



Rainbow city – the cast of *Brick Lane* enjoy London

## Brick Lane - Going into worlds that aren't your own

“First and foremost, I am a Londoner,” says *Brick Lane* director Sarah Gavron, “and I think the most interesting London stories are those that come from immigrants into this great, volatile melting pot.” Sarah’s grandmother first came to London in the 1930s to escape the rising tide of anti-semitism in her native Berlin. “My own family is still pregnant with that story about coming to a new world.”

Culture shock and the challenges of integrating one’s own life in the face of conflicting cultural imports is what *Brick Lane* is all about. A best-selling novel by London novelist Monica Ali, the book charts the struggle for social autonomy of a young Bangladeshi woman thrown abruptly into the bustling multicultural world of East London. *Brick Lane* sold over 300,000 copies and seemed to catch something of a London zeitgeist around the complexities of immigration and the highly-mixed urban culture of the metropolis. But the depiction of the lead female character’s struggle to throw off the shackles of an arranged marriage wasn’t to the taste of all. “It exposed the fear of men of a particular age - the social and religious conservatives in Britain’s South Asian communities,” says Himesh Kar, who oversaw the production for the UK Film Council.

The strength of feeling against the book was revived when word got around that it was being made into a film. In an incident which threatened to throw the film’s production into chaos, the crew received threats as they prepared to shoot a scene on London’s Brick Lane, the eponymous thoroughfare of the book’s title. “The place is intensely symbolic,” Sarah remarks. “The mosque there was once a synagogue and, before that, a church.” After relocating, the production also had to endure a demonstration by a small group of men who objected to alleged scenes in a script which none of them had seen. One of the objections concerned a scene which hints at the lead character’s husband’s prejudice against another Bangladeshi community. “For one of the characters to express

racial prejudice, that was realism, not ideological criticism. We didn't set out to make a politically-correct tract about multi-cultural London," reflects Sarah.

These incidents attracted disproportionate levels of press attention, prompting *Brick Lane* author Monica Ali to write a long, well-argued piece in the UK's *The Guardian* newspaper denouncing media hype. The events were especially hard on the Bangladeshi members of the *Brick Lane* crew who felt angry and pressurised by what they saw as the censorious pressures of members of their own community.

But the agitation did not deflect the film's director from the all-absorbing task of creating a movie which would look and feel genuine and true to the communities it depicted. "I was a little daunted at first, because this wasn't my own community. Of course, I could relate to the universal story behind the characters, but I wanted to make sure all clichés were avoided." Sarah decided to appoint two associate directors. The grade of 'associate director' does not actually exist in the mainstream British industry but is an established currency in Bollywood. Ruhul Amin and Sangeeta Datta were respectively from Bangladesh and Bengal. Not only were they both experienced in the medium of film, but they were also able to advise Sarah on chiselling into the texture of the film those finer details that make up cultural authenticity. "Ruhul was here each day," recalls Sarah. "He would sit by the monitor shot after shot, ensuring that everything from accents, the way characters' homes were laid out, the things they ate, how they would pray, all these elements, actually reflected reality." Sangeeta, whom Sarah had met while looking around India to cast certain characters, also provided copious notes on the script.

A similar level of commitment was brought to casting the film. The trip to Bangladesh served Sarah's development well not only as an opportunity to find the right actors but also as a way of soaking up the landscape and atmosphere of a world that shaped her characters' psychology. In choosing the two young women for the lead roles, she was helped by local filmmaker Tareque Masud and by a British-born casting agent. "Our lead, Tannishtha Chatterjee, was Bengali, but her grandparents came from East Pakistan. She grew up in Kolkatta but now lives in Mumbai. The fact that she didn't know England well was a bonus for the film because it made her sense of displacement more tangible and spontaneous," says Sarah. The cast was completed by local East End South Asians which included non-professionals.

The film earned £850,000 from the cinemas in the UK. Although its performance was a little below the expectations of its makers and distributor, it was nevertheless a healthy result for an independent British film tackling a difficult subject. DVD sales have been robust since *Brick Lane* reached the stores and the film was premiered on television by Channel 4, one of the UK broadcasters most committed to film. Film4, the film arm of Channel 4, was the largest co-investor in *Brick Lane* and developed the project with Sarah.

"I want to contribute to the world, not harm it," Sarah reflects. "The immigration experience resonated with me and *Brick Lane* was a chance to play my part in building cultural bridges in this disparate jumble of cultures that is contemporary London is."