

Sex and the multicultural city

Calgary director brings sitcom pilot to Globalfest

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It sounds like a strange concept. Take one Calgary-based Caucasian male filmmaker and send him to New York City to shoot a sitcom about four South Asian women coming to terms with North American culture.

DesiCiti, which is giddily being described as Sex In the City with a little Bollywood flavouring, is a

SPOTLIGHT
DesiCiti will screen today at 6:30 p.m. at the Calgary Chinese Cultural Centre as part of the Globalfest filmfest. The film portion of the festival runs until Sunday. Visit globalfest.ca

virtual love letter to multiculturalism, both in its end result and execution, says director Jonathan Joffe. "The most interesting thing was the multiculturalism of the set itself," says Joffe. "Aside from the extremely multi-cultural cast, we had (crew) from New York, people from Wisconsin, Canadians, Israelis, African-Americans — this crazy mix of people. Every English accent you could think of was on this set. And it just made for a really fun experience. It was always a good time and there were always interesting people to talk to."

Which makes it a perfect entry for this year's Globalfest Filmfest, which focuses on cross-cultural dialogue. It will run at the Calgary Chinese Cultural Centre



Puja Suri, Leena Manro, Purva Bedi and Shetal Shah star in DesiCiti, a TV pilot directed by Calgarian Jonathan Joffe, which is screening as part of this year's GlobalFest. Courtesy, Jonathan Joffe

from Friday through Sunday. For the first year in its five-year existence, the film festival side of Globalfest opened its doors to dramas and comedies rather than just documentaries. DesiCiti is actually the pilot to a sitcom that Joffe and its producers hope to shop around to international broadcasters, which makes it an unusual pick for the gala opening at a film festival.

But the multicultural hue of the comedy — which includes some sturdy nods to Bollywood fashion and dance — made it an irresistible choice to programmers. Written by ex-Calgarian Leena Manro, the pilot follows the romantic adventures of four women as they try to balance a professional and love life with the expectations that come from their Desi heritage.

Joffe is probably best known for his sci-fi shorts, including 2005's brainy, award-winning Cost of Living. The 36-year-old filmmaker has his black belt in Wado Kai Karate and is an avid mountain climber and scuba diver. None of which would seem to march him to the front of the line for directing a sitcom with chick-flick leanings.

"I love science fiction" says Joffe. "But given that I've been stuck with very low budgets, I've really focused on dialogue-based work. So moving into a TV comedy was actually not a big move because it was staying the dialogue-based, acting-based environment where it's really about the actors and the words on the page."

The depth of the DesiCiti is what attracted programmers of Globalfest to the project, says

festival curator and founder Ben Tsui.

"I had to open the entire festival with it," says Tsui. "The whole goal of the festival is to change perspectives. Every culture has its own stereotypes, but through film we can see that. Don't see us as stereotype Chinese or South Asians. In DesiCiti, they are professionals. These are Canadian or American-born kids who are now

professionals. They are the same as everyone else, they need the loving relationships and have to deal with office politics as we all have to."

The films at this year's festival — which run the gamut from documentaries, to comedies, dramas and experimental shorts — all deal with multiculturalism and often deal with social issues or human rights. Films cover cultures in Indonesia, Germany, Japan, Trinidad-Tobago, Africa and Japan among others, all introducing a wide array of cinematic languages that are different from the Hollywood norm.

Tsui, a Hong Kong native who moved to Canada at the age of 10, said the festival is all about making the real world smaller and the film world bigger.

"When I was growing up, I watched Italian films, French films, British films, German films, Japanese films — it was such an influence on my young life," he says. "When I came to Saskatchewan there was only one local theatre but it was just like Hong Kong because they played everything — world cinema to Woody Allen. On Sunday night there was a double feature of kung fu movies and on Monday night they'd have Bergman. Seventy-five cents got you in and I went to all of them."

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