



Ismail Merchant: "Mogul Producer"

by Gerard Raymond

Twenty-six years ago, Ismail Merchant, then a twenty-four year old Indian-born graduate of New York University, travelled to Los Angeles, with a fourteen minute film he had produced in New York. He styled himself as "Mogul Producer" and carried a thick folder of press cuttings which he had generated about himself. His main worry was that he would be besieged by newspapermen when he stepped off the train in California. As it turned out, there was no one to greet him and he soon found himself working at a clothing store and doing another part-time job in the classified ads department of the *Los Angeles Times*.

In between these jobs, he found time to convince a film exhibitor to play his film in a local cinema house; that film, *The Creation of Women*, went on to be nominated for an Academy Award in the short subject category.

This March, *A Room With A View*, a subtle and ironic Victorian comedy of manners, was nominated for eight Oscars including Best Picture of the Year, and won three awards. It was produced by Merchant Ivory Productions (MIP), a company that Ismail Merchant and James Ivory, a Californian who was raised in Oregon, founded shortly after Merchant's first trip to LA. They approached Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a German Polish author who had been educated in London, and proposed making a film of her novel *The Householder*. She had, by then, moved to Delhi with her Indian husband, and agreed to write the script. Thus began a cosmopolitan partnership that is perhaps the most eclectic and the most long-lasting in cinema history.

The Householder (1963) explored the cross-cultural influences of the East and the West, a theme which surfaced in many other subsequent Merchant/Ivory/Jhabvala collaborations, like *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), *The Guru*

(1969), *Bombay Talkie* (1970) and *Heat and Dust* (1983). MIP films have a distinct literary flavor. Henry James's *The Europeans* (1979) and *The Bostonians* (1985) are part of their non-Indian based output. Working on small budgets, Merchant Ivory Productions has taken risks that major Hollywood studios are unable and unwilling to take. For the most part, MIP scripts are written by Jhabvala while Ivory directs. The range of its output reflects the tastes of the three individual collaborators, but as Ruth Jhabvala once said, "Ismail is really the first touchstone." She explained, "... we really have to convince him it's something we like. Then he says, yes, but he'd like this better or that better, or why can't we do this or that. And then only when he's in the mood will he go out and get the money, which is the hardest thing of all. We have to really charge him up."

When "charged," Ismail Merchant has demonstrated an extraordinary talent for persuading the most diverse group of people to invest their money in projects that were almost certainly non-commercial from the start. In the true tradition of independent film production, Mr. Merchant has observed that "there is no hard and fast rule" when it comes to sources of finance. He has been known to successfully raise money from corporations that have never invested in film production before. His first money raising attempts apparently took place when he was working as a guide to Indian delegates at the United Nations in 1958. He quickly learned to make contacts and use them, and turned the UN dining room into a platform for raising funds for his projects.

International fund-raising is a full-time occupation for Ismail Merchant. He has found time, however, to direct two films himself. According to James Ivory, Merchant rarely stops working

and makes his films privately as a "form of relaxation." *Mahatma and the Mad Boy*, a twenty-three minute film, was made in 1972 and premiered in London in 1974. The film depicts a day on Juhu Beach in Bombay, where the activities of Westernised Indians are observed by a teenage beggar boy. The outcast boy who is considered "mad," steals and scrounges food with the help of a pet monkey and conducts philosophical conversations with a statue of Mahatma Gandhi. It was almost ten years later that Mr. Merchant found time to make another film. *The Courtesans of Bombay* premiered in London in 1983. This seventy-three minute semi-documentary was devised by the Merchant/Ivory/Jhabvala team and bears some resemblance to MIP's *Autobiography of Princess* which Ivory directed in 1974. At the core of the film is the Pavan Pool community of singers and musicians, one of the last enclosed courtesan communities in India. As a boy, Merchant had heard the courtesans and had become enraptured and his intention was to make a film about them. The fictional story starring Saeed Jaffrey is woven into the documentary material that was shot.

Ismail Merchant's next bout of "relaxation" is scheduled for 1988. MIP has announced that he will direct the film version of Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* which is set in India. The book has been described as a "sensuous Song of Experience" and tells the story of an Indian teacher who is totally smitten by poetry. He gives up everything in order to be close to a man he believes to be a true genius, only to be disillusioned in the process.

With the critical and public success of *A Room With a View*, MIP is attracting the sort of talent and high powered starts that independent filmmakers cannot normally afford. The perception that MIP is devoted to quality and is not afraid to pursue ventures not always in keeping with the supposed interests of the general audiences, is responsible for this trend. Mr. Merchant says he "feels very great" about the success of *Room* but proudly claims that his films have always been of "exceptional quality" and have received "enormous support from the critics." MIP has developed "our audience over a quarter of a century" while the general audience "has been asleep" he claims. This fall MIP will release *Maurice*--based on E.M. Forster's posthumous novel, directed by Ivory, although in this instance, not scripted by Jhabvala. The trio will team together for their 25th anniversary production--a film aptly entitled *Three Continents*. It is based on Jhabvala's novel about a pair of American twins and their Indian guru and is set in India, England and the U.S. They will also work together on *An Innocent Millionaire*, an adventure story based on the novel by Stephen Vizinczey. MIP also has plans to foster the work of new directors, just as in the past it has been responsible for introducing new acting talent to the screen. *The Perfect Murder*, a whodunit by Harry Keating, is currently under production in Bombay and will feature the directorial debut of Zafar Hai. A film version of John Masters's *The Deceivers*, directed by Nicholas Meyer, is also scheduled.

According to the forty-nine year old Ismail Merchant, the popular, commercial recognition that his company has finally achieved after twenty-five years will not change anything: "We will keep doing the same things we have done over the years."

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* *Mahatma and the Mad Boy* (1972) and *The Courtesans of Bombay* (1983), the two MIP films directed by Ismail Merchant himself, will be screened at THE 1987 ASIAN AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL. See enclosed Festival schedule for date and time.