

RANA CHAKRABORTY



Morning with Midnight's Child

Time spent with Satya Bhabha, the actor cast as **SALEEM SINAI** in Deepa Mehta's *Midnight's Children*, offers **MEHER MARFATIA** revealing rushes of the awaited film in an exclusive interview

If Salman Rushdie confessed surprise at the global — and by now eternal — hurrah for his opus which Jonathan Cape publishers once clearly dismissed, 30 years later a startled Satya Bhabha realised he'd snagged its cinematic hero's role just as unexpectedly.

The novel was birthed after an exploratory 1975 journey of 15-hour bus rides in India exhausted the author's advance on his first novel *Grimus*. Cut to young Satya listening to actress Ellen Bernstein's Q&A with Deepa Mehta at a New York show of *Heaven on Earth*. He all but fell off his back row seat to hear the director announce, "There's the young man who will be Saleem in my next movie." The auditorium swivelled to stare at the hooded figure pointed out. "I sat up from being scrunched under my jacket, the news was unreal!" he grins. "That's Deepa, relying on her instinctive feeling of a person. She speaks and films spontaneously." Not dreaming he would play what

must surely reign among Indo-English fiction's most challenging protagonists, Satya met Mehta in Toronto a couple of years back. There was casual chat of Bombay, a brief recording of audio and video material he thought no more about. Yet he emerged the choice of both Mehta and Rushdie, who has done the screenplay adaptation. Getting the 27-year-old to portray Saleem aged 13 to 30, the Booker-feted writer pronounced they hit on "the perfect blend of gravity and gumption". Satya in turn says, "I don't know if anyone but Salman could take liberties with the text..."

Where we sit in the ancestral Cuffe Parade home he visits for the wedding of his cousin, daughter of an uncle actually referred to in *Midnight's Children* (industrialist Cyrus Guzder as Cyrus the Great), offers instant throwback to a lineage ensuring London-born Satya firmly belongs to the arts. Here a fortnight ago, his father Dr Homi Bhabha, Director of the Humanities Center at Harvard University, received word of being

awarded the Padma Bhushan. The actor speaks of his Jewish mother Jacqueline, an attorney and human rights lecturer who lived in Mumbai for 10 years, devoting long weekends to her three children's music practice. Satya picked up the cello at three, a skill he still showcases with the band He's My Brother She's My Sister.

Summer holidays in the city were crowded with swims at the Breach Candy pool and protecting potato chips from crows at the Willingdon Club lawn. The more serious connect to Mumbai, thanks to this plum part, is a chance he relishes. "*Midnight's Children* is a big rite-of-passage book for my family, with its freewheeling world to fall into, the myths deeply ingrained." To meaningfully soak in Saleem's milieu, Mehta encouraged

him to devour Nehru's *Discovery of India*, Ramachandra Guha's *India after Gandhi*, Lapiere's *Freedom at Midnight* and Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City*. Learning Hindi, he took a contextually authentic recce for six weeks, "trying to be more Mumbaikar", armed with Rushdie's accounts of Dhobi Ghat and fishing shanties balancing descriptions of Malabar Hill and Warden Road.

Shot in Sri Lanka, Mehta's mega movie releases this year. Mumbai was nixed as rampant congestion has left few spaces looking free enough to suggest locations capturing the 1940s-to-1970s period. How the vast sweep of defining Partition-to-Emergency politics, life-changing magic and high-voltage antics of larger than life characters peopling

Rushdie's bold narrative will unfold makes this a most anticipated production. The telekinetic powers shared between special *Midnight's Children* are rendered wonderfully nuanced, promises our celluloid Saleem — "No fear of *X-Men* stuff there". Satya adds, "Watching Deepa work is fascinating. Her awareness of human truth is a gift to actors. She unflinchingly searches the canvas in delicate detail for veracity of textured emotions."

This role follows screen appearances including on-the-sets baptism with Sean Penn for *Fair Game* and an edgy role in *Scott Pilgrim vs the World*. It's a fuller folio of stage credits for the multidisciplinary artiste currently based in Los Angeles. From the Anna Scher Drama School to being accepted by the National Youth Theatre, the London years saw Satya assistant direct for companies like Shunt, The Clod Ensemble and The Red Room. Moving to the US, he spent every evening at the theatre department in the University of Chicago's Lab School. Practically living in its costume shop, he hung lights, built sets and became addicted to strong physical, visceral approaches to theatre.

When the family settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts, things went further upswing. At Yale he read theatre studies, art history and anthropology, becoming one of two undergraduates to direct a Yale Dramat main stage show in the University Theatre. In New York, he created and performed *Rum and Cash (In Love & War)*, a cabaret show on the Thirty Years War using a fresh composition of Brecht's songs from *Mother Courage*.

Seeing Satya pace his grandmother's hallway with bridled energy for photographs, one can't help recalling lines — albeit in less menacing vein — from the book he soon brings alive: "We shall be watching your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own."

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