



What do Srinivas Krishna and Vic Sarin have in common? Only celluloid, some roots in

India, and a wise resistance to any accepted wisdoms when it comes to race. Sarin is best known as one of Canada's best cinematographers, but he's long been a filmmaker in his own right as well. In 1989, he directed *Cold Comfort*, the first agency-funded feature to be directed by a person of colour. Sarin was Director of Photography on

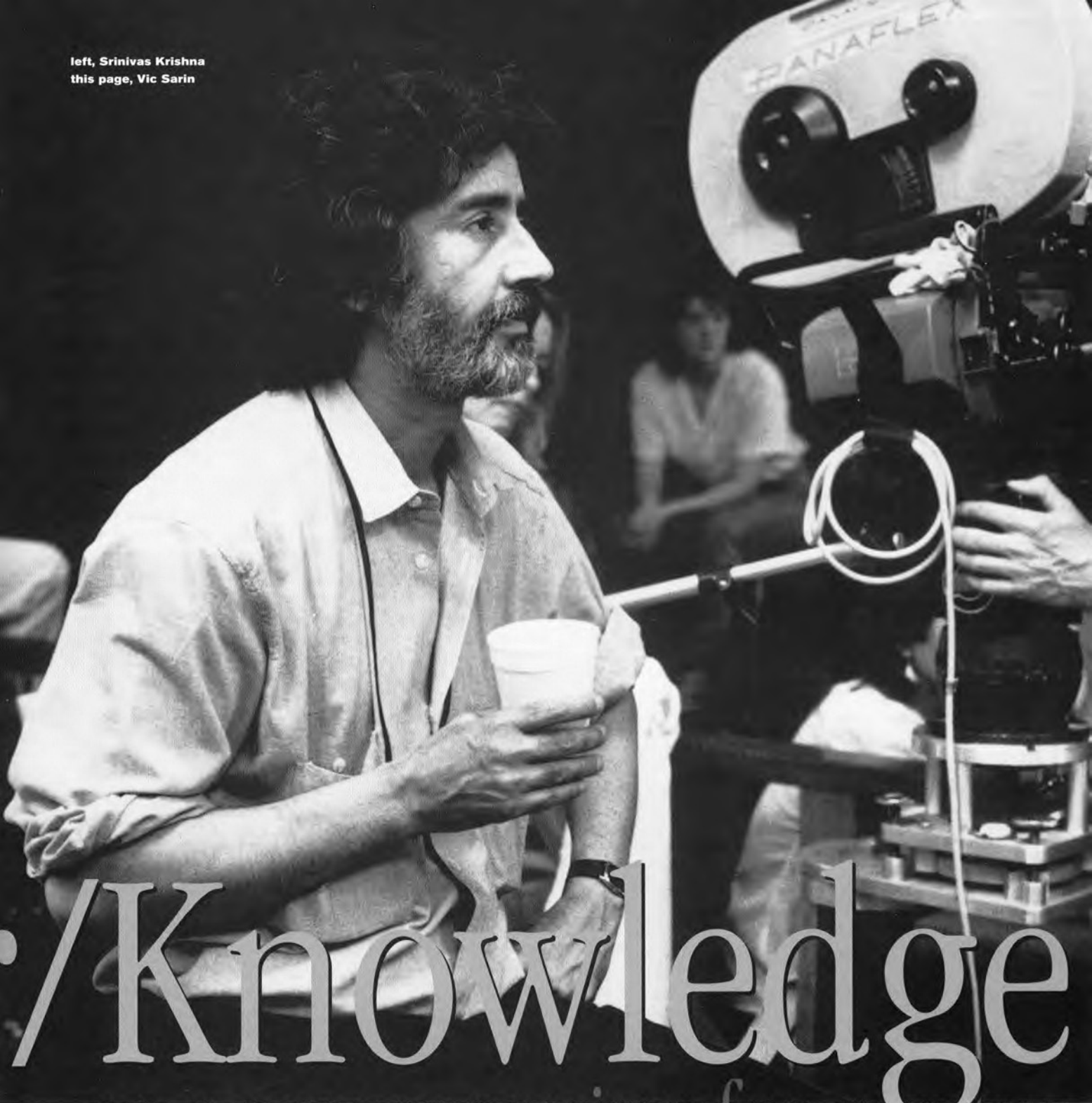
Harvey Crossland's *The Burning Season* (1992).

In 1991, Krishna came along and unsettled the nation with *Masala*, a heady stew of Bombay musicals and youth culture angst which signalled a change in what race means in Canada. In a week when Sarin battles in development purgatory, and Krishna

prepares for the upcoming shoot of his new film *A Promise of Heaven*, we sit them down with moderator Hussain Amarshi – former director of Toronto's Euclid Theatre and the Kingston International Film Festival – for a bracing talk about things usually left unsaid.

AMARSHI: You are very different filmmak-

left, Srinivas Krishna
this page, Vic Sarin



/Knowledge or a new meaning for agency

ers at different stages in your careers and with very distinct talents, styles, sensibilities. You have little in common, yet the reason you are here today is –

SARIN: Because we make movies!

AMARSHI: Because you make movies, and you are, in the local lingo, called filmmakers of colour. So what is it, to be a filmmaker of colour in Canada?

SARIN: Well, I was born in Kashmir but I grew up in Australia, which was supposed to have a White Australia Policy. But it never affected me on a one-to-one basis, because since I was a kid I always believed that the day God made you, he made some choices right there. He made somebody Black, somebody brown... I mean he's the guy to blame. After you've said that – that's what I am – it

doesn't worry me one bit. I have to move on.

I had really never had any kind of a problem where I felt that I was different. But as I'm getting older, I feel it much more, partly because I've learned a lot more, and I've also started to see the hypocrisy and the vacuum in some areas which I never sensed before.

AMARSHI: Krishna, how do you conceptualize this idea of being a filmmaker of colour?

KRISHNA: Well, I didn't realize I was a filmmaker of colour until after I made *Masala*. There was a panel at the Festival of Festivals – Michelle Mohabeer organized it – and she called me about it and said, "Do you want to be on this panel, it's about colour and cultural appropriation, voice appropriation." In all honesty, I wasn't so familiar with that kind of language to begin with. I'd been in the U.S. working in very isolated circumstances.

So when I got to that panel, I realized I was a little out of my league, and I didn't know exactly what the consensus was. Essentially, I'd wanted to meet Richard Bugajski, who was also on the panel. And then I saw the description of the panel in the Festival catalogue, and it said, "This is an amazing moment for Canadian cinema, because for the first time in its history, we have two filmmakers of colour represented." I freaked! I thought, "You called me a filmmaker of colour and you didn't even ask my permission to print that!" (Laughter) Little did I know what I was saying. It never really dawned on me that I, in fact, was a person of colour. I thought it was some political organization or some kind of new word or coinage

ness. I feel that they will not give you the same kind of attention, even if you've done over a hundred films now, or the hundreds of documentaries that I've done now. They still do not have that kind of respect for you. You have to prove yourself all the time, every time.

So what's happening for me now is I'm turning back to the old roots. I was there (India) last month. It's not like I'm going to embrace everything, but I have some ideas that I want to make films about. I'm seeing the good things there now as well.

I was on a more artificial level before, in one sense. Also, everything was camouflaged here, just like death is camouflaged when you walk into a funeral home – "ahhh, it looks so beautiful." It's not like the old country where you take your mother in your arms and you bathe her and you clean her. You feel death much differently. It's the same thing on every other level here.

Essentially, what you have to do is talk the same language. That's what's missing for me. See, I come from a visual background. I talk in pictures, I talk in emotion, my background is an emotional background, where I was born. People don't talk about this here. I

mean, I just had a three-hour session with the CBC. They're talking all mind!

KRISHNA: I think that you just experience it (racism) in a more rarefied way. That's essentially what Vic is saying, and it's entirely true.

A lot of my background is similar to Vic's, in that I trained

as a painter and then as a cinematographer, so it was only later that I arrived at this. I'm interested in storytelling, so I learned some of that verbal discourse in order to get money to make a film. I still find it extraordinarily painful.

The question always arises "Does everybody go through this?" Everybody does go through the same hell, trying to get money. How much of that is in fact racist is very hard to discern. I think you do experience it, but it's very rarefied, it's very heightened.

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KRISHNA: I remember when I showed you my script of *Masala* before I shot it –

SARIN: Yes, I remember.

KRISHNA: Either you told me, or someone said you had said, "Oh, this script, it's not going to be produced. It's too Indian, no one's going to put money into it."

SARIN: No, no. I said to you it was very ethnic because all the inside jokes would be hard for people to understand. But don't forget, in all fairness, you did a lot of work on it after that.

KRISHNA: No, it was the same script.

SARIN: No, the one I read, you did some

more work on it. You brought this whole thing when you walk with the jet, and the flashbacks –

KRISHNA: No, no, no, no. That was there from the beginning. It went through many, many rewrites, but its essential stock and take on things didn't really change.

SARIN: Well, of course I'm wrong –

KRISHNA: You know what? I don't think you're wrong. In fact, there's a queasy problem with that film for a lot of people: "What kind of film is this?"

I don't know how to answer the question, "Is this an Indian film, or is it a Canadian film? Are you Indian or Canadian?" In fact, it never occurred to me to settle on any of those names to attach to myself, but this is what I've had to reckon with. Within official cultural circles, I think the film has been very, very difficult. For example, at Telefilm, there's been an incredible failure to represent this film internationally as a Canadian film.

AMARSHI: Placing yourself in this kind of context, do you relate to similar cultural developments in the U.S. and England – with the works of Salman Rushdie or Rohinton Mistry or Mira Nair? Or do you see yourself more related to, say, Bruce McDonald or Patricia Rozema or Atom Egoyan?

KRISHNA: I see relations (with other diasporic Indian artists), but there's still a real paucity of work, especially in cinema. So it's a vague feeling of "yes, but..."

For example, Mira Nair's interests in cinema are probably very different from mine, same with Deepa Mehta's. My interest is more formal, and also more narrative, a certain narrative experimentalism that comes out of the avant-garde of the 60s. Yes, we are a part of the Indian diaspora, but there are other things that make us different.

SARIN: I'm at the stage where there are some films that I want to do, and it has nothing to do with being Indian, or Oriental or anything. They're going to be good films because they'll touch people one way or another. I prefer people to take me as Vic, the filmmaker.

AMARSHI: If you were just starting out to make your first film now, knowing what you know, how would you go about it?

SARIN: I would drive the whole project myself. If you're passionate about something, and you want something badly, you'll have to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Knock on doors, I don't care what it takes, but you can't sit until you've got it done. There's no easy road for any of us.

KRISHNA: The other thing I would emphasize is never give up control over your project. Incorporate it and be 100 percent shareholder of your own company. And don't ever let anyone have that. Stick to your guns, and make sure your guns are really big ●

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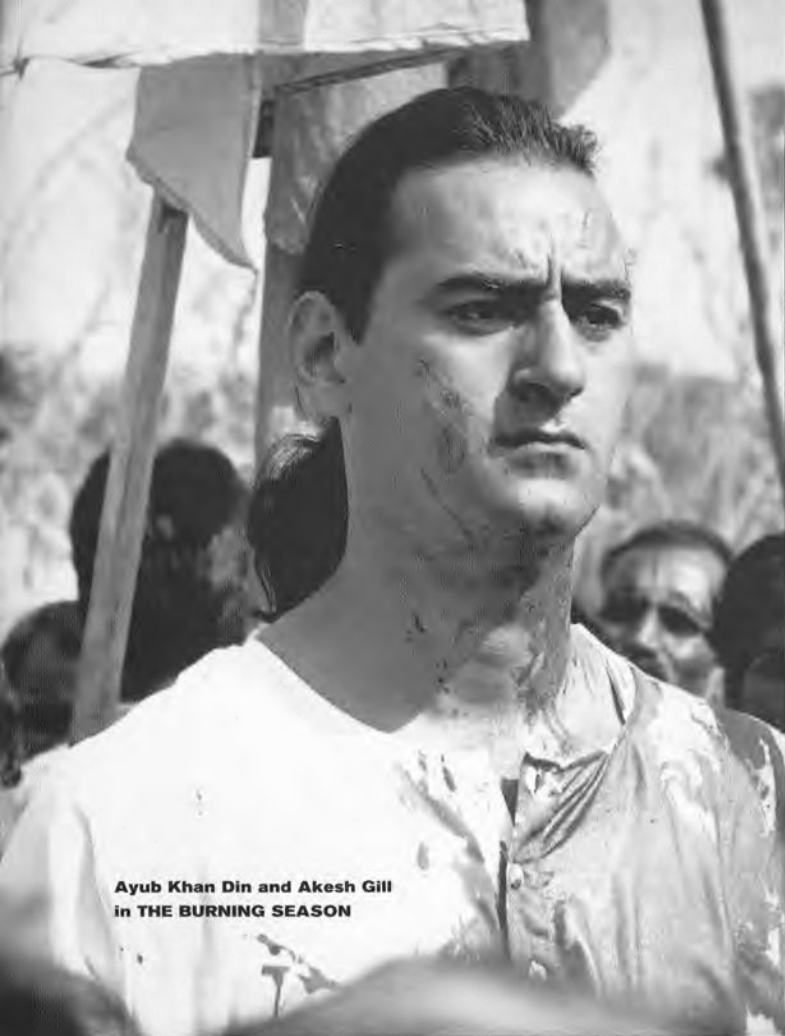
that was developed to represent somebody. I didn't quite think it was me. This sounds a bit fatuous, but it's not meant fatuously. I don't mean to be an ingenu about it; it really was surprising.

As far as I was concerned, I was just a filmmaker – very much obsessed with my own interests which really weren't political, weren't even about race; they were much more about images, more po-mo kinds of concerns that were thrown into a narrative context.

After that panel, I thought I'd better read up on this stuff. I got a lot of books, and now I know what people mean. I'm able to talk about it a little bit. However, I still don't see myself as a "Filmmaker of Colour," as though that somehow differentiates my work from white people who make films.

AMARSHI: As people who are different from the mainstream here, do you, as pioneer filmmakers, have the luxury to be divorced from the exclusions, racisms and hypocrisies that other people of colour experience?

SARIN: It's a very subtle thing. I'm realizing that in Canada nothing is said out front, but the undercurrent is very strong. It's polite-



Ayub Khan Din and Akech Gill
in **THE BURNING SEASON**



Sakina Jaffrey and Herjit Singh Johal
in **MASALA**

