

# Hark back to Bombay

In his film, Joseph Mathew pays a tribute to the city of an earlier time through his three protagonists, who become motifs to capture its energy and youth culture in transition

Joseph Mathew grew up in Trivandrum in the '70s, when distances seemed great and Mumbai or Bombay, as he refers to the city, was a mythical dream.

"It was the time of Fiats and Ambassadors, and it would take about three days to travel to Bombay," says the New York-based Mathew, as he prepares for the Indian premiere of his first narrative feature film *Bombay Summer* at the International Film Festival in Goa. "For me, the Bombay that existed was more in my head," he says. "I passed through the city a few times, and there was an image. When I was a kid, people would go to Bombay, and it was a big event. They would wind up their small lives in Kerala, and travel to Bombay to make a living. After I came to the US, I started going back more often to Bombay and staying in the city. I always wanted to shoot a film in Bombay – capture the energy of the city in transition."

*Bombay Summer* is a quiet, touching story about three friends (Tannishtha Chatterjee, Jatin Goswami and the Indian American actor Samrat Chakrabarti) as they weave their way through a city. Last week, the film swept the Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council Film Festival, winning the best actor award for Chatterjee, and two nods for Mathew – Best Director and Best Picture.

The film is Mathew's homage to the old city evolving into a modern metropolis. "The film is a lot about change," he says. "The characters and the city are in a state of flux.

At the same time, I wanted to pay a tribute to the Bombay of earlier days – of chawls, old hand-painted Bollywood posters and



Tannishtha Chatterjee in a scene from *Bombay Summer*, for which she won the Best Actor award at the MIAAC film fest

abandoned textiles mills."

*Bombay Summer* is also an ode to youth culture. Mathew recalls the strong bonds he had with his friends growing up in Trivandrum. "The relationships you build are very intense, and you feel they will last a lifetime. I wanted to transfer some of those emotions in this story."

In the film, Chatterjee and Chakrabarti play upper class characters, who befriend a poor, talented artist (Goswami) from the chawls. Their friendship, which crosses class barriers, has emotionally satisfying moments, though there is also much heartache. "All three have amazing strengths, yet they are also flawed," says Mathew. "They are trying to find themselves. They have certain ambitions and certain drives. However, they have these weaknesses, which pull them down. Unless you go through something like that, you do not find yourself."

Chatterjee, who had two films playing at the MIAAC festival (she plays a supporting role in director Raja Menon's *Barah Aana*) gives a well-nuanced and complex performance of a woman drawn

to the two men. The other two leads are equally strong. In directing the three actors, Mathew gave them a lot of room to explore their characters.

"I come from the documentary film background," says Mathew. His 2006 documentary *Crossing Arizona* played at the Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the grand jury prize. "With *Bombay Summer*, I kept a lot of room for improvisation. I laid a solid groundwork of the script."

Other strengths of *Bombay Summer* are in its stunning cinematography by Amol Rathod and the melodious soundtrack by the French composer Mathias Duplessy, whose work is complemented by four haunting songs by the Rajasthani Sufi singer Mir Mukhtiyar Ali.

"The music just happened by sheer chance," Mathew says. "I was very lucky since a friend introduced me to Mathias and Mukhtiyar. It was at a party, where they had only met a few minutes ago, and were performing together. It was breathtaking, and I knew I had found the music to my film."

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