

FILM

Interview

Foreign affairs

Writer Hanif Kureishi's controversial home life finds its way into *My Son the Fanatic* By Gerard Raymond

The characters created by British screenwriter, novelist and playwright Hanif Kureishi tend to fall headlong into new experiences, usually generating chaos in their wake. "I'm riveted by change," Kureishi says. "You keep falling in love with things and it fucks you up." Such is the case with the young gay Pakistani and his street-punk boyfriend in the writer's Oscar-nominated 1985 screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette*, and with the young man who discovers sex, punk rock and fringe theater in Kureishi's first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), which he adapted into a 1993 British TV miniseries. Kureishi's latest film venture, *My Son the Fanatic*, follows suit, telling the tender tale of an affair between a Pakistani immigrant and a prostitute.

Unlike the cocky young lads in Kureishi's previous work, however, *Fanatic's* protagonist is a middle-age father, Parvez (Om Puri). A taxi driver in a blue-collar town in northern England, Parvez is baffled by a sudden change in his teenage son's behavior. He discovers that the boy, Farid, hasn't succumbed to drugs as he initially feared, but has instead swung in the opposite direction and embraced a strict fundamentalist branch of Islam. The son brands his father a bad Muslim, accusing him of having become corrupted by the West.

Kureishi, whose father is Pakistani and whose mother is English, says he became curious about Muslim fundamentalism after a visit to Pakistan in the early 1980s. By 1989, with the Iranian fatwa against his friend and fellow writer Salman Rushdie in full swing, the issue had taken on a more terrifying aspect. Kureishi says that he was surprised at how zealous some British-Pakistani youth had become. They had turned against sex, music, drugs and going to clubs—"normal young stuff"—and were following Islam in

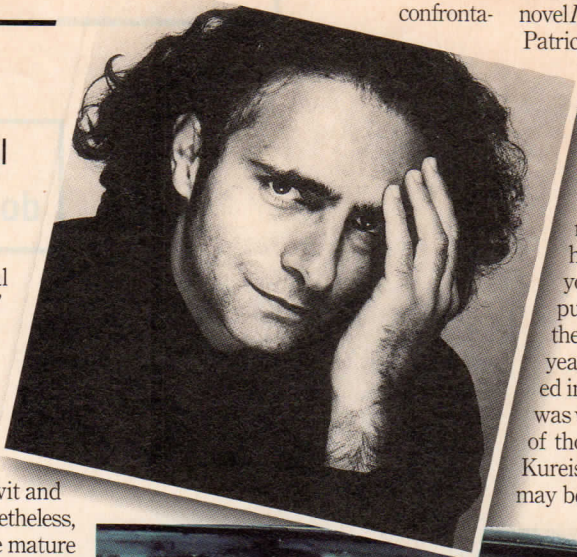
a "rather medieval and absolute way," he notes.

Always the provocateur, Kureishi examines this dichotomy with typically incisive wit and offbeat humor. Nonetheless, *Fanatic* has a more mature and darker aspect than the sassy *Laundrette* or its follow-up, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987). "That was early '80s stuff. It was hip, and it was cool," says Kureishi about the two earlier films. "I don't understand kids in the way I did when I was 25 or 30. I'm amazed when I see *Laundrette* because I don't remember the person who wrote the film. But at the same time, I see stuff that I am still thinking about, like fathers and sons."

Familial bonds—"the deepest and most passionate" of relations, Kureishi observes—are a recurring theme in his work. But until now, he had written solely from the younger generation's viewpoint. The shift in perspective in *Fanatic* was motivated partly from wanting to try something different, but also because life has been catching up with him. "I had just become a father for the first time [when I wrote it]," explains the 44-year-old Kureishi. His first version of *Fanatic* was a short story for *The New Yorker*; he further explored the subject of liberalism versus fundamentalism in a subsequent novel, *The Black Album* (1995). Feeling he hadn't "squeezed everything out of it," he went on to write the current movie.

Beyond the father-son conflict, *Fanatic* also examines the love between an oddly matched couple. In the course of his job, the married Parvez strikes up a friendship with a

local sex worker, Bettina (*Hilary and Jackie's* Rachel Griffiths). As Parvez and Bettina's relationship blossoms, everything around them goes to pieces. Kureishi's inspiration for their affair came from a newspaper article he'd read about confronta-



DRIVEN TO DISTRACTION Screenwriter Hanif Kureishi, above, explores the topsy-turvy world of a cab-driving Pakistani immigrant (Om Puri, below left) and his newly religious son (Akbar Kurtha, below right) in *Fanatic*.

tions between prostitutes and poor Asian families who lived side by side in an impoverished area in Birmingham, England. "Obviously, they had many things in common," remarks Kureishi. "They were poor, they were proletarian, and they had no hope." The unlikeliness of Parvez and Bettina's relationship intrigued Kureishi. "These two people suddenly find that they have things to talk about, and this transcends the differences between them. I think it makes them both feel alive in ways they hadn't before. But of course it disturbs everything else around them."

That Kureishi's protagonist follows his heart regardless of the consequences might strike some audience members as selfish, but Kureishi is unafraid to explore that theme. Parvez's wife, for instance, is completely sidelined by her husband's twin concerns: his son and his newfound love. "There's always

somebody left out, isn't there?" says Kureishi. "Her story could and should be told, perhaps not by me." But the issue of a man's leaving his wife for another woman is more than just a passing plot point for the writer. It also comes up in his recent novel *Intimacy* (soon to be a movie by Patrice Chéreau, the famed French theater director who made *Queen Margot*) as well as in his latest play, *Sleep with Me*, currently at London's National Theater.

And it has a personal connection as well. Kureishi left his partner and two sons for a younger girlfriend prior to the publication of *Intimacy*. When the book came out in Britain last year, he found himself excoriated in the English press for what was viewed by some as a betrayal of those who were closest to him. Kureishi responds that his stories may be inspired by his life experience but calls it "reductive" to assume they are simply autobiographies in disguise. "I'm annoyed that *Intimacy* turned into a personal attack on me. [It's] a book about marriage and families, and these issues—rather than my private life—are worth discussing."

Controversy, Kureishi claims, is nothing new in his experience as a writer. Indeed, it seemed he was courting it in his early work. "I'm used to a certain amount of shit being flung about," he

recalling the weekly demonstrations by Muslim groups when *Laundrette* was released in New York 14 years ago. While it may not prove as incendiary, *Fanatic* slyly mixes eroticism and religious fundamentalism. In fact, there's something gleefully subversive about the way Kureishi portrays the Muslim priest that Parvez's religious son invites into their home. Once the fanatical guru arrives in the decadent West, he begins to like it so much, he wants to get a visa and stay on. "Radical puritanism and ideology can be corrupted by the sensual world, the real world," he says. "We somehow capture our humanity through the erotic, through our sexuality. I'm fascinated by that idea, and I don't find it a hypocrisy. I am amused by corruption, in the best sense."

My Son the Fanatic opens Friday 25. See Review, and see Index for venues.