

COOKING WITH STELLA

Director: Dilip Mehta Language: English, Hindi Runtime: 103 minutes Rating: PG

Transplanting the upstairs-downstairs comedy to New Delhi, Dilip Mehta has crafted a delightful feature debut scripted in collaboration with his acclaimed sister, director Deepa Mehta. Featuring charming turns from Don McKellar and Lisa Ray and a standout performance by Seema Biswas, *Cooking with Stella* is great fun to watch as it offers a glimpse of how Canadians live in India's capital.

As head housekeeper at a diplomatic residence in New Delhi, Stella (Biswas) serves up delectable dishes to a succession of Ottawa civil servants. But while she sets a divine table, some of her other activities are less above board. Through finely orchestrated duplicity, she skims inflated bills to pad her modest salary and raids her employers' pantry for her own "duty free" business. Each night, the devout Christian impishly prays to the Virgin Mary to bless her crooked schemes.

The arrival of Maya (Ray) and Michael (McKellar) initially disrupts Stella's routine. To her surprise, the wife is the diplomat while the husband stays home to look after their baby daughter. Even more shocking, he has designs on her kitchen! When Michael, a trained chef, discovers Stella's culinary talents, he asks her to be his guru and teach him the secrets of authentic Indian cooking. She warily agrees to this breach in master-servant protocol, and as the two begin whipping up mouthwatering curries and dosas together, her trepidation eventually turns to pleasure.

Meanwhile, the beautiful and virtuous Tannu (Shriya Saran) joins the household to care for the baby. Can Stella make her an ally in domestic subterfuge, or will the honest young nanny topple the kitchen kingpin? Determined to protect her turf, Stella plots her slyest and most ambitious ruse yet.

Fans of Deepa Mehta's *Water* might remember Biswas in a heart-wrenching dramatic role. She is every bit as good here, but utterly transformed – both commanding and coy, especially in her market and kitchen scenes with McKellar. A proud and complex Indian working in a Canadian enclave, her Stella redeems all deceptions with a radiant, irresistible smile.