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Interviews on

NSD Production

with

Kanhaiya; Chittaranjan; Sravasti;
Greeny; Vivek; Medha; Bhooshan Bhatt

Production Designer

Sukant Panigrahy

DOP

Anil Mehta

Arvind Kannabiran

Savita Singh

Mohana Krishna

Sound Designer

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Interview with *Anil Mehta*

After Highway and Finding Fanny, acclaimed cinematographer Anil Mehta shot an equally diverse film, Badlapur. In an exclusive chat with RACHANA PAREKH (for www.pandolin.com), the director of photography shares his experience shooting the intense crime drama.

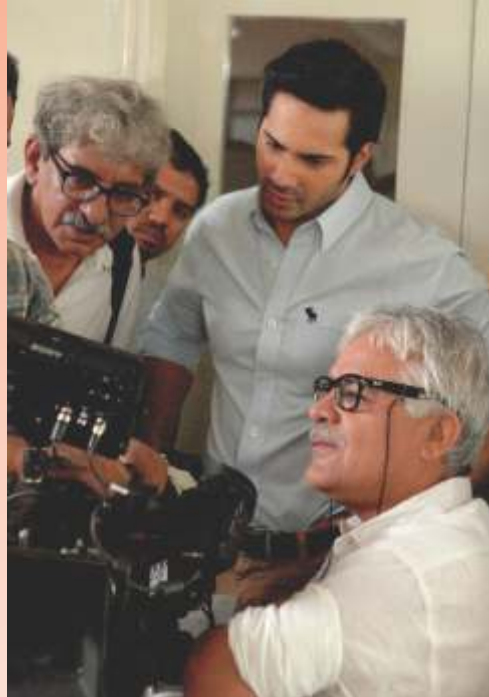
How important is the story or the script of a film you take up?

I have often asked myself the same question. Basically I see the cinematographer as a person who travels along with the director to tell the same story. One has to be able to assimilate what is written in the screenplay and then be challenged or excited enough to tell it in 'film form'. If that motivation is not there, then one might as well take a job in a bank?

This was your first time with Sriram Raghavan as a director. Can you throw some light on the association?

Yes, that was also the exciting part for me; I get to work with a guy who is known to be 'unpredictable' and famously 'indecisive'. I got to see up-close another approach that involves being alive in the moment, of evolving, of co-opting what is being said around you. Not being a big fan of story boards and locked breakdowns myself, I enjoyed the process of engaging with the uncertainties of live locations, blocking scenes on the day and of scheduling the day without a dialog draft of the scene. He is a man of few words, you need to be able to sniff the vibe and move on. I had actually assumed that we would be on the same page from the word go, but it was not like that.

He has recesses which are not so accessible. There was an occasion when I landed up at his house insisting on a printed script so we could start scheduling and scouting for locations. I knew how important the locations would be in a film like this and a couple of months away from the shoot we did not have a finished draft. We ended up



having a lot of cheap whisky that evening, better than a finished draft, I guess. His process involves continually refining whatever he has written, yesterday's dialogues are stale today. You learn to respect that because nuances



show up in newer drafts which are evidently better for the film. Life becomes hell for the assistant directors (ADs) and production people, but the film gets better. Luckily on this film we had a first AD, Aarambh (Mohan Singh), who is a filmmaker first and scheduling junky later. We also had a long-time associate of Sriram's, Rakesh Sain, who would second guess the future for us. The Executive Producer, Vishal Bajaj, wore his hair really short so there was no risk of tearing it out. He was a real sport and would bend over backwards to accommodate last minute changes, followed by more changes. Without this 'guerrillas in a trench' attitude, it's almost impossible to make a movie like this one.

What 'look' did you set out to achieve for Badlapur?

'The Look' in bold caps, scares me. For me the look of the film is embedded in its elements. Starting with actors,

costumes, make-up, sets, locations, lensing, etc. It is a sum total of all these decisions that you make while on the go, not some layer you lay on in the proverbial 'DI' (Digital Intermediate). Let me give you a small example: The film is titled Badlapur, we wanted the film to inhabit true spaces/real locations, so we went to Badlapur, Ambarnath, Bhiwandi, Nasik, almost all satellite towns off Mumbai and Pune but we didn't like any of them. All these places have started looking like the city's suburbs. One day, after many frustrating rounds of recce, we were poring over innumerable location photos and hopelessly looking at the map of Maharashtra, when, on an impulse I asked to go to Igatpuri the next day. I was told that Sriram was busy doing hundred other things and would not be free. I said I would go regardless.

So with the production designers, ADs and some locations crew we set out. We moved around from building to building, street to street and soon we had covered the entire town. No suitable location, yet. Although in the script it was a 2 BHK in Badlapur, to me this space had to have the meditative quality of a recluse, not the grungy, claustrophobia of a small town apartment. To cut a long story short, we decided to 'build' a Barsaati type apartment on the terrace of a newly constructed building on the outskirts of Igatpuri. Production Designers Anita (Rajgopalan Lata) and Donald (Reagen Gracy) were thrilled. The Producer, sitting in Mumbai, thought we were mad to ask to build a set for interior scenes on location, as it did not balance the books. When Sriram came for a final 'dekho' all he asked is, 'How did you all find this place?'. The smile said the rest. The paint on the walls, the view from the windows, the props, the drapes, the naked tube light, determined the 'look'.

Badlapur seems to have a dark tone, though Highway, which was also an internal film, did not have a similar visual style. Comment.

Badlapur is not all dark and gritty, it's not obvious in that way. Let me dovetail into the previous question, again to do with the 'look'. When I started Badlapur, I did think that with this film I might be able to make a style statement, 'Noir', 'Grit', 'Inscrutable Shadows' could make a heady mix, but sadly when I started

shooting all that went out of the window, I approached it as it came. Then during finalisation I said, 'Ah... DI!', now we'll crack it, my long-time trusted Colorist at RMW, Tushar Jadhav, will bend some rules/curves. He came up with some crackling options. Old man Ken Metzker chipped in with his 'version'. I have to admit, I did not sleep well that night. Next morning we played the scenes straight up, like they were shot and it looked fine. Tushar confirmed my hunch. He said, 'I have rarely seen visuals play out so seamlessly on first pass'. We decided to let it be, to go with the look as embedded in the visuals during the shooting. So now you will have to tell me if there was a 'dark tone' or did the cinematography just blend in with the story telling.

What was the lighting set-up for Badlapur?

Two tube lights and a bulb. And that's not a joke. When I spoke to Mulchand (Dedhia), our very own 'world famous' gaffer, of my intent, he was quite excited. He said that he has always wanted to do an entire feature with available light. I said that I was not going to be that adventurous on this one. I then proceeded to give him my light and crew requirements, which was a really minimal kit comprising a couple of KINOS and a few 650W/300W Fresnels, a 2K was thrown in as safety net. I asked him to fit everything into a Tempo, not a light truck and to restrict the crew to three to four men. He heard me out but sceptically told the Producer to wait till shooting day, when all the bells and whistles will be called in, on the shoot.

Well now that the film is out, it can be said that we did make this one with 'Two tube lights and a bulb'. And, oh yes, we bought a commercial sodium vapour fixture and put it in the Tempo. The Producer on the other hand kept sending my requirement list back for double checks: 'What! No Dolly' and 'Only one day of Steadicam, are you sure?'. I was not sure at all, but I was quite happy to go with the 'minimal' as an aesthetic choice. To be totally honest there were days where we shot with bigger sources, but very few and far between.

What camera and lenses did you shoot the film on?

I generally use only one camera to shoot a movie, except on some big days, involving stunts or songs.

On previous films like Highway and Finding Fanny, I shot with SONY F 65 which is a full blown 8K chip with 4K Raw recording. It is the top of the line model and has great bandwidth. For this film I wanted to cut back on that also. So I asked for a Sony F 55, which has a smaller profile, it's a lighter camera and records lighter 4K raw files. I knew I was going to shoot in really tight spaces too. Nawaz (Nawazuddin Siddiqui)'s house is as tiny as it looks. The director's first response was, 'This is too tiny to shoot in'. For a change the cameraman was actually gunning to shoot in that house and mohalla. The F 55 sat on my shoulder for many, many setups. The lenses were the usual kit of Master Primes with a 20mm Ultra thrown in. Pretty much the entire film is shot on Primes.

Can you tell us about the locations used in the film?

The film starts in Pune and moves to Badlapur, few scenes are set in Mumbai. That's the arc. We wanted to stay faithful to this arc. Pune for Pune, Mumbai for Mumbai, Igatpuri for Badlapur, then bits and pieces in Lonavla, Vashi, prison in Nasik, a shooting bungalow in Juhu, one set in a Mumbai studio and some cheats for police thanas. The more important thing is that we never 'bought the street', we 'informed the cops', we did not 'buy the train', we 'bought tickets for the compartment', we did not 'lock it off' we worked with the 'chance' of real life. Take the first scene of the film; camera wise nothing happens, everyday life on the main street in Pune unfolds for a really long screen time, except that all is not normal, as you soon find out.

That scene, which seems the simplest was the most complicated to execute, and like I said the cameraman had nothing to do, except sit and watch it unfold. Igatpuri, its rains and trains, are a story unto themselves. Nasik jail felt like we were all in rehab, it was so peaceful in there. At Colaba, around Regal cinema, the busiest district of Mumbai, we were stealing shots with Varun. Locations were made to serve the film and not vice versa. Sriram was very charged with the idea of not deadening the environment

for the movie, rather finding the movie within the environment. He is not a control freak but then that can freak the production personnel. Bottom line : we got the film shot in 45/46 days.

Any VFX / CG in the film?

There is only one sequence in the car, which is green screen. Rest of the CG work is incidental like removing string, clean up, add blood etc. all very effectively handled by Tata Exlsi. Pankaj Khandpur and Vishal did not need any prompting in that area.

Which is your favourite sequence in Badlapur?

I am always stumped trying to answer this question because it is never about one sequence. Ok, maybe one shot where nothing much happens. The camera is fixed in a mid-long shot, Raghu (Varun) has just told Liak (Nawazuddin) the truth, Liak walks out of the door and for more than what seems an eternity nothing happens. Varun is sitting in the foreground, Nawaz returns and still nothing happens, then, he says three-four lines and leaves, Varun is still sitting there; that's my favourite moment.

If you ask me, what did I do – I will say I switched on one tube light and a bulb and sat there. As a cinematographer it's not one of those fabulously designed or fantastically lit shots, the beauty of the scene is that even the director or editor have chosen not to cut to a close for such a big moment in the film. Everyone has held back and let the moment play.

Are framing, lensing and composition of a scene crucial and different for each film, especially the genre?

While this is a vital question, I am not able to articulate an answer. I do find myself shifting the camera a few inches here or there, every now and then; find myself changing a lens even after thinking that 32mm is the lens for the shot. It's both an exploratory and intuitive thing of how you respond to the moment, to what is happening in front of you. Composition, lensing, lighting are the cinematographers' lifeline.

The interview is also available at : www.wica.in