

SCREEN

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Hong Kong-born film director Komal Tolani has created waves with her debut documentary about the flip side of Bollywood stardom, writes Kavita Daswani

FEW DIRECTORS CAN boast that the world premiere of their debut film was not only held in Hollywood, but was held in front of a full house in the film capital.

But such is the story of Komal Tolani, a Hong Kong-born, British-educated Indian, whose directorial debut, *Sunset Bollywood*, was unveiled at the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles last month.

The festival, now in its third year, ran from April 20 to 24. Although it may not yet have the cachet of Cannes or Venice or even Sundance, it's at least in the city where potential distributors can stop by for a couple of hours and have a look.

For Tolani, having her film among the 30 accepted from about 200 submissions from around the world was a major accomplishment. The 26-year-old, who's produced documentaries for National Geographic and the Discovery Channel, says she's negotiating with a network to sell *Sunset Bollywood* to foreign markets, and that there's also strong Bollywood interest – even though the film will ruffle a few feathers.

Consider the subject matter. The film, which has also created a stir in Hong Kong (a screening to be held on Monday at the Hong Kong Arts Centre sold out quickly and organisers are trying to arrange more), profiles three one-time Bollywood stars whose careers have since sputtered and all but stalled.

Tolani, a film and television graduate from Bristol University, produced and co-hosted *Sangam*, a BBC radio show about the Asian entertainment scene. She says she got the idea for *Sunset Bollywood* while working as assistant director on the Bollywood feature *Mahatma Versus Gandhi*.

After being in the trenches with Hindi stars – one of whom had a major tantrum on the set – Tolani began to remember some of the actors she was familiar with while growing up, and found herself wondering what had become of them.

"I thought it would be cool to do a documentary – a kind of 'whatever happened to' film," she says. "I had an idea, a camera and I knew how to make a documentary, so I figured, how hard can it be?"

She began researching, and decided to focus on the "one-hit wonders" that are a happenstance of any form of entertainment. Ultimately, Tolani settled on three former actors, two male and one female,



Seedy side up

who achieved virtually overnight success with their first films, but who failed to show any lasting power.

Rahul Roy, whose 1991 debut in *Aashiqui*, turned him into one of the biggest stars of the 1990s, is now barely a part of the Bollywood scene, largely as a result of making films that fizzled at the box office. Bhagyashree, who enthralled Bollywood fans with her turn in 1990's *Maine Pyar Kiya*, has since married and started a family, and insists on working only with her husband – a tactic that doesn't quite take with directors. And Kumar Gaurav, the boyishly handsome son of Indian actor Rajendra Kumar, was touted as the next big

thing after 1990's *Love Story*, but a series of less-than-ideal career choices blighted his chances of enduring stardom.

Tolani admits she was less than completely forthcoming when approaching the actors. "I know what people in Bollywood are like, and I knew I didn't necessarily have to give everything away," she says. "I told them it was a documentary about fame and how it impacts on people."

Now that the film is about to be released, Tolani says some kind of backlash may be inevitable. "My friends tell me that I'll be the next Martin Bashir [a British journalist who interviewed Princess Diana and Michael Jackson]," she says, laughing. "Of course, there's a worry the subjects won't be very happy. But at the end of the day, I haven't changed anything they've said. Everything they say about themselves is true. They realise they've made bad choices."

For Tolani, the film also serves to highlight an element of Bollywood that's largely ignored by the media. "I was so sick of seeing documentaries that showed Bollywood in all its glamour and splendour. Yes, there is that, but there's also a seedy side to the industry."

It's also a "universal story of fame and failure. In Bollywood everything is heightened. The fame is exaggerated, so the fall is that much worse. These stars are worshipped there, and these people are struggling with what's happened to them."

The tone of the film is straightforward enough, almost touching in parts, lending



Former top actor Bhagyashree (above) features in *Sunset Bollywood*, as does a film poster workshop in Mumbai (top)

a human face to the voraciousness that is stardom. The documentary, which is just under an hour long, is given greater heft through interviews with film magazine editors, directors and socialite/author/columnist Shobha De.

Tolani says that each one of her subjects has dealt with their fall from glory in

different ways, ranging from acceptance to disillusionment. But she succeeds in showing them as vulnerable human beings. "It's interesting, but I felt like they were now looking for a happy medium, a little bit of glamour, success on a lower rung," says Tolani.

Putting the film together was a bit of a family affair. Tolani, who went to King George V School in Hong Kong before going on to university in England, stayed with her grandparents in Mumbai while she was working on the documentary. Help on everything from financing to editing came from a variety of uncles, aunts and cousins between Mumbai and Hong Kong, with her father helping to fund the project. Through a network of friends and acquaintances, she made the contacts she needed. "I pulled everybody in," she says.

No matter what happens with *Sunset Bollywood*, Tolani already has other ideas for projects that she's eager to get working on. "I'd like to take Asian and South Asian stories and show them to a global audience," she says. "There are so many stories about India and Indians that need to be seen. And I'd like to maybe move away from the Bollywood thing and try to do something a bit more raw – something where we can watch the action unfold."

Sunset Bollywood, May 9, 8pm, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Agnès b. Cinema, 2 Harbour Rd, Wan Chai, \$60, Urbtix. Inquiries: 9182 8482 – sold out

CINEMA SCOPE

Jason Gagliardi

Wild Man on Campus

Job description: As long as there have been teen movies, there's been the Wild Man on Campus (WMOC). He disdains authority of all kinds, wouldn't be caught dead studying, and exists chiefly to provide the butt of jokes, perpetrate gross-out acts, and generally be an all-purpose foil for the characters with whom we're supposed to share a modicum of sympathy. Nothing is beneath the WMOC, who will happily ingest bodily fluids and



excretions of all kinds, fill himself with near toxic amounts of alcohol, and do just about anything else in the hopes of eliciting laughs.

The WMOC's stunts grow ever more outrageous and sickening, as directors of gross-out teen films seek to one-up their predecessors.

Recently seen in: *American Wedding*. Steve Stifler (Seann William Scott) is a wonderful example of the WMOC in the third of the *American Pie* films. Over the course of three films, he does everything from swallow semen to have sex with lesbians to impertune his friend into prematurely ejaculating on a live internet broadcast. In *American Wedding*, Jim (Jason Biggs) has graduated from college and pops the question to his girlfriend Michelle (Alyson Hannigan). But with Stifler in charge of the bachelor party, you just know the course of true love won't run smoothly.

Defining moment: Suffice to say it includes shorn pubic hair, dog excrement, cake icing, and, oh yes, Steve Stifler.

Most likely to say: "Oh, cake, huh? Hope it's good..."

Classics of the genre: Sean Penn as Jeff Spicoli in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Spicoli cruises through life in a haze of dope smoke, and treats school as if it's his personal pleasure dome. He has pizzas delivered to him in geography class, when he bothers to turn up at all. As he says: "All I need are some tasty waves, a cool buzz, and I'm fine."

Ultimate avatar: Who could forget John Belushi's defining role as Bluto Blutarski (above) in *Animal House*, a twisted cross between Harpo Marx and the Cookie Monster? You'll never look at a toga the same way again. And of course there's the all-time gross-out standard setter, when Bluto does his impression of a human zit. "Foood fiiiight!"

Not to be confused with: *Dead Man on Campus* or Freddie Prinze Jrn.



Komal Tolani (right) on the set of *Sunset Bollywood*

"IN BOLLYWOOD EVERYTHING IS HEIGHTENED. THE FAME IS EXAGGERATED, SO THE FALL IS THAT MUCH WORSE"

Komal Tolani Director

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