

PRESS NOTE

THE SALT IN OUR WATERS

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English Title THE SALT IN OUR WATERS

Original Title NONAJOLER KABBO

Genre Drama

Language Bangla

Country of Production Bangladesh, France

Writer & Director Rezwan Shahriar Sumit

Producer Rezwan Shahriar Sumit, Ilann Girard

Cast Fazlur Rahman Babu, Shatabdi Wadud, Titas Zia, Tasnova Tamanna, Dulari Begum, Ashok Bepari

World Premiere BFI London, Oct 2020

Running Time 106 min

Aspect Ratio 1.85:1

Format 2K DCP, Dolby Digital

social: facebook.com/thesaltinourwaters
instagram.com/saltwatersfilm/

SHORT SYNOPSIS

For his latest art installation, Rudro journeys to a remote mangrove isle on the Bangladeshi Delta, a day's boat ride and a world away from modern, crowded Dhaka. Welcomed by the local fishermen and their leader Chairman, Rudro's modern ideas and lifelike sculptures enchant the village boys and his landlord's daughter. But when the local Ilish catch proves elusive, the elders blame Rudro's "idolatry" for the curse of empty nets. In this vanishing land where sea and sky merge, a storm is brewing and change –welcome or not—is coming.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Set in a tiny mangrove isle in the Bay of Bengal, *The Salt in Our Waters* is the story of RUDRO (32), a city-raised sculptor who comes to this place, hoping to understand the people and way of life that captivated his coastguard father. He is welcomed by local headman and religious leader, CHAIRMAN (60), and hypnotized by the lowering sky and restless seas of the teeming delta.

He rents a makeshift studio from native fisherman, BASHAR (45), whose children TUNI (19) and TAHER (12) are enchanted by Rudro's artistry and way of being in the world. With them as guides, Rudro explores this extraordinary land and seascape, which nature both restores and menaces, seeing for himself what motivated his father's lifetime of work in these waters.

On the first day of fishing season, the men of the village take to their boats, but return with empty nets: the plentiful local Ilish are not to be seen. While Rudro describes climate change as the reason, Chairman blames Rudro's lifelike sculptures. The devout Muslim villagers call him an idolator and shun him. As Rudro rethinks his plans and choices, Tuni continues to visit and inspire his art. The Ilish finally arrive which persuades the locals to re-think their conclusions about Rudro and their blind allegiance to Chairman.

But when a cyclone's approach threatens the village, Chairman overplays his hand, demanding the fishermen ignore the storm warnings and return to their boats to recoup earlier losses. Concerned for his friends and neighbors, Rudro inspires a revolt among the fisherman leading to the precautionary evacuation of the village. As a deadly storm threatens this defenseless spit of sand, Rudro finds himself center stage in a primal, elemental conflict between land and sea, man and nature, past and future.

ORIGIN STORY

When I first visited the Southern coasts of Patuakhali, I ventured out of the popular tourist trails and walked miles to find the local Hilsha fishers. I remember watching them in awe as they pushed their tiny wooden boats into the choppy waters of the Bay of Bengal. Every boat generally faces three waves. The first one is a gentle tap, the second one tests your nerves, and the third can actually tip the boat over. It makes a boat fly! I began to wonder why these men face this danger on a daily basis. They became the focus of my very first research. Their coastal livelihoods are continually at risk as a result of cyclones, saltwater intrusion, and erosion. Their homes are regularly ravaged by tidal bores, yet they simply pick themselves up and return to fishing without any kind of lament or second thought. A primordial drive is at work here and this is what has fascinated me the most.

Director Spike Lee was the first person who gave me a grant for this project, not without a warning. “You are going to shoot a first feature, in Bangladesh, during monsoon, on boats? May Allah be with you! Allahu Akbar!” Maybe I laughed that day, but he was right. This project – from development to post-production – put me to the test in ways I never imagined.

The film is also a kind of classical tale where two cultures clash. A modernist artist of the city is initially welcomed, then misunderstood, and finally ostracized by a rural community for his progressive ideas. In my view, the fishing island of this film is a microcosm of Bangladesh, in unity as well as in division. It would take courage for a sculptor to come out of his / her urban setting and go into a secluded pocket to practice figurative art. At the same time, I do not think any of the villagers would harm an artist without provocation. It is the absence of dialogue between these two groups that leads to conflict. While my film will not solve all their problems, I hope it will serve as an icebreaker. I look forward to presenting this film in a room full of fishers, artists, believers, skeptics – all laughing at the same jokes.

ARTISTIC APPROACH

The movie was shot in a small fishing village composed of 15 families. The village is neatly nestled on the shore of Patuakhali where Mother Nature is both restorative and menacing. Here the sound of breaking waves is omnipresent, and it gets quite disconcerting during monsoon. Despite the looming threat of cyclones, tsunamis, and high tides, the villagers put in a lot of hard work to build their wooden boats and thatched huts. The craftsmanship of these structures is unique and adds picturesque charm to our frames. We constructed four additional shooting-friendly structures right where the housings trailed off, so they would look like just an extension of the village. We used locally found objects such as fishing nets, multi-colored floats, anchors, oars, styrofoam ice boxes, dead crabs, drying fishes to prop up these structures. The use of saris as blankets and drapes made the interiors colourful.

As far as cinematography is concerned, we decided to keep it entirely handheld. The film was shot from Rudro's POV, who, as an artist, tends to look at little details, jump, get wet, touch and smell objects. He's also fixated on human figures. Through his eyes, we wanted to show human bodies in their full splendor, in captivating shapes and superbly animated movements. The camera movement had to match Rudro's frantic rhythm and capture his creative impulses. Chananun and I agreed on shooting the film on ALEXA Mini - to be able to stay lightweight. We selected ZEISS Master Prime lenses for their unique ability to create a cinematic look.

We shot the film in the middle of the monsoon (June - Aug) when the coconut trees start to undulate in strong bursts and the mangroves are saturated with fresh green leaves. The sky was always overcast, and that was in our favour. The clouds acted as natural filters which made the light on the

scenery very spectacular. There were occasional flurries of rain starting in mid-July, but as the shoot progressed, the frequency of showers slowly decreased.

Casting: Rudro, Tuni, Chairman, Talash, and Bashir - these five roles were played by trained actors from Dhaka city. The rest of the actors were locals from Patuakhali. I started looking for potential actors in the course of my research. I found a couple of boys at the tourist beach in Kuakata selling trinkets. I made sure they knew the rest of the crew at least a week before we started shooting. They also of course participated in training camps – but never in actual rehearsals. I thought it would remove the freshness of their performances. However, trained actors went through a different process. I was keen to get naturalist performances, so the first step was to watch many movies together. Tulpan, Embrace of the Serpent, Woman in the Dunes and Breaking the Waves are among the films we examined. The actors moved to Patuakhali quite early to be able to immerse themselves in the rural way of life. I wanted to ensure that the film was authentic to the place in all possible ways, therefore, speaking in a Patuakhali dialect was also a challenge that trained actors had to meet within a relatively short timeframe.

FAZLUR RAHMAN BABU (CHAIRMAN): INTERVIEW

1. Describe your process.

After reading the script, I had long meetings with Sumit where I tried to find out more about the Chairman. I was interested not only in his present but also in his past. I tried to understand what his faith meant to him. How long has he been holding on to this particular faith? Was his upbringing any different from the rest of the villagers? I went to the location early. I met with locals and studied their body language, their culture, their routine. I was particularly fascinated by how brave they were. Each of them was survivors of a disruption related to climate change. Fresh storms are brewing as we speak, so where do they find the energy to bounce back? These inquiries led to a better understanding of the Chairman character.

Chairman plays both a legal guardian and a spiritual leader in the film. He does business on their behalf and makes money, in return he brings food and supplies from the city. He also teaches their children. It seems like a fair system at first sight. But when you add religion to that mix, it starts to get complicated. He falters when he is supposed to take decisions in favor of science.

2. Is the Chairman basically a bad person then?

In average Bangladeshi films, characters are portrayed merely based on binaries. As if life has only two sides – it is either black or white. In our film, however, we tried to introduce a very new grey hue.

Chairman for example is quite grey. He seems like a cold, heartless man in the beginning, but he did have a softer side when his wife was alive, he still remembers her vividly. He loved his son from the bottom of his heart, but never received affection in return. He thinks he was a failure as a father. Perhaps this is the reason he chose to use brute force to preserve his reign. He came from the bottom and knows what works and what doesn't work in those waters. He fished, weaved nets, planted fishing poles under the water, did the entire nine yards pretty much. He shares a great part of that knowledge with the villagers. But he also uses religion to influence them, to blindside them. There are times when it feels like he's doing it on purpose, and we begin to question his morality. There are other times, though, where he looks like a good Samaritan. He's flesh and blood, the same as you and I.

3. What was the most memorable moment on set?

It was a multicultural set. There were people from Thailand, the United States, France, and Bangladesh. We all had to work hard to get through a day, we were up to our knees in mud trying to do ballet, but it never felt like work. You know, we were all in it together. I loved it when our director, DP and the production designer got together and laughed a bit after wrapping a scene. I could tell we were on course. That helped me prepare for the following day. I enjoyed every bit of the shoot. I will cherish these memories for the rest of my life.

PRODUCER'S NOTE

I met Writer and Director Rezwan Shahriar Sumit at the 2016 Film Bazaar Co-Production Market in Goa where his project was invited to participate. It's the most prestigious forum for South Asian filmmakers where select projects are matched with international co-producers, who, in turn, bring projects to the attention of industry around the world.

I was drawn to Sumit's project for two sets of reasons: Firstly, due to its story that pits a charismatic religious leader from the village against a young and liberal artist from the city. One has an entire fishing village under his spell, and the other one is destined to break this spell. Secondly, because of the setting of the film - Bangladesh, a country that is battling several challenges of the modern world: climate change, radicalization, refugee crisis, in its unique ways, however, is not often seen on mainstream media beyond the scope of clickbait headlines. Sumit manages to blend never-before-seen social, cultural, and religious elements and create a story world that feels grounded in reality. He puts this in the spectacular context of the Bay of Bengal during the monsoon - making the film even more special.

The shooting of the film was a trial by fire for Sumit, especially due to the ruthless character of the Bangladeshi monsoon which followed him for almost two months. But I must say that the story of a young city artist confronting the traditions of a fishing community found a special resonance against the backdrop of such adverse conditions. The spell of the imam felt all the more profound.

BIOGRAPHIES

CAST

TITAS ZIA

Rudro

Titas is a National Award-winning film and theater actor. He has performed in twelve theatre performances at home and abroad, including at Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, and directed more than fifteen theatre performances. His film credits include **Mrittika Maya**, **Ujan Gaanger Naiya**, and **Nonajoler Kabbo**. He received the Sergeant Ahad Parvez Memorial Scholarship for achieving first class first position while pursuing a Bachelor in Dramatic Theater at Dhaka University. He is currently a Ph.D. researcher at the Russian University of Theater Arts – GITIS in Moscow.

TASNOVA TAMANNA

Tuni

A business school graduate, Tasnova's debut as an actor was in a short film titled **Aro Kichu Drishyaboli** in 2010. Since then, she has acted in several short films, TV commercials, and two feature-length films titled **Nree: The Son of Soil** and **Live From Dhaka**. She later bagged the Best Director and Best Actor award at the 27th Singapore International Film Festival and screened at Rotterdam Film Festival. She temps as a voice actor on foreign-language TV shows and animations.

FAZLUR RAHMAN

Chairman

Babu started his acting career in 1978 when he joined the theatre group Baishakhi Natya Ghosthi in Faridpur. He started his television acting career in the soap opera **Mrittu Khuda** which was produced by Abu Zafar Siddiqui and aired on Bangladesh Television in 1991. However, it was his role in **Poran Majhi** and television drama **Iti Kotha** (1991), written by Rashid, which secured him roles in prestige dramas such as **Shundari** and **Danab**. Babu emerged as a playback singer after he performed two

songs for the feature film **Monpura**. After the film's success, Babu published his first solo music album **Indubala** in 2009 which was a super hit in Bangladesh across all tiers of audiences.

Babu will play one of the leading roles in the upcoming Sheikh Mujib biopic titled **Bangabandhu** to be directed by veteran Indian director Shyam Benegal.

CREW

REZWAN SHAHRIAR SUMIT

Director, Writer

Sumit was born and raised in Bangladesh's boisterous capital Dhaka. **City Life**, his first short, earned him a place at the Berlinale Talents in 2008. He then attended the Graduate Film Program of New York University as a Tisch Fellow. There he produced Barbara Cigarroa's acclaimed short **Dios Nunca Muere** that played at NYFF, AFI Fest, and Palm Springs. His debut feature **The Salt in Our Waters** was an official selection at BFI London and Busan in 2020. It was nominated for the Ingmar Bergman Award at Göteborg, New Directors Award at both São Paulo and Seattle, and won the NETPAC Award at Kolkata. The project received funding from France's CNC, TFL Audience Design fund, and director Spike Lee. Sumit's second feature **A New Prophet** is backed by Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (\$100K grant), IEFTA, Film Bazaar and Torino Film Lab. The screenplay is in development at Film Independent's year-long Global Media Makers program.

Studio: mypixelstory.com

Personal: pixelrhyme.com

ILANN GIRARD

Producer

Former General Counsel of Pandora Cinema, Ilann Girard started ARSAM International -- a Paris based production company in 2003. He is also the founding partner of Olffi.com the largest database and toolbox about public funding (www.olffi.com) servicing more than 40,000 films and TV professionals. Olffi now provides consultancy to help producers finance their films abroad.

Ilann has been an executive producer on **Renaissance**, **March of the Penguin**, and **Plastic Planet**. He has produced **Goodbye Bafana** (Cinema for Peace Award at the Berlinale in 2007), **Lebanon** (Golden Lion Venice Mostra 2009 and Discovery Prize at EFA 2010), **I, Anna** (Berlinale Specials 2012), **Ombline** (Cannes Junior Prize 2012), **When Day Breaks** (Toronto 2012 – Academy Award 2013 Candidate for Serbia), **The Ghetto Of Venice** (Venice Mostra 2015), **Final Portrait** (Berlinale official selection 2017), and **Cunningham** (TIFF 2019).

A French lawyer, Ilann Girard graduated from the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris in Public Law and holds a master's degree in private law and a post-graduate diploma in telecommunications and television management. He travels extensively and attends all major international markets and festivals.

He is a consultant and advisor for several regulatory and training organizations, including Paris's ACE, Berlin's Erich Pommer Institute, Strategic Partners, The Producer's Network, Screen Australia, the NZ Film Commission, the French CNC, as well as Telefilm Canada.

CHANANUN CHOTRUNGROJ

Director of Photography

Chananun is a **Spirit Award**-nominated Thai cinematographer and artist based in Los Angeles. While pursuing her MFA in film at NYU, she was awarded the Ang Lee Fellowship and received the Nestor Almendros Award for Outstanding Cinematography by a Woman in 2013 and 2015. Her feature credits include **The Third Wife** directed by Ash Mayfair (Toronto, Busan, Locarno), **Pop Aye** directed by Kirsten Tan (Sundance, Rotterdam), **Motel Mist** directed by Prabda Yoon (Rotterdam), and **Karaoke Girl** directed by Visra Vichit-Vadakan. Most recently, she was awarded Best Cinematography - Southampton International Film Festival 2018 for **Don't Come Back from the Moon** by Bruce Thierry Cheung starring James Franco, and Best Cinematography – Imagine India Film Festival 2019 for **The Third Wife**.

KRISTAN SPRAGUE

Editor

Kristan Sprague is a **member of the Academy** and a **Spirit Award**-nominated editor based out of Brooklyn, New York. His most acclaimed film **Judas and the Black Messiah** was nominated for six Oscars, including Best Picture. One of his early works **Manos Sucias** premiered at Tribeca and helped launch **Narcos** helmer Josef Ladyka's career. Kristan is also a regular at Sundance, where four of his films (as an editor) have been screened: **Newlyweeds**, **Mulignans**, **Hair Wolf and Buck**. He recently edited **Nigerian Prince** which was an AT&T Untold Stories One Million USD grant winner.

SYLVAIN NAHMIAS

Production Designer

Sylvain is a French Production Designer and Creative Producer. He has worked extensively in the Indian Subcontinent for the past two decades. His credits include Tareque Masud's **Matir Moina** (Cannes 2002, FIPRESCI Prize) and **Ontorjatra, Bhopal - A Prayer for Rain**, Oscar-nominated Ashwin Kumar's **No Fathers in Kashmir**, and most recently Rezwan Shahriar Sumit's **Nonajoler Kabbo**. The film was shot in fishing villages across Patuakhali and Chittagong. He spends his free time making experimental 'wind paintings' in his suburban studio in Paris.

LUIZA PARVU

Associate Producer

Luiza Parvu is a Romanian film director, editor, and educator, based in the US. She holds an MFA in Film Production from NYU Tisch School of the Arts. Films she has directed, edited, or produced have screened in various international film festivals including Sundance, Tribeca, Karlovy Vary, and Camerimage. She is now editing her directorial feature debut, **Ubi Bene Ibi Patria** (co-dir. Toma Peiu).

Her website: rootfilms.org

ARNOB

Music Composer

Arnob is Bangladesh's preeminent indie music composer. He hit the mainstream back in 2009 with his score for **Monpura** which went on to become a huge box-office success in Bangladesh. This album remained in the top chart for nearly six months and helped create buzz for the film. He followed up this success with two back to back albums which sold a million copies across Bangladesh and West Bengal. He has composed numerous jingles for TV commercials and branded content since then. He went to Santiniketan, a conservatory established by poet Tagore, for his graduate studies in art and music.

CREDITS

A Co-Production Between
mypixelstory & ARSAM International

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Half Stop Down
HD Systems Digital Lab

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Film Bazaar

Audience Design Fund

Torino Film Lab

Written & Directed by

Rezwan Shahriar Sumit

Produced by

Rezwan Shahriar Sumit

Ilann Girard

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Titas Zia, Tasnova Tamanna

Fazlur Rahman Babu, Shatabdi Wadud

Ashok Bepari, Aminur Rahman Mukul and Dulari Begum

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Khandaker Golam Kabir

David Spratt

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Luiza Parvu

Shirin Akhter Banu

Shaheen Mosharrof

Nicolas Pollachi

Guy Courtecuisse

Jaspreet Kaur

Director of Photography

Chananun Chotrungroj

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Sculptor

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Luiza Parvu

Sankha

Music Composer

Arnob

Casting Director

Rafi Sumon

Costume Designer

Edila Farid Turin

Post Production Supervisor

Guy Courtecuisse

Senior Color Grader

Olivier Garcia

Re-Recording Mixer

Bruno Mercère

Sound Design

Tiago Cardoso & Dinis Henriques

SONGS

“Heion Re Heion”

Singer: Abbasuddin Ahmed

Lyrics: Abdul Karim

Album: Allah Megh De

License from Nashid Kamal, Ferdausi Rahman, Mustafa Zaman Abbasi

“Porer Jayga Porer Jomi”

Singer: Abdul Alim

Album: Voktimulok Polligeeti

License from Abdul Alim Family

“Moriya Jamu Bujhi”

Singer: Rezaul Karim

Lyrics & Music: Rezaul Karim

Original Recording

Copyright: mypixelstory

“Ekbar Aashiya Sonar”

Singer & Composer: Abbasuddin Ahmed

Lyrics: Abdul Karim

Album: Allah Megh De

License from Nashid Kamal, Ferdausi Rahman, Mustafa Zaman Abbasi

“Ki Bolibo Shonar Chand”

Singer: Romiz

Lyrics & Music: Jasimuddin, Anonymous

Original Recording

Copyright: mypixelstory

“Keo Noy Jogot Shongsharey Rey”

Singers: Rituparna Banerjee & Arnob

Lyrics & Music: Anonymous

Original Recording

License from Shayan Chowdhury

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