

LONG ROAD HOME



DIPTI NAGPAUL-D'SOUZA

LAST year, *Slumdog Millionaire* made everything that is Indian exotic. From being a country of palaces, snake charmers and spirituality, India became the nation that music maestro AR Rahman, the gorgeous Freida Pinto and, partly, Dev Patel belong to. With the spotlight on India, the likes of Kal Penn, Jimmy Mistry and Naveen Andrews are now no more the only easily recognizable celebrities.

The list has grown quite long. *Avatar* and *Inception* has brought actor Dileep Rao into the news. The television industry in particular is dotted with Indian-origin actors. Recently, Archie Panjabi, a British actor of Indian origin, bagged an Emmy for her role in CBS show *The Good Wife*. Sendhil Ramamurthy shot to fame as a scientist in the supernatural thriller show *Heroes*. Deep Katdare is a popular actor who starred in the film *American Desi*. Samrat Chakrabarti was recently seen in films like Claire McCarthy's *The Waiting City*, and Reshma Shetty features in USA Network's hit original series *Royal Pains*. The roles being offered to an actor of Indian origin are no more limited to that of a taxi-driving migrant or a terrorist.

Both Chakrabarti and Shetty agree that the scenario is changing for an actor of Indian origin in the entertainment industry in the West. Increasingly, diverse roles are be-

Actors of Indian origin in the West may have gained more visibility, but there's still a long struggle ahead



ing written to accommodate the ethnicity. However, the scenario isn't as pleasant as one might perceive it to be. "*Slumdog* acted as a catalyst in heightening the West's interest in India. The film industry — be it Bollywood or Hollywood — is very fad-oriented. Things happen, awards are won, and then it quickly fades away. To get noticed in this industry is one thing, but to maintain excellence is much tougher," says Chakrabarti. "Now there are directors and producers out there who are willing to think out of the box, but it has been frustrating to be considered for roles only because of my cultural identity," adds Shobita Mehta, a drama student at New York University.

This struggle to create an identity in the West often begins at home. Many first-generation actors grow up preparing for a traditional career in medicine or engineering. They find their true calling only much later. While Ramamurthy is a popular example, the same stands true for Shetty. "I was set on becoming a doctor. But I had also been a musician since I was a child. As an Indian child, the thought of making a career in entertainment was never really considered. It was not until I had won another state vocal competition that a teacher took me aside and suggested that maybe I had a gift I should pursue," she recounts.

Being a second-generation Indian in the US, 18-year-old Mehta feels she has had it easier at home. "My parents, who grew up



in Massachusetts, moved to the Silicon Valley to pursue careers in IT. But they realised the value of personal choices. My younger brother will be joining a course in ballroom dancing next year and it is fine by them," she smiles.

Still, it is the first generation Indian abroad who struggles with an identity crisis — often striving to strike a balance between the desi roots and the Western upbringing. Panjabi, who was born in India, grew up in the UK and now works in New York. She prefers to think of herself as a global citizen. "I am first and foremost an actor," she quips.

Shetty points out, "We are expected to have the same beliefs as our parents though we have grown up in a completely different society. When you are younger,



(Clockwise from extreme left): Panjabi's role in *The Good Wife* won her an Emmy; Reshma Shetty (seated, right) on *Royal Pains*; Rao was a part of *Inception*; Chakrabarti in *The Waiting City*

you tend to dislike your cultural boundaries. However, as I grow older, I do think it is important to balance your dual cultural identity and use it as a positive addition to your personality." She says that there is a community, though small, of first-generation Indian filmmakers and actors who make culture-themed movies.

More than anything else, Aroon Shivadasani, president of Indo-American Arts Council, which helps develop new projects, feels that it is the perception of India that should change in the West. "Then, the changes in terms of characters to be played out by Indians will naturally follow. The issue we are often dealing here with are that the Indian-origin actors, in the beginning of their careers, are offered roles that are often derogatory to the cultural identity," he says.

Panjabi rightly nails down this issue to the lack of writers of ethnic origin. "The cultural boundaries are fast melting away. The writing should reflect the times we live in." Agrees Chakrabarti. "We have a long way to go before you can have more three-dimensional characters for South Asian actors."

Bollywood on Stage

A NEWBORN prince is dumped among the *banjaras*, an evil sorcerer plots against the king and queen, a beautiful princess meets a feisty gypsy girl, good and evil clash amid treachery and counter-ploys and, a few minutes before the curtain falls, the prince fulfills his destiny of wearing the royal crown. With all the makings of a kitschy soap opera, the play *Zangoora: The Gypsy Prince*, set in the fictitious kingdom of Shaktishila, will open at Nautanki Mahal, the new theatre at Kingdom of Dreams, a culture destination in Gurgaon.

Wizard director, Viraf Sarkari, who operates Kingdom of Dreams and has co-produced *Zangoora*, resorts to superlatives while talking about both, the theatre and the musical. "With aerial flying sequences, special effects, digital surround sound, lights and 3D video projections on each side of the stage, we have created something better than what Broadway and West End has on offer," he says.

The musical flirts with different genres of romance,

action, drama and thriller, and boasts several big names. Lyricist Javed Akhtar has written the story, Shiamak Davar is credited with the choreography and the cast includes 24 performers from TV and stage like Hussain Kuwajerwala, Isha Sharvani and Gauhar Khan. British artistic director David Freeman, a veteran of London's West End productions, has come on board as co-director. Neeta Lulla of *Devdas* and *Jodhaa Akbar* fame is responsible for the garish costumes.

Fittingly, Shah Rukh Khan was recently announced its brand ambassador. Filmy numbers like *Pehla Nasha*, *Khuda Jaane* and *Chand Taare Tod Lau* have been tweaked and woven by composers Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy into the narrative to make the 2.15 hour musical look like a film on stage.

The show opens today and will be staged every evening, except Mondays. Tickets are priced at Rs 1,000, Rs 2,500, Rs 3,500 and Rs 6,000.

Contact: 95124-4528000

— DEBESH BANERJEE



Hussain Kuwajerwala and Gauhar Khan in the play

In a Minute

Two Indian entries make it to Filminute, an international one-minute online film festival



SOMYA LAKHANI

WITH Filminute — the international one-minute online film festival dedicated to promoting and awarding the best one-minute feature films from around the world — there is good news for India. Two of the top 25 entries shortlisted from 1,500 entries for the fifth edition of the festival are of Mumbai-based Vasan Bala and Kolkata-based Dhruv Mookerji.

Eighteen countries from across the world have taken part in the festival.

The winners of the festival will be declared online in the first week of October. The winning films will be chosen by online voting.

Bala left a stable bank job at the age of 27 and assisted director Anurag Kashyap in *Dev.Dand Gulaal*. The story, he says, came to him in 2009, when he was waiting for an autorickshaw outside Mumbai's Andheri station, as he was getting late for a lecture by director Sriram Raghavan. Characteristically, most auto drivers refused.

This incident inspired his one-minute film *Auto Madar*. "The film is about a contract killer getting late for a kill and not getting an auto. It is a minute-long dark comedy," says Bala.

The film was made on a frugal budget of Rs 200 and the shots have not been staged. "I had a camcorder with me and I told my actor to stand outside the Andheri station and look for an auto. Luckily

that day no auto driver was ready and that's exactly what we shot. For the last shot, we paid the autowallah Rs 100 and that's how we finished it on time," explains Bala.

What excites him the most is the fact that the jury has some top international names. "I am happy to have made it to the top 25 and feel proud that eminent members of the film fraternity like Neill Blomkamp, director of *District 9*, have seen my film," says Bala.

Apart from Bala's *Auto Madar*, 29-year-old Mookerji's film *Gone* has also made it to the top 25 in Filminute. Actor, director, stand-up comedian and playwright, Mookerji has played numerous roles in his professional life. "I was thoroughly impressed when I watched an entry from last year's festival and decided to give the festival a shot," says Mookerji.

Gone, made on a budget of Rs 30,000, is the story of a volunteer who goes on stage for a magic show which ends in a goof-up. There are no dialogues in the film and the beauty of the concept lies in the expressions of actors and the soundtrack.

Mookerji hopes that the concept of short films will catch on in India and says, "Even though I come from a country with a billion-plus population, I will probably not get very few votes because the buzz here is very low."

The festival also sees an Indian member — writer-director Tanuja Chandra — in the festival's jury for the first time.



Filmmaker Dhruv Mookerji; a still from his film *Gone* (top)

On the ROLL

DRESSED in white, the dancers were lost in their swirling motions as Sufi rhythms played in the background. Gradually, the beat picked up and so did the tempo of the dancers, until they were nothing more than spinning blurs on stage. What made the performance special was that all the whirling dervishes were differently-abled youngsters on wheelchairs. "At 200 mph, the speed of a wheelchair is higher than any dancer can spin on his feet. A stage full of dancers on wheelchair spinning at top speed is a mesmerising sight," says Salaudin Pasha, the Delhi-based maestro who trained the dancers at his school Ability Unlimited. On Sunday, the students presented Sufi dance, Bharatanatyam, martial arts and yoga on wheelchair at a 60-minute-long performance called *Commonwealth on Wheels*. "The wheelchairs were customised and we spent almost six years preparing the piece. Sufi dance



Students of Ability Unlimited stage Sufi dance on their wheelchairs

on wheelchair premiered two years ago and has been a hit every time," says Pasha proudly. Bharatanatyam on wheels was split into two pieces — a *Tillana* and a choreography called *Ten Direction of the World*. The dancers use traditional *abhinayas*, *mudras* and poses as they depicted mythological figures like Indra and

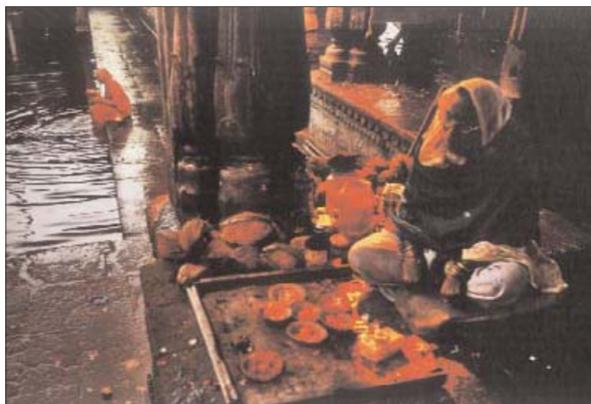
Shiva in a *tandava* stance.

Twelve dancers performed yoga on wheels, coming together in their wheelchairs to replicate yogic postures of animals such as elephants and horses. But it is when the dancers clashed in the Thang-ta moves that formed the martial arts segment that one saw the sparks fly

— literally — as the wheels hurtled at breakneck speed. "The concept of dance on wheelchairs is catching up across the world and in October we will have an interactive session for foreign visitors that the Commonwealth Games will bring to the city," says Pasha.

— DIPANITA NATH

Shades of Light



Mistry's work titled *Introspect 2*

WRAPPED in shawls, braving the morning chill, when Shiva devotees assembled outside the temple at Trim-bakeshwar in Maharashtra, waiting for the morning *aarti* on Mahashivratri, the group was unaware that a camera was focussing on them from across the street. For Mumbai-based photographer Pankaj Mistry, the image combined reverence and anxiety. "It was just before sunrise. The light has an important role to play, and the sheer interplay can lead to interesting images — one needs to get all the elements right," says Mistry. With group exhibitions in Mumbai, Cochin and New York and several corporates assignments — projects with Siemens, Godrej and Voltas — to his credit, the 47-year-old is making his debut in the art circuit with an exhibition titled "Reverie" at Lalit Kala Akademi.

Comprising 60 photographs, the exhibition is an outcome of his road trips

during the last two years. Armed with his Canon EOS 5D Mark II camera, the photographer had travelled to Goa, Kolhapur, Udaipur, Nasik and Kolkata among others, capturing the life en route. If, in Goa, he spent hours in the inner altar of the Basilica and the beaches, in Kolkata, he set up post on the banks of the Hooghly.

One of the photographs in the exhibition shows a blue haveli in Udaipur dappled with sunlight, while another has a priest gazing into the waters of the Krishna at Wadi in Kolhapur.

There are also shots of objects that Mistry feels "might not be visible in another few years" — a typewriter in the spotlight in a photograph titled "Yesterdays", and a rickshaw in an unlit world.

The exhibition at Lalit Kala Akademi is on till September 20, and then moves to Gallerie Nyva. Contact: 29564333

— VANDANA KALRA