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Sri Lanka: Shyam Selvadurai's 'Funny Boy' to be released on Netflix

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Deepa Mehta's latest film, an adaptation of Shyam Selvadurai's Sri Lanka-set coming-of-age novel "Funny Boy," has been picked up by Ava DuVernay's ARRAY Releasing, and will land on Netflix this December, Variety revealed.

The Oscar-nominated "Earth" and "Midnight's Children" director wrote the screenplay for the film alongside Selvadurai, whose debut 1994 novel is set in Sri Lanka during the 1970s and 1980s and was ground-breaking in its discussion of identity politics against the backdrop of escalating conflict between the island nation's Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority.

Shot on location in Colombo, the film explores Tamil protagonist Arjie's (Arush Nand/Brandon Ingram) sexual awakening from a young boy, deemed "funny" by disapproving family, to a teenager enamoured by a male classmate, just as political tensions escalate between the Sinhalese and Tamils in the years leading up to the 1983 uprisings — violence that led into a 26-year civil war.

The film delivers powerhouse performances by a cast including Ingram, Nimmi Harasgama, Ali Kazmi, Agam Darshi, Seema Biswas, Rehan Mudannayake and Shivantha Wijesinha. It is produced by Mehta's long-time creative partner David Hamilton, with a score from three-time Oscar winner Howard Shore. Teresa Font served as editor and Douglas Koch is the cinematographer.

"Funny Boy" will debut on Netflix in the U.S., U.K., New Zealand and Australia on Dec. 10. It will also receive a theatrical release in Canada, as well as select cities throughout the U.S. that month.

"Deepa Mehta's 'Funny Boy' builds upon the iconic filmmaker's provocative canon of work as a film that is beautiful to the eye and emotional for the heart. Her singular vision for adapting this best-selling novel invites film-lovers to delve deep into themes of identity, acceptance and family, while she shares the majesty and turmoil of Sri Lanka during this particular time in history," said DuVernay and ARRAY president Tilane Jones.

"We are honored to share Ms. Mehta's latest cinematic gem with fans and film-lovers and we cherish our time working alongside this exceptionally talented director."

In "Funny Boy," the Indian-Canadian director becomes one of a handful of international filmmakers to tackle Sri Lanka's civil conflict, following on from Jacques Audiard's Palme d'Or-winning 2015 film "Dheepan," which followed three Tamil refugees who flee to France, and Indian filmmaker Santosh Sivan's "Inam" (2014), which examined the war through the lens of teenagers. More recent efforts by Sri Lankan filmmakers include "Her. Him. The Other" (2018) from Asoka Handagama, Vimukthi Jayasundara and Prasanna Vithanage.

"All my films are quite political," Mehta tells Variety. "This was a good fit for me, because it's not just a coming-of-age film. It also deals with an oppression of minorities. Who is the victim? Who is

the perpetrator? Where is humanity? It spoke to me on a very human level.”

Mehta first signed on to direct an adaptation of “Funny Boy” more than 20 years ago, but was sidetracked by “Fire,” the first in her seminal ‘Elements’ trilogy, which focuses on a lesbian relationship between two Indian women. Mehta’s later films, always rich in South Asian storytelling, include “Earth,” about India’s Partition; “Water,” about an 8-year-old widow in colonial India; and “Midnight’s Children,” an adaptation of the Salman Rushdie novel. Selvadurai’s tenacity to bring “Funny Boy” to screen, however, won the director over in recent years.

“The book is 25 years old, but I thought it was completely relevant, and perhaps more relevant today than it was even 25 years ago,” declares Mehta.

Even though the director, who filmed “Water” and “Midnight’s Children” in Sri Lanka, was savvy to the extreme challenges to get permission from the Sinhalese government to shoot films with subject matter deemed controversial, production on “Funny Boy” was shut down twice over the course of 2019.

“It took a year to get permission,” says Mehta, who says the only reason she was successful came down to the efforts of the local producers, as well as the pull of the Canadian High Commissioner, a change in leadership at the national film commission and the influence of then Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe’s wife, the academic Maithree Wickramasinghe.

“Funny Boy” is at its heart a personal story about a young man coming to terms with his gay identity in a deeply hetero-normative society, but the film also presents a nuanced portrayal of the bitter conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils. “It’s too easy to make somebody bad, or somebody good. Life is far more complicated than that,” explains Mehta. “Anyone affected in any civil war of any kind is actually a victim.”

As for why stories out of Sri Lanka rarely enter the mainstream, or even the arthouse festival circuit, Mehta says preconceptions about Western tastes prevent some art films from even getting off the ground.

“There’s this sense that if the film isn’t French enough, or German enough, then it’s not going to be accepted,” says Mehta. “It won’t get into Cannes; it won’t get into Sundance. It has to be a particular kind of gaze, which is a white gaze.”

“That’s why I waited the first people to see this film to be from Sri Lanka,” she adds, referencing the underground screenings held in Colombo in the last two months.

“I wanted the Sri Lankans to own their own narrative. There is now an awareness about Black lives, indigenous lives and POC. There is a certain window that’s open, and people say the minute a window opens is the minute it starts to close. So I feel we have to really just go right through it, and actually own our own narrative.”

Of “Funny Boy’s” release on Netflix, Mehta is philosophical. The film was made for cinemas, she says, and was set to play the festival circuit and receive a theatrical release, but when DuVernay rang up, “it was like a marriage made in heaven.”

“There’s a part of me that says, ‘Oh my God, wouldn’t it be lovely [to get a full theatrical release], but those days are gone, unless a vaccine happens,” says Mehta.

The film marks the seventh release in 2020 for ARRAY Releasing. Other titles distributed this year include Stephanie Turner’s “Justine,” Simon Frederick’s “They’ve Gotta Have Us,” Numa Perrier’s

“Jezebel,” Isabel Sandoval’s “Lingua France,” and Merawi Gerima’s “Residue.”

The acquisition was negotiated by Gordon Bobb of Del, Shaw, Moonves, Tanaka, Finkelstein and Lezcano on behalf of ARRAY and Lon J. Hall of Hall Webber LLP on behalf of Mehta.

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