

Hanif Kureishi

An angry young screenwriter looks at Thatcher's England

BRIXTON, IN SOUTH LONDON, IS A community of largely unemployed working-class people, mostly black and West Indian. In this neighborhood, which is slowly being gentrified, more Jaygee Curl may pack pharmacy shelves and more reggae may sound in the streets than in other parts of the city, yet one can now find a refrigerator case of fresh pasta next to the oxtail counter in a local food shop. Though more like New York's East Village than like Harlem or Watts, Brixton is a pocket Mrs. Thatcher prefers not to look into.

It is where, on September 28th, 1985, at 7:00 a.m., police officers with sledgehammers broke down the door of the home of Mrs. Cherry Groce, mistakenly believing that her son Michael, whom they had come to arrest on charges of armed robbery, also lived there. Mrs. Groce, awakening to answer what she thought were the calls of her epileptic daughter, was shot without warning by a policeman unable to discern her form in the dim light. The bullet damaged Mrs. Groce's spine, paralyzing her from the waist down. Because of lack of intent, the policeman was cleared of charges.

The shooting, and the riots that followed in Brixton and other areas of England, are the inspiration and setting for *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, the new film written by Hanif Kureishi, a 1986 Oscar nominee for *My Beautiful Laundrette*, much of which is also set in south London. As *Sammy and Rosie* opens, a black woman is shot by the police. On the eve of the ensuing riots, Rafi, a prominent third-world politician, returns to England to make peace with his past, and with his estranged son Sammy, with whom he has come to stay.

Sammy, an Asian accountant, lives in Brixton with his non-Asian wife, Rosie, a social worker for the community, and is involved with a young American photographer. With the promise of a handsome check from Rafi and the upward mobility it will bring, Sammy wants to try a more conservative life. But Rosie, who believes in "freedom plus commitment," initiates an affair with Danny (played by the Fine Young Cannibals' lead singer, Roland Gift), a young black man who lives with a caravan of homeless kids under a motorway that is set for redevelopment by a Tory businessman. The film is also the story of these kids. Toward the end, the layers of plot intermingle in a celluloid *mille-feuille*, as the motorway is bulldozed and all the characters meet for what may be Rafi's last stand.

Sammy and Rosie is, after *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Kureishi's second screenplay for director Stephen Frears. He has also published several plays and pieces of writing, including "The Rainbow Sign," an autobiographical vignette that accompanies the published version of *Laundrette*. Kureishi is the voice of a new generation of British writers and filmmakers, only thirty years old and eager to have a say.

Hanif Kureishi lives in a neighborhood of west London that is being gentrified, not too unlike those he writes about. The tube lines run above ground



just outside his window, much as they did outside Omar's in *Laundrette*. The lines in London are rarely on schedule. "Thatcher can't even make the trains run," Kureishi says. "Even Mussolini could make the trains run on time."

Kureishi was born in England to a British mother and a Pakistani father and was raised in the south-London suburb of Bromley. Though his mother's marriage to an Asian (a generic term in Britain encompassing Pakistanis, Indians, Sri Lankans, et cetera) was merely considered exotic in Fifties Britain, the atmosphere of Sixties Britain, with its large Asian influx, was less congenial for Kureishi to grow up in. Nor did it take a turn for the better: in the Seventies and Eighties jobs became scarce while the immigrant population, and resentment toward it, grew. Though he was born in Britain, Kureishi was, at the same time, a "Paki" to most Britons.

To Kureishi, his Pakistani self became "a curse" and brought him such nicknames as Pakistani Pete in school. He was articulate and outspoken even then; his verbal self-defense led to detention and eventually suspension. Kureishi used the time to roam the streets with a friend. Years later, he would follow this friend, who was now wearing steel-capped boots and answering to the name Bog Brush, as he went around taunting Pakistanis, the same ones Kureishi had gone to school with. Bog Brush would become Johnny, the punk in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, and experiences like these would

both inspire a screenplay and shape the young writer.

While waiting to flee the suburbs, Kureishi isolated himself in the music of Pink Floyd and the Beatles, in libraries and books. It was the Sixties, and Pakistanis were the butt of British television-comic humor, the center of arguments on assimilation. In "The Rainbow Sign," Kureishi writes, "I was desperately embarrassed and afraid of being identified with these loathed aliens." He reckoned, upon looking back, that "at least once every day, since I was five years old, I had been racially abused." He put up pictures of the Black Panthers in his bedroom. He became angry.

Kureishi left the suburbs for King's College, in London, to study philosophy. After that he went to the Royal Court Theatre. "In the middle Sixties until the middle Seventies," he says, "the theater in Britain was really exciting. There was a lot of fringe stuff, there were a lot of companies around. A lot of good writers. That was where the energy was."

Kureishi ushered for the Royal Court, then became a writer in residence. He found his material while in his midtwenties, an early age for a writer to discover his voice. "I was sitting with this friend of mine," Kureishi says. "I had written a play

called *The King and Me*. It was about a woman that was obsessed with Elvis Presley. And this guy says to me, 'You've never written about your own life, or about the lives of your family, or about Asian people in Britain,' which I hadn't done before. He said, 'Actually, that's your subject.' And it came to me as a great illumination. It was an epiphany. I suddenly thought, 'Oh, this material is rich.'"

He became a screenwriter, he says, quite by accident. "Channel Four Television asked me to rewrite *Laundrette*. I wrote it as a recycling of material that I used before, because I wasn't very serious about screenwriting. I thought, 'Well, I'll have a go at it; I need the money. I'll just try it.'"

In *Laundrette*, Omar, a young British-born Pakistani, on the dole like many Brits his age, is persuaded by his alcoholic, ex-journalist father to work for his uncle to pass time constructively before university. So promising are his entrepreneurial skills that his uncle gives him a laundromat to try his hand at; Omar and his street-punk friend, Johnny, who becomes his lover, turn the failing business around.

Kureishi wrote the screenplay on a first visit to relatives in Karachi, Pakistan, where he encountered not only the Pakistani self he tried to escape but also the British self he had not yet recognized. Kureishi describes the screenplay: "It's a contrast between those two societies, and also the first time I really understood what Pakistan was like. And what it would be like for someone coming from there and going to Britain. Like my father."

Sixties America reverberates in *Sammy and Rosie*, as it does in Britain today. Kureishi says, "It's taken longer in Britain than it did in America. Especially since

BY MARLAINE GLICKSMAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY DOUG FORSTER

ROLLING STONE, NOVEMBER 19TH, 1987 • 33

MOVIES

most of the immigrants we're talking about only came to Britain in the Sixties. And the various conflicts have only fully developed now, really. And black people [a term used to connote the political solidarity of most nonwhites in Britain] are seen much more, are much more evident in political life right now."

In *Sammy and Rosie*, Kureishi uses his characters' responses to the Brixton riots to make racial and political issues personal. "It's about the kind of moral positions that people have to take around a very complicated issue like that," he says. "So, like *Laundrette*, it's about public issues and private issues at the same time: the private lives of the people involved in it and the larger issues that are pressing on them, about which they have to make choices, have to take stands.

"One of the challenges," says Kureishi, "was to take characters that are horrible, because people are not horrible all the time. If you look at, say, scenes of South African policemen beating up blacks in the township, when they go home to their wives and children, they're probably very kind to them. And that's hard for me to work out in my mind, about how you torture someone in your day job and in the evening go to the pub with your wife. And then make love. And so I wanted to write a character who could be a murderer, yet would want to be loved and to love."

Unlike many other screenwriters, Kureishi doesn't see himself as a frustrated director; he values his working relationship with Stephen Frears. Frears is very much a part of Kureishi's work as a screenwriter, an unusual situation in a business that typically breeds antagonism between writer and director. "We do it together," says Kureishi warmly. "It's a collaboration. Stephen improves my work." It's unlikely that Kureishi will ever succumb to the lure of Hollywood glitz. "I want a cheap cinema that's rich in ideas and imagination. I want rough films. I want them to look as if they've been made around the corner, you know, like home movies. I like all that.

"We've proved that you don't have to make *Revolution*. You don't have to make *Chariots of Fire*. You don't have to make *Absolute Beginners*. You can make films about what goes on down the road. And people go and see it in Melbourne, and people go and see it in Dallas. That's quite a breakthrough."

Though he is quick to mention Sam Shepard, Saul Bellow, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker as writers he admires, he doesn't name any screenwriters. "I don't think I admire any screenwriters," he says. "I don't think there are many people who go and see films because of screenwriters. I don't want to be a screenwriter. That's not my job. I wrote these screenplays because I thought I had something to say that would work as films."

Nonetheless, Kureishi says, films weren't particularly significant to him when he was growing up: "I wasn't crazy about the cinema. I was interested in rock & roll, really.

"Fashion and rock & roll all come from the street in Britain. Most of modern music came through the streets, comes from the punks, from places like Liverpool and the inner cities and so on. From young people expressing themselves despite oppression, unemployment, waste and so on.

"I want to be popular. I want to do stuff that reaches large audiences. I want to do stuff that sixteen-year-old, eighteen-year-old kids will go see. It's not like I want to write a short story that is published in an obscure journal. I want to do stuff that someone who listens to Living in a Box or Curiosity Killed the Cat would like, as opposed to reaching a literary audience. That's what Stephen and I are interested in doing." ■

MARLAINE GLICKSMAN is a filmmaker and an editor at *Film Comment*. This is her first article for RS.

Adrian's line on sex

Fatal Attraction, directed by Adrian Lyne, is the surprise smash of the fall movie season. The thriller, which tells the story of a married lawyer (Michael Douglas) who has what appears to be an innocent weekend fling with a book editor (Glenn Close), seems to have hit a nerve with audiences. Close's character, who becomes obsessed and, ultimately, vengeful when the affair ends, is a nightmarish twist on the standard jilted lover. This woman has been left by one guy too many, and she's lost her grip: she will not take no for an answer.

Adrian Lyne, who began his career directing TV commercials, has demonstrated a knack for theatrical sexuality in *9½ Weeks* and for tapping into the public taste with *Flashdance*. In *Fatal Attraction*, he manages for the first time to find real resonance beneath his shiny surfaces. "Fatal Attraction," wrote critic J. Hoberman, "is a metaphor for just how devastating sex itself can be."

Has the response to *Fatal Attraction* surprised you?

Yes. I was surprised. Audiences go bananas. They shout things at the screen, especially at the end of the movie. It's like a riot in some theaters. They just hate this woman [Glenn Close]. More than I thought they would, in fact.

Why do audiences react so strongly to her?

Well, she's quite blatant in her seduction, and men, especially, are frightened by that. Most of them have known somebody like this in their lives, someone with this sort of potential. This is the kind of woman where nothing you say will have any effect, a woman who is capable of anything. When she says to Michael Douglas, "I won't be ignored. You just don't get it, do you?" it hits very close to home for a lot of men. They're bowled over by her sexuality, but they're also terrified.

As it turns out, my sympathies were with her for longer than the audience's. I saw her as a tragic and lonely figure. She's pathetic. He screws her not once but twice and pretends it didn't happen. In a sense, he got what he deserved.

I read that you were originally interested in Isabelle Adjani for the Glenn Close part. How did you settle on Close?



LYNE AND HIS STAR, MICHAEL DOUGLAS

She really chased this part down. I had never seen Glenn in terms of sexuality. Actually, she always seemed calm and unpassionate. But she read with Michael, who had been cast earlier, and it was like lunacy unearthed. She had a way of being self-destructive and sexy at the same time.

Do you think that you know what men really want?

No. Never. Ever. But I think I understand what they fear. Look, men, in my opinion, are easier than women. Men are putty in women's hands. They are definitely the weaker sex. Michael, in this movie, is not a hero. He is, to me, a loser. A weak, vulnerable man.

Is it difficult to direct sex scenes?

Not really, although the weeks leading up to the sex scenes in *Fatal Attraction* were agony. It just got worse and

worse. On this set, the difference between reality and making a movie was a blur, and there was a lot of pent-up energy and panic.

I find that with sex scenes the thing to remember is, give them something to laugh at or else they'll laugh at you. I thought long and hard about where they should fuck in this movie. I thought of the floor or in a taxi, but I finally decided on the sink. The sink had erotic possibilities. I like water. Water makes an appearance in all my movies.

Were you concerned about AIDS, safe sex and all that while you were making this movie?

No. It's not my business to preach. I hope the threat of AIDS does not affect sex scenes in the movies. That would be just absurd.

Is *Fatal Attraction* a dark vision? Or simply realistic?

I think my movies, especially *Fatal Attraction*, have a familiar quality. They're different from something like *Blue Velvet*, which is full of strange, bizarre people doing strange, bizarre things. You look at a movie like that from the outside. You're not one of them.

In *Fatal Attraction*, you are one of them. You are Glenn or Michael. You're normal, but if pushed . . . who knows? The situation in this movie is fairly routine. A man has a brief affair, and then the woman becomes a crazed beast. It could happen to anyone. After all, who the fuck's normal, anyway?

BY LYNN HIRSCHBERG