

girls will be girls



a film by Shuchi Talati



A cinematic photograph of two women riding a motorcycle. The woman in the foreground is wearing a red sweater and is looking forward. The woman behind her is wearing a dark blue jacket and a tan backpack, also looking forward. They are riding on a road with green trees on the left and a blue sky with white clouds on the right.

ORIGINAL TITLE: *Girls Will Be Girls*

INTERNATIONAL TITLE: *Girls Will Be Girls*

DIRECTOR: Shuchi Talati

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN: India, France, USA, Norway

PRODUCTION YEAR: 2024

DURATION: 118 minutes

LANGUAGE: English, Hindi

TECHNICAL INFORMATION: Ratio 1.50:1 (custom framelines) | Sound format 5.1



CAST

PREETI PANIGRAHI (Mira)

KANI KUSRUTI (Anila)

KESAV BINOY KIRON (Sri)

SYNOPSIS

In a strict boarding school nestled in the Himalayas, 16-year-old Mira discovers desire and romance; but her sexual, rebellious awakening is disrupted by her mother who never got to come-of-age herself.

CREW

Director & screenwriter Shuchi Talati

Producers Richa Chadha, Claire Chassagne, Shuchi Talati

DOP Jih-E Peng

Editor Amrita David

Casting Director Dilip Shankar

Art Director Avyakta Kapur

Costume Design Shaahid Amir

Sound Carole Verner, Laure Arto, Colin Favre-Bulle

Original Music Pierre Oberkampff, Sneha Khanwalkar

Production

Pushing Buttons studio

Dolce Vita Films

Crawling Angels Films

Cinema Inutile

Blink Digital

Arte Cofinova

Hummelfilm

INTERVIEW WITH SHUCHI TALATI

Can you describe how you decided you wanted to become a filmmaker?

It came to me by accident. I grew up in a small town in India, called Baroda. We were all geared towards more stable professions. I was a pretty good student, and thought I was going to become a doctor, like my dad - we have lots of doctors in the family. It didn't occur to me that I could do anything else! The smart students do medicine or engineering. At some point, a friend of mine said, "What do you like? You've never thought about it!". And I said, "I have! I don't want to do engineering, so I'm gonna do medicine!" And he's like, "Oh my God - there's a whole world out there." That just blew my mind. And I thought, "Well... what I actually like is stories!" I always had a book with me - under the table, even walking from one class to another. So I went to study English literature. I had a teacher who organized an elective film appreciation programme. The film I remember most vividly from that is Kieslowski's *Red...* and feeling like "Wait, cinema can do what books can do for me!"

It's interesting that you felt only certain roles were available to you, and others discouraged or forbidden, because that's such a strong theme of *Girls Will Be Girls*.

For sure. In many cultures, and certainly in India, we have clearly prescribed roles. There's comfort in that, and there's also a kind of entrapment. For girls and women, there are many more prescriptions, and much harsher punishment if they step out of the box. That was the seed of what I wanted to do with both Mira and Anila, the daughter and the mom. They're both trying to push against what's allowed. Mira is supposed to be the good girl, the rule-follower, and she's exploring another identity with this boy. And the mom too. Many young mothers are relegated to an asexual, supporting role in life, and come to feel like: well, what about me? I knew women in my life, who were transgressing in various ways, and often they're not written about.





Did attending film school help you to find your role, and your style as a filmmaker? Or did it show you what not to do?

I went to AFI when I was twenty-four. It was a big move from India to Los Angeles, and a lot of my classmates were older. I think this has changed, but there were not many women in the class. And I felt like there was a certain kind of storytelling that was prioritized or celebrated. So after making a quiet, character-centric story, I tried my hand at horror, and at dark fantasy, thinking, “I should be more ambitious!”

So, I came out of film school a little bit lost. Then I made a film where I thought: “I’m just making this film for myself. I don’t care if anyone watches it.” It’s called *Me and Ash*, and it’s about a young couple navigating an open relationship. And by taking off the pressure, and just exploring on my own, I found what I wanted to do. What I’m really interested in is these gendered power dynamics in relationships. That restored my confidence a bit... but it was a multi-year recovery process!

Your short films covered quite taboo subjects – open relationships, menstruation. Did that take boldness?

I really didn’t think about it for the film about the open relationship, because I was making it just for me. And then

it ended up doing well. I had more of those questions when I made *A Period Piece*. I was also casting South Asian actors, so it felt closer to home. I wanted to see people who look like me as sexual beings, which is not always allowed for us on screen! But casting it was very challenging. A lot of people said, “I liked the script, but sorry, I can’t do this.” So did I worry about how people would see it? Yes. But I think there’s something about making films - the remove, perhaps - that makes you more courageous.

How much did your experience with shorts help when it came to making a feature film?

On short films I figured out how I like to work with actors. And I got comfortable directing intimate scenes, making sure that everyone feels good about what we’re doing. I’m a very spreadsheet-y, organized person but you can’t prep a feature like you prep a short! When you’re shooting a short for four days: you can really know what’s going on each of the days. But on a feature, every day is chaos! I can’t pre-approve every prop, every background actor, what people in the background are wearing. These are all surprises on the day. All the decisions to make and things to assess - I did find that to be challenging.

But making a feature had always been your goal?

This story had been banging around my head for years. But the leap from a short - which can be self-funded, or funded with friends and family - to a feature feels very opaque. How does one get there? But you have to take one step, and then you can see two more steps ahead.

At some point I started writing. I worked through early iterations, where the triangle was between Mira, her boyfriend, and a teacher, and discovered that it was actually a story about Mira, her mother, and her boyfriend. Then producers joined and it became more real. It was only in the last two years where I finally felt: “OK, there’s a path to making it.”

I did a lot of rewriting. And because it had been with me for so many years, I feel like the story matured with me. I had so much more compassion for all the characters by the end of the writing process.

Did you yourself attend this type of school?

I didn’t go to a boarding school - it’s just been a fascination of mine. But I did go to the same kind of regimented school that this boarding school is, and I knew lots of schools like that.

So the attention on Mira’s academic achievement and her perceived moral character is something that you were familiar with.

Very familiar. I knew how to play that game, and excelled at it!

How did you find the right girl to play Mira?

We worked with Dilip Shankar who cast *Monsoon Wedding* and *Life of Pi*. I told him I don’t start with a visual of a character - or if I do, I hold that very lightly. It’s really about the essence of the person.

We knew that we wanted to do a wide search for Mira. There are a lot of young actors in India who have credits, so we auditioned many of them. We also did an open call in various cities and in colleges. With a lot of trained actors, they hit all the beats, but it didn’t have the aliveness that I was looking for. When Preeti auditioned through an open call, the audition scene was the astronomy scene - the first time Sri and Mira meet and talk. A lot of girls played it very coy. But I was very struck by how Preeti played it, because she had a kind of strength. She liked this boy, but she had a lot of self-respect, and she was not going to play coy or bat her eyelids. I just felt that that was Mira. And she’s a really, really smart actress, and intuitively understands this character. Because she shares





some qualities with Mira – she’d come with her notebook and take notes. And it’s also courageous for a young person to play a part like this – to talk to your parents and say, “I’m going to do this film.” I have such admiration for her.

The ambiguity around whether a relationship with Sri is good or bad for Mira is very interesting. Did you want the audience to feel conflicted?

With the romantic relationship I wanted you to take the journey that Mira takes. Here’s this boy, who has seen more of the world than she has, who can open up these new ways of thinking, and with whom exploring her sexuality is safe. I want audiences to feel that seduction and that charm. He does care about her, and about her mother, and he finds solace in this home, which is unlike his own home. And yet, when he uses his charm to get things, to get people to like him... there is something amiss, you know? And I feel very proud of Mira that she sees that. Because I’ve dated men like that and not seen it, for many years.

You mentioned shooting intimate scenes. That’s an area of great sensitivity at present. How did you handle it, particularly with such young performers?

The actors read the script very early in the casting process. I

asked them during callbacks if they had questions. Most actors came to the callback with questions about the intimacy. But Kesav and Preeti came with character questions. Before we were about to cast them, I said, “You haven’t asked me about the intimacy.” And in their own different ways, they both said, “We think this is really important to the story.” Preeti said, “I think it’s important for these kinds of stories to be told; talking to my sister and mom about it has already sparked conversations that I wouldn’t otherwise have had in my family; I want everyone to have conversations, so I want to do this film.”

When we got to the rehearsal, it was really about giving them freedom. “Look, you may feel something, and that may feel uncomfortable; you may not feel something, and that may feel uncomfortable... whatever you feel is okay.” We would take photographs of the shot, and say, “Does this look fine to you?” There was once when we had framed up a wide shot, and one of the actors was uncomfortable, and we reframed it. It was really to reiterate at every point that they had agency, and they could say no. I think that’s really, really important, because there is a power dynamic. They are younger than me. They’re actors and I’m the director. They want to comply; they want to please me. Luckily, they’re both strong young people. And they made each other very comfortable, too. That was so precious to me.

Shooting the love scenes were actually some of my favourite moments of the shoot, because it was so warm and intimate.

How close is the film to the script you wrote?

On one hand, like, it's essentially the story that I wanted to tell. At the same time, it changed a lot! Our first assembly was almost three hours long, and the final version is under two hours. So there's a lot that's not in the film. But I really love the editing process and we had an amazing editor, Amrita David [*Saint Omer*], and she and I were always happy to cut something. "Let's just take it out and see!" There's so much more that gets communicated on screen than on the page - just a glance or a look can do so much.

And what looks. Can you talk about the amazing Kani Kusruti, who is such a fascinating presence as Mira's mother Anila?

I had known of Kani's work, and I brought her up to our casting director in our first meeting. She sent in a tape that blew us away. She has a live wire quality, where you're not sure what she's going to do. That's also true for her as an actress - she doesn't like to over-rehearse, and I think she doesn't quite know what she's going to do! She really, truly can be in the moment, and you feel that. That feeling of "what will this

mom do next?" was so essential to the film. I didn't see a lot of actors who had it. And then when we put her and Preeti in a room together, it was magic.

How are you feeling about bringing your very first feature to Sundance?

When we first heard, for the first few days, I was like, maybe they'll take it back. Maybe they'll say, "we changed our mind." So when the announcement happened, it became very real. As independent filmmakers, we mythologize Sundance. We hope that our films will get there, but we can't really believe they will! It seems so far-fetched. Many thousands of films are submitted, and many of them are probably very good. So it feels like winning a lottery. Of course I want to pat myself on the back and say, "you made such a great film!"; but I know that there are many, many great films that didn't make it, so I feel very fortunate.

I want many people to see the film. Because although it's really grounded in 1990s India, I do think it's like a film that will connect with people. And I hope that the Sundance launch means that it can have a wide audience.

Interview by **Hannah McGill**







DIRECTOR'S NOTE

SHUCHI TALATI

Girls Will Be Girls is set in a conservative boarding school, much like the school I attended, where girls are policed, ostensibly to protect their “virtue.” Male sexuality is allowed to express itself, sometimes in aggression towards girls; while we’re instructed to be submissive and ashamed of our bodies. Despite this, I saw fierce, funny girls and women all around who subverted and circumvented the social and moral codes.

In *Girls Will Be Girls*, I wanted to write about these subversive women who populated my life but never my screens and to expand the narratives that are available to Indian women. Films from India (and the west) often erase real female bodies. Breasts and butts are hypersexualized, but masturbation, menstruation, vaginas, etc. are treated with revulsion or embarrassment. This erasure is a part of the way girls are trained to be invisible in a world that’s afraid of their sexuality, identity and voice. But Mira (16) and her mother Anila (38) are embodied beings with secretions and desires. Mira examines her vagina in a mirror, masturbates by rubbing up against a teddy bear, and plans her first time having sex. Anila shuns

the self-sacrificing, asexual roles mothers are relegated to. She envies her daughter’s youth and boyfriend and pursues her desires with fervor. Both mother and daughter are outspoken, subversive characters who emerge defiant, if not necessarily triumphant.

The film is set in the late 1990s, when the Indian economy was opened up to western exports. This sparked fierce culture wars between debauched ‘westernness’ and virtuous ‘Indianness’. Women’s bodies became battlegrounds in the war and women in miniskirts or with sexual agency became symbols of corruption. Unfortunately, this is still scarily resonant in many parts of the world today.

Though the film is rooted in the 1990s in India and is a close observation of gender roles, sexuality and oppressive patriarchy, I’m not interested in a grand thesis statement or preaching about social issues.

It’s very important to me that Mira and Anila are not defined by their identities as Indian women and that they don’t have to become stand-ins for their community. I want to allow them their full range of humanity: to be in love, experience disillusionment, envy and grief, and to represent only their peculiar and singular selves, not their full cultures. Because this is how their stories will also be universal - a luxury mostly reserved for characters from dominant cultures.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Shuchi Talati is a filmmaker from India whose work challenges dominant narratives around gender, sexuality, and South Asian identity.

Her feature film, *Girls Will Be Girls*, will premiere in competition at the Sundance Film Festival. *Girls Will Be Girls* has been a recipient of Aide Aux Cinémas du Monde and Sørfond grants, and the ArteKINO and VFF Talent Award at the Berlinale Co-Production Market. It has also been selected for Gotham Week, Berlinale Script Station and Cine Qua Non Script Lab.

Her short film, *A Period Piece*, about an afternoon of period sex, was selected for SXSW. Another short film, *Mae and Ash* won numerous awards before becoming a Vimeo Staff Pick. Shuchi is an alum of Berlinale Talents and her work has also been recognized by the New York State Council for the Arts and Région Île-de-France.

She is a graduate of the American Film Institute. She lives in NYC and is a member of the Brooklyn Filmmakers Collective, the Bitchitra Collective and the Freelance Solidarity Project.

DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY

2024: *Girls Will Be Girls*

118 min - fiction feature film
Official Selection Sundance 2024

2019: *A Period Piece*

12 min - narrative short
Official Selection SXSW 2020

2013: *Mae and Ash*

20 min - narrative short
Official Selection Palm Beach IFF 2013





PRODUCTION COMPANIES

PUSHING BUTTONS STUDIO

Pushing Buttons Studio is a production company founded by renowned Indian actors Richa Chadha (*Gangs of Wasseypur*, Cannes Quinzaine 2012, *Masaan*, Cannes Un Certain Regard 2015) and Ali Fazal (*Victoria and Abdul* by Stephen Frears, *Death on the Nile* by Kenneth Branagh, 2022). *Girls Will Be Girls* (Sundance 2024) by Shuchi Talati is their first production.

DOLCE VITA FILMS

Dolce Vita Films is a Paris-based production company with a strong track record in international co-productions. Recent films include Tunisian film *A son* by Mehdi Barsaoui (Best actor, Venice Orizzonti 2019), Sudanese *Goodbye Julia* by Mohamed Kordofani (Un certain regard Liberty Prize Cannes 2023) and *Chicken for Linda!* a French-Italian animation film by Chiara Malta and Sebastien Laudenbach (Best film at the Annecy film Festival 2023).

CRAWLING ANGELS FILMS

Crawling Angel Films is an Indian production company founded by Sanjay Gulati. Recent films include Nepali film *Nimto* by Saurav Rai (Rotterdam, 2020), Indian *Laila aur Satt Geet* by Pushpendra Singh (Berlinale, Encounters competition 2020), Nepali film *Guras* by Saurav Rai (Jury Prize at Proxima Karlovy Vary 2023) and Sri Lankan *Tentigo* by Ilango Ram (Special Jury prize, Tallinn Black Night 2023).

CINEMA INUTILE

Cinema Inutile is an independent film development, production and finance company based in New York and Tokyo that focuses on artist-driven films from underrepresented perspectives. Most recently, Cinema Inutile produced *the Settlers* (2023), by Felipe Gálvez which premiered in Cannes and won the Fipresci Prize before being selected as Chile's entry to the 2024 Academy Awards.

BLINK DIGITAL

Blink Digital is a Digital Agency based in Mumbai. *Girls Will Be Girls* (Sundance 2024) by Shuchi Talati is their first venture in cinema.

HUMMELFILM

Hummelfilm is a Norwegian Production company. Since its establishment in 2011, Hummelfilm has produced a variety of features, documentaries, and television series, like the internationally acclaimed TV-series *Occupied* (2015-2020) that showed on Netflix.



