

hooray for BOLLYWOOD

Kevin Shahinian was rushing out his door, on his way to shoot a musical number at a library on the outskirts of Los Angeles, when we first spoke to him about the Bollywood “mini-epic” he was making for a couple from Southern California. Jignasha and Neil, the bride and groom he was meeting at the library (which is actually a replica of an authentic Indian castle), had first approached Shahinian as most any other couple seeking a wedding videographer for their Hindu wedding. They wanted to hire him to shoot the traditional ceremonies, including Jignasha’s prewedding bridal Santak dinner, the Pithi, the Mehndi, the actual marriage ceremony, and the reception. The reception, they had envisioned, would have a Bollywood theme, complete with movie ticket table seating cards and a 2-minute Bollywood-inspired music video number starring them.

Shahinian, whose Huntington Beach, Calif., atelier is the home of Pacific Pictures, his award-winning event videography studio, took their idea and ran with it. “I always think outside the box, but I always try to think of a bigger box,” he says of his customary brio. As a student at the exclusive University of Southern California film school—first as a critical studies major and then, five rejections and one hard-won acceptance later, as a production major, Shahinian was known for going above and beyond. Tenaciously trying to win the attention of film production professors, he was given one shot to make a short film. “In the only production class nonmajors could take, we were told to explore film technique by shooting several 5-minute silent films on video and encouraged to do so in our dorms starring a roommate,” he says. Always the extra-credit seeker, “I decided I would go out into the California wilderness and shoot a full-blown World War II epic set in Europe and complete with pyrotechnics, tanks, and 25 fully costumed extras.”

Afterward, production professors welcomed Shahinian into their program. But he would later cite his aborted critical studies program, specifically its world cinema class, for introducing him to Bollywood films. His knowledge of Bollywood came in handy when Jignasha and Neil expressed interest in doing their Bollywood-themed music video. True to form, Shahinian expanded upon that concept. “Let’s do a film,” he said.

BACK STORY

He saw a chance to do a narrative film along the lines of a Hollywood movie spoof but without its trademark kitsch. He explains: “Hollywood movie spoofs are totally tongue-

PACIFIC PICTURES



“I always think outside the box, but I always try to think of a bigger box,” says Pacific Pictures’ Kevin Shahinian.

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in-cheek, and they really can’t be authentic at the same time. Bollywood films are tongue-in-cheek by nature, so we can be that and authentic at the same time.” If the acting looks like it’s excessively dramatic or straight out of a campy B-film, that’s OK because that’s how it’s supposed to be.

Shahinian went back to the couple and pitched the idea of making an original, semifictional movie, 7 minutes in length, for theatrical release at their reception. They went for it immediately, with one caveat: “Just make us look like stars,” they said. Shahinian came up with a motif that incorporated concepts from the Hindu culture that resonate with most of us.

“Everybody knows about karma, reincarnation, and déjà vu,” he theorized. “Let’s do a marriage of the past and present, use the symbol of the Hindu religion, and have reincarnation as a theme.”

BOLLYWOOD WEST

In the film, he traces the past lives of Neil and Jignasha. A world away, in ancient India, they fall in love. Destined to meet in every lifetime, the soul mates are mirrored in modern-day Southern California, falling in love again. Shahinian illustrates this parallel by cross-cutting the ancient and modern scenes. “This made things extra challenging since it required many scenes to be shot twice: once set in ancient India and then again set in modern America. The trick was to place set pieces, costumes, props, and actors in the exact same position in the frame for both setups so the trick would be understandable.”



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Shahinian illustrates the past life-present life parallel by cross-cutting the ancient and modern scenes. Pictured is the couple's most recent meeting in So Cal.

For example, a scene set in ancient India was shot on a south Orange County cliff top at sunset. At nightfall, the couple traded their vintage robes for modern clothes. Shahinian did a hard cut to make the common denominators obvious—the only things different were the costumes and the night sky.

With its Pacific coastline, its deserts, mountains, and valleys, So Cal was the ideal place to scout for century-spanning locales. But the search for authentic ancient Indian architecture was another story. “It was extremely difficult to find authentic Indian buildings. And we had only 2 weeks’ lead time. But we lucked out. I pulled a lot of favors,” he says, describing one shooting location, a California mission with a ruined, broken wall framed by palm trees.

CASTING CALL

Departing from the bridal-party-as-cast trend, Shahinian assembled a supporting cast of complete strangers. This was necessary because Jignasha and Neil wanted to keep the movie a secret from everyone, even their parents and closest friends.

Rather than paying professional actors, Shahinian found willing participants in the Indian community. He only needed to explain that he wanted to portray the Indian community in the best light possible, and volunteers jumped on board. One volunteer, whom Shahinian found by walking the streets of Little India in Artesia, Calif., stars in the opening scene as a guru in a Hindu temple. Visiting a little shop where he had earlier purchased some Bollywood films to use in his research, he says, “I asked the clerk if he knew of any authentic guru guy, and he said, ‘Go ask my dad. He’s in the shop next door.’”

MTV INDIA

If you’ve ever seen a contemporary Bollywood film, you know that a Bollywood movie is not complete without a musical number, or several. Shahinian decided to go with two. It was important to him that the film stay true to the myths, conventions, and iconography of Bollywood, while maintaining an underlying western Hollywood spin to keep the piece up-to-date and fun. “As Bollywood has come into the new millennium,” he explains, “it’s very MTV-influenced. So that’s the new modern twist on it.”

Shahinian set out to find two distinct songs to illustrate the reincarnation theme. One would be used for the first time Neil and Jignasha meet. He’d use the second as a dramatic love song to play “at the suspenseful point in most Bollywood films when the main couples’ relationship comes into question: Will they or won’t they end up together?”

A recent destination wedding he shot in Greece exposed Shahinian to the possibilities of incorporating world music into ethnic wedding productions. “With research, you can find songs that sound just like western pop. Besides Bollywood, India’s music industry is one of the largest, with the ‘Indipop’ genre lending most of your Western-sounding pop tracks to the scene,” he says.

SINGING IN THE RAIN

The film’s climax is set at night, in the rain—“probably the harshest filming conditions you could ever set up for yourself,” Shahinian says. The rain towers he rented, his cranes, steadicams, and dollies—equipment he used to give the short film the epic quality it needed—set the stage for the ne plus ultra of every Bollywood film. “If there is one thing every Bollywood film must have, it’s a singing and dancing scene in the rain.”

This scene, he explains, advances the plot in a love story the same way a sex scene or romantic kiss does in Western film. Because even kissing in public is taboo in the Hindu culture, you won’t see it in a Bollywood film. What you will see is a smitten couple singing in the rain. “They’ll lock eyes, their lips will almost touch, and they’ll do the patented turn-away and start singing,” he says.

Neil and Jignasha lip sync, not sing, “Khuda Jaane” and the other pop track, but their dance moves are authentic. It helped a bit that Neil is a professional choreographer. He was able to coordinate the dance numbers, a fact that Shahinian says he often took for granted. “I can tell him, go into a little Michael Jackson move, and he’ll just do it.”

WORLD PREMIERE

A full-size movie poster of their film, *Tum Hi Ho (You Are The One)*, surprised the couple and their 450-plus guests as they entered the reception hall lobby. In the ballroom, guests buzzed about the curios set out on tables—movie ticket place card souvenirs and screen shots from the film. A 15’ movie screen reached the 22’ high ballroom ceiling. Still, no one expected what they were about to see.

Once the wedding party and parents made their entrances, guests were asked to direct their attention to the screen, and the surprise was revealed. The bride and groom hid in the lobby, stealing peeks of the crowd through the sliver between the wall and door. “The film ran 10 minutes to deafening reactions,” says Shahinian. “As the last end credit rolled, the bride and groom were announced, and the applause brought the roof down.”



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In keeping with contemporary Bollywood film, Shahinian decided to include two musical numbers. This still comes from the first, which celebrates Neil and Jignasha's meeting.

Dancing followed the premiere, with “a few amazing dance performances to Bollywood songs put on by bridesmaids and groomsmen.” With pre-approval from the couple and their coordinator, Shahinian lit the dance floor with a pair of 1K film lights. “We normally try to keep these low profile, but with the Bollywood theme, we brought them front and center.”

In the frenetic wake of the screening, so many guests approached Shahinian and his crew that they struggled to shoot the rest of the reception. “I must have handed a business card to every guest,” he says. When he finally caught up with his leading man and lady, who were in full-on celeb-mode with their own fans, Shahinian says proudly, “They introduced me as as ‘our director.’”

Three days after the wedding, his memories from the event center not on his own work but on what he took away from the experience. “Neil and Jigna’s wedding turned out to be an unexpectedly emotional day for me. I’ve shot countless weddings, but none has had the effect on me that theirs did.”

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