

PRODUCTION STORY of “Dance of the Wind” by Rajan Khosa

*For 5000 years,
Taught by parent to the child,
By guru to the disciple,
Songs of wisdom, echo through my land.*

I was brought up in the Indian oral tradition, where the teacher-pupil relationship is of utmost importance. Although I studied at the film schools in India and London, I was aware that my vision of the world had nothing to do with the skills I had acquired at the film schools. If there is a thing called vision, I had received it from my philosophical teachers, and I was equipped to apply it to any profession, and in any walk of life. So it was only natural that I would try to understand the 5000 years of Indian philosophical tradition through the medium of cinema.

I had made five short films so far, the last three on 35mm, and it was time to write my first feature length screenplay. That was five year ago, it was called ‘The Moth and The Flame’. It received the Hubert Bals Award at the Rotterdam Film Festival and Karl Baumgartner of Pandora Film, Frankfurt, picked up the project to produce. Two years passed by, but no financiers came forward. We saw no money and rejection letters piled up. The repeated complaints were inevitably that the film would be in Hindi; it was too poetic; it proposed the use of non-actors; I was a first time director; there was no market for Asian films, etc., etc. Karl Baumgartner, affectionately known as Baumi, was frustrated. Whilst his other project were doing quite well, this one

I said let us make a short film, like a pilot that will give a taste of the proposed feature film. Baumi agreed to finance it and I traveled to India to assemble my team. We made a 15 min. film on video-tape. Baumi took it to the Cannes, Venice and Berlin film market. The reaction was very positive; It was a beautiful small film, complete in itself, but would financiers offer the necessary support for making a feature film? The answer was, ‘No’.

Despite these reactions we remained committed to the project. We decided to set the film in contemporary New Delhi where 5000 years old Hindustani music tradition is still alive and where 50 years of Indian Independence would soon be celebrated.

It is obvious to all that in this period of economic ‘Liberalisation’ in India, we are faced with a flood of Western thought, ideology and life style. Market forces with its promises of instant bliss threaten to sweep aside the powers of our sacred traditions. We are changing but we are not sure whether we like this change.

Irrespective of this economic invasion something flows in our veins that is truly our own, that goes back centuries, that is of this soil. It is our sacred music. It is an oral tradition, it can’t be written down. It is heard in the voices of the mendicants and wanderers, classical musicians and folk singers, grandmothers and the rhymes of children. It is the sacred music bestowed by Gods and carried in the hearts of Indians for millennia. It is the intangible soul of our nation, still revered by many, but so easily lost under the impact of a new order. Maybe, it was here that the heart of our story lay.

Something God-sent happened, I met by sheer accident, Robin Mukherjee, an English writer of Indian origin. He felt he could re-work my screenplay, and was confident of imbuing it with a universal quality. He cared about Indian philosophy and without demanding any immediate remuneration plunged himself into the project. The screenplay evolved dramatically a great deal and I liked what was emerging. I was critical but always encouraging and supportive.

In 1996, we were at the Rotterdam Film Festival again. Sandra den Hammer presented the project for consideration at Cinemart. This was our fourth year of trying to raise funds. We gave it a new name- “Dance of the Wind”. Karl Baumgartner had already been an associate producer on Emir Kusturica’s Underground and people increasingly wanted to work with him on projects. Yet, here he was again,

with the same project, still in Delhi where both completion bonders and insurance companies prefer not to tread.

We pleaded, we wanted money that would not pinch their pockets, anything between 10,000 to 100,000 dollars would have been appreciated. The response was enormous because the screenplay had finally worked, it was universally accessible. It posed no cultural barriers, yet it remained culturally authentic.

It took four months to raise finance from twelve different sources and six different countries. Jaques Bidou of JBA Productions in Paris and Phil van der Linden in Amsterdam had both worked hard. Montecinemaverita, in Locarno, selected the project for a production award and critically Ravi Gupta at the NFDC of India gave his financial support. Simon Perry committed European Co-production Finance through Keith Griffiths at Illuminations, who had already co-produced two films with Baumi. The budget was extremely tight. Could we take the risk of shooting the film? Baumi was hesitant, if we went ahead we would be playing with the trust of the investors. But we convinced ourselves that we had to take the jump. Mainly because we were absolutely certain about the multifaceted capacities of our line producer, Nalin Pandya, an Indian filmmaker based in Paris, and old friend of mine. He put together the Indian team composed of young professionals. He generated that particular creative atmosphere in which the most difficult seemed simple.

We had a successful nine-week shoot in Nov-Dec 1996 in New Delhi. Many of my ideas changed during pre-production. First, I used an extremely well known actress, Kitu Gidwani, as the main lead and she spent six months learning classical music. Then, I asked my own philosophy teacher, Kapila Vatsyayan, to play the lead role of the mother and an octogenarian painter, B.C.Sanyal, to play 'Baba'. The rest of the cast were a mixture of actors and non-actors, because I needed to retain the authenticity of the milieu and culture whilst not wishing to underestimate the power that trained actors could bring to the script. The most difficult was the search for Tara, the street child. She had to be absolutely authentic, yet mystical. She was indeed an unexpected gift.

The camera man was the best in the country, Piyush Shah. The music composer, Shubha Mudgal, believed that the story was a mirror of her own life. She did everything from research, to training the actors, to consulting on the decors and of course the composition of the crucial music itself. And Mike Shoring, the experienced location recordist of Merchant-Ivory films, his love for Indian classical music brought that extra special enthusiasm to the work which sailed us through chaotic and noisy Indian locations.

After completion of filming, we returned to London for post-production. We decided to edit the film on AVID technology and use the Audio Vision to lay the complex textures of the soundtrack. Suddenly, we were using the most modern film technology to communicate a story that was Centuries old.

We spent only twelve weeks in post-production in total, working with a talented and intuitive English editor, Emma Matthews, and three sound editors, one Indian, one Swedish and one French. Both time and money dissolved before our eyes, but our spirits were finally lifted at the last hurdle by the magic fingers and ears of the dubbing mixer, Paul Hamblin, at Boom, who tied the final threads of the film together. Now the film is ready, waiting for the audience where in lies its final test.

Have I managed to communicate all that I wanted to say in this film? Did I finally understand what I was trying to probe? The answer lies in the fact that this experience has only made me humble. It has sharply brought forth my own limitations, and also the limitations of the medium. And still it has wet my appetite to do more.

The people who staked their money and reputation say they are satisfied with the result. Baumi is proud of the film, he believes today that films like these can be made. It is a story of faith that he now tells with joy.

Rajan Khosa