Journey of a medal
Suman Ghosh on the highs and highs of making Nobel Chor

His profession? Teaching economics at Florida Atlantic University. His passion? Making Bengali films between sessions! His latest venture? Nobel Chor. Just before wrapping up his third film and heading back to his classroom in USA, Suman Ghosh spoke to t2.

How has Nobel Chor shaped up?
I’m very satisfied with the way it’s looking. This film is completely different from my previous two films, which were very serious and slow-paced. Not that I have any regrets because it was meant to be that way.

This one’s serious at its core. But on the surface it’s an entertaining film and very fast-paced. I was treading into new territory in the way I’m also progressing as a film director. The final vote came from Mithun Chakraborty. I know him well as a person now and he doesn’t bullshit about what he doesn’t like. I was a bit scared and apprehensive when he was going through the film during the dubbing but he told me that he was hooked to it till the end and that has given me a lot of confidence that the audience will like it too.

It has already started getting film festival invites…
Lot of these festivals take rough-cuts at the edit stage. The film is being premiered at the Busan International Film Festival, which was known as Pusan earlier. That is in October and then there are other festivals lined up but we have a press embargo till they make a formal announcement.

How universal is Nobel Chor for a worldwide audience?
I am quite lucky in the sense that not only in Bengal but a lot of people in the western countries also know about the Nobel theft. It was a bizarre incident and the fictional story in the film starts off on that premise. The fictional part is more a comment on the current state of our country or Bengal and the issues of globalisation, but it’s a human story after all. The bottomline is that it’s a homage to Tagore. I could have made a film on one of his novels but I wanted to use a different route.

What inspired this metaphorical take on the Nobel theft?
The inspiration for the film came from a comment made by Amartya Sen right after the Nobel theft. He said that it was very shameful that such a thing had happened but one should also remember that it’s a metal object after all and questioned how much we truly imbibe Tagore in our lives, which was more important than the medal as such. That struck me as a very interesting point of view and through that, I felt a lot more could be explored.

You were nervous before shooting with Mithun and Soumitra Chatterjee. How did it pan out?
Just before the shoot there had been some political issues between the artistes’ union regarding the film industry and also something related to Mithun. Soumitrakaku being the chairman of the Artistes’ Forum, I was apprehensive about how the equation between the two would be on the sets. But as actors and as artistes their admiration for each other was amazing.

In between shoots Mithun would tell us how as a struggling actor he’d follow Soumitra Chatterjee, who he’d call Puluda, and Uttam Kumar around to be in their shadow. There’s no ego, just pure reverence. Something for the younger generations to learn.

Take us through some of the high points during the making of Nobel Chor…
I’ve always adored Mithun as an actor and I remember his first day at the shoot. I was in awe of him, the superstar with that elan and that swagger. His character, Bhanu, was diametrically opposite to what his typical image is and it still gives me goosebumps when I think of how he became a completely changed man.

On asking him later he told me that he always has a conversation in his mind with the character before he transforms into
In Bolpur we had great fun. Mithun had cooked mutton for everyone; Barunda (Mukherjee), our cinematographer, cooked another day. Goutam Das Baul had come to sing for us one day at our resort and from there I decided to use his singing in the film.

Shooting for Nobel Chor was quite a journey. Apart from shooting with legends, it was also my first working experience with Saswata (Chatterjee) and discovering what makes Saswata, Saswata! And I worked with one of my favourite actors and idols Roopa Ganguly. I’m a big fan of hers and realised her fine sense of aesthetics that is reflected in her work, acting, clothes and the way she carries herself. Also, Shankar Debnath and Soma Chakraborty are two actors who turned out to be a revelation for me.

**How did you design the film’s look since it’s set in 2004?**

I was careful in maintaining that none of 2011 comes into the film. A good part of the film is based in the village, which remains the same, but shooting the city parts required some planning. For example, we couldn’t show malls like South City. We also had to be careful about the kind of phones one would use. Media is important, in the way it was in Peepli Live, so I had to be careful about what we showed.

**When are you planning to release Nobel Chor?**

We intend to release the film produced by Impact Films around December after doing the initial bit of the festival circuit. The final date will depend on our distributor as there are a lot of other constraints...

Finally, how well does the Miami-based economics professor relate to Tollywood now?

I spend at least four months every year in Calcutta and this time I was here for eight months. I take without-pay leave when I come here and try to interact with the younger generation of actors and directors. I have lovely addas with the older generation of theatre actors too, like Manoj Mitra, Bibhash Chakraborty and I watch lots of plays. I saw Raja Lear and Bikele Bhor Shorshey Phool.

I’ve watched most of the Bengali films that have released of which I felt Aarekti Premer Galpo was the best. I liked Ranjana Ami Aar Ashbona and met Anjan Dutt for the first time during a special screening of the film. I was so moved by his acting that I went and hugged him.

That apart when I look at the larger perspective I try to mix with Topi the posterwallah as much as I would with Mithun Chakraborty because in the end I’m the gainer. I’m a greedy person and try to take as much as I can from Calcutta.