

Production photos: Dilip Mehta

**Shabana Azmi, left and Nandita Das: "There is no word in India for their lesbian relationship and so their love exists beyond the barriers of language—and therefore beyond reality."**

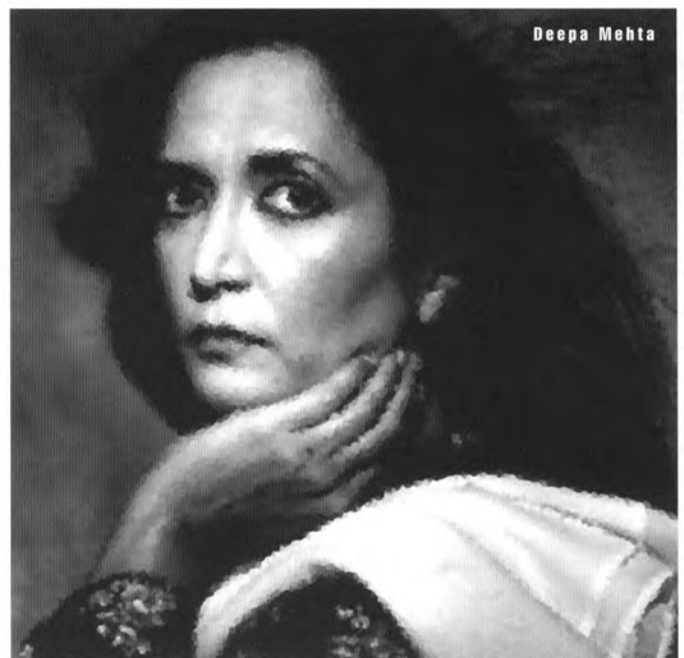
# Deepa Mehta's TRIAL BY FIRE

By Pamela Cuthbert

**"Evolution is not a force, but a process; not a cause, but a law."**

**Evolution, although accelerated in some parts** of the world, has no fundamental basis in either geography or ideals. It ploughs ahead like some preprogrammed tank that stops for nothing, crushing old standards and clearing the path for shiny, new ones. With the coming of the millennium, evolution has a new speed: breakneck, and change appears to be swooping around the world at an unprecedented rate.

Deepa Mehta's new film, *Fire*, captures a moment in this frenzied time, holds it up to the light for a good look, and offers a meditative pause to contemplate the ongoing battle between transition and tradition. Under Mehta's watchful eye, the domestic drama of one household in contemporary New Delhi is observed. The story could be the stuff of folklore and conceived just about anywhere: two sisters-in-law, neglected by their husbands and oppressed by a patriarchal culture, find not only comfort but love in one another's company. They are both wives in arranged marriages who cook and clean in their husbands' family household while taking care of the elderly mother-in-law. Their world dictates that it's all work and little play—all in the name of duty. When they discover and then confess a mutual desire for pleasure, these women begin to blossom. Everything takes on new meaning and purpose. The fact that this new love is not platonic and develops into a steamy, sexual affair, yanks



Deepa Mehta

photo by Debra Doffing

# FIRE



Right: Kulbushan Kharbanda as ASHOK.  
Below: Ranjit Chowdhry (MUNDU) holding  
Kushal Rekhi (BIJI).



the folklore analogy right out of the picture and then—bam!—suddenly, their affair is ripe for trash TV.

True, the essential elements of *Fire* could be used to construct a titillating, naughty tale, but in the telling there is nothing but grace and compassion. Young Sita (Nandita Das) is the bride of Jatin (Jaaved Jaaferi). On their honeymoon, as Sita looks on with admiration at the Taj Mahal—a symbol of eternal love—Jatin is so detached that she is compelled to ask him: “Don’t you like me?” It’s downhill from there. As the newlyweds attempt to converse, the first topic we are privy to is the movies. It’s a brief exchange: he likes kung fu, she likes romance—like the Taj Mahal.

When Sita enters her husband’s bedroom in his family home for the first time, she throws off her sari, tries on his jeans, turns up some Indo-pop and bounces around the room like some fame-seeking nubile on MTV. It’s as though, once out of her traditional dress, she’s transformed; underneath that constricting tangle of beautiful cloth is a woman longing to be free and adored. In her new home, above the fast-food and video-rental family business, Sita shares the daily duties with her sister-in-law Rhada (Shabana Azmi) and a servant, Mundu (Ranjit Chowdhry). Rhada’s husband Ashok (Kulbushan Kharbanda) and his ancient mother, Biji (Kushal Rekhi), rule the roost with outdated maxims. Biji is as silent as the dead (but no less imposing) and Ashok recites the dogma of a religious zealot: “Desire is the root cause of all evil,” he claims and he lives by that rule.

Describing the creative process of *Fire*, director-writer Mehta (*Sam and Me*, *Camilla*) draws a picture of herself in the winter of 1995, when she stared out over a frozen lake from a cottage window in Ontario and envisioned the colours of *Fire*: the orange, white and green of the Indian flag. It started to snow. Mehta was born and raised in India and has lived the last 20-odd years in Canada. With *Fire*, she has returned to the familiar territory of home with new eyes. Throughout the film, she constantly weighs the pros and cons of the familiar versus the unknown; it’s a daily grind for anyone remotely cognizant of the passage of time and its connection to inevitable change. In *Fire*, the “familiar” is a stack of dominoes, waiting for a gale force like Sita, to blow it down.

“I’m so sick of all this devotion,” says Sita to Rhada on a day of fasting (the women don’t eat for a day so their husbands will have long lives). “Maybe we can find choices.” Choice is a commodity that’s hard to come by: Mundu is a servant, Biji incapacitated, Jatin, a man married against his wishes, and Ashok a slave to his swami. For Sita and Rhada, choice may appear within reach, but it is still elusive. Sita says there is no word in their country for their lesbian relationship, and so it remains that their love exists beyond the barriers of language—and therefore beyond reality.

Mehta places conflict front and centre in her gentle films. *Sam and Me*, which gained an honourable mention for the Camera D’Or at





the 1991 Cannes Film Festival, pitted two cultures against one another, and *Camilla*, a big-budget commercial film featuring the final screen appearance of Jessica Tandy, which Mehta regrets ever beginning, played upon the great gulfs of miscommunication between the sexes and generations. The experience of making *Camilla*, however difficult, was not a complete waste. Mehta says the two films not only prepared her technically for *Fire*, but also helped to launch her into the dual role of writer and director. "I wouldn't have done it with *Sam and Me* because I think it would have been too much. You lose objectivity. You need feedback and that distance is important the first time around."

The spark of *Fire* came from Mehta's upbringing: arranged marriages—such as those of Mehta's mother and aunts—are the source of much loneliness for young wives. "It just happened," Mehta says of the screenplay. "I started off thinking of a house in Delhi and who inhabits it. A woman comes into an arranged marriage, and I thought of a sister-in-law, of course, because there are lots of them around. There are joined families all across India. Then it was a matter of the interaction between them and [defining] what their husbands were like. It developed from characters rather than a story itself."

Mehta says she "returned home with this film" (something she had thought of doing after *Camilla*), as a place of retreat. She says, at that time, she "considered never making another film." But as it turned out, it was a matter of not making any compromises. Mehta was stung by the distributor when she was denied the final cut on *Camilla*. When she set out to make *Fire*, a combination of government cutbacks and two very effective executive producers, meant the film could be made with private money and without a distribution deal in place. No ties to government agencies meant she could cast and shoot wherever her heart desired, and there was no question that place was India.

Mehta also knew whom she wanted to cast in the lead role of Rhada—Shabana Azmi (*City of Joy*, *Madame Sousatzka*), an esteemed Indian actor and activist. Azmi was interested in the role, but the Sapphic content gave her pause, says Mehta, "because of her work as an activist. She thought that people would start looking at her in a way she didn't want them to. However, she overcame that. First, because she realized that she was an actor before she was an activist; and second, because it was a role that really appealed to her." It took Azmi two weeks to decide. Mehta was concerned, but never anxious, she says. "I was very Indian throughout this process of making *Fire*. I thought about things like karma and fate, which I never have before because I'm not very religious, and my upbringing was not very religious, or very philosophical for that matter."

While karma reigned for Mehta, the environment she creates on the screen is a haven for rebellion. Mundu is the most reckless of them all. Instead of caring for Biji by playing a religious movie on the family VCR, Mundu opts for abuse and watches porn videos in front of her. She sits

immobile and helpless as he shakes and gyrates his way to orgasm in front of the tube. Jatin rebels by renting porn videos to customers in the family shop and carrying on an affair with his mistress, Julie. He is not as imaginative a rebel as Mundu, but neither is he as pathetic. Duty is equally loaded. When Jatin tries to do his "duty," by having sex with his new wife, he only succeeds in making her bleed—something she is ashamed of. When she tries to do her "duty"—by sharing the domestic responsibilities with Rhada—Sita winds up falling in love and tearing the family apart. It is her desire that sets the naive Rhada on fire and nearly destroys her. Mehta has created a story that, against the odds, is not a man-bashing saga. Her interest is contemporary India and the struggles it faces, and not exclusively the long-neglected rights of women. There is also a strong sense of love in the film—the love Mehta has for her home. It is evoked in the lush, musical score that ranges from weightless, celestial voices to pounding drums, and in the sensual textures of the film's tactile palette.

Whether *Fire* is a Canadian film or not is a moot point. The fact that the stars are Indian precluded any government subsidy, but the Toronto International Film Festival stepped in to declare the film homegrown as the opening night title of Perspective Canada. Once again, the ongoing quandary of what defines Canadian cinema rears its ugly head. Industry members were saying, at Festival time, the chances of *Fire* getting a Canadian distribution deal were next to nil because of the absence of a government envelope to tap (no public production money equals no public distribution money).

However, Mehta is not concerned; she is focused on other things. She has called the experience of getting private financing for *Fire* "liberating" and she says of her next film: "Unless I get an actor who is Canadian or British—somebody who is a male white actor or a female white actor—the chances of getting funding are close to zero. I would love to get public money if I meet the criteria. But, let's face it, government money is not going to last."

With or without it, Mehta is proceeding with a trilogy that begins with *Fire*. *Earth*, set in 1947 in Northern India, follows the division of the sub-continent when the British leave as reflected in the home of an upper-class family in India. *Water*, a film set in the 1920s on banks of the river Ganges, tells the story of a young girl sheltered in a home for widows who range in age from 11 to 90.

Mehta is writing *Earth*, and after favourable reviews at the 1996 Toronto International Film Festival for *Fire* (it tied for third place with Carroll Ballard's *Fly Away Home* for the Air Canada People's Choice Award), as well as a standing ovation from a full house at the New York Film Festival's Lincoln Center (which accommodates about 1,200 people), Mehta is confident she will move ahead. "The point is: if you want to make films, you'll find ways of making them." ■