

MOVIES

Ronny Sen takes his début feature to Slamdance Film Festival

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Kolkata-based photographer and filmmaker Ronny Sen takes his harrowing tale about drug addiction to the Slamdance Film Festival

Last week, the prestigious Sundance Film Festival – home to million dollar distribution deals, and the launchpad of famous directors (Ryan Coogler of *Black Panther* fame included) – announced its lineup for 2019. Soon after, filmmaker and actor Mark Duplass tweeted a message to those who did not make the cut: “Sundance is awesome, but Sundance is not everything.” Ava DuVernay (*Selma*), concurred. “Hear him,” she said, sharing her own story of being rejected six times before she won a directorial award at the festival in 2012.

Four filmmakers thought so too, but back in 1995. Incensed by similar rejections, they started their own rebellious alternative, named Slamdance. The festival, like Sundance, is also held in Park City, Utah in January. And its lineup, also released last week, includes Kolkata-based Ronny Sen’s directorial début, *Cat Sticks*.

If Sundance is a festival of glitz, Slamdance would be one of grit, and Sen is chuffed about premiering his edgy, black-and-white film that depicts the lives of brown sugar (a synthetic opioid extracted from poppy) addicts in the underbelly of Kolkata, there. “There is a certain edginess to [Slamdance], a certain honesty and integrity to it,” he says. “There are no quotas. There is no red carpet, but there are many filmmakers who are doing what they want to do.”

Ditching labels

Until *Cat Sticks*, Sen was primarily known for his work as a photographer. In 2016, he won the Getty Images Instagram grant for his series, *End of Time*, which depicted life in the Jharia coal mines. He has never been to a photography or film school. I ask him whether labels matter. “No, no, no,” he responds. “I just want to work and do things that excite me.”

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'Cat Sticks', which will première at Slamdance in January 2019, is an interweaving narrative that depicts the lives of brown sugar addicts in Kolkata | Photo Credit: [Craigmore Films](#)

The story that he wanted to tell through *Cat Sticks*, largely influenced by his life in Kolkata, “is the story of our lives”, he says. It is dedicated to his friends whom he lost to drug addiction. “It’s the collective experience of an entire generation that grew up with drugs on the streets of Calcutta in the late ’90s and early 2000s. Brown sugar made us forget the dark abyss of adolescence. Innocence, more than anything else, and pure, unadulterated, unconditional love for drugs, and its eventual predictable consequences, inspired the story.”

In fact, Sen’s earlier photography series examined the lives of his city’s drug addicts, but to tell the story of *Cat Sticks* – one about the past – he chose film. Photography, he tells me, is better suited to the present. “I think the story we are trying to tell in *Cat Sticks* would have been difficult in any medium except film,” he says.

The filmmaker similarly believed that a black-and-white aesthetic was also crucial to the story, to help provide “the canvas” over which he would make his movie. “In classical music, you do something called an *aalap*,” he says, about the melodic improvisation that sets the tone for a song. “The first duty of the artist is to build the mood, and *Cat Sticks* is about a rainy night in Calcutta. Doing it in colour, or during the day wouldn’t have done justice to the kind of story I wanted to tell.”

The heart of inspiration

Young addicts in an abandoned aircraft; addicts attempting to dispose of a dealer’s body at a crematorium; a father who cooks and smokes brown sugar in front of his son: the film

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are not understood by modern society, says Sen.

Mainstream reaction, he admits, does not perturb him. “The audience is not important when I am making anything,” he says, reminding me of a TEDx talk in 2017 where he asserted that the journey is more important than the destination. “We’re obsessed with arrival – aspirational arrivals,” he explains. “[That] comes with its own sadness. If you arrive where you wanted to arrive, there is nowhere else to go,” says the multi-hyphenate artiste who will start working on a photography project next, but not before taking a holiday. “I haven’t taken one in eight years, and I am really tired.”

For the full lineup, visit slamdance.com

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