

STARTING AT THE END



Last holiday: Adil Hussain as Rajiv and Lalit Behl as the dying Daya

In *Hotel Salvation*, his first feature, Shubhashish Bhutiani manages to find lightness and humour in contemplating old age and death

By Sophie Monks Kaufman

Twenty-six-year-old Indian director Shubhashish Bhutiani was born in Kolkata, but raised in the Himalayan town of Mussoorie. He discovered cinema when his father, having joined a film club, began bringing home a LaserDisc a day. At boarding school, he smuggled in a DVD player and watched films under the blankets at night. He studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York, where he drew attention with his short film *Kush* (2013).

Bhutiani's first feature, *Hotel Salvation* (*Mukti Bhawan*), is a sophisticated, comic depiction of how the shadow of death ripples across the dynamics of family life. A grandfather has a prophetic dream and promptly takes off for the holy city of Varanasi to prepare his soul for death in a hotel designed for precisely that purpose. His family – especially his son – is forced to reckon with this dramatic move.

Bolstered by a Unesco award from the Venice Film Festival, a successful release in India, and distribution in close to 50 countries, Bhutiani has been touring the international film circuit. When we speak, he is in Berlin for *Hotel Salvation*, and trying to squeeze in the beginnings of a “research bible” for his next film.

Sophie Monks Kaufman: Are there plenty of real Hotel Salvations in Varanasi?

Shubhashish Bhutiani: Not plenty, but three or four. I took elements of each one based on whatever the production designer or I liked, and we designed our own version. The idea

that you can check into this hotel to attain salvation and have 15 days to do it was more important than basing it on one particular site.

SMK: Do you know how 15 became the magic number of days you need to achieve salvation?

SB: No, I should ask! But even then they're lenient about it. They flag the 15 days to get people in who are serious about it, not just freeloaders.

SMK: You're a young man making a film about an old man dying and you're engaging with all the mysterious emotions surrounding death. What drew you to this subject?

SB: The film is about how a man feels in his final moments and where that comes from. It would be silly for me to say that I understand death, but I can understand the impact the spectre of death could have on a family.

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Shubhashish Bhutiani

SMK: What informed your decision to shoot most of the film in wide shots set back from the action?

SB: I work with two cinematographers, even on my short film *Kush*, and now on *Hotel Salvation*. The idea was to be deliberate; for every shot to have its own identity; not to be repetitive with ourselves and not to do coverage. That was partly an economical decision, because we didn't have so much money or time, but it made us stronger filmmakers because it made us think about what was important to each scene.

A lot of times, the wide shot is the best frame for the humour. Let's say the scene where the family are donating a cow: I wanted to show the absurdity of that situation. You see the family all together, almost like it's a photograph, and let that situation play out. You get a chance to see the whole dynamic in one shot with no cuts.

SMK: For a film about death, *Hotel Salvation* has a light, absurdist tone. Where did you get your sense of humour from? I really like the scene in the hotel in which the owner finds a dead cockroach and cradles it lovingly.

SB: This humour – the cockroach incident, for instance, I read this anecdote in a book about when animals or insects die and I thought this could be an interesting, very small side moment, not really the core of a scene, just a really simple moment. It's the kind of joke that could only exist in this movie. It's not really a gag. It's the kind that the story gives you and it grows out of the cultural context and subject matter, but this is my sense of humour. This is the kind of stuff I find funny. I'm into this tongue-in-cheek, dark humour – stuff where you're not sure whether you should laugh or not, or where the line is. I love comedians who push the envelope and make you really uncomfortable sometimes as well.

SMK: Are there any comedians you'd like to name-check?

SB: Recently I've really been into Larry David. I've been rewatching *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Then there's Phoebe Waller-Bridge who made *Fleabag*, which was beautiful and funny. I've always been a strong fan of Louis C.K.. When editing, my editor and I take breaks every few hours to keep our sanity. We used to watch stand-up comedy because it would help us forget what we'd edited so that when we went back it still felt fresh. It's important for us to keep positive and laugh. Is that a good list?

SMK: It's very Westernised...

SB: There's this group in India called Aisi Taisi Democracy and they use music and stand-up. I went to one of their shows and it was amazing. There's a group called AIB that does some really funny stuff in India too.

SMK: Sometimes I feel like art and films can teach you something so you don't have to go through every single mistake you might otherwise go through. Do you agree?

SB: I definitely think that films can make you reflect on your own life in some way – 100 per cent – because it's happened to me thousands of times, and it's probably the reason why I make films. I also think you pick up different things at different points in your life. We bring our own lives into the stories we're watching. And everybody takes something different away.

SMK: Can you think of any films that you've had that relationship to?

SB: When I was a teenager, maybe 17 years old, I was going through a tough time at school emotionally and I was feeling a bit lost and somehow I got a DVD of *Into the Wild* [2007] and that was a film that I needed to watch at that point and I still think it's a great film. Or when I watched *The 400 Blows* [1959] and experienced that angst through the eyes of that boy, or through the father-son relationship in *Bicycle Thieves* [1948]. These three films at different points found their way into my life at the right time but – I don't know – if I watched them today maybe I would see something totally different and *Into The Wild* would become about a guy who rejects capitalism, but at that time for me it was about a guy who wants to run away from everything and live in the most essential way and discover who he really is. Interpretation of films definitely changes over time and it depends on where you are at that point in your life.

SMK: Have you been surprised by any interpretations of *Hotel Salvation*?

SB: No, if you're open to interpretation you can never be surprised by it. You just listen. People sometimes come up with funny theories of where they thought the film was going to go. Someone thought the son was going to die in the process of the film. That's the most surprising theory and I heard it a couple of times. I also knew the film is only 50 percent. The other 50 percent is the person watching it. They kind of become a screenwriter themselves. I've seen how strongly this impacts different people in different cultures. You see that in some ways it's not your film any more. It's theirs. 📍

i *Hotel Salvation* is released in UK cinemas on 25 August and is reviewed on page 66

THE NUMBERS LADY MACBETH

By Charles Gant

It's a familiar story: British low-budget arthouse title achieves envied slot in major international film festival, and then struggles to convert the buzz into equivalent cinema box office, both internationally and in the UK. We've seen that in recent years from British debuts premiering at Cannes (Daniel Wolfe's *Catch Me Daddy*), Venice (Guy Myhill's *The Goob*) and Toronto (Hope Dickson Leach's *The Levelling*). Which makes the success of *Lady Macbeth* – from first-time director, writer, producer trio William Oldroyd, Alice Birch and Fodhla Cronin O'Reilly – all the more remarkable.

At the filmmaking stage, *Lady Macbeth*, adapted from the 19th-century Russian novella *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, was not a must-have title. As Mike Goodridge, outgoing CEO at London's Protagonist Pictures, explains: "It was a film that we had been tracking, but we are across all British films. Because it was a first-time filmmaker and because, for an international sales company, it wasn't an obvious proposition, we said we'd like to see something first. Which is cowardly, but not unusual in a situation like this."

Protagonist saw the film in March 2016. "We pounced on it," says Goodridge. "Not because I thought it was going to be as successful as it turned out to be, but because it was so intriguing and delicious and dark, and the filmmaking by Will so extraordinary. We thought this will get great festival play, and will make sales, plus we want to be in business with Will, Fodhla and Alice."

However, he cautions, "You're still looking at a film which is in the six-figures budget, has no recognisable cast, has regional British accents, and ends with a cold-blooded killing. It's not an obvious sales title, but it was so good, we couldn't deny it."

Protagonist's first job was to decide on the right festival berth. "Toronto came after us very aggressively for their Platform section," says Goodridge, referring to the competitive strand that's designed to draw attention to films that don't have a deal for North American



What's done is done: *Lady Macbeth*

distribution. "Having said that, the worry with Toronto is always that you have a festival of 300-plus films. The conversation with Toronto was: what can you do to help us not get lost?"

What Toronto offered was "a very good slot" that, crucially, had no other title with US rights available screening at the same time. Explains Goodridge, "If you are up against some huge [unsold] George Clooney film, you're not going to get any buyers at your screening. So for the acquisitions world, their focus was on *Lady Macbeth*. In that timeslot, there was only one title available."

Offers started to come in within an hour of the first screening, with Roadside Attractions eventually securing North American rights. Key territories, including France, Spain, Italy, Benelux and Australia – which have so far done the heavy lifting in the film's extraordinary \$2.6 million take outside the UK – followed.

In the UK, the film's distributor Altitude has grossed a remarkable £804,000, taking the current global total to \$3.6 million. As Goodridge points out, "The UK is not a slam-dunk territory just because a film is British. UK audiences don't necessarily respond to British arthouse films. It's one of the toughest marketplaces in the world right now, and Altitude really got a great result. It caught the zeitgeist for about four weeks and got to great numbers." 📍

SELECTED DEBUTS OF BRITISH FILMMAKERS AT THE UK BOX OFFICE

Film	Gross	Year
Hunger (Steve McQueen)	£806,517	2008
Lady Macbeth (William Oldroyd)	£803,804	2017
Ratcatcher (Lynne Ramsay)	£437,694	1999
Orphans (Peter Mullan)	£412,699	1999
Red Road (Andrea Arnold)	£340,547	2006
Tyrannosaur (Paddy Considine)	£269,955	2011
TwentyFourSeven (Shane Meadows)	£235,126	1998
Broken (Rufus Norris)	£163,928	2013
The Warrior (Asif Kapadia)	£147,365	2002
Katalin Varga (Peter Strickland)	£128,255	2009