

On Srinivas Krishna's MASALA By Cameron Bailey

Curatorial essay accompanying The Cinema Lounge screening of Srinivas Krishna's *Masala* at The Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque on Nov. 19/2010

In 2002, the British Film Institute conducted an online poll that voted *Masala* to be the Best Film of the 20th Century from the South Asian Diaspora.

The film is almost 20 years old now -- written, directed and co-produced by Srinivas Krishna in 1991. It also stars Krishna. He made the film when he was 25 years old. Think about that: in 1990 and '91, when Deepa Mehta was the only other south Asian feature filmmaker in the entire country and he was only 25, he made a movie that was unlike anything else ever produced in Canada.

Masala made its world premiere at the 1991 Toronto International Film Festival, and then called the Festival of Festivals. I was a young programmer at the Festival then; that was just my second year as one of the team that selected the Canadian films. I remember finding *Masala* to be incredibly exciting at the time. Why? Partly because it was one of the first ever feature films by a person of colour to be made in Canada -- that was the term we used at the time, "people of colour". More importantly I was excited to see *Masala* and to premiere it in Toronto because the way it showed its characters and understood its setting in Canada were close to how I saw things in the world around me, but almost never saw in the movies.

What do I mean by that? To answer, let's go to the meaning of the word, *masala*. It's a blend of spices, a mixture. It also refers to the mix of genres often found in Bollywood movies: action, romance, musical and melodrama all thrown together in one film. A *masala* is a collision of different flavours that might not seem to fit together. That's exactly how I experienced life in Canada. Being an immigrant from Barbados trying to learn Canadian meant becoming equally fluent in *Hockey Night in Canada*, *The Flintstones* and how to eat sugar cane. That was my *masala*.

Krishna grew up in Canada watching hundreds of hours of American television and movies, while his family environment was full of stories and social codes from India that also crowded his imagination. Lord Krishna is a part of his mental makeup. So is Jane Fonda in *Barbarella*. In fact he's said that one of the fantasy sequences in the film was directly inspired by *Barbarella*. He's also mentioned the Hollywood musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, and when I first saw *Masala*, it looked to me like *Rebel without a Cause*, if James Dean's character had grown up in an Indian family in Canada.

This is now a pretty normal state of being for Canadians: holding two or three or four different realities in your head at the same time. But back then it was still pretty rare, at least still rare in our movies, our music and our TV shows. And it was the way the *masala* of genres mirrored a new kind of Canadian character that was the most striking thing. When the New York Times reviewed Krishna's film in 1993, the critic wrote that "the most ingenious aspect of *Masala* is its use of clashing cinematic genres to illustrate the theme of cultural collision and dislocation" -- a formal technique designed to mirror an existential state.

In order to better understand where *Masala* came from and how it works, it helps to have a bit of historical and cultural context:

In 1972 Idi Amin expelled all south Asians from Uganda. Canada accepted 7,000. This coincided with the numbers of immigrants from India more than doubling during the 1970s, compared with the 1960s, and the number from Pakistan more than tripling. This sparks what came to be known as “Paki-bashing.” If you grew up as a south Asian in Canada in the 1970s you were routinely abused and shunned as a “Paki,” no matter where you came from. When Krishna’s character uses that word in the film it carried enormous freight.

On June 23, 1985, Air India flight 182 exploded en route over the Atlantic. The Montreal-London-Delhi flight suffered an attack that killed 329 people, including 280 Canadian citizens, most of them of Indian birth or descent. The incident was the largest mass murder in Canadian history. *Masala* begins with a reimagining of that bombing, and Krishna turns airplanes and flight into a recurring motif.

In 1985 Stephen Frears releases *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Two years later he makes *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. Both films are set between the south Asian and white British communities in England. Both popularize a new vocabulary of hybrid, urban identity and a new kind of protagonist: mixed up, in-between and often angry, even when the films were comedies.

At the same time in Canada, a debate raged over what came to be called “identity politics.” On university campuses and all through the arts scene of Toronto, Ottawa and Vancouver in particular, artists (of colour) reacted against the disappointments of Canada’s official Multiculturalism policy and lobbied cultural institutions to better reflect the changing face of the country. Battles were fought over the right to represent -- who got to tell which stories?

In 1987 Patricia Rozema premieres her debut feature at the Cannes Film Festival. *I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing* is a comic fantasy; it’s released the same year as Atom Egoyan’s second feature, *Family Viewing*, which was received as a kind of existentialist, dystopian fiction. Both films represented contemporary Toronto in their settings and approach. Both made clear and decisive moves away from the governing form of English Canadian fiction filmmaking up to that point: documentary realism. That moment in Canadian cinema became known as the Toronto New Wave. But changes were also happening in Winnipeg, as filmmakers like John Paizs and Guy Maddin moved Canadian filmmaking from the clarity of realism into the uncertain realm of the unconscious.

In addition to the directors who helped shape the kind of film Krishna would make, it’s important to note the central role of *Masala*’s producer Camelia Frieberg. She worked as the first assistant director on Rozema’s acclaimed short film, *Passion: A Letter in 16mm* and Egoyan’s *Family Viewing*. She was also the production manager on Egoyan’s *Next of Kin*, *Family Viewing* and *The Adjuster*, and went on to produce other Egoyan films, including *The Sweet Hereafter*. The other key creative talent who overlapped between Egoyan and Krishna was Paul Sarossy, who has been Egoyan’s long-time cinematographer.

Finally, in terms of filmmakers, 1991 was the year that both *Masala* and Deepa Mehta’s *Sam and Me* premiered at the Festival of Festivals in Toronto. At the time *Masala* was the more groundbreaking film and Krishna looked to many critics to be the more promising filmmaker, but Mehta went on to make the *Fire-Earth-Water* trilogy as well as many other features. After completing his second feature, *Lulu*, Krishna struggled to get subsequent features made. Recently, he has moved into documentaries and video installations that continue his experiments in form and play with south Asian popular culture.

I haven't touched much on the story *Masala* tells because I don't honestly think the story is the most important thing. The various plot elements – a precious stamp, drugs, romantic convolutions – are not what's most significant about this film. Instead, what matters are the flavours. The taste of British south Asian art, but with a Canadian accent. The bitter notes that come from the memory of racism, and of the Air India bombing. The bright colours -- partly a hangover from 80s music videos, partly an attempt to bring a Bollywood palette to a Canadian film. The sound of the tabla, used not just as percussion but as a kind of dramatic chorus. *Masala* is a satire. So its flavours have bite.

Cameron Bailey
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Background on Cameron Bailey

Currently co-director of the Toronto International Film Festival, Bailey has a wealth of experience in the Canadian film community. He has been a programmer for TIFF for more than 12 years, and has been responsible for the annual selection of films from Africa, South Asia and the Philippines, hosted the highly successful subscription series Reel Talk, and headed the Perspective Canada Series. He has also served on awards juries at film festivals in Canada, South Korea, Greece, Burkina Faso and Tanzania. As a journalist, Bailey reviewed films for Toronto's NOW Magazine, CBC Radio One, and CTV's Canada AM. As a writer, Bailey has written articles for publications such as The Globe and Mail, Village Voice, CineAction! Screen and the Banff Centre anthology Territories of Difference.