

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Margarita With A Straw – Yes, please.

Sophia Stein · Tuesday, June 14th, 2016

The best film that you see this weekend might not be one that is screening in theatres; it might be the one you stream and watch in the comfort of your own home. *Margarita With A Straw* is a deeply intimate film from director **Shonali Bose**. It features Kalki Koechlin in a career-defining performance as Laila, a charismatic and curious young woman born with Cerebral Palsy, yet determined not to let her disability stand in the way of her free exploration of sex, love, and relationships.

Performances this powerful, coupled with such assuredness in the direction of the camera to capture the fleeting, nuanced emotions from her gifted ensemble, make it almost impossible to believe that *Margarita With A Straw* is merely Bose's second feature film to date. The screenwriting by Bose and co-writer Nilesch Maniyar is patient and sensitive, yet never simplistic. Bose started writing the screenplay in the aftermath of the tragic death of her sixteen-year-old son, Ishan, who died as the result of severe burns when an appliance malfunctioned and caught fire. While the film grapples with such loss, it never succumbs to despair. "When life hands you lemons, you can be bitter and sour or you can make a yummy Margarita with them and raise a toast!" Bose speaks to the essence of her film. The story takes place in Delhi, India, and Greenwich Village, New York, and is in English and Hindi. In *Margarita With A Straw*, Bose explores the complexity of sexuality and the fluidity of sexual orientation. The world as rhapsodized by Lin-Manuel Miranda: "And love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love ..." Lensing by Anne Misawa, score by Mikey McCleary, and sound design from Resul Pookutty (CAS, MPSE) and Amrit Pritam combine to form a nearly-perfect mosaic of sound, color, emotion and sensuality.

Bose's first film, *Amu*, received India's highest accolades for Best Film and Best Director. (It shook co-writer/co-director Maniyar so completely to the core, that the experience of watching it prompted him to abandon engineering to pursue filmmaking, and to work in creative partnership with Bose!)

I first saw *Margarita With A Straw* at CAAMFest in San Francisco, and as testament to a great film, it stayed with me long after the lights in the theatre came up. It has since enjoyed a highly celebrated theatrical run in India, playing on more than 300 screens over six weeks, as well as screening in theatres across the United States and across the globe. Just this week, *Margarita With A Straw* is available on iTunes, Vimeo On Demand and Wolfe Video.

I had an opportunity to speak with director Shonali Bose about her cousin who is her primary inspiration for *Margarita With A Straw*, her maternal approach to directing actors, her own sexual awakening, and her enlightened understanding of the mourning process.

When so many of us have been impacted by the gun violence of the past few weeks, I am hoping that Shonali's interview and beautiful, life-affirming film, *Margarita With A Straw* will provide

some solace and respite to those mourning the deaths of friends, lovers, parents, and children in Orlando, Los Angeles, and all throughout the world.



Shonali Bose, Director, "Margarita With A Straw."

Photo courtesy of Wolfe Video.

Sophia Stein: The story was inspired by your cousin Malini. How old were you when you first became aware that she had Cerebral Palsy?

Shonali Bose: Malini was born with acute Cerebral Palsy. I was one when she was born. I can't identify a moment of consciousness about it, as such, because we grew up in a joint family, doing everything together. It was such a natural thing for me. Anywhere that we went, it would take longer. We would both be learning the same things at the same time. I remember taking swimming lessons together. The family made sure that there were no differences in how we were treated. We went out of our way to make sure that Malini had everything that I had.

My aunt by necessity formed the first school for children with Cerebral Palsy in India because there weren't any here. Malini was one of the first persons with Cerebral Palsy to go to college in India; I was one of her writers. When we were teenagers, I would take her out dancing. People would stare, but we would still do all of that. Cerebral palsy is just something that I grew up with and have been very engaged with my whole life.

Sophia: Over a drink in a London pub, you asked Malini, "What are we going to do for your 40th birthday?" She answered: "I just want to have sex by the time I'm 40!" Do you remember your reaction at the time?

Shonali: I was forty, and she was thirty-nine. "What do you want for your fortieth birthday, Malini? It's the best birthday ever!" It came up loud and clear. "I JUST WANT TO HAVE SEX!" Not I want to have sex by the time I'm forty, but "I just want to have sex." Then, literally my line, "Oh, it's not as good as it's made out to be." I didn't know what to say. Then I added, "You know, we'll get you a vibrator." Later, I was thinking about it. I was thrown.

I was very conscious about her sexuality as a teenager. I did not date anybody when we were in high school together because I didn't want her to be heartbroken — Because Malini was *so romantic* and constantly thinking everybody is in love with her! If somebody (of the male species) would just look at her kindly, she'd be, "Ahh ... guess what, I think he likes me!" And it would break my heart so much. I shelved thinking about it for many years because maybe I didn't want to deal with it. Or because she was doing amazing in her career. Malini had written a novel by that point. So it shocked me! It shocked me when that sentence came out.

Sophia: Did you end up taking her to buy a vibrator?

Shonali: You know, we looked. We did an Indian cut where I added back in my favorite things that I had cut out for the international cut. I was so nervous that I needed to get into a major festival with the film. I was trying my best to make the film as tight as possible. After the masturbation scene, there is a scene where Laila and her friend go to try and buy a vibrator in an Indian store, and it's so funny.



Revathy (Shubhangini, mother) and Kalki Koechlin (Laila, daughter).

"Margarita With A Straw," directed by Shonali Bose. Photo courtesy of Wolfe Video.

Sophia: I was out with a friend recently who is a child therapist. She babysits for an autistic girl who asked her about sex. Like you, she wasn't sure how to respond. Media and society as a whole treats people with disabilities as though they were asexual.

Shonali: Malini writes a lot about this. That's what was happening when we were teenagers. I

knew that she would keep getting rejected. I kept also *hoping – hoping* — that somebody would be able to see past the disability because she's very attractive and intelligent.

I gave Laila's character fifty percent of Malini's disability. People who are way less disabled are rejected, too — because people just want the perfect bodies. Women face that. When I started doing research, I found that there are quite a few males with disabilities who end up being able to marry or have relationships — more so than females with disabilities. Women not only need to have the perfect female body, but also a female is looked upon as the nurturer. If you are disabled, and you need to be taken care of, you aren't that capable of doing all the housework. So this gender role also becomes a problem.

A lot of people, including Malini, are writing about how persons with disabilities are looked upon as asexual. Malini's autobiography, *One Little Finger*, is about her life from birth and all she went through. It's called *One Little Finger* because she typed it herself.

Sophia: Malini has seen the film, obviously. What does she think about it?

Shonali: Loved. Loved. Read every draft. Watched it so many times. She howls even now when she watches it. When I was writing it, I said, "Malini do you want to change anything?" She didn't want to change a single dot. She had no suggestions. She has not seriously had those experiences. Possibly she imagines what would happen if her own mother died. I was worried about the reactions from my aunt and uncle and everybody else in my family because they are such hardcore disability activists. I was worried that they would feel like I had not dealt with the issue. I thought they might feel like I was not doing justice to the cause. They loved it and said this is taking it to a whole other level.

Sophia: You had originally intended to cast an actress who was born with Cerebral Palsy to play Laila? What did you encounter when you auditioned actresses with CP?

Shonali: There aren't any actresses with CP [in India]. I knew that. And no blind actors. There aren't any actors with disabilities in the Indian film industry, yet. In my first film, I deliberately cast a non-actor in one of the leads because I could see that she could act, and she didn't know that she was an actor. So I thought if I can find that talent, I can make it work. I am very connected with all the institutions for CP in the country — because of my family having founded the first one. We put out a big call, traveled, met many people, and did different kinds of auditions — not direct auditions with lines, but just figuring it out. I felt like one girl possibly may have been able to do it. Then, she was like, "There's no way, I can do the sex scenes." But she realized, "You can't cut the sex scenes." "Yeah, obviously not," I said. "I can't do them, even if it's fictional. My family will just die of embarrassment if their daughter does that," she confessed.

I found a blind woman who is an actor, a mother in her early thirties. She wasn't ideal, but because of my commitment to those particular disabilities, I would have been ready to adjust my script to the actors. But the sexuality was an obstacle for her, as well. She helped me to train Sayani, to play Khanum.



Revathy (Shubhangini, mother) and Kalki Koechlin (Laila, daughter).

"Margarita With A Straw," directed by Shonali Bose. Photo courtesy of Wolfe Video.

Sophia: What gave you confidence in casting Kalki Loechin in the lead? She is brilliant. How did you see that she would be able to handle the challenge of portraying a character with Cerebral Palsy?

Shonali: Kalki is a well-known actor, but still I told her, you have to audition. I saw only ten percent in the audition. She was terrified; so was I. I asked her to commit to me for 4-6 months. "Four months, where you don't do anything else." She agreed. And I said, "At the end of that time, we will abandon the project if we don't get it authentic." But I was in terror until the very

last two weeks. Very late in the last two weeks, all of that work in terms of the CP came together. But I think her performance is much more than just getting the CP right. It's nothing like any of her other films. Kalki is luminous in this film.



Kalki Koechlin (Laila), *"Margarita With A Straw,"* directed by Shonali Bose.
Photo courtesy of Wolfe Video.



Kalki Koechlin (Laila), *"Margarita With A Straw,"* directed by Shonali Bose.
Photo courtesy of Wolfe Video.

Sophia: She is like an open nerve. You can feel her feelings right on the surface.

Shonali: This is because of this six-week workshop that we did based on Grotowski. It's an amazing technique that teaches an actor to go from deep within their body to respond honestly. Usually, we have filters, and we respond from our brain. If you have to express an emotion, it's not necessarily going to come out honestly. You're gonna *act* sad or *show* something. You just need to feel it deep within and then it will come out in your eyes. It was this intense body workshop for eight hours a day over six weeks at my house. We didn't even touch upon disability. Kalki was doing the workshops as an able-bodied person. The Grotowski training is what transformed her performance.

Sophia: Is this what you refer to in the credits as the actor intimacy workshop?

Shonali: That was something else entirely. Rachel Monsoon, a friend of mine, sees all kinds of clients in workshops to do with emotional and sexual intimacy. I told her, "Listen, I'm just terrified of the love-making scenes. What do you do?" She offered, "Let me come in and do one." So she led the first two-hour workshop with the two girls, and then I carried on the work. You just start off with all your clothes on, just looking at each other, and slowly you approach and touch. Just very gently leading the actors to be able to touch — because these are two straight girls, and they have to do a gay love-making scene. So Monsoon gave me the confidence, and then I continued that work with them.



Kalki Koechlin (Laila) and Sayani Gupta (Khanum).
"Margarita With A Straw," directed by Shonali Bose. Photo courtesy of Wolfe Video.

Sophia: What scenes were the most difficult for the actors?

Shonali: I feel it ultimately ended up being those scenes. After these workshops, the girls and I were so confident and happy. We were like, "Oh, my God, we nailed it. This is going to be easy as cake." They loved each other. They became good friends. Kalki was worried about the sex scene with Jared, but then I did the workshop with her and Jared. You know, he was so terrified of doing it. He's the lead from the *Narnia* films. And his mother said, "Well, you've got to do this because of the sex scenes, because that will be coming of age for you in the cinema." His *mother* said that!

Sophia: That's very funny.

Shonali: He's an English boy. But he was terrified! So I got him past his fear. So we're all feeling o.k. — especially the girls, they were feeling super-confident. But when we got on set, even though it was a closed set, and I had the bare minimum people, and my DP is a woman, still, you can't just do it in one take, you need different shots. And you feel vulnerable. You have your close-up, and you feel vulnerable.

So before even getting to the love-making scene, when they're about to swim in the water, Khanum kicks off her top and then she has to help Laila undress and put on her bathing suit. Laila

is looking around awkwardly. People can see her. When I first came here from India, this happened to me. I felt so shy, because you don't change in the open like that in India. You go behind closed doors. Here in America, people are just walking around naked. It was such a shock to me! What surprised me is that the actors felt self-conscious taking off their clothes. So I took off my clothes — to make them feel that it was o.k. I am directing, and I am putting myself in that vulnerable place of being nude. Yeah, can you imagine?

[We share a laugh.]

We get to the love-making scene, and I thought this is going be fine. But it wasn't. In her intensity and whatever, Khanum bit Laila on the first take. Then Kalki said, "What is wrong with you?" Then that one started crying, and this one got upset that now that she's mad at me. I had to take them into separate rooms and redo all my work.

I do a lot of work in my rehearsal process of building trust between the actors and me, building an umbilical cord between us. So that while they're on set, they don't have to watch themselves. They know that I'm watching their backs. I'm like a mother for them. I want for them to just play freely, as if they were toddlers. To just be. They can trust you. They can run anywhere because momma's watching. That feeling, that you have their backs and that you have such immense love for them. I build that up in rehearsals with my cast, and then it's easy for me to deal with tantrums, or breakdowns, or upset feelings, to just bring them back to the place that I need them to be. Those two scenes were the toughest. After that, I would have to say the Black Lives Matter demonstration was challenging because there were so many extras!

Sophia: I wanted to ask you about the Indian view of homosexuality and bisexuality. What were you taught growing up about homosexuality and bisexuality?

Shonali: So when I was exactly the same age as Laila — nineteen, in my second year of college — at that point, I didn't have any gay awareness. I had no clue. This is 1985. At that time, it was not the digital world. You were not seeing stuff that happens in America or wherever, that much. There's this girl who came from Berkeley on an education abroad program, and we became best friends. And then, that morphed into a relationship. So unlike in the film where Khanum was already gay and knew her sexuality, neither this girl, nor I, nor her family, knew. So, when it became a full-blown love relationship, a full physical and emotional relationship, I had zero problem with it. It always felt very natural to me. I didn't feel: "Oh, my god, there's something wrong with me." But even though she was coming from Berkeley — because she was brought up Christian, she had so much pain. She was in such conflict with herself. I was so sad for her. She had so much pain, and I had zero. That's how I wrote Laila. She didn't know what this experience would be, and she just went with it.

Then my friend's life evolved. She went back to America. I came to America only because of her. I would not have come to America. I came here because I was still in love. I came because I thought that we should try to continue. But then, she was like, "No, I'm straight." Ironically, now she is gay; she is married to a woman; they have children. She lives in Washington, D.C. She was at the festival there when we won the Jury Award and the Audience Award. I said in the Q&A that it was lovely because she's part of the story too, in a certain way.



*Kalki Koechlin (Laila), Sayani Gupta (Khanum), Revathy (Shubhangini),
Kuljeet Singh (Balraj), Malhar Khushu (Monu).*

"Margarita With A Straw," Directed by Shonali Bose. Photo Courtesy of Wolfe Video.

Sophia: The film is dedicated to your son, Ishan Vivan (1994-2010). You quote Rumi at the end of the film: "The wound is the place where the light enters you ..." To which you add: "If you let it —" Can you talk about how the death of your son factored into the writing of the

film?

Shonali: I started writing it on his birthday. Four months after his death, even though he was no longer there, I was able to celebrate that day that he was born.

Just to go back a little bit further, in February of that same year, I had written and produced a film that my husband directed, *Chittagong*. (When my son died, it actually ended my marriage.) While we were married, I had to do a small role in that film in which a mother runs to her sixteen-year-old son's dead body, and she has to cry. It was a such a tiny role that we couldn't find an extra good enough to do it. Then my husband suggested, "Why don't you do it?" I remember when I was in make-up thinking, if Ishan died what would I do? I went to pieces. I thought, I won't put that part in my head to bring out the performance because I won't be able to perform. I thought about my mother's death instead. She died when I was twenty-one. But that sentence, "If Ishan died, what would I do?" ...

Then, six months later, at the age of sixteen, he died. Three days after the death, basically, he gifted me the light. I was looking at his picture, and I just felt this light and energy come to me. This sentence came from him saying, "Momma, I didn't need to be on earth any more." I immediately was able to embrace and accept that. To understand it. Twenty-five years after my mother's death. When my mother died I didn't know how to deal with the loss and pain of it. I came away to America, and it was a terrible time. When I found out about Ishan, I thought, oh, my God, I can't go through that again. Then he said this to me, and it just made me not question why. Why did such a young person have to die? I was like: Oh! I get it. So you finished whatever you had to do on this earth and you went.

At least, I had acceptance. I didn't have anger. But I still had to deal with the pain. I had not read Rumi. I didn't know what to feel. I'm a hardcore atheist. But this is what I did. Because of my experiences with my mother's death, every day I sat with Ishan's picture and whenever feelings came up I would spread them to it. Usually in my thoughts and pain, I would think, let me meditate, let me do yoga. I would do healthy things. I never drank or did anything bad. But my mother said, "Pita, a healthy alternative is actually a diversion. You're not actually present to your pain. You're just trying to do something to cheer yourself up and rise above it." That's very different than saying, "You don't scare me, I'm going to sit with you. Come, wherever you are." You tell the feeling: "Here, come. I'm gonna hold you, and let's go through this." — That is really unbelievable.

I was writing this whole year, as well. At the end of the year, I transcended that pain. Because if you can embrace pain, you transcend it. Only when I was finishing the film, I came across this Rumi quote. I added, "If you let it" — because I saw other members of my family, including my ex-husband, who were unable to do this. You can shut down in a wound so the light won't automatically enter you. But it is a huge opportunity for the light to enter you, anytime you have any kind of wound. It doesn't have to be death, you know. Death is the biggest, biggest gift. The biggest gift in this life, if you can know how to approach it actually. For you to go to another level in your own soul journey on this earth.

Sophia: The film is absolutely gorgeous. I can't wait to see what you're working on next.

Shonali: There are two are Hollywood scripts – which I'm very excited about, because it would be the first time that I would be doing an American film. Then, I've written a script myself, which is beautiful. In a sense it's connected with *Margarita*. This eighteen-year-old girl in Delhi watched the trailer for *Margarita With A Straw* thirty times in January of last year. She told her parents, "I hope I live to see the film." But she didn't. She had been given five years to live at the age of fourteen, and she died at the end of that January. Her parents watched the film in theatres the following April, and it took them until November to track me down and connect with me here.

"We only want one filmmaker in the world to tell the story, and if you don't want to do it, then we

don't want to make it," they entrusted me with their tale. So that's the script that I've just finished. I love that script because it deals with spirituality and death. I can bring so much to it. I have a lot to impart. But not in an on-the-nose way. It's subtle.

Top Image: Kalki Koechlin (Laila), "Margarita With A Straw," directed by Shonali Bose. Photo courtesy of Wolfe Video.

Margarita With A Straw – On Demand

Available now across digital platforms including: iTunes, Vimeo On Demand, and WolfeOnDemand.com. DVD available June 28, via Wolfe Video and major retailers.



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