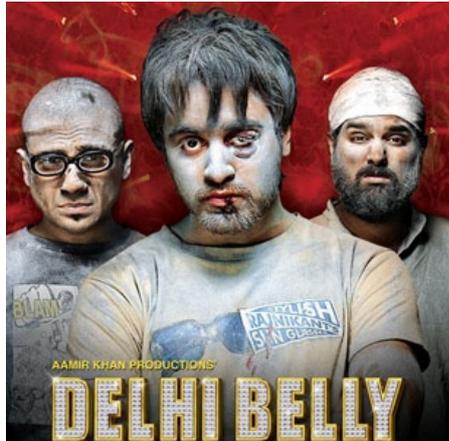


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Delhi Belly

**The Delhi Belly director on revolution, paranoia and procrastination**

Akshat Verma may have had to wait almost a generation - 16 years - to see the script he wrote as a film student at UCLA turned into a movie, but it's been worth the wait. And he's not the only one laughing. Delhi Belly's twisted and physical sense of humour has won him plenty of attention at home and abroad, grossing Rs. 92 crore worldwide. GQ caught up with one of the hottest new Bollywood writers in the business to hear his reflections on his success so far.

**GQ: Some say you have revolutionised Indian film with Delhi Belly. Do you agree?**

Delhi Belly's success has been a bit of a crazy ride but at the end of the day, mostly a relief. You take this long to make a movie and then if it just goes down the toilet... I'm well familiar with depression, but that would have been an abysmally long way down. Right now, it's been like going on a really long run, you're just happy to stop putting one foot after the other when you're done - even though you know you're going to have to repeat it all soon enough, and again, hope for the best.

About revolutionising Indian film - it's gratifying and flattering to hear, but the only way I can deal with that is with a

sack of salt. Tomorrow it'll be something else revolutionising Indian film. I'm happy to enjoy the moment and just let it go at that.

Revolution is a big deal. When you're writing and dreaming up characters and situations, you only hope the story connects with an audience and comes alive for them as it has for you in your imagination. Everything else is a bonus. You're not writing for a revolution, you're not hoping for a revolution, only a connection. If a revolution does happen, I imagine it's accidental. For me, if it just expands the notion of what is possible in Indian film, it'll be good and enough.

**GQ: Where did you get the idea from for Delhi Belly?**

Creating without restrictions is far more difficult than creating with. When you can do whatever you want, it leads to catatonia more often than effusion. You'd imagine it would be the opposite and you'd be running through fields of daisies, singing, ideas gushing out of you like a drunk bringing up lunch after a vicious bender - but no. To be given carte blanche is to be killed by kindness.

For me, it helps to define boundaries for myself when there are none. And that's usually the case, unless you're writing on assignment. By painting yourself into a corner, you force yourself to be more creative. The story then becomes a puzzle that needs to be solved.

The first thing that came to me for Delhi Belly was an image. And stories and films can come from anywhere, a fragment of dialogue, a character, a situation and some of them have within them the seed of a feature, a novel, some a short or a short story and some you just need to discard and move on.

The image was a foot sticking through a ceiling. Where it came from, I don't know - probably from my paranoia about ceiling fans, I constantly worry about them coming down and killing me in my sleep. But what if it did happen - what then? Would there be a hole in the ceiling? Who lives upstairs? What were they doing when the fan came down? And one thing led to another and that's how the whole yarn unravelled.

**GQ: Delhi Belly is entertaining, but also smart. Tell us more about what you were trying to achieve.**

Delhi Belly is a genre piece and every genre comes with its own conventions and boundaries. Those were the restrictions I wanted. Once I knew there would be a switcheroo along the way, some story options fell away and others opened up. And this is why genre films are so difficult to do well - if you subscribe to the notion that every story has already been told and there's nothing new under the sun, how do you still make it all seem fresh? With Delhi Belly, I wanted to have a familiar tale unfold in an unfamiliar world, in an unfamiliar way.

Consider this - in a romantic comedy for example, there are only two possible outcomes. Either the boy and girl end up together, or they don't. So then it becomes a matter of finding wiggle room within the straitjacket of the genre and the more restrictions you have, the more creative you have to get. It's like Houdini escaping from increasingly elaborate set-ups. Because the audience is jaded, it isn't enough to free yourself from a pair of handcuffs. You have to be handcuffed, suspended upside down and dunked in tank of water for it to make an impression.

Perhaps it isn't about a boy and a girl? Boy and boy? Girl and girl? Girl and two boys? Boy and fish? And that is a fantastic creative leap - Splash is a romantic comedy about a guy who falls in love with a mermaid. And that's something we hadn't seen before, but in the end, the options remained unchanged - will they end up together or won't they? Do you think the audience was upset that the possible outcomes were no different from the many romantic comedies that had already come before? Hell no.

The challenge with any genre movie, actually with every movie, is to give people what they want - but not the way they expect it. Audiences are incredibly smart and more often than not, they know what's coming. So storytelling is really a game of one-upmanship, you want to be ahead of the audience and they want to be ahead of you. If you can keep confounding their expectations while staying true to the universe you've created and the characters that populate it, well then you make it interesting and memorable for them and for that and all your suffering since birth, they reward you with their time and money and appreciation. Even exchange.

**GQ: Where can we follow you? Twitter?**

I spend large parts of my day trying to wean myself off the teat of the Internet. Unfortunately, I have nothing to report but failure. I'm not on Twitter, because I don't need any more distractions to take me away from the writing. And because the world doesn't really need my pithy contributions - there is enough detritus out there as it is, clogging up the arteries of the planet.

Should people be unable, or unwilling, to stymie this desire to follow me, please show up at the theatre, with cash,

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next time I have a film out. That will keep me rolling in the luxury to which I'm accustomed. This, of course, assumes I will have another film out. We all gotta hold on to something – this is what I have. Having said this, I reserve my right to lose my on-going battle against procrastination and show up on Twitter.

*Photo credit: Jonx Pillmer*

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- Daniel Scheffler

27 Apr, 2012

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