

Mutual confusion

by [Tom Aitken](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

The ismail Merchant--James Ivory production team, now synonymous with elegant costume dramas set in the 19th century, first attracted notice in 1965 with *Shakespeare Wallah*, the story of the Kendalls, an English theatrical family who toured Shakespeare productions around India. The themes of that film--the aftermath (and the aftermyth) of empire, comprehension and incomprehension between people of different races, cultures and religions, and the relationship between an art or profession and the rest of life--have persisted in their work.

Lately Merchant, originally the producer in the duo, has set up as a director on his own account, and in *The Mystic Masseur* he has given us his version of the postimperial scenario. The principal setting is the West Indian island of Trinidad in the 1940s, with occasional excursions to Oxford University.

The story offers a rich mixture of ingredients. The mystic masseur himself, Ganesh, is a member of Trinidad's Asian community who achieves local fame as a healer and writer. With Trinidadian independence approaching, his people find themselves looking in two directions and not much liking what they see either way.

The British rulers, dignified but effete, are aware that their time is almost up, but meanwhile they are protected by ceremonial rituals which allow them to condescend to both major communities on the island. Looking the other way, the Asians have little regard for the indigenous West Indians, the descendants of slaves. Indeed, a source of amazement and comedy in the film is the dawning realization that only at Government House, in the presence of the British governor, do English, Asians and West Indians sit down to eat together. The atmosphere of precarious cordiality and uncertainty as to table manners is well caught.

Merchant, however, is not absolutely in tune with his literary original. *The Mystic Masseur* was the first novel by V. S. Naipaul (who recently won the Nobel Prize for Literature), and it is an altogether more complex work than the film. In the novel, Ganesh is clearly a charlatan. His literary ambitions are based on the slenderest of talents and the books he produces are the merest hack work: scissors-and-paste

assemblages of facts about religion and other matters which sell only because nothing better is available. His healing powers are hit-or-miss, and it is never clear whether they go beyond a smoothly comforting bedside manner.

This is not to say that he is an absolute fraud. What he offers fulfills a need among his people and, almost unwittingly, he helps many of them in sundry ways. One such is the boy who wins a scholarship to Oxford and who greets him there in scenes that stress Ganesh's slim grasp of the learning and culture he so wonderingly admires. Merchant, however, prefers to present Ganesh softheartedly, as a man "whose decency and hard work triumphs over the double-dealing and corruption of the time" (I quote from the press release). That is certainly how Ganesh perceives himself, but the ambiguity of his nature, although not invisible in the film, is very much underplayed.

Because the comedy and satirical wit of Naipaul's writing is hard to detect, the film lacks verve. When they do survive, it is sometimes as embarrassing caricature. The decent and (within his range) fine actor James Fox plays an eccentric, bookish hippie, resident in Ganesh's native village, in a wild-eyed, messy-haired, loose-limbed manner which suggests less a man living on the edge than an actor in an underwritten role clutching at straws.

I'm told, however, by a friend who lived in Trinidad during part of this period that the film's slow pace reproduces the unhurried, sun-baked somnolence of Trinidadian life. This makes up for some of what is missing and, together with its insights into the undercurrents in a mixed society whose balance of power is about to change in unpredictable ways, and the comedy of mutual incomprehension, makes *The Mystic Masseur* an amiable exploration of another time, with other values--the past, in short, in which they did things differently.