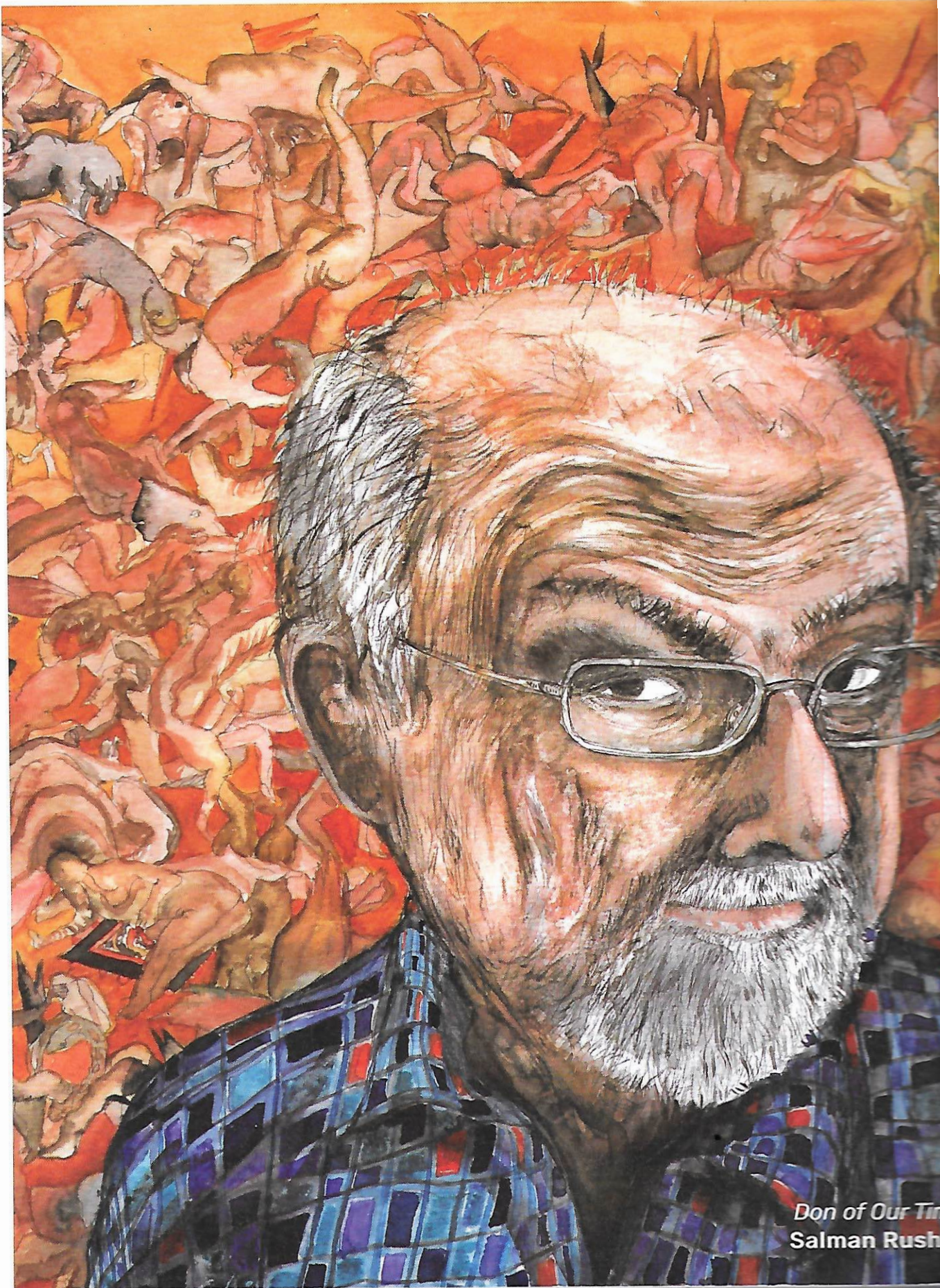


■ PLATFORM

A CREATIVE PLAYGROUND [ART / STYLE / MUSIC / FILM / LITERATURE / DESIGN]

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Don of Our Time
Salman Rushdie

RONNY SEN

CAT STICKS

film 1



If you freeze the very first frame of *Cat Sticks* after the film credits, and observe the *mise-en-scène* of the long shot, there is an abandoned aircraft in the distance, rain pouring relentlessly and three men hidden under their umbrellas, making their way towards the aircraft, all in black and white. Immediately, this very first frame, heavily invested with meaning, establishes the many elements that are essential throughout the film. The abandoned aircraft lends a surreal effect to the scene, its haunting imagery making the atmosphere seem almost unreal. The rain is omnipotent throughout the film as the timeline of the movie spans a few hours of one particular night. The use of black and white chiaroscuro is essential to director Ronny Sen's aesthetic even as a photographer, and acts like a canvas where the film comes alive. It is then an important question to ask, what kind of people would be making their way towards an abandoned aircraft, and the answer to that is drug

addicts, the main subjects of the film.

Cat Sticks is Ronny Sen's debut film and a remarkable one at that. The film explores, in excruciating detail, the lives of the hidden brown sugar [an adulterated, cheaper form of heroin, also known as smack] addicts of Kolkata. Drug addiction has always been a sensitive subject, whether in literature or cinema and there seems to be a stock attitude with which it is dealt with—one that is less invested in understanding the disease that is drug addiction, and more interested in issuing a warning about it. Sen's movie breaks out of this mould and shows addiction in its barest, most honest form. Nothing is held back or dramatised. Everything is depicted with sheer honesty and this honesty comes from the director's own experience. 'There were stories of drugs and addiction I had lived with for many years and I was desperate to tell them and film was possibly the only way. Addiction is largely understood through the monologue of psychiatry and

↑ A still from Ronny Sen's film, *Cat Sticks*, Kolkata, 2018.



↑ Raja as Biplab on the right. A moment from Ronny Sen's film, *Cat Sticks*, Kolkata, 2018.

the modern society is in no mood to talk to the person who is still suffering,' says Ronny.

The movie begins with three friends, Pablo, Ronnie and Deshik, making their way to the abandoned aircraft to smoke their next fix of brown sugar. The aircraft is intriguing not just for its surreal quality but also in depicting how the world of an addict functions. They require an enclosed space for a steady flame in order to smoke the drug and decrepit spaces like the abandoned aircrafts are necessary for this. The focus then shifts from these three friends to many other addicts, all in their own spaces of high. In one scene, a man and a child are sitting on their dining table, and as the child eats, the man smokes. The uniqueness of this scene is in the sheer normalcy of it. The child is completely unfazed by the man getting high and vice

versa. The nonchalance is hard to digest yet the normalcy of it, of the presence of the drug in their lives, is ubiquitous.

In another beautifully haunting scene, two friends, in an attempt to inject the drug in their bodies, begin to find a vein on each other's bodies. Slowly, they strip naked and as they examine each other's bodies, they look like they are dancing white bodies an infinite black space. The scene is perhaps the most brilliant artistic exercise in showcasing the desperation of drug addiction. The synthesis of the real and unreal spaces and experiences is astounding. It is almost unreal how the movie manages to draw you in with these stunningly powerful portrayals and you begin to feel the high and the lows that the characters feel.

In another scene a man undresses and begins to smoke smack and for the



→ Tanmay Dhanania as Byang on the right and Sounak Kundu as Potoi on the left. A still from Ronny Sen's film, *Cat Sticks*, Kolkata, 2018.

first time the word *Cat Sticks* appear on the screen, written on a box of matchsticks. Here the significance of the title of the movie comes to fore as '*Cat Sticks* is a brand of wax matches used to chase brown sugar for a uniform flame which the wooden matches can't produce. Brown sugar when heated on a foil produces smoke which can be chased on a foil through a pipe. The wax match sticks are used to heat the foil above which the brown sugar is. So the wax match sticks in this case '*Cat Sticks*' is just a catalyst,' explains Ronny. The movie progresses and this man then dresses as a woman and walks out of the industrial space. In another scene, three friends speak nonsensically to each other as they wait for their dealer to buy more smack. And just like this, the movie progresses with more scenes of addicts, some who seek a release and some who do not seem to want the night to end. At the end of the film, we are briefly told of the death of a drug addict who is Ronny's friend, and the fatal reality of drug addiction is left hanging in the air. 'Everyone deserves a life of dignity. Not only the ones who are courageous, even the cowards deserve to live, the way they want to, with dignity and respect. We need to learn empathy and compassion, not mercy. And that no addict seeking recovery need ever die,' asserts Ronny, explaining the intent of this film.

All other aspects of the film, from the music to the locations used for film- ing are fascinating. The music by Oliver

Weeks uses a lot of grunge music, a sub- genre of alternative rock that was created in the mid-1980s, characterised by heavy guitar distortion, strong riffs and heavy drumming. Ronny tells me that it was nec- essary to use such music because, 'Anyone who is high on heroin or brown sugar can't listen to EDM or Techno, they can listen to grunge.' The locations used in the film are mostly in Kolkata. Recalling how chal- lenging the locations were, he says, 'A few days before we went on the floors a murder happened in one of the location and we had to start looking for another location. Everyone was scared because we were using rain machines and we didn't have the money where a few days of extra shoot could be accommodated. The aircraft was in an abandoned film city but there was a lot of production design work which had to happen. The lamp post, the grass, the interi- ors of the plane everything was entirely designed by our very talented Devika Dave who was the production designer.'

Perhaps, the most significant aspect of the movie is the outstanding acting by its cast which includes Tanmay Dhanania, Joyraj Bhattacharya, Summet Thakur, Rahul Dutta, Saurabh Saraswat, Kalpan Mitra, Soumyajit Majumdar, Sreejita Mitra, Sounak Kundu, Raja Chakravorty. 'Actors such as Tanmay Dhanania had to lose so much weight just to get the biology of a certain kind of an addict right. During the work- shops something happened which was

↓ Ronny Sen



Photograph: Cirma Berta

→
The Cat Sticks poster made by
Polish artist Lech Majewski.



absolutely not my idea. They went and stole from a real shop because they had to enact a similar situation in the film, obviously they went back and returned it but it was a tough few months for them. There are numerous such examples of the tremendous hard work all the actors had to put up and how bizarre it got at some points,' says Ronny.

With the help of cinematographer Shreya Dev Dube and producers Theodore Shivdasani, Soumyak Kanti De Biswas and Tanaji Dasgupta, Sen has managed

to make a movie that is unabashed in its depiction of drug addiction.

Ronny tells me that *Cat Sticks* begins with the line, "This is for my dead friends to come back from the night. This is precisely the reason the film was made," and perhaps this is precisely what the film does, it brings all the people who have died of this disease and those who are assumed to be dead by the society just for being addicts, back to life.

Words Nidhi Verma
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