



OFFICIAL
SELECTION

INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL
ROTTERDAM
2024

SCHIRKOA

in LIES we Trust

A FILM BY ISHAN SHUKLA



SYNOPSIS

In a dystopian world where people are forced to wear paper bags over their heads, a newly appointed council member sparks an accidental revolution.

**INTERVIEW WITH
ISHAN SHUKLA**

BY MARTA BAŁAGA

Where did the idea for these covered-up characters even come from?

When I first entered the animation industry, my daily routine involved commuting to the studio for about an hour. In the subway, in that sea of monotony, I found myself surrounded by hundreds of people with glum or neutral expressions. I began to feel like a cog in a vast machine: utterly replaceable, devoid of any distinct identity.

In a strange way, it seemed as if none of us had faces. Our individuality was masked by the uniformity of our existence. To cope with this realization, I resorted to scribbling, giving life to faceless beings that echoed the soulless anonymity of the daily grind.

It's almost a film of two halves: you start with this sad, monotone world and then jump into craziness and color.

Schirkoa: *In Lies We Trust* talks about two ideologies at opposite ends of the spectrum. While this may appear simplistic on the surface, delving into these contrasting realms allowed me to convey larger and more complex themes. I feel that this sudden shift in tone, mood, and visual design added an element of unpredictability.

As the narrative progressed, I aimed to create an immersive experience: it's like witnessing a myth coming to life.

"Flipping" the mood is also something I find immensely intriguing as a creator.



I relish the element of surprise and how humor can take center stage when you least expect it, providing a stark contrast to the somber themes. I love such unusual juxtapositions. I like to incorporate humor into the darkest moments of the story. It's not an attempt to downplay the gravity of situations, but it reflects the multifaceted nature of life.

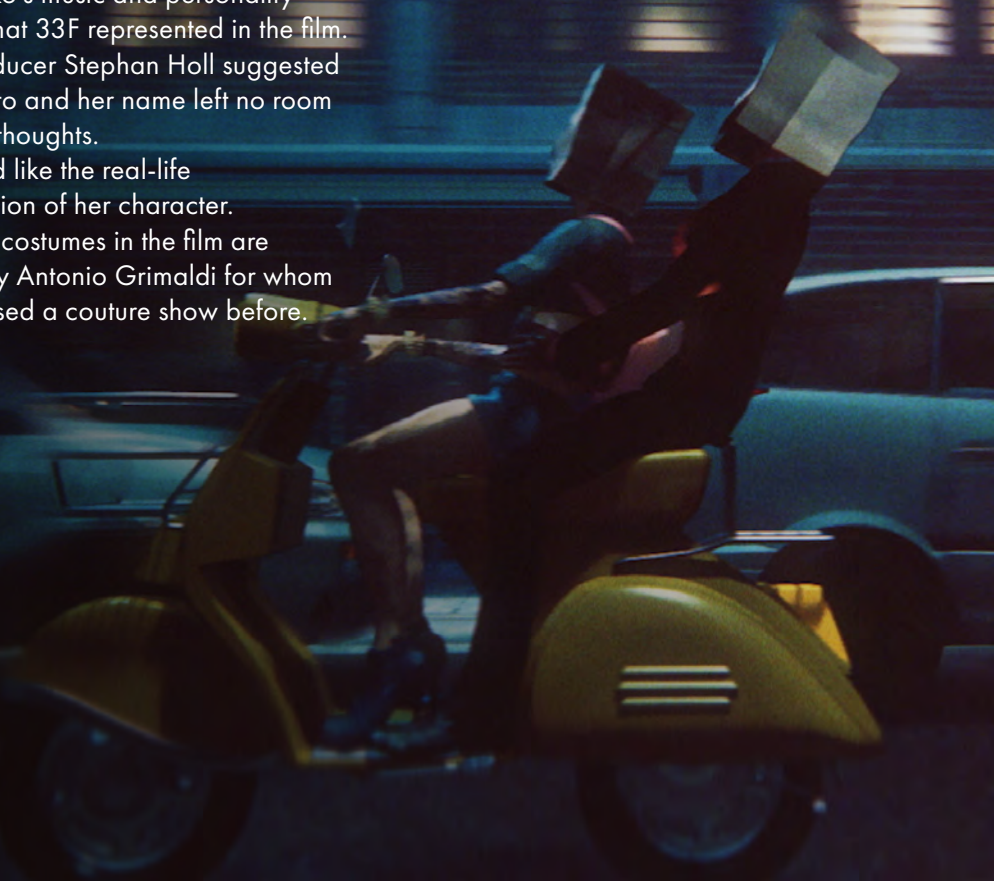
You assembled a very interesting voice cast, from Asia Argento to Gaspar Noé. What were you looking for?

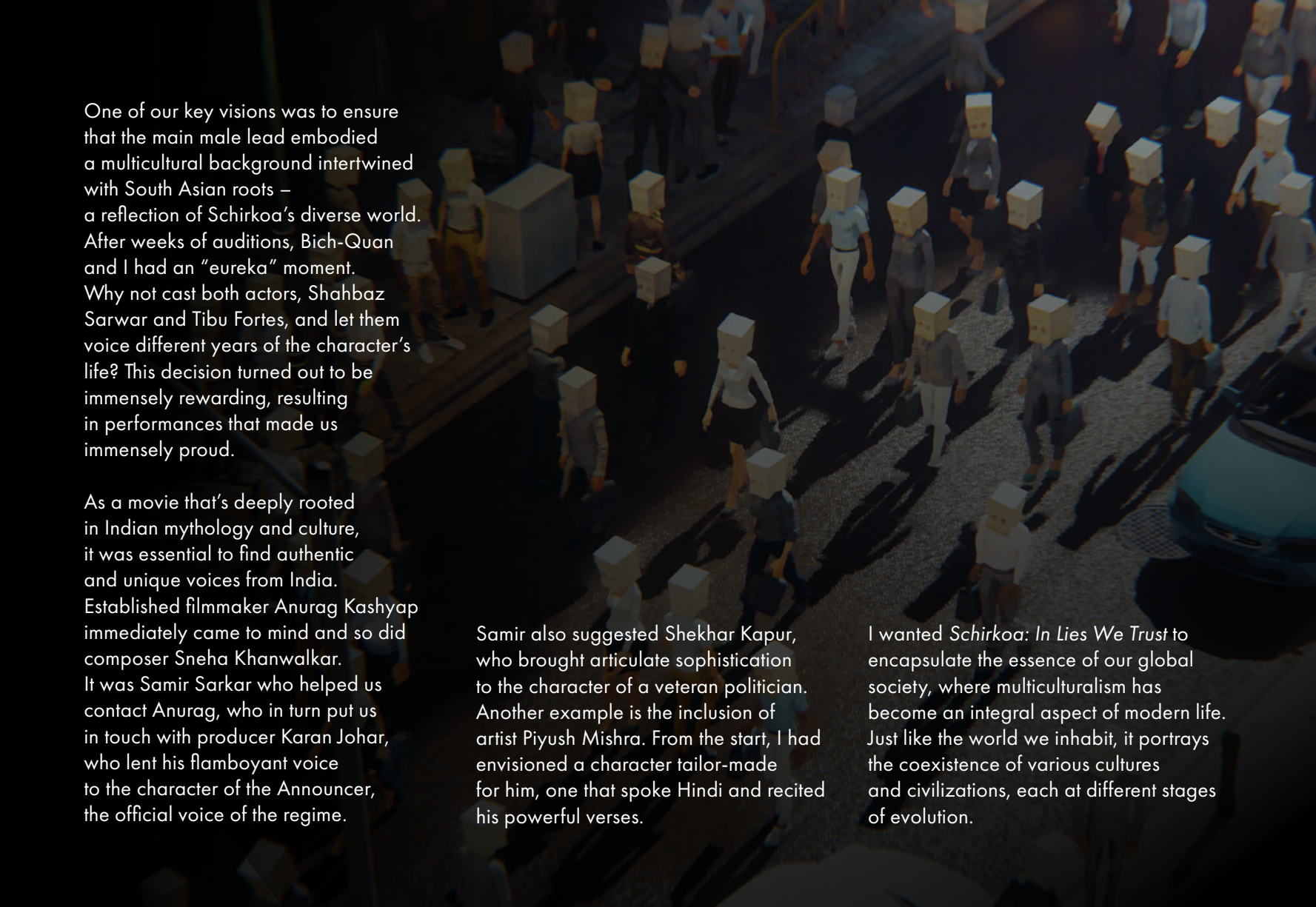
Our primary goal was to breathe life into these characters and that meant searching for artists who could truly embody their essence.

During our early discussions, when [producer] Bich-Quan Tran suggested names like Gaspar Noé and Lav Diaz, I was intrigued. Gaspar, in his sweetness, made himself available for one of the most improbable characters imaginable, while Lav Diaz offered to sing his poems in his native Tagalog language. Continuing this exploration, Bich-Quan

brought in the immensely talented Golshifteh Farahani and Soko, who portrayed 242B – a character who would rather face exile than stay in caged freedom – and 33F: nomadic artist with a romantic yet rebellious worldview. For me, Soko's music and personality mirrored what 33F represented in the film. My co-producer Stephan Holl suggested Asia Argento and her name left no room for second thoughts.

She seemed like the real-life personification of her character. And all her costumes in the film are designed by Antonio Grimaldi for whom she has closed a couture show before.





One of our key visions was to ensure that the main male lead embodied a multicultural background intertwined with South Asian roots – a reflection of Schirkoa’s diverse world. After weeks of auditions, Bich-Quan and I had an “eureka” moment. Why not cast both actors, Shahbaz Sarwar and Tibu Fortes, and let them voice different years of the character’s life? This decision turned out to be immensely rewarding, resulting in performances that made us immensely proud.

As a movie that’s deeply rooted in Indian mythology and culture, it was essential to find authentic and unique voices from India. Established filmmaker Anurag Kashyap immediately came to mind and so did composer Sneha Khanwalkar. It was Samir Sarkar who helped us contact Anurag, who in turn put us in touch with producer Karan Johar, who lent his flamboyant voice to the character of the Announcer, the official voice of the regime.

Samir also suggested Shekhar Kapur, who brought articulate sophistication to the character of a veteran politician. Another example is the inclusion of artist Piyush Mishra. From the start, I had envisioned a character tailor-made for him, one that spoke Hindi and recited his powerful verses.

I wanted *Schirkoa: In Lies We Trust* to encapsulate the essence of our global society, where multiculturalism has become an integral aspect of modern life. Just like the world we inhabit, it portrays the coexistence of various cultures and civilizations, each at different stages of evolution.



Sneha Khanwalkar is also responsible for the film's soundtrack.

The essence of *Schirkoa: In Lies We Trust* soul also lays in its music, and we agreed with Stephan Holl that Sneha Khanwalkar would craft the overall music, intertwining it with licensed tracks from King Khan, Saba Lou and Sun Ra. One melodic choice that held a special place in my mind was Benny Turner's *You Gonna Miss Me*. The hauntingly impressive track from the film *Baraka*, based on *Brother's An Daorach Bheag*, also lingered in my thoughts. That's when Bich-Quan proposed that Sneha could create a special track based on that song. We were also blessed with Asia Argento's *Sexodrome*.

Can you tell me about the technique you chose?

It was a blend of traditional methods and new technology. For the characters, I employed a modern character generator. The characters and sets were then brought together within a game engine, specifically Unreal Engine, where they were assembled in their respective locations. From this point onward, we used a unique hybrid of animation and live-action techniques.

We embarked on a motion-capture process that spanned over two weeks. It was camera-free, allowing us to shoot the film like a stage play, where every angle and movement carried significance. However, it's essential to acknowledge the considerable effort and talent involved. Hundreds of hours were devoted to manually fine-tuning each performance and that task was handled by a team of skilled animators, who brought life and emotion to every character on screen. Integrating data into the game engine



marked a turning point in our creative process, allowing us to approach shooting with the fluidity of a live-action movie. This newfound creative freedom opened doors to experimentation, enabling us to explore diverse multi-camera setups and lighting techniques. Unlike the locked-in nature of traditional storyboarding, the hybrid game engine pipeline granted us the incredible ability to make real-time adjustments. We could modify shots, edit sequences and entire scenes on the go. This process fostered a dynamic environment where we could continuously refine designs, camera angles, animations, sets and color. Surprisingly, this approach didn't inflate the budget. It actually allowed us to work efficiently with fewer resources.

I guess this film is a testament to the advantages of utilizing a game engine like Unreal. Not only did it handle vast amounts of data with ease, surpassing other animation software, but it significantly reduced rendering times. The environmental implications

were significant, as it drastically minimized energy consumption and resource usage. I hope more filmmakers embrace this sustainable method and set a precedent for the future of animation filmmaking.

You have also worked on the second volume of *Star Wars: Visions*. How did you discover animation in the first place?

I was aware of the medium since an early age, but it wasn't until my college years that animation truly enticed me. I was deeply involved in writing and directing stage plays, and I came across an experimental theatre troupe called the Neo-Futurists. Among their plays, one called *Bingo* caught my attention and it had been adapted into an animated short film by the Canadian animator Chris Landreth. It completely blew me away. I believe that every cinema lover should see it. Working on *Star Wars: Visions Vol. 2* was a blast. Having the opportunity to contribute to this iconic universe was an incredibly rewarding experience.

One of the most beautiful aspects of the project was the freedom Lucasfilm granted us to incorporate Indian culture into the *Star Wars* universe.

It was a chance to infuse my own heritage and artistic sensibilities into a world that has captivated audiences for generations.

Of course, working within such established universe required adapting to a different filmmaking style, but I embraced the opportunity to blend a more classic *Star Wars* narrative with the vibrant energy of Bollywood cinema and the rich tapestry of Indian culture.





I am curious if the pandemic has changed the film in any way. All of a sudden, everyone was covered-up too!

I couldn't help but notice these similarities. I wouldn't say that the pandemic fundamentally changed the essence of the film, but it certainly reinforced certain themes and character motivations. In a way, it became a reminder of the ever-changing world we live in and the need for art to adapt and connect with the zeitgeist.

Also, animation industry has undergone a remarkable transformation during the pandemic. In the past, I used to favor working in a physical, email-agnostic environment where physical interaction was the key to solid communication. Over time, I realized this approach came with its limitations. When artists are granted the flexibility to collaborate from their chosen environments, they become more open, motivated and deeply invested in their work. This newfound sense of ownership and comfort creates an environment

where creativity can thrive without the constraints of a traditional workspace. Actually, two of the critical brains behind pre-production were artists who worked from different countries. My storyboard artist Shahab worked from Iran, bringing amazing creative sensibilities and experiences into the narrative, and character designer Yaning worked from China.

Were you always interested in animation for adults? What kind of stories inspired you? I think Kafka immediately comes to mind.

From the very beginning I have been drawn to the idea of crafting animation for adult audiences. However, I wouldn't classify myself as solely an animation enthusiast.

I have a profound love for movies and I used to be an avid reader. My father introduced me to the writings of Khalil Gibran and Tolstoy at a very early age. Kafka, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche influenced me as well, shaping my creative perspective. Beyond the world of animation, I found myself mesmerized by the works of Fellini and Jodorowsky: their ability to create vivid, shocking and imaginative worlds. For me, they transcended boundaries of multiple art forms. When it comes to animation, the works of Santoshi Kon and Ralph Bakshi have certainly left a mark.





Do you see this film as political? There is something very recognizable about the unrest you are showing.

I guess the fears depicted in *Schirkoa: In Lies We Trust* are not confined to a specific timeline or era. They have existed throughout history. At its core, it's a story of an ordinary individual, initially experiencing nothing more than a sense of discomfort with the state of affairs. Before that moment, politics plays no prominent role in his life. However, as the narrative unfolds, his discomfort transforms into personal loss. He decides to take matters into his own hands and challenge the establishment. It portrays the powerful transition from individual concerns to a broader political awakening: suddenly, personal experiences merge with collective grievances. The film explores the question of how many citizens are content with mere mild discomfort and how many are pushed to the point of agonizing pain before deciding to take action.

You have already made a successful short set in this world. Would you like this story to continue?

From its inception, *Schirkoa* was a vast world that extended far beyond the scope of the short film. In 2010, I decided to make a graphic novel, and then it just grew. The animated short allowed me to delve into the look and the heart of this world, leaving room for further exploration. Its success reaffirmed my belief in the potential of *Schirkoa: In Lies We Trust* as a multi-dimensional narrative.

In the future, I would like to branch out to various mediums. Certain aspects of the world are more suited for a graphic novel, allowing a more in-depth look at the world's intricacies, lore and aesthetics. There are more immersive world building aspects that are best suited to interactive mediums while the journey of some key characters can certainly be explored in a TV show. From art installations, board games to Lego sets, there are almost too many possibilities!



DIRECTOR ISHAN SHUKLA

Ishan drew his first comic at the age of 6 and created many original comics before finishing school.

After he worked in the Singaporean animation industry for several years he came back to India and managed to finish his first short film single-handedly. The film named *Schirkoa* – which the animated feature *Schirkoa: In Lies We Trust* is based on – received more than 30 awards and became the first Indian animated short to get long listed for the Academy Awards® followed by a tremendous reception at more than 120 international film festivals.

Ishan Shukla has now set up his own animation studio, Red Cigarette Media, to work on highly personal and artistic adult oriented animated feature films aimed at both an arthouse and broad audience.

Ishan Shukla is also the director of *The Bandits of Golak*, one of the nine short stories from the Lucasfilm anthology series *Star Wars: Visions Volume 2*, which premiered in May 2023 on Disney+.



Photo credit: Prakash Tilokani

ISHAN SHUKLA FILMOGRAPHY

SCHIRKOA: IN LIES WE TRUST (2024, Feature Film)
STAR WARS: VISIONS VOL. 2 (2023, TV Series)
SCHIRKOA (2016, Short film)

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Schirkooa: In Lies We Trust is a metaphorical reaction to the world I live in today -a perpetual conflict between two dimensions of our world.

Thus, I imagined an alternate timeline where the whole world is concentrated into just two nations -an eclectic mix of cultures, identities, and languages.

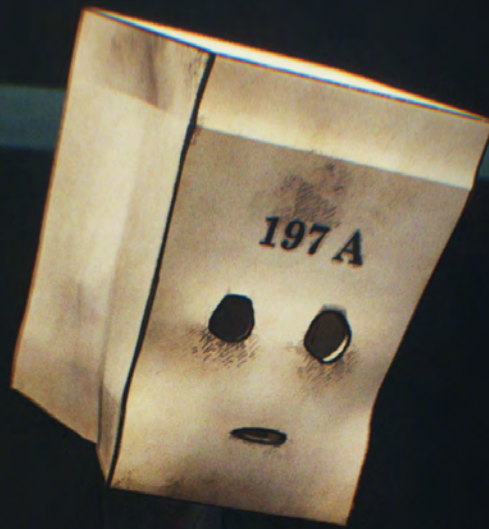
One nation, Schirkooa, is striving hard to achieve perfection and quite successfully achieves it through the 'Bag Act'.

The second nation, Konthaga, is more human, colorful, romantic, sometimes irrational, and eventually chaotic.

Both nations have thought-provoking ideas to run their nations and the better alternative can only be subjected to an individual's perception.

Against this giant backdrop, there's an intimate story following the events in the life of a meek man whose life keeps ascending to extremities as he travels through these two worlds trying to

find meaning between society, spirituality, and family. As the story treads forward we transit from a relatable contemporary setting to an avant-garde fantastical territory. I tend to see the world through an absurdist lens: for me, animation provocatively amalgamates absurdity and fantasy while still keeping the visual poetry and human moments intact.



PRINCIPAL VOICE OVER CAST

GOLSHIFTEH FARAHANI

is an Iranian actress living in Europe, who has been filming all over the world since her forced exile from Iran in 2008. She has made a name for herself working with great auteurs, from Asghar Farhadi to Jim Jarmusch, Ridley Scott and Arnaud Desplechin, to name a few, as well as in Hollywood blockbusters such as *Pirates Of The Caribbean* or *Extraction*.



ASIA ARGENTO

is an Italian actress, film director and singer known for her controversial dramatic roles and her intense acting style. She has worked with many leading filmmakers including Nanni Moretti, Patrice Chéreau, Abel Ferrara, Olivier Assayas, Sofia Coppola, Tony Gatlif, as well as directed her own features - *Scarlet Diva*, *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*, *The Misunderstanding*.



PRINCIPAL VOICE OVER CAST

S O K O

is a French singer, songwriter, musician and actress. As an actor, SoKo took the lead role in *Augustine* (2012) followed by *The Dancer* (2016), which earned her a Best Actress nomination at the French Academy Awards (Cesars) for her impressive performance as Loie Fuller. Her multiple collaborations with Spike Jonze have also seen her score his animated short *To Die By Your Side* and play the role of 'Isabella', the sex surrogate in his critically acclaimed feature *Her* (2003).



Photo credit: Cameron McCool

" K I N G K H A N "

(born Arish A. Khan) is a music producer, artist, writer, and frontman of King Khan & The Shrines and the King Khan & BBQ Show. His latest works involved collaborations with the legendary Sun Ra Arkestra.



Photo credit: Miron Zownir

PRINCIPAL VOICE OVER CAST



Photo credit: Priyasha Nair

DENZIL SMITH

is a veteran Indian film and stage actor, who has acted in over 50 plays and 60 films. He is best known for his character roles in *Tenet* (2020), *The Lunchbox* (2013) or the award-winning Netflix shows *Delhi Crime* and *The Railway Men*.



Photo credit: John Sutton

JOHN SUTTON

is a veteran American voice actor who has been actively working in the industry since 1969. He has worked on a diverse range of projects ranging from films, video games, animation shows to commercials.



Photo credit: Yellowbelly

TIBU FORTES

is a British actor of Tanzanian/ Indian descent, who has worked with many British TV series. He is a new regular character on the popular BBC *Shetland* series and will be starring in Simon West's upcoming action comedy *Old Guy*, alongside Christoph Waltz and Lucy Liu.



Photo credit: Nicolai Egense

SHAHBAZ SARWAR

is a Pakistani multi-faceted artist living in Denmark. As an actor, he worked on many popular Danish series including *The Nurse* and *Ride Upon The Storm*. As a writer, director, and producer, he's currently working on the post-production of the world's biggest Star Wars Fan Film *Shrouded Destiny: A Star Wars Long Tale - Part II*.

VOICE GUEST STARS

LAV DIAZ

is a filmmaker from the Philippines. He is especially notable for the length of his films, which are not governed by time but by space and nature. His work mostly deals with the social and political struggles of his motherland. Since 1998 he has directed eighteen films and won numerous international awards including the Locarno Golden Leopard (*From What Is Before*, 2014), The Berlinale Alfred Bauer Silver Bear (*A Lullaby To The Sorrowful Mystery*, 2016), and The Venice Golden Lion (*The Woman Who Left*, 2016).



Photo credit: Bradley Liew

KARAN JOHAR

is an Indian filmmaker, actor and iconic television personality. As a director and producer he is known for some of the highest-grossing Hindi-speaking films: *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) or more recently *Rocky And Rani* (2023) starring Alia Bhatt and Ranveer Singh.



Photo credit: Dharma Production

VOICE GUEST STARS



Photo credit: Shekhar Kapur

SHEKHAR KAPUR

is a BAFTA award winning Indian filmmaker and actor. He made his directorial debut with cult classic *Masoom* in 1983 before gaining international recognition and acclaim in 1994 with *Bandit Queen*, which premiered at 1994 Cannes Directors' Fortnight. His 1998 film *Elizabeth* starring Cate Blanchett was nominated for seven Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Actress.



Photo credit: Sinbad Phgura & Tejinder Singh Khamkha

ANURAG KASHYAP

is a critically acclaimed Indian filmmaker and producer. He is considered one of the most versatile and prolific filmmakers in contemporary Hindi cinema. He is best known for his film *Gangs Of Wasseypur* which premiered at Cannes Directors' Fortnight in 2012. He returned to Cannes with *Ugly* in 2013 and with *Kennedy* in 2023.



Photo credit: Tambao321

PIYUSH MISHRA

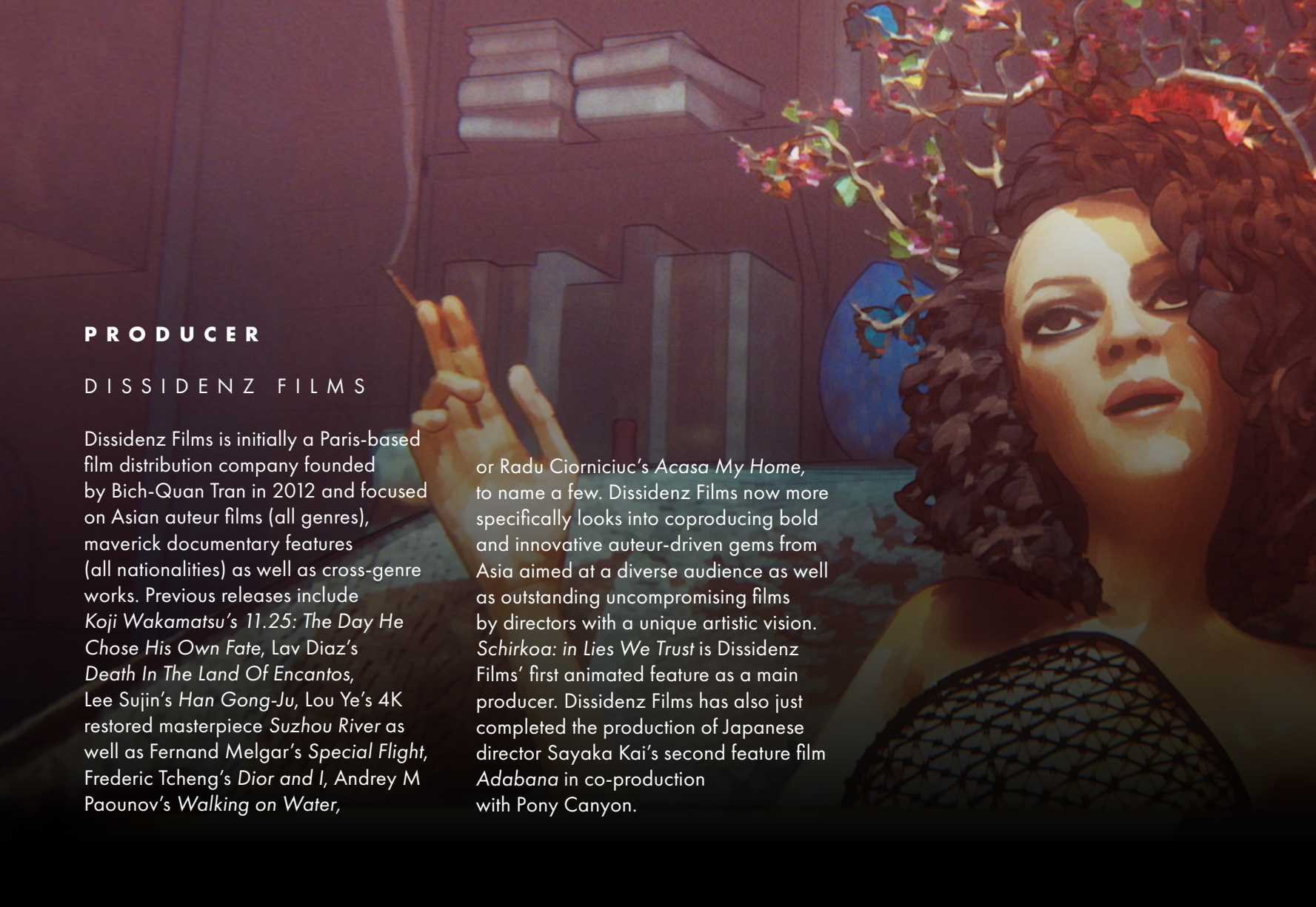
is an Indian poet, lyricist, singer, actor and playwright. As an actor, he is best known for *Maqbool* (2003), a critically acclaimed adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which premiered at Toronto Film Festival, and Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs Of Wasseypur* (2012).



Photo credit: Philippe Quaisse

GASPAR NOÉ

is a French-Argentinian filmmaker best known for his thought-provoking shock-cinema works with intense graphic and sound experiences that push boundaries, from his feature debut *I Stand Alone* (1998) to *Irréversible* (2002), *Enter The Void* (2009), *Climax* (2018) or *Vortex* (2021) to name a few.



PRODUCER

DISSIDENZ FILMS

Dissidenz Films is initially a Paris-based film distribution company founded by Bich-Quan Tran in 2012 and focused on Asian auteur films (all genres), maverick documentary features (all nationalities) as well as cross-genre works. Previous releases include Koji Wakamatsu's *11.25: The Day He Chose His Own Fate*, Lav Diaz's *Death In The Land Of Encantos*, Lee Sujin's *Han Gong-Ju*, Lou Ye's 4K restored masterpiece *Suzhou River* as well as Fernand Melgar's *Special Flight*, Frederic Tcheng's *Dior and I*, Andrey M Paounov's *Walking on Water*,

or Radu Ciorniciuc's *Acasa My Home*, to name a few. Dissidenz Films now more specifically looks into coproducing bold and innovative auteur-driven gems from Asia aimed at a diverse audience as well as outstanding uncompromising films by directors with a unique artistic vision. *Schirkoa: in Lies We Trust* is Dissidenz Films' first animated feature as a main producer. Dissidenz Films has also just completed the production of Japanese director Sayaka Kai's second feature film *Adabana* in co-production with Pony Canyon.



PRODUCER

RED CIGARETTE MEDIA

Red Cigarette Media (RCM), situated in Vadodara, India, is an animation studio founded in 2020 by Ishan Shukla. With a versatile core team of artists, it is focused on crafting imaginative fictitious worlds. RCM aims to expand its production to a broad spectrum of media, including graphic novels, cinema,

video games, and virtual experiences. RCM prioritizes the use of tools that empower a creative environment that thrives on organic creation. To achieve this, RCM has strategically adopted cutting-edge tools that liberate them from the constraints of rigid traditional animation pipelines.



CO-PRODUCER

RAPID EYE MOVIES

Rapid Eye Movies is a German film label co-founded by Stephan Holl and Antoinette Koester dealing in distribution, production and music. Since 1996 the company has been distributing highly esthetical and extraordinary cinematic gems and triggered the breakthrough of Asian directors like Takeshi Kitano, Takashi Miike, Park Chan-wook, and Kim Ki-Duk for Germany and popular Indian cinema in Europe.

The initial focus of primarily distributing national and international film has been extended bringing together filmmakers and longtime companions from a diverse

array of cultures and artistic spheres – from music to film and visual arts – such as Christopher Doyle, Khavn de la Cruz, SABU, Ashim Ahluwalia, Stereo Total, Mario Lombardo and Alexander Kluge and more to come and join the Rapid Eye family to create and produce movies that push boundaries and defy the conventional.



EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

CIVIC STUDIOS

Civic Studios is a global media company founded by Anushka Shah with a vision of creating entertainment that drives social impact. Incubated at the MIT Media Lab, USA, it creates stories of change, hope and pride, across formats of film, web series/ television shows, and short-form digital content. The company develops authentic, research-backed media IPs, & facilitates international co-productions. It has a distribution reach across theaters, film festivals and streaming platforms, domestically and internationally. Civic Studios is currently based in Mumbai & London.

PREMIERE

World Premiere: International
Film Festival
Rotterdam
Bright Future Section
2024

FILM INFORMATION

Original Title: Schirkoa:
in Lies We Trust
Genre: 2D/3D animation
Countries of production: India, France,
Germany
Language: English
Year: 2024
Duration: 103 min.
Picture: Color
Exhibition format (DCP): 2048x858
Framerate (DCP): 24
Aspect Ratio: 2.35:1
Sound: 5.1
Available Format: DCP

CREW

Written and directed by: Ishan Shukla
With the artistic
collaboration of: Bich-Quan Tran
Sound design: Nicolas Titeux
Designs: Ishan Shukla,
Yaning Feng
Lies' clothes designed by: Antonio Grimaldi
Storyboard: Shahab Serwaty
Cinematography, FX: Ishan Shukla
Lighting: Ishan Shukla
Editing & Compositing: Ishan Shukla
3D Animation Supervisor: Piyush Mittal
Head of MoCap: Jean-François Szlapka
Sound Mixing: Florent Fournier-Sicre,
Nicolas Titeux

VOICE CAST

Golshifteh Farahani, Asia Argento, SoKo,
King Khan, Denzil Smith, John Sutton
and introducing
Tibu Fortes and Shahbaz Sarwar

VOICE GUEST STARS

Lav Diaz, Karan Johar, Shekhar Kapur,
Anurag Kashyap, Piyush Mishra,
Gaspar Noe

Producers: Bich-Quan Tran,
Ishan Shukla
Co-producers: Stephan Holl,
Samir Sarkar
Executive Producer: Anushka Shah

A Dissidenz Films
and Red Cigarette Media production
in co-production with Rapid Eye Movies
in association with Civic Studios and Cofinova 18
with the support of
Aide aux Cinémas du Monde - Centre National
du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée - Institut Français
Epic MegaGrants
Film und Medienstiftung NRW
Nouvelle-Aquitaine region
in partnership with the CNC

Filmed in France and India

Based upon the short film *Schirkoa*
created by Ishan Shukla

www.schirkoamovie.com

PRODUCER'S CONTACT

DISSIDENZ

14 rue Charles V – 75004 Paris - France
Bich-Quân Tran
www.dissidenz.com
bqt@dissidenz.com
+33 6 87 77 41 47

WORLD SALES

NEW EUROPE FILM SALES
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kat@neweuropesales.com
+48 698 900 936

NORTH AMERICAN SALES

Nick Shumaker
nshumaker@anonymouscontent.com

Beatriz Martins
bmartins@anonymouscontent.com

INTERNATIONAL PRESS

NOISE FILM & TV

Rapenburgerstraat 109
1011 VL Amsterdam
Mirjam Wiekenkamp
mirjam@noisefilmpr.com
+31 6 28652249

