

TIME OUT NEW YORK, JULY 2003

# Pas de Deux

*Le Divorce* is Merchant and Ivory's 45th film together, and the long-time production partners are still in step

The news that Diane Johnson's popular 1997 novel, *Le Divorce*, was headed for the big screen elicited a certain horror among some loyalists—would the beloved book be butchered? But then came a sigh of relief, for this was to be a Merchant Ivory production. In the more than 40 years since the Bombay-born Ismail Merchant, 66 met Oregon-born James Ivory, 75, in a Manhattan coffeeshop, the pair, along with screen-writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala, has made 45 films, 12 of them gently translated literary gems. With Merchant as a producer and Ivory as director, they've managed to delicately adapt everything from E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View* to Henry James's *The Europeans* into highbrow yet entertaining films for the art-house set.

Sure Enough, *Le Divorce*—which stars Naomi Watts as Roxy, a pregnant expat poet who's been jilted by her French husband, and Kate Hudson as Isabel, Roxy's irrepressible stepsister—is as fizzy and sophisticated as its paperback counterpart. TONY had the intimidating privilege of participating in a three-way phone chat with messieurs Merchant and Ivory—Merchant in New York City, Ivory relaxing in the Oregon woods—and found the legendary duo to be as charming and witty as their films.

**TimeOut New York:** I've heard you say, Jim, that *Le Divorce* is one of your most frivolous

**films.**

James Ivory: In a way. It's got an awful lot to do with people enjoying themselves, eating in restaurants. Things like fashion and clothes. Just the tone of it is different.

Ismail Merchant: Lighthearted. I wouldn't say "frivolous."

Ivory: I would be happy to say it.

**TONY: People equate you with period pieces, so it's a surprise that you're trading corsets for Kelly bags.**

Merchant: People keep saying, "Oh my God, Merchant Ivory are in new territory." But we have always been in the new territory: Henry James, E.M. Forster, [Kazuo] Ishiguro, Tama Janowitz. My goodness, who can boast, if I can say "boast," such great names and such a lavish canvas as we have?

**TONY: And shooting in Paris is not bad either. I take it you're both Francophiles.**

Ivory: We are. People may not notice that it's been a long time since we've done a film about the English or been almost exclusively working in France. It's the most marvelous atmosphere for making a film.

**TONY: How so?**

Ivory: It's much more democratic. Every member

of the crew really seems to be—not a collaborator, exactly, but there’s a spirit that everyone is working together to make this piece of art.

Merchant: And the French have always reflected a great passion for cinema. If you want to see any obscure documentary, it is playing on the Left Bank somewhere. There is no other city in the world that has the same passion for cinema as Paris.

**TONY: New Yorkers won’t like to hear that.**

Ivory: No, but Paris is certainly the only city I know where one of our films could play for five years, as *A Room with a View* did.

**TONY: The new film is about a divorce between an American woman and a French man, and their split reveals all sorts of transatlantic differences and grievances. That plot has some implications now that it didn’t when you started the production in March 2002.**

Ivory: Absolutely. Iraq and the rest of it, and the so-called falling out between the French and Americans, hadn’t happened yet.

**TONY: So much of the humor from this story arises from the French-American culture clash. Might the rift be good marketing for the film?**

Ivory: Maybe. Even though [the French and Americans] admire each other, they don’t understand each other. They’re like a couple.

Merchant: The French have their own position as far as politics or food or music is concerned. And they are forever—with great fervor—standing by it, no matter what the world has to say. That’s why they are French. That’s why they have 140 cheeses.

**TONY: Do you think there’s a chance that the freedom-fries, dump-the-Bordeaux rancor**

**could hurt the film?**

Ivory: I don’t know how it will play in some of these communities that have all the flags and yellow ribbons.

Merchant: This film is so entertaining. Anyone can identify with the two American sisters.

**TONY: You two are often described as being complete opposites—oil and water. How did you ever decide that you could work together?**

Merchant: There are certain things you share. For example: music, Satyajit Ray films, Indian art and, of course, living in America. I came here as a student and saw this American who had these extraordinary sensibilities.

Ivory: By “extraordinary sensibilities” he means that I was an American who knew something about India. From an Indian’s point of view, that’s rare. In 1959, I made a documentary about Indian miniature art and had to learn a lot in order to make that film.

**TONY: You interrupt each other like a married couple. Do you bicker a lot, too?**

Ivory: We have knock-down-drag-out fights. People witness one of these battles and they think, How in the world can they work together? They do a lot of shouting in India; it’s more for effect.

**TONY: Some of your food scenes in the film are almost erotic. Ismail, you’re a foodie. Was this your doing?**

Merchant: I’m a foodie for a long time and I love the elegance of the French, the way they prepare meals. It was a wonderful opportunity to have a feast for the audience to enjoy.

**TONY: You’re known for cooking for the cast and crew. What did you make this time?**

Merchant: During the rehearsals, everyone would come to my apartment in Paris. I made Indian mustard chicken with ginger slices and pilau rice and lemon lentils, a signature dish, and green beans with mustard sauce.

**TONY: Jim, is he a good cook?**

Ivory: Very good. I'm rarely able to get a plate, because most things have run out by the time I get to the front.

**TONY: A lot of people don't realize that you two made your early films in India. Now that Bollywood movies are finally on the radar here, any chance that you two might make one?**

Ivory: I don't see it.

Merchant: But I certainly am going to do it. I'll direct it. Bollywood is where I got my start. The reason I came to cinema is that, when I was 13, I went with the actress Ninmi to the premiere of her film in her convertible Cadillac. When we arrived at the cinema, thousands of people were waiting and marigolds were thrown at us. I said, "My goodness, what a wonderful life this is. You're worshiped like God.

**TONY: Is that how it's been?**

Merchant: Absolutely. Now, wherever I go, I demand that people bring me flowers.