

Bollywood North

An Interview with Deepa Mehta

BY Wyndham Wise

Although Deepa Mehta's father was a successful film distributor in India, and she grew up watching popular Bombay musicals, her university studies led to a degree in philosophy, not film. In 1973, she immigrated to Canada, married producer Paul Saltzman, and together they established Sunrise Films. Mehta proved to be an industrious and talented writer, editor and director of short films and documentaries such as *At 99: A Portrait of Lousie Tandy Murch*, which won a Canadian Film Award in 1974. Leaving Sunrise and divorced from Saltzman, Mehta turned to feature filmmaking. Her films include *Sam & Me*, which won an Honorable Mention at Cannes in 1991, *Camilla* (1994, with Jessica Tandy and Bridget Fonda), *Fire* (1997) and *Earth* (1999), the first two films of a trilogy set in India.

While shooting the third film, *Water*, a mob ransacked the set causing over \$500,000 in damage. Set in the northern holy city of Varanasi, the story of *Water* is about a young widow who falls in love with a lower-caste man. On the second day of shooting, the police watched but did not intervene as about 500 people tore down the set and threw the pieces into the Ganges River. After the attack, the state withdrew permission to shoot the film in Varanasi. At that point, a disappointed Deepa returned home—to Canada. *Take One* interviewed Mehta in her Toronto home just as she received the news that her most recent feature, the romantic-comedy *Bollywood/Hollywood*, had been chosen to open the prestigious Perspective Canada section of the Toronto International Film Festival.

What was the inspiration for *Bollywood/Hollywood*?

Water was over. My effigy was being burnt, and we were receiving death threats. I came back from New Delhi on an Air France flight to Toronto, and for the first time in my life I was thrilled to be coming home. That was the trigger for *Bollywood/Hollywood*, the acceptance that I have a viable home, and that's Canada. It's not that I didn't consider Canada home before, it's just that I felt safe and secure here.

After the heavy melodrama of *Fire, Earth and Water*, was it a relief to turn to something lighter like *Bollywood/Hollywood*?

It took me almost three months to get over what happened to me with *Water*. I felt I never wanted to make another film again. It was so painful, so terrible and dark, and so utterly unnecessary. I was questioning my craft. Suddenly I was no longer just a filmmaker but a controversial filmmaker, which is very scary. Then I heard a story about an East Indian businessman who had gone to the casino at Niagara and was playing the slots. He sat next to a woman. They started talking, and he said, "Who are you?" And she said she was East Indian. An Indian woman alone and in such a place, he didn't believe her. He said, "You can't be," and she said "I can be whoever you want me to be." That story was like a bolt of lightning. It started me thinking about my role as an Indian woman in Canada and how I felt about that.

And of course you use that line in your film. When Rahul (Rahul Khanna) meets Sue Singh (Lisa Ray) in a bar and asks her who she is and why she is there, Sue says, "I can be whoever you want me to be."

That's right. *Bollywood/Hollywood* is the story of a beautiful, gorgeous dot-com millionaire who lives in Canada with his family: his mother, grandmother, sister and younger brother. He is Canadian, but like most of us, he has ties elsewhere, with a different culture and social mores. In this case, it's India, and in that culture he has to get married before his sister can marry. The film is about the pressure, the baggage of a culture that can play upon you even if you didn't grow up there. Rahul ends up hiring Sue, who is a professional escort, and he pretends to his mother and grandmother that she is his fiancée so his sister can get married. He's doing his duty. His father, who is dying in the opening scenes, tells him that sacrifice is the brightest torch of Indian family values. But the film is not about Indian family values; it could be any family values that are passed down from father to son. Of course, it ends happily ever after. It has too. It's a romantic musical comedy!



Lisa Ray as Sue Singh.

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Tell me a bit about your lead, the stunningly beautiful Lisa Ray, who is a Canadian but went back to India and became a supermodel, a television host and now a movie star.

Lisa was born in Toronto and went to school and university here, but she wanted to pursue a career as an actor. Of course, being an East Indian, she couldn't find any work because there is no real work for anyone who is not white in mainstream Canadian films. Perhaps some exotic bit part or secretary. So she went to Mumbai [formerly Bombay] and became an absolute supermodel, sort of like a Cindy Crawford of India. She's huge and very well respected, with over half-a-million Web sites in India. And now she has started to do movies. She's very choosy about what she does and her first film [*Kasoor*] did extremely well in India.

Can she sing and dance?

Very few Indian actors can sing and dance, everything is lip-synched with backup singers and there is a choreographer to take care of all the dance routines. Lisa's not bad. She's a good dancer and she has made it very big in Bollywood. So when I was looking for a beautiful woman as a lead for my film, I saw the one she was in and thought she was very good. I had no idea she was Canadian.

You also use Ranjit Chowdhry again, as Rocky, the family chauffeur who moonlights as a drag queen cabaret singer at night.

He's been in every film of mine. He now lives in New York and is making a living as an actor. Nine years ago Ranjit knocked on my door in Toronto because his mother knew someone I knew very well in India. It was minus 20 and he was wearing sneakers. He had just come from Bombay and he said he wanted to work with me. He was very nice and a very talented young man. I told him I was working on this story, which eventually became *Sam & Me*, but I was having trouble with the script. So he said, "I'll help you write it."

He's a great comedic talent. I just look at him and start laughing. He's been in all my films and was in Mira Nair's *Kama Sutra*. He thinks the two great nemeses in his life are Mira and me. We adore him.

Apart from Ray and Chowdhry, you have two legends of Indian cinema, Moushumi Chatterjee, who plays the mother, and Dina Pathak, who plays the grandmother.

Moushumi Chatterjee, who plays Rahul's mother, grew up in Indian cinema and at the age of 17 became one of the biggest heroines of Bollywood. Actually, she played with Rahul's father, who was a megastar of Indian film himself, a huge matinee idol. It was very interesting for her to play Rahul's mom. Dina Pathak, who plays the grandmother, has been around forever, in over some 600 films.

And she quotes Shakespeare.

That was my idea, and it's in the script. Whenever something comes up, the grandmother will quote a line from Shakespeare. As someone who writes the script, you can do whatever you want. That's the thing that really made me excited about doing *Bollywood/Hollywood*, writing the script. I felt I could do as I pleased and go the distance. It was very relaxing. It's my love song to Toronto. After what happened with *Water*, I felt I could do anything I wanted and just use my imagination to take me wherever I wanted to go. That was very important to me. After *Water*, I just wanted to make a happy film about my hometown.

Tell me, what did happen with *Water*? Why did it happen and, in fact, did you expect it to happen given the reaction to *Fire* when it was released in India?

Not at all. Before you can start filming in India, you have to give your script over for approval by the Ministry of Information. They look at it and approve it or not and make sure you stick to the script and don't shoot something else.



Rahul Khanna and Lisa Ray



The Family

They actually send a liaison officer to the set who stays with you all the time to make sure the film is being made as submitted. So our script had been approved, and we had a liaison officer on the set. We had no clue about what was going to happen next. We were over there for six weeks in pre-production and we had just began to shoot when all hell broke loose.

What happened?

We only got two days of shooting complete. One of the representatives of the local government said to me—and I guess that is one of the reasons I wasn't very smart about this—he expected the revenue from the distribution rights of the film in his province for himself. I said, "you must be crazy." What I should have said was "fine." It would have made my life a lot easier. The next day things started to role and trouble began. It fit the right-wing agenda of the local government, attacking people who they perceived to be anti-Hindu. Our set was a soft target.

Are you Hindu?

Of course.

And that didn't make a difference?

It did in a funny way. The head of the fundamentalist Hindu organization, whom I met after the set was trashed, told me, "Just thank your lucky stars you were not on the set at the time or you would be dead now."

However, the theme of *Fire* is a forbidden lesbian relationship and *Earth* is about the violent separation of Indian and Pakistan in 1947. *Water* is about a child widow and her affair with a teenage priest. It's not as if your films haven't attracted controversy. Surely this would have been a red flag, especially such films directed by a Hindu woman.

It's not about being a Hindu. It's a normal thing for anybody who is a questioning human being. I'm not saying a bright human being or a feminist human being, I'm saying a questioning human being. India is a very well-educated country with a fabulous culture and tradition. I think it's the economic, political moment in time, and we were used as an example. If someone deviates from the norm then they will be punished. It happens elsewhere. It's not just India.

Will you restart *Water* and finish it some day.

I will, there's no question about it. If there is one film I want to make, it's *Water*.

What do you account for the current interest in Bollywood filmmaking? *Lagaan* and *Monsoon Wedding* both did very well at the box office in North America.

Like most things in this world, it's economics. I think distributors are waking up to the fact that here is a huge expatriate population of East Indians, whether they be Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, South Africans or West Indians. It's a huge market that needs to be served. There are now enough East Indians with expendable income in North America and elsewhere. This is my theory.

I understand all the music in the film is original.

The music was composed by an Indian composer, Sandeep Chowta, who is quite well known, and it's all original. What I did was give him song situations, something I had never done before. When Sue and Rahul fall in love, we had a song situation or when Sue reveals who she really is, that is a song situation. He wrote the music for the situation, and I hired a lyricist to work in tandem with him and me. All this was done before we shot because it had to be lip-synced. It was an incredible experience. My director of photography was having a ball because he had never done anything like this before.

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You have said despite its romantic-comedy surface layer, *Bollywood/Hollywood* contains many of the themes you have been working with in the past, especially in your trilogy.

If you think of *Sam & Me*, *Fire, Earth*, even *Water*, all of them were about where does one's own voice stop and the baggage of tradition begin. It's the conflict between the individual voice and the voice of tradition. I have been exploring that in my films and even though *Bollywood/Hollywood* is a romantic comedy, it still contains these themes, these conflicts. I don't sit down to write a script with these ideas in mind, in as much as they always seem to come out in my films. I write and I direct, but I don't think there is a certain way to be, or a certain way to project yourself. Me, I'm a bit of a homebody. I like cooking and gardening and being with my daughter. I've grown up all my life with movies, but I would be happy not to make another one. If an idea has life, if I have something to say, then I will make a film, but I don't make a film so I can make another. My father, who was a distributor in India, told me there were two things in life you will never know about: one is when you are going to die and the other is how a film is going to do at the box office. When you grow up with that kind of philosophy, you never say I'm going to make this film so I can make another one if this film does well. You don't have a clue how a film is going to turn out.

It has been said that Bollywood films are based on old Hollywood song-and-dance musicals recycled for a different audience and a different culture. So, really, what you are getting is reality twice removed.

I quite agree. *Bollywood/Hollywood* is *Pretty Woman* twice removed! Films began screening in India around 1932. So what Indian filmmakers did was to adapt Hollywood musicals and comedies with their own storylines to create films that were pure entertainment. Entertainment in India is not



Deepa Mehta

just something that makes you laugh, it's what engages you emotionally. So in India we took that art to an extreme, and the films are about love, romance, tragedy and large gestures. Everything is melodramatic, larger than life. The influences are Frank Capra, Billy Wilder and the films of Gary Grant, Katharine Hepburn and Jimmy Stewart. But everything is over the top. So Bollywood is a combination of ancient stories with classic Hollywood, and 90 per cent of the films, whether they be comedy or tragedy, have song and dance in them.

There was a perception in the 1950s and 1960s that the only Indian filmmaker of worth was Satyajit Ray, who made films that were the antithesis of these films.

That's true. But at that time what he was doing was no different than what Kurosawa or Bergman were doing at the time. There was a movement toward greater psychological realism in cinema, and Ray was part of that, which is very different from what is happening now.

It was Rudyard Kipling who famously said, "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet." It seems that this is no longer the case. The cultures have become intermixed.

It's not about what is mine anymore. It's about what is ours. Let's take a bit of this and a bit of that and mix it up and make the best concoction that you can. That's what *Bollywood/Hollywood* is all about.

TAKE ONE