

Dubai filmmaker in international collaboration

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Fahad Shaikh with his cast and crew on the set (a friend's flat) for the filming of their four-minute segment in the still-untitled worldwide collaborative feature about a lost backpack. Jeffrey E Biteng / The National

Fahad Shaikh is a man with a mission: to film a four-minute segment in one day. It is for a worldwide, collaborative project called CollabFeature, which was dreamt up by two Detroit-based directors, Marty Shea and Ian Bonner, and involves 25 aspiring directors from around the globe working independently to write, direct and produce short films linked by one main theme. The as-yet-untitled film follows the progress of a mislaid backpack as it makes its way around the world back to its rightful owner.

Despite the financial constraints of directing a small, independent short, Shaikh, a Pakistani filmmaker based in Dubai, who estimates that his shoot will cost him approximately Dh3,000, has high hopes for his slot. "I really hope we can film the whole segment today as most of the cast have to fly back to India soon after, and our budget is very tight. I'm very thankful that our lead actress, Ridhima, paid her own way to come from Mumbai just to be part of the project. It was also just luck that our main actor, Sunny, who also lives in Mumbai, was visiting his family who live here."

And he's not joking about the budget. Financed by Shaikh and three friends (one of whom is present during the filming to show his moral support), the movie involves no Hollywood-style

film sets, no trailers for the actors to rest in between takes. For Shaikh and the other eight cast and crew members, filming takes place in a small flat - courtesy of a friend - while all three actors have lent their services free of charge.

For some participants in the project, such as the Italian director Giacomo Mantovani, money has not been too much of a problem. "I shot most of [the film] with my crew, for three days, using professional equipment and high-level cinema techniques," he said. "My segment is called, *The Plot* - I cannot tell you anything about it because it is the penultimate segment of the film. The experience of working on a project of this scale has been amazing, because the technology we used [has] changed the way in which we consider the world and its barriers."

Despite the small budget for Shaikh's segment, the lead actress Ridhima Sud was determined to be a part of it: "When I met Fahad to discuss taking a role in the movie, he warned me about the budget constraints. It really never came into my mind to refuse the role based on that, given how interesting it all sounded. It's something I'm proud to be part of." So what was it about the project - and this segment in particular - that piqued the interest of the young actress? "I had been in LA for the summer, taking acting classes, and when I got back home to India, I came across the project on a friend's social web page. With social networking these days it's very easy to get wind of this sort of stuff. Having realised that the segments taking place in Delhi and Mumbai were already taken care of, I decided to try my luck at getting a role in one of the pieces getting filmed in a neighbouring city.

"When I got in touch with Fahad, I discovered he was looking for a south Asian actress to fill the lead female role. It was a lucky coincidence." The segment, called *Chat Away!*, will be the 20th in the series to be shot and will link two pieces set in Delhi and Beirut, the latter of which features a female character who is mentioned but not seen in Shaikh's segment. Mixing comedy, drama and even horror, some of the slots that have already finished production include *Hottie Lollie*, which follows a precocious, aspiring actress who begs her rich boyfriend to find the backpack for her after she spots it in a magazine. In Dublin, two young brothers cross paths with the bag in a segment called *Heart-Shaped*, when it is mistakenly delivered to their house, while in Mumbai (*The Bullock Cart*) it finds its way into the hands of a Bollywood-obsessed bullock cart driver, searching for his daughter.

Xavier Agudo, the Venezuelan director behind *Hottie Lollie*, describes the experience of working on the collaboration as "awesome". "This kind of collaborative project gets you in touch with like-minded people who offer criticism and valuable feedback that keeps you polishing your work," he says. The independent filmmaker and full-time mother Neha Thakker agrees. A Mumbai director whose 2009 short film, *Erased*, won the Focus Dialogue Prize for Best Short Film from the Indian Subcontinent at that year's student film festival *Sehsüchte* in Potsdam, Thakker said working on *CollabFeature* - she directed *The Bullock Cart* - had "been an amazing experience".

Set in Dubai, Shaikh's segment does not make use of the backpack itself, instead choosing to focus on the tumultuous relationships between the people linked to the unseen woman in possession of it. "If you were to describe my character, Ali, in one word, it would be that he's a player," says 26-year-old Sunny Hinduja, *Chat Away!*'s lead actor. "My character is a risk taker. Being as charming as he is, he's able to manage two different relationships at one time. When you watch the piece you'll see Ali trying to persuade the unseen female character, Sanya, via online chatting, to visit him in Dubai, despite the presence of his girlfriend Divya - played by Ridhima. Basically, he's not a nice guy."

"I can agree with that," laughs Sud. "In this situation, I play the girl who is more in love with the boy, who is just having fun." Filming on such a short movie, was it hard to get into character? "It's not about the screen time," says Hinduja. "It's about how much you know about the character. Before we started the shoot, I had to get into the skin of Ali. I had to work out why he acted the way he did as well as what influenced his behaviour. If you know the background information, then filming a one-minute scene is not hard."

"For me," interjects Sud, "the hard part has been to layer the performance. It's like writing smaller pieces - you have to edit and be concise, even though there is so much you'd like to add. So it has been hard. But given how much we have been involved in the project - Fahad has let us improvise - it has been fun." Another difficult part, presumably, must have been the process of finding 25 directors, not to mention keeping in touch and working with people based all over the world. Shea explains that they advertised for filmmakers through various websites such as Craigslist and Mandy. Subsequently, he says: "We have mainly kept in touch through a central website which Ian [Bonner], the co-director, created. We pitch ideas, comment and vote on them, post drafts of our individual scripts, cast and location pictures and now rough cuts of our individual segments. We chat on Skype or iChat or g-chat, email a lot, and occasionally, but rarely, jump on the phone to figure something out."

"We watched one of Fahad's films that he submitted [The Veil] and we really liked it. It had a very realistic feel and then it took a very symbolic, spiritual turn that is very rare to see in filmmakers today. He's very much an ideal collaborator. So naturally, we asked him to join us for the backpack project." So what next for the duo? "In many ways," says Shea, "we have already achieved [what we wanted with the film]. To see the process working has been so rewarding. But, of course, we want the finished film to be seen and loved by many, many people. There's an understanding among the group that we're not in this for the money. Whatever money it generates will go right back into making more collaborative films."

"I would love to see it get into some big festivals or win awards. But I'm more interested in seeing what we can do as a group to promote the film and screen it in our hometowns, across the globe. That, for me, would be a true accomplishment." Having been given permission to watch *Chat Away!* being filmed, I find it surprising to see the amount of effort being put into such a small production. Despite having started work in the afternoon, the cast and crew work tirelessly on as the clock strikes 1am. Fighting her way through the mound of pizza and various bits of equipment littering the room, a tired Sud sits down for a break. What does she hope will come from taking part in the project? "As an actor, the kind of visibility you get from working on something like this is incredible. Thanks to the uniqueness of the movie, my segment will be seen by various directors the world over. It's really exciting." Delivering this last line with a bright smile, Sud is called to action once again, the crew eager to complete filming before the sun starts to rise.

Despite overrunning, Shaikh remains upbeat. "This is a completely fresh idea. I think it's going to give everyone involved a big boost, especially the filmmakers. I've never met Marty and Ian face to face, so when the film is finally finished, which we hope will be sometime in January next year, it's everyone's wish to meet up at a film festival in February." Still, with one set of directors - Shea and Bonner - yet to complete their segment ("we're casting this week for the lead") Shaikh can be forgiven for not sticking to his schedule. Says Shea: "I don't want to give too much away just yet. I can tell you that ours is about this crazy street evangelist. But he won't be shouting about any religion or condemning people to hell. He is a 'cinema evangelist', warning people about the mediocrity of modern blockbusters and trying to convert them to [become] followers of great cinema auteurs. It's a comedy."

He adds: "We have had some interest from distributors, but no one has seen more than the teaser trailer so far. Once the film is done we'll come up with a festival and distributor strategy. We have two other collaborative features in the works and several other ideas brewing. "This is just the beginning."