

Art of storytelling by Imtiaz Ali

A very special fireside chat with one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary Indian cinema, Imtiaz Ali. Known for his deeply human storytelling and emotionally resonant journeys, his films have explored love, identity, and self-discovery in ways that have connected with audiences across generations. From the beloved Jab We Met to the soul-searching Tamasha and the passionate musical drama Rockstar, his work has left an indelible mark on Indian cinema.

In this conversation, we'll explore his creative journey, the stories that inspire him, and his perspective on filmmaking in an ever evolving global landscape.

Moderator: Dr. Bhuvan Lall

Celebrated Author, Filmmaker, Entrepreneur & Biographer of Subhas Bose, Har Dayal and Sardar Patel

Bhuvan Lall: What is more important in your film? The character, the story or the location?

Imtiaz Ali: It's very difficult to isolate any one thing because all these things are joined together. What really moves me is people in a place, I don't think there's any plot or story without a character or a place. All locations put a different perspective to the character, the story and the plot. Many times, it is an imaginative location and then one tries to find something that fits into that imagination.

Bhuvan Lall: Citing work styles of Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg and William Oliver Stone, what is your style to get the best performance out of an actor?

Imtiaz Ali: I don't watch the monitor. I am always watching the actor so that I can communicate to the actor quickly. Since I am from theatre and it's my early

upbringing to be close to actor in same proximity. I feel that when you are on the shoot some new things may happen and in order to improvise, you should already know the dialogue, the material, the character and everything else. I feel that all this pre-work can be done earlier. Shooting is creative time, not education time.

Bhuvan Lall: Your stories are very personal and emotional so when you make a movie is it emotionally exhausting for you? Are you putting part of yourself into that?

Imtiaz Ali: It is rejuvenating. I feel many of us who make films do it because it's the only way they can survive. When you do something as intense as that, it becomes a part of your life, so I try to keep it simple.

Bhuvan Lall: All your films have a very strong love element and they are personal. Is it because of your own life or is it just the way stories are written in the world?

Imtiaz Ali: I am sure there is a connection between the writer and the filmmaker and the material that you see in the film. One can't say that I have nothing to do with this. But with me I feel there is also an element of aspiration. Sometimes you try to live vicariously through your characters, you try to do things that you haven't been able to do in life through the work of art. As Portuguese poet said "Advertising hoarding can give you, what real life can't", just like any other art.

Bhuvan Lall: As Albert Kabo said "If the world would be perfect, art wouldn't exist".

Imtiaz Ali: If the world was perfect, then art wouldn't let it be so (chuckles).

Bhuvan Lall: The musical genre of cinema is unique to India. No other country has been able to merge songs and movies in such a beautiful way like Indians do. Why do you think that is?

Imtiaz Ali: We are used to the concept of musical theatre. So, storytelling always has songs from the tradition of

Ram Leelas or the tribal plays that you see, there is always a little bit of a melodrama and a song when you're trying to take the story forward. Even if something very deeply philosophical is going on in our minds, we don't say it in words because that's not how people talk. They are guided by that third dimension which cannot be in conversation, it can be in poetry and that poetry can find itself in a song.

Bhuvan Lall: You have shot in many countries Prague, Corsica, and I think Portugal. So, when you get there, you have already imagined a situation or you get there do a recce and then decide?

Imtiaz Ali: When we shoot overseas then you don't want to do such an experiment. With the Indian directors the first recce might be just two or three people. Then of course, you'll have one

or two more rounds and a technical recce like anywhere else in the world.

Bhuvan Lall: How many people would travel with you for the film?

Imtiaz Ali: When shooting overseas we try to take a lot of local crew and talent. This is for two reasons. One is because it makes the film more authentic. And Second, it is usually cheaper. But the most important reason is that it's more fun to work with people from a different discipline of filmmaking.

Bhuvan Lall: You have worked with Shah Rukh, Ranbir and Deepika. What do you look for in an actor when you cast them?

Imtiaz Ali: Suitability to the character, age, gender, height, weight all of that. But sometimes it's just the nature of a person. When casting for 'Highway',

I was looking for a mature lady who thought would be close to 30. However, when I met Alia, who eventually worked in the film, she was only 18 years. But then I realised that she also has the same maturity that I was looking for because contrary to popular belief, maturity has not much to do with the age.

Bhuvan Lall: You work with an actor, you work with a location, you have a story in mind and there's a film probably running in your mind. How many times the film that's running in your mind is the same one that you finally filmed?

Imtiaz Ali: Never. A film is a very collaborative enterprise. However, writing it or conceptualising it is a highly individual. What happens is that when more and more people come in, they bring in their creative ideas, their inspiration. You welcome that because it adds to the film you're doing.

Bhuvan Lall: Why do you think Indian directors don't have the same international profile as European, Korean or Japanese directors? Have we lost the global edge?

Imtiaz Ali: This is a sensitive topic as not many French or Spanish directors are as prolific today as Korean directors. Many American directors are not as influential despite American movies being so popular. I think a lot of our movies are doing very well internationally and making strong cultural impact, the latest example being Homebound, which made it to the shortlist at the Academy Awards.

Bhuvan Lall: Shekhar Kapoor was telling me that all movies going forward will be made using AI. Will we be misfits in the creative world, when AI takes over?

Imtiaz Ali: Cinema has always been an evolving field and as we go along, we have realized how to (evolve with it). We were threatened by Television, VCR, DVD, OTTs. Then we realized that behind every threat was an opportunity. We will have to roll with the punches as we have always done.



Greatness is something that you see
in retrospect - Imtiaz Ali