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Filmmaker's Journey from Mendocino to Hollywood

November 14, 2007 - Mendocino to Mumbai to Hollywood is the unusual journey local filmmaker Shyam Balsé has taken from the creation of his award-winning film, *Monsoon*, to his next film project. However indirect, Balsé's path has now led him to Hollywood where he is developing a feature film with a prominent production company.

Mendocino local Balsé based his short film, *Monsoon*, on his intimate experiences traveling back and forth between India and the USA. "The two cultures are worlds apart, yet somehow I, and thousands of others like me, belong to and feel at home in both of them," he said.

"To me, Eastern philosophy is so filled with chaos, magic, and mysticism which stands in stark contrast to the predominantly ordered, cold, and clinical outlook of Western Science," Balsé said. "In *Monsoon*, I wanted to explore what happens when these two worlds collide within the same family."

Part of Balsé's well-traveled youth was spent in Mendocino where his mother, Alene Victoria DiDio, and sister, Shanti Balsé, still live, so it was fitting that one of the first places he screened *Monsoon* was the 2007 Mendocino Film Festival, where it won the Watertower Award for Best Short Narrative Film.

Since then, *Monsoon* has won more than a dozen prizes including the Jury Award at the Sonoma Valley Film Festival, the Audience Award at the Los Angeles Indian Film Festival, the Jury Prize for Best Short Film Director at the Jackson Hole Film Festival, the Jury Prize for Best Foreign Film at the Long Island International Film Expo, and the Narrative and Best Overall Film at the First Look Film Festival in Denver.

"I began writing the story in Spring of 2005 as my thesis film for the graduate film production program at the University of Southern California," Balsé said. "I knew I wanted to shoot in India about something that I knew. Since I've spent a lot of time studying Eastern religions and know much about family life in India, and at the same time know first hand about growing up 'American,' I decided to make a film about what happens when a young man, born in India yet identified with Western/Scientific thought, is forced to confront his ailing father who is very much a product of the Brahmin Hindu culture."

"We shot the film over 8 days in Mumbai, India in December 2005. Most of the filming took place in and around where my father lived. We assembled a great cast and crew in India, many of whom had experience in the Bollywood film industry," Balsé said. "We also had a handful of Americans fly out to help as well. It was truly an international co-production and I am looking forward to making many more films in India."

Now developing a feature film project at Radiant Productions, director Wolfgang Peterson's (*Air Force One*, *Perfect Storm*) production company, Balsé may be busy in Hollywood for some time.

Many other directors who screened their films at the 2007 Mendocino Film Festival have gone on to further success, including Robert Carillo Cohen, Simon Ardizzone and Russell Michaels, creators of *Hacking Democracy*, which poses potent questions about the electronic systems that count more than 80 percent of the votes cast in America today. *Hacking Democracy* won an Emmy nomination for outstanding investigative journalism and has been shown on HBO.

Adrian Belic, who screened two films at the 2007 Festival, has gained unique recognition and recently won his 20th award for *Beyond the Call*, a documentary about three ordinary, inconspicuous Americans who realize their deepest passion in life through self-financed humanitarian missions to war zones around the globe.

Belic's film, *Genghis Blues*, also screened to a packed house in Mendocino. It had previously won the Audience Award at Sundance and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

Belic, who with his brother Roko has been making films since childhood and screened all over the world, has fond memories of the Mendocino Festival. "It was wonderful walking around town in the hours and days after my screening and bumping into people and striking up interesting and dynamic conversations with people who had seen the film and for whom the film resonated," Belic said. "They wanted to share their questions and thoughts. This is a film festival that genuinely makes you happy to be a filmmaker."

Hoku Uchiyama screened *Rose* in Mendocino in 2007 and 22 other festivals in the past year. *Rose* is a "rural American ghost story" which showcases Uchiyama's fascination with traditional fairy tales. *Rose* won awards at the Newport Beach, Santa Fe, and Phoenix Film Festivals and was featured in the July issue of *American Cinematographer* magazine for its striking visual technique.

With plans already underway to bring other filmmakers like these to the third annual event next May, the Mendocino Film Festival has just launched a Friends of the Festival drive to seek the continued community support that will nurture the burgeoning success of this bright addition to the Mendocino Coast cultural year.

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