

## Having a gay old time

Novelist turned film-maker Shamim Sarif has two films, both based on her books, coming out tomorrow. She tells Rachael Scott how this one-two punch came about

Rachael Scott  
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Unusual routes ... scene from *The World Unseen*

Having two of your novels turned into films is remarkable. Seeing both films released on the same day is amazing. That they're cross-cultural, lesbian, romantic dramas makes it extraordinary.

### **The World Unseen**

**Production year:**

2007

**Countries:** Rest of the world, UK

**Cert (UK):** 12A

**Runtime:** 110 mins

**Directors:** Shamim Sarif

**Cast:** David Dennis, Lisa Ray, Nandana Sen, Parvin Dabas, Sheetal Sheth

[More on this film](#)

But such is the experience of novelist turned film-maker Shamim Sarif. *The World Unseen*, which opens tomorrow, is a poetic love story about two Indian women in 1950s South Africa; the other film, *I Can't Think Straight*, is a contemporary love story involving a Palestinian Christian and an Indian Muslim. Both star one-time Bollywood actor Lisa Ray alongside American-born Sheetal Sheth.

So when only three lesbian-themed films were given a theatrical release in the UK last year, how did Sarif manage to get both of hers into cinemas at exactly the same time? "Pure determination," she says. Being a gay, British-born Indian Muslim, she says, has far from hindered her career – if anything her race and sexuality equipped her with the drive and conviction needed to succeed the industry. She wants, she says, to take advantage of the freedom she has in this country to break down as many prejudices as possible elsewhere.

Sarif, 39, says she had already adapted *I Can't Think Straight* into a screenplay when she decided she wanted to direct it as well. After completing several film-making courses run by the independent film festival Raindance, she started shooting. She persuaded her partner of 13 years, Hanan Kattan, to produce the film. "If you tell her it's impossible she instantly wants to do it," says Sarif of Kattan. "She's just a powerhouse." The couple set up their own company, Enlightenment Productions. Then finance for the film fell through. "It was a situation where we as a production company didn't have any control," says Sarif. "It was just a bad situation that went horribly wrong."

With *I Can't Think Straight* in limbo, Sarif started working on *The World Unseen*, while Kattan tried the usual routes of the Film Council, tax funds and cobbling together

co-production money to fund it, never quite managing to raise the tiny budget most Hollywood directors wouldn't get out of bed for. Then a friend who loved the book offered to invest in the film. By the time *The World Unseen* was completed 18 months later, Sarif had regained ownership of *I Can't Think Straight* and finance had been secured. "We had this unique situation where we were doing post-production on two movies at the same time," she says, "and we finished them both relatively simultaneously."

So why is it so difficult to get a same-sex film off the ground? London Lesbian and Gay film festival programmer Emma Smart thinks the reason lies in gender politics, not sexuality. "In the main the people making lesbian films are women, and historically there has always been a discrepancy between male and female directors and their access to modes of production. Simply put: more men make more films than women, they have the greater opportunity to do so. It's trite but it's true – the film industry is a man's world, the queer film industry is a gay man's world."

Convincing distributors Sarif's characters' sexual preference was incidental to the main narrative proved equally challenging. Citing Ang Lee's approach to his Oscar-winner *Brokeback Mountain*, Sarif is convinced the universality of her films will appeal to everyone. "My aim is to get people to see *I Can't Think Straight* and *The World Unseen* as just love stories," she says. "I think the next step for integration and acceptance, where it's not an issue any more to be gay, is to not have it be an issue in art."

Even if you can get an audience interested in the subject matter, there's still little room for the independent low-budget movie. Tom Abell, founder of gay and lesbian film distributors Peccadillo Pictures, says the big boys are only interested in "event" gay titles such as *Milk*, unless they see dollar signs in the DVD release. "Successful theatricals such as *Go Fish*, *High Art* or *Fucking Åmål* (aka *Show Me Love*) all worked by marketing to a mainstream audience, not a lesbian one. If *Go Fish* were released today it would not get a cinema run; it isn't mainstream enough." When Sarif's sales agent could only secure a DVD release for both films she set up her own sales agency with Kattan and knocked on a lot of doors.

As well as the gay theme, the mixed-race cross-cultural elements of both stories also proved to be a stumbling block in some countries. Although *The World Unseen* was invited to the Toronto international film festival and warmly received on the gay and lesbian film festival circuit, the Dubai international film festival rejected it on the grounds that "the subject matter doesn't exist". "You can't have an argument about that, can you?" says Sarif, laughing.

In truth, the subject matter is all too real for Sarif. Born in the UK to Indian parents who had left South Africa in the early 1960s, she refused to visit her parents' homeland until apartheid was abolished. "It just appalled me that my parents would come back after visiting in the late 1980s and be thrilled that they could sit on a bench somewhere or go to a beach."

*The World Unseen* was partly inspired by Sarif's grandmother and the lack of choices she had as an Indian woman in South Africa. The story has dutiful housewife-and-mother Miriam with few options outside her husband's dictate until she meets Amina, a rebellious trouser-wearing lesbian who emanates chivalrous femininity, and who makes Miriam realise she can control her own life. "She is somebody that once awakened can't go back," Sarif says. "Those kinds of people have great charisma when you meet them in real life. It's nice to portray them on the screen."

The romantic comedy *I Can't Think Straight*, on the other hand, is heavily autobiographical and charts the friendship between two women, both in relationships with men, who eventually come to terms with their sexuality and attraction to each other. "I was loosely dating a man who was Hanan's best friend at the time and he introduced us. He said, 'Come and meet my friend Hanan. You'll love her,' and he was right." Sarif and Kattan have two sons and entered into a civil partnership in 2006.

Both films are almost entirely written, directed, produced and financed by women and

Sarif has been amazed at the response from the lesbian community. She says: "We've had emails from people who've said that now they feel they can think about coming out to their parents. If it can help like that, as well as entertain, then wonderful."

•The World Unseen and I Can't Think Straight are released on 3 April

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