

Riding the Tiger is a personal story of the filmmaker's journey into self-identity



On the sets of The Rebel Queen

The star attraction

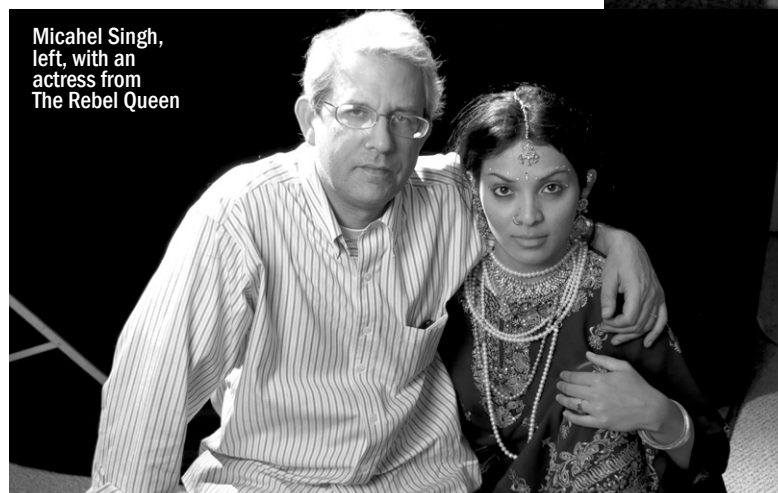
ARTHUR J PAIS

Michael Singh, a California-based filmmaker could become the most envied filmmaker at the Sikh Art Film Festival. He has three works at the New York event: *The Rebel Queen*, a feature film; *Uncommon Journeys*, a documentary, and *Riding the Tiger*, a work in progress.

"A festival of this nature gives a powerful platform to filmmakers from all over the world," says the writer, director and editor. Michael, who is of Sikh, Dutch and German origins, majored in film production at the University of Southern California. He also has a master's degree in Indian languages and civilization from the University of Chicago.

The teaser for *The Rebel Queen* asks: How could the daughter of an Indian dog kennel owner almost bring the British Empire to its knees? How did the Empire's brilliantly ruthless propaganda machine scramble to fight back against her?

The film looks at the British schemes in India and the role played by Punjab's Duleep Singh, who was installed as the ruler following his father's death and become a British ally, in giving the Kohinoor diamond to Queen Victoria. The youngest son of Ranjit Singh, Duleep was exiled to Britain at age 13 following the annexation of Punjab. He was befriended by the Queen; he had become a Christian.



Michael Singh, left, with an actress from The Rebel Queen

Despite his closeness to the British, he eventually decided to take back his kingdom, resulting in tragedy after tragedy. The biggest tragedy was meeting his mother, Jindar Kaur, who had become blind. For the most part, the film focuses on Jindan's escape from British captivity and her many betrayals.

In *Uncommon Journeys* Michael looks at four people who have taken a different path from traditional careers

and a Muslim in Lahore whose knowledge of Sikh history is formidable. He takes us to London to learn about Indi Kaur — a musician, composer and teacher, who is in her 20s and has become famous for her fusion music. The radical writer and human rights fighter Ajeet Kaur, and two DJ brothers in Scotland who strive to educate people about Sikhs are also profiled in the film.

And finally, there is Fakir Syed Aijazuddin, a descendent of Maharajah Ranjit Singh's most trusted minister Aijazuddin. "He has decoded a famous painting in Ranjit Singh's court," says Paul Johar, the festival chairman. "He has identified the people in the painting, and it took him a long

time to know about each person in the picture."

Riding the Tiger is a personal story of Michael's journey into self-identity. His story includes the aftermath of the attack by the Indian Army on the Golden Temple in 1984 and subsequent murder of then Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi at the hands of her bodyguards. It is also a

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The Abohar-Jodhpur passenger train, which snakes through Punjab towns like Pakki and Malout, picks up at least 60 people in Bhatinda as it goes through Haryana and Bikaner before reaching its destination. The 60 men and women who disembark at Bikaner are mostly agricultural workers or their kin in Punjab who either have cancer or are going for a check up.

"This film *Cancer Express* is very much a Sikh subject, but like so many other films we have been showing at the Sikh Film Festival in the last six years, this too has a larger story," says Paul Johar, a physician who is the chairman of the annual festival held in New York. "Indians across the country suffer from the consequences of industrial pollution and pesticides as in Punjab. But this happened in Punjab, a very prosperous state. Another film we are showing — *Harvest of Grief*, directed by Anwar Jamal — is also connected to the theme of *Cancer Express*. It shows how farmers in Punjab were driven to despair, how they became heavy borrowers and destitute, with many committing suicide."

The Sikh Art & Film Foundation, which sponsors the festival, helped filmmaker Reema Anand in the post-production of *Cancer Express*.

"The cotton belt, which gave life to many after the green revolution, suddenly turned into a monster, gobbling up many an innocent life," Anand says in the production notes. "The villagers could not understand the changed ecology and health scenario... Several deaths occurred in every village. As many as three generations were wiped out in single homes."

For a long time, she says, doctors could not diagnose the cause. Then patients began going to Acharya Tulsi Regional Cancer Treatment and Research Institute in Bikaner. According to scientist Ajay Tripathi, working with the Kheti Virasat Mission, spraying pesticides year after year had resulted in the poisoning of the water table.

The government is still reluctant to acknowledge the



From left, Teji Singh Bindra, president of the Sikh Art and Film Foundation; Paul Johar, chair of the film festival; Mandeep Sodi chair for finance; and Harmeet Bharara, the chair for the Heritage Gala

truth, Anand says, adding that in one village 20 people have died from pesticide-related cancer. "Young men, who should have been helping their fathers retire, are being carried on the Cancer Train to Bikaner by their parents," she says.

"Films of this nature can resonate with the audiences anywhere," Johar says. "They have appeal not only in India, but also with anyone who is worried about the harm we face because of pollution."

Another film that received a grant is Michael Singh's *Uncommon Journeys*, focusing on four Sikhs with unusual career choices.

The annual film festival not only looks at contemporary issues affecting the community across the globe, but also explores the well-known and little-known stories from Sikh history," says Teji Singh Bindra, president, SAFF.

For instance, Michael's feature film *Rebel Queen* is a

story of betrayal and identity loss set against the historic happenings in Punjab and England mostly in the second half of the 19th century.

The festival also gives away \$15,000 in prizes. "The amount may not be big, but it is an incentive," Johar says. "We hope when the economy improves, we will be able to produce a film each year, help short film and documentary makers, and increase the prize amount."

Each year dozens of new and established filmmakers from across the world, especially India, the United Kingdom, Canada and America seek funding, he says, adding "They know we have limited resources, but they are so passionate about their work, they keep on trying."

One filmmaker wants to make a documentary about a group of Sikh soldiers sent to defend the British border with Afghanistan in the 19th century "They knew they were not going to come back and their fears came true," he says.

Flying Sikhs — A History of Sikh Fighter Pilots, produced by the SAFF last year, has travelled to many film festivals.

Directed by Navdeep Kandola, it offered a lively history of the Sikh pilots who contributed to British success in World War I and World War II. "The history of the Sikhs who flew in the Royal Flying Core, the Royal Air Force and the Indian Air Force has been forgotten," Kandola wrote in the production notes. "Yet their bravery was recognized widely by the military and the public during the dark days of the London Blitz by the Nazis and the brutal Japanese invasion from the East."

It also told the story of the first Indian pilot who had sought to enlist with the British in WWI, Hardit Singh Malik. After the British rejected him, he sought to fight with the French air force. The only Indian pilot to survive the war, he went on to become PM of Patiala before

Indian independence and high commissioner to Canada and France after that.

"We are incredibly proud of this film," Bindra says.

While some of the festival dig into history, short films such as *Raising the Count* made by Rick Lin, look at history in the making. The film follows the SEVA Immigrant Community Advocacy Project as they work to raise the response rates of the under-represented communities of Richmond Hill for the United States census 2010.

"The film gives viewers a glimpse into the trials and tribulations of being community organizers," the filmmaker says. "It follows them through the task of educating the community about their rights to be represented and their right to a better life in the country that they call their home. It delves into the psyche of the community organizers to understand what drives them and why they do the work they do."

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story of how he had denied his Sikh heritage and passed for a white man for several years.

His stirring and at times scary story is set

against the backdrop of the bloodiest year in modern Sikh history. As Sikhs were killed in hundreds in Delhi following Gandhi's assassination, for three days, about 30 Sikh women and children hid in the bedroom of the Bishop of Delhi. Michael was among them.

Sikh history and contemporary issues have fascinated Michael for more than 15

years, and this is not the first time he has dabbled in it. His documentary *The Prisoner's Song* — a Sikh soldier captured during the First World War — was another example of this passion.

Michael's interests also range from Gospel music to the images of Muslims in America over the last century. Among his best known works — as a writer and associ-

ate producer — is the 1995 documentary *Power and the Glory* about the legendary Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, telecast every year during the Black History Month. He is currently working on *Valentino's Ghost* — a journey through more than a century of images of Muslims and Islam in the American media — as writer and director.