

25 DIRECTORS, 1 BACKPACK

For the first time, 25 filmmakers in 14 countries have written and directed parts of a 100-minute film — *The Owner* — set to release on May 25. YOSHITA SENGUPTA unearths the story behind the story

THE hero of this film is a lost backpack trying to find its way to the owner in South America via US, Asia, Europe and Africa. Along the way, the bag changes several hands — from a thief in Ecuador to morticians in New York and a bullock cart in Mumbai. Each segment is about four minutes long, and has a different director. Each segment has a different style, and talks to you in a different language.

The scenes range from drama to comedy and sometimes border on plain absurd, but the one question that remains a mystery till the end is will the bag ever find its way to the Owner. We talk to the project director and Detroit filmmaker Marty Shea, Berlin filmmaker Xavier Agudo and Tom Kingsley, director, Press. The film is set to release on May 25 in 19 cities across 13 countries.

A film with 25 directors in five continents. How did that happen?

Tom: We started writing the film in March 2010. The idea to create this film started when Marty Shea and Ian Bonner formed CollabFeature (an international feature film group).

Xavier: I remember applying to an online advertisement looking for directors from across the world for a collaborative feature film. I submitted my reel and credentials and was selected for the project. I became part of an

online community of filmmakers working together to flesh out a cohesive narrative using independent stories written by each director.

The final call to accept directors into the project was in the hands of Marty and Ian, but choices were always made according to what the film needed. We found the need to balance geographic locations, styles and storylines to incorporate segments into the overall narrative. There was no competition within the group. It was always about collaboration. Everything was decided through constructive feedback, voting and each director created their own voice in each segment of the film.

Tell us about the mystery man to whom the bag belongs? Where does

The group is now filming their second CollabFeature Train Station (working title). It is a film about possibilities, destinations and fate. It follows a character, played by different actors in different cities around the world. Throughout the film, the character comes to several moments, where he must make a decision. At this point, they cut to



A still from the film *The Owner*. PIC COURTESY/ COLLABFEATURE

the film begin and end?

Tom: The film begins in a small village near Sao Paulo, Brazil. And it follows a backpack around the world. I can't give too much away about the man whom the backpack belongs to, but I can say that the backpack ends up back in South America after going to the US, Asia, Europe and Africa.

Tell us more about the collaboration.

Marty: Marty Shea and Ian Bonner

conceptualised the project when they started CollabFeature. The basic framework of the plot was in place, but the group of filmmakers wrote the entire story and the characters. We used an innovative online info-sharing system that allowed filmmakers to collaboratively pitch, give feedback, and connect their segments to each other's and to the central plot.

Xavier: Each director had complete freedom on theme and storyline. The

around a dying billionaire who has no heirs. He conducts a worldwide search for the person or family that most deserves his fortune. Other ideas include a global satire about the music industry and several documentary ideas.

CollabFeature is inviting applications to work on the projects.

only condition was that each segment had to link to the previous and the next one and move the story forward. The myriad of sub-themes, cultural values and sub-plots all linked into a single storyline is what makes the whole feature one-of-a-kind in terms of narrative structure.

Weren't their differences in production quality? How were these issues addressed?

Marty: Each filmmaker edited their own segment and did their initial sound design and colour correction. The project directors in Detroit assembled the segments and added transitions. We have an international post-production team and team of composers who are still working on finishing the film for our May 25 premiere. There are differences in style and genre, different cameras were used and different lighting approaches implemented, which adds to the variety. The experiment was to see if we could keep our individuality and still narrate a single story and we feel that we have succeeded. I don't think that has ever been done before.

How many Indian directors are part of the project and what are the cities they have shot in?

Tom: There were five filmmakers in India: Vishesh Mankal, Neha Raheja Thakker, Asmit Pathare, Varun Mathur and Prashant Sehgal and we shot in New Delhi and Mumbai.

What was the film's total budget?

Marty: Each of us managed our own shoot pooling our resources. We don't have a final budget number that we can report, but I can say the total budget was much much less than most films of this quality.

To watch the trailer and for more information on the directors, countries and characters log on to <http://www.collabfeature.com>

yoshita.sengupta@mid-day.com