



Arthur J Pais explores actor Samrat Chakrabarti's impact on the independent movie circuit

In between shooting for *The Waiting City* in Kolkata, actor Samrat Chakrabarti, who plays a villager working in a city hotel, stayed in character. He wore village clothes, used coconut oil in his hair, went around in *chappals* (Indian flip flops), and learned to use a villager's body language.

"I was making sure my character would not become a caricature," says the London-born and America-raised Chakrabarti, who speaks fluent Bengali. "I entered a cyber café to check my mail and took a seat... The manager promptly told me in Bengali, 'Sorry, these chairs are for customers only.'"

Fast forward to the red carpet for *The Waiting City* at the Toronto International Film Festival 2008. "I was wearing a suit," Chakrabarti recalls. "As I walked the red carpet with fellow artist Radha Mitchell, journalists asked if I was the producer of the film. 'No,' said Mitchell with a great smile. 'This is the guy who played the hotel boy in the film.'"

Some of them had seen the film, the promo and posters, but they didn't recognize him.

Waiting... is one of the two Chakrabarti films that will be shown at the Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council Film Festival. The other is *Ashes*, co-written and directed by his friend, actor Ajay Naidu.

The Waiting City, an Australian movie, was particularly interesting to work on, the actor says. "The film is very important because it shows Indian characters that are different from the ones seen in films like *Slumdog Millionaire*," he says. "My parents migrated from Kolkata to London and then to Boston via Canada to create their own life. A couple of decades later, their son was going back to their city, not for a visit but to work in a film."

Not playing an urban man in the film made it an "even bigger challenge," he adds. "I have been to India many times, but it was not easy to create this character because this man is very different from who I am."

He believes it was the chemistry he felt with direc-

tor Claire McCarthy that got him the part. There are "amazing" actors his age in Kolkata, he admits, "but with her Western sensibilities, she was not able to convince them to her satisfaction. I could play the working-class man and yet understand what she wanted me to do."

Ashes is a gritty urban drama that could not be more dissimilar to *Waiting...*, the actor says.

"I play a dark character in *Ashes*," he adds. "The film is partly about the seduction of an American dream and how it could become an American nightmare."

Working with Naidu, who studied acting at Harvard like him, gave Chakrabarti quite a few thrills. "Ajay is an icon to me," he says. "He is an artist I deeply respect... We communicated in a language we knew, and that meant there was hardly anything to be explained in detail."

Both the films are to be shown back-to-back at the festival. "This gives an opportunity for people to see how versatile one can be in this industry," he adds.

Chakrabarti has become one of the busiest actors on the independent movie circuit. On the day of the interview he was flying to Rome to attend the premiere of *Gangor* made by Italo Spinelli based on a novella by Mahasweta Devi. He has just finished the shoot for an episode of *In Treatment* in which he plays actor Irrfan Khan's son.

"One got an opportunity to learn a few things from (Gabriel) Byrne (*the lead actor of In Treatment*)," he says.

It often happens in the movies, he adds, that a big actor does his scene and goes away, and the other actors work with a standby. But Byrne would wait to see the work in progress.

"I have been lucky... each of the films I have worked in over the last seven years has been a good experience," says the actor, who has also appeared in stage productions.

Filmmaker Shailja Gupta, whose film *Walkaway* recently premiered in New York, says Chakrabarti was the first to be cast in the film, and he volunteered to introduce her to potential artists. "I could not have asked for a bigger gift," she says. "He is much more than an actor, he is building a very good community of South Asians with a big vision."

"We have a long way to go," the actor concludes. "But there are many things that we have to be glad about."

'Much more than an actor'

M3

out looking into it. Jayamma did not know why her husband had become despondent in spite of the successful surgery.

"Once I got past the shock of the suicide attempt, I asked the parents if they wanted to share what happened - this is their story and it's up to them, I said," he remembers. "After some debate amongst themselves, they consented. I surely think they took a leap of faith. They spoke to each other about their problems openly and honestly in front of our cameras. I think it was in the months they opened up to each other. They allowed me to put their story on film and that made a lot of difference to the film."

After Ganesh was born, the Yadavs had a girl. "They were determined to give the children good education and sent them to the English medium school, which added to their debt," he continues.

And they had approached many doctors to help Ganesh. But Indian doctors did not have the knowledge to operate on a growth that obscured most of his nose and has pushed his eyes outward. "This was unusual, they had seen babies with a growth at

Ganesh, boy wonder

the back of their head,' Srinivas continues. By the time Ganesh was six years old, his face was disfigured. He had trouble seeing and could not go to school unaccompanied. And yet he dreamt of becoming a doctor. While his dream continued after the surgery, his father was facing turmoil.

Krishna, the father, slowly revealed before the camera that he had accrued huge debts. He was already short of money before the surgery. He was not good at business, and when he took off days to attend the surgery, it suffered much more than before. And he had incurred travel expenses. Seeing the stories about his son in newspaper and television, the money lender became even more aggressive.

"In the end, the documentary has a happy ending but we also included footage discussing his problems. And we have shots of the money lender."

Kaila said the television team followed

the surgery team "through the whole thing and did a fabulous job." The surgery took about 10 hours. "The movie is very accurate and really showed how this affected Ganesh and his family."

One of the most arresting images in *Ganesh, Boy Wonder* - and there are many - said a Canadian newspaper, is that of terrified father Krishna standing in a hospital in Hyderabad, wearing a shirt with Canada emblazoned across the chest.

Canadian publications have run good reviews of the film and Srinivas hopes that mainstream Americans will get to see the film at MIACC.

One of the big challenges for Srinivas was that of intimacy. "I had to remember I have different circumstances," he says. "At the end of the day, I would go back to my life. The Yadavs knew it and they had no problem with it. We were very careful in showing respect to everyone whose life was con-

nected to Ganesh."

The three Yadavs came 'face to face with utter despair and found the faith to live with dignity, until someone from across the globe answered their prayers,' he has said. "In this, our age of endless arguments, I hope viewers will be moved by the transformative power of such stories."

A reporter asked Krishna recently if there is a person living or dead he would most like to work with is...

'Mahatma Gandhi,' said Krishna who migrated to Canada from Chennai when he was about six. 'If I had lived during his time, I would have followed him around with a movie camera. The resulting film would have encompassed two world wars, the end of colonialism and included some of the most memorable characters of modern history, all from the perspective of a man who wouldn't take no for an answer.'

His final thoughts on the documentary: "I hope it will go to many South Asian film festivals. But this is a story that would move anyone, and I hope it is seen in the theaters, and people get to talk about it after the screening. Then, it should go on TV."