program for the **Asian Re-Visions Film and Video Festival** at Harbourfront Centre, Toronto (Oct 29 – Nov 1, 1992). Rungh is a sponsor of the Festival. *\*Coolies was once a neutral word for labourer, but is now used derogatorily to describe people of Indian ancestry in the Caribbean.*





*Sujir began to wonder what a billboard would look like instead, if it would project images from here of stories that are never told publicly and of people who are never seen in the media. She wants to form those images, to build a kind of billboard that would allow those who are invisible to many to be seen by many and more importantly, that would allow those who are invisible to see a reflection of themselves. The illuminated 6' by 8' screens in the video installation, **Working Portraits**, act as such billboards...*

***Working Portraits** is a composite portrait based on conversations with over forty people who work as caretakers at The University of Calgary...She looks at how identity is often defined externally by employment, race, class, culture, gender and age, but how those cannot be treated as fixed limitations. Homi Bhabha, a cultural critic of current interest to Sujir, wrote: "The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation..."\**

*... "It is hard to construct an identity if you are not mirrored in a larger cultural context," Sujir says. Her alternative to other forms of representation is to use the production process itself like a mirror, so that people see themselves reflected in the video and then respond to those reflections. With their choice of images, she builds portraits that are representative of them. Then she serves to make those portraits public.*

From an excerpt of Katherine Ylitalo's essay in **Screens: Amantea, Aziz, Stone, Sujir** at The Nickle Arts Museum (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1992) 28-35.

\*Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in **Literature, Politics and Theory**, ed. F. Baker, et al., Methuen, London, 1986, p. 163.

This page, border, detail of the installation, **Working Portraits**. Segment on Lolita Macalma.

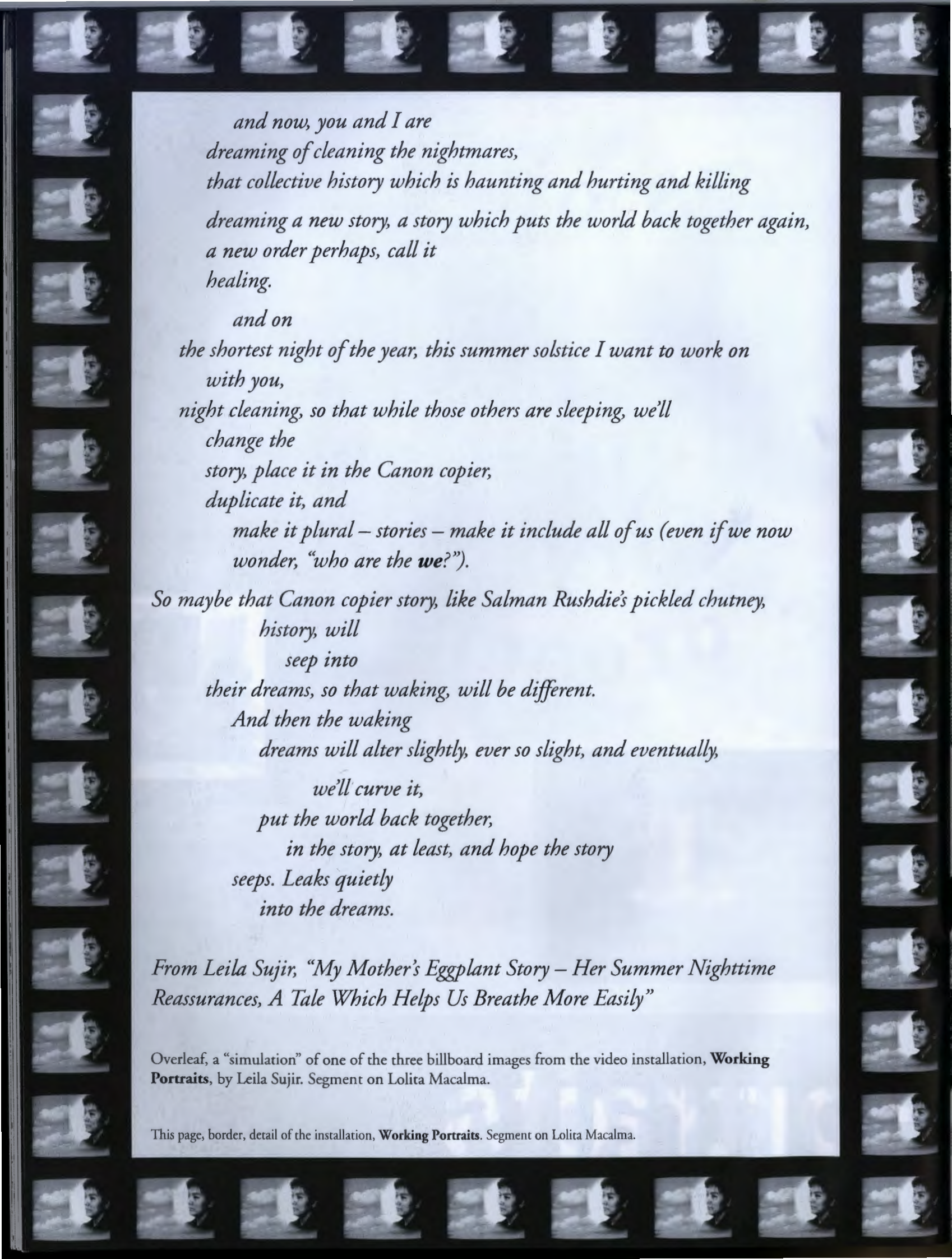


stories to pass on  
working to change  
the larger story  
the myths, the dreams



# Working Portraits





*and now, you and I are  
dreaming of cleaning the nightmares,  
that collective history which is haunting and hurting and killing  
dreaming a new story, a story which puts the world back together again,  
a new order perhaps, call it  
healing.*

*and on  
the shortest night of the year, this summer solstice I want to work on  
with you,  
night cleaning, so that while those others are sleeping, we'll  
change the  
story, place it in the Canon copier,  
duplicate it, and  
make it plural – stories – make it include all of us (even if we now  
wonder, “who are the **we**?”).*

*So maybe that Canon copier story, like Salman Rushdie’s pickled chutney,  
history, will  
seep into  
their dreams, so that waking, will be different.  
And then the waking  
dreams will alter slightly, ever so slight, and eventually,  
we’ll curve it,  
put the world back together,  
in the story, at least, and hope the story  
seeps. Leaks quietly  
into the dreams.*

*From Leila Sujir, “My Mother’s Eggplant Story – Her Summer Nighttime  
Reassurances, A Tale Which Helps Us Breathe More Easily”*

Overleaf, a “simulation” of one of the three billboard images from the video installation, **Working Portraits**, by Leila Sujir. Segment on Lolita Macalma.

This page, border, detail of the installation, **Working Portraits**. Segment on Lolita Macalma.





view. But a decent working out makes you feel good that you have contributed something, that you have done something worthwhile.

**Zool** Safdar Hashmi—any comments on that, any feelings about what happened to him? My understanding is that he was involved in street theatre and his views were not liked by those in power.

**Om** Yes, he was an activist, involved with a lot of good work. I knew him and he was really doing wonderful work. So it was a political matter.

**Zool** Was there an uprising by the creative community to this incident? [Safdar Hashmi was killed in India while performing in a piece of political street theatre].

**Om** Yes, oh my God. Today a big trust has been established and there is so much activity. His death didn't go to waste. Poor fellow, he was really one of the jewels, you know. But it did arouse a lot of emotion. People who didn't even know him got involved.

**Zool** It seems all too rare to get that kind of emotion these days, on any kind of project.

**Om** Well, no. But the emotion in India was fairly on the surface in the sense that this was not just one incident. I remember this woman, Suhasini Mulay, had made a film (*An Indian Story*) on the Bhagalpur blindings when the police got hold of these dacoits and other antisocial elements and blinded them in the jail. She made a film on that which was initially banned. Then she went to court and the court gave its permission. So you know there is a lot of participation from social organizations all over the country, in every state. It is not as though excesses go without any voice.

**Zool** Tell me about the theatre group *Majma*?

**Om** *Majma*...well, when I came to Bombay in 1976, I formed this theatre group. I and a couple of friends got together and we produced about 20 plays over a period of four to five years. Now it is sort of sleeping. I haven't done any theatre for the last couple of years.

**Zool** Is there a guiding vision behind the group? How would you articulate what it is trying to achieve?

**Om** What we were doing basically, we were

doing plays which were socially relevant. Then I got involved in cinema of the same nature. So I didn't miss theatre, frankly. If I had to choose between theatre and cinema, I would choose cinema because it is a much more effective medium. If you have to reach out to people with a certain problem, if you want to communicate with them, cinema reaches much larger audiences compared to the theatre.

**Zool** And that to you is an important factor, getting the word out to as many people as possible?

**Om** I think that's important.

**Zool** Do you see yourself doing more of theatre work in the future, going back to *Majma*?

**Om** For personal growth, I always keep missing theatre. Theatre is wonderful. In one way I feel it is much deeper than cinema, but it is not necessarily wider. I feel that it is a 'man to man talk'; it's a live contact. Your audience will believe you better in theatre than in cinema. In cinema they might think that, "Oh, this could be a trick, an external method used." But in theatre, there is nothing in between you and your audience.

**Zool** Do you prefer that kind of immediate relationship?

**Om** Yes, it is a wonderful feeling, because you instantly get feedback from your audience. But professionally, films are important. We did a film on Partition and a number of other socially relevant films, and it is important that those messages reach people and we are 800 million people. Imagine doing a play and reaching out to that many people? But you do an important series on television and overnight you reach out to so many people at the same time.

**Zool** Video has made the production of work so much more accessible to younger filmmakers, and television makes the dissemination of that work so much quicker in comparison with film production. What impact has that battle between video/TV and film production had on the industry from when you started to now?

**Om** Well, with any new innovation, human nature becomes like a child's nature. You want to forget the old and you are attracted by the new. But people generally have started feeling that it is not the same thing to watch a film on a small screen as it was on a big screen. It's like "old-fashioned" going back,

old designs coming back. In India still, the video hasn't effected it to that extent because of economics. It is not easily available in every family. Eighty per cent of India's population lives largely in villages. Now there is electricity, there may be two videos in a population of 8,000. There have been some kind of video libraries, but is hasn't really spread all over. Therefore, the number of films India produces has not reduced. It may happen in the future.

**Zool** As someone who has now been in the industry for a while, what do you say to new people coming in as actors? What do you think are the important elements for them if they want to persevere? What would you say to them?

**Om** I would really say that they should have proper professional training because then they will be able to guide themselves all their lives. The younger actors tend to ask, "Look, why should we spend four years in drama school when you have actors who didn't go to any drama school and they are good today?" The reason is that with education, choices will be available to them. They will not be dependant just on directors or on producers. They will have some kind of alternative. They may after five years, if they are good, if they know the job, find some viable media and start producing their own work. They can work in television, in radio, or they can teach in the university drama schools. That will make them much more independent. Because acting is like a free-lancing thing. You may get it, you may not. So you must have an alternative to be safe. At least it will give you a job. If you don't become a star, you won't starve.

I may sound philosophical, but it makes sense that you are on this earth for a few years—you only realize this when half your life is gone and you say, "Oh, Shit! I'm close to it! What have I achieved?" So what do you leave behind? What kind of a body of remembrance do you want to leave? Now that thought does give a balance to you as an individual in everything. You have a limited time on this earth, and as you are climbing up or moving ahead, see that you don't step on anybody, because that makes you feel uncomfortable. That's all.





**T**here are very few directors anywhere in the world who will say,

"I don't give a damn whether  
I am pleasing anybody or  
not. This is the truth."

**Zool** I was just looking through your biography and the work you've done and I wanted to focus on the styles of working in India and in the West. It's my understanding that in the Indian industry you might be shooting a comedy in the morning, a drama in the afternoon, and an action film in the evening. While in the West, the tendency tends to be to work on one project for a sustained period of time. As an actor, what sorts of challenges do you find working in India and in the West?

**Om** I have largely been doing one film at a time. That's my preference. The reason why a lot of actors work in more than one film at a time is insecurity. If somebody feels insecure, how long will he sustain in the industry? I am a trained actor. I have been through drama school for three years and I was in film school for two years. So I don't feel that kind of insecurity. It's not that I'm going to lose my job.

**Zool** Do you find you are very careful about choosing your film projects in the West?

**Om** Well, not only in the West. But in general, in India as well. I do resist commercial cinema, though about 25% of my work is in commercial cinema.

**Zool** What do you look for in projects? What excites you?

**Om** I look for something which is not 'low' kind of entertainment. Either it is a tasteful kind of entertainer or it deals with today's problems. It could be of any community, of any nationality, but something which is based on real issues.

**Zool** What attracted you to this particular movie project (*The Burning Season*)?

**Om** This was what we would call 'better cinema' or 'off-beat cinema.' It is small, it doesn't have an epic size. It's a small film, small budget, a very compact kind of film.

**Zool** And do you have a preference for

those sorts of projects over, say a *Gandhi* type of project?

**Om** No, certainly, *Gandhi* was an epic film which I did. No, I have done a lot of small films, tiny films like this. They also have a relevance in that they deal with today's problem of youngsters adjusting at home and adjusting outside.

**Zool** What do you look for in your relationship with a director? What are you seeking? Are you looking for more of a sharing, where you bring something to the role and there is a dialogue?

**Om** Well, that depends, you know, it varies from director to director. For example, I have now done 100 films and there could be a director who is absolutely young and this is his first or second film. So the relationship is bound to be different. It is a question of experience. But as a professional relationship, I look at it as a 'father-son' relationship.

**Zool** Who's the father?

**Om** Obviously the director. Because eventually it is his choice. The total vision is his. The actor is concentrating on his character. And that character is part of the total design, which a director visualizes. You are just playing one part. There may be twenty parts, there may be a hundred parts in the film. And the director has to design and gel those parts together.

**Zool** So how do you as an actor then resolve your vision for a character, which may differ with a director's vision for that character?

**Om** I give up. I don't let my views dominate.

**Zool** Do you feel that takes away from your performance?

**Om** I mean even if you lose 10% or 20%, I say, "Fine." I wouldn't argue. But if I feel differently, I will put it in front of him. I don't try and influence him. Let him see after that. Maybe he will say, "Oh, Om was right," or let me also discover that, "Oh, what I was

saying was right." But you may be wrong. That fear is always there because you are thinking only from you character's point of view.

**Zool** Do you find your rapport with directors differs based upon where they come from? For example, someone like Deepa (Mehta) who comes from a South Asian background. Do you find that sometimes you have a relationship with someone who shares the same heritage with you, that there is a certain agreement there about how to portray that character?

**Om** Not necessarily. There could be an Indian filmmaker who is insensitive or there could be an outsider whose perception is much better than that of someone who has lived there. That purely depends on the individual and what kind of sensibility he comes from and what kind of intentions there are to make a particular film. Unfortunately there are very few directors anywhere in the world who make films like that, who will say, "I don't give a damn whether I am pleasing anybody or not. This is the truth."

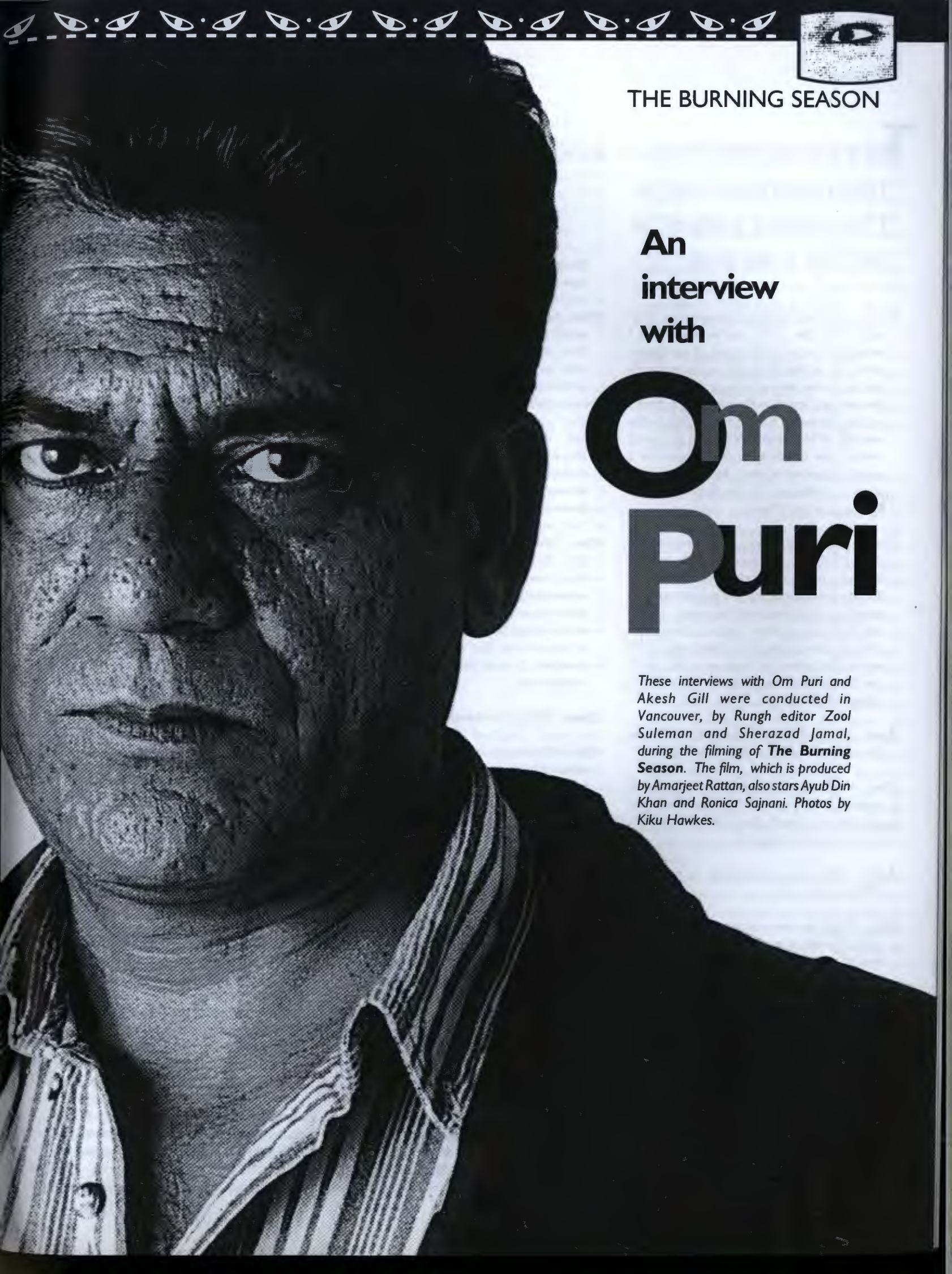
**Zool** Do you prefer to work with people like that?

**Om** Oh, I love to!

**Zool** So, you are not averse to tilting at a few windmills or rocking the boat if you feel the project is saying something?

**Om** I am not saying you are being cynical or anything like that, but you are just being true. For example, we did this film on Partition in India. Now, fortunately, the director of the film had money coming from a source who said, "Look, don't worry about the money coming back. But you make the film you want to make." So, the director didn't have to put in sounds, he didn't have to pick up certain stars thrust upon the project, and things like that. He came out with a wonderful film which was liked by people, admired by people, which affected people, which changed people's lives to some little extent. Cinema involves big money and there is always fear of how that money will be recovered, which is understandable from a business point of





THE BURNING SEASON

An  
interview  
with

# Om Puri

*These interviews with Om Puri and Akesh Gill were conducted in Vancouver, by Rungh editor Zool Suleman and Sherazad Jamal, during the filming of **The Burning Season**. The film, which is produced by Amarjeet Rattan, also stars Ayub Din Khan and Ronica Sajani. Photos by Kiku Hawkes.*



Firehall Arts Centre

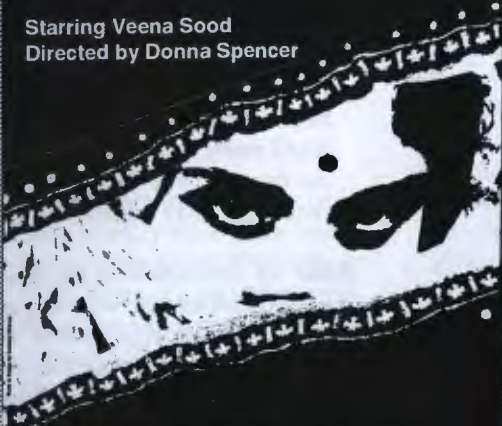
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लिम्बलिखित बतानों मे चाहिये: (a) बालबालिका बिचा बस्त्रावेष्ट -  
साधारणतया स्कूल बोर्ड नीर सिटी आफ बिनकुनर के लिये बनुवती  
के हिन्दी मे बनुवाक करे के लिये (b) कलुव बन्वन्ती बस्त्रावेष्टो  
का बनुवती के बनुवती मे बनुवाक करे के लिये  
बन्वन्तीबत मे ब्यावसायिक बनुवाक के गुण होने चाहिये नीर  
बह सोलमटी आफ ट्रांसनेटरल रेड इन्टरनेशनल आफ डिटिरा  
कोलम्बिया (S.T.I.B.C.) के बनेडिशन लेने का इन्चुक होना  
चाहिये कृपया ऊपर लिखे बतों पर बनुवा रिजुमे (resumé) बेवो

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## Or Gallery

Fall 1992



Frances Grafton

Stripped of Sense

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Patrick Mahon

Nov 10 – Dec 5

Inter Views Dec 1 – 5

Clare Gomez-Edington

Dec 1 – 23

NOTE: The Or Gallery's Bus Shelter Project (Sept/Oct)  
has been temporarily postponed due to a strike,  
please stay tuned for new installation dates!!!

Or Gallery

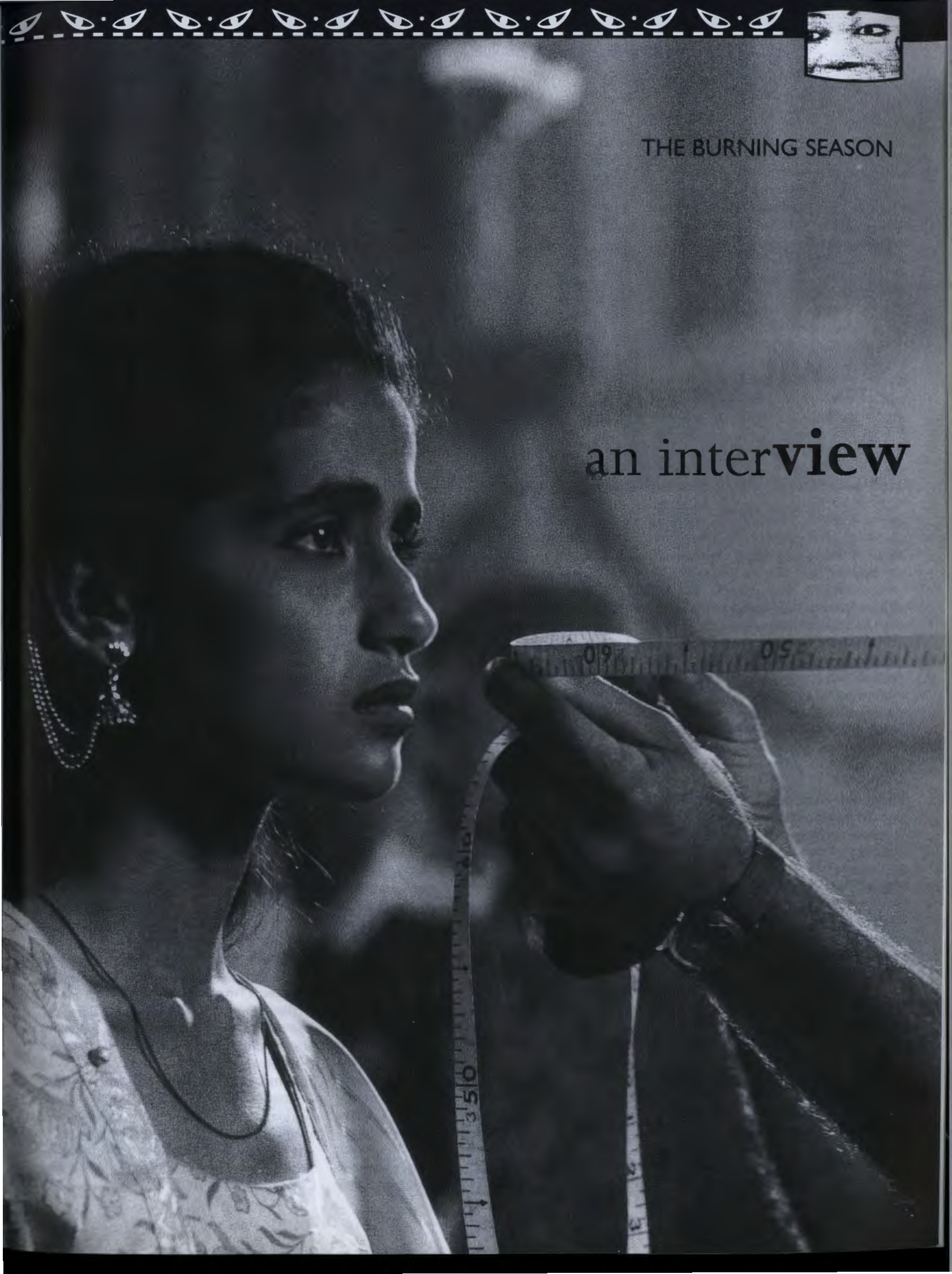
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Gallery hours:

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THE BURNING SEASON

an interview





"in the industry there is this tendency to stereotype by race, rather than focus on talent and ability."

# with Akesh Gill

**Zool** What do interviewers focus on when they talk to you?

**Akesh** All the real serious questions tend to be asked of the male actors. I had one interviewer say to me, "Don't worry, we'll put in a nice, pretty picture of you." Others usually ask, "How do you relate to the character?" I guess they want to see if my life is as difficult as Sanda's (the female protagonist in *The Burning Season*), if I am personally going through all these problems?

**Sherazad** How do you feel about that? Do you think that they're looking for grist for the stereotyping mill, some sort of evidence that South Asian women are so oppressed?

**Akesh** Whenever they ask me that question I can't help but smile, because I think, "Oh, you're waiting for me to say that I came from an oppressive family and I'm breaking free, aren't you?" I can tell them I do not relate to Sanda, and that her home life is not my home life. And in a way I love it when they ask me that question because I can say, "No, sorry, I'm not being forced into an arranged marriage against my will. I am allowed to have free thought." Whenever I say that, though, they reply that my family must be very 'Westernized.' And I think that's so interesting. They seem to be saying that if your family understands you, relates to you, is supportive and trusts your judgement, then in some way they're less oriental or less Indian, and more Western.

My parents aren't Westernized. They're not really 'hip' and 'cool.' But they do support, understand and trust me. That's just the way it is. In my last interview, when I was asked if my family was traditional or Westernized, all I could say was, "They're normal."

**Zool** Is there a fear that *The Burning Season* is going to be tagged as a sort of 'exotic' film, another Indo-Canadian film that portrays family problems? Are you concerned that the film is going to be taken as being realistic somehow? As opposed to a dramatization, a fictionalization?

**Akesh** In a way, you can't say it's completely dramatized because that does happen. Right in the middle of pre-production I had a chance to go to an Indian wedding. I'd asked some of the women in their twenties there how school was and how married life was going? Suddenly they just looked at me and said things like, "Oh well, I guess it's okay." And I said, "Well you know I really don't have any interest in marriage at this point, just career and education." And they replied, "That's good, but what happens when your parents turn to you and tell you to either get married or your food and the roof over your head will not longer be paid for, then what would you do?" Oops, wrong question! There are girls out there like that.

As a professional, and as a person in the industry, I don't want the film to be seen that way. When I first got this part, the one thing I did wonder was, whether or not they

thought of me only as an Indo-Canadian actor. Which is fine, because that's your heritage and that's what you are. But in the industry there is this tendency to stereotype by race, rather than focus on talent and ability. This is my first major part and what if they see me only as my ethnic background? That is a worry. I'm hoping they see that the film is not about typifying cultural oppression. That's kind of a cop out. It's about Sanda, her growth as a woman and how she is trying to overcome what she feels are her weaknesses.

**Zool** So tell us a bit about that. What made you want to become an actor and what work have you done to date?

**Akesh** My family moved a lot when I was little. And I was lucky because at one of the elementary schools I was in, the teachers did not insult our intelligence. We read Greek tragedies in Grade 4, *Animal Farm* in Grade 5 and studied the beginning of art and architecture in Grade 6. It was such a great environment. One of my teachers was with the Vancouver Youth Theatre. And so we'd always be doing plays. It was the best opportunity to express what I was feeling. It gave me this great outlet, a chance to be somebody I couldn't be on my own. And it just seems like I was meant to do this because I'm always the sort of person that does things the hard way. Since I'm an ethnic minority, it's going to be harder for me to prove to people that I can do a particular role, and that it doesn't have to go to somebody who has green eyes and light brown hair.

**Zool** When you got the role, what were your family's feelings? Were they happy for you when you got the role? Were they worried about you?





**Akesh** Well always. They respect my decision, but they have to put in their two cents worth. I make my own decisions, but they are still a part of the decision making process. I still ask for their opinion, they're still a part of it. I guess that must be why they're so comfortable with it, because I'm not completely going out on my own, I'm not doing it as a rebellion kind of thing. I can't speak for other families, but maybe they just worry because in our culture, sometimes parents love their children so much that they try to control them. For some parents, the idea of kids individually making decisions is so alienating that they feel like they've almost lost their child. In this culture, children are everything.

**Zool** How are you going to deal with the fact that people are going to look to you as a role model? People who start to work as pioneers, as the first people out of any community, they do it for whatever inspires them. But the social responsibility is a real factor.

**Akesh** I think so. When I first started in the business, I was 15 or 16. I had to ask myself how far was I willing to go? If there's one thing I could tell them [future actors], it is that you have to be certain of who you are, and of what you are willing to do as a professional and as a person. Because as a professional, I want to do everything. I want to do every genre, every medium. But as a person, coming from my family—they trust me. They know I'm not just myself, but I'm also representing our family. So decisions I make are going to reflect on them, too. So really, be certain about the kind of roles you're going to take and how far you're willing to go in them. Nowadays, for example, it seems like in a lot of films, I get the feeling that actors are being told that they have to take their clothes off if they want to make it. That's not the kind of thing I want to bring out.

**Sherazad** What do you think about how women are represented in films?

**Akesh** I have to wonder about some of the roles that they're presenting now. It's odd because when *Pretty Woman* first came out, I thought wow, this is so neat. But then you look at what it was portraying and it was saying, "Don't worry if you're a woman in a tough spot, some man will come along and save you." It's not very believable. I'd like to think it's changing, because a lot of the female roles that are coming out right now, they're strong.

**Sherazad** Does Sanda come to a place where she can be comfortable with who she is, or is she forced to take a *Thelma and Louise* type of way out? In that, their suicides at the end of the movie, in effect, reinforce their victimization by male oppression.

**Akesh** I think you might think at first that the decisions that she makes might look that way. Just because she does run away from everything. But what is 'running away'? That almost seems inactive. Whereas Sanda is active. She's looking for something. She's actually searching for something. It's not just running away. She's actually thinking about her situation, where she's going and who she's going to be. She is on a journey of discovery. And I think that is what the film is about. What's great is that she's not just out there by herself. She has a child. So she has to think very hard about what she's going to do.

**Sherazad** Do you have any comments about the tension that seems to be inherent in the film between individual and community? That tension is clearly something that people who grow up in this environment have to deal with. The individual may need to carve out a space or push at least a little bit of community obligation away, so that he or she can be focused on personal growth. Yet, the community clearly asks that certain duties and obligations be fulfilled for continuity and survival. What do you think about this, and do you think that the movie deals with the tension in a successful way?

**Akesh** I don't know. It just seems that in our society—I'm thinking in terms of Canada—that we are more individual anyhow. So you can't help but focus on yourself, and how you are in the big picture. That's what you're bombarded with, right? The bad thing about growing more individualistic, losing ties with the community, is more loneliness, which can lead to other problems, like suicide. But in the end, the person you're going to have to face is yourself. No matter what the community is forcing on you, in the end, it's you who has to decide. My attitude is that the 'community' isn't a collection of individuals, it's more a cohesive gathering of people who are individuals. The focus should be the individual. How, then, do I deal with the issue of family? I'm representing myself, but I'm also representing my family. But in the end, if I am representing the whole family, it's me who has to decide how I'm going to

behave.

**Sherazad** But ultimately, even though you have to make that decision, it is completely informed by behaviour that the family expects to be represented by. So, one's choices are actually limited. It seems to be a delicate balance, to me, to keep between becoming so individualistic that you abdicate responsibility to community or becoming so absorbed by community that you abdicate your responsibility to your self. Is there a place where balance can occur? Does Sanda find that place?

**Akesh** Now how can I say this without giving away the whole plot? There is something that my father said regarding some of the choices made by Indian kids today. The older generation cannot relate to these choices, he says, and the younger generation need to wait for the older to catch up. The same can be true of community. Here we are making decisions, and the whole community is saying, "Wait a minute, what about this, what about what we are dealing with?" A lot of that is in the film. I'd like to think that they don't completely reconcile. But there is that thing where the Rajivs [Sanda's father-in-law played by Om Puri] and the Santoshes [Sanda's mother-in-law played by Ronica Sajani] look at the Sandas and they know they can't relate. But they are trying. This movie encroaches on that grey area, where they are trying to understand each other. Because in the end, Sanda doesn't want to be where she is in the beginning of the film.

**Zool** Write your own bio ten years from now. How would you like that bio to read?

**Akesh** The word that comes to mind is 'strength'. I'm not the sort of person who likes to admire people for fear of trying to become that person, when I think you should be becoming your own person. But there are women in the industry that I do have a great deal of regard for like Sigourney Weaver. She can do something like *Aliens* and show that 'masculine' side and yet she does work where she is very 'feminine' yet strong. When I am working, if I don't feel it completely, feel it real, then I know I'm not doing it well. I want it to be so real otherwise I won't accept it. I'd like to think ten years later, I will still be going for something that is real.

Rungh



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# about face about frame

struggling for a voice within and without

by  
Kwame  
Dawes

Between June 17 and 22 some twenty or so film and video makers, producers, and administrators of colour and of First Nations descent met at the Banff Centre in Alberta for dialogue and strategic planning for the future in a meeting appropriately titled **About Face About Frame**. The meeting, organized and spearheaded with admirable energy and skill by Alliance Board Member Premika Ratnam, sought, through intense discussion, to identify and articulate some of the central problems being faced by independent film and video artists of colour and of First Nations descent in Canada.

Funded by the Alliance of Independent Film and Video makers of Canada, this conference constituted a landmark moment in the evolution of the film and video industry in Canada, as it was the first time such artists, representing most regions of Canada, had ever gotten together to find common ground through honest interaction. The agenda of the conference was decidedly political, in that it focused more on the political dynamics of funding film and video projects than it did on the creative process itself.

What happens then, when a group like this, of highly motivated people of colour and First Nations people come together to discuss the political ramifications of their work? They rail against the impact of cultural appropriation by the main stream white society on their work. These problems tend to come up at conferences like the Banff meeting. In that instance, after political advocacy and positioning had been discussed, these artists and administrators were forced to try and find their common ground—their position of unity on several critical issues. Without this, the concept of a coalition, or that of further action would have remained unrealized.

To my mind, the question of cultural appropriation, and the response of the

delegates to this issue characterized the spirit with which plans for a coalition of these artists were made. It also represented the spirit which allowed all these people of divergent and disparate races and backgrounds to forge a collective political voice that could address the mainstream echelons of funding and policy making in Canada's film, television, and video industry.

Firstly, there was the question of naming and labelling. First Nations peoples are not a homogeneous collection of people sharing the same culture and values. What they do share, however, is a history of struggle, repression, resistance, and a connection with the Canadian landscape. They share a common enemy, they share suffering, and they share a desire to break away from the strictures imposed on them by the common enemy. Essentially, they share struggle. The same is true among people of colour, for, as was discovered at the conference, the term is deeply problematic and can only function as a metaphorical counter-statement to the term 'white'—meaning colourless. Beyond that, the histories are disparate. However, the shared enemy, the shared sense of marginalization and social alienation, have, through various accidents of history, allowed people of colour to recognize commonalities between themselves. It is the politically expedient who react to these connections and seek to unify these groups into a single voice. To do this, however, there is a lot of 'stuff' to plow through and to clear away. Part of this 'stuff' is tied to the question of cultural appropriation.

At Banff, some of the artists (I use the term loosely) met in a sub-group, to discuss the question of cultural appropriation. Typically, the discussion began with the expression of heart-felt anger at white establishments and writers for stealing and distorting the narratives and histories of marginalized people. But the discussion grew more complex. People identified in much of the funding policies being implemented by large agencies in the country, a tendency to deny the voice of indigenous peoples who wanted to speak about their own cultures; by ghettoizing them, and consequently limiting the amount of funds available to them. Simultaneously, a mainstream level of 'higher art,' continued to receive funding for projects that could easily be accused of propagating the 'sacred' tenets of cultural appropriation.

But things become even more complex. Some who spoke expressed concern that this ghettoization of the work of artists on the margin was simply a backlash aimed at advocate groups that railed against the abuses of cultural appropriation supporters. Bureaucracy had reacted by introducing apartheid







policies at a certain level of funding. Nothing was changing, fundamentally. 'Higher art' still celebrated the freedom of the 'true artist' to write about anything. 'Higher art' got all the money.

Other speakers were less convinced that legislation against cultural appropriation was a particularly useful way to deal with it. Their problems with this were largely theoretical. They argued that simply fighting to ensure that all work about black issues be written by blacks was politically and artistically unsound. By extension, the argument went, blacks would be prevented from writing about whites, and then there would have to be a chart indicating where race and culture aligned themselves and defined themselves. The prospect was not just daunting, but absurd.

Then a third voice: "And what of us," it asked? "Can I, as a black person, write about a native issue? Or can a native person write

The dynamics of representation and voice would have to be discussed. The internal runnings of the people trying to find voice would have to be clarified if an effective movement towards change were to be accomplished.

The caucus came to a few conclusions: when cultural appropriation is counteracted by the qualities of respect, sensitivity and equal opportunity, the result is wonderfully developed work that is filled with the richness of cultural interaction and dialogue. These qualities are liberating for they open a door for dialogue among marginalized artists, which many felt was slowly closing. This openness seeks to make a distinction between stealing and getting permission to take, borrow, or share. The cry for measures against cultural appropriation emerges out of a sense of abuse and exploitation felt by disenfranchised minorities. It is a reaction to the work of many

white artists who deal with subject matter that they do not respect or understand. It also involves the question of money. Many artists have stolen from other cultures without giving acknowledgement; they have mis-represented cultures and values with complete disdain and disregard for the people that they have exploited, and have made significant amounts of money from such efforts in the process. In many instances, our understanding of ourselves as peoples of colour and

First Nations peoples has been determined by the language and ideology of these exploitative artists whose sense of accountability is minimal, largely because it is they who have the funding and the power.

Armed with a sense of collective understanding, and a series of values which freed them to share their voices, the artists at Banff proceeded to formulate ways in which to actively resist the detrimental features of cultural appropriation. This was achieved through an encounter with history and the pro-active politic of correcting a much too-long pattern of exploitation. Thus, it was possible to: argue for a policy that would privilege the voice of the marginalized when it came to issues that dealt with marginalized society; demand that the funding agencies study the record of exploitation and abuse that has come with much of the material written about marginalized cultures by white people; and use that trend as a strong

indication of how to allocate funding in the future. They could suggest that the principle of affirmative action is applicable even in this context, for there are wrongs to be righted. Most critically, it gave them a vehicle by which to try to determine the criteria that should be used to determine the efficacy of a work that appeared to cross cultural lines.

Underlying all of these stances was a willingness to celebrate the freedom and imagination of the artist, while giving attention to the political and social responsibility of that artist. The **About Face About Frame** meeting was about this very thing. The final 'Core Assumptions,' constructed through involved dialogue, soul-searching, tears and sweat, reflected this spirit completely.

From these core assumptions, mandates were made to: (1) ensure that the proceedings of the meeting be properly recorded; and (2) for a coalition to be established between these artists. (Since that time, a great deal has taken place to realize this aim). Finally, it was mandated that efforts be made to use the collective voices of these artists to require all government funding agencies involved with film, video and television to evaluate their policies and practices of cultural interaction, through a comprehensive and critical report, and to have this report made public. By taking a pro-active position in seeing this done, these artists were advocating a process whereby marginalized people would seize control of their own destinies within this society.

The work begun at the Banff meeting will undoubtedly have far-reaching repercussions in the film, television, and video industry in Canada. This is largely because the discussions affected the often difficult interaction of politics and art. In this instance, the fusion was dynamic and fruitful. Credit should go to Premika Ratnam and her team of supporters who ensured that while attending participants were highly-positioned and influential people in the industry within their own rights, they were also people who had dared to contend with the intimate reality of their personal politics of race and identity. We hope the Alliance not only seeks to embody this spirit, but further endeavors to let the spirit direct its activities in the future.

**Rough**

**Kwame Dawes** is a poet, playwright, fiction writer, musician, actor, nuclear physicist, guru, marsian, pyrotechnician, with a vivid imagination. He teaches English at the University of South Carolina at Sumter, where he is also recovering from New Brunswick winters.



Photo: Ali Kazimi

about an South Asian issue? Is there such a thing as a marginalized culture that allows such arrangements to be acceptable?"

Caught in what was a deeply problematic quagmire, the artists began to ask fundamental questions about the issues surrounding cultural appropriation, and to formulate a sense of what values they felt were important if marginalized people wanted to share their work with each other. The shift from a behaviour within the struggle was a fundamental and telling one, for it had an impact upon the rest of the conference. Further, it brought to the fore a basic reality concerning the position of marginalized artists in this society—that these artists are no longer way out in the margins. Instead, some are becoming power-brokers and bearers in the system. In many ways, it is becoming increasingly important that those marginalized people with power dialogue with those on the margins who still have no power.



# vancouver international film festival

## Film Clips

**The Visitor** (India 1991), **Kasba** (India 1990), and **Immaculate Conception** (Great Britain/Pakistan 1991) are the South Asian films featured at this year's Vancouver International Film Festival, co-sponsored by Rungh from **October 2 – 18.**

**THE VISITOR** (or *Agantuk*, which also translates as *The Stranger*) is the last film directed by the late Satyajit Ray. It won in the Best Film category at the Indian Film Awards, and Satyajit Ray won the Best Director prize for his work. Manmohan Mitra is the visitor who, after a mysterious 35 year absence from India, returns to Calcutta to visit his niece Anila. His arrival is prefaced by a letter to Anila which triggers suspicions on the part of Anila's husband Sudhindra Bose. Who is Manmohan? Why did he leave India and neglect to keep in touch with his family? Why is he choosing to return now, to contact Anila, his last surviving relative? Anila and Sudhindra speculate about Manmohan's motives during the week prior to the visit. When Manmohan does arrive, however, he is immediately accepted by Anila's 11 year old son Satyaki. Anila and Sudhindra's doubts persist—they hire Sen Gupta, a friend and barrister, to confront Manmohan for an explanation of his history and his visit. It is revealed that Manmohan has spent the last 35 years travelling and living with indigenous peoples in India and the Americas, and, during that time, has developed a huge contempt for the so-called 'civilized' world. He describes his love for 'the only society where equality prevails, where there are no oppressors and no oppressed.' For espousing these views he is regarded with even more suspicion by his hosts. But, as the story continues to unravel, Manmohan wins the respect of Anila and Sudhindra.



**KASBA** is a film adaptation of Anton Chekov's novella *In The Gully*. Director Kumar Shahani says, "I wanted to approximate his self-mocking tone. I thought, how can anyone get into Chekov's spirit without mocking himself? I was laughing at myself, saying that art perhaps doesn't mean anything in the end. Also, I had seen some films adapted from works by Chekov end up making fun of the world at large and of the actors playing their ordained roles. I think that's wrong. Before castigating anyone else, it is essential to take a look at yourself and not be afraid to laugh at the image in the mirror." The film, which Shahani has reset in a small north Indian community located on a smuggling route, has been described by critics as a "tragi-comedy of greed, passion, frustration and insanity." Maniram is a corrupt local resident who makes Tejo, his low caste adopted daughter, take care of his business dealings. When Maniram's eldest son Dhani is arrested on charges of counterfeiting, Maniram panics, and Tejo, in her anger, decides to take what is owed to her.

**IMMACULATE CONCEPTION** is award-winning director Jamil Dehlavi's fourth film. Critics say its "visual luxury and heady atmosphere contrast with the darkening clouds of the Rushdie fatwa declaration and coax us into a story where West meets East in mutual exploitation." The script centres on Hannah (of Jewish American descent) and her husband Alistair (a British conservationist) who live in Pakistan. The two desperately want to have a child but are unable to conceive—so they go to a eunuch-run fertility shrine in Karachi for help. Hannah becomes pregnant but the events which follow the visit to the shrine mar the couple's happiness.





BY CHRIS CREIGHTON-KELLY

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#### Sat. Dec. 5 Film Screening

*Maltese Cross Movement* by Keewatin Dewdney; *Rat Life and Diet in North America* and *Handtinting* by Joyce Wieland

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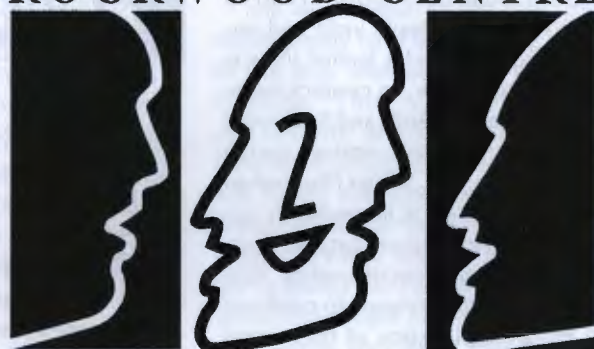


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## Of Customs and Excise

by Rachna Mara

reviewed by Maia Chowdhury

I have a new favourite book. Rachna Mara's short fiction *Of Customs and Excise* is an eloquent and unpretentious model of South Asian women's writing which interweaves the experiences of women in India, Canada, and England across several generations. The stories tackle issues that arise for people who migrate, who must redefine their sense of belonging, and who must negotiate their experience of living with cultures juxtaposed. Rachna Mara writes with a sensitivity to conflicts that arise between daughters and mothers, women and men, people who are old and young, of colour and white, poor and rich. While doing this she also creates a fluidity of experiences rather than writing of binary conflicts. In *Of Customs and Excise* there is no right, and there is no wrong. There is no escapist ending that leaves me feeling like the writer is trivializing her subject by tacking on a resolution at the end of the book.

*Of Customs and Excise* opens with a story called *Pipal Leaves* in which Bridget Parkinson tries to find her place in an Indian village as a white doctor visiting from England. She is forced to unlearn her Western training and privilege in order to be accepted as a medical practitioner in the village, and learns about the subtleties of Indian medicine through her co-worker Dr. Naigar. When a young bride named Parvati comes into the clinic for a check-up because she has missed a few menstrual periods, Bridget diagnoses that the woman is four months pregnant. Dr. Naigar steps in:

"Dr. Parkinson, this girl is clearly no more than two or three months pregnant. You English doctors think you are knowing everything, but you cannot even determine how far along a woman is?"

...She'd heard a fetal heartbeat. There was no question the girl was in her second trimester. ...Abruptly she said, "I'll examine her again."

"There is no need for that," snapped Dr. Naigar. "I have already corrected your mistake."

Bridget said slowly, "I am examining her again, Doctor. She is my patient."

She placed the stethoscope on the bride's lower abdomen and listened.

"I'm afraid I mistook intestinal gurglings for a heartbeat." Her voice was tight, clipped. "It's difficult to say how far along she is, but certainly no more than two or three months."

Later:

"How long has she been married?"

Dr. Naigar, her back to Bridget, continued to collect the instruments. "Three months." Bridget leaned against the table.

"Do you know what happens if they find out she is more than three months pregnant?" Dr. Naigar's hands, suspended above the tray, gleamed with steel. "There'll be an accident, screams in the night. They'll say her sari caught fire while she was frying something, or she ate poisoned food put out for rats."

Bridget's stomach cramped. She saw a peacock-blue figure bobbing under a vulturous black umbrella, saw Parvati's eyes on her again, the eyes of a cornered bird, knowing there is no reprieve.

When I think about the pool of writing by South Asian women in the West, I see Bharati Mukherjee as a reference point. As I locate Rachna Mara in that pool, I know she has become my new landmark. Mara's *Of Customs and Excise* succeeds where Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* falls short. *Jasmine* is about a woman who has lived in both Indian and American communities. Mukherjee's apparent view that cultural assimilation is necessary in order to live happily, is reflected in her writing. Whether or not this is true, the fact that this value judgement is conveyed in *Jasmine* detracts from the realistic representation of a woman's experience. People don't live according to static theories of cultural assimilation. Mukherjee's character Jasmine runs away from responsibility and from prejudice, and ultimately runs away from herself. Mara, however, does not imply that you have to lose your 'Indianness' before you can begin to negotiate your past and enjoy the present. Mara's series of related characters do not seek black and white

resolutions—they learn, they take two steps forward and one step back in their acceptance of their backgrounds and their resistance to prejudices. Rachna Mara does not fall into the trap that gets so many women—the trap which is popularized by a movie such as *Thelma and Louise*, in which two women choose to escape rather than fight, and the trap set up by Mukherjee, whereby a woman's only option is to run from her background. By preventing her characters from leaping over the edge of that metaphorical *Thelma and Louise* cliff, Rachna Mara creates a tension in the lives of her characters that is believable and refreshing to read.

In the concluding story *Parvati's Dance*, the protagonist is Parvati's daughter Mala and the setting of the story is Canada. When Mala learns that the man she thought was her father really is not, she turns to imagining a segment of Parvati's life in order to understand the history of her conception.

*How do I tell her story? Do I tell it as she told me, pitiful, skeletal, the edifice of their love gutted, steel girders gaping? Or the way it seemed to her then, rose-and-ivory marble?*

...a secret marriage takes place between Parvati and a mysterious man she met at the movies.

And the marriage is consummated. Is it hasty, fumbled, in a park, or the car perhaps? Does he take her to a seedy hotel, rent by the hour? Maybe she lies again to the nuns, says she has to be away for the weekend, go home to meet a man her parents want her to marry...

Is he gentle? Does he take time? She's never seen a man naked, though she's probably seen some creep exposing himself. She has no idea what to expect. Some elaborate dance, perhaps, on cool marble floors. I hope there is tenderness, ecstasy. I can't ask.

By rewriting her mother's history in her own mind, Mala manages to bridge a generation and span two continents of misunderstanding. Rachna Mara clearly believes that it is necessary to acknowledge and accept one's heritage before it can be documented. By rewriting this history (and by writing all of *Of Customs and Excise*) Rachna Mara supports the need to record women's experiences. I really do think that Rachna Mara's clear, accessible writing will have as great an impact on all you other readers as it did on me.

Rungb

Maia Chowdhury lives, plays, works, sleeps, writes and generally hangs out in Vancouver.





## A letter to *Mississippi Masala* director Mira Nair



# Dear Didi...

This letter is *gup-shup*, yak-yak all from my end. This is not a review for Cinemascope. But I admit, there is a long, long line-up in Calgary, winding past the Kensington Building. Plaza's doors to open in another half an hour. Lot of whites in the crowded line-up (they are everywhere) but my eyes gawk at Indian housewives in starched summer saris, resembling Mina's Aunty (*Chachi? Maami? Who is she?*) who wants to grasp all toilet paper on sale. When Mina glares at her, I laugh, and Shani next to me laughs, and Shelina next to her, laughs. Our two rows bunched together, laugh. (I'll tell you about the two rows in a bit). Because we of the two rows often conduct Mina's sulky stance, here, out West. She has brought her Aunty (chaffingly, like us, when asked to run an errand by elders) to the supermarket to purchase American cartfuls of homo milk for the wedding *mithai*. *Didi*, I wish there is more of the Aunty in the film. I just know this Aunty makes *gor ker* and lemon pickle in the four o'clock Mississippi sun when she has finished her regular chores. (She would never buy Patak's sealed pickles. Just know).

Back to the line-up outside the Plaza in Calgary:

An Indian housewife has slits in her heels indifferent as brown thread, and University women with thick cropped hair, oxidized silver bangles, shorts, no lipstick, white, white teeth. Mummy is in the line-up, too (in East Africa, we never called her 'Mum'), in her mid-length cotton dress and bob-cut hair. Your Mina calls her mum 'Maa'. Sounds lyrical—she would also have called her 'Mummy'. It sits on the character you try to flesh out: in Kampala, Uganda, their drawing room (we called it 'sitting room' in East Africa) is lampy-western, African carvings and rugs (a child in such a family would call her mother 'Mummy'. Mina calls her African Uncle, 'Uncle'—western style. I forget what Mina calls her father—Papa?).

*Didi*, should I tell you first that I saw *Mississippi Masala* in Vancouver, or discuss the strangeness I felt when Mina kisses her little Ugandan playmate. Her playmate who is their servant's child. *Didi*, let's celebrate first!

Even now, I hear Lakshman Subramaniam in my ears, over the oceans, as the maps of the continents move across the screen. (Cornily, I want to use the word 'migrate' instead of 'move'). On the red ply screen, names of countries in yellow. Is this true? Or my imagination? Red and yellow are auspicious colours, my colours, from Ganges India, carried to East Africa, carried to Canada. *Didi*, did you carry them to America? It is verandah-warm in the cinema. Shani clutches my hand. We are moving with you, *Didi*. This is *our* film. This is *our* *mehfil*. And snatches of ghazals, for our ears only.

*Sarakti jaye hai rukh se nagab  
ahista, ahista*

Let me tell you of our two rows of seats filled by Indian *yaaro* from all over: Shani's Caribbean, Shelina and I are from Tanzania, which is not as ritzy as Kenya, or as fertile as Uganda, but we share East Africa. Ashok born in Bhopal but never seen Bhopal. (*Didi*, these "buts" are tender hyphens). Today, in Vancouver, it is our father's cinema. There is a couple, a white man and a Japanese woman who sit in front of us.

Ashok's seats are taken! No way! I am timid (except on paper). Not Shelina (she runs a business on Granville Street, but I am partial to her long Kashmiri nose), she tells them the seats are reserved (in Vancouver, Ashok of Bhopal, who lives in Calgary, is always delayed at the *Paan ki Shop* on Main Street. He likes a good spread of the chalky stuff and nugget betel pieces. Definitely none of the sweet, red paste). The Japanese woman gets up, miffed (typical Asian or African reaction). The man smiles affably-*yaar*, these Whites grin affably in an Indian ghetto: Indira Gandhi International Airport, *mehfil* gathering, or film. Today, it is our father's cinema.

*Didi*, when I was young, maybe eleven, my grandparents moved to Canada. This was my last visit to Dodoma in the interior of Tanzania where I did my primary school. One of our oldest servants, Mzee Juma, say me on the street. It was *Idd* and I was carrying a tray of *mithai* to a friend's home. He was with another black man. I waited for him. He stroked my forehead. Didn't say a word. His fingers were rough from cutting, peeling, washing, ironing, lifting, farming, building. His African friend grinned. Another sly way an African manages to touch an Indian. *Didi*, so creamily little Mina kisses her Black Ugandan friend. *Didi*, such cinema satisfaction.

In 1972

*an African touched my breast  
I walk the street  
with hunched shoulders.*

Between Asians and Africans in East Africa, there was no innocence. Your sunniness isn't agreeable to me. *Didi*, friendships like the one between Mina's father and his African friend may have been possible. You should have interrogated, unpacked and further. Unpacked to heal instead of consumptive cinema. Then I could have retrieved Kiswahili words like *polé* (sorry).

*Soft Kiswahili like  
polé I have exiled  
You say polé to a leader in jail,  
to a young child  
whose wobbly feet can't stand alone.*

Perhaps then I could have licked Mina's creamy kiss because such friendships didn't occur in my ordinary Indian home. Because even as I was four (younger than Mina?) I knew that Africa was for the Africans. *Didi*, being an outsider, you have done an outsider's thing—romanticized the diaspora of Asians from Uganda.

There is another scene you skirt around but don't unpack. I am talking about the embrace between Mina's mother and their African friend. It must have happened for the first time between them like it happens for the first time when Mzee Juma touches my forehead on *Idd*. What occurs between Mina's mother and their friend is too fast, too quick. *Ahista, Ahista, Didi*. Slow, slowly, *Didi*. Like the veil in the snatched ghazal: this *pardah*/curtain descends from the face (*Sarakti haye hai rukh se nagab*) s-l-o-w-l-y. It never just slides off.

To my history: we are crossing the border. From Kenya into Tanzania. The Black Tanzanian inspector smiles. It is about two in the morning. My mother in a yellow sari, travelling without a man, travelling with her two children. The inspector looks at her breasts. As she fills out the declaration form, her *pallaui* slips. She asks for a paper clip, and the inspector takes the paper clip pot with both hands (sign of respect) and holds it close to her breast. Smiles. An East Indian woman's harassment by a Black man in East Africa. In the seventies there is a lot of cornering. Wild running down the street. *Didi*, ban the prescriptive embrace between Mina's mother and their Black friend. Oh, the brown-black colour is there... The White *jati* caste (my mother asks do I have to be so rude?) would probably smile affable and say, "So what was the



problem?" *Didi*, such an enormous chunk of history/my flesh you abort: an Indian woman (even if she wears a European cotton frock) is like a Brahmin, any other man besides her husband, an untouchable. And you exhibit an Indian woman clasping a Black man, chest to breast. My mother insists there is an awkwardness conveyed in the scene. She is satisfied. (*Didi*, here in the West, mother's generation is easily satisfied. Grateful). I say, *ahista, ahista, Didi*.

In film analysis, my teacher slices things apart. Colloquially, she is sharp as a *kukri*. She says that Nair (but I call you *Didi*) pulls the rug from under our feet when Mina tells Demetrius, the morning after that she has something to tell him. Allah! She tells him it's her birthday! When us Indian women want to find out whether she is a virgin or not! Pulling the rug from under our feet is urban film direction, a Western quick step; I am a rustic and want to know how Mina gets birth control pills (I never go to an Indian doctor for pills) or does she pick up condoms from the hotel. How? When? Show us Mina, *Didi*. Mina is expert at lovemaking in comparison to her goofy male cousin. Fascinating! Dig, dig, digging Mina, yes, that's what I want. (Part of Mina exists in many South Asian women. I am one of them. So *Didi*, you can't say that this is your film, not ours!)

From what is shown of her family, the concept of virginity must be fused to her jugular vein shame. Where did I get this from, you ask, *Didi*? *Yaar*/friend/*Didi*/sister, we are talking about Indian shame, a compounded mass of woman shame, family shame and tribal shame. Then there are valves like Sita purity and husband is Godji—these tighten the hymen until the proper time of henna, wet as Uganda soil, doctor-grooms, tycoon-grooms, and sweet *mithais*, of course.

*Didi*, Mina and her lover's heavy kisses are spitty and wonderful, but their lovemaking, on a Hollywood bed. But in true Indian *filmi*-style, out of the blue, Mina's red *chunni* is draped around her when she phones her mother to say that she is going away with Demetrius (this rustic loved the detail!). Oh, and you should have unpacked the hair-scenes. Yes, there is the scene when Mina's mother gives her a hair massage as they *gup-shup* about Mr. Hand-Picked groom. But on the beach, *Didi*, on the beach, Mina does a *jura* with a flick of her palm. I want to celebrate this motion not a single exotic detail, but repeated many times because it is vernacularly Indian. Indian women do this all the time when talking to their *wohi* (or when they are in a huff with their *wohi*). You may argue, *Didiji*, that Mina isn't from India, that she wouldn't think of her beau as *wohi*. Really *Didi*, you are an outsider to East Africa! My *Didiji*! I don't want to enter into a *bahez*-argument with you, and what the hell, I am partial to *juras*! Moreover, I confess that I think of my 'him' as *wohi* even though I am from East Africa. That's the Indian dilemma. Was fed on Sita, Draupadi, fiery Bengali heroines through the umbilical cord of my second generation East African mother.

Why did you make this film first for the White-*jati*? If you had made this film for me, an East African homing in Canada, I would have asked you to take me to a bed where love is made Indian East African *istyle*. Wonder if there is such a thing? I am her *jhumka* (she has short liberated hair in Mississippi). *Jai* and his wife clink glasses in her liquor store (from housewife in Kampala to running a liquor store in Mississippi). Husband's pillar. I have witnessed such East African women many times.

husband gone to town  
again  
to fetch goods and urban pleasures  
(as urban pleasures anywhere)  
she sits in her duka  
interior of the forest  
unmarked in history  
braver than Livingstone, Stanley et al  
Kichri pot on fire, baby in box  
selling  
flour, Vicks, oil,  
blankets, lanterns, Aspro

My *salaams* to these women. I clink glasses with them. Salut! But why didn't your push on *Jai* and his wife's actual sexuality? I am keen to know how my parents' generation in East Africa made love. In India, there is the mother-in-law who instructs daughter-in-law to take a glass of milk to her 'him.' But in East Africa, what love words or prods did my parents use? Did my mother wear (private) *jhumkas* on such days? I want this nearness opened. I dream it must be moist yet gauzy like a mosquito net.

But Mina and her *wohi* is the hot masala theme. On my way to Delhi this time, I briefly stay in London, where I am invited to dinner at my Aunt's (never Aunt) friend's home. Her daughter, born in London, an Indian Londoner. The daughter draws up her knees dreamily at the romance in the film (of course between Mina and Demetrius) and says to me, it is a sunny film. I choke on my *mishkaki* (barbequed beef East African way). But I cannot blame her, *Didi*. Mina's T-shirt as it slides up her loinic belly and Demetrius who is first class Mr. White in a Black skin—yes, yes, I witnessed fried chicken and corn on the cob in this Hollywood *masala*.

*Didi*, now I will waffle all over the place. Raw thoughts, processed thoughts, whatever comes to mind. So waffle with me as I heat unformed thoughts: Mina washes toilets (bright yellow gloves), her low cut tribal *cholis*, frisky miniskirts, *ornis*, and girdle-belts brim with confidence, security. Personally I know that the psyche of Asians from East Africa has taken years and years to repair and they (Mina's family have not left Uganda—Mina's father writes demanding letters to the Government of Uganda for the return of his property). In light of unforgotten Kampala, how can Mina fall in love with a Black man so effortlessly (even though he is a black-American?) Can she shift so soundly? Does she not remember her mother's harassment by ugandan soldiers on the day they leave Kampala and ironically what's playing on her cassette player is Mukesh's: "my shoes are from Japan, trousers from England, hat from Russia, but my heart remains Indian." (Bad translation, *Didi*, sorry).

For a person who is deeply tied to her family, wounded as deeply as they are (in fact this is Mina's personal landscape), her loyalty to Demetrius shifts *fatafat*, quick-quick, or a proverb in Kiswahili, *bandera ufata upepo* (flag follows the wind). *Didi*, bring in the melting pot, or as we Indians say, even bring in the father of melting pots, Indians just don't melt that easy. Wrench the real Mina out (not the imagined one). Show her conflict and I will accept her choice. Portraying a Mina who only seethes under the skin won't do. Actually, I consider this another form of Hollywood re-domination, ie. a hot-headed heroine, foreign to an India-Mississippi (music parties, videos, saris, arranged marriages, fair brides). *Didi*, you are portraying an Indian girl with a western vision of her Indian world. This is the dye of a mainstream-*wallah*. This is how a western character would grasp my world. Leave everything and ride off into the sunset, like Mina does. Mina is westernized (I am you) but not western (but am also not you). I wanted my Ugandan film to be interrogative (Mina's sticky-tribal Indian blood; her woman identity out of her political and cultural history; Mina who is her parents' protector/soldier).

*Didi*, your film is affable and sunny. Your Uganda, prescriptive. You subject me to Hollywood's *darshan*-glory.

Love,  
Yasmin

P.S. *Didi*, after the 15th, I'll be in Calgary. So drop ey a line in Calgary. I hear **M. Masala** will be on at the Plaza again in October. Popular film.

**Rungh**

**Yasmin Ladha** is a writer currently homing in Calgary. Her book, *Lion's Granddaughter and Other Stories*, will be published by NeWest Press in the fall of 1992.





# Samachar

*Rungh accepts submissions to Samachar. Please send us your calls for submissions, announcements, upcoming events, etc. and, space permitting, we will publish them.*

**Calgary Status of Women Action Committee** presents Continuing the Dialogue...A Conference Celebrating Identity, Moving Towards Alliance, Creating Feminist Community.

October 23 & 24, 1992, Calgary, Alberta.

Black feminist theorist bell hooks will present the keynote address. Registration fee is \$125 for the conference package (Friday keynote, Saturday workshops and lunch, and Saturday celebrations). If you cannot afford the registration fee, send what you can afford. Cheques should be made payable to SWAC and mailed to 319, 223-12 Avenue SW, Calgary, Alberta, T2R 0G9.

## The Memorial Project

November 7 – December 19

Opening: Saturday, November 7, 2 – 4  
A Space, Suite 301, The Orient Building,  
183 Bathurst Street,  
Toronto, Ontario, M5T 2R7

The Memorial Project is timed to coincide with Day Without Art and World AIDS Day on December 1. It is a multi-media exhibition featuring works by artists who have been directly affected by the crisis, having lost a friend, lover, spouse or family member.

## Beyond 1992: Experiments in Cross-Cultural Collaboration

September 1 – October 31

Opening Saturday, October 3 at 7:30 pm with live music by Muyacan

**Beyond 1992** is a 'process' multi-disciplinary exhibition which will take shape during the month of September. Both the actual interdisciplinary/collaborative works produced, and the documentation of the working process, form the content of the exhibitions to be shown concurrently at A Space and a number of other galleries and art spaces in Toronto. For more information please call Scott Marsden or Ingrid Mayrhofer at A Space, 416 364.3227.

## to visit the tiger:

**Multi media works by contemporary BC artists of South Asian origin** curated by Chris Creighton-Kelly and Shani Mootoo  
Community Arts Council Gallery – Upper and Lower Gallery, 837 Davie Street, Vancouver, BC. 604 683-4358

October 20 – November 7, 1992

Reception: Tuesday, October 20, 7pm – 9pm

**We are seeking** submissions for a performance/exhibition/screening/writing series dealing with intercultural conditions for the construction of sexuality in contemporary Canadian society. These commissioned or curated pieces will deal with issues of sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual practices in the context of race, culture and socialization. We are also inviting artists, organizations and individuals to be a part of a new data base of cultural workers and producers. We are the newly formed Chinese-Canadian Contemporary Projects Committee. If you are interested, send info to: 2814 Trinity Street, Vancouver, BC, V5K 1E9, or contact Cynthia at 604 254.9487/fax 604 687.6260.

## South Asian Video/Video Installation & Film Exhibition

As part of the *South Asian Video Arts Festival* being staged throughout the West Midlands in autumn 1993, Ikon Gallery is organizing an open submission exhibition of video/video installations and films by artists of South Asian origin.

Ikon will be commissioning two new videos/video installations/film by South Asian artists (total allocation is £8,000).

Please send demonstration copies of videos (please submit films on a video format) together with relevant details, information about works in progress, and/or brief proposals for new works for possible commission, CVs and statements (if desired) to Ikon Gallery, 58 – 72 John Bright Street, Birmingham, UK, B1 1BN, by December 31st, 1992.

Please mark on the envelope 'Film/Video Show': all material will be acknowledged upon receipt, and will be returned by the end of March. **Please do not send master copies.** This exhibition is open to all video, video installation and filmmakers of South Asian origin.

## The Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA)

in London, England is hosting a South Asian Film & Video season next March. The six week programme will feature work by South Asian artists working in the west and will be curated by Ian Iqbal Rashid. A series of panel discussions and lectures will complement the series.

For further information please write: Cinema, ICA, The Mall, London, UK, SW1Y 5AH.

## Call for submissions

Special issue of *LABOUR, Capital & Society/ TRAVAIL, capital & société* Fall 1993

**"Contemporary Perspectives on women and work in South Asia"**

Research articles • Research reports • Interviews • Review essays • Book/film/video reviews • Book notes • Select bibliography •

Deadline: February 15, 1993

Contact for guidelines: Dolores Chew, Centre for Developing-Area Studies, McGill University, 3715 Peel, Montreal, Canada, H3A 1X1

**"Beyond the Boundaries: Exploring and Transcending Our Differences"**

Women's Caucus for Art, National Conference Seattle, Washington February 2 – 4, 1993

Hosted by the Seattle and Portland chapters of the WCA. We are accepting proposals for panels, workshops & events. Contact 206 783.3531

**The India Music Society** presents regular music performances in Vancouver. For more information please contact the Society at 604 872.1400.

## "The Reality, the Challenge & the Opportunity"

The 2nd International Congress on AIDS Asia and the Pacific, New Delhi, India  
November 8 – 12, 1992

Contact: Dr. AN Malaviya, Chairperson, AIDS Congress, Department of Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Ansari Nagar, New Delhi 110 029, India.

Tel: 661.1123 ext. 303 and 029

Telex: 031.73042 AIMS IN/Fax: 91.11.686.2663

**SAWAN** is raising funds for the creation of a South Asian Women's Centre in Vancouver, and welcomes new members. Please call Sunera at 604 435.9420, or Yasmin at 604 669.6241 for more information.

**THANKS TO:** ASAP • Nurjehan Aziz • Himani Bannerji • Basic Inquiry Studio • Brownie and Val at Octopus Books • Cheryl Crawford and the Vancouver Cultural Alliance • Ian Desouza • Ramabai Espinet • The Euclid Theatre • Kala Nidhi Fine Arts of Canada • Ali Kazimi • Khush • Ravi Naimpally • Steve Pereria • Sushma and Jim at IT Productions • Premika Ratnam • Deepti Sharma • Vipin Sharma • Chet Singh • Siren Films • TSAR • Vancouver Folk Music Festival Society • Western Front •

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# Rungh

## The Body Issue

**Identity**  
**Race**  
**Sexuality**  
**Gender**  
**Physicality**  
**Self-Image**  
**Media construction...**

seen through  
South Asian eyes,  
experienced through South  
Asian bodies.

Rungh invites  
your submissions  
for this exciting issue.

We are looking  
for analysis, conversation,  
testimony, poetry, fiction,  
reviews.

**Deadline** November 30, 1992

Our address  
PO Box 66011 Station F  
Vancouver, BC V5N 1L4  
604 876.2086

**From Flesh to Cyberspace**  
Representations of the Body in Popular Culture

## The *Body* Project

October 3 – December 19

**October 3**  
Adrian Walker

**October 9 & 10**  
Kiss & Tell  
Heavenly Alarming Female

**October 16 & 17**  
Lorna Boschman  
Femamatic

**October 23 & 24**  
Debra Pentecost, Sheri-D Wilson

**November 6 & 7**  
Norbert Ruebsaat, Mark Lavalle,  
Jaci Metiever, Hiromoto Ida  
Sherazad Jamal  
co-production with  
Rungh magazine

**November 13 & 14**  
Chris Creighton-Kelly  
co-production with  
Tamahnous Theatre

**November 27 & 28**  
Philip Vitone

**December 4 & 5**  
Lianne McLarty,  
Derek Simons

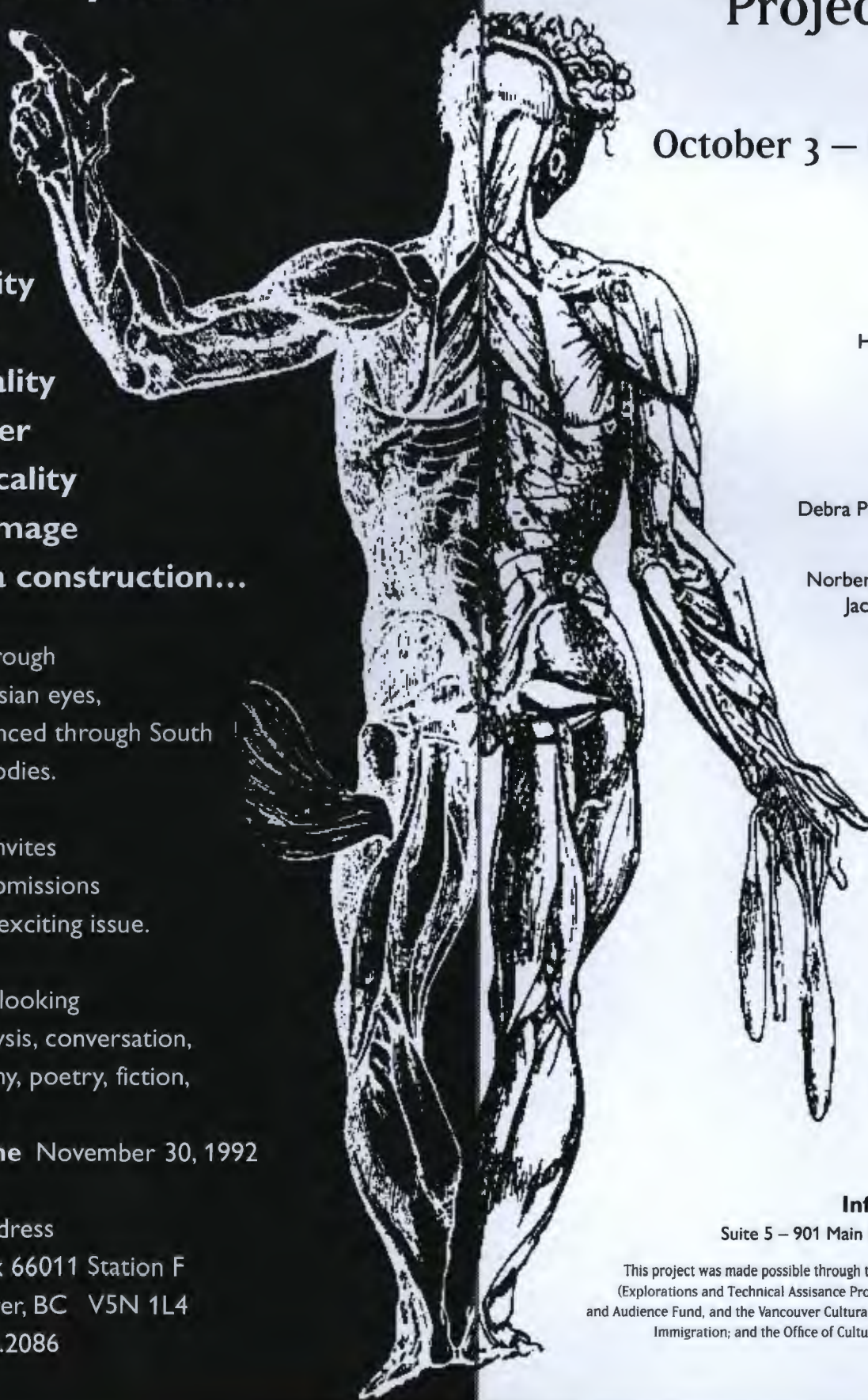
**December 11 & 12**  
Sandra Lockwood

**December 18 & 19**  
Roman  
Onufrijchuk

**Information 681.2855**

Suite 5 – 901 Main Street Vancouver V6A 2V8

This project was made possible through the assistance of the Canada Council (Explorations and Technical Assistance Programs), the 295.3 FM's Young Artist and Audience Fund, and the Vancouver Cultural Alliance; Canada Employment and Immigration; and the Office of Cultural Affairs of the City of Vancouver.





Everything i know about this place



I have learned somewhere else.

(I am the silver lining  
on your fucking cloud)

R14:25:47.12.2

Cover by Gita Saxena