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Spicing up the Screen

By **Imran Suleman** 4 SEPTEMBER 2004 NO COMMENT

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In recent years, South Asians have crept up to Hollywood. Although Hollywood is a term loosely used to describe the movies coming out of the studio-based environ of America, there is an entire universe of cinema inhabited by film-makers who work outside these mega-budgeted big studio productions. Quentin Tarantino's Reservoir Dogs (1992) and his sophomore production Pulp Fiction (1994) were the first independent features to bring about a revolution in mainstream film production. Robert Redford's Sundance Film Festival in Utah was instrumental in bringing this independent revolution to the forefront. With each passing year since, enterprising artists have produced works of independent film-making, on tight budgets, to express their creativity in ways that are both critically acclaimed and financially rewarding. Both South Asian film-makers and performers are quick to immerse themselves in this lucrative trend.

There was a time, not too long ago, when there were hardly any South Asian film-makers in the west. Indians or Pakistanis were cast purely along stereotypical, ethnic lines. From the days of Gunga Din (directed by George Stevens in 1939) to The Party (directed by Blake Edwards in 1968) where Peter Sellers launched his infamous Indian accent, South Asians have been 'exoticised,' until very recently.

That exoticised identity is what many South Asians, who are currently trying to make a name for themselves, have to face everyday. Actress Sheetal Sheth battles this phenomenon daily, and quite successfully, to a certain extent. She is one of the few actresses of South Asian origin in America who has been able to balance her South Asian films such as American Chai and the forthcoming Wings of Hope and Indian Cowboy, with appearances in major American prime time television dramas, such as ABC's Line of Fire, CBS's The Agency, and Lifetime Network's Strong Medicine. "Getting past the stereotype and the type-casting is one of my biggest challenges," says Sheetal, from her apartment in West Hollywood. "Many times, it may be better to turn down specific work that is degrading and non-progressive."

Independent film-making for the South Asian diaspora received a major spur nearly two decades ago. During the mid-80s, My Beautiful Launderette (directed by Stephen Frears in 1984), an independent feature from England, received great acclaim. Written by Hanif Kureishi, a novelist of Pakistani origin, the film depicted Pakistanis as "real" characters within their own surroundings in England, with unique and individual problems. Playing up the tensions associated with race relations, the protagonists of Launderette set themselves apart from the formulaic South Asian characters commonly seen on celluloid.

A few years later, Mira Nair's Salaam Bombay (1988) was released and eventually nominated for an Academy Award. Shekhar Kapur's Bandit Queen (1994) followed and blew audiences away with its depiction of the gritty reality of the life and times of Phoolan Devi. The Indian characters in Bandit Queen, like those in Salaam Bombay, were seen within their own reality, completely bereft of any western actors, yet they played to packed art houses in the west. South Asian performers from the subcontinent were now being noticed for their stark realism, in complete contrast to the goofy, clumsy and backward characters that the western audience had become so accustomed to. All these productions were considered low budget and mostly independent.

South Asian cinema today provides a repertoire of film that tackles a number of genres, including comedy, drama, or musicals. Through dabbling in different genres, South Asian film makers are creating diverse resumes for themselves. Sabiha Sumar, originally from Pakistan, last year released Khamosh Paani to generous international praise for its gripping story set in Pakistan in the late 70s. So compelling was its story that it was bestowed with the highest honour at Switzerland's Locarno Film Festival, in addition to winning an award in its own country – the Kara Film Festival in Karachi.

Actors such as Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah are also taking up meaningful and entertaining projects. Om Puri has appeared in a number of films, including My Son, The Fanatic (directed by Udayan Prasad in 1997) and East is East (directed by Damien O'Donnell in 1999), solidifying his presence as a cross-cultural artist. Naseeruddin Shah managed to play the heart-broken father of the bride in Monsoon Wedding and followed it up as one of the principal characters in the Hollywood flick, The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, alongside Sean Connery.

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Whereas Puri and Shah are established actors in their native country, Aasif Mandvi and Sheetal Sheth represent the new brand of passionate actors who working on projects in the US exclusively. Both, like many of their contemporaries, took up acting as a discipline early on in their lives. Sheetal Sheth was an acting major at the Tisch School of New York University, and spent a semester in Amsterdam concentrating on the arduous "method" form of acting, practiced by the greats such as Dustin Hoffman, Robert DeNiro, and the late Marlon Brando. Mandvi was a theatre student at the University of Florida before he appeared in such films as ABCD (directed by Krutin Patel in 1999) and The Mystic Masseur (directed by Ismail Merchant in 2001). He also had a special appearance in Hollywood hits Analyze This (directed by Harold Ramis in 1999), Spider Man 2 (directed by Sam Raimi in 2004) and a host of TV shows such as CBS's CSI, NBC's Law & Order, HBO's Oz and Sex and the City. His real claim to fame was back in 1998 when he appeared in a one-man show, Sakina's Restaurant, on the New York stage. Mandvi's drive to perform was evident earlier on.

"I can't explain why I wanted to act," he says. "I think being an artist is not a profession you choose, it chooses you." Currently, Mandvi has wrapped up a film with director Robert Altman, co-starring Cynthia Nixon and Michael Murphy. This month, Mandvi will also appear in a raw piece of political theatre titled Guantanamo, to be performed on the New York stage.

Films like American Desi (directed by Piyush Dinker Pandya in 2001), American Chai (director by Anurag Mehta in 2001), and ABCD have quietly captured the imagination of audiences, so much so that now these films are available at Blockbuster and Hollywood Video, two of the largest American video store chains, as well as click-and-mortar establishments like amazon.com and netflix.com. For such non-studio ethnic fare to make it to the mainstream "hot hit" shelves across the United States was almost unthinkable just a few years ago.

Two films released in the span of less than a year were instrumental in helping the market grow for South Asian cinema. Mira Nair's Monsoon Wedding (2001) and Gurinder Chaddha's soccer frenzy, Bend it like Beckham (2002), kept cash registers chiming and jump-started the demand for South Asian fare. Chaddha has already completed her bigger budgeted, cross-cultural, transnational Bride and Prejudice, (scheduled to release in December 2004) and Mira Nair's Vanity Fair, adapted from the Victorian era novel written by William Thackeray, has just hit theatres across America. Chaddha's bride is Aishwarya Rai, while Nair's Vanity Fair stars Hollywood diva Reese Witherspoon (Legally Blonde, Pleasantville) in the lead.

In the post-Beckham and Monsoon seasons demand for such work has grown. Just a few weeks ago, Harold and Kumar go to White Castle (director by Danny Leiner in 2004) opened nationwide, alongside such films as The Manchurian Candidate and Spider Man 2. This was unprecedented in cinematic history – to have a major studio such as New Line Cinema release a stoner comedy with two Asians as heroes. Unfortunately, Harold and Kumar was a box-office disappointment, even though studio executives waited with bated breath to see if the western audience was ready for Asian protagonists. Perhaps their expectations were too high, but given the euphoria surrounding all things eastern, this expectation was not wholly misplaced. "The thing, is we as South Asians are over-achievers," explains Krutin Patel, director of the critically-acclaimed independent feature, ABCD. "Despite our relatively modest census numbers, we have a higher profile that our population as a whole warrants. Thus when a film of such high-profile as Harold and Kumar disappoints, it is partly because there aren't enough of us to make the film a financial success and at the same time, the population as a whole still sees our ethnicity."

South Asian cinema has come a long way since the days of Gunga Din. Bend it like Beckham made nearly 10 times more than its production cost. Yet, Patel observes, it is hard for executives, and perhaps audiences, to move beyond the exotic South Asian stereotype.

Logically, the South Asians who are doing tremendously well are those that have gone beyond their South Asian identity. "Many will succeed immediately," explains Patel. "Those who will succeed faster are the ones who won't limit their art to a South Asian perspective, such as M. Night Shyamalan, or even Tony Kanal (bass player for rock band No Doubt)."

"There is an old joke in Hollywood," says Anurag Mehta, director of the wildly successful American Chai, starring Paresh Rawal, Sheetal Sheth and Aalok Mehta. "The only colour Hollywood sees is green." Mehta, like many of his South Asian fellow film-makers, did his best to balance the expectations set by his cultural background and his dreams. He was a finance and cinema studies double major at Rutgers University in New Jersey. He then interned under James Cameron (The Terminator, Titanic) and also worked on a number of independent productions. Says Mehta: "Right now, the general world-wide audience still has trouble accepting a South Asian in a role that's not a doctor, or an engineer, or a convenience store owner, unless it's an Indian film. Small steps I think will eventually lead to more and more of a presence on television, in movies and in music. After a while people will think nothing of the fact that one of the main characters in a film is Indian. It's already starting in the world of music – there's Tony Kanal. Nobody talks about him as that 'Indian' bass-player from No Doubt. The moment we don't make a big deal about somebody being Indian, then we will truly have arrived on the scene. Until then, small steps."

Perhaps audiences are not yet quite mature or open to fully accept the South Asian ingredient in modern western cinema. South Asian film-makers and artists are doing their best to improve the relationship between the Asian actor and the western audience. Also, most of them are undaunted by the political tension between India and Pakistan and are quite open to Pakistani projects as well.

Says Anurag about the opportunity to work for a Pakistani project: "You know, I find it so funny that if you drive down a street in New York, you'll see so many Indo-Pak restaurants or Indo-Pak grocery stores side by side, yet the two countries always seem to be feuding. In the end, all people are part of the great human race and despite our differences, we're all ultimately governed by the same laws of nature."

Krutin Patel is quite interested in this idea and mentions that Mohsin Hamid's novel Moth Smoke could be translated really well onto the big screen, if handled intelligently. Sheetal Sheth has always looked toward compelling projects no matter which country they originate from. Aasif Mandvi will act anywhere, India or Pakistan, he says, as long as he is paid in US dollars!

Over the past few years, South Asians have been consistently delivering quality projects in what is arguably one of the most competitive fields in the world. Though they have not been able to break into the studio system completely, they have taken the task of luring western audiences to their creative products via the independent route, and that is not always an easy task. "Stop looking at

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us and other 'ethnic types' as merely ethnic," says Sheth. "We should get to a point where our ethnicity should not matter. That's what America stands for and we need to start living it."

Despite the competitive nature of the business, audiences the world over can should expect to see a lot more South Asians appearing in theatre, film and television in upcoming months. With time and the consistent delivery of even better projects, both roles and storylines will become more palatable to the western diaspora.

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