

# Ardor in the Court

Shekhar Kapur,  
*Queen Maker*

BY GERRARD RAYMOND

Indian filmmaker Shekhar Kapur started receiving offers to direct in the West soon after the art-house success of *Banahi Queen*, his 1994 Hindi-language movie about a true-life female outlaw. He even made the shortlist for *Alvin Resurrection*, but for his first film in English (and his first outside India), Kapur jumped at the opportunity to direct a biopic of Elizabeth I for Working Title Films in England. "I was excited by what they were expecting from me," he says, "something very dangerous."

In 1970, while he was in his early twenties, the Punjab-born Kapur moved to London to pursue an accountancy career. But finding life as a management consultant planner during the Thatcherite boom years unfulfilling, he returned to Bombay hoping to become a film director. At first he had to settle for being a mostly out-of-work actor. He eventually made three films—*Masoom*, the successful musical *Mr. India*, and the controversial *Banahi Queen*—but remained, he says, an outsider in an industry dominated by glossy, star-driven musicals and archetypal revenge dramas/love stories.

An outsider to English historical dramas as well, Kapur gives his own contemporary spin to *Elizabeth*, which stars a radiant Cate Blanchett in the title role. Noting parallels with Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher in Michael Hirst's original script, he interprets it as the story of

success for the usually dialogue-heavy Hindi films don't speak the language, so, Kapur explains, "everything else about the film has to speak." *Titanic*, he adds slyly, "is a Hindi movie with all the tradi-

with the way the camera moved." Kapur ran into some flak early on for refusing to take the great English icon's self-proclaimed virginity at face value but, he argues, "Why equate purity with virginty? When the Taliban does it in Afghanistan, everybody says they are backward." More interesting, he says, is how Elizabeth and Walsingham, her chief adviser, spy-master, and spin doctor, created the virgin image that has lasted for four centuries. Kapur prevailed on Geoffrey Rush, who had initially turned down the role of Walsingham, by describing to the actor his vision of the role as an Elizabethan version of Krishna, the Indian deity who acts as charioter for Arjuna, hero of the great Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*. Like Krishna seeling Arjuna for battle, Walsingham bolsters Elizabeth in adversity, guiding her toward her mythic destiny.

"Success is a ruthless path," Kapur comments. "You have to learn not to be sensitive and emotional. But then how human are you?" With his star rising in the West, the question becomes personal. "What if I lose the very thing that makes me a film director in the first place?" His solution is to continue to live in Bombay, even as he embarks on projects abroad. (His next film is Poligram's *Long Walk to Freedom*, with Morgan Freeman playing Nelson Mandela.) "I come out of my house and there are people crapping; there's a dead body passing, and at the same time somebody is celebrating a birth or a marriage. Nothing is hidden here. It's uncomfortable, but if I am to keep making films, even taking on a big Hollywood movie, I have to go on questioning." V



ROBIN HOLLAND

"Success is a ruthless path."

"the world's greatest career woman." The film's operatic visual style owes much to Kapur's training in Bollywood. In India, around 40 percent of the audi-

tional moral structures." With actual production time available, and far more resources at his disposal than before, Kapur sought in *Elizabeth* "to tell the plot