

TOUCHING LIVES

Oscar award-winning film director Megan Mylan is ready to launch her new film *After My Garden Grows in India*. On the eve of her visit to the country she talks to *Verve* about her documentaries and the challenges she faces

What drew you to the format of documentary films?

I've rarely met a stranger I didn't want to know more about. I find people and their realities endlessly fascinating. As a die-hard optimist, I'm convinced that the more we get to know each other the better this world will be.

How do you select the subjects for your documentaries?

I don't have a specific recipe for finding subjects; they often find me. What I try to do with my films is to stir up an appreciation of our shared humanity - beyond our nationality, economic class or gender. I want the audience to connect with someone who on the surface may be living a life wildly different from their own. So, I make films that usually have very strong central characters.

I try to identify people going through life-defining moments that are revealing of larger issues. Then, I go along for the ride and take my audience with me. I work in an observational style without narration or interviews. I don't tell the audience what to think, but within the action of their lives, I'm working to find small moments that help you connect with my characters at a very human personal level.

Whether it's a father from a village in Uttar Pradesh singing a lullaby to his daughter, a young Sudanese teenager getting a haircut for his school picture,

or a Brazilian senator in the heat of a legislative battle stopping to take a call from his teenage son who's just had his heart broken.... Those moments are pretty universal.

My hope is the next time you meet a refugee; or see a fundraising ad about children with clefts, or read about young girls being married before they're 18, you will feel like you already know someone who's dealt with that - they're part of your human family and you're more informed and passionate about the issue.

Your film *Smile Pinki* won the Oscar for Best Documentary Short. What prompted you to make a film about clefts?

I don't really think of *Smile Pinki* as



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a film about clefts. For me, the story is a real-world fairy tale. A young girl is ostracised and her family treated as a source of shame in their village. Then a warm-hearted stranger comes to their region to tell her that she has no reason to suffer, all she has is an incredibly common birth defect that can be cured with a simple, free surgery. There was so much magic in it, and I was so lucky to find Pinki and her father who loved her so unconditionally.

What was the inspiration behind *After My Garden Grows*?

The film is part of an initiative by the Sundance Institute and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support film-makers exploring strategies for overcoming hunger and poverty. I feel there is an unprecedented conversation going on in India about gender and how girls are valued. I wanted to focus on a story where you clearly see the difference a small investment in a girl can make. *After My Garden Grows* tells the story of Monika Barman, an Indian teenager from West Bengal growing food to feed her family and sowing the seeds of her own independence, in a tiny rooftop garden.

I wanted to find a girl who was at a life-defining moment - grappling with the mix of poverty challenges that hit girls particularly hard. Monika's garden and her parents looking for a groom offered that. It gives us a window into what it takes to change futures for girls and again, I love being able to share a complex, but hopeful story.

What were the challenges you faced while filming *After My Garden Grows*?

The biggest challenge for me was not speaking Bengali. So, I had to rely on a lot of eye contact and instinct and, of course I had to trust my translator. I've been fortunate to work with great Indian collaborators. It amazes me how well we can communicate when motivated to do so, but I always try to stay keenly aware of the limits of my ability to understand someone else's life and culture. **V**

- SHRADDHA JAHAGIRDAR-SAXENA