

Widowed Women Bring Strength to Filmmaker's 'Water'

By Michelle Solomon



I have met celebrities up close. I've interviewed Brad Pitt in London and Julia Roberts in New York, just to name two. But nothing compared to chatting with director Deepa Mehta a few weeks ago while the two of us had a drink at Birmingham's City Cellar.

I've followed the filmmaking career of Mehta for more than a decade. The Toronto-based director, who was born in India, defies convention.

I went to a preview screening of her latest film, "Water," at the Uptown Palladium, where Mehta answered audience questions. She was gracious and took time with each audience member's query until there were no more. On her way out of the theater, college students asked for her autograph on movie posters.

She was tired, but wanted to take a break from the whirlwind press tour that wasn't about to stop. After Detroit, she was off to Houston. Sitting across from me at the table was the courageous woman whose quote I have scrawled on a Post-It: "Honesty for me works."

During our talk she brushed off the notion that she was a pioneer, while I pushed the envelope.

"You've been classified as a feminist filmmaker," I said.

She doesn't believe in labeling her movies; that would "compromise her work enormously. It becomes a different film," she said.

And what about the issue of gender? Her movies "Fire" (Mehta's 1996 film about two sisters-in-law who fall in love) and "Water," center on the female condition and traditions they are bound by. Again, it wasn't right to pigeonhole the two.

"I'm not saying it doesn't work to concentrate on gender; it just doesn't work for me," she said.

Her most recent film, "Water," does have women at its center, but Mehta said it's not just a film about women.

"It's a film about tolerance. It's a story about what happens in society in general."

"Water" begins its journey with 8-year-old Chuyia (played by new-

comer Sarala), who is already widowed from an arranged marriage to an older man in an effort to secure the financial stability of her family. When the man dies, the family sends the widow to an ashram, an institution, where she will live her life in perpetual mourning.

"Because of convoluted religious beliefs, they were relegated to a life of deprivation and indignity," said Mehta.

Mehta's deep study of the women's lives in the ashram met with opposition, however, even before it made it to the screen.

"Accusations of 'Water' being anti-Hindu were cited as the cause of the film sets being thrown in the river, my effigy being burned, and protesters marching in the streets of Varanasi, denouncing the film and its portrayal of Hindu widows," said Mehta.

Mehta shut down the production in 2000, mostly to protect her cast and crew, she said.

"I was angry and I could not make this film being angry," she said.



Five years after the attacks, she started again. This time, the production would take up residence in Sri Lanka. Created in secrecy, "Water" was shot over 45 days under an assumed name, "Full Moon."

With its beautiful photography and in-depth character studies, it is apparent that Mehta approached "Water" with a gentle hand. For audiences and the widows of the ashram, "Water" has been released after a long journey.

"Water" is playing at the Landmark Main Art Theater in Royal Oak.

Michelle Solomon is a Detroit-based entertainment columnist who appears on local television and radio.



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