

Q&A with Sarmad Masud, My Pure Land

How did the film come about?

I was looking to go out and make a film in Pakistan. I didn't really have an idea at the time but I was considering remaking *Copland*, I felt the themes of Police corruption and cover ups were very transferable. I Googled police cases in Pakistan for a bit of background, at which point I came across an article about a woman called Nazo Dharejo who had defended her home and land from 200 bandits, I straight away thought that's a much better idea for a film!

I made contact with Nazo herself through the man who wrote the article, and asked if anyone was making a film about her. She said no and was happy for me to do so. She did have some reservations/questions – Would she be in the film? I said no.

Would there be a song and a dance in the film? I said no.

So it will be a documentary...? I said no, it will be a song and a dance film without a song and a dance.

I continued to speak with her and her husband and did as much research as I could before embarking on the script. I spoke to my family as well who have land in Pakistan. Very early on I had the idea of making it a non-linear film which jumped back and forth in time; I felt this would keep the siege element of the story tense and interesting while also allowing us to learn more about the characters past.

I knew given we would be filming the story on location in Pakistan it would be difficult to raise money through traditional funding bodies in the UK, so my plan was to raise the money through private investors, and that given this was my debut feature the budget would no doubt need to be very small. I had the initial idea in 2013, I got married in 2014 and the plan was to make the film in 2015 before we had any cats or kids of our own.

It was tricky to raise the money, a lot of phone calls, emails and meetings later I had managed to raise enough to shoot the film through the very kind investment of friends and family, the plan was to shoot the film and come back and then raise the rest later. It was around this point that my agent set me up with a meeting Bill Kenwright Films, they were looking for directors for a feature currently on their slate, I successfully talked my way out of that and instead pitched my idea for a Pakistani Western. Later on I sent the script to them and before I knew it I was in front of Bill Kenwright himself. That was an amazing experience. He shook my hand there and then and said "Let's do it". Not long after that, me and my wife Caroline, who was the Production Designer, were soon on a plane to Pakistan ready to start pre-production.

Tell us a bit about the casting process

We got ourselves a fixer in Pakistan. I'd sent him references ahead of flying out there, but the pictures of the actresses he sent me back just didn't have the right look. It appeared as though they were all aspiring to be glossy Bollywood actresses, which is fine but it wasn't the right look for our film. I really wanted the lead actress to be

comfortable in her own skin, I wanted her and the rest of the cast to have a natural look, but this is not what actors are used to in Pakistan. When we got to Pakistan I made it clear that we needed authentic actors for this subtle film. We approached theatre companies, colleges, universities and had numerous open call sessions. Eventually I was sent a photo of an actress who is also a dancer in Karachi, Suhae Abro, who I thought looked really interesting. She travelled up for a casting the next day and I knew immediately that she was the one. Same rule applies for all our principle cast actually, as soon as they walked in the room I knew they were the one, it just took a bit of time to find them.

Casting was a long process, and I think all in all I auditioned over 300 people. Tanveer Bhai, who we cast for the father is actually a teacher who had just come in to support his friend. Needless to say his friend wasn't impressed we had given him the part! There was an element of street casting as well. So if I saw someone while we were out on location shooting, who I thought was interesting, I'd bring them into the shot and give them a line. I remember for the scenes in the jail, we had two sets which Caroline had designed and built from scratch in a studio in Pakistan, I decided to cast some of the actual labourers as prisoners because they had the right look. Casting wise and in terms of performances in the final film, I am very happy with the end result.

How well do you know Pakistan?

I think I now know Pakistan a lot better than I did. Previously whenever I had been it was to visit family, and I'd made a short film there in 2008. Now, having lived and worked there for 12 weeks, I know it much better. I came back saying "anything is possible in Pakistan, and everything is impossible". There's a chaos to the country that I really enjoy but arguably it's not the most conducive environment for making a film. Organisational stuff is difficult out there, plus there always seems to be something happening politically. However, it's where my family come from and I am a proud British Pakistani, and I definitely have an affinity to the country. People did say to me that we should film in Morocco or India due to the security issues in Pakistan, but I was adamant that we shoot in Pakistan because I wanted to make an honest film that came out of that country, and for other Pakistani's to be proud of..

I think it might be difficult for Western audiences to comprehend the context, magnitude and importance of our film and the significance of what the real Nazo did. There are still some parts of Pakistan where girls are killed at birth, parts of Pakistan where girls are not allowed to go out of the house alone, or go to school, or choose who they marry, and yet here we have a strong, brave, proud Pakistani woman throwing all those conventions right out of the window.

There is certainly a revival of cinema in Pakistan with more and more films being produced which is great news for everyone.

What was it like filming on location in Lahore?

It was an experience and a half filming there. I'm quite a positive person so I would say I really enjoyed the madness. Turning up to find out that one of the actors will be two hours late, the camera is there but not the lenses, that it's 40 degrees in that given

moment but it's going to rain later on, somebody might have been bitten by a snake plus we all need to leave in convoy so we don't get robbed on the way and of course there is every chance we might get shot at... again! There's all of that stuff which you don't need while trying to shoot a film on top of which you're not in your natural environment, you're not really eating or sleeping properly, you and your wife have both been in hospital during the shoot and yet you need to make sure you have the energy and clarity to make the right decisions all day long. But it really concentrates you. And I like the blood and thunder of being on set. It challenges your instincts.

Unlike in the UK guns are commonplace in the rural villages in Pakistan. Initially for me whenever I saw someone casually walking around with a gun it was like I had seen a dinosaur. I spotted it, made sure I knew where it was heading and whether or not it was likely to attack... We did have security on set, but oddly enough as time went on we became a bit blasé about the presence of guns ourselves. We did have a number of hairy moments, I recall one incident when we were filming at night with a number of extras during a dream sequence scene. It was a complicated shot with the extras, a wedding band and fireworks going off in the background, all in the dead of night in a village in the badlands of Pakistan, what could go wrong... anyway, one extra was constantly running into people and being a general nuisance so a member of the production crew took him aside and sent him home. Later the same night as we were doing another shot, after I said cut we heard what sounded like a firework, but it was actually this extra who had returned with a gun and was firing it towards us. By this stage of the shoot I was fully consumed by the film and the environment, and while our Cameraman hid behind a wall I stood there doing my best impression of Robert Duvall in *Apocalypse Now* trying to work out what we've got left to shoot.

Toughest day?

The first day of filming was probably the toughest and set the tone. We were filming outside in a market from 7am. Caroline headed off to paint the jail set in the studio. As she's a white British woman, we felt it was safer not to have her on the streets while we were filming on the first day. It was a slow day at the market as we all tried to find our rhythm. We didn't really have enough extras so I managed to convince the hundreds of onlookers gathered behind the camera to join us in front of the camera. They happily did so, but after two takes they hid in the shade because it was so hot! It gets to 4pm and I haven't had lunch, so I grab an apple. A little later Caroline texts me to say she thinks she might have carbon monoxide poisoning from the petrol generator in the studio?! We wrapped as the sun went down on a painful first day and I quickly returned to our flat and took Caroline to the hospital where they gave her gas and an injection, she did indeed have carbon monoxide poisoning. It was a tough few hours but the doctors were good and she slowly began to feel better, it certainly gave me some perspective.

Best day?

Tough to say, but the day we filmed the armada of bandits coming over the hill was a particularly crazy day. Every time I'd pitched the film I'd said it was about a girl fighting off 200 bandits, so we needed to deliver on these 200 bandits... The place we filmed was

actually built by my granddad many years ago, it had a single small dirt road leading up to the house and I'd asked our fixer for a turning circle to be built further back because I knew we'd have 200 extras driving up there and we'd need them to be able to turnaround for different takes. Obviously, it was never built. We had one Assistant Director for 200 extras and she didn't have a walkie talkie, so we stole our security guards instead. We had numerous vehicles, people, guns and we were shooting it in magic hour. In Pakistan the magic hour is more like magic 20 minutes! We filmed the whole scene with one camera and a drone camera. The drone camera had about 30 minutes of battery, and the operator forgot to press record on the first take. However, we got the shots. I don't know how, but we got it. That's been the running theme in the making of this film really!