



After making ad films for 15 years and feeling jaded, Veena Bakshi began looking at the world of cinema. Initially it was a struggle, but the very determined writer and filmmaker now has *The Coffin Maker* to her credit.

The film has won many awards at film festivals across the globe, including the best actor award for Naseeruddin Shah at the New York Indian Film Festival. In India, *The Coffin Maker* won the National Award for the best English language film.

Based in a village in Goa, it revolves around Anton Gomes (*Shah*) who comes from a family of carpenters and takes up coffin making when difficult circumstances render him jobless. Cynical and disillusioned Anton simply exists constantly bickering with his wife Isabella (*Ratna Pathak Shah*), until Death (*Randeep Honda*) challenges his life.

The idea for *The Coffin Maker* began six years ago when Mumbai-based Bakshi was discussing death with some friends. A friend said they should change the subject of the conversation.

"But I was like, Why is that people don't want to talk about death? Isn't death a fact of life? Isn't it the other side of the coin," Bakshi told *India Abroad*.

Later another friend, Shirish Desai, told her of a story he had in mind, about a coffin maker meeting death. "I called him up and asked him whether I could develop the story into a script," Bakshi said.

Death for her is "young, mischievous and full of life. And that is the thought behind this film," she added.

"I have seen a life that was extremely harsh. I lost my parents very early and I cremated them," she told *DearCinema.com*, a Web site on indie cinema. "So at one stage in my life, life became much less materialistic. Life became about being with friends, about going for a walk. The reason why I am happy is because I've seen tragedy. It's the same for everyone."

Bakshi added, "What if somebody comes to you and says: I am death and you are going to die in 30 days. What would you do? Would you really be concerned about the car that you could never buy? Or would you be concerned about living it up with your friends every night. So death is the meaning of life."

Having come upon the idea, she went looking for a writer. "I am basically a director," she said. "I would leave the writing to someone else. But I could not find the scripts satisfying. The characters I had visualized were not coming through. So I said, 'Now, Veena, you have made your own coffin (*laughs*) and got down to

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT SUBJECTS

'Films like *The Coffin Maker* need time to grow on the audience,' Veena Bakshi tells

Arthur J Pais

writing the film."

She added that she has come to believe it is the script that chooses the actors.

"You can want a certain actor and that actor may not be available, but you will find somebody else who will be a perfect fit," she mused. "Initially I couldn't find a person to characterise death — someone with a strong personality, good looking, young. Then I was at a function and I heard this laughter. I turned around and saw Randeep Honda."

Bakshi revealed that making a film in Goa had been a long dream for her. She recalled visiting the region with her family over the years, thanks mainly to her

father who worked as a merchant navy captain. She has vivid memories of villages and towns between Dabolim and Margao in Goa and also knows a bit of Konkani.

Marketing the film is her next big challenge. "I am not the producer of the film," she said. "The producer unfortunately knows little about how the film distribution system works in India. Films like *The Coffin Maker* need time to grow on the audience. The word of mouth is very important for the film, but distributors and exhibitors often go by the first weekend results. Keeping a film in theaters in decent numbers in the second week becomes a big struggle."

She blurted out names of films in the popular genre too, which took off only after the second or third week. "*Sholay* is one great example. It picked up only after the second week. In today's trade, it is unlikely that a film like *Sholay* is given a second chance," she said.

Independent films with a very limited marketing budget cannot be distributed and shown like regular Bollywood films, Bakshi added. "The idea of selling every film as if you are selling potatoes does not help indie films at all."

The Coffin Maker has been well-received, not only at film festivals in India, but also around the world. "People can relate to this film even though it is in English," Bakshi said. "At one screening in Kerala, the house went full and some people were even sitting on the floor."

Her film has also got positive reviews from influential trade publications like *The Hollywood Reporter*.

"A whiff of magical realism pervades *The Coffin Maker*, a sweet tale about an old grump who discovers he only has a month to live, told against the tropical backdrop of Goa," the weekly wrote. "Its greatest merit lies in its conviction, which becomes the audience's conviction, that life is worth savoring to the fullest and love is its most important value."

Bakshi hoped she would secure a few screens, at least in big cities in India, and then look at video on demand channels. "If marketed well, the demand for films on VOD in India could be big," she said, "and that will help a lot of films like *The Coffin Maker*."

She is already writing her next film, which deals with the problem of renting a house in Mumbai.

"You find it difficult to get a house for rent if you are single," she said. "And in many cases, if you are not vegetarian. The housing societies come up with a huge list of demands." ■

Veena Bakshi with Naseeruddin Shah, right, and Randeep Hooda on the sets of *The Coffin Maker*

