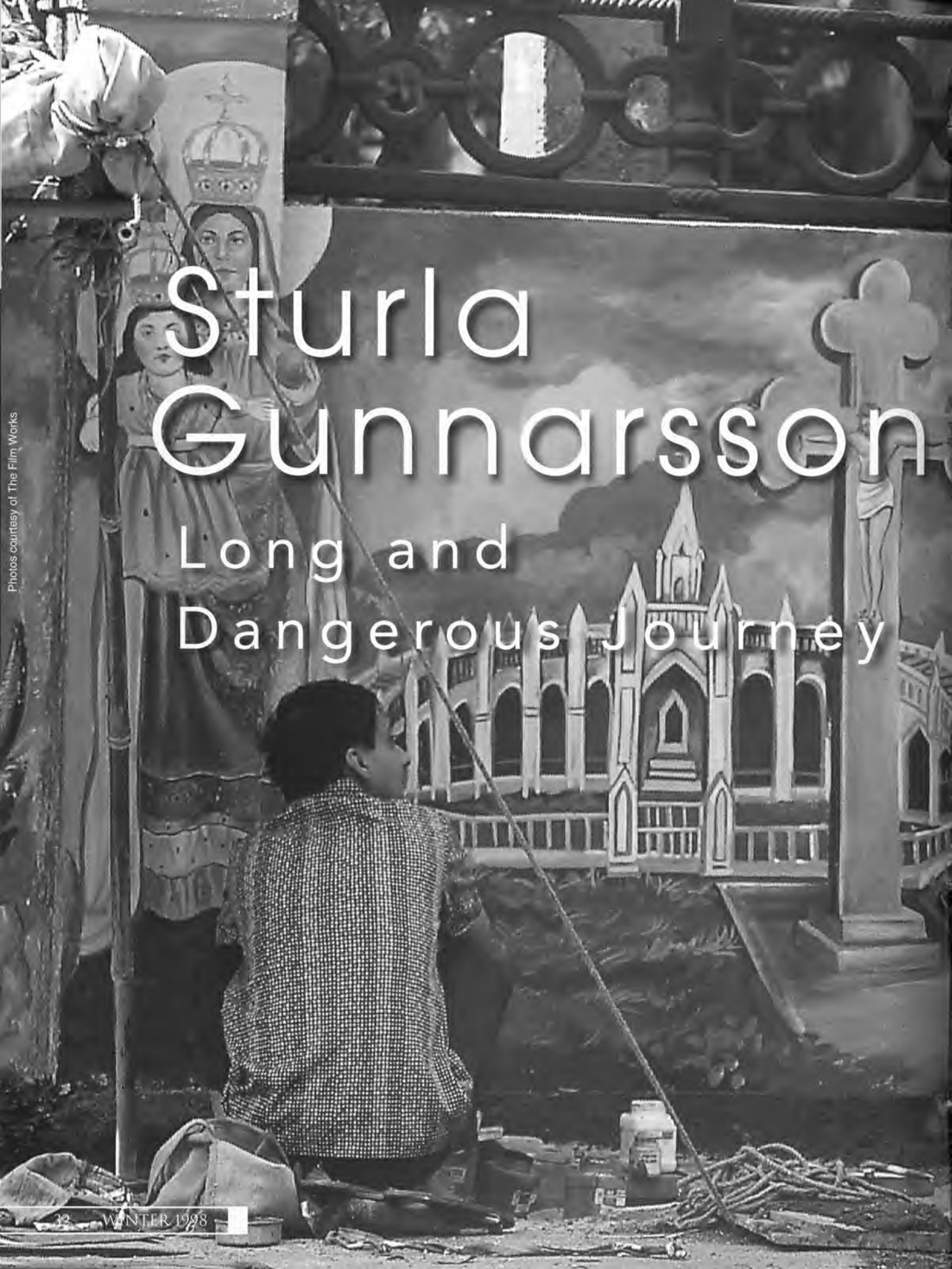


Sturla Gunnarsson

Long and Dangerous Journey





By Cynthia Amsden

Some directors like the moral high road. Some like the low road. Others prefer the road less taken. Then there is Sturla Gunnarsson. He prefers to bushwhack his way through territory where no director would voluntarily set foot. And making Rohinton Mistry's 1991 Governor General's Award-winning best-selling novel, *Such a Long Journey*, into a feature-length film required just that—taking film crews into parts of Bombay that even the local police categorically refuse to patrol; shooting a script which required constant babysitting by the Indian government's liaison officer; and working in an environment where sectarian violence can interrupt a shooting schedule at any moment.

But being a cinematic sherpa is hardly new to Gunnarsson, having tiptoed through the political land mines of El Salvador for his fictional political thriller, *Diplomatic Immunity*, and dodged the corporate executioner in his Oscar-nominated feature-length documentary, *After the Axe*, and squared off against the trepidatious politics of South Africa for his love story, *Gerrie & Louise*, a documentary that opened at the 1997 Toronto film festival and headlined at the 1998 Human Rights Watch International Film Festival. His career is adorned with awards, including a Genie for *After the Axe*, a Grand Prix from Cannes for *Diplomatic Immunity*, a Prix Italia for *Final Offer*, a Gemini for a *Scales of Justice* episode, as well as a host of other nominations.

His latest nonfiction feature, *Such a Long Journey*, stars Roshan Seth (*My Beautiful Laundrette*) as the honest bank clerk, Gustad Noble, Sam Dastor as Dinshawji, his loyal co-worker, Om Puri (*City of Joy*, *The Ghost and the Darkness*) as Ghulam, the man who draws Gustad into a world of political intrigue and Naseeruddin Shah as Jimmy Billimora. Supporting performances by relatively unknown actors such as Soni Razdan (*Une Vie plus tard*), who plays Gustad's wife, Ranjit Chowdhry (*Sam & Me*, *Camilla*) as the pavement artist and Kurush Deboo (*Percy*) in an astonishing performance as Tehmul, the idiot "Scrambled Eggs," who comes to symbolize a ritualized sacrificial lamb, all contribute to a superlative ensemble performance.

There is a small, over-used joke among the makers of *Such a Long Journey* which focuses on exactly how long a journey the film took to completion. The financial excursion, which began in 1993, led producers, Paul Stephens of The Film Works (*The Arrow*) and Simon MacCorkindale of Amy International Artists (*Stealing Heaven*) through cuts to the production budget at the Ontario Film Development Corp., Telefilm Canada, the many variations of the cable production fund, the Harold Greenberg Fund and the CBC on the Canadian side; while the British leg of the tour offered an excursion of two political postures of British Screen (in terms of attitudes about Canadian directors) and BSKyB funding, and then there was UTV in India.

This was an arduous trek, but certainly not an unusual one for a Canadian producer. Even the passage of the director's chair, which began with Deepa Mehta, then Waris Hussein, and ultimately ended with Gunnarsson's name on the canvas back, was not a unique process. However, the shoot, the location and the politics of India were like nothing either Gunnarsson, Stephens or MacCorkindale could have foreseen.

Ranjit Chowdhry, left, and Roshan Seth, right, in Sturla Gunnarsson's *Such a Long Journey*



Above: Ranjit Chowdhry

Below: Kurush Deboo as "Scrambled Eggs"



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Bombay is a kaleidoscope. "It takes a while to find your eyes there, because it's so intense and it's so populated. There's no place where you can step back. You're always inside it," Gunnarsson explains. "I needed to create a little oasis where the personal interaction takes place, but in the context of this much larger, extraordinary bustling city." Mistry's novel, and Sooni Taraporevala's (*Mississippi Masala, Salaam Bombay*) ably adapted screenplay, is set in the India of 1971, a modern India, a distinctly urban India, with the central character of Gustad Noble, a Parsi who works as a bank clerk.

"Everyone told us, 'You can't do it, it's impossible,'" Gunnarsson recalls, well after the fact. With a population of 16 million people, located in an area the size of Manhattan, the chaos factor maxed-out to the point where surrender was the only way to achieve equilibrium. "You can't own a street, you can't control traffic, even if you get permission from one level of government to do anything, there's half a dozen others and then there's the Goondas (gangster warlords). You can't actually nail anything down, everything happens, it just doesn't happen the way you expect it to. You sort of just have to get use to it and roll with the punches. It would take us three hours to get from our downtown location to our hotel in the suburbs, but if we went in the middle of the night it would take us 30 minutes. The pollution is so bad that visibility is maybe down to 10 cars ahead of you. On the median between the northbound and the southbound lanes, which is 15 feet wide, are rows of cardboard shacks that people are living in. If they find wood it becomes a fire; if they find something, it becomes a pot to cook in. The children have no clothes but they'll use a stick and a rock and play cricket in the middle of this. That's Bombay, this incredibly difficult city with this extraordinary human spirit that lifts and rises up to make you feel you've been blessed to have just been there."

Preproduction was an eight-week stretch and principle photography lasted "f-o-r-t-y d-a-y-s and f-o-r-t-y n-i-g-h-t-s," said Stephens, smiling beatifically as if he had developed the patience of Job. But this was a posteriori calm, because the crew had been through the fire and survived. Two of *Journey's* scenes had been shot in the thieves market and the brothel district, both known as "shoot-on-sight" security zones, which are controlled by local gang lords. On-duty policemen were a luxury not available on this set. Gunnarsson recalls, "There is a tremendous amount of politics involved in just getting in there. Cameras aren't in there, westerners aren't in there. As soon as we showed up, the crowd starts building and building. Om Puri walked into the crowd and spoke to the people. He's a big star in India and he sort of just asked them to disperse and let us do our work. The same thing happened in the red-light district. Om used his celebrity. Everybody knows him, and he used that to help us to deal with big-crowd situations." Gunnarsson continues in a manner that indicates the stories are without end. "One day we had to rewrite a scene, recreate a location, in a matter of a half an hour. My ideas went out, the crew gathered up a couple of taxis and a couple hundred people, and created a location that didn't exist. No preproduction, no planning, they just went out and got people. People in Bombay are absolutely movie mad. It's the movie capital of the world."

Violence in India has a spontaneous quality which cannot be factored into a shooting schedule. On the day Gunnarsson was to shoot at the Central Bank of India, a bomb exploded in Bombay. This, combined with the visiting prime minister of

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France, plus the fear of terrorist activity, caused all public institutions to be closed down. "India is a place where sectarian violence can erupt at any time. When you see these people living cheek by jowl, all the different religions and backgrounds, and the pressure to survive, it's a miracle that they are not in a constant state of riot."

Local colour was enhanced by a political perception that western media have cast India in a negative light (or, at the very least, as a bomb target) over the last few years. Consequently, authorities exert creative control which borders on censorship. "This was the only foreign feature film that was approved for production in India that year. You need to get your script approved, and you need to have a government liaison officer with you when you are shooting. Unfortunately, like any government initiative, when it becomes bureaucratized, it takes on absurd proportions." This sensitivity became a pointed issue when the script focused on the scandal of a senior Indian official making off with funds designated for financing the Bangladesh war effort.

The essence of Mistry's novel plays out on multiple levels. Coming from a wealthy family, Gustad Noble has suffered a reversal of fortune and now works at a menial level in a bank. In times of distress, he retreats into the comforts of his past and builds walls around himself to protect him from the pain of the present. He tries to redeem some of these comforts by projecting his hopes onto his eldest son, Sohrab, only to be confronted with the young man's own need for independence. The theme of independence and control ripples out to Gustad's surrounding environment which includes eccentric inhabitants of his apartment, the Khodadad Building, an extraordinary location that likens itself to a somewhat rundown Victorian Tower of Babel, and the wall outside which had become a public urinal and a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

When Gustad's daughter falls ill with malaria, he takes control by hiring a pavement artist to paint holy figures on the wall, turning it into an impromptu shrine. Interwoven throughout this narrative is the character of Jimmy Billimora, a retired Indian army major who disappeared from Gustad's life when he went underground as a military agent in support of Bangladesh's war of liberation against India's archrival, Pakistan. With the arrival of a letter, Gustad is drawn into Billimora's plot to funnel government monies into a secret bank account, under the auspices of the old friendship. This triggers a challenge to Gustad's understanding of friendship and loyalty leading him into the dangerous back streets of Bombay and the company of men who view life with more gravitas. Ultimately, the plot circles back to the family dynamic and resolution.

The multilayered story was so complicated that Gunnarsson was not even inclined to fall back on the exotic setting, as do most films about India. "I think that the exotic is really the icing on the cake. At its core, the story is so human and universal that I didn't feel there was a stretch required for North Americans to engage with the characters. The exotica is there. It's textural, but it's not the main thrust. I felt that through Gustad, his son and his family, we could enter into the world of Bombay, the world of India, and for that matter, the world of the Parsi community in a way that wasn't challenging. All those aspects of the story are just there, they are not in the foreground. What's in the foreground is the story of this little man."

For a director who has established himself in the area of documentaries, Gunnarsson finds himself seduced both by



The Noble family with Roshan Seth (centre left) as Gustad and Soni Razdan (centre right) as his wife, Dilnavaz. Ultimately, the plot circles back to the family.

the spirituality and cinematic richness of India, but also by the cornucopia of possibilities of humanistic stories for the feature-film venue. In his past projects, such as *Diplomatic Immunity* and *Gerrie & Louise*, weaving the personal narrative into a factual history has been his leitmotif, but with *Journey*, the balance has shifted and history has become more of a backdrop. He has experienced "the dream of the story," and the nonfiction world has loosened its hold on him, permitting him to move into that dream. Just prior to the Toronto festival, Gunnarsson explained, "I'm not thinking about any more documentaries at the moment." ■