



ARTS ILLUSTRATED

Death by Wool

Death by Caption

Death by Freezing

Death by 3D

Death by Candlewax



Death by Overdose

Death by Xerox

Death by Sharpener



Death by Stencil



Death by Dental Floss



Death by Teabag



Death by Fire





Up, Up and Away

Faiza Ahmed Khan's 2012 documentary 'Supermen of Malegaon' is an effortless journey through the many layers of humour and the spaces they create for dialogue, the internal and external kind

PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

In *Supermen of Malegaon*, there is this intensely surreal moment when the director cuts a wide hole at the back of Superman's shorts (worn over blue tights, in case you are worrying), just along the butt crack, to prop him up on an iron rod connected to a contraption on wheels, so when they move the contraption and take the shot from behind it looks like Superman is flying. And then, because this is Malegaon, where a river running across keeps communal tension at bay with one side for the Hindus and the other for Muslims, with only the Muslim community home to a thriving local film industry (but enjoyed by both sides), they have to bring in a woman from the neighbouring village to play Superman's love interest, because Muslim women

aren't allowed to participate, wondering in the end how they are going to manage to make her fly when all they can do is get her to sit on the iron rod against green 'chroma' cloth.

If you just took a moment to breathe at the end of that long sentence with distracting subtexts, then you have a pretty good idea what watching *Supermen of Malegaon* is going to be like. Long breaths at the sheer audacity and spirit of the crew making *Malegaon ka Superman* that Faiza captures with such tenderness and warmth, punctuated with short bursts of laughter carrying with it the weight of the unseen iceberg, the one that Ernest Hemmingway said all good stories are made of, and incidentally, the one all good

humour is also made of. 'That is, in some sense, the essence of their film-making as well. Their films, as this one, deal with the social, economic, political conditions of their lives, which are often fraught, and they use satire to deal with these realities. It also has its roots in Urdu literary culture and the use of tanz or irony/satire as a form. Malegaon, because of its large Urdu population, has an influence of this Urdu culture. In quite a direct way, my adaptation of this came from them. There was an apprehension sometimes about it coming across as a mockery of it all, but everyone involved, them and us, understood what role humour was playing here and the gravity beneath it,' explains Faiza.





In Faiza's debut film we follow Shaikh Nasir's intrepid bond with film-making. After the success of his first film *Malegaon ka Sholey*, he takes Hollywood head-on with his home-grown spoof of Superman. We witness their film-making process and the little quirks of parody Nasir and his team put into the film, such as a thin, emaciated, bungling Superman (played by Shaikh Shafique); Superman's father sending him to the most unique village – Malegaon – but also adding that if he fails in his mission, then he will send his younger brother, Spiderman; the villain in the film (who is also the cinematographer and editor) saying he loves 'filth' and dreams of watching every Indian spitting on the roads; Superman flying up into the air to speak on his phone (his number is 007) because there is no network below; and we also witness their little in-jokes – during a script-writing session, Farogh, one of the writers (with the most heartbreaking line in the film: 'For 15 years I have been heading towards Bombay, but Bombay isn't any closer') describes a shot to Nasir and asks with a straight face, 'You are hiring a helicopter, right?'

It's almost as if humour is the bedrock on which their cinema and their lives are built and anything we might be feeling – laughter, pathos, sympathy, empathy – are like unnecessary sediments, or like redundant policemen at the end of the film. And so you watch from the periphery the way this film within a film gets made. You are the audience, yes, you are laughing, yes, and thoroughly enjoying the film, yes, but you are on the outside as the audience is meant to be, and somehow, with just this film, that hard truth is momentarily disappointing, like a shore might feel when the wave recedes. You watch the bullock cart that is used as a crane, you watch Nasir climbing a tall electric pole for a shot, you watch Shafique sink his teeth into this lead role with utter seriousness, even at the detriment of his health, you watch the confusion of the tailor too afraid to cut that piece of blue cloth in front of him, you watch Superman propped on the heads of three men under a green sheet doing a 360-degree turn to eventually show Superman's flying capabilities, you watch Nasir's twinkling eyes when they make Superman fly and his crumbling eyes when his camera falls into the river. You watch it all with a sense of effortlessness, everything flows naturally, every nuance and sub-story is etched into the magnetism of this film and you are overwhelmed by this 'funny' film and its lightness and the visceral, throbbing world of gravity underneath in this village of power looms with debilitating power cuts, in this village of fractured dreams held in fragile casts of irony, and in this village of guileless remorse and potent vulnerability. 'I think their approach also resonated with me. In the same way as they tackled serious subjects in their films with humour and lightness, I found that lightness and humour a worthy way to bring up serious issues in my film as well,' says Faiza.

There is the poverty, the communal tension, the obvious gender disparity, the small homes and big families, the lack of jobs and the lethal illnesses (Shafique died of mouth cancer before he saw the film on big screen), the always impinging reality and the doggedness of spirit that comes in to outsmart it, and the reaffirming presence of cinema that allows them to carry all of that like wind on their backs. Faiza's film is as much a tribute to the everyday comedy of life as it is an antidote to our privileged, fractal existence.

It is also, as Shaikh Nasir says, a film – both his and Faiza's – about universal truths: 'Life is full of tears and sorrow anyway. But it is very difficult to find any laughter. Laughter is precious... And very important.'



Faiza Ahmad Khan.

All photographs by Ameet Mallapur



Death by Smoking



Death by Ball-point Pen



Death by Chewing Gum



Death by Voodoo



Death by Flesh-eating Cannibals



Death by Stapler



Death by Ink



Death by Deletion



Death by Cactus



Death by Shrinking



Death by Vacuum Seal



Death by Mummification



Death by Glass



Death by Pixellation



Death by Clothespin



Death by Stovetop