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Talking about a revolution

On May 25, a global collaboration of 25 aspiring film-makers will make celluloid history. Pakistani director Fahad Shaikh recounts his part of the epic adventure

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Image Credit: Supplied

Lead actors Ridhima Sud and Sunny Hinduja in Chat Away!, the 20th segment of the film The Owner, which is a collaborative endeavour by 25 innovative moviemakers worldwide

It's October 2010. Film-maker Fahad Shaikh is surrounded by a motley group of cast and crew preparing to film a scene. Twelve hours later, Shaikh

has what he'd like to call his five minutes of fame. Making a film is seldom a straightforward process. It takes a lot of proverbial glue to hold one's commitment and passion to see it through. Especially when your slice of the pie is just five minutes and you're working with 25 other aspiring film-makers who you've never met.

The start-up

The Dubai-based expatriate's dream began to take flight just like any other modern day adventure, on the internet. He was browsing www.mandy.com, a film and TV production resource site, for film projects when he stumbled across an ad that read: 'Make a Film!' What piqued his interest further was the location — worldwide. "So I applied, I just had to see what it was about," says Shaikh with a lopsided grin.

The opportunity turned out to be a worldwide collaborative project called CollabFeature. Conceived by two Detroit-based directors, Marty Shea and Ian Bonner, the project has 25 aspiring directors from across the world working independently to write, direct, and produce short films linked by one main theme. The film, now entitled *The Owner*, follows the colourful and event-filled journey of a backpack as it makes its way back to its rightful owner.

The Owner will be CollabFeature's first movie, and is set for a worldwide premiere on Friday, May 25. The film is set to break the world record for most directors, surpassing *Paris je t'aime*, which currently holds the Guinness World Record for the most directors in one film (21).

"Once this film is out, it will definitely help me get on my way with future projects, which I plan on producing in Pakistan. There're so many stories waiting to be told there," says Shaikh.

Drawn to French and Iranian cinema, Shaikh's passion for film began at the age of 12. By 21, he had taught himself film-making through books and the Internet, while taking film workshops to hone his skills. *The Veil* emerged as his first short film, and was a personal struggle to achieve definitive work. In his introduction on CollabFeature's portal he writes: "A film-maker's first film is in many ways his most defining work. Even though there are many obstacles, there is still no excuse to create a weak piece."

Getting into the groove

Shea and Bonner had requested interested film-makers to submit a sample of their work, to ensure only serious contenders applied. Shaikh submitted his eight-minute short *The Veil*, which they liked immensely. They promptly invited him on-board. "When I made the shortlist, I realised that I was part of a group that had been culled from more than 700 applications; for an aspiring film-maker that's a huge boost," says Shaikh. "I think the gravity of the project sunk in one fell swoop when I logged on to our collaborative portal. Versions of scripts were being submitted for review, updates on edits and filming schedules were being tracked on a timeline, emails with progress reports, photos, and rough cuts were being exchanged, while I've never met any of the co-directors, I have tweaked their scripts!"

Shaikh's primary (and only) way of communicating with his fellow raconteurs was through the central portal, which co-director Bonner created. "The only two directors I communicated with online were from New Delhi and Beirut as our individual segments linked together. We were on G-Chat a lot, and very rarely has a phone call been exchanged to sort out a problem," he explains.

After a session of rewrites and a final vote, Shaikh's

segment *Chat Away!* was cleared for filming as the twentieth in the film series. "My segment is a link and so I've kept it as simple as possible, yet the characters are anything but!" Set in Dubai, *Chat Away!* does not make use of the backpack, around which the film is based, but focuses on the riotous relationships between people linked to the unseen woman in possession of it.

"What followed after was a patchwork of goodwill, serendipity and a passion for film-making all seamlessly woven together," says Shaikh. The estimated Dh3,000 shoot was financed in part by Shaikh with three friends pitching in to cover basic costs. "We had practically no funds to pay for talent; from the writer to the production equipment, actors and cameraman. Everyone was pitching in on their own time and efforts — the only goal was for everyone to be a part of something meaningful, and that helped immensely."

May D-Day!

Record setting or not, CollabFeature's *The Owner* has tested and endured two years of against-all-odds film-making. Now as the film gets set for its worldwide premiere, Shaikh sounds a bit wistful. "CollabFeature is defined by its own triumphs and pitfalls. We've seen some directors leave the project and new ones join in, the project has been resilient and is almost nearing completion. We're in the final stages of post-production now. My segment was completed a while ago and I have been facing a few challenges with getting the final edits done, there's only so much of free time you can eke out of friends and contacts," he says.

While Shaikh's ideal location for *Chat Away!* would have been Pakistan, he believes that Dubai worked better symbolically and geographically. "I think I represent Pakistan as a collaborator and interpreter in this project. Dubai perfectly reflects the multiculturalism of CollabFeature — my actors are from India, and my

production crew comprised Europe, talent from the Middle East and South Africa — so it fits in very nicely."

The Dubai screening of *The Owner* from CollabFeature will be held at The Pavilion Downtown. To sign up for screen updates and to read about CollabFeature visit www.collabfeature.com.