

Homos away from home

South Asian fest serves up a spicy Desh of queer culture

Story by Glenn Sumi

Photo by Rachel Kalhana James

the festival with the coolest name keeps getting bigger.

Desh Pardesh (Hindi for "home away from home") began four years ago as a two-day event featuring queer South Asian writers and filmmakers. Today it has mushroomed into a five-day phenomenon. Participants come from across Canada, the US and Britain — all to add spice to this masala of homo-friendly events, where sex and race meet art and politics.

"We've gotten really big," says co-coordinator Steve Pereira, who has spent the last eight months planning this year's Desh.

Although the festival now includes representation by South Asian women, the working class, the disabled and those living with HIV, it's core remains firmly queer.

Says Pereira, "We are defiantly and definitely gay and lesbian."

A casual look at this year's programme proves his point. Laid out like colourful dishes on a buffet table are dozens of queer events.

First on the menu is 24-year-old Neesha Dosanjh, who comes to Desh with *Is It Safe to Come Out Yet?*, a fascinating documentary about the taboo subject of Sikh women and sexuality.

According to Dosanjh, the title hints at the profound fear felt by Sikh women around the subject of sex. "A lot of the lesbians I interviewed didn't want to talk,"

Dosanjh says. "Some didn't want their voices heard, so they wrote them down for me to speak. I understand them because

I grew up in the same environment, where even straight women are in the closet about their sexuality."

The film also deals with sexual abuse, a topic no one would speak about on camera, even though it's rampant in Sikh society.



"I wanted to identify myself, be visible and reach out to others with HIV," says Oza about last year. "I wanted to show that it's possible to have AIDS and have fun, to wear a smile on your face."

Inspired by the responses to his declaration, Oza launched an informal group for South Asians living with HIV. This year he is mounting the stage again — on wheels, no less — with his piece *Living With AIDS on Roller Blades*.

Oza says the title is a metaphor for learning how to balance in a crisis situation. "When you discover you're HIV-positive, it's not a pleasant experience and you really lose balance — you have to change your plans and adjust. This piece is about learning how to get back on track."

Oza, who is equally critical of overly sympathetic friends and insensitive AIDS workers, describes his piece as "part theatre, part stand-up comedy," with a lot of sarcasm. An example?

"A friend of mine revealed her HIV status to her doctor," says Oza, "and the first thing he asked her was, 'How did you get it?' — not the first thing a doctor should ask. So my friend said, 'Oh, I picked it up at K Mart for \$1.99.'"

Other forms of discrimination add spice to Shyam Selvadurai's novel, *Funny Boy*, about a young Tamil's awareness of his homosexuality. Set in Sri Lanka, the book explores racial problems between Tamils and Sinhalese, as well as the treatment of gays in South Asia.

Selvadurai, who comes from a mixed Tamil-Sinhalese background, knew he wanted to write from a gay perspective, but it became clear to him early on that he "couldn't ignore the communal problems going on in Sri Lanka."

"There are so many parallels between the problems of being Tamil, a woman or gay. If you're beaten up because you're one of these, you have the same sense of injustice and helplessness."

In an incredible coup, Selvadurai's book is being launched this summer by McClelland and Stewart, with a story from the book reprinted in an upcoming anthology of international gay fiction.

Despite these laurels, Selvadurai looks back to last year's Desh as one of the most exciting moments in his life.

"When I performed last year, the response was so incredible. I realized that what I had to say about being gay and South Asian was interesting and relevant."

The same could be said for all of the artists and speakers at this year's Desh, which promises to be one of the spiciest dishes ever concocted. Kind of like a South Asian Fruit Cocktail, with lots of hot sauce.

Dosanjh adds, "I grew up and saw the lives of my cousins, friends, aunts and grandmothers — and it was always the same story: silence. If you haven't been abused yourself, you know somebody who has."

Serving up equally serious issues is AIDS activist and performance artist Kalpesh Oza, who created quite a stir at last year's Desh when he stood up in a bright dress and introduced himself as a South Asian gay man living with HIV.

Desh Pardesh.
\$6 (\$40 for festival pass).
Various times.
May 4-8. Various locations.
For more information,
call 601-9932.

WHEEL LIFE. Kalpesh Oza is living with AIDS on roller blades.