

'It's important to be a witness – at times it's very painful'

Acclaimed Magnum photographer Raghu Rai has spent 40 years photographing India, from Mrs Gandhi and Mother Teresa to the victims of Bhopal. As two exhibitions of his work open in London, he meets **Elizabeth Day** and, right, talks about some of his favourite images

It was a donkey that made Raghu Rai want to become a photographer. He trained as a civil engineer in the early 1960s, but did the job for a year in Delhi and hated it. His elder brother was already earning a living taking pictures and suggested Rai accompany a friend on a shoot to take photographs of children in a local village. When he got there, Rai's interest was sparked not by the children but by a donkey foal in a nearby field.

"I tried to get closer, but when I was about 10 feet away, the donkey started running and the children started laughing," he says now, more than 40 years later. Rai chased the donkey for the best part of three hours in order to amuse his audience. "I was enjoying myself. After a while, the donkey got tired and stood there so I got closer and took the shot. It was evening and the landscape was fading in soft light." His brother entered the resulting picture into a weekly competition run by the *Times* in London. It was published. "The [prize] money I got was enough to live

scene after the 1984 Bhopal industrial disaster and has produced acclaimed documentary series on Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama and the late Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi. Championed in the west by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Rai joined Magnum Photos in 1977 and went on to judge the World Press Photo Awards from 1990 to 1997. His impressive body of work is now being featured in a retrospective at the Aicon Gallery in central London and in a landmark exhibition at the Whitechapel, charting 150 years of photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

At 67, Rai says he is not "proud" of what he has achieved, "but it's fulfilling to know one is going deeper into the layers of complexity of my country... I like being among my own people. I merge with them. I don't carry camera bags, I don't wear stylish clothes. I have one camera with a zoom lens so I am not alarming people; no one is saying, 'Here comes a photographer!'"

Like Cartier-Bresson, Rai believes in the importance of the telling detail and the captured moment: the crucial accent that gives greater meaning to the whole. "Either you capture the mystery of things or you reveal the mystery," he explains. "Everything else is just information."

At Bhopal, when a toxic gas leak caused the death of more than 3,000 people, Rai focused on the burial of a single unknown boy, his blinded eyes staring blankly out of the rubble. It became a landmark photograph, all the more disturbing for its strange beauty.

Was Rai thinking of his own children when he was taking it? "No, I don't become sentimental. At the time you see a tragedy, if you worry about your own children, you get carried away and it's not a good idea." But is he never troubled by his role as a detached witness? "It is important to be a witness and at times it's very painful. At times, you feel very inadequate that you can only do so much and no more."

Not all of his work deals with such brutal subject matter. Many of his photographs of daily life in India are full of humour and affection. Often, his images intrigue rather than merely entertain, causing the viewer to question what they are seeing. "Most people don't see, they just glance," Rai says. "When we take a picture, we have to be aware of every inch of space we're dealing with."

With a World Press Award to his name, countless accolades and two forthcoming London exhibitions featuring his work, I wonder what his future would make of him now? Rai laughs. "He lived to see my success," he says, "and then he was very happy."

Raghu Rai: A Retrospective is at the Aicon Gallery, London W1, Friday to 20 February, and Where: Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh is at the Whitechapel Gallery, London E1, Thursday to 11 April



Raghu Rai. Acero/EPA/Corbis

'Most people don't see, they just glance. We have to be aware of every inch of space we're dealing with'

on for a month," says Rai. "I thought, 'This is not a bad idea, man!'"

That was 1965. The following year, he joined the *Statesman* newspaper in West Bengal as its chief photographer. He never went back to civil engineering. "My father worked for the irrigation department," says Rai. "People would ask how many sons he had and he would say, 'I have four. Two have gone photographers, like he was saying, 'Two have gone mad.'"

His father need not have worried. Over a career spanning four decades, his son has become one of the foremost chroniclers of the changing face of India. His images are famed for capturing both his country's brutality and its beauty, often within a single frame.

Rai, who was born in a small Pakistani village and came to India during Partition, has been witness to some of the most significant events in his country's recent history. He was one of the first photographers on the

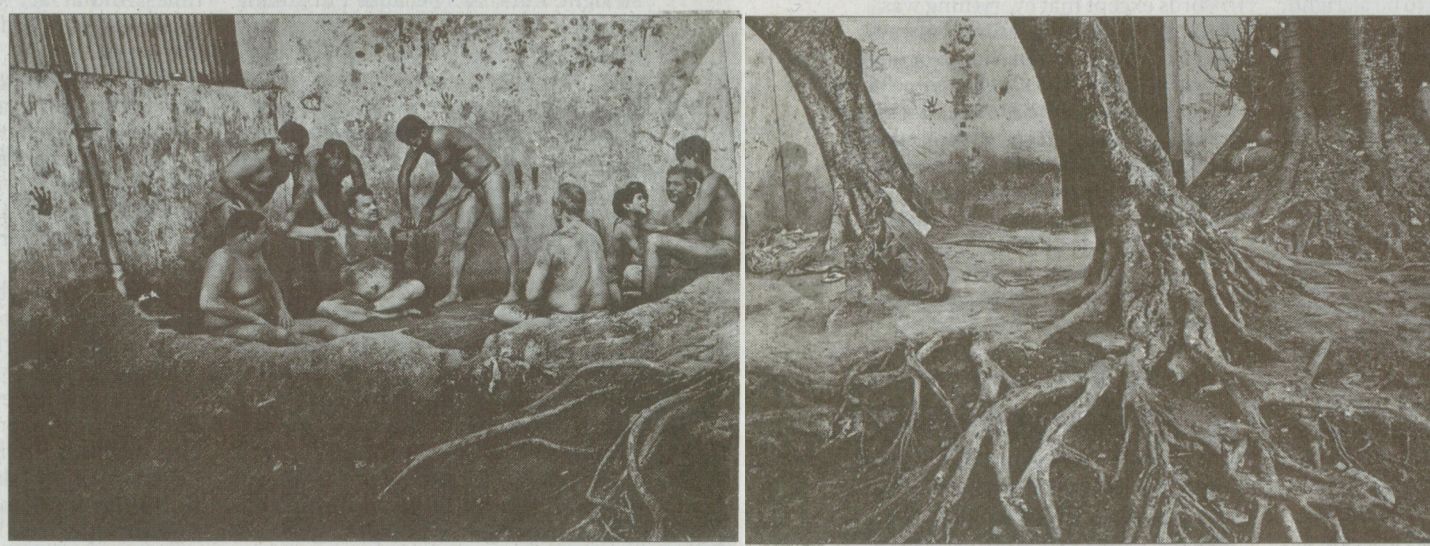
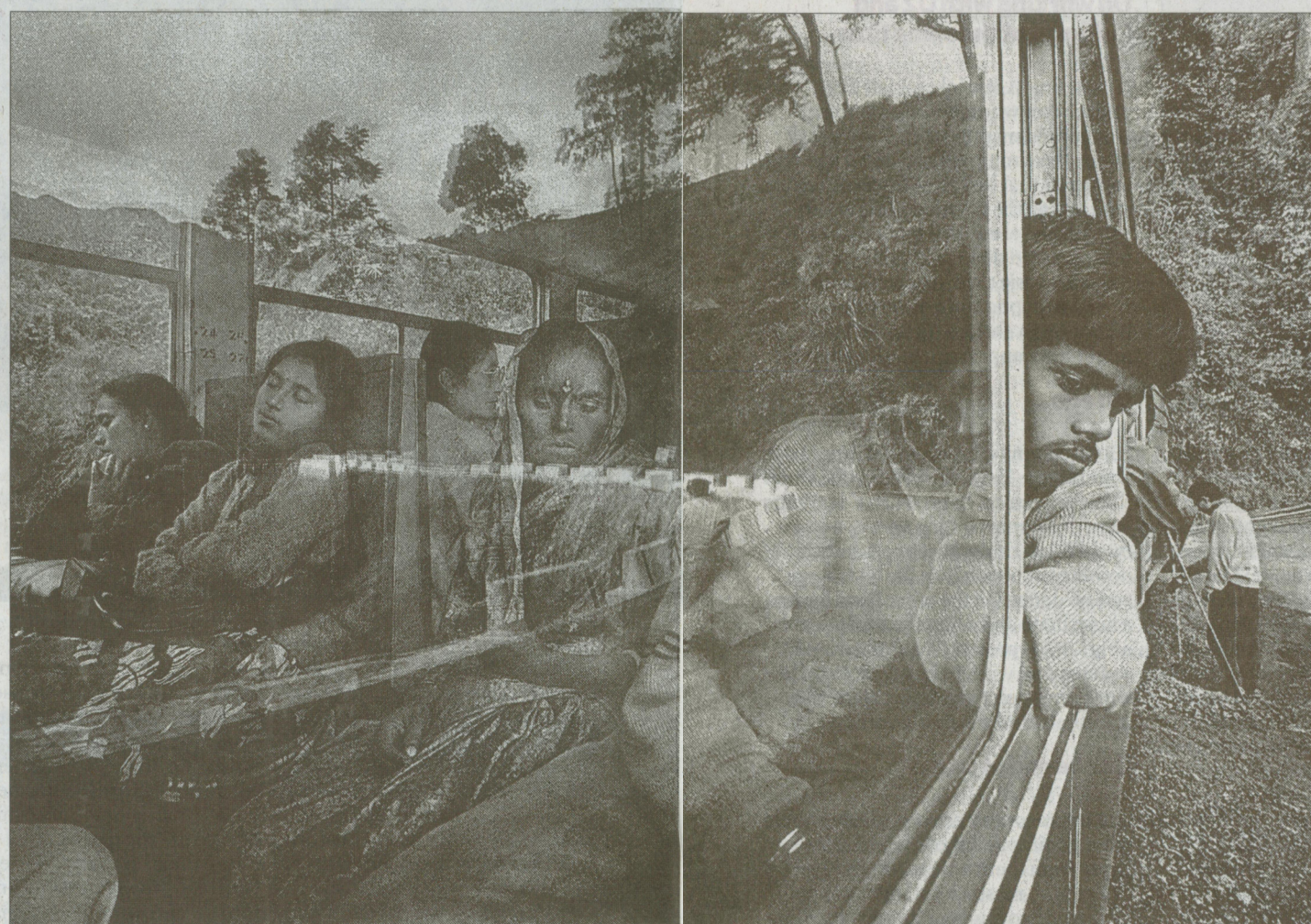


▲ **THE DAY BEFORE, AYODHYA, 1992**
This was the day before the mosque in Ayodhya was demolished by Hindu fanatic groups. The day after, it was a different world altogether (more than 2,000 people died in the ensuing national riots). Ayodhya is meant to be the birthplace of Lord Rama and is a very religious city. Everywhere there were temples like this one. I took this in three or four frames – the moment you want can turn up at any time: you have to be ready.



▲ **UNKNOWN CHILD, BHOPAL, 1984**
The gas started leaking at midnight; by 10 o'clock in the morning, I was there. This was one of the Muslim boys who was being buried. As I got there, they were just putting the last bit of mud over his face. I said: "Wait a minute." The child's eyes were open; that created such a strange feeling. The human face can touch you more deeply than anything.

▶ **WRESTLERS UNDER HOWRAH BRIDGE, KOLKATA, 2004**
Wrestlers come to this bridge every morning to practise and their limbs, legs, hands spread everywhere like the roots of the tree. I like the relationship between the tree and the men. The bulk of my work today is in panoramic form. A horizontal experience can give you many moments that live side by side and that is the feel of this country.



◀ **ON A TRAIN TO DARJEELING, 1995**
I like this photograph because it contains all four dimensions: left, right, front and back. You don't normally see front and back in photographs but here, the white line of the railway ahead and the hills in the background are both reflected in the window glass. If you look at the expressions on the passengers' faces, you can see the uncertainty and anxiety of travel.

▼ **MOTHER TERESA, DOCUMENTARY SERIES, 1971-97**
Mother was somebody very special. She was very loving, very tender and very tough and she also had a great sense of humour. I photographed her over 20 years and each time I went back, I would have to prove myself again. She would say: "You've taken enough pictures! You don't need any more." She was wonderful – anyone could take a good picture of her.



MORE PHOTOGRAPHY ONLINE
See a slideshow featuring more of Raghu Rai's photographs from his Aicon exhibition, at: observer.co.uk/review
PLUS Read Sean O'Hagan's regular series of blogs on photography, at: tinyurl.com/y9wdqgl

Mark Kermode: my life story

► **CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5**

"Does it ever hurt?" I asked. "Only when I laugh," he replied. "If I laugh really... profoundly, then I suddenly get a searing pain in my abdomen." And with that we went our separate ways.

On the journey home, I thought about Herzog and that magic bullet and the peculiar way in which it had bonded us, the visionary, secularist, Bavarian filmmaker and the dewy-eyed, God-bothering, liberal critic from Barnet. And I thought about the fact that every time Herzog, with all his rigorous anti-sentimentalism, was really enjoying himself he would feel an annoying pain in his side. And, in some poetically appropriate way, that pain would be me.

MY STORY, MY CHOICE

If my life were a TV movie of the week, who would play me? I'd like the answer to be Richard Gere, although physically the front runner is clearly Jesse Birdsall, on whose behalf I have been merrily accepting compliments about my sterling work in "that Spanish soap series" for years. Apparently, Birdsall and I are all but physically indistinguishable to the public at large and I've simply given up trying to tell people that I'm not him (I've even signed autographs "With best wishes from Jesse" to those who won't take no for an answer).

Sometimes I wonder whether this is a two-way street and whether Mr Birdsall has ever been thumped for writing a rotten review of *Blue Velvet* or punched on the arm for dubbing Keira Knightley "Ikea Knightley" in honour of her on-screen teakiness. If so, I apologise. And Jesse, if you're reading this, everyone really loved you in *Eldorado*.

But looks aren't everything (did "Sir" Anthony Hopkins look anything like Nixon? Was Kevin Spacey a dead ringer for Bobby Darin?) and since we're in the realms of fantasy here I should get to choose whoever I like to play me. And I choose Jason Isaacs.

Hello to Jason Isaacs. In case you don't know (in which case shame on you), Jason Isaacs is just about my favourite actor in the whole gosh-darned world. He's done everything from gritty TV dramas to romcoms, war flicks, fantasy films and sci-fi blockbusters. To some of you, he'll be best known as the fiendish Lucius Malfoy from the Harry Potter films, but to me he is, in the words of David Bowie, chameleon, comedian, Corinthian and caricature.

More important, he is also the person whom I most wanted to be as a child. You see, Jason and I were at school together, in the same class, although we never really spoke or even acknowledged each other's existence. I thought he was incredibly cool and aloof, being one of the first people at school to own a skateboard and the very first to swear out loud in an English class. If truth be told, I had a sort of schoolboy crush on Jason Isaacs and I've never really got over it. And if I get to choose who plays me in the movie of my life, then it's Jason all the way – he knows the background, he's done the research and he would look really good with a quiff.

So, the lead role in *The Mark Kermode Story* (we'll need to come up with a better title – *Easy Writer* perhaps or *The Man Who Watched The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*) goes to Jason, with John Malkovich co-starring as Werner Herzog (same shaped head and I'm pretty sure Malkovich could do Bavarian). Then, in the other assorted supporting roles, I'll have Toby Jones as David Lynch (I've heard his impression and it's really quite unusual), Samantha Morton as Linda Blair (because she's tough and smart and great in pretty much everything) and David Morrissey as Noddy Holder (he's got stature, plus he had good sideburns in *Stoned*, plus he was really funny in *Basic Instinct 2* for which I retain a foolish fondness). The role of my long-suffering partner in crime Linda Ruth Williams will be filled by four-time Academy Award nominee Julianne Moore who will have to work pretty damned hard to look unimpressed by all the zany scrapes into which Mr Isaacs will get himself.

The Queen will play Dame Helen Mirren, obviously; Charles Hawtrey will play radio's very own Simon Mayo (his choice, not mine); Ian Hislop will play my great friend Nigel Floyd (not physically similar, but a perfect match in attitude and mannerisms); and Ken Russell will play himself (I've already asked him and he's said yes, as long as it's only in my head).

Picture the scene. We open on a sepia-toned shot of an awkward young kid with stupid, unruly hair being mocked at school

and called "Mr Pineapple Head", which was just one of the terms used to deride my upstanding hair when I was young. Other insulting sobriquets included "Bog-brush". The camera follows this scrawny kid home, alone, passing en route a cinema (showing a double bill of *The Exorcist* and *Mary Poppins*) and a desolate barber's shop, the window of which showcases a handsome array of male hairdressing products and pomades.

Cut from here to the kid at home, spooning wax into his hair, with Elvis playing on a plastic Decca Dansette, his mum shouting from downstairs for him to come and have his tea, but his attention entirely gripped by the sleekly handsome quiff which he has skillfully crafted from his previously ragtag spikes.

The camera closes in on said quiff, delving into the hair like David Lynch's extreme lawn close-up at the beginning of *Blue Velvet* which foretells great horrors to come. We pull back to reveal that very same hairstyle, utterly unchanged, although now it adorns the head of our adult star (Jason Isaacs to the set, please) whose barnet has remained immovable despite the passage of time and the ageing of his face.

After which we'd get the movie. Then, as the end approaches, we'd come to the crucial scene in which La Jolie (played by herself – as a favour to me) compliments Jason's hair in the most effusive manner. He laughs nonchalantly but then, unexpectedly, seems to retreat into his own

The camera delves into my quiff, like Lynch's extreme lawn close-up

inner world. As the crowd of technicians and cameramen scuttle on the outskirts of the frame, we follow Mr Isaacs back to his dressing room where he sits silently in front of a mirror.

Slowly, the music starts to swell and, as it does so, we see Jason staring at his reflection, the distorted sounds of childhood taunts echoing around his head like the creepy kids' nursery rhyme ("One, two, Freddy's coming for you...") in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. As we watch, the reflected image of Jason's face dissolves into a nostalgic scene of the previously awkward kid striding boldly through the school corridors, ignoring the jeers of his classmates, safe in the knowledge that his hair is immaculate and they are all just idiots. He is right, they are wrong. End of story.

ANGELINA LIKES MY HAIR

Angelina Jolie likes my hair. She said so. In those exact words.

"I do like your hair," she said, looking at my hair.

"Do you?" I replied, pretending not to care, like Pooh Bear.

"Yeah," she confirmed, just in case there was any doubt.

"Thank you very much," I replied. "I like my hair too."

And then, as an afterthought, Ange added: "I must get Brad to do that..."

"Well of course he already did," I burbled. "In that film *Johnny Suede*." This was true. Before becoming officially the Sexiest Man in the World Ever, Brad Pitt had starred somewhat self-deprecatingly in a little, New York indie-pic directed by Tom DiCillo who famously shot Jim Jarmusch's black-and-white cult favourite *Stranger Than Paradise*. The titular character was a somewhat dorky 1950s throwback who worships Ricky Nelson and sports a bouffant pompadour on which you could balance your hat, coat and shoes and still have space for a compact Wurlitzer jukebox. I really loved that movie and indeed the British poster consisted of a picture of Brad's hair with the quote "Quiffastic!" – Mark Kermode, *Q* magazine – emblazoned across it.

"Oh, right," said Angelina, nonplussed.

"So that was that. I still wonder from time to time whether, in between bouts of photogenically physical interaction, Ange ever turned to her beloved and said: 'Hey, I met this weird, middle-aged, English journalist with really great hair and I think you should try to look more like him...'"

Probably not. Still, it's something to tell the grandchildren. My grandchildren, not hers, obviously.