

Fireside Chat : Lights, Camera, Locations featuring R Balki

A chance enrolment into a 6-month experimental training program at Mudra to becoming the Group Chairman of Mullen Lowe Lintas, Balki's 3-decade advertising career is what urban legends are made of. His non-conformist yet simplistic approach to solving marketing problems has led to iconic ad campaigns, which have become a part of Indian advertising folklore. Balki made his film debut with a refreshingly enjoyable 'Cheeni Kum' (2007) followed by the critically acclaimed and commercially successful 'Paa' (2009), establishing him as an ace director. As a Producer and Director, Balki has created a unique path with his unusual selection of stories. His handling of complex social issues and making it into an entertaining commercial film - Padman (2018) has been a hallmark of his genius.

Moderator: Truls Kontny
International Producer (Norway),
Former Head of Norwegian Film
Commission (2003 – 2021),
Former President
European Film Commissions
Network (2014 – 2020)

Moderator: You have had a very successful career in advertising. What made you shift to movies?

R Balki: I got into advertising thinking it was a movie production house. Somebody wanted to sell something and you told your story. I got addicted to advertising because it was a way of telling stories. So, I always saw advertising as almost like movie making with a certain purpose. But no, I didn't move from advertising to cinema. I was always in cinema and I just went via advertising.

Moderator:

When you write your story, how important are the locations? Are you thinking specific locations when you write the story?

R Balki: The way I look at it, locations are almost like part of the cast. It is like casting.

It is very difficult to write a film without knowing where you are setting it in.

For 'Cheeni Kum', I was extremely clear it would be London. But I didn't want to show London like a song and dance routine, so I would choose locations for a Londoner not for a tourist. Because it was not a touristy film, it was a film about a person living there.

I think locations are really important. I cannot start writing a film, without knowing the location or having seen it.

Moderator: So, the location actually inspires you to write the story?

R Balki: You have a story idea in your head, but the location can inspire a completely new way of looking at that particular concept. Location may not always inspire you to write a story, but for sure it does inspire in how the story will be told. The taste and the texture of a film is really the location.

Moderator: Do you often go abroad to find new places?

R Balki: Yeah, I have been to many places in advertising.

I was telling you, I was in Finland and got stuck in a snowstorm. I went down to Lapland to shoot one song, because it was the most beautiful place. It was an adventure. But trust me, I could have shot that anywhere. But I had to shoot that in Finland as location was a star by itself. You know, it is the second star in your film. And you can do wonderful things with it and it gives your film an edge that one has not seen before.

Moderator: How do you find new, interesting locations? Do you contact the film commissions? Do research on the internet?

R Balki: I think we can... Let's say, for example, if more than 60% of the film is set in a particular place then you go through a certain commission or you go through a line producer there.

And sometimes if you can also tailor your story around a particular destination, it's going to help both parties. It's not like those old brand placements, where you put a brand for the sake of economics. A place can always add texture. We have a lot of

examples in the Indian film industry which have showcased the richness that a place in a film.

Moderator: What attracts or convinces you to go to a new place? Is it only locations? Or is it a combination of locations and incentives?

R Balki: I think incentives is second, locations come first.

I just want share with all the film commissions, the requirements that I have.

I want to do a film based in a theme park. Like an old world theme park. Not a modern American theme park... a more European one with a classic feel

Of course, there will be economic considerations. But for me, the first thing that comes is whether I have the right place there? And how much can a film commission support me in getting that? And then we could have a discussion if they are interested in promoting a part of their country. We would definitely look into it.

Moderator: When you go abroad, do you take your whole crew? Or do you also connect with the local talent?

R Balki: When we went to Finland, our DOP missed the flight for some reason and we couldn't wait. So, we found a local cameraman who was a fabulous person and in the four days, we finished shooting. But in general, it's very difficult to shoot half the film with one crew and half the film with the other. But yeah, a lot of the equipment and support crew can be local.

Moderator: Are you also looking to do co-productions?

R Balki: We would love to do co-productions. But I feel co-productions are mired in a lot of technical issues because co-productions mostly work with governments. If the film has a huge market in foreign country as well as in India, then it makes a co-production. But if it does not have a market outside, then it's very complicated.

