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From Germany, with love

ROSHNI MUKHERJEE Times News Network , Aug 8, 2010, 12.00am IST

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Wotan Wilke Möhring

Kolkata is fast becoming a favourite haunt of film-makers. And we are hinting at not just Bollywood, but also at directors from foreign shores.

This time around, the city has opened its gates to Germany. Four students from Hamburg Media School, one of Germany's most renowned film schools, are canning shots for their graduation project in the city. Interestingly, the school has won the Student Academy Award twice earlier.

Giving details of the project, student producer Stefan Gieren, says, "Max Zähle, Sin Huh and Florian Kuhn are in charge of direction, camera and screenplay respectively. We have shot two movies earlier and this film is part of our final year graduation project." This 20-minute film, which currently has a working title of Kolkata, might later be titled City of Joy. "It is part-fiction and part-documentary," says Stefan, adding, "In keeping with the documentary approach, the German cast will be conversing in German, while the dialogues between the Indian and German cast will be in English. Any on-screen exchange between Indian characters will be in Bengali."

The team had come for a recce to the city in March and in the course of it, "fell in love with the city". They made a stop at Mumbai and then took a train to Kolkata in order to observe the city's culture. "It was our first time in India and we travelled by AC II-tier so that we could interact with people and breathe in the ambience of the city. Mumbai is hectic, but I love the pace of Kolkata. It's architecture is fascinating and the people here are friendly," Stefan opines. Ask him why he chose to shoot in the city and the young producer reasons, "We have a partnering university in Kolkata and hence, we decided to film it here."

Max Zähle, on his part, explains, "India is a magical place. I've always been looking for an opportunity to visit India. But I've never felt comfortable being a tourist. I'm not interested in sights or artefacts. If I come to a country, I'm interested in people, culture and traditions. Such encounters move me and this is the basis of artistic expression."

And the young team's expression takes shape in narrating a socially relevant topic. It's the story of a German couple coming to Kolkata to adopt an Indian orphan. After a couple of days, the child runs away and the new father starts looking for him in the busy streets of Kolkata. While on his journey, he gets to see the magical sides of this city that lead him to a deeper understanding of himself. Suddenly, he becomes aware that adoption is about finding parents for children and not about finding children for parents.

Ask Max if there was any particular reason that the story has a German couple coming to India to adopt a child and he answers, "Any narration can never be fully objective. There is always a



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message, a certain form of judgement. It would be inappropriate if I wanted to tell an Indian story. India has great directors. They should do this. I have a lot to tell and to argue about the situation in Germany and Europe. About prejudice, arrogance, egoism. So this can only be a German story, but with a strong connection to Kolkata due to the fact that I feel strongly related to this place even after a couple of weeks."

Stefan continues, "We are not against adoption. But we want to create a consciousness within Germany and the European society towards this concept. Fact is, people opt for adoption without thinking how it might affect the child if he/she is uprooted from his/her familiar surrounding and placed elsewhere."

Now that the German team has been placed in Kolkata, one wonders what the experience is like. Stefan adds, "I am figuring out the process of film-making in Kolkata." And for Max, "It is the greatest adventure of my life. I enjoy Kolkata and its people, but to shoot a movie here is a great challenge. I'm used to the German way of producing movies and I've done many commercials over there. We're adapted to a different pace of work, to longer working hours and to a different way of distributing responsibilities amongst crew members."

And talking of the cast, two of Germany's very renowned film personalities, Wotan Wilke Möhring and Julia Richter are part of this venture. Arindam Sil too is part of the cast apart from being the executive producer of the same.

The team had approached the stars with the first draft of the script and the concept. "They liked it and decided to be part of the venture," Stefan fills in.

Max too wastes no words in their praise, "I love the way they approach their roles. I'm a great admirer of their work as actors. It is a great gift that both of them have decided to join this adventure. And being a student director I'm very proud of having the opportunity to work with such renowned actors."

The experience of being part of an international venture is undoubtedly exciting for this actor, whose name was suggested by Gaurav Pandey to the German team. "I play Arun, the director of an NGO here and most of my shots are with Wotan, whose name is Jan. Julia plays his wife and her name is Sarah. Wotan is a fantastic actor. In fact, the team is so professional that it doesn't look like a students' project. Before a scene, I remember rehearsing at least 10 to 15 times to get that perfect shot," says Arindam, adding, "Wotan and I have been exchanging notes on cinema and he said that he has a lot of respect for Indian films."

The team will be here till August 10, shooting in New Market, Latubabur bari and other places that highlight Kolkata's rich heritage.

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