

Casting off stereotypes

Jennifer Jaffrey set up a casting agency in India for foreign film-makers, discovered many Asian actors and is now based at Pinewood. **Patrick Newley** finds out more

A leading casting director and theatrical agent, Jennifer Jaffrey has worked alongside some of the world's greatest film directors and producers including Bernardo Bertolucci and Ismail Merchant.

Married to the acclaimed Indian actor Saeed Jaffrey for more than 20 years, she was the first English woman to set up a casting service in India to supply Asian actors for international film productions. Later she set up her own agency in the UK where many of her clients are Asian actors working in both theatre and television.

An amiable and knowledgeable figure, she talks about her work in her office at the famous Pinewood Film Studios in Hertfordshire. "I didn't really start out to be a casting director," she says with a smile. "I had worked for 18 years at the BBC, mainly in production and research. I wasn't ambitious but I had an eye for talent and new ideas – not all of them appreciated. I once put forward a proposal for Madhur Jaffrey – Saeed's first wife – to do a cookery series. A man at the BBC said, 'Oh, Jennifer, nobody is interested in Indian cookery, let alone want to watch a programme about it'. I pestered him for years – and finally they made it. It was sold worldwide and made Madhur a household name.

"I suppose my break came when Saeed started to go to India to make films like *The Far Pavilions* and *Gandhi* and I went with him. In 1985 we set up home in Bombay and a Los Angeles producer told me that what was needed in India was a casting service for international films. They didn't have casting directors in India then. They didn't even have *Spotlight*. I took the job on and regarded it first as a research job. I knew what was required, I knew what the standards of acting should be. I got to know all the actors and I went to see plays in all the different Indian languages."

She began casting for Merchant-Ivory

films such as *The Deceivers*, starring Pierce Brosnan and Shashi Kapoor, and later French, Swiss and American films, rapidly earning herself a reputation for her shrewd eye for talent. "Jennifer brings the kind of forthright, western approach to her work that is essential for a casting agent," says Merchant. "She applies standards of selection which western directors working in India appreciate and rely on."

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"Casting is an intuitive thing," says Jaffrey. "One of the most important things is that the director must have complete trust in you. They want to know that you will be sensible with your suggestions."

In 1989 she set up Culture Club, Bombay, a project where she selected and arranged for British performers such as Ben Kingsley and Susannah York to perform in Bombay, now Mumbai. The same year she returned to the UK where she continued casting as well as setting up her own agency.

"Saeed wanted to change agents and he suggested that I represent him," she says.



"I started to take on other actors as well and about a third of them were Asian. I knew Asian actors and, more importantly, I understood the culture."

Does she feel Asian actors get a better deal in film and TV shows nowadays?

"When Saeed first started in the seventies, Asian actors in the UK were usually cast in jokey roles or they had English actors black up in shows like *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*. I think there are definitely more opportunities for Asian and black actors today. Television companies will always consider Asian or black actors for roles written as English. There might be a role, say, in *Casualty* for a John Smith that's written as English but could easily be played by an Asian. And nowadays Asian actors work in theatre doing Shakespeare and the classics, so it has improved a lot. I think Saeed made people realise that Asian actors are as good as English actors."

Jaffrey discovered Asian actors such as Ayesha Darker (*Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*), Nitin Ganatra, Archie Panjabi (*East is East*) and Indira Joshi but she was also responsible for the early careers of several English actors including Hannah Waterman (*EastEnders*).

Although fiercely loyal to her own discoveries she is critical of some young actors today. "Nowadays young actors want to make money and be famous quickly. They want their holidays abroad, they want their car and so on and because money is so important many of them take other jobs

outside the profession. That's fine if it's a job you can get away from but you often find actors who turn things down because of that other job that makes them more money. The way I see it, you're either an actor or not. It's a commitment, a way of life."

So what advice would she give to would-be stars?

"Most actors want to go into soaps when they leave drama school. In soaps young actors have to learn very quickly and be on the ball. I think they grow a lot as actors being in a soap but in the long run it's not going to enhance their career. It certainly doesn't hurt it but there is much more to acting than being in a soap. Young actors need a balanced CV, they need to work in the theatre as well. I've always given theatre actors a chance and I always did when I was casting in India. If they are good theatre actors then they will make the transition to television and films."

Although something of a fixture at Pinewood, the legendary film studios where everything from the *Carry On* films to classic British war movies were made, Jaffrey keeps her eye firmly on up and coming new talent.

"Showbusiness works both ways. "If an actor works hard then so must a casting director. I think it is terribly important to casting directors and agents to go and see actors in the theatre and fringe and find new talent. That's what it's all about. Supporting and nurturing new talent – and looking after it." ■

Jennifer Jaffrey – A Summary

1946: Born in London. After leaving school she works in a travel agency.

1963: Works as a production assistant on BBC Schools Radio and later as researcher on BBC Television documentary features.

1975: Creates programme *Madhur Jaffrey's Indian Cookery* (BBC). Works as PA to Saeed Jaffrey on films including *Gandhi*, *Jewel in the Crown*, *A Passage to India*, *The Far Pavilions*.

1980: Marries Saeed Jaffrey.

1985: Sets up casting agency in India for foreign film-makers. Casts for Merchant-Ivory films including *The Perfect Murder* and *The Deceivers* and international films *Manika*, *Manika*, *Bye Bye Blues*, *Masala*.

1989: Works as casting director in the UK. Sets up Culture Club, Bombay arranging for British celebrities to perform in Mumbai.

1991: Casts international films and TV series including *Mowgli – The Jungle Boy*, *Fire Within*, *Les Prix d'une femme*, *Fire in Paradise*, *The Storm*, *On Dangerous Ground* and *Guru in Seven*.

1993: Sets up Magnolia Management to represent British and Asian actors in UK and India.

2001: Casts Bernardo Bertolucci's *Ten Minute Order*

2006: Works as a casting director and establishes Jaffrey Kent Management Ltd based at Pinewood Studios, UK.