

PRESS KIT

शिवलोक बॉलिवुड

THE UNTOLD STORY
OF INDIAN CINEMA



CONTACT:

Danny Ben-Moshe

e. danny@identity-films.com

m. +61 434 585 655

www.shalombollywood.com

SHALOM BOLLYWOOD: THE UNTOLD STORY OF INDIAN CINEMA had its world premiere at the MAMI Mumbai Film Festival in October 2017. The film was reviewed in The Hollywood Reporter as *“Lively, upbeat and entertaining.”*

LOGLINE

SHALOM BOLLYWOOD: THE UNTOLD STORY OF INDIAN CINEMA tells the unlikely story of the 2000-year-old Indian Jewish community and its formative place in shaping the world’s largest film industry.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

SHALOM BOLLYWOOD reveals the unlikely story of the 2000-year-old Indian Jewish community and its formative place in shaping the world’s largest film industry. When Indian cinema began 100 years ago it was taboo for Hindu and Islamic women to perform on screen, so Indian Jewish women took on female lead roles, which they dominated for decades. The film focuses on the lives of five of the great Jewish actors. Infused with music and dancing, the cheekily told documentary unabashedly oozes Bollywood as it uses film motifs to drive the narrative.

LONG SYNOPSIS

SHALOM BOLLYWOOD: THE UNTOLD STORY OF INDIAN CINEMA is a feature length documentary celebrating the all singing, all dancing history of the world’s largest film industry. It reveals the unlikely story of the 2000-year-old Indian Jewish community and its formative place in shaping the world’s largest film industry.

When Indian cinema began 100 years ago it was taboo for Hindu and Islamic women to perform on screen, so Indian Jewish women took on female lead roles, which they then dominated for decades. However, because of their stage names people thought they were Muslims or Christians. Until now....

SHALOM BOLLYWOOD is a story told in a cheeky tone in a unique way. As a film about film, the documentary uses film motifs to drive its narrative as a stylistic part of the storytelling. For example, film archive is placed in old Indian style cinemas, there are animated storyboards, and the film is formally structured in three acts.

The documentary unabashedly oozes Bollywood as it makes the most of its Bollywood theme: the music rarely stops, and the archive shows Bollywood for all its splendor and glory, or kitsch and stereotypes depending on your perspective. From the origins of Indian cinema to the present, this is an epic tale, and guided by mellifluous narration, its intelligently told infused with lots of humour.

SHALOM BOLLYWOOD tells its tale through the lives of nice Jewish girls who became icons at the heart of Indian cinema from the turn of the 20th century to the present day. From the 1920s silent era we meet Sulochana (aka Ruby Myers), arguably the greatest ever female superstar of Indian cinema. In the 1930s there was Miss Rose (aka Rose Ezra) the Queen of the Bollywood’s racy party scene, and in the 1940s Pramila (aka Esther Abraham) who became the country’s first Miss India. Then, in the 1950s and 1960s golden era of Indian cinema, the quintessential Bollywood vamp Nadira (aka Farhat Ezekiel). All these actresses were household names in India and beyond.

While the Jewish stars are now deceased, they appear in the film through archive interview (Pramila only), through their films which are used as if it is home video, through animation of their stills, in specifically created storyboards, and with verbatim quotes read by actors as if in the first-person voice of the Jewish stars. Montage sequences from the Jewish stars' films provide a rare opportunity for viewers to familiarise themselves with their films. In addition to extensive use of film archive and master, the film includes a treasure trove of never before seen stills from the personal collections of the now deceased Jewish stars. It includes information from unpublished autobiographies that have never been made public, and includes rare remastered films not seen for decades.

While a predominantly historical story, SHALOM BOLLYWOOD provides great access to Bollywood today as we see descendants of the Jewish stars who work in Indian cinema on film sets, in edit suites and at film launches. They include Bollywood editor Rachel Reuben and scriptwriter/actor Haider Ali, the respective granddaughter and son of Jewish cinematic legends Rose and Pramila. The film explores intergenerational themes of legacy. Rachel and Haider have a primary role in guiding us through the Jewish Bollywood story. Interviewees also include Bollywood A-lister Rishi Kapoor who personally knew and acted with some of the Jewish greats.

The film has uplifting and moving moments as we follow the high and lows in the careers and personal lives of the great Jewish stars. We see the often-tumultuous lives, the romance, the peaks and troughs, the parties, the fortunes made and lost, and the challenges they face as youth gives way to age. Once their renowned beauty fades, so did their careers: some emigrated, while others ended their days in loneliness and poverty.

The film also shines a light on the Jewish identity of the Jewish stars and its place in the wider cultural mix that is India. The film takes viewers on a journey into Jewish India and Indian society, the former is told in a specific sequence and the latter with colourful montages of the diverse Indian landscapes at key moments in the storytelling. SHALOM BOLLYWOOD is also a story of interfaith harmony and coexistence as we see how Jews, Hindus, Muslims and others coexisted and shared a common love of filmmaking – a poignant tale of coexistence.

SHALOM BOLLYWOOD - a documentary about kosher papadams, over the top costumes, religious co-existence, the odd elephant, big screen romance and 12 million cinema tickets.



The Jewish actress Arati Devi AKA Rachel Sofaer

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT – by Danny Ben-Moshe

The first thing people say when I tell them about SHALOM BOLLYWOOD is that I must be a Bollywood aficionado, but I have a confession to make: I'm not. Despite the spread of Bollywood mania around the globe, when I began making this film I had watched a grand total of zero Indian films. However, I do have a longstanding passion for Jewish stories and when I stumbled upon the story of Jews and Indian cinema it captured my imagination. What I didn't know was that it would be the start of an 11 years journey to tell in a film.

My induction into the world of Jews and Bollywood began in the least likely of places: Melbourne Australia. I was working as a professor supervising an international student from India. She ran into some problems with her landlord, a common problem for international students, and I helped her sort out this problem.

The student's father was extremely appreciative of the help I provided and, as I soon learnt, he partook in a common Indian habit of sending gifts. Every few weeks the student entered my office with what can best be described by the Yiddish word *shmutzkas*, knick-knacks, from pens to pendants began piling up in my desk draw. On one occasion the student entered my office with an article from an Indian newspaper her father thought would be of interest to me. This, I already decided, was destined straight for the recycle bin, but as she handed it to me she said, "It's an obituary about the Jewish Bollywood actress Nadira". A Jewish Bollywood actress? I was intrigued, and rather than the recycle bin, I placed the article on the top of my "to read" pile.

Nadira, I quickly learnt, was a Jewish superstar of Indian cinema. She not only played the vamp, the infamous drinking and smoking bad girl of Bollywood films, but was widely regarded as the quintessential and greatest vamp Bollywood has ever known. This was in 2006, I had just finished my first documentary and was looking for a story for my second film. It seemed Nadira was it. I went home and with great excitement told my family about Nadira. My then seven-year-old son Zak chipped in "and you should call it Shalom Bollywood". They say half the success of a film is its title, so once Zak had bestowed the story with a name there was no turning back.

I travelled to India for the first time to get a fuller sense of Nadira's story. Who could I interview about her? What archive would there be? As I met people in the Jewish community and explained I was researching a documentary about Nadira they would ask, "What about Pramila, are you including her?" And "What about Sulochana she was the biggest star of all?" And "Are you including Uncle David, the great Jewish male character actor". I went to India with the intention of making a film about one Jewish film star called Nadira, but it transpired she was the last in a long line of Indian Jewish cinematic greats. Thus began an 11 year odyssey to make 'Shalom Bollywood', a film that would tell the story of the multiple Jewish stars of India's silver screen.

Back in the West, when I told people about the film the repertoire became predictable:

Q: Were they Hollywood Jews working in India?

A: No, Indian Jews.

Q: So were they male producers like in Hollywood?

A: No, they were actresses front and centre on screen.

Q: So were they assimilated like American Jews?

A: No, they proudly identified as Jews.

It wasn't just in the West that their story was unknown, but this was also the case in India, as Bollywood figures and film historians who approached to interview them about the Jewish stars did not know these household name actors were Jewish. They all had stage names, not to hide their Jewish identity, but to give them Indian sounding names - Nadira was Farhat Ezekiel, Pramila was Esther Abrahams, Sulochana was Ruby Myers, Uncle David was David Abraham – so as a result no-one knew they were Jewish. It was time to set the record straight.

It was not just that there were Jewish stars in Indian cinema that inspired me to tell their story, but it was the impact of these stars who had a formative role in shaping what we now know as the world's largest film industry. This stemmed from cultural reasons because when Indian cinema began in the early twentieth century it was taboo for Hindu and Islamic women to perform in public, so female roles were played by men. However, the Jewish community was more liberal and educated so many of the early female stars of Indian cinema were Jewish. These Jewish women not only went where few other Indian women were prepared to go, but pushed the boundaries of Indian cinema by making the most of their femininity.

I began to get to know and love these Jewish characters with their massive personalities: Sulochana who caused controversy by reportedly earning more than the Viceroy, Pramila went on to be the first Miss India, Miss Rose the socialite extraordinaire who hosted many after parties, Uncle David who often hosted the Filmfare Awards (India's equivalent to the Oscars), and of course the sassy Nadira.

What also surprised and excited me was their lives were a fascinating intercultural story as these Jewish stars were friends with – and even married – Muslims and coexisted happily. It appeared I had found a country without anti-Semitism. This was turning into a refreshingly positive Jewish story.

There were multiple challenges in telling the story, particularly relating to archive. I quickly learnt that few if any of the films of the early era of Indian cinema survived. I wanted to include the now deceased Jewish stars through archive interviews and news reports, but despite my best efforts I could not navigate the quagmire of India's archive bureaucracy. However, necessity is the mother of invention. I began to animate the stills of the Jewish stars, with animation becoming an important storytelling device.

Stylistically, given the subject matter of my documentary, I wanted to ensure it had the look and feel of a Bollywood movie. SHALOM BOLLYWOOD is thus infused with multiple singing and dancing scenes, and the music bursts across the entire film. I have now made up for the deficit I had in familiarity with Indian films.

While I clearly had a great story, it was hard to get it commissioned. As I pitched it to broadcasters I was told it was either too Jewish, too Indian, too historical, or not historical enough. So, for several years, between making other films, I incrementally put together the pieces of SHALOM BOLLYWOOD. My 7-year-old son who came up with the film's name is now 18. It's been a long time coming, but I am delighted that the story of the Jewish superstars of the Indian silver screen will finally be told and that these Jewish greats of Indian cinema will once again hit the silver screen.

KEY CREATIVES



Producer, Director & Writer: Danny Ben-Moshe is one of Australia's leading documentary filmmakers. Danny won Australia's top documentary prize, the Walkley Award (2014), for his film *CODE OF SILENCE*, which lifted the lid on sex abuse on the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community.

Danny has made many Jewish themed documentaries for Australian broadcasters' ABC and SBS. Danny brings a quirky perspective to his storytelling, seen in his first film in 2006, *THE BUCHENWALD BALL*, where Holocaust survivors dance to commemorate their liberation. He is currently in post-production on *The OUTBACK RABBI*, a road trip following rabbis who head into the Australian outback to find Jews where you would least expect them.

Danny has also made highly acclaimed films beyond Australia. His 2011 feature length documentary *CARNABY STREET UNDRESSED*, which featured rock legends such as Roger Daltry from The Who, was pick of the week in Britain's 'Sunday Times' and received a four-star review in London's 'Time Out'. Danny's latest film for BBC Storyville (November 2017), *MY MOTHER'S LOST CHILDREN*, is an epic family saga told across five continents and six decades.

Danny is currently making a Virtual Reality film series of Holocaust survivors, which has included filming in Auschwitz and Buchenwald Death and Concentration camps.

Born in Britain, Danny is a graduate in Law and Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. For several years Danny was a professor researching a range of Jewish and cross-cultural issues. He has worked at universities in Australia, America and Israel. He lives in Melbourne with his wife and two children.



Narrator: Ayesha Dharker's voice has been a powerful presence in her many film, theatre and TV roles. These include the acclaimed award-winning Tamil Indian film *The Terrorist*, Hollywood blockbusters such as *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* when she played Queen Jamillia, the Queen of Naboo, and popular British TV series such as *Doctor Who*. Ayesha also starred in the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *Bombay Dreams*, both in London's West End and on Broadway.



Assistant Director: Dwit Monani is a Mumbai based producer and director of independent documentary films. He also works as post-production producer on various TV shows for BBC World and the Discovery Network in Mumbai. Dwit entered the world of filmmaking after a career in advertising. He has a post-graduate degree in Film and Video Production from the University of Pune.

CAST

The Indian Jewish stars



Sulochana: Born Ruby Myers in 1907 in Calcutta, and bursting onto the Silver Screen in the 1920s, Sulochana was the first female superstar of Indian cinema. She got her break when scouting out the location for a film called Telephone Girl. When the director cast his eyes on Ruby he was determined she was perfect for the role, even though she had no acting experience. Ruby had spellbinding beautiful eyes, and was thus given the stage name Sulochana which means “the one with the beautiful eyes”. Sulochana was prolific, and many of her popular 1920s silent era films were remade as talkies in the 1930s and 1940s in which she also starred. A pioneer celebrity, Sulochana was reported to have the first Rolls Royce in India, and drawing on her star appeal even Gandhi used her images as part of his political campaigns. In 1973 Sulochana was conferred with

Award for contribution to cinema. After her death in 1983 the Indian Government issued a stamp in her honour.

Miss Rose: Rose Musleah was born in 1911 in Calcutta, where she was a dance teacher. It was after her divorce in the early 1930s that she decided to move to Bombay to start over by trying her luck in the burgeoning film industry. Rose quickly made the grade, and played a leading lady in many films. Her willingness to play modern women was a reflection of art imitating real life. A true socialite, during the 1940s her home in Bombay’s prestigious Marine Drive was a popular hangout and party venue for film stars, musicians and American military personnel. Around the time of Independence in the late 1940s Rose suffered a back injury which prevented her from acting for several months. At this time, Hindu and Islamic women also had begun taking up acting roles, no longer deemed taboo and Rose struggled to regain her place at the top of the billing. After an American airman proposed, she moved to America and settled into a new role as housewife in Los Angeles. But she regularly returned to India to catch up with her film buddies and host her renowned parties. She passed away in 1985. Rose’s daughter Cynthia, and granddaughter and film editor Rachel Reuben, are interviewees in SHALOM BOLLYWOOD.





Pramila: Born Esther Victoria Abraham in 1916 in Calcutta, Esther was a teacher at the local Jewish school. Her fate changed when she went to Bombay to visit her cousin Rose. Rose was on set and the director was having a meltdown that none of the actresses were tall enough, when Rose pointed to her tall onlooking cousin and before you could say kosher pappadam, Esther was acting in film and given the stage name Pramila. Often playing the vamp, or bad girl, Pramila became the first Miss India in 1947 and acted until her final year, at the age of 90, in 2006. Pramila married the Muslim actor Kumar but their home was one of Jewish and Islamic coexistence, and her chicken soup a staple fixture on the family menu.

Pramila's son, actor and scriptwriter Haidar Ali, is an interviewee in SHALOM BOLLYWOOD.

Nadira: Born Farhat Ezekiel in 1932, Nadira established her place in Indian cinema history by playing the vamp in the 1955 classic SHREE 420, where her man chasing, drinking and gambling party girl roll was another case of life imitating art. With her fiery looks, admonishing style and darting eyes, Nadira set the benchmark for being a vamp and was a stalwart of the famous RK Studios where she was a close friend of the legendary Indian actor and director Raj Kapoor. Nadira was the last of the Indian Jewish cinema. Unlucky in love, after her death in 2006, she left many of her possessions to the local synagogue.



Nadira's good friend, Solomon Sopher, the leader of the Indian Jewish community, is an interviewee in SHALOM BOLLYWOOD.



Uncle David: Born David Abraham Cheulkar in 1909, David's family sent him off to law school, but amateur theatre had more allure than Law, and he went onto to try his hand at acting. Small in stature and bald, David was never going to get hero or villain rolls, but he mastered the art of character acting and in 1954 joined the pantheon of Indian cinema legends when cast by RK Studios in *BOOT POLISH*. A highly

regarded raconteur, David regularly hosted the Indian equivalent of the Oscars. Actively Jewish, David visited Israel in his role as an Olympic weightlifting judge. He was at the Munich Olympics where his friend, the manager of the Israeli weightlifting team, was murdered in a Palestinian terrorist attack. David retired to Canada where he lived with family in Hamilton until he passed away in 1982.

David's niece and nephew, Victor and Dianne Abraham, whom he retired to live with in Canada, are interviewees in the film.

BEHIND THE SCENES

David Joseph Penkar: Born in Bombay in 1887, David was a playwright who also wrote plays for the Jewish community. In 1931 David wrote *ALAM ARA* the first talkie in India, and thus set the template for the all dining all dancing storyline for which Bollywood is renowned. David passed away in 1942.

Ezra Mir: Born Edwin Myers in Bombay in 1903, Mir changed his name to Ezra Mir because he felt his original name "lacked Indianness". In the 1920s Mir travelled to America where he worked in the film industry, and when he returned to India he brought a bit of Hollywood approach to his filmmaking. This included the 1932 film *Zarina* which caused great controversy by including a record number of kiss scenes: 86. Mir went on to make more documentaries, over 700, an Indian record. He was awarded the prestigious civilian Padma Shrimedal by the Government in 1970 in recognition of his distinguished contribution to the [Arts](#). He died in 1993.

CREW

Writer, Producer and Director: Danny Ben-Moshe

Assistant Director: Dwit Monani

Narrator: Ayesha Dharker

Editors: Bill Murphy ASE & Robert Werner

Camera: Danny Ben-Moshe, Rakesh Bhilare, Jake Clennell, Bonnie Elliott, Roshan Marodkar, Dwit Monani, A.J. Rickert-Epstein, Sunil Sharma, Tapan Vyas

Line Producer: Dwit Monani, Line of Action Films, Mumbai

Online: City Post, South Melbourne

Sound Post Production: Alchemy Audio Post Production

Animation: Benny Goldman, Tim Patterson - Digital Media Creations, Rubber House, Steve Milne & Sid Shukla - Studio Nuvu:

Storyboard Artist: Siona Benjamin

Developed and produced with the assistance of:

Film Victoria  

Australian Jewish International Film Festival

Debbie Dadon AM

Documentary Australia Foundation

Katahdin Productions

Ricci Swart, Shadowlane

Mark Weingard

Screen Australia