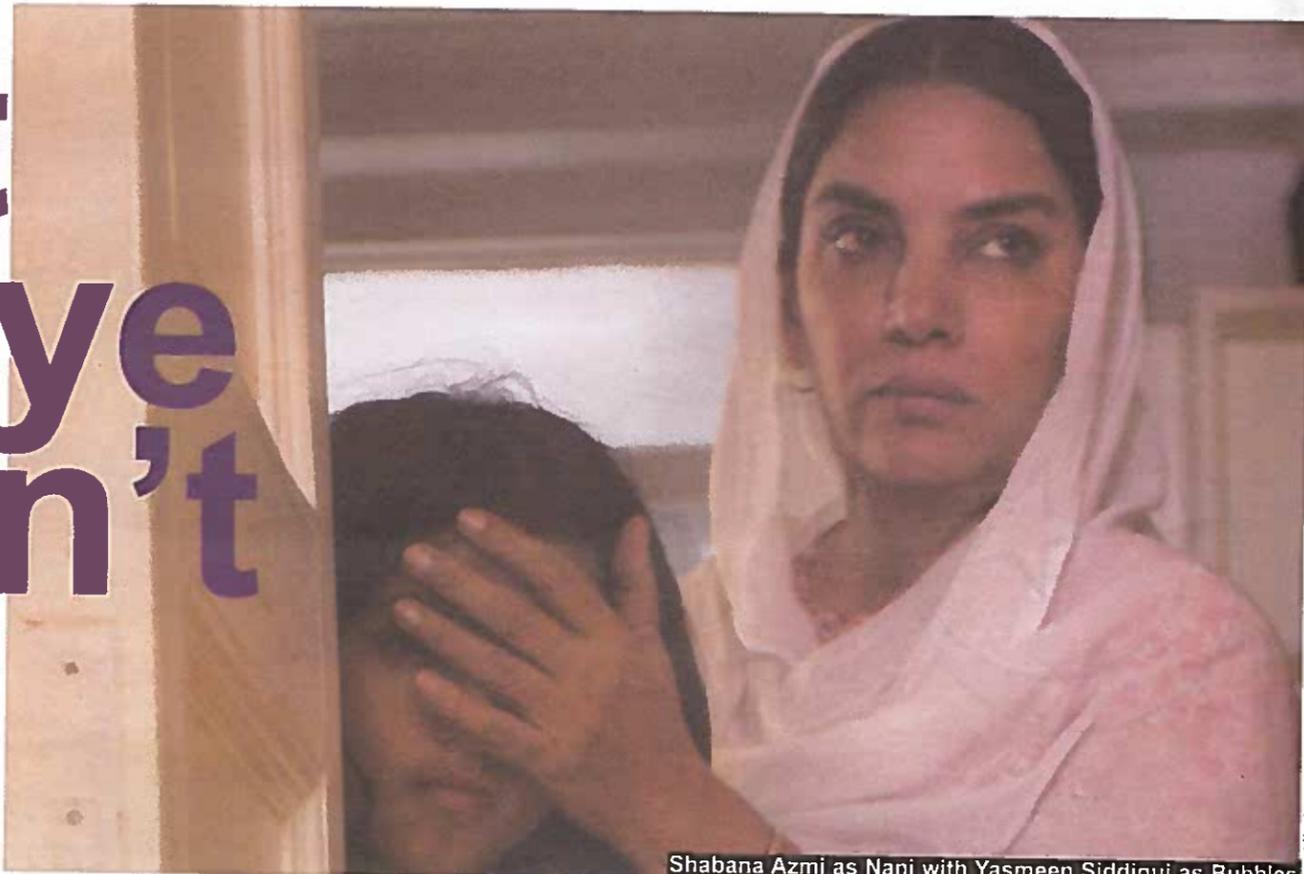


What the eye doesn't see



Shabana Azmi as Nani with Yasmien Siddiqui as Bubbles

Maheen Pracha in conversation with London-based filmmaker Nasheed Faruqi about her short film *Bubbles*

"When I started to write the screenplay for *Bubbles*, it was early in the morning," writes Nasheed Faruqi, "and I had just woken from a strange dream. In the nights that followed, I had successive dreams, which added to the haunting images of my first. As I wrote these dreams down, image-by-image, sound-by-sound, I saw that they were connected and that my imagination was trying to communicate something to me through these seemingly disjointed fragments."

It is a luminous spring morning and Nasheed and I have agreed to breakfast together as we talk about her new short film *Bubbles*: she, in her flat in London, and I here, sitting across from my computer screen in Lahore. She has kindly let me watch the entire film – due to be screened at the Cannes Short Film Corner in May – and it has left me more than a little disconcerted. A small family wedged uneasily together in a tiny London flat. A grandmother who obsessively chops betel-nut and apples in turn and clutches her kitchen knife as though she cannot imagine letting it go. A truculent grandfather constantly at loggerheads with his wife and his son. A little girl who witnesses an act of terrible violence. And yet, even in

the short, taut space of 14 minutes, the film's story arc never veers off into the wholly expected. It is the ragged trajectory of a heart breaking.

Bubbles is about the ragged trajectory of a heart breaking

Bubbles is not intended for commercial release. It was produced on a very tight budget with funds raised through family and friends, and shot over three days in her mother's flat in London. It is, says Nasheed, effectively her "career calling-card" and while she has made several music videos and documentaries, this is her first short film since leaving film school at Columbia. The calling card comes with an impressive cast: Shabana Azmi as the little girl's grandmother, Bhaskar Patel as her grandfather, and Christopher Simpson as the couple's son. Together, they generate a bitter tension one could cut with a knife. Trapped within is Bubbles herself, the little girl played with astonishing restraint by twelve-year-old Yasmien Siddiqui, while Dolly Ballea plays her as an adult.

I remember that the film's working title was *Outside* and ask Nasheed why she decided to change it. "I was thinking of the

character Bubbles, this whole idea of being trapped in a bubble, and I asked myself: if I had to watch a film, would I rather watch a film called *Outside* or *Bubbles*?" she laughs. The film's physical universe, the family's small flat, has only two "windows" looking out: the television screen – on which scenes from the Indian film *Bobby* play in the background almost throughout – and the window through which Bubbles looks at the cold roovescape outside. It is a flat I remember well – warm and lined with books – but Nasheed's production crew has transformed it into a small cold space dotted with the

you're working with her, it shows." Azmi, who is an extraordinarily attractive woman, is first and foremost the consummate actor who can look ten years older and project a life's worth of bitterness without having to utter a word. Given the role she plays and what she puts into it in her attempts to protect Bubbles from the toxicity of the family's atmosphere, I am not surprised when Nasheed tells me that Azmi found the film a draining experience.

"I am, in general, in awe of actors, of their job, their resilience and sensitivity," says Nasheed. I nod, knowing what she



Christopher Simpson as Bubbles' uncle

detriment of a n unhappy family, in which the film's cinematographer, Sam William Mitchell, captures an unexpected, almost angular, beauty. As Nasheed herself says, it is never clear whether the family is "marooned... rejected by London, or whether they have successfully barricaded themselves into a world of their own fashioning: a world of *paan-daans* (betel-nut boxes) and Hindi films."

What, I ask, was it like, working with Shabana Azmi? "She arrived on set in character on the first day of shooting," remembers Nasheed, "and from the moment she was involved with the film, she became engaged in conversations about it. She even went shopping in Bombay for costumes. She's made hundreds of films and when

means. Bhaskar Patel and Christopher Simpson are both well-known television and screen actors in the UK. In *Bubbles*, they brim with thinly veiled anger and frustration. All three adult characters lash out at each other, but they also preserve the sense of ambivalence that accompanies some acts of violence so that, in the end, it is hard to decide whom to blame and for what.

Did you find your cast interpreting their characters slightly differently from what you might have had in mind when writing the script, I ask her. It is intriguing to think that a character might oscillate between director and actor in this way. Nasheed pauses. "As the scriptwriter, you know the story better than anybody else. The actors know their characters, but you've got the



Nasheed Faruqi and Shabana Azmi

whole story in your head. They might build on it and bring something completely different to the table. They may have questions or doubts, but the key word for me is collaboration. As long as you're able to tell the story, you need to give them the freedom to do what they want," she muses. It's like the famous moment in *Blade Runner*, she says, when Rutger Hauer ad libs at the end – "All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain" – and creates one of the most memorable endings in film history.

For me, one of the most unsettling parts of the film, I tell Nasheed, is the eponymous character played brilliantly by Yasmeen Siddiqui, who shifts seamlessly from the protective shell of an automaton when with her grandparents to the little girl who comes to life as she blows bubbles with her uncle. What was it like, directing a child? Especially when Yasmeen has very little dialog. "I've never worked with child actors before," admits Nasheed, "and I was really nervous. Yasmeen had never been in a film. But she was engaged, committed, and made an ally of everyone on the set. Also, from the moment Shabana Azmi arrived on set, she made friends with her, guiding her through the whole process and making her feel comfortable."

Shabana Azmi can project a life's worth of bitterness without having to utter a word

Yasmeen, I discover, is the daughter of a mutual friend. "My sister suggested asking her parents," remembers Nasheed, "and I thought, who's going to put their child through what is quite a serious film." She laughs, adding, "They agreed promptly, and I asked them, hang on, do you know what this film is about? Do you want to see the script first before you say yes? I sent them the script, which they read and said was absolutely fine. At some point, they said, she has to learn about such things in life and now is as good a time as any. The final decision is, of course, hers." Yasmeen was then given the script to read and discuss with Nasheed, and decided she wanted to be involved.

I think back to Yasmeen playing Bubbles as she sits cross-legged on the floor, watching television, captivated by Rishi Kapoor and Dimple Kapadia singing "Hum tum ek kamre mein band ho [You and me locked in a room]." I can't get the

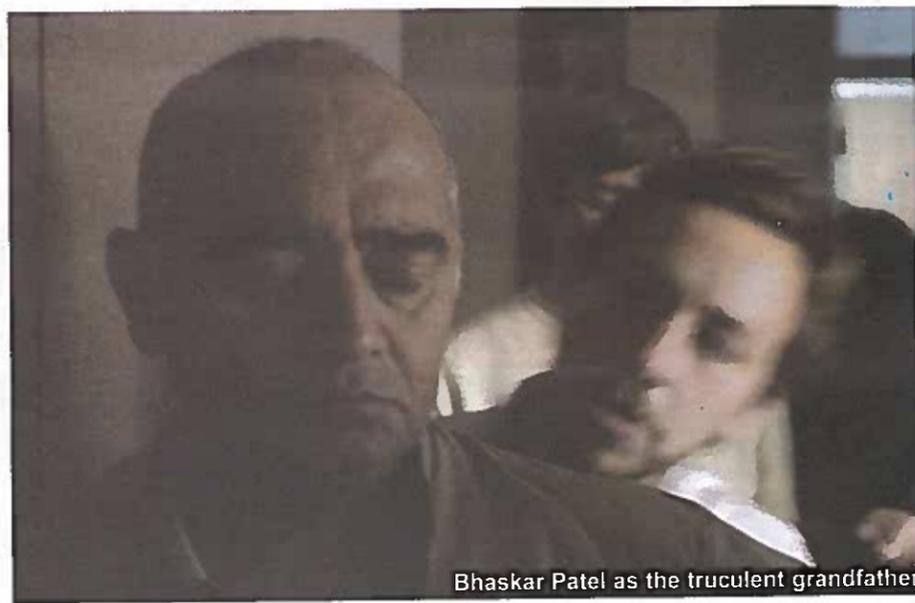
refrain from Bobby out of my head, I tell Nasheed. The television in the background is the almost discordant, but effective, narrator of subtext in the wings. It is both the family's proverbial fire escape and a symbol of their isolation. As Nasheed says, no one can get in. But can anyone get out if they want to?

It is five years since she shot her thesis film, *My Father's Son*, in Paris, and Nasheed says she is less concerned now with being experimental. "With *My Father's Son*, I had a really strong sense of how I wanted it to be shot. It wasn't conventional at all, but in this film, we didn't have time. It was less about expressing myself and more about whether the story was being served," she tells me.

Among other projects, Nasheed says she is working on an adaptation of *Measure for Measure*. "If you could adapt a book for film, which would it be?" I ask her, and dissolve in delight when she mentions not just Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* but also the whimsical Rumer Godden novel set in Kashmir, *Kingfishers Catch Fire* – the story of an eccentric Englishwoman and her two young children, trying to be self-sufficient in a place where it isn't really possible. It would warrant remarkable performances, agrees Nasheed, and the chance to work in India and Pakistan. Another unhappy family, I think to myself later, at least through most of the story. But, like the family in *Bubbles*, perhaps each unhappy family really is "unhappy in its own way." ■



Yasmeen Siddiqui

On set with the crew of *Bubbles*

Bhaskar Patel as the truculent grandfather