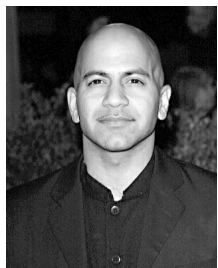




Actor and filmmaker Ajay Naidu in conversation with Arthur J Pais



Ajay Naidu

or, partly based on his life.

What is *Ashes* about?

Ashes is about a small-time dealer who takes care of his mentally ill elder brother, and is unable to save his brother and his gang. Yet somehow the story is triumphant. It's a tricky line to walk, but I think the styles in it allowed for that story to happen, because everything in the film actually happened in one way or another just maybe not in the order it occurred.

You have been thinking of making *Ashes* for years...

From the time I thought of this film, it took me almost a decade to write the script, raise the money and shoot it. The idea grew out of the difficult times my family — my father was a physician, my mother a physical therapist and my older brother a medical student — had in dealing with my sister's mental illness. She had a manic depressive schizoid disorder, which eventually led to her suicide. I was 21 and she was 28. The year was 1992.

When I began discussing the project (*with prospective financiers*), I knew I had a tough fight. Indian people who read the script did not want to talk about the subject matter — mental illness and drug abuse in our communities, and a film doing that would not interest them. The Americans, on the other hand, did not get the cultural background of the lead characters that is so important to this story. So, I decided to fund it mostly from my work.

You grew up in Chicago, but you made this film in New York...

I desperately wanted to shoot in Chicago. I went back to Chicago from New York many times to raise funds and create a support system... It was impossible to get the funds... It is difficult to bring people to Chicago without a proper support system in place, and most of the people I knew who were working in films there were either interested in big-budget projects or making their own work. So, we shot in New York... Taking the artists and the crew to Chicago from New York would have cost a lot of money.

I have cast some of the finest actors of my generation, including Piper Perabo, Farhan Tahir, Firdous Bamji, Reena Shah and my fiancée Heather Burns and some of the finest technicians, perhaps most importantly my DP (*direc-*

'The less money you have, stronger the decisions you have to make'



Ashes is partly based on his life

tor of photography) Ben Kutchins. When they read the script, they were ready to work for nothing, if not something very small.

A lot of people who I have known for many years pitched in. Among them were musician Karsh Kale and the band Midival Punditz.

How else did the budget constraints affect the film?

In a certain way, the less money you have stronger the decisions you have to make. I kind of tailored every role to someone I knew, I couldn't not see someone I knew in each role and I had to make sure that before I did each role they would be open to playing it... Yeah, kind of didn't really need a casting director for *Ashes*... I knew right away what I was going to do.

Why is *Ashes* the story of two brothers and why not a brother and sister?

I did not want to do a disservice to the story by telling the straight story of what happened to me. Real life is boring.

How much did you agonize as you went back to the days of the crisis in your family, and how did you handle it?

I agonized quite a bit, but not about the personal feelings of loss. It was the difficulties of filmmaking. The telling of

the story was very liberating as opposed to being very painful. I dedicated the film to my father and my sister.

With *Ashes* did you plan to make a mainstream American film with an Indian story?

I set out to make a good film. I did not tell myself that I was going to make a mainstream or an Indian film... I made this film because I had to. I believe unless you talk about the issues raised in *Ashes*, more people in our community will suffer. I wrote several scripts and I had to revise them extensively. It may sound a bit strange, but the script that really appealed came about only after I had edited and reedited the film. My mother, who had seen an earlier version about 18 months ago, thought it needed more clarity, but when she saw the final cut a month ago, she said it 'shook her up.'

What kind of reactions did you get when it premiered at the South Asian Film Festival in Chicago?

People were deeply shaken. A number of people asked me deeply personal questions. Some wanted to know if the real life situation was very difficult. My answer is that the situations in the film are much softer than what my family and I encountered.

Celebrating the many avatars of Indian cinema

◀ M2

Among the other films at the festival are *The Poetics of Color: Natvar Bhavsar* is made by gallery owner Sundaram Tagore on the life and work of the long-time New York resident; Rohit Kulkarni's *Pitch of Dreams — Cricket in America*, a short film on how India's favorite sport is kept alive thousands of miles away by immigrants; Israeli

filmmaker Erez Laufer's *Rafting to Bombay*, about an Indian Jew who returns to Mumbai with his Israeli son to get caught in the 2008 terror attacks on the city; Claire McCarthy's *The Waiting City*, about an Australian couple discovering the reality of India while trying to adopt a baby in Kolkata; Aparna Sen's *Japanese Wife* and Srinivas Krishna's feature-length documentary *Ganesh: Boy Wonder*, the story

of a boy who has a successful surgery for a deformity that made him look like the Hindu god Ganesha.

"This year's festival promises once again to be a heady mix of terrific films, stimulating conversations, and fabulous events," says Shivdasani, executive director, Indo-American Arts Council.

Indian independent films have attained a maturity displayed by

regional cinema in India, she adds. "Our opening night film *Shor*, centerpiece *Memories in March* and closing night film *Cooking with Stella* have characters speaking in Hindi, English and another Indian language... the way most Indians speak... Our festival is truly a celebration of Indian film in all its avatars."

<http://www.iaac.us/MLAAC2010/films.htm>