**Interview: Suman Ghosh, Director of “Shyamal Uncle Turns Off the Lights”**

By Nandita Dutta | Friday, October 19th, 2012

After *Nobel Chor* in 2011 featuring stars like Mithun Chakraborty and Soumitra Chatterjee; director Suman Ghosh returns to Mumbai Film Festival 2012 with a small-budget Bengali film *Shyamal Uncle Turns Off the Lights*, which is the story of an eighty year old pensioner who wants the street lights switched off during the day to save waste.

The film recently premiered at Busan International Film Festival where it was picked up by Global Film Initiative for North American distribution.

**Suman Ghosh**, in a conversation with Nandita Dutta, ahead of the Indian premiere of his film on October 21:

**Who or what was the inspiration for the character of Shyamal Uncle?**

Shyamal uncle is a real character and is played by Shyamal Bhattacharya himself. And this film is based on a real incident which was experienced by Shyamal Uncle. You see, Shyamal Uncle represents an entire generation. The generation who has seen the country change dramatically over the last two decades. This is a generation who sometimes feel at odds with all the changes happening around them – somehow their morality, their beliefs, there convictions do not find a place in this changed scenario. In a sense there seems to be “too much of lights” around. So the main theme of the film where our 80 year old protagonist is trying to “turn off the lights” is a larger metaphor.

**Tell us about the journey of making this film: why did you choose to make it in cinema verite style?**

Given the narrative I thought that a cinema verite approach is what I need to bring to life the slice of life of Shyamal uncle which I want to portray. The choice of Ranjan Palit as the cinematographer was immediate. But to get him on board was the first challenge since he had just shot “Saat Khun Maaf” and “Aparajita Tumi” – a big budget Bengali film with the Bengal superstar Prosenjit. I was not sure that he would be willing to work in such a so-called small film.
When I approached him he wanted to know the concept and the script. He was immediately on board after hearing it. Then I wanted to work with an entire cast of non-actors since I thought I need that aspect to bring out the form of realism that I want to achieve in the film. I was always an ardent devotee of the films of Robert Bresson. And amongst contemporary filmmakers I have been in awe of the type of realist films that are being made by the likes of Dardenne Brothers, Ramin Bahrani and Tsai Ming Liang. So from the point of view of cinematic style they were my inspirations.

The way I shot the film, often times the characters did not know that they are being shot. Only Shyamal Uncle’s (who has also never faced a camera before) script was written and we created the situation for a particular scene. I let the scene emerge from the situation. That is how the entire film evolved organically. So one might say that it was “controlled cinema-verite”.

**What are the challenges you faced while making this film?**

Ironically the challenges that I faced is my forte in the film. Let me give you an example. I had asked my production team to get the permission for us to manually operate the lights on the street where we were going to shoot. After a few days I came to know that one needs permission from two councilors since the street lights for each side of the street was under the jurisdiction of two separate councilors. And not only that- the lights were under CESC – the electricity office. I found that remarkable and incorporated it in the script as Shyamal Uncle himself is going through this Kafkaesque journey in the narrative. And the spontaneity I got from working with non-actors added to the vitality of the script. I could not have scripted such spontaneous reactions a-priori.

**How did you raise funds for the film?**

A friend of mine from college Arindam Ghosh is the Producer of the film.

**How did Colin Burrows ( UK-based producer) come on board as the Executive Producer?**

Colin saw my previous film “Nobel Chor” at the BFI London Film Festival last year and liked it a lot. Ever since then we have been in touch and when I told him about my new project he gladly agreed to be associated with the film as an Executive Producer. His presence definitely gives an international exposure.

**How was the experience of making Shyamal Uncle..different from making Nobel Chor?**
Hugely different. In a film like Nobel Chor – which is quite a big budget film – with Mithun Chakraborty, Roopa Ganguly, Harsh Chaya and others, I am working with stars and big actors. The unit consists of 70-80 people. So coordinating everything is a big challenge. And most importantly there is very little scope for improvisation. The planning must be meticulous. But in a film like “Shyamal Uncle..” it is a much relaxed environ with a much smaller crew. I would say the pleasures are different in each kind of film.

What did you learn from working with non-actors?

I have always believed that good acting is a state of “being” in a particular situation convincingly. If the actor can be made to relax and just “be” oneself- that is what makes it convincing. Given Shyamal Uncle has never acted before- the first thing I told him before shoot was to forget the camera. You just behave and it is the responsibility of the camera to capture you. You just behave and it is the responsibility of the camera to capture you. Later he told me that that advice was very helpful since he had the impression that for acting in cinema one needs to always take into account technical nuances of lighting, camera angles and stuff. It removed a lot of constraints from his mind which would have definitely affected his behavior otherwise.

When will it release in theatres in India?

The film will release in Bengal next year after we are done with the festival circuit. The North American rights of the film have been bought by Global Film Initiative who will release it theatrically in North America. The premiere will be at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in January 2013 in the Global Lens Series.

Shyamal Uncle Turns Off the Lights at Mumbai Film Festival:

Sunday, 21-10-2012, Inox (Screen No: 5) at 3.30 pm.
Wednesday, 24-10-2012, Cinemax, Sion (Screen No: 1) at 3.30 pm.
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