



When the Gods Came Down to Earth

Srinivas Krishna

CANADA, 2008

Film and sound installation

Production Company: **Divani Films Inc.**

Producer: **Sherrie Johnson**

Choreographer: **Janak Khendry**

Director of Photography: **Rhett Morita**

Costume Designer: **Milan Shahani**

Visual Effects Producer: **Nancy Nor**

Visual Effects Director: **Paul Wollenzein**

Animation Art Director: **Peter Nalli**

Sound: **Debashish Sinha**

Performers: **Uupekha Jain, Biplob Kar,**

Hiroshi Miyamoto, Mala Pisharody,

Rajesh Pisharody

Production: **Divani Films Inc.,**
401 Richmond Street West, Suite 385,
Toronto ON M5V 3A8 Canada.
info@divanifilms.com

Curated by Noah Cowan and
 Francisco Alvarez

Presented by the Royal Ontario Museum's
 Institute for Contemporary Culture in
 association with Future Projections

Hindu mass iconography – those eye-poppingly colourful representations of Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesh and their cohorts – are the subject of Canadian filmmaker Srinivas Krishna's first major public installation project. On screens dynamically interacting with the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal at the Royal Ontario Museum, these gods literally come alive. Utilizing actors and computer-generated animation, each god engages in their own characteristic activity, based on the iconic poses captured in the zillions of cards, stickers and posters that populate South Asian shops and homes around the world. The effect is a discomfiting but spiritually moving experience for the viewer, providing an unexpected intimacy with these unique objects of contemplation.

And yet there is also something playful, almost campy, about *When the Gods Came Down to Earth*. These images are a kind of Indian pop art, brazen rethinks of ancient sacred concepts that only began appearing in India when printing presses became widely distributed several decades ago. They share with neon bleeding hearts and Las Vegas cruciforms a crass sincerity about faith that elicits titters from intellectuals yet has undeniable power for their devotees. Krishna's work on this project – sensual, tactile – questions that dichotomy.

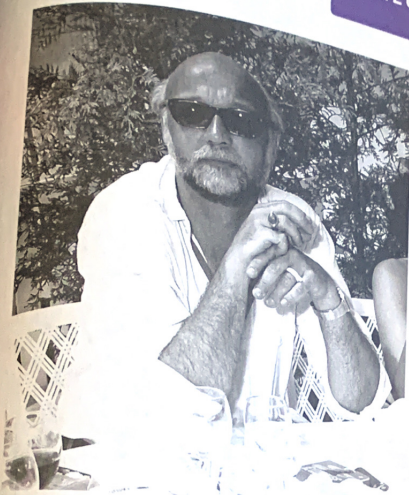
This area of contested semiotics is a fertile playground for Krishna. His provocative films also ask questions about how artists might confront the sanctities of Hindu and South Asian cultural experience and

the European "multicultural" response. (In fact his name, Krishna, itself is the core cultural trope in *Masala*, his first feature.) He even extends that conceptual playfulness to the art work's location, nestled as it is in the bosom of Daniel Liebskind's reaction to nineteenth-century bourgeois Toronto. It is as though Krishna's gods have come to earth only to ask: "Are we post-modern enough for you yet?"

■ Noah Cowan



Srinivas Krishna was born in Madras, India, grew up in Toronto and received an M.F.A. in cinematography from Temple University. His features have had their premieres at this Festival as well as at Cannes, Sundance and the International Film Festival of India. His films include *Masala* (91), *Lulu* (96), *Forever* (99) and *A Tryst With Destiny* (05). He has also directed dramatic and performing-arts television programmes including *Burning Skin*, *Spicy Fusion* and *The Smart Woman Survival Guide*.



Few people have shaped and defined the Toronto International Film Festival like David Overbey. He was a programmer from the organization's second year until his final Festival ten years ago, shortly before his death in December 1998, and is credited with discovering some of the major talent of our age. John Woo, Wong Kar-wai, Gaspar Noé, Tsui Hark, Charles Burnett, Deepa Mehta, Jean-Jacques Beineix, Santosh Sivan, Guillermo del Toro, Paul Verhoeven, Lino Brocka, Jacques Nolot and the late Edward Yang, among many others, count David as the first serious international programmer to believe in them. Some of these directors premiered their films here, others at the Semaine de la Critique at the Cannes Film Festival during David's long tenure as a member. His critical writing was forceful and direct. In many ways, he pioneered the classic "programme note" – because of course the Europeans don't actually write such things – erudite advertorials creating enthusiasm and sparking intellectual debate. The filmmakers he supported were able to use his writing and good name to move their careers forward; it offered a reason for others to invest, financially and spiritually, in these artists. He also insisted that this Festival adopt an open, autonomous structure for its programming team, a model that is now copied the world over.

But David's influence does not stop there. An American installed in Paris, he brought international glamour to the city of Toronto at a time when it was sorely needed. He and another transplanted Yank, Jay Scott, revolutionized how film was written about in this city. They believed that intelligent criticism and a sense of play were not mutually exclusive – and, in part, created the voracious cinema audience with which we are blessed today. Many of us who began in journalism (Cameron Bailey and myself being two ready

examples, as well as one of our guests, Joan Dupont of the *International Herald Tribune*) found our voices by reading David's prose and sharing with him a passion for cinema.

David was also about as much fun as one person can be. A towering, heavy-set man, he thundered through life, clutching an ever-burning Gauloise and knocking back a vodka or seven before the dinner hour, with a handsome, much younger man never too far away. He was a great raconteur and made the movies all the more magic with each conjured memory. (My favourite involves John Waters and Pia Zadora – but ask about that one another time.)

To celebrate this most extraordinary life and his unparalleled contribution to the cinema, our city and this Festival, we have asked three special guests to present and discuss films that David championed. The fact that one is an Indian filmmaker working in Canada, another is an American-born journalist living in France (who will speak about David's best friend, a Filipino filmmaker) and the last is among the finest living British filmmakers should speak to the extraordinary range of David's curatorial abilities.

David would have loved revisiting these films with three of the greatest storytellers I have ever encountered. So we welcome you all to celebrate a most extraordinary life at the movies with some of the cinema that inspired him the most.

■ Noah Cowan

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