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India's first screening of Nancy Kates and Bennet Singer's historical film, *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin* took place in a spartan room in a North Mumbai suburb early last week. The throaty, booming voice of this gay, black American activist filled the room, compelling one to sit up and listen: "Your body is the only weapon you need to protest for your rights."

"Bayard Rustin is the most important man you haven't heard about," says 32-year-old Mridu Chandra, a New York-based film-maker and writer, who co-produced the film with Kates and Singer. A working holiday led her to Mumbai and she decided to organise the screening at the Humsafar Trust.

"Rustin was the pivot of Dr Martin Luther King Jr's crusade for civil rights. However, he put his body and life on the line for racial justice long before King became a leader of the movement," says Chandra who spent four years studying Rustin's life and writing. Working along with the two directors, Chandra was instrumental in getting in touch with Rustin's relatives, friends and old lovers.

The 90-minute documentary was well received at various screenings, including the PBS premiere in January 2003, and has already won three international awards.

One of the challenges of making the film was locating historical material on Bayard, a Pennsylvania-born Quaker. There were times when Rustin had simply been listed as a 'black man in protest.' But after foraging archives Chandra managed to get rare footage of the young Rustin and exclusive footage of the historic 1963 civil rights march he organised in Washington.

"Many films refer to this march, since King made his 'I have a Dream Speech' here. However, a lot of them don't feature Rustin. We managed to source unused footage from the Bob Dylan archive," says Chandra with a triumphant smile. So not only do we get a glimpse of Rustin in the background while King delivers his speech—there is a clip of Rustin's own speech, too.


Besides his work as an activist, strategist and later, a politician, Rustin's most remarkable quality was his non-violent methods of protest, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. Interestingly, Chandra had been studying Gandhi before she began working on the film, "For me Rustin was the next step after Gandhi. Though I believe Rustin's was a more holistic approach," says Chandra who looks on Rustin as her mentor.

However, the sole purpose is not just to lionise Rustin. The film carves out a warm, human figure, complete with his desire to celebrate all aspects of his life, including his sexuality. It's about who inspired him and who shut him out. "During his time, there were many who attacked Rustin. Not for his political leanings, but because he was openly gay," says Chandra.


Interestingly at current screenings, Rustin was critiqued for moving from activism to politics, and not for being gay. Meanwhile, Chandra's considering the possibilities of working on a film in India. "I'm considering working on docu-fiction, something narrative, though I'm yet to find a subject. Politics has always interested me, but I find fiction pretty appealing these days," she says. Wait and watch.

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