



Hari Om

Western Artists Explore Exotic Eastern Landscape

In a truly bizarre turn of scripts, German filmmaker Florian Gallenberger, who was assigned to write a story set in Berlin, came up with an exclusively Indian love saga. Seeking the origins of "zero", Toronto based filmmaker Elida Schogt embarked on a spiritual journey to Varanasi. Just four days before the shooting of *Hari Om* was to commence, Camille Natta was offered a role in the film. All three artistic explorers made their appearances at the 2004 Toronto International Film Festival. Even though the South Asian representation at this year's fest remained nominal, each of these artists had something unique to say about their exotic and profound experiences in the Indian subcontinent.

Florian Gallenberger has picked up even the subtlest nuances of Indian culture in his film, *Shadows of Time...without ever visiting India before*. "I had a contract with a producer to write a story for a film taking place in Berlin," he says. "I heard a radio report about a girl who was working in a carpet factory and was rescued by an organization. Her voice was very fragile and humble, and I kept thinking about her life. Three days before my deadline was due (being unhappy with the Berlin idea), I sat down and suddenly started writing a story about children in a carpet factory in India - to my own surprise. I thought my producer would say, 'What the heck are we going to do with a story in India?' But he loved the story and agreed to do it."

They decided to go to India and spend time there to see if Florian's project was realistic and to gather the Indian perspective on his story. They spent one year in research and traveled from Mumbai to Jaipur, Jodhpur, Lucknow, Delhi and Calcutta to get a feel for the country. Most people they asked said that his story was "too Indian." Finally, they decided to set the film in Calcutta. "There is a certain sleeping beauty in Calcutta; I liked the city," says Florian. "I have to admit that I didn't know anything about Indian culture before I started the project, and that's why it was a surprise to even myself when I suddenly wrote this story. It was really like somebody else was telling me what to write."

Once in India, it was a whole different world, he says. "In the first moment, you are speechless about the things that you see. You really need to find someone who will open the door into India for you, someone who understands his own country and also your mindset as a foreigner. So, you need a cultural interpreter in the

beginning, but after you have taken the first step through the door, it opens wider and wider. The people are very open and welcome you very openheartedly."

Shooting in India, however, was a challenge, and Florian wondered a few times why he chose to make an Indian film. Shooting on the streets was problematic as it meant handling crowds of over 3,000 spectators. Florian finds that the style of acting in India is different. With a completely Indian cast and few Germans in the crew, he felt that "You need to establish a common understanding and trust from the beginning." *Shadows of Time* stars Prashant Narayanan, Tannishtha Chatterjee, Irrfan Khan, Tillotama Shome, and veteran actor Soumitra Chatterjee. "I strongly believe in destiny, otherwise I would not have made this film," says Florian. "One of the major points in the film is that there is a lot of wanting, struggling and wishing. You can aim and try to achieve something, but cannot change the outcome of what is

going to happen because life goes a different way. Finally, what happens is not in our hands. I think the western way of seeing things ('If you want it, you can do it') is completely wrong. I think that is the reason for sadness in western countries."

When Florian returned to Germany, he was happy to be home, but after a few months, he started missing India. "I was missing the sense of being alive in India, the energy and interaction," he says. "Nowhere else have I seen so many outstandingly wonderful people. I admire those people for their smiles, their kind, intelligent way of thinking. They are the real pearls in India."

Elida Schogt likes to defy cinematic conventions. She set out on an insightful quest to explore the secret behind the number zero. "You are right in calling *ZERO: The Inside Story* a documentary," says Elida, "but it also has narrative elements and can be considered an essay piece or a poetic journey." In



Shadows of Time



Camille Natta

1999, Elida read a review about two books on zero in the newspaper. The review described one space inside the ring – a finite closed space and the other an infinite ring that formed a psychological space. The second book dealt with circular imagery whereby the circle becomes the individual. Zero also signified the sphere of emptiness within, and Elida wanted to explore all aspects. "The subject matter is more universal," she says. "Even though it is partly inspired by personal experience and how it connects with the universal experience."

Elida had not decided from the beginning that India would feature in such a prominent way. "It wasn't until I was in India that I realized that everything came together." She was drawn by the power of Varanasi, the ancient Indian city, which is also the birthplace of the mysterious number. "It shifted my way of thinking," she says. "I had thought of nothingness as emptiness, but nothingness contained everything. I realized that birth and death are connected." For Elida, the experience was very different and spiritual. Varanasi itself exemplified the interaction of different faiths over millennia. "If you can face emptiness, you can fill it," an Indian philosopher revealed to her. It made sense. "It means that you are open to the possibility," she says. "Westerners resist that. They are fearful." She describes Varanasi as a city where people understand their place in human life.

The film focuses on a woman's perspective to bring out her emotional core. The imagery in the film is remarkable. The sun portrays the cyclical nature of life, and the flight of steps represent the woman's sense of being stuck and striving for upward motion. The images linger and have a poetic quality.

The film was shot in the month of May, in high temperatures and humidity. "We woke up at 4:30 a.m., and by 9:00 a.m., it was too hazy to shoot," says Elida, who was overwhelmed by having death around her in a way she had never experienced before. "Varanasi contains both life's suffering and hope - they are inextricably linked," she says. Elida describes her experience in India as "very enriching and overwhelming". She hopes to return to India again as a tourist.

Camille Natta had a first time experience of sorts in everything. Director Bharatbala asked her if she would like to come to Bombay and act in *Hari Om*, just four days before the shooting was due to start. She had seen a script, but it was not the script that was given to her when she arrived in India, and it wasn't the

script that was shot either! "I am very used to working my parts very intensely," says Camille. "This was very different. I knew I had no preparation, and then I realized that I had no script either. So, it went from moment to moment and day by day."

Bharatbala had met Camille in Paris when he was auditioning French actors for the roles of Isa and Benoit. "I am English but I faked a French accent," says Camille. "I told him later that I was English."

"It was my first time in India. There are so many directors from different countries that I would love to work with, in countries where I don't speak their language. When I was offered a role in this film, it was incredibly exciting as it was one of the ways I wanted to go with my acting." Camille loved the challenge. Born in Africa, she has lived in quite a few countries. Her parents are from mixed backgrounds - her father is French and her mother is Italian/English.

Camille found an immediate connection with her co-star Vijay Raaz. "It was like we knew each other," she says. "We have the same desires in acting to portray a real person, new situations, and people. It was spontaneous". Raaz, who plays Hari Om, is also her love interest in the film.

"Shooting was intense, and there were no rules," says Camille. "It was 21 days non-stop with all sorts of things. We had a new surprise every day, like sleeping on the road."

Speaking about her character she says, "I didn't want Isa to be a stereotype. I got rid of the makeup. It is the story of a plutonic love between the East and the West - it is a real connection...her love for Hari Om is very real. She could have become a rickshawallah's wife." Yet, the film unravels in a different way. The film brings alive a different kind of journey for two French visitors who actually set out to explore Rajasthan in the royal Palace on Wheels. But turn of events lead them to dusty roads and alleyways. Isa enjoys the transition and finds herself at home in old havelis, where even the walls seem like they have a story to tell. Camille herself exults and enjoys the experience, and most of all, the colourful traditional Rajasthani outfits. AV

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