

Natural Born Killers Is Depressing

Mickey and Mallory. The film shows them doing the most horrible things, but it does so excitingly if not beautifully. Murder is horrible but we sometimes gasp with pleasure when we see it. Some of the situations in the film (Mallory killing her pump jockey because he was too eager and gave her the worst head she's ever had in her life; Robert Downey Jr. eagerly becoming a killer) elicit the same kind of nervous laughter as do films such as *Reservoir Dogs* and *Blue Velvet*. Yet, in order to engage with

Mickey and Mallory at all, we can't see them as too horrible. Thus, most of the time we are asked to share their point-of-view. The major characters they kill are scum (the father's a rapist, the detective kills his partners during sex, the warden is arranging their murder) and most of the minor ones are mostly fat white trash and thus disposable (the contempt in which poor white people are held in contemporary cinema is at least another article if not a Ph.D. dissertation). Mickey and Mallory are victims and scourge. There is cure neither for them nor for us.

Natural Born Killers is depressing. Yet I found it riveting to watch. The film is a sensational, serious spectacle. It's the work of artists with a substantial command of the medium at their disposal and only the most crushing banalities to communicate.

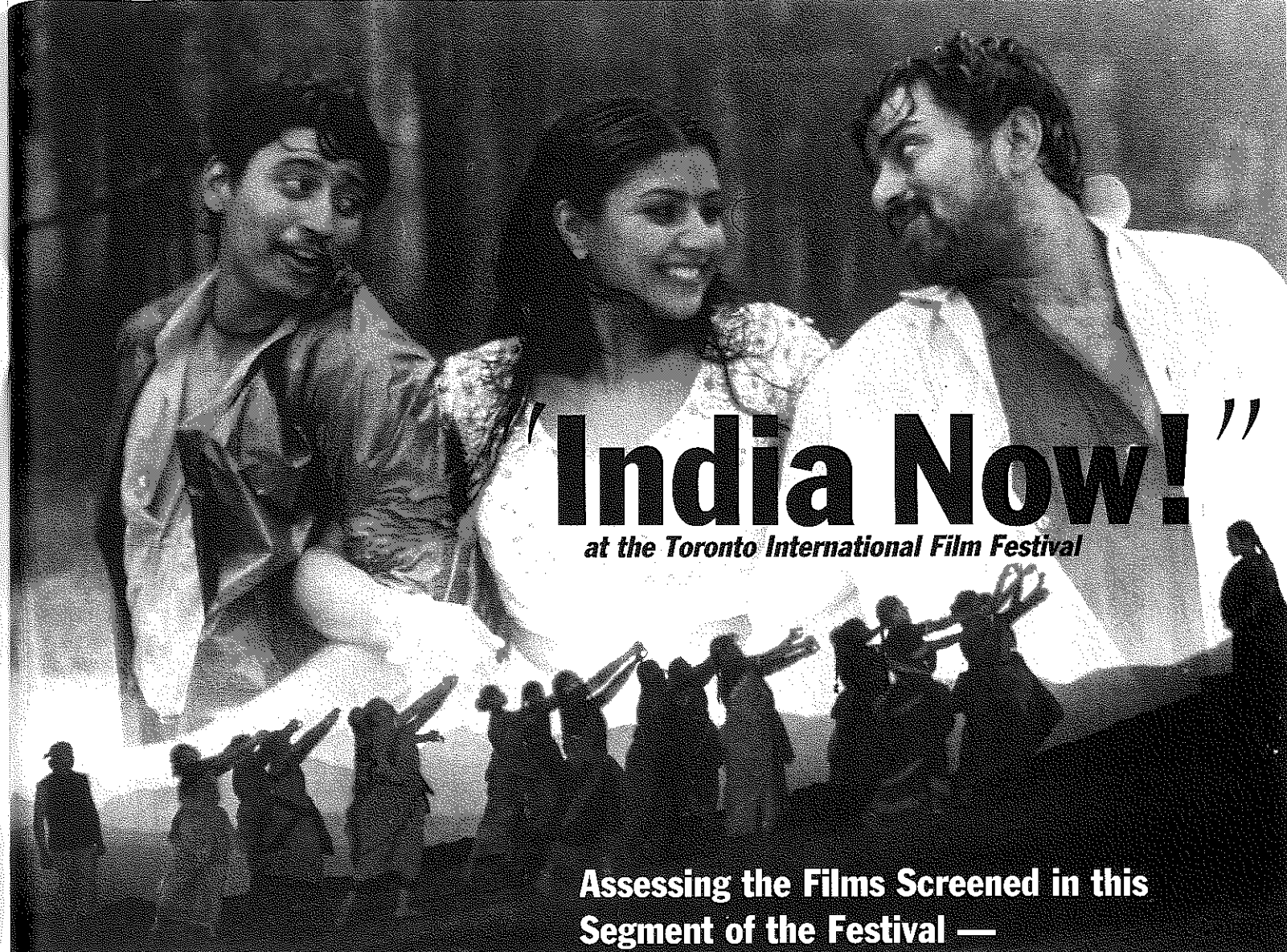
The future is murder. It's a bit shallow. If that were the message only in *Natural*

Born Killers, we could dismiss it. But it's cropping up across genres, throughout various media in many "First World" cultures. In one of the last songs in the film, Leonard Cohen warns that "the blizzard of the world has overcrossed the threshold and overturned the order of the soul."

Unfortunately, artists are more interested in representing the crumbling of the old order than in imagining the construction of new and better ones.

José Arroyo is a lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Warwick.

Stills courtesy of Cinematheque Ontario. p.10: *Requiem pour un beau sans-cœur*. p.11: *Natural Born Killers*, *Serial Mom*. p.14: *Natural Born Killers*



India Now!"

at the Toronto International Film Festival

Assessing the Films Screened in this Segment of the Festival — Hits, Misses... and Programming Oversights

by STEVE PEREIRA

There was an unfortunate tendency towards the exotic impulse: advertising copy that offered cinema from "far away lands"; press conferences that were heavy on atmosphere (sitar music wafting through air pungent with the smell of samosas) but very short on substance; program notes that evoked "caravans and elephants and sumptuous cloth"; introductions to films that invoked a colonial legacy (Noah Cowan introducing the film *Bollywood* to the audience as "the jewel in the crown" of the program!). Then there was an inexplicable lack of work from women filmmakers—of the twenty-three directors represented, just two were women—an embarrassing ratio given the number of women now producing exciting new work in India. And ultimately there was nothing particularly exciting about the work presented. This was surely not

the best that India has to offer. I do believe the programmers, though, when they say they chose "the very best films we could find." The question is a matter of who was doing the looking.

What the India Now! program at the Festival did offer, as promised, was a representative sampling of the types or genres of work that are now being produced in India. Separated into three rather broad categories, there was the commercial, mainstream cinema as seen in the work of Mani Rathnam; the independent art cinema, as in Goutam Ghose (*The Kite*) or Adoor Gopalakrishnan (*Servile*); and finally the independent documentary scene, the best-known exponent of which is probably Anand Patwardhan (*Father, Son, and the Holy War*).

On the commercial front, for the past couple of decades India has been leading the world in film production, with the commercial film mills spinning out an average of eight hundred films a year. Consider that, on any one day, a film star in the

BORDER

commercial film industry will go from a morning shoot for one film, to an afternoon shoot for another, and a night shoot for the third. The next day will see a similar schedule for a completely different set of films. Commercial films have become the mainstay of Indian popular culture, both in India and in diasporic Indian communities from Nairobi to Frankfurt. Bombay, centre of Hindi production, is still the centre of the commercial film industry in spite of the fact that films are now being made in all the major languages used in the country, and the southern states, including Tamil Nadu, now produce the largest number of films.

It is a credit to the programmers of the festival that, in a field dominated by Hindi production, they should choose to focus on the work of the prolific and accomplished Tamil filmmaker,

audience they wish to reach is rural and/or urban working class."

While there was a strong showing of independent work in terms of numbers at the festival, the selection was a mixed bag which worked with varying degrees of success. Goutam Ghose, for instance, whose exquisite *Boatman on the River Padma* screened at last year's Festival, disappointed with this year's entry *Patang (The Kite)* despite the stellar performances from a renowned trio of actors: the talented, ubiquitous duo of Shabana Azmi and Om Puri, here with Indian heartthrob, Shatrughan Sinha. Azmi plays a cleaning woman, a widow who is having an affair with the leader of a local gang (Om Puri). Her teenage son, Somra—country naïveté personified—spends his days flying his kite above the grimy smog of the small mining town. Things get complicated

when, as Somra gets drawn into the gang's activities, a new police inspector (Shatrughan Sinha) comes into town determined to clean it up and a swarm of politicians get caught up in the resultant machinations. As with *Boatman*, Ghose's film works best in its character study, in the early part of the film as it focuses on the lives of the widow and her son and the small defeats and victories of their lives.

Unfortunately, a third of the way through, the film changes its scope, attempts a satirization of small-town bureaucracy and gets mired in a

melodramatic tangle that never quite sorts itself out.

On the other hand, *Charachar (Shelter of the Wings)*, Buddhadeb Dasgupta's film, is eminently more satisfying. Again working within the premise of a rural/urban dichotomy, *Charachar* is a sensitive, affecting story of a birdcatcher in rural Bengal. Lakinder, in the best rural tradition, (see *Somra*, above) is a simple, honest, naive man. He is the descendant of generations of birdcatchers who catch exotic birds in the forests of Bengal to sell in Calcutta markets. Deeply affected by the death of his only child who buried a dead bird to grow a "bird blossom tree" the day before he died, Lakinder begins setting free more birds than he sells and he finds himself becoming more and more attached to the birds he is supposed to capture. Faced with impoverishment and unable to understand his preoccupation with birds, his wife begins an affair with a motorcycle-driving townsman and eventually leaves Lakinder. Alone, he begins to retreat into his world of birds until, in the final ethereal scene, he is enveloped by his family of birds. Beautifully shot, *Charachar* has the blend of lyricism and realism of the best of the poetic realist tradition. Shots are languid, the lighting moody, there's lots of evocative play with light and shadow.

Other films were a great deal less sentimental or nostalgic in their depictions of rural life, opting instead for depictions of lives of casual and often deliberate brutality, portraits of the dark undercurrents that permeate village life. K. P. Sasi's *Ilayam Mullum (Leaves and Thorns)* is a case in point, though it suffered a great deal from its overwhelming earnestness. Sasi gets points for subject matter: an examination of the oppressive patriarchal life of a small village. Like Ghose, his strength lies in capturing the small details of village life and in the details of character. Using the beautiful Kerala landscape as a backdrop, the film

focuses on four young women who work in the same weaving centre. Close friends, they have their small rebellions against the relentless sexism of the world they inhabit: sabotaging a potential arranged marriage, fighting back at the sexual harassment by local layabouts. But as Sasi shows it, the traditions of patriarchy are so ingrained and so pervasive that the women are completely consumed by it. One of the women goes through with her arranged marriage, is abused and kills herself. Ostracized by the village for acts of petty rebellion, two others are also driven to suicide. There is obviously an issue at stake here, and there is a story to tell, but the sheer relentlessness of the message makes it difficult to respond to the film. Sasi's attempt to salvage the film by imposing a coda that has the men go through an attack of remorse is ultimately unconvincing. Assuming that systemic oppression invokes guilt in the perpetrators is simplistic on one end of the scale, optimistic on the other.

Much more nuanced and far more interesting is Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Servile*, winner of the international critics' prize at the International Film Festival of India. Gopalakrishnan's earlier film *The Walls*, a poignant tale of a romance between an imprisoned writer and a woman heard but never seen on the other side of a wall, was screened at the 1990 Toronto Festival. Set in a small village in Kerala, *Servile* is a study in character, character shaped to a large part by caste, economic and power structures. Tommi is a migrant eking out his squatter's existence, until he is forced into becoming the dogsbody for a local landlord—a man given to drunken rages and extreme physical brutality, including the continual rape of Tommi's wife. When things look like they cannot get any worse, the landlord gets Tommi involved in a plot to kill the landlord's own wife and uses him to help in what is ultimately a botched escape. *Servile* is a fascinating film on a number of levels. It is an absorbing look at the hierarchal dynamics of village life and at the development of power relationships. Particularly interesting is its focus on a protagonist who is alternately repulsive and pathetic. Even as the abuse escalates, and his own life becomes more and more fraught with danger, Tommi seems to get increasingly attached to the tyrant he serves, sycophantically grateful for the small kindnesses offered him. Among other things, this dynamic makes for an interesting metaphor for colonial relationships.

Speaking of colonial relationships and another take on the rural/urban dichotomy: As a preface to Dev Benegal's *English, August*, I would like to offer two quotations. The first one is from Mahmud Jamal, who, in a commentary on Hanif Kureishi and *My Beautiful Launderette (Artrage, 1987, Autumn 1987)*, says, "Neo-orientalism best describes the way the Asian community is incorporated within contemporary culture by Asian intellectuals who have been laundered by the British university system." The second is a quotation from the novel by Upamanyu Chatterjee on which the film was based. The speaker is a character in the novel named Sathe, a political cartoonist. In the novel he is a sardonic voice of reason; in the film, however, he comes across as being something of a cynical buffoon. Sathe describes a cartoon he is drawing, which shows a man sitting at a typewriter with the Statue of Liberty in the distance: "I wanted to suggest an Indian

writer writing about India, after having spent many years abroad, or living there. There are hundreds of them—well, if not hundreds, at least twenty-five. I find these people absurd, full with one mixed-up culture and writing about another, what kind of audience are they aiming at. That's why their India is just not real, a place of fantasy, or of confused metaphysics, a sub-continent of goons. All their Indians are caricatures. Why is that. Because



Leaves and Thorns, directed by K. P. Sasi

there really are no universal stories, because each language is an entire culture." I don't believe this second quotation was actually used in the film, but I do believe that Mr. Benegal, who adapted, produced and directed the film (and who spent a great deal of time in the States), should have been paying attention.

English, August is a sort of contemporary picaresque Indian

This was surely not the best that India has to offer. I do believe the programmers, though, when they say they chose "the very best films we could find." The question is a matter of who was doing the looking.

Mani Rathnam. We are talking about commercial films here—often engaging, but as formulaic and as star-driven as any Stallone, Schwarzenegger or Cruise vehicle. Except that, never to do anything by halves, any one Indian commercial film will be a combination of a number of Hollywood formulae: drama/action/thriller/romance/comedy—that it is a musical is a given. While there is an overt attempt to engage in contemporary socio-political issues (as Rathnam does with the politically volatile Kashmiri issue in *Roja*, or with the issue of arranged marriage in *Mouna Ragam*), as with most commercial films, the issues tend to become grist for a cinematic mill that reduces everything to personal, individual, dramatic action. For those not weaned on such films, they are definitely an acquired taste. For those who grew up with them, you might hate yourself, but they are an absolute delight.

The independent cinema—the art house cinema circuit—is, as in the independent arena anywhere, an attempt to provide an alternative, in this case, to the dominant "song-and-dance" film. Ranging in its inspirations from the auteur school of filmmaking to a social-realist imperative, the films are seen as a site both for formal experimentation and for social critique: a cinema of social significance and artistic sincerity. In her recent book, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987*, Sumita S. Charkravarty says of the "new cinema" that it has an interest in linear narrative, "realistic: *mise-en-scène*," psychological portrayal of character, the "motivated" use of songs and dances (as and when required by the context of the film), explicit scenes of sexuality, and a disenchantment with the workings of the Indian political (social) system. She also notes that "one of the ironies of India's new cinema is that while the filmmakers belong, for the most part, to a middle-class English educated elite, the

film . Agastya (anglicized to August) Sen is the son of the Governor of the State of Bengal. Born into a world of urban, post-colonial privilege, he has been educated in the finest schools and brought up in the cosmopolitan whirl of Delhi and Calcutta. As is typical of his class, who speak and think in English, his range of reference is almost completely western—he invokes *Twin Peaks* on occasion, lipsynchs to Queen (done while driving, à la *Wayne's World*), uses Marcus Aurelius for his daily dose of wisdom from the classics. Just out of university, August has joined the Indian Administrative Service—the most influential and powerful cadre of civil servants in the country, the governing elite. As the film begins, August is sent off for a year's training to Madna, a small town in the backwaters of central India, where for the first time he comes into contact with rural India. An innocent abroad, brought into contact with the "real" India for the first time, August is in for all sorts of surprises, and, unable to deal with his reality, retreats into a world of daydreams and masturbatory fantasies.

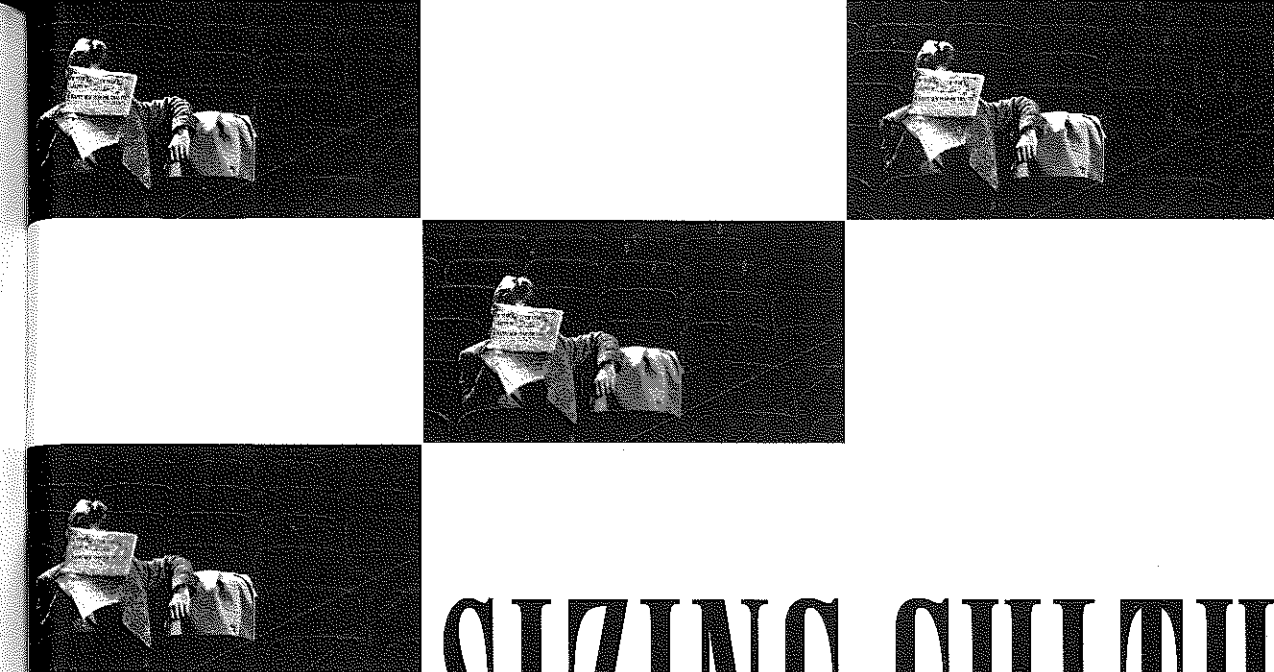
My quarrel with the film, in the first instance, is that the story is told from the perspective of a hip, urban westernized Indian and is designed to identify with equally hip, urban westernized Indians and Westerners. Everybody else comes off as being hopelessly provincial. It is a town populated by pompous bureaucrats and sycophantic minions, bored housewives, comic-book policemen and sinister servants, a nation of caricatures and "goons," to quote Sathe. What is particularly insidious about this is that the film has deliberately taken out the nuances and subtleties of the novel to achieve this effect. In the novel, August's central concern is the state of ennui that afflicts him—he has no real ambitions, no desires, and, recognizing this, chafes at his own paralyzing inertia. That is the reason for his retreat into himself. He is also fully conscious of and uncomfortable with his alienation from his own culture, but his level of perception that never translates to the screen. He says of Bhatia, a school chum also serving his time with the service in Madna, who is besotted with Western culture, that he is "just one more urban Indian bewitched by America's hard sell in the Third World." That line never makes it into the film; instead Bhatia is presented as a further validation of August's perceptions of the town and its people, and rural India by implication. *English, August* was made for Western audiences. It was shot in English (with the help of French financing) and there is no way that the Indian censor board is going to pass the film—with its nudity and salacious sex—to the Indian commercial market. It will probably be a great success in the West—unfortunately.

Another film designed for the West and the elite art-house circuit is *Bandit Queen* by Shekhar Kapur. It was perhaps one of the most controversial films at the Festival. In what is probably a Festival first, there were reports of the real life heroine of the film threatening to sue the film's producers and the Festival if the film were screened. Word was, depending on who was talking, that she had either refused to see the film or that the producers had refused to allow her to see the film. *Bandit Queen* tells the story of Phoolan Devi—a sort of contemporary Robin Hood. Escaping from a history of poverty and abuse, Phoolan Devi

became the leader of a gang of men who led daring raids on towns and villages, and thwarted government forces for years. By the time she was finally negotiated into a surrender in 1983, she had achieved cult status and the title Phoolan Devi (Goddess of Flowers). She is now married to an MP and is running for office herself. The film is based on her bestselling autobiography and is a tremendous film in many ways, carrying an emotional punch from the opening frame that never lets up until the credits roll. Seema Biswas as Phoolan Devi does a tremendous job in what from all accounts was a harrowing role. Apparently she was so traumatized by a crucial scene in the film, where she is paraded naked in front of an entire village, that shooting had to be suspended for four months. The film is, it should be acknowledged, a sensationalized thriller. The energy of the film is fuelled by the sheer emotional rage of the sexually ravaged Phoolan Devi. The profound social and political circumstances—the tensions between castes, the fight over land that had as much to do with the gang warfare—are given short shrift. But then the film is really no more than what it was meant to be: an action thriller.

Of the documentaries, Anand Patwardhan's was the most compelling. *Father, Son, and the Holy War* is Patwardhan's ambitious follow-up to his 1992 documentary, *In the Name of God*—the vibrant film that documented the religious wars that erupted in 1990. *Father, Son, and the Holy War* attempts to trace the roots of the fundamentalist violence that has become so much a part of the Indian landscape. The documentary is divided into two parts; Part One, "Trial by Fire," refers to the fires that are burning up Indian society. In one chilling section Patwardhan interviews a brother and other men related to a woman who committed sati—the ritual self-immolation of widows that is now illegal in India, but that is becoming more popular wrapped as it is in fundamentalist fervour. The men have deified the sister for, in their view, her act of religious conviction. In another section, the filmmaker interviews a social worker who was savagely attacked and her husband killed in an apparently random attack. Punctuated by charred scenes of carnage, this section is disturbing, compelling; it is Patwardhan at his best. Part Two, "Hero Pharmacy," is more ambitious and works less well. Here Patwardhan looks at the cult of the machismo that has always been present in Indian society, but that is now taking on sinister ramifications. He looks at the roots of violence that have historic antecedents in the warrior society of the past and are now being newly affirmed by the Schwarzenegger/Stallone/Hulk Hogan school of machismo that has made its inroads into Indian culture. Patwardhan's over-all conceit is an interesting one, if a little facile. Five thousand years of patriarchy does not fully explain the sudden explosion of fundamentalist fervour that is now erupting all over the world. His skill as always lies in his capturing of the kinetic intensity and fervour of life on the street. If you are looking for real images of India, look to Patwardhan.

Steve Pereira is the co-ordinator of Desh Pardesh, a South Asian cultural festival and a writer and artist living in Toronto.



DOWN SIZING CULTURE

In my current copy of the *Toronto Star*, I find the following item:

The most prominent casualty at the Jewish Community Centre is the Leah Posluns Theatre, whose entire 1994-5 season has been axed. The theatre, formerly designated as North York's official theatre, has been shut down indefinitely for the first time in at least 17 years.

The main reason is that JCC directors have spent a \$2.4 million endowment fund set up for the theatre to pay the operating costs of the centre. Bernie Ghert, president of the Jewish Federation, which is trying to sort out the centre's financial situation, says that without this support, the theatre has now become a serious financial burden. . . . Sources say staff at the Leah Posluns Theatre are outraged at what has happened. They claim the theatre has always been solvent, and the endowment fund—capital raised or donated by businessman Wilfred Posluns—should never have been touched.

(Henry Mietkiewicz, *Toronto Star*, August 28, 1994)

by Ioan Davies