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Long Life of a Short Film

Riyad Vinci Wadia

SUMMARY. What follows is an account of my personal experiences as an independent Indian film director who had the fortune to make the country's first openly gay film, the short *BOMgAY.* That said, I would like this essay to be accepted as, rather than a critical appraisal of Indian cinema, a humbly autobiographical account of one individual caught in the hectic throes of political (and cinematic) visibility. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com>]*

I wish to share with you the story of why and how I came to produce *BOMgAY,* a short film that had the dubious distinction of becoming India's first "gay" film. As I sit to write this I realize now that the "why" is more important than the "how." For in that "why" lies the real beauty of this endeavor. The "how," which was so important to discuss at the time of its release, has paled in significance with the passage of time.

In the summer of 1996 I was in my prime. A newspaper profile had dubbed me "the Young Turk" of Bombay's independent cinema industry and I half believed it. My reputation had been built on the fact that at 27 years of age I had already produced and directed a feature length film that had had international acclaim, and that I was a scion of an illustrious family that had a sixty-year history in film production. My grandfather, JBH Wadia, was a pioneer producer-director who had founded the erstwhile Wadia Movietone

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Studios in 1933. As I carried the mantle of my family's reputation I was well aware of the charade that I was perpetuating by appearing as a dynamic film-maker all set to steer the course of my inheritance well into the next century. When asked, I would talk with great flourish about the several projects I was working on and the great stories I wanted to tell. The reality was that I felt I was in the creative doldrums. An impasse had set in two years earlier after the initial success of my debut feature, *Fearless–The Hunterwali Story* (1993).

What I didn't realize then was that this doldrums was a necessary phase and that actually I was drifting with a purpose. Not that the drift was on calm waters–in fact quite the opposite. You see, in the aftermath of the release of *Fearless* at the London Film Festival in 1993, my personal life underwent a sea change. Having achieved in one shot all my life's ambitions–monetary success, fame, respect of my peers, etc., what was left was just one issue I had to deal with. My gay identity locked deep in the proverbial closet.

This was driven home to me in that winter of '93, in London. I was staying for the duration of the festival with an old family friend who was gay. He and his boyfriend of ten years lived together in central London and led a picture-book, openly gay life that I had read about but till then never witnessed. While I was deeply closeted I was very comfortable with my gay identity on a personal level. It was the act of expressing my gay identity and all that it would entail for my family and my social environment that made it difficult to make the no-turning-back decision to open that closet door. Temperamentally, too, I was loath to do things in half measures, which meant that if I were to ever discuss my gay identity I would first and foremost have to reveal it to the persons closest to my being, my parents. Once they knew, I believed I would be comfortable with the concept of letting anyone and everyone know. For then it would not matter to me what people thought.

My observation of my London hosts' bliss and my need to finally find that bliss for myself was sharply put into discussion when a letter arrived at the London Film Festival desk with my name on it. It was from (the late) Mark Finch, director of the San Francisco Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, inviting my film and me to attend the 1994 edition of that festival, all expenses paid. The lure of 10 days in that fabled city, my film mainlining at the fabulous Castro cinema with me at the center of attention in the gayest spot on the planet, was too much for me to resist, and I accepted instantly. It was only a few days later that my bravado started to crumble. How was I to explain to my family (with whom I lived in Bombay) and my friends (not to mention the Indian press that seemed to be hanging on my every word) that I was going to show a film at an exclusively lesbian and gay event? In a deeply closeted society such as exists in India, where even issues surrounding heterosexual sexuality are seldom discussed in the open, this was surely asking too much.

On my return to Bombay I hid the news of my acceptance to this festival for a few days. Then a fax arrived from Mark Finch discussing travel arrangements and other such technical details and I knew the time had come to take a deep breath and face the consequences. I gingerly mentioned the news to my parents, speaking a little too fast and a little too disinterestedly. They took in the news without too much ado–apart from a query about why a gay film festival would want to show a film on the life of my grand aunt, Fearless Nadia, who was not gay. I had anticipated this and casually showed them a review that had appeared in "Variety," which praised the film and mentioned that its camp subject and feministic heroine would be of interest to gay and lesbian audiences worldwide. I also threw in the fact that now that the film was made I needed to recover money and every potential market should be explored. Thus using capitalism and media manipulation, I thought I had managed to evade turning the handle on the closet door. But I felt angry at myself for having cheated the issue. In the festival entry form I had marked off one of the boxes alongside the questions "is the director of the film gay?"

A few days later, the 26th of December 1993 to be precise, as I was alone with my mother driving home in her car, we came across a beggar woman carrying a beautiful child in her arms. My mother wistfully looked at the child and wondered aloud as to when she would become a grandmother and have a baby to play with and love. I can't say what came over me. Perhaps it was the weeks of tension and debating whether I should say I was gay, or if this was actually the occasion I was seeking to finally rid myself of the shackles of needless duplicity, but I blurted out that she shouldn't look to me for that to happen. Without missing a beat she turned to me and bluntly asked, "Why? Are you otherwise inclined?"

My coming out was rapid. One day my mother, the next week my close friends, the following fortnight my brother, a few days later my father, and within two months my general social circle. Over the next eight months I was travelling the world from festival to festival, from San Francisco and Los Angeles to Cannes and Toronto to Hong Kong and Tokyo. Alive, free, exhilarated and gay, gay, gay! The pink champagne bottle had been popped and the bubbles were overflowing. I found and lost love, became a fixture at gay bars and discovered Lycra. I started to read and become aware of gay issues and re-evaluate my life and its direction. I quickly became aware about the silent yet powerful gay mafia that ran the international film world and started to bask in being the new boy on the block. It was during this time that the seed was planted in my head to make a gay film based in India. Both Mark Finch and later David Overby (a programmer with the Toronto film festival) encouraged me, spending some precious hours giving me insights as to how the gay distribution network worked. The more I traveled internationally, the more I came out to straight friends in India, and the more I realized that I had

a story that needed to be told cinematically. It was a subject that needed to be addressed publicly, now that I had addressed it personally.

By the summer of 1995 I had written and discarded some fifty ideas for gay stories. As I discovered for myself the gay world that lived and thrived in the shadows of the gullies of India's urban underbelly, I kept changing my mind on the exact angle I wanted to tell the story from. A collaborative attempt to work on a television project with filmmaker Kaizad Gustad introduced me to the work of R. Raj Rao, a writer and poet who had just released his book of short stories "One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City." A slim volume, which I read in a matter of hours, this book was the first work I had read from an Indian author that was able to capture the essence of being a homosexual in India. It told its stories primarily from a middle class point of view, a point of view that I found interesting to read and document. I didn't waste time. I traced Raj to a University in Pune (a town a couple of hour's drive from Bombay) and a few weeks later had acquired the rights to adapt his book for the silver screen. We decided to write the screenplay collaboratively, meeting on weekends.

As we went about this venture, we found that it wasn't as easy as we had hoped. Struggling to write and make a living proved to be difficult for both of us. One weekend Raj would have commitments; the next weekend I would have to be elsewhere. All this meant that our writing process became way too extended and we lost the thread. I became disenchanted when, after the initial rush of creativity had worn off, I found that raising the money for making a gay film from India was not going to be as easy as I had envisaged. My friends in the international festival gay mafia, who had seemed so close and easily accessible when I was on the festival circuit, suddenly seemed very far away now that I was once again stuck in Bombay.

By the time the summer of 1996 had rolled around the gay feature project had almost stalled. Prompted both by some friends and a pressing need to keep busy, I started to occupy myself with other projects. One such project centered on transgender issues in a patriarchal society. Titled *A Mermaid Called Aida*, it was a documentary on Aida Banaji, a notorious transsexual from Bombay. Intended for television release, the making of this feature length film was a bumpy and long-drawn journey. It gave me an opportunity to focus on gender politics and sexual identity and very soon the buzz in Bombay's film industry was that I was a director working on bold new films.

Then one afternoon Raj called me and asked if he could come around to show me some poems he had recently written. He was invited to attend the writing program and workshop at Iowa State University and was keen that I film him with a video camera reading some of his poems. He wanted to have some visual material to take with him, as the other writers who were invited to the program would also have cinematic representation of their work.

That evening, as I read the three typed pages of poems, a shiver went down my spine. Raj's poems were so explosive, so in-your-face gay, and so incisive of the urban gay milieu that he and I had been trying to capture in our screenplay. What wasn't working in our prose came alive with vitriol in his poetry. I was determined to make something of this work. My decision was further bolstered by the fact that I had just completed some banal ad film assignments that had brought in some money–money that I could use to fund a short film project. I called Raj the next day and said I was keen to make something of this material, but not just have him read his poems against a backdrop. I was keen to explore the poems with my own vision and bring to screen the power and passion of the poems as I had encountered them. Raj was agreeable. His only request was that I have the film ready in time for his departure to the U.S., only eighteen days later!

There are some moments in one's artistic career where the mind, the soul and the medium all mesh together to create a work that comes from the heart. For me, the making of *BOMgAY* was that moment. The confluence of twenty-seven years of being in the closet, two years of being hedonistically out, and the confidence of regaining pride and self-worth all came together to shape a film that, while twelve minutes short in length, is very long in its evolution.

Because of Raj's deadline, things moved at such a speed that even today I am amazed that we were able to create what we did in such a quick span. Perhaps it was this very speed that allowed the film to come from the subconscious and not from some calculated or thought-out plan. After putting the phone down on Raj, I called up my friend Jangu Sethna. Jangu was one of the few gay men in Bombay who had been out since his childhood in the early 70s. He had worked in film production in various capacities over the years and had a keen sense of the urban gay culture of Bombay. He had switched careers in the early 90s and had become a respected landscape artist. I was keen to collaborate with Jangu and asked him to come on board this project as my associate director. A few hours later we were sipping coffee and he and I started to furiously ideate on our interpretation of Raj's poems.

The next morning we had our storyboards down on paper. We felt good. We had let our stream of consciousness flow wild and true and we had come up with images and story lines that came from our collective experiences. I was clear about one thing when we started the ideating process: we were not going to fall shy or act coy just to please some societal norms. We were going to make a short film as we saw it. The only restriction would be the budget. I had earmarked a total budget of two hundred thousand rupees (then equivalent to approximately U.S. $5000). We were determined to shoot on Beta as film would have been prohibitive and a far lengthier process, difficult to achieve in our timeframe. There is an inherent difficulty in translating the subjectivity of poetry to the objectivity of film. A poem offers unlimited

variations to interpretation to a single reader each time that reader goes through it. In visualizing the film, Jangu and I were freezing once and for all a visualization of the poems as we saw them on the day we drew the storyboards.

Now came the tough part. Putting together a team of professionals to work on a film that was bound to gain some notoriety is not easy. In India making a film that will shake mountains or threaten the peace is not considered avant-garde. It's seen as being childish. "Five thousand years of cultural evolution" is a phrase often thrown at any attempt to contest the status quo. I was keen to involve as many people from the gay community in Bombay as I could, but found after a few initial phone calls that most fought shy of coming on camera or working behind the scenes for fear of being clearly identified. It was the old syndrome: if you work on a gay film then you must be gay. Just as "if you had a friend who identified himself as gay then, ergo, you were gay." This prompted me to call in some of my friends who were clearly not gay. I brought in Neha Parikh, a senior production manager, and got her to make the initial phone calls. This worked wonders. She got Tejal Patni, a heterosexual, who was the "hot" new videographer in Bombay. He was then producing a popular fashion show on Channel [V]. We contracted Ashutosh Phaatak, also a heterosexual, to do the music score. Ashutosh, now a major music director in India, was then starting out and had just the musical sensibilities I felt this film needed. Plus he had really cute hands.

Casting was proving to be tricky. I decided to tackle casting myself. When I was very young my grandfather had shared with me a trade secret. He told me that he always went for the most difficult aspects of a job first and then finished up with the easier tasks. In our case, we knew getting an actor to perform in the nude, with some frontal nudity, was going to be the make-or-break aspect of our film. If we could convince two actors to do this for the sequence we had set in the public library then we were assured that our worries were over. I called my friend Rahul Bose. He was an actor of some repute in India, having performed in the legitimate theater and having done one feature film. That film was Dev Benegal's independent masterpiece *English August* (1994), where Rahul had played the central role. There were some sequences in the film that were clearly homoerotic, and Rahul had done some nudity in that film too. I decided to play reverse psychology on Rahul and told him I was casting for an experimental art film and wondered if he had met any actors that he could recommend to me for the principal roles. I told him about the library sequence and said it would require a really talented and fearless actor. Rahul immediately suggested himself but I told him to reconsider it, as he had a high profile and it may not be wise of him to take on a role that could have adverse effect on his career. It is to his merit as an actor that he saw through my bluff and told me to fuck-off feeding him that crap

line. That same afternoon he was at my office and we went over the script. He loved it and was all ideas as to how he would do it. I offered him both choices: to play the "sodomiser" or the "sodomisee" (sic). Sensing that the latter was the more challenging, he opted for it.

Once we had an actor of Rahul's standing in the film the rest of the roles filled in easily. My pitch to others went "well, we have Rahul in . . . now do you want to do it?" And they did. There were some that accepted to do the film in the name of the "cause" as well. Within 48 hours of starting the venture we had shaped the film as an "important" work of "socio-politics" that "needed" to be made. My own coming out in Bombay society and the fact that I was making the film under the venerated banner of my family's company, Wadia Movietone, also added legitimacy. For the narration of Raj's poetry we requested the National Award-Winning actor Rajit Kapur to lend his voice. Rajit is one of the leading actors in India's art and independent film scene and that year had made a splash in Shyam Benegal's *The Making of the Mahatma*,[1] playing the role of a dashing Mahatma Gandhi. When Rajit agreed to participate in our venture I was overjoyed. It showed that the film we were making was being taken for all the seriousness that we had intended.

Getting permissions to locations was especially benefited by the fact that we were a recognized film unit and not some new kids on the block out to have fun or disturb the peace. Within six days of starting we were on a roll. There were a few glitches–some actors dropped out at the *nth* hour and some locations (especially the underground bathrooms and shooting on the train) had to be used "guerrilla" style. The most stressful shoot was the library sequence, where the librarian supervising the location had to be distracted and led away while our actors got nude and simulated sex. The librarian kept trying to hang around the set and the actors (Rahul Bose and Kushal Punjabi) became adept at slipping in and out of clothes every time he would reappear without notice. At one point the librarian caught on to what was going on and started to scream, saying "You are making a perverted porno." Jangu Sethna expertly handled the situation by reasoning with the librarian: "How can Wadia Movietone, the maker of great Indian cinema films for over 60 years, be involved in something so base!" The librarian then accepted our lie that we were making a social service film about ragging on college campuses! I had to sign a letter stating the same and only then did the librarian agree to let us proceed.

While such incidences in retrospect seem funny, the real threat of being caught by the law while making this film was felt by all of us at the time. It was a fear based on the fact that we were, indeed, breaking the law. To start with, we were making a film about homosexuality and quite openly depicting acts of homosexuality–crimes punishable with life imprisonment in India under the Indian Penal Code. We could also have been booked under several

other laws for making what could easily be termed "lewd," "lascivious," and/or "perverted" films. Our actors could have been hauled to jail as could the crew and our suppliers. This threat was not taken lightly by us and we went through the entire shoot constantly keeping an eye out for any potential trouble. Section 337, which states that carnal intercourse against the course of nature is punishable by life incarceration, is a law that has seldom come to the courts, but is used repeatedly by the police and the state to threaten, coerce bribes from, and otherwise subjugate the public. A relic inherited from the English colonial period, this law has seldom been discussed because to discuss it would invite a description of sexual behavior, something that most Indians shy away from.

When the shoot was completed we rushed right into post-production, and because of the sensitive nature of our material I decided to edit the film on an AVID system myself. What initially emerged were six short films ranging in length from 30 seconds to two minutes. All together they made for nine minutes of running time. Jangu and I were very excited with our work. We knew we had done justice to our vision. Our next concern was how we planned to present it. We showed the six vignettes to friends, both straight and gay, and listened to what they had to say. Most felt that we would need to put these films into some sort of context. I too felt that if I were to screen these films for a more general public then I would have to find a way to deflect the film's strong images (and Raj's very strong poetry) by some sort of covert gimmick. I decided to set the six films in a sequence, using inter-titles between each to construct around them a quasi-socio-political frame. While the language of the inter-titles was academic, the thoughts expressed in them by me were heartfelt. They helped give our film a veneer of respectability, a film that otherwise would have been seen as simply provocative. Our final film was now twelve minutes long.

Now came the all-important decision: to get the film sent for censorship or not. We debated this for a long while and came to the conclusion that it would be an exercise in futility. The film not only contained images that would be seen as profane but also had language that was unacceptable to current censor laws. We knew that all we would achieve would be to create controversy and that was not our intention. Instead I devised a plan that I felt would be much more effective. The plan rose out of my understanding of advertising and marketing, trades I had experience with as an ad film-maker.

There is a hierarchy in the media and arts. Film is at the top of the hierarchy, followed by literature, then by journalism, and then by visual arts like painting and sculpture. Film is atop this exalted pedestal because it has the potential to reach the widest audience and cuts across social and educational barriers. It is also seen as a medium that is the most expensive and collaborative to work with; hence any idea that can be made into a film must

have passed through much discussion and consideration before making it to its final form. While this is not entirely true, especially in the Mickey Mouse world of video production, it is a reputation that the film medium generates. And it is this reputation that allows film to be used for propaganda in the most effective way. And it was with a propagandistic stance that I went about marketing and screening *BOMgAY.*

In December of 1996 I had finished work on *A Mermaid Called Aida* as well, and I requested a friend at the prestigious National Center for the Performing Arts (NCPA) to let us use that venue to premiere both of my recent works. Like New York's Metropolitan Museum complex or Berlin's Volksbuhne, the NCPA provided me with a platform that allowed my work to be seen as art, and serious art at that. For the screening we invited a select band of journalists, film critics and television crews, as well as some friends and crew members. I was rather nervous. Two years of living a life as an openly gay man and my reputation as a film-maker were finally going to come together at this screening. It was a decision I had taken without too much preparation, rather letting it evolve in fits and starts. The screening went splendidly and both films were well received. There were several questions asked and the session went on till late, ending up in the gardens outside the theater complex.

One of the debates that surrounded the film was my claim that the film was "India's first gay film." Many came forward and said this was not true. They cited a film called *Adhura* (incomplete) which was made a few years earlier by one Ashish Balram Nagpal. I investigated this claim and found that this film was actually a pilot for a television series that never got screened. Furthermore, it was a story that revolved around a bisexual man and had a brief and rather derisive homosexual subplot. I stuck to my claim. That is not to say I was in any real way proud of my achievement. I wish gay films had been made many years before I came to make *BOMgAY,* and then, too, in abundance. That would have gone a long way in helping me and so many, many others in not having to struggle as hard as we still have to in the contexts of our identity and cultural and social acceptance.

Over the next several months the film received reams of newsprint. It opened up an extensive discussion on homosexuality in India and it brought the "g" word into people's homes. I was invited to guest on talk shows and lifestyle programs, where lengthy excerpts of *BOMgAY* were screened. Within a few short weeks I started receiving letters from small towns and far away cities–from gay men–wanting to know how they could get hold of a copy of the film. I was approached everywhere I went by men who would come up to me and tell me of some gay guy they knew, or some friend they wanted to give the movie to. It seemed to me that before my very eyes a whole new gay world was coming alive.

Strangely in all the press that the film received there was not one reaction that was negative or derogatory. It surprised me that no one seemed to find the film objectionable or worth raising any ire over. In fact, the most severe reprimand the film received was from gay activist Ashok Row Kavi, who reviewed both films in the *Times of India*. He wrote that *BOMgAY* painted a portrait of south Bombay (read: Westernized Indian) gay life and was far removed from the realities faced by most gay men in the rest of India, especially men who lived in underprivileged socio-economic classes. I agreed whole-heartedly with Ashok on this. My film was never intended to be a realistic portrait of an Indian gay community because, as I saw it, there is no such thing as the Indian gay community (or to stretch the discussion, there is no such reality called India!). An Indian in my opinion is a person who dwells in a geo-political entity called India. That's where the similarity between one Indian and another ends. At its lowest common denominator India is an amalgam of several universes and time zones, a geo-political entity in which the 14th century and the 23rd century coexist, and whose citizens are not from any cohesive culture. *BOMgAY* tries to portray the emergence of a small gay community that dwells in Bombay and who choose to interpret the word 'gay' as practiced and loosely defined by the cultural, social and ideological expressions as seen in the western hemisphere. Of course this interpretation becomes mutated with the ground realities of living within the other cultures that exist with and alongside Bombay.

With *BOMgAY* and the resultant media frenzy, the press was hungry for more gay related stories. It legitimized the efforts of social activist and once and for all declared that India had a gay community that had a voice in the arts. Whereas once gay issues were seldom heard about, now there is some reportage of them almost every day. More and more guys have come out of the closet in recent times and have started demanding some semblance of rights. While the road to acquiring these rights is a long one, the thought of a revolution is no longer fantastical. Following soon after in the steps of *BOMgAY* were a slew of gay theme films. Some of these films were directly the result of the hype that surrounded *BOMgAY.* Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) brought lesbianism into focus (inciting riots and becoming a political weapon in the hands of right wing fundamentalists) and Kaizad Gustad's *Bombay Boys* (1998) had a confused gay protagonist too. Wheelchair-bound Bombay born writer, Firdaus Kanga, starred as himself in Warris Hussain's *Sixth Happiness* (1997), with scenes of his homosexual awakening being playfully portrayed. Even Bollywood has nodded to the emergence of an urban gay identity with Subhas Ghai's *Taal* (1999), which features a very camp queen choreographer (played by real life gay choreographer Mahesh "Pankola" Mahboobani) prancing around the leading lady. The most recent film to bring gay and bisexual issues to its central story line is Dev Benegal's *Split Wide*

Open (1999), which has just been completed and will premiere in the spring of 2000. Rahul Bose stars in this as well, and plays a street hustler who is educated by a gay Roman Catholic priest. Further gay images are to be found in recent television serials and music videos and short films, most produced in Bombay.

The most startling gay Indian film since *BOMgAY* is a stunning documentary by 22-year-old Nish Saran of New Delhi. This young filmmaker is representative of the new generation, having grown up in a world where being gay is no longer revolutionary, yet a world that still does not accept homosexuality. In his film, Nish confesses to his mother on-camera about his being gay and tackles issues of HIV/AIDS and fear of ostracization. The film recently had private screenings in India and has regenerated media frenzy on gay issues, this time bringing into sharp focus the need to discuss sexuality in a time of medical catastrophe.

My own quest continues. I am still working on bringing the screenplay (now completed by scriptwriter Shuchi Kothari) of R. Raj Rao's short stories to the screen. It's tentatively–and perhaps subliminally–entitled *Second Chances.*

NOTE

1. Also known as *Apprenticeship of a Mahatma.* (Ed.)