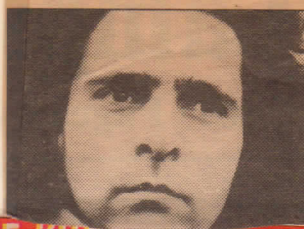


SEX, DRUGS AND NEW SHOES

Hanif Kureishi says
'London Kills Me' is
about capitalists:
Young drug dealers.

48

'LONDON KILLS ME' WRITER / DIRECTOR HANIF KUREISHI



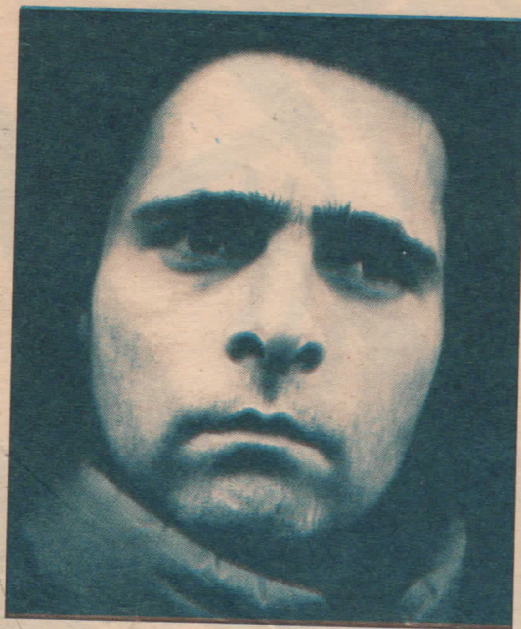
Showing the Down Side of Thatcherism

By Gerard Raymond

HANIF KUREISHI is not very happy his new film is getting a lot of attention. But moviegoers are, of course, interested in "London Kills Me," the latest from the 37-year-old Anglo-Pakistani, best known for his cheeky and controversial screenplays for "My Beautiful Laundrette" and "Sammy and Rosie Get Laid." This time he is the director as well as the writer, and he is keeping an uncharacteristically low profile.

Last month when we spoke, Kureishi was about to undergo a back operation. Resting on a couch in his West London flat, he explained that the hype in Britain for "London Kills Me," which opened last year's London Film Festival, got out of hand, and the film got too much exposure. "For me, it was like writing a short story, a little thing," he says, speculating that the film would have been more suitable for television.

But seven years ago, Kureishi relished both the adulation and outraged reactions to "My Beautiful Laundrette," a gay love story about a young Pakistani man and a white punk set in London's Pakistani community. Kureishi cheerfully fueled the controversy, playing up his bad-boy image in interviews.



Kureishi on London: 'I have everything I need here.'

vigorous film industry, it was hatred for the Iron Lady that inspired the high level of creativity of that period. Kureishi acknowledges that Thatcher was a stimulating influence because she was an ideologue. "She didn't hide what she believed in and that made us think about what we believed in as well. She was so upfront, it was wonderfully exhilarating for us to engage with her."

But the resurgence of British cinema has faded in the wake of the country's economic fallout, and "London Kills Me" was one of only a handful of British films made last year.

While Kureishi's previous screenplays, as well as his first novel, "The Buddha of Suburbia," dealt with themes of race, identity and migration, he describes "London Kills Me" as "just a story about a boy trying to get a pair of shoes." In the film, a 20-year-old amateur drug dealer hunts for a pair of shoes that will enable him to get a job as a busboy in a restaurant.

It was in the streets of the Notting Hill neighborhood of London that Kureishi found his inspiration for "London Kills Me," a young man and his friend who dealt drugs on the streets. The writer spent time with the drifters and the squatters on the streets, developing a series of vignettes loosely structured around the young dealer's search for the shoes and his ambition to go straight. In the course of the movie the young man meets various colorful characters, hanging out in a derelict squat with a ragtag bunch of street denizens known as the "posse."

When filming, Kureishi kept his script open for improvisation, and even worked a scene around a cameo appearance by his friend, author Salman Rushdie. Kureishi says that Rushdie, who is still under a death sentence from the Ayatollah, is "brotherly" towards him as a writer and had long expressed a wish to appear in one of Kureishi's films. But on the day

"When you are young you want your work to be controversial," he admits, smiling. "It had never happened to me before — that I could say something and people would write [it] in the newspapers. When that happens you rather enjoy it."

Now Kureishi says he is very much aware of the dangers of personality becoming more important than the work. "You become a kind of exhibition rather than an artist. It was one of those things which happened in the Eighties, and I think you have to resist that."

"Laundrette" and "Sammy and Rosie" were very much of the '80s, as they rode the crest of the New Wave that revitalized the British film industry. Both films implicitly attacked Margaret Thatcher's high capitalist doctrine by exposing the underbelly of British society in the '80s. "London Kills Me," Kureishi explains, is about the "bum end" of Thatcherism, where the kids dealing drugs on the streets offer a metaphor for capitalism. In the film, the kids who sell the drug Ecstasy have bought into the same market-driven dreams that kept Wall Street and the City of London humming in the latter part of the last decade.

The financial euphoria of the '80s buoyed British cinema as well. But while Thatcher's policies created an environment for a

Rushdie was expected on the set, the press got wind of it and the author opted out.

Kureishi says he leapt at the chance to direct his own script when Stephen Frears, who directed both "Laundrette" and "Sammy and Rosie," was unavailable. "When you are a writer you are never in charge of anything," Kureishi says, "but running a movie set you have to deal with a lot of other psychologies and egos." As much as he enjoyed directing, however, he missed the freedom of working without budget constraints. "It is difficult to be creative when it is costing so much money," he notes, adding that a writer needs to occasionally follow a wrong path to be creative.

"All writing to me is a kind of experiment, to try and learn how to write, and to find out what you want to say," says Kureishi. He is currently adapting "The Buddha of Suburbia" for BBC television.

Kureishi is confident London will continue to feed him new ideas for his writing. "I like it here because I have everything I need — there are bars, cafes, book shops, record shops, people to sleep with, theater, cinema, drugs." Our interview over, Kureishi asks if I have enough material. Then with a touch of his old impish self, he grins and says, "If not, just make it up!" / ■

Gerard Raymond is a free-lance writer.