



# W A T E R

## The End Of An Era

### Final Piece of Deepa Mehta's Trilogy Creates Ripples at the Toronto Film Fest

In *Water*, the final chapter of her trilogy, Mehta profoundly depicts the contrasting outside world of loveliness brimming with lotus petals by the dark inner turmoil surrounding the lives of widows in India. Bearing *Water* has not been easy for Mehta, as violent protests, death threats and controversy submerged the shooting of the film in India during 2000. Determined, she continued shooting the film in Sri Lanka amidst the utmost secrecy and has completed her trilogy, 5 years later. Starring Seema Biswas, Lisa Ray, John Abraham and Mehta's find, Sarala, *Water* brings to the fore compelling performances from Biswas, the little Sarala and John Abraham. *Water* opened the 30th Toronto International Film Festival this year and has been receiving rave reviews since.

The starkness of the story is related to the fate of eight-year-old Chuyia (Sarala) who is widowed and sent to a Hindu widow ashram to lead a life of renunciation. What it means to be a widow is beyond Chuyia's innocent comprehension of age-old repression in the name of religion. The film is set in 1938 colonial India when Mahatma Gandhi's influence was on the rise. John Abraham plays the Gandhian idealist, Narayan, who falls in love with the beautiful Kalyani (Lisa Ray) who is the only widow in the ashram with unshorn hair. The reason for this becomes apparent as night falls and Kalyani is ferried across the river to the mansions of the rich.

Subtle yet powerful, *Water's* strength lies in the intensity of what is not portrayed on screen. The repercussion of a child abuse episode sends shudders down the spine as the audience tries to imagine what might have happened to the naïve Sarala. The strongest yet quietest voice in the film is that of Shakuntala. Played to perfection by Seema Biswas, Shakuntala is the most devout follower of the scriptures in quest of the liberation of the soul. But her struggle is between her conscience and her belief system. Portraying the character with inner strength, she is perhaps the only one who is able to take a solid stance against what is happening in the lives of the widows. Almost an adopted mother to Chuyia, the presence of Biswas is like a soothing balm in an otherwise menacingly dismal existence.

Mehta discovered Sarala from the tiny village of Galle on the south coast of Sri Lanka. She was one of over 50 girls auditioned for the role but Mehta was quick to recognize her talent. "Sarala is a natural who loves to act," says Mehta. Producer David Hamilton recounts how Sarala's mother was anguished and

crying while her daughter's long beautiful hair was being shaved off in a moving scene in the film. "I was very sad," says Sarala, "but I told my mother that it's okay, my hair would grow back."

For Sarala, being at the Toronto Film Fest is like a dream. A grade five student in Sangamitta College in Galle, she is shy yet confident with all the camera flashes and media attention. Even if she felt a little tired during the shoot she had Deepa Aunty and her Mom by her all the time to help. Sarala loves to sing and dance and adores stars Hrithik Roshan and Preity Zinta. She aims to become an actress when she grows up, and through the cast and Mehta, she has been tutored well.

Speaking with *AV* about working and connecting with Sarala, Biswas says, "Sarala is a lovely kid and a highly talented girl...we spent a lot of time with all the cast and rehearsed so Sarala could remember her dialogue because her language is Sinhalese and she does not know either English or Hindi. Her tutor was with her for communication but after a certain time we just threw a smile and communicated in our own way" The on-screen bond between Biswas and Sarala is remarkable given the fact that in reality, they don't speak each other's language. "Seema Aunty was friendly," Sarala says, describing her relationship with Biswas. Despite her young age, Biswas says she learnt a lot from the little actress, "Within two to three days, given it was her first film, she was so competent that she knew...how much she needed to express herself, how much she should control, how much she should show her emotions, (and all) through another language...she expressed herself so deeply and with so much conviction."

Deepa Mehta's *Water* evokes deep felt ripples as sordid realities of the lives of widows in India emerge. A resounding success at the Toronto International Film Festival and picked up by Fox Searchlight for American distribution, the film will hit theatres in November this year. *AV*

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