

Article

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Body: Unmasking the Mask



When the feature film has a title as basic and simple as *Body* and explores the topic beyond the realm of plot and character, I felt it very pertinent to examine it further to help each one of us have a conversation about it as an individual and a society.

The fundamental truth of life is that we exist because of the body, and we experience life through it. The body is born and the body dies. This is a reality no human being can escape. And the film makes this basic vessel the canvas of the film. What is the relationship of the body to the process of the film, the filmmaker and the actor- this is what this article will strive to reveal and, in the process, reflect on art, more specifically acting and filmmaking.

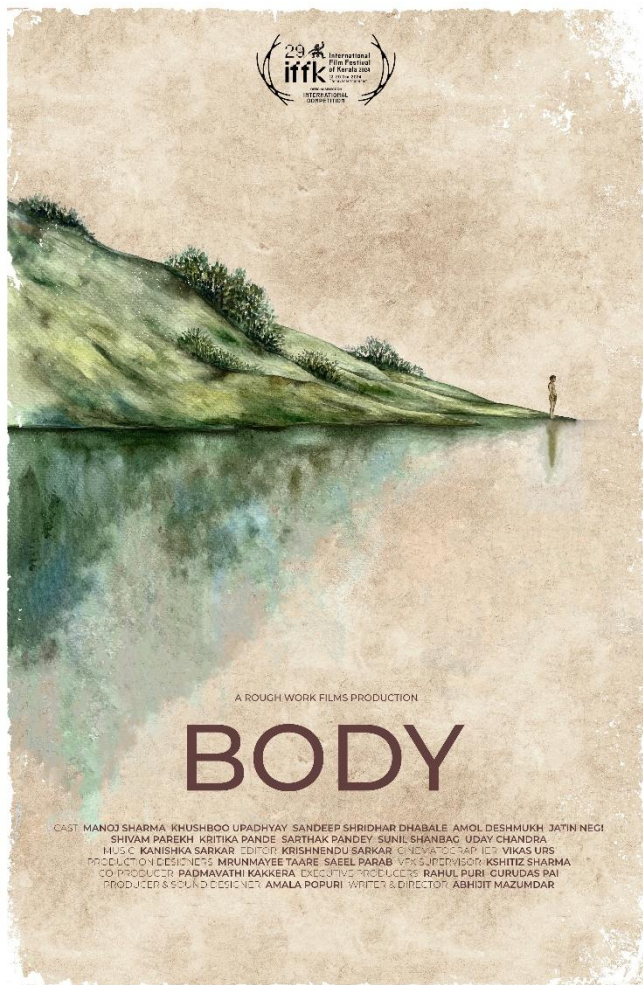
The first reaction to the film as an audience is discomfort and it takes you into a state of questioning why we live in a world where the most sacred and basic aspect of being human, having a body and seeing it bare on screen is the cause of discomfort. As a society what is our evolution that the body is covered with so many layers of conditioning that just the act of seeing it naked is full of potential threat, fear, judgement and shame.

The body has been misrepresented by society in so many ways that its purity and sanctity has been destroyed over the years. The gaze of greed, lust, ego has polluted its essence, and this is one of those rare films that allows the viewer to go beyond those stereotypes to an honest, simple and purer space to reflect on

what it means to be human – to look at the body and start the conversation with oneself.

The film confronts you with the body, but the gaze is not that of a voyeur and the honesty with which the cast and crew achieve the outcome is praiseworthy. This article is not so much about understanding what the film is as a plot but rather about the experience of the film as a whole and the larger issues the film raises.

spaces. This is inspired by a recurring dream that I have had for a very long time...of seeing myself naked in public spaces. Usually, my dream goes through a journey...of feeling utterly helpless and scared of finding myself naked...to slowly reconciling with that fear and anxiety and overcoming them. I have tried to explore a similar graph in the film while trying to understand how this journey unfolds in the mind space of the film's protagonist.



With this context it seems that the birth of this film was created in the womb of the subconscious of the artist and therefore has tremendous depth. Also, since it is a common dream many humans share, it makes the film not only individual, but it also belongs to the realm of a collective unconscious. In the view of the famous psychologist Carl Jung, we could attribute such a dream to symbolise and point at probably vulnerability and a need for stripping away of your mask and revealing your authentic self. The story of the film grapples with the concept of a mask for an actor as a professional and as a fake persona at an individual level. Thus, the journey of the film is about unmasking and seeking to find liberation by arriving at the naked truth.

Collaborative nature of the film being created:

The writing and development of the script for this film was a unique process of collaboration between cast and crew and it beautifully dissolves the rigid boundaries between assigned roles, and the film shines out as a complex tapestry of reality. It's not very common to involve the actors as part of the writing and conception of the film and

Germ of the Idea for the film:

Examining the journey of this film, I would like to start at the very beginning, which is how the film came to be born, and I quote the words of the writer and director Abhijeet Mazumdar - *My latest film "Body" revolves around the image of a naked man in public*

usually the actor plays out the vision of the writer/director. However in this case the writer and director has collaborated with all the actors in the film who he shares a close bond and respect for which started from his first meeting with them in FTII for a Diploma film, I quote the words of Abhijeet to understand the nuances from him in the first person: *When I first felt the strong urge to explore the image of my recurring dream, of a naked man in public, in the form of a film I immediately thought of Manoj. I had nothing but the basic idea...no story, no script. I shared my idea with him and asked if he would be interested in playing the lead role if I ever make the film. He said yes instantly. If he had said no I perhaps would have shelved the idea. I started writing the script. I chose to retain his real name. I knew exactly who I wanted to play the other key characters as well in the film. Almost all of them were from the same batch. I retained their names too. I knew them quite well. Their aura as individuals shaped my characters at a basic level. Later I took off on that and added additional layers. I blurred the lines between the real and the fictional worlds and the fictional world slowly started becoming the real world to us. That could only happen with the wholehearted support of all the actors.* He also adds that the acting workshops conducted by Pushendra (also from FTII), an accomplished writer, director, actor were very helpful and *his critical feedback was instrumental in giving final shape to the script.*

To take the discussion deeper I would like to take a more specific prism of one actor and share how Manoj Sharma who is playing the protagonist in the film -overcame the

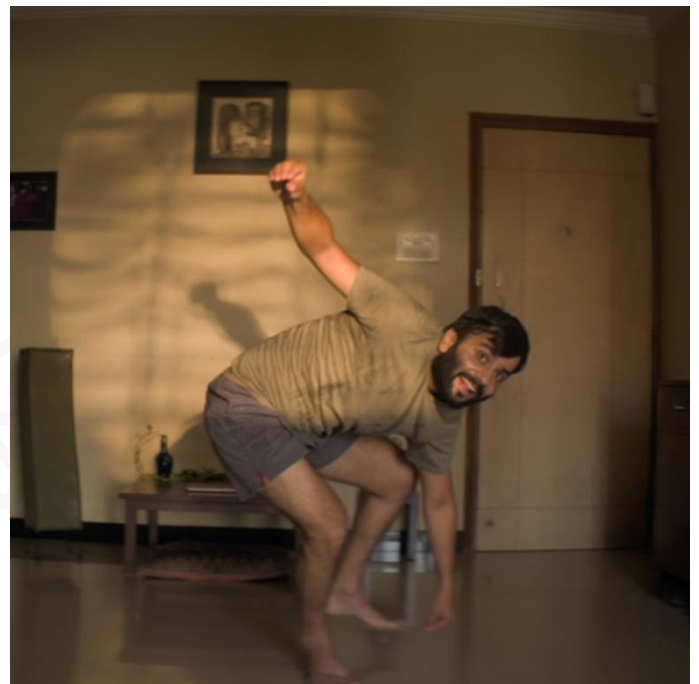
challenge of playing such a complex character and how he contributed to making the character come to life, and I quote: *Vulnerability and Naked Truth are the ingredients of compelling characters. Exhibitionism and Narcissism are bound to come as a consequence of the choice of becoming an actor. Specifically with my character in the film it was very important to stay in the zone of Vulnerability and Naked truth. If the character was not anchored by the personal loss and subsequent traumas, then it had a risk of becoming exhibitionist for the performer or voyeuristic for the audience. Desexualizing the male naked body was important for the film but it was not my job. My job was to portray the truth of the pathos that I was feeling. I was convinced that if stripping is mixed with pathos, then I can take the audience with me. It was important for me to take the audience to my side of the story. Arriving at the logic of stripping in each scene was equally important for me as that not only helped fit the stripping perfectly in the narrative but also gave me more motivation in performing it.*



The Actor's Process and Image of the Actor in Society:

Acting has often been a misunderstood art and shrouded in mystery and the actor is seldom given his due respect. Historically it is not wrong to say that an actor has been labelled as a prostitute. So, what is the role of an actor? Is the intent and treatment of the film important in defining these boundaries? And inherently what does the process of acting involve that lures the ordinary human being. These words below from Manoj is a revealing first-hand account of defining acting and his personal journey as an actor starting from the present time: *A unique open-eyed guided meditation where I am following the voice in my head and also responding to my outside environment. Acting for me is also a process of relaxation and to get rid of anxieties of daily life via the character's journey. My acting journey started on stage from Grade 6 at my boarding school (Oak Grove School, Mussoorie). Back then, it was mostly centered around mimicry of teachers, voicing animal sounds and mimicking famous Bollywood dialogues while trying to perfect the voice and expressions. Each year, I would win the Best Actor award and that became an act of receiving annual validation for an otherwise weak student at studies according to the school system. However, performing on stage was empowering. This constant want of validation kept me going as I performed at college festivals and later got into FTII to study acting formally. The change that has happened is that now the element of validation has fairly subdued, and my focus has shifted to trying to perform for myself.*

The film *Body* was in the process of making for around 5 to 6 years since the germ of the idea was born in 2018 and each member in the team was having their individual moments of growth and realization. I probed Manoj and he replies *BODY gave me a lot of confidence. It has made me more fearless as an artist. The first time when I stripped for the shot it liberated me. There was immense power in that moment.*



The years spent on the film have taught me the importance of breathing the script in and out. I could literally read my lines backwards by the time we shot the film. That level of association with the written word completely eliminates the alienness of the situation. Whatever happens next is from the gut. This film also taught me the virtue of blurring lines between actor and character. I also feel more empathetic to the profession of acting. Even more alarmed to the possible dangers that it may entail.

While filming the lake swimming scene right after the bullying scene I drowned. That was a long shot and while performing it I thought of the Stanislaviskian 'Moment Before'. The thought of trauma froze my body, and I started drowning. I am a trained swimmer with experience of swimming in the sea. But that day I had a revelation that certain shots require you to only do the action technically. If i would have just swam the shot would have still worked equally well. But the greed of getting closest to the truth of the moment took me to the dark space that was totally unrequired. While writing this answer, I am getting an insight that maybe as a person I should invest my energy according to the requirements of the situation. Maybe giving my hundred percent every moment is not the wisest thing to do.



Themes explored in the film:

The film deals with many themes, but violence is an important central theme that it explores and within that more specifically 'bullying' which gets embedded in the plot beautifully. Abhijeet says, *I have been interested in exploring themes of violence and abuse...sometimes seething under the surface of an interpersonal space or in its more visible forms in a larger socio-political*

context. How violence in its various forms affect the psyche of an individual.

Manoj takes the conversation forward with reference to the film and his own experience which is relevant to point out from the individual and profession perspective: *Bullying is pathetic. Its trauma scars deeply. In the forest scene with Sandeep, my character says, "The concept of Time-Heals is Bullshit."* For me, *BODY* is a lot about that dialogue. From post screening discussions with the audience, I am getting this sense that the bullying aspect is getting communicated quite sensitively. The inclusion of the Bullying angle was completely a director's choice. *Bullying lends vulnerability to the character who is already dealing with loss.*

For me, performing it meant always keeping a clear boundary between actor and the character and to blend it only between Action and Cut. I did not consciously rely on emotional memory for playing those scenes and only worked on the truth of the scene. Of course, the scars keep coming at a subconscious level. Doing this, automatically brought in the character's arc as the scenes of the film were already written in a nuanced manner. All I had to do was to discuss with the director the essentials of each scene before playing it.

The film is anchored in the real world with the subject of bullying but soon the canvas expands and enters complex layers of reflection on sanity vs insanity and the audience is placed in a position to solve the puzzle of the cause and effect of violence and

the film in its conclusion symbolically offers a possible solution out of this vicious cycle.



Spirit of the film

The film in idea, form and execution embodies a seeking beyond the realistic mundane yet remains deeply rooted in reality. At one level the film is anchored in the concrete examination of one individual and his interaction with society and at another

level the film zooms out to a macro experience which questions the very real and lingers in the reality of ideas. The film explores not only the body but also the spirit within it and haunts the viewer with this mysterious encounter. To get a perspective on a very critical aspect of the intent of the artistic experience I give Abhijeet the last word: *what deeply fascinates me is the possibility of exploring the “abstract” in cinema. Formally cinema lets us work only with the concrete...the real. There’s a literalness in the very act of cinematography. But that literalness doesn’t necessarily have to amount merely to “realistic”. There’s always a potential to transcend the “realistic” and enter the realms of “abstract” or a more dream like space.*

The article includes excerpts of an exclusive interview with the writer and director Abhijeet Mazumdar and lead actor Manoj Sharma

Oorvazi Irani based in Mumbai is a media professional, entrepreneur, independent filmmaker, film and acting educationalist, freelance consultant and film critic.