



# THE OTHER HOLLYWOOD

*An SU professor takes a cinematic peek inside India.*

Ten days before she begins the eighth film of her acting career, Kasthuri is being driven through a city in India. Chatting amiably, she points out the massive movie billboards lining the streets of Madras. "That's me," she says, matter-of-factly indicating the giant panel bearing her likeness. For Kasthuri, movie acting is simply a job, nothing to get excited about. Every second Sunday, she gets a day off.

She says the director of her next film, P. Vasu, "is *numero uno* in the film industry just now, and he's the king of drama."

Not that a P. Vasu drama differs much from any other Indian director's. Commercial Indian films are strictly formulaic and mainly genre driven. Over the course of three or four hours, a limited repertoire of plots combining unlikely elements from Westerns, fifties musicals, and martial arts movies unreel in vivid color, usually delivering a moralistic cliché.

At this stage of her career, 21-year-old Kasthuri is a featured ingenue, often playing the pretty young daughter. At the moment, she's starring in *Kasthuri*, a 30-minute documentary produced and directed in India last summer by Richard Breyer, a professor of television/radio/film in the Newhouse School.

Breyer, a former Fulbright scholar who has lived and taught in India, is fascinated by the country's culture and disappointed by its prevailing images in the United States. He created the documentary, in part, to help dispel stereotypes and provide Westerners with an authentic glimpse into Indian culture and cinema. The documentary is available nationally via PBS and the Filmmakers Library, an academic clearinghouse in New York City.

"I think Western media poorly represent India," says Breyer. "They



EMILE F. WANSTEKER

Through *Kasthuri*, a documentary about a reigning starlet of the Indian film industry, Newhouse professor Richard Breyer hopes to break stereotypes of India and Indian culture. "India is very complicated," says Breyer.

make us think India is inhabited solely by clients of Mother Theresa, snake charmers, or lepers. I'm not trying to say India doesn't have problems, but we never see the merits of the culture. I wanted to show normal, articulate people who look at their culture with the same sense of humor and maturity that we look at our culture."

Breyer chose to deliver his message through *Kasthuri* and the Indian film industry, which is the world's largest, producing more than 1,000 films each year in several languages.

"India is a land of 800 million people," says Kasthuri. "All of them watch movies without exception. If you're blind you still go to a cinema. Still, it's nothing compared to the Hollywood audience, which is the world market."

There is no kissing, only a bit of nuzzling, and certainly no sex in commercial Indian films. Violence is cartoonish. "India is very com-

plicated," says Breyer. "Politics, religion, regional culture, language. Kissing would offend the modesty of viewers. Blood is clearly not blood; it's red paint. The hits in fight scenes are so out of sync that it's pointing to itself as contrived."

Clips from *Kasthuri*'s films are interspersed throughout the documentary, including scenes in which she is seen making goo-goo eyes and shooting chaste come-hither glances at her leading men. The male stars are older, chubby guys in shirts that could have come from Sears or K-Mart.

In one clip, the effect of her co-star kneeling before Kasthuri and briefly resting his chin on her hip while lip syncing a song is surprisingly sensual.

Kasthuri maintains an ironic detachment from her work. "In a typical Indian movie," she says, summing up her usual role, "she laughs, she dances, she sings, she runs around trees, she marries, she cries, she dies.



There's the whole movie."

Kasthuri says Indian plots come in only three flavors. There are romance films. ("I sing a lot of soulful songs and try to woo the hero with all my heart. Basically, Romeo and Juliet.") There are angry-young-man films. ("Something keeps going wrong for the protagonist, and finally he decides to give it back to them.") Then there are the films she calls "lost and found," in which siblings separated at birth lead different lives before being reunited in a fight against some villain. ("It's been beaten to death.")

Breyer's documentary also depicts the growing influence of Western culture, including MTV, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and *Santa Barbara*, which have been delivered to India via satellite TV since the Gulf War. Kasthuri hates the soaps, preferring Clint Eastwood movies and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.

In a scene from *Kasthuri*, the starlet and her mother sit at a café. Off camera, Breyer suggests the Western image of Indian women is hardly one of liberation. "A Hindu girl, especially in India, is the most liberated girl in the world," counters mom, who later admits her definition of liberal may be rather conservative by American standards.

From a Western perspective, Kasthuri's life is dictated by tradition. She will eventually retire from acting to enter an arranged marriage. She will consult a horoscope to determine if she and her intended are compatible, and will follow her family's orders and be a virtual servant to her husband.

In exchange for playing by the rules of her culture, Kasthuri "will never be rejected," says Breyer. "She will always be secure."

For Breyer, there's a certain amount of attractiveness to such security.

"Growing up, I was told you can be anything you want, that to a certain degree you can invent yourself, and I find having to prove yourself is a burden in some ways," he says.

"I just find so much of Indian culture very appealing, everything from the way young children are treated to the way traditional culture continues to exist in mass media."

—GEORGE LOWERY

## RESEARCH NOTEBOOK

- **Hello, Dolly.** The Oregon Ballet Theater commissioned Jeffrey Mayer, a professor of environmental arts, consumer studies, and retailing in the College for Human Development, and his wife, Lisa, to create a series of collector dolls depicting each of the characters in the *Nutcracker*. The first set of five hand-crafted and authentically costumed collector dolls, ranging in size from 24 to 28 inches, was auctioned off in December, earning the ballet \$27,000. The Mayers' long history of designing and dressing dolls and mannequins has earned them recognition in international doll making and collecting circles. Their credits include the launching of the Parisian Theatre de la Mode replica mannequins in Portland, Oregon.



Lisa and Jeffrey Mayer

- **Environmental Policy Center.** SU has created a multidisciplinary Center for Environmental Policy and Administration, which will be based in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. The center will foster joint study between the Maxwell School and the neighboring State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. "Centers like this are vitally important to society," says W. Henry Lambright, director of the center and professor of political science and public administration. "They are a vehicle by which a discipline-oriented institution—the University—can relate to a problem-oriented world."
- **The Book on the EPA.** Rosemary O'Leary, an assistant professor of public affairs in the Maxwell School, has written *Environmental Change: Federal Courts and the EPA*. The book presents the findings of a four-year study on the impact of federal court decisions on Environmental Protection Agency policies and administration, and on amendments to laws drafted by Congress. "Given the propensity of business and environmental groups to sue the EPA, and of Congress to encourage such suits through sometimes irrational statutory provisions, it is amazing the EPA is able to accomplish anything," writes O'Leary.
- **Food Stamps Underused.** Low-income households eligible for the Food Stamp Program are frequently opting instead for the Emergency Food System—food pantries and soup kitchens—according to a study by Jean Bowering and Katherine Clancy, professors of nutrition and foodservice management. Their study for the Office of Nutrition of the New York State Department of Health resulted in a report, *Understanding the Interaction of the Food Stamp Program and the Emergency Feeding System in New York State*. "We found that virtually all those eligible for food stamps were knowledgeable about them, but chose not to use them because they had experienced such incredible hassles applying for them or incorrectly felt others needed them more," says Clancy.