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all stills from *Camilla*, clockwise from top left: JESSICA TANDY, MAURY CHAYKIN, BRIDGET FONDA

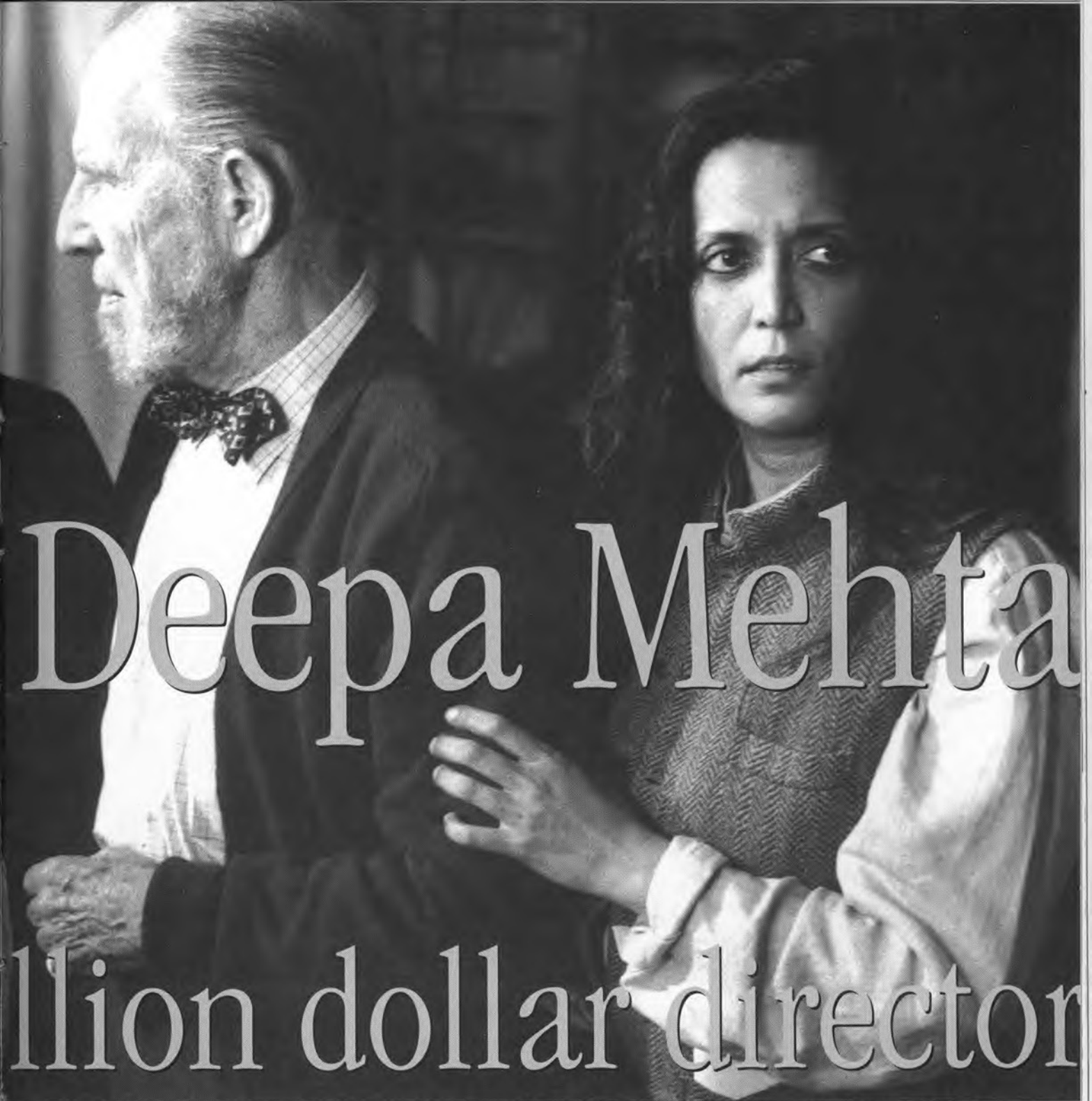
FROM THE relatively small *SAM AND ME* in 1991 (a very good year for Canadian cinema), to the \$11 million *CAMILLA* (via George Lucas and the *YOUNG INDIANA JONES* series), director Deepa Mehta has come a long way in just three years. Virtually ignored by the Canadian critical and production establishment (it received not one Genie nomination that year), *SAM AND ME* scored well at Cannes and the international festival circuit. The film eventually came to the attention of American mega-producer George Lucas and Simon Relph, co-producer on Louis Malle's *DAMAGED APRIL*. Relph is the co-producer, along with neophyte Canadian producer Christina Jennings, of *CAMILLA* (a Canadian-British co-production), the largest budget ever given to a Canadian woman director.

t1: What led you from *Sam and Me* to *Camilla*?

mehta: Christina Jennings, the producer, approached me with the script. She loved *Sam and Me*. She gave it to me, I read it and we met. I gave her my take on the script. We had a very intense conversation about it and the next day she asked me to direct. I said I would love to. I loved the script.

t1: What is the story of *Camilla*?

mehta: The story is about an older woman, Jessica Tandy, who lives in Georgia with her son (Maury Chaykin). She is a musician who had her career debut at the Winter Garden in Toronto. She meets Bridget (Fonda) who comes on a holiday and rents a small house on their property. She comes with her husband, played by Elias Koteas. She is a musician as well, but has very little self-confidence. Then she meets Camilla, and



Deepa Mehta

llion dollar director

and ELIAS KOTEAS at Toronto's Winter Garden; JESSICA TANDY, HUME CRONYN and director DEEPA MEHTA; BRIDGET FONDA; JESSICA TANDY

Camilla becomes her cornerstone. It's through her that she gets confidence, and they both decide to travel to Toronto. They take off to hear Brahms, which is what Camilla used to play. They head for the Winter Garden. It's the story about their relationship and what happens to them, what they learn, and the people that they meet on their way.

t1: How did the casting come about? You

managed to score two of the leading icons of American film and theatre, Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn, as well as the granddaughter of an American acting legend, Henry Fonda.

mehta: Christina had been working on the script for some time. It's loosely based on her sister's story. She had been working with Paul (Quarrington), and they sent the script to Jessica through a friend. She really liked it and said, "Whenever you want to do it, let

me know." When Christina got to the point where I was in and the script was ready, then Jessica said she would do it.

t1: What was it like working with her?

mehta: Jessica was terrific. I think the best screen actors are the ones who have a theatrical background. Her discipline is amazing. There were times when I asked her if she wanted to rest, and she would say, "No, darling, it's fine." It's 40 degrees, and



Camilla: JESSICA TANDY and BRIDGET FONDA

the crew is dropping like flies, but Jessica is right there!

t1: Hume Cronyn has a small part in *Camilla* as well.

mehta: The two of them together are perfect, great fun. They really care for each other, you can see it. They're also very critical of each other's performance, which is also fun to watch. It's very moving seeing them together. Once Jessica came on board, I did the rest of the casting. I knew I wanted Bridget. I think she is just wonderful. She has a very innocent quality about her, a certain purity in her being. This kid is going to be very, very big. She's just reaching it. She's a very dedicated actress, very serious, a very intelligent actress.

t1: Ranjit Chowdhry is also in the film. He co-wrote *Sam and Me* with you, didn't he?

mehta: I did the story for *Sam and Me* and Ranjit did the screenplay. He's fabulous in *Camilla*, just wonderful. He plays a Georgia State cop.

t1: Does this make sense?

mehta: Oh, absolutely! I remember the first thing I was asked, "Are you sure there are Indian cops in Georgia?" I said, "Yes, there are," without being sure, but I was positive. There has been an incredible immigration from Uganda of Indians to the southern United States. I, with my assistant, spent three days on the phone to the Georgian police, and we finally found two cops who were East Indian. Once we had

that, we knew we were totally realistic.

t1: How did the post-production go?

mehta: I wasn't very thrilled with the first editor we had. And that's not because he wasn't a nice man, we just didn't see eye to eye. A brilliant editor, but just not right for me. No one imposed him on me. I met him. I approved him, but when we started working together, it just didn't work. Not for any other reason than we wanted different things for the film, for the material. So, once he left it was just smooth sailing.

t1: Any reaction from your American distributor, Miramax?

mehta: No, not really. They looked at me at a board meeting, and said what's wrong? I said I'm not having much fun with my editor.



ducer of *The Singing Detective*), saw *Sam and Me* at the London Film Festival. He called me up, and asked if I was interested. He had heard about me from Mira (Nair), who produced and directed *Mississippi Masala*. So, I asked him to send me the script, which I quite liked, but it needed a lot of work to be done. They brought me to meet George Lucas, who asked me what I thought of the script, and I said it needed a lot of work. I was not going to do it just because George Lucas was asking. I told him what I thought, and left thinking I'm not going to get this job. But they phoned the next day and I got it.

t1: Did they take your advice on the script?

mehta: Oh yes. This is what's wonderful about them. They do a lot of research and they know what you want to do. When they hire a director, they're behind you 100 percent.

t1: You have come a long way in a very short period of time. Any reflections on going from small budget Canadian features to George Lucas, *Indiana Jones*, and the \$11 million *Camilla*?

mehta: It just happened. First I thought, when I heard about the budget for *Camilla*,

should be able to do whatever they want to. I don't want a bunch of cultural bureaucrats giving me money to do film just because I'm coloured. I'd rather that someone likes what I'm doing, or is moved by the script. Not for someone to look at me and say our quota is still open for a woman of colour.

t1: When you walk on set, a short brown woman, no one asks who you are?

mehta: No, but the only thing about being short is that every time I look through the camera I need an apple box! I'm not the kind of director who carries a whip and wears black leather. I know as a director, if I don't know what I want that day, then I'm in trouble. That's what's it's all about.

t1: Have you developed a style as a director?

mehta: It's very important to me that I have a whole chunk of time before the shoot to rehearse the actors. Another is that I work with the writer. To take the script from the written page to one that is going to be shot is another pass, because it is different. I work with the actors and I choose my key crew myself. My preparation is more emotional. I don't do shot lists or story boards, I deal with

a passion for painting a canvas where my actors can live

They told me to get someone I could work with. They were very supportive.

t1: This was a large production, by Canadian standards.

mehta: It came to \$11 million by the time it was finished. Where the money went to was above the line, for the stars, but we did have the money for a longer shoot. That's what's great about it. But a big budget or low budget film... if the passion is there, the intensity, the integrity, that's what's important.

t1: Between *Sam and Me* and *Camilla*, you did some work for George Lucas and the *Young Indiana Jones* series.

mehta: That's right. It was about young Indiana Jones going to India. Apparently Rick McCallum, the series producer (also the pro-

ducer of *The Singing Detective*), saw *Sam and Me* at the London Film Festival. He called me up, and asked if I was interested. He had heard about me from Mira (Nair), who produced and directed *Mississippi Masala*. So, I asked him to send me the script, which I quite liked, but it needed a lot of work to be done. They brought me to meet George Lucas, who asked me what I thought of the script, and I said it needed a lot of work. I was not going to do it just because George Lucas was asking. I told him what I thought, and left thinking I'm not going to get this job. But they phoned the next day and I got it.

t1: You were born in India and now are a Canadian citizen. Do you think the same opportunities would have afforded themselves to you if you remained in India?

mehta: Absolutely. There are some fabulous Indian women making films, making the kind of films I like. I think the opportunity I have living here is making western films and also Indian films. I could have done Indian films there, but I'm not so sure I could have moved back and forth with the ease I find myself doing now.

t1: *Take One* recently devoted an issue to filmmakers of colour and multiculturalism as it is expressed in mainstream Canadian film culture. In the past, you have been critical of official multiculturalism.

mehta: I still am. I think to label people and then expect them to perform within that label is unfair. People of colour or whites

the emotional content of the script. There is a certain style that I'm trying to evolve, which is choreographing the scene as opposed to going in from the wide shot to the medium shot to the close ups and the reverse. That's how I prepare with my DOP, and since I have worked with the actors, it's very easy to know which way they are going to move, which lenses to use. The colour palette of the film is very important to me. I always think in colours. I did not want any blue in *Camilla*. There is no blue. Blue is very cold. So nights are very black, as they are supposed to be. I hate that fake moonlight. So yes, I have a style that is my own – a passion for colour, a passion for setting, a passion for painting a canvas where my actors can live.

t1: *Camilla* is to be released shortly, any nervous butterflies?

mehta: My father is a film distributor in India. When I was very young, about ten years old, a film of his wasn't doing very well. I said, "Daddy, why don't you pick up films that do well. Wouldn't it be nice to be rich?" And he said, "There are two things in life that you don't know about. One is when you are going to die and other is how a film is going to do." And it's true, you just don't know ●