



Hanif Kureishi: In The Vanguard of The British New Wave

by Gerard Raymond

"I want to put the audience in a difficult situation," says Hanif Kureishi gleefully. "My characters are complex, rounded, contradictory and difficult. The audience may like a character very much and then the character does something horrible. It challenges the audience, wakes them up. It bothers them and upsets them."

Going by the success of his first two films, audiences seem to be enjoying this challenge. In 1985, *My Beautiful Laundrette* made such a strong impression at the Edinburgh Festival that the originally made-for-television movie was released theatrically. The response in the U.S. to this British film about a gay Pakistani laundromat manager and various members of London's Pakistani community was quite phenomenal, and the film was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Original Screenplay. Directed by Stephen Frears, *Laundrette* is a cheeky

and irreverent look at an ethnic community, reflecting the harsh social conditions and the rampant exploitation that is a direct result of ten years under Margaret Thatcher. The film breaks racial stereotypes and fearlessly portrays Asians as real, though not always compassionate, people. Nasser (Sayed Jaffrey), the entrepreneur who owns the laundrette, has no qualms about evicting his fellow countrymen from the building he owns. He is, after all, "a professional businessman, not a professional Pakistani," he points out. The film's central gay romance between Omar (Gordon Warnecke), Nasser's nephew, and Johnny (Daniel Day Lewis), his white punk childhood friend who once marched against the "Pakis" in the National Front racist demonstrations, certainly did not endear Kureishi to the Asian community in England.

This of course is exactly the sort of reaction that Kureishi delights in. One of

his aims is to subvert the trend of the "polite, controlled," English movie, represented by films like *A Passage To India*, *Brideshead Revisited* and *Jewel In the Crown*. He defiantly wants to create a London that is familiar to him, a London that some audiences are shocked to discover resembles their conception of a Third World country rather than the genteel land of crumpets and afternoon tea. Kureishi's current film, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (also directed by Stephen Frears), opens with scenes of rioting in East London. An elderly black woman is killed by the police while they are trying to arrest her son, and all hell breaks loose. "The idea for the film started with the image of a man walking down the road carrying a suitcase and the streets were burning," explained Kureishi. The script, however, is a veritable maze of plots and

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Frances Barber as Rosie (l), Ayub Khan Din as Sammy in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*

Ayub Khan Din—Rising Star

Ayub Khan Din, the twenty-seven year old, Manchester-born actor who plays Sammy in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* discovered the "fine line between retaining an Asian culture and living in a completely Western society" through working in the Asian theatre movement in England. His father, who had married an Englishwoman, gave his nine children a stricter and more orthodox upbringing than most of their cousins. It was as if he had to "prove that his children were Pakistani," says Ayub. "All through my early life the conflicts were always there. At one time I completely went off anything Asian." At the age of twelve, however, he went to Pakistan for a year, and that changed his whole outlook on life. Ayub joined Tara Arts, a South London company that "combined Indian styles with a western approach to theatre," resulting in a stylized yet contemporary form. Tara, which is the bigger of the two Asian theatre companies in Britain, was founded in the seventies as a community group and has now evolved into a professional group that regularly tours the country. Here, Ayub found the right balance: "I now know how much of an Asian I am and how much of an English person I am."

Ayub landed the role of Sammy when Art Malik (*Jewel in the Crown* and *Passage to India*) turned down the part. If you discount Ayub's bit part in *Laundrette* (most of which ended up on the cutting room floor), *Sammy and Rosie* represents his first film role. He had to learn to curb his Tara inspired stylized manner of acting for the film medium and was occasionally told by director Stephen Frears to "stop acting" and to stop "doing things" with his eyes! He is indebted also to the veteran star Shashi Kapoor, who was always ready to help him. "Basically, Shashi told me how to look into the camera," Ayub explained.

In the wake of his success in *Sammy and Rosie*, Ayub Khan Din has a lot to look forward to in his career. He would love to work on another Kureishi script: "Hanif has changed his thinking on how to write about Asians." He also anticipates returning to Tara Arts which keeps him in touch with his cultural roots.

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subplots, a characteristic that has become a trademark of his style. "I don't want my films to be boring; I want them to be full of action. They are like carpets which are tightly woven, they all join up. They are very complex, but you can work them out." This is a style he developed in his play *Borderline* which was produced by the Royal Court Theatre in London. Kureishi described *Sammy and Rosie* as an extension of his previous work with Frears on *Laundrette*.

"The idea of a number of characters interlocking, the number of plots, the idea of surrealism, the humor which is underpinned by great seriousness," are common themes they developed through both films. In an original version of the *Sammy and Rosie* script, Omar and Johnny from *Laundrette* attend a party given by Sammy (Ayub Khan Din) and Rosie (Frances Barber). Sammy apparently was their accountant. Unlike *Laundrette*, however, *Sammy and Rosie* encompasses a wider range of ethnic groups, not just the Pakistani or Indian community. Pakistani or sub-continent characters predominate because of the author's own Pakistani heritage. "But this also has to do with the fact that these films are about people who are excluded, people who are marginalized, and who aren't always in the center of British films," explains Kureishi. The multiracial mix of characters gives *Sammy and Rosie* a vibrancy that is quite unique in British film.

"Most films are made about straight white men, but you won't find them in my films," says Kureishi. The most fascinating character in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is Raffi Rahman, Sammy's father. He is a retired politician from the sub-continent who has returned to his beloved England, the land of civilization and

breeding, whose memories he cherishes. He is horrified by the violence on the streets and the dissolute life led by his son. We can easily empathize with his disgust at the lack of principles evident in contemporary London. Then we learn that he has been responsible for human rights abuses, torture and a reign of terror in his home country. Horrors for which he is haunted by a guilty conscience are surrealistically portrayed in the film through the appearance of a ghostly torture victim. This is perhaps the most complex part written for an Asian in an English language film. It was specifically written for the Hindi movie star Shashi Kapoor, who has described the role as embodying even more than the full complement of nine "rasas," or flavors, of traditional Hindu acting. Utilizing his true star quality, this former matinee idol gives the finest performance of his career, creating a quintessentially complex Kureishi character: irresistible, charming, rude and totally ruthless.

In terms of his art, Hanif Kureishi sees himself as part of the British "New Wave." "Films like *Wish You Were Here*, *The Ploughman's Lunch*, *The Draughtman's Contract*, *Prick Up Your Ears*, and *Personal Services* are all films made by my friends. We are a group of young people making low budget films." The challenge of his films is the same challenge he sees facing Britain today. Many in the Asian and other ethnic communities sit uneasily between two cultures. They have to find their identity in England, which is the only home they know.

Gerard Raymond, a freelance writer of Sri Lankan descent, has contributed articles on theatre and film to a wide variety of periodicals.

"I think some of the greatest artists might be physicists, who create with their own wisdom."

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sity of Pennsylvania, and then served on the faculties of the College of San Mateo in California, and George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, as well as the aforementioned stint as a laser optics engineer at I.B.M. All the while, Wang kept his artistic interests alive through local theatrical productions that eventually led to his becoming a founding member of the Asian Living Theater in San Francisco.

He moved into films via documentary work, and later appeared as the fry-cook in Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing*, and co-wrote and starred in Allen Fong's *Ah Ying*. His decision to devote himself

entirely to films was prompted when Wang was denied a promotion at I.B.M., not unlike Leo Fang in *A Great Wall*. Wang was well over forty when he made that decision.

His unusual history also discredits the commonly held notion that science and the arts are in many ways polar opposites. This applies especially to Asians, who, like Wang, are often asked to choose between the two.

"It was good training to be a so-called 'professional' at engineering school" observed Wang. "I learned that there are certain combinations to make things happen: how to start and finish a project and how to perfect your craftsmanship. Those are all things that are directly related to what I do now, so I

definitely appreciate every moment of my science training. [Science training] doesn't mean that you have to prevent your other talents or creativity from growing. A lot of Asians believe that these two [science and the arts] are contradictory. I don't think so. I think some of the greatest artists might be physicists, who create with their own wisdom."

Wang is also hopeful that another scientist's stigma will also soon change. "Although scientists, engineers and technical people are so powerless, I still think that they can do a lot. I'm hopelessly optimistic."

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