

# Judy Naidoo about KINGS OF MULBERRY STREET

“We only had one car to blow up”



Welcome to Mulberry Street in Durban, South-Africa. When Babu and his father are moving in, meeting Ticky – the boy next door – is unavoidable. Ticky is wild and cheeky, his role models are all Bollywood movie heroes, while Babu is introverted and well-educated. An odd duo, sharing a passion for crazy adventures. But the biggest adventure is yet to come, when the boys take on the fight against nasty neighbourhood gangster Raja. **KINGS OF MULBERRY STREET**, directed by

Judy Naidoo, serves a cocktail of vibrant South-African street life, combined with the grand spectacle of Bollywood cinema. The result is an entertaining, upbeat movie adventure. During the classic Bollywood dance finale, the audience in the Schlingel Festival had a hard time remaining seated, affected by pure and uncut Bollywood dancing vibes.

**Even if it's a highly entertaining film, underneath the surface many social issues are tackled.**

Judy Naidoo: The film is inspired by my childhood in South Africa, living in the eighties during the last days of apartheid. The story is set in 1989, just before democracy came. I wanted to be true to that time and that reality, when our world was still segregated. For me it was important that there was some heart to the film, which came with my childhood memories. I was a naughty kid, a tomboy doing lots of mischief. Just like Ticky, I jumped on a roof and fell off. I wanted to be like those action movie heroes, practicing Kung-Fu and karate.

**The movie is also inspired by the films you watched as a child.**

Naidoo: I've watched Bollywood all through my childhood. Bollywood films have romance, dancing, and there is always a villain, a bad guy. The overly romantic parts never appealed to me, but I was amused by strong female characters, police officers or vigilantes who were going in, kicking the shit out of the bad guys. I also grew up watching westerns. When casting these two boys, I could see them like a young Bud Spencer and Terrence Hill. Those were my earliest memories of cinema. But at the very heart of it, I wanted to tell a simple story about friendship and how dear it is at that age to have a friend that believes in you.

**In a society segregated by colour but also by class, I wonder if kids like Ticky and Baboo could have ever even met with each other.**

Naidoo: In the eighties you could move from Durban to Johannesburg because your life was improving. But Baboo's family has seen some hard

times and they have to make the move backwards. In real life Baboo, a private school pupil from a well-off family, and Ticky attending public school would never meet and become friends.

**The 'king of petty crimes' ruling the neighbourhood, was that also part of the typical 1989 scenery?**

Naidoo: Neville Pillay, playing Raja, was born and raised in Phoenix, an area notorious for drugs and gangsters. Bad things happen there. When putting the villain's story together, everything was drawn from real situations. In the eighties, if you walked into an Indian town as a white guy, you would stick out like a sore thumb. That integration had not happened yet. That is why there is only one white character in my film.

**Also the position of women is a topic that pops up when digging deeper into the story.**

Naidoo: In South Africa even nowadays in a lot of families fathers are not present. It's a thing that stems from





Judy Naidoo (middle) with the Schlingel team

our history. Especially in poor households, with fathers escaping through drugs, alcohol etc., mothers are often left to be the ones running the household, disciplining the children, doing almost everything. As a boy among many sisters, Ticky is surrounded by strong women, who reflect our society. There are many granny's like the one in the film, putting their lives on the line for their family – most of them are quite feisty. They will never stop asking questions or imposing responsibilities.

**You prove yourself an excellent observer of life out on the streets.**

Naidoo: The film was shot close to where I grew up in Durban, and all of

the characters were inspired by people that I knew. I was born in a middle class family, surrounded by lower income housing areas. I've always been in the position of an outsider, looking into those communities.

**You take a certain risk in the way you picture Baboo, on the edge of being ridiculed. Chubby as he is, you expose him performing a silly dance. How did you keep him with his dignity?**

Naidoo: Every Bollywood fan will recognise this dance, originally performed by the great Sridevi, from whom Baboo copies parts of the choreography. The fact that he goes on stage, doing that dance, reveals an

important aspect of his personality: being committed! As a character he is very consistent. Whatever situation he is confronted with, he will always respond in a Baboo-kind-of-way. He is an intelligent kid, just like Ticky. Coming from a poor background doesn't mean you're stupid. Don't underestimate people because of where they come from or how they look. Ticky and Baboo are like two sides of the same coin, and I am that coin. I was chubby like Baboo, but crazy like Ticky.

**You cast them as a duo?**

Naidoo: Baboo we found easily. The only thing worrying me was that he was only 8 years old. But what maturity and confidence he had for his

age. But Ticky, we couldn't find. Only children from private schools would react to our calls, while this kid needed to be kind of cool and rough and unpolished. Finally we found him in my hometown. The boy in the audition looked nothing like the kid in the movie. He was incredibly shy, his body language was very much inwards, he had a bowl haircut, but he was good at remembering lines. At some point I thought: if this child would grow his hair out, he would look like a perfect Mowgli. During the 6 weeks of preparation, he blossomed and came out of his shell. His only problem was: he couldn't master the slang language. All the time I asked his parents to practice street talk with him, but be-



cause he is such a well behaved kid, he couldn't handle the more rude lines. He had the greatest problem only saying the word 'shit'.

#### His hair looks fantastic!

Naidoo: Not when I first met him! After the shooting he came up to me and said: "*Juicy* (that's how they called me), *do you know that most of the time I couldn't see a thing?*"

#### I find that hard to believe. From his very first second on screen, he radiates with star quality, blowing everybody away with his confidence.

Naidoo: He was totally not cast close to his character. The experience helped him to grow. Actually the two boys were the opposite. Baboo is crazy and a bit hyperactive, Ticky is very polite and considerate. Yet they became like brothers on set.

#### What were the most difficult moments on the set?

Naidoo: When we were recording stunts. When Ticky saw his stunt double at work, he was like: "*That looks easy, I can do it myself.*" But then they needed time to overcome their anxiety, doing scenes over and over again, until we finally got what we wanted.

#### The movie clips in KINGS OF MUL-

#### BERRY STREET are all original Bollywood material?

Naidoo: Every single clip used in the film is iconic, these are legendary pieces of Bollywood cinema. The very opening scene is with Rajinikanth, who is worshipped like a god of South Indian cinema. Ticky introduces Baboo to cinema through a film called RAM LAKHAN, with Anil Kapoor. Then Baboo dances to 'Hawa Hawai'. Every Indian under the sun knows that song. I made the film for \$500,000 and a large sum went into these Bollywood music pieces. I was most lucky with Amitabh Bachchan's scene, one of the most classic dying sequences in any film. I tried to have those Bollywood clips well integrated into the story. Ticky is such a melodramatic boy that he even wants to die like a movie star on the screen. 99% of any western audience will not get those Bollywood references, but I wanted it to be entertaining either way.

#### Where does that closing scene come from, with all its vibrant dancing?

Naidoo: I asked my composer Brendan Jury for a song with a Latin vibe to it. Bollywood borrows from all types of music around the world. In this song, I wanted each of

my characters to have their own moment. Recording that scene was such fun. We filmed it at night, out on that one street where most of the film was shot, and the whole community came out, standing around cheering and enjoying the music. All the kids were up late and nobody complained. It was a marvellous night!

#### Apparently there was another very special day on the set...

Naidoo: When we filmed the explosion! I always wanted to do that! We only had one chance to blow up a car, because we only had one. I told the pyrotechnician: "*This is my first explosion in my first film with kids, so the main thing I want for everybody is to be safe. However I want a full screen explosion! Please tell me that this red box you're carrying is enough to do the damage!*" And guess what... we got a full screen explosion. I don't think anyone has ever seen me smiling so deliriously happy before. I would love to do another action movie, only for the sake of blowing things up.

#### How do you evaluate the audience's reactions so far?

Naidoo: In South Africa, at my request, we had a premiere for underprivileged children. For these kids, the language is still an issue, many of

them don't speak English. But their response was so good. Screening it here for an international audience, again I was so nervous, I couldn't bare to sit and watch it together with them but I felt happy and relieved. Working for a young audience for the first time, I'm still trying to get my head around what can be done and what can't. I'm trying to figure out why, for instance, some people have a problem with guns being fired or cars exploding in my film. However, I'm very glad that the film is now travelling to so many wonderful festivals.

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