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For writer and director Gitanjali Rao, the 'love' within a simple rose inspired her compelling and beautifully hand-painted animated film about people in India living unfulfilled lives as they struggle to survive.

By Victoria Davis | Thursday, March 4, 2021 at 2:51pm

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Gitanjali Rao's 'Bombay Rose,' premiering March 8 on Netflix. Images courtesy of Netflix.

Whether offered in hopes of sparking a romance, sold to pay rent, or laid at a grave, a rose, according to Gitanjali Rao, goes through many hands and many loves. "The rose for me is something that takes the love from one person to another," explains the Bombay-based director, producer, and self-taught animator. "The Rose came to us from the Mughals and is a big iconography of love. Jasmine also stands for love in the south of India and there are jasmine garlands all over the place in Bombay. We have this market in Dadar which opens at five in the morning, with women and young girls selling flowers that go from there to all over the city."

It was this market and those flower sellers that served as an inspiration for Rao's touching and emotionally gripping animated feature film, *Bombay Rose*, which was acquired by Netflix's LA-based content team and premieres March 8 on the streaming platform.

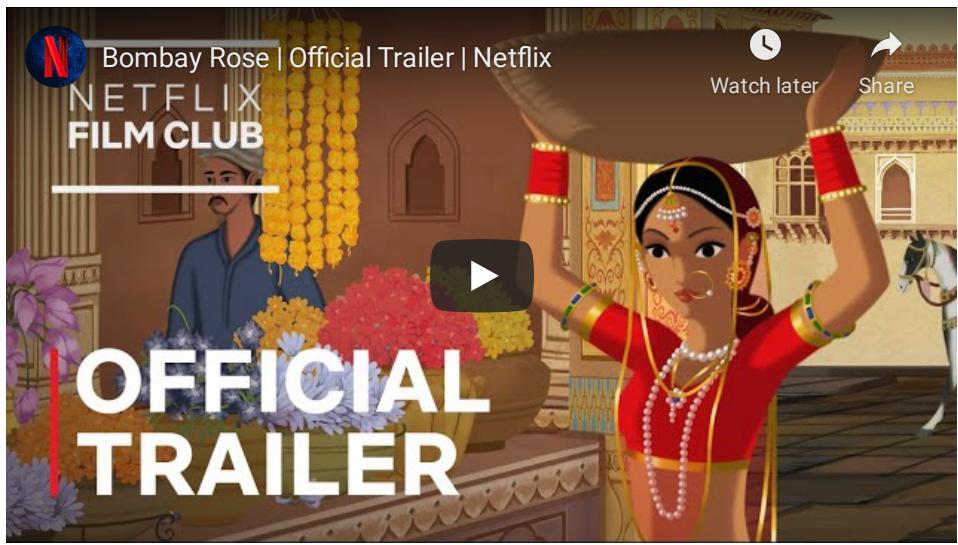
Six years in the making, the film, produced by Cinestaan Film Company and Les Films d'ici, follows the romance of a young Hindu flower seller named Kamala and a Muslim man named Salim, who sells bouquets of roses across the bustling street. The pair's taboo love journey is also woven through the life tapestry of their family and neighbors, such as Kamala's sister, who saves the life of a deaf, orphaned boy working illegally at a local restaurant; Kamala's toy-making, down-on-his-luck grandfather; and a formerly famous dancer Ms. D'Souza who mourns a lost love.



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"It's a story of Bombay people," says Rao, known for her award-winning and Oscar-nominated animated short, *Printed Rainbow*. "People I come across each and every day of my life. Whether you're traveling, going to school, or going to work, you're always thrown in with people who live in the streets. It's quite a homogeneous city. You can sometimes be stuck in a traffic jam for hours together. You see their lives and realize that this is a very marginalized society."

"These people have come from all different parts of India to find jobs and settle in with their dreams," she continues. "They help build the city, clean the city, cook for the city, but they do not even have voting rights. From me and my own family - who came to Bombay two generations back - as well as a friend of mine, or a maid, or a cleaner, the story of *Bombay Rose* was all around me in this city, where we all come together from different places and learn to live with each other and rely on each other."

The characters in *Bombay Rose* are all struggling, either financially or emotionally. Kamala's grandfather saved her from being sold but, due to their poverty, she now works at a dance bar and looks at selling herself into prostitution to pay for her sister to go through school and live a better life. Salim's only source of income is by selling the roses he's stolen from gravesites, including those Ms. D'Souza brings to the graves from her own garden. And Ms. D'Souza, who may be able to afford roses, is unable to move forward from her sadness and loneliness, save for the joy she finds in her household toys - fixed by Kamala's grandfather - and visits from Kamala's sister.

"All of the events in this story are based on facts," adds Rao, whose film references India's dance bar raids in 2005, militant aggression on locals in Kashmir, as well as the effects of the 1986 Child Labor Act. "These things would happen and still happen a lot, but you have people - of different religions, different ages, different languages - all strung together and each of them looks out for the other. When two people fall in love, or form friendships, they reach out to help each other through difficulties, which is essentially the way people survive on the streets. The government is not there for them and the system doesn't work for them, so they create their own little systems. That interdependency was very interesting to me."



India's history and culture takes center stage in *Bombay Rose*'s vibrant, soft, fluid animation, produced by Paperboat Design Studios and based on Mughal miniature paintings from North India.

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"It's a traditional Indian folk art," Rao explains. "They're really beautiful and, for me, the intrigue was in taking an art which has been long celebrated and seen by people in still form and imagining how it would look if it moved."

The film's Mughal art style also played a big part in *Bombay Rose*'s narrative, which focuses not only on events in the lives of its characters, but also follows each of their daydreams, such as Kamala as a Hindu princess and Salim as a Muslim prince galivanting through India's forests and countryside.

"Their dream modes are a mix of places that they wish to go into and places that they have come from in their past or heritage," says Rao. "I think we all do that subconsciously. Whenever we are doing something which is very boring, our mind takes off and gets into a better space. That's very precious. In a lot of ways, I'm a dreamer myself, using animation to get into that mindscape."



Utilizing animation production techniques like those of traditional 2D animation, minus the still frame camera capture, Rao says her team of roughly 100 animators and artists took a true painter's approach to bringing *Bombay Rose* to life. "Each and every frame was hand-painted by the artist," says Rao. "It was not digitally filled in with closed lines or vectors."



Gitanjali Rao

The team was a mix of senior animators, those with 10-12 years of experience doing shading and lighting, and a large number of recently graduated art students from Sir J. J. Institute of Applied Art and Rachna Sansad College of Applied Art to do coloring. "The animatics and the storyboard of the film I did single-handedly," Rao reveals. "Every shot was inspected by me, individually. And that's how I could keep everything homogeneous. I was playing a lot of roles. I know every stage of animation because all my short films I made by myself, but it was

really nice this time to have these extra arms."

While *Bombay Rose* is her first finished feature film, Rao says it's not her first attempt. "It's actually my third," she says. "But I had a lot of similar ideas and characters with the stories I didn't finish, so I feel that I finished my other films through *Bombay Rose*."

She adds, "It's a film about love and peace against conflict and violence, and a story about struggle and survival, celebrating the struggle for survival and celebrating women and their spirit. This is the way I make people question their own points of views in a very gentle way, rather than being preachy or in your face about it. That's another reason why we wanted the animation to be soft and painted, to make it emotional. The aesthetics of animation lends itself to that."

Highlighting the visuals was one of the reasons *Bombay Rose* makes minimal use of dialogue; the two main characters speak only two words to each other the whole film. "My method of storytelling has been through silence, through gestures, through moods, and through colors,"

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says Rao, whose previous short films have also been silent. "I wanted people to sense the story much more than hear it. These two main characters might not even speak each other's language, which is what happens in a place like Bombay. You just use gestures to communicate what you can. A lot of people can actually fall in love without even saying anything to each other because they understand each other's lives."

Rao hopes that *Bombay Rose* will not only serve as an eye-opener for those unfamiliar with India's past and present but will also inspire Indian viewers to look toward the future for more animation coming out of their own country. "We really don't have animation which looks Indian, feels Indian or is Indian," says Rao. "Animation in India has been around since the 1970s-1980s. So, when I joined in around 1994, it was almost at the beginning of its creation. We didn't even know what we were getting into. But I hope this film familiarizes Indian audiences with Indian animated films and sets a baseline for future stories like these where Indian content is created and appreciated."



Rao first gained attention with her animated short, *Printed Rainbow*, which premiered at Cannes Critic's week 2006 (Kodak Discovery Award, Petite Rail D'Or, Prix Du Jeune), ultimately going on to win 25 awards and a spot on the 2008 Oscar shortlist. Her four animated shorts, all independently produced, have been selected at more than 150 International film festivals, taking home more than 30 awards.

Bombay Rose was the first Indian Animation film ever chosen to open Venice Critics Week; it was also selected by TIFF and BFI and won at the Chicago and Mumbai Film Festivals. The film won the 'India Gold Silver Gateway Award' and the Manish Acharya Award for 'New Voices in Indian Cinema' at the 21st Jio MAMI Mumbai Film Festival.

The film is written, edited, and directed by Rao. The film is produced by Rohit Khatter and Anand Mahindra and co-produced by Charlotte Uzu and Serge Lalou. Deborah Sathe and Tessa Inkelaar serve as executive producers. The film is a Cinestaan Film Company/Les Films d'ici production, with animation provided by Paperboat Design Studios. Soumitra Ranade is the animation producer; Sangita Khatu, Sanjay Dengle and Prashant Shikare serve as animators. Swanand Kirkire provides the film's lyrics, which are performed by Cyli Khare. The principle voice cast includes Cyli Khare, Amit Deondi, Gargi Shitole, and Makrand Deshpande.



Victoria Davis is a full-time, freelance journalist and part-time Otaku with an affinity for all things anime. She's reported on numerous stories from activist news to entertainment. Find more about her work at victoriadavisdepiction.com.

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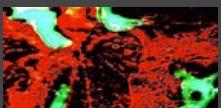
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