

Running With Crutches

WTF is happening to the world? In *Running With Crutches*, we might just find out.



2020 / Australia-UK / Feature Film / 93 minutes

Short Synopsis

2020 began with the pandemic, and by the middle of the year another outbreak, BLM, was sweeping the world. In the middle of this new age of uncertainty, one person, Veyd, is running with crutches, when he can't even really stand. Somehow, he still believes the future is possible.



Longer Synopsis

2020 begins with a viral pandemic, COVID-19. By the middle of the year another outbreak, Black Lives Matter (or BLM as it came to be known), is sweeping the world. It is a new age of uncertainty and one person, Veyd, still standing albeit with the aid of crutches, observes the chaos of past and present from his effective incarceration.

Being physically vulnerable, Veyd has been 'shielded', totally isolated, in suburban Ealing, London, for the previous six months. He will continue to be so imprisoned indefinitely, or at least until there is a 100% effective vaccine, which may be never. Somehow, he still believes the future is bright.

Cinematically bold and intellectually mesmerising, *Running With Crutches* is an exploration of the line between drama and documentary in the worst of times and the best of times.

Notes from the Directors

Molly Reynolds

As a film-maker I often get the urge to make a film with certain parameters or in a certain subject area, without really knowing why or what the film will be about. Those matters of significance, the "why" and the "what", whilst already roiling at a subconscious level, always seem to reveal themselves to my conscious self later in the process. The clues emerge while shooting, the consolidation happens during post-production and the articulation and an understanding of the resulting work generally occurs while writing material for this document, the Press Kit.

I had been keen to work with Shekhar for some time, so when his condition placed him in the eye of the storm and he recognised it, he finally agreed to my crazy proposition of us making a film together, even though geographically we were half a world apart, Shekhar in London and me in southern Tasmania. Little did I know then that he was going to create a gentle character of steely resolve and play him with measured nuance to remind us that most days lived can be good days.

For long periods since the beginning of the pandemic, Shekhar has not just been in quarantine, he has had to 'shield'. His collection of conditions makes him especially vulnerable to covid. Shielding has the effect that he cannot leave his home, nor can he have others come and visit him (unless they are in a hazmat suit). The complex 23 hour medical procedure required to preserve his spine has been delayed for the foreseeable future. It is like he is in indefinite detention. Fortunately, his quarters and his diet are better than most.

Not only is he disabled and has to prove himself every day (even through the simple act of getting out of his bed), Shekhar is also coloured, not black, but brown. Or more simply expressed - not white. I remember being at an airport with him in Sicily some years ago. He commented that it was only a matter of time before security would be paying him some extra attention. Sure enough, he was right. Apparently this was his usual experience, even back in England. Though Shekhar is British of Indian heritage, 'security' only sees the colour of his skin and would more often than not confuse him with being from the Middle East. Discrimination is not subtle.

It is an established fact that the disadvantaged, be it through finances, culture, disability, colour, age or gender, do it harder in our societies during even the best of times. Their disadvantage is amplified during times of upheaval, such as war or a pandemic. The Black Lives Matter protests that surged around world were 'People of colour' (and their sympathisers) jacking up against even further hardship. A threshold seems to have been crossed, especially in the USA. If the elderly had the mobility I'm sure they would have been out there protesting too.

For me, 2020 feels like the accumulation of this century's transgressions. Yes, COVID-19 is a biological adversary. However, the virus has been given untold advantage thanks to a long run of greed, gross inequality, discrimination and an almost universal attachment to the free-market economy.

At the beginning of this pandemic, when the lockdowns were rolling out across Australia, I, like many others, naively thought that 2020 would be the year of our reckoning, a time when we could consider new paradigms for managing our societies (think Stephanie Kelton and Modern Monetary Theory) and tending to our planet (think solar and wind over coal and gas). Instead, the dichotomies are continuing to harden (such as the economy vs our health...since when did they become mutually exclusive?) and countries like the USA and the UK are on the brink of sustained civil unrest. I think I would be very pessimistic about humanity's future if it weren't for an individual like Shekhar (and his character - Veyd) who teaches us that triumph comes through positivity, effort and in increments.

In many ways, Veyd is like Ivan, the main character in the Solzhenitsyn novel, "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich". Set during a single day in a labour camp in 1950s Soviet Russia, Ivan lives a brutally oppressed existence, yet he recognises that his day was a good day, because he survived it to live another.

Both Veyd and Ivan Denisovich make the most of the present in order to live in the future. Veyd, however, is more optimistic than Ivan. Veyd believes the future will be good, not only for him but for his nieces and nephews as well.

Shekhar Bassi

My passion for cinema and the cinematic is what drives me to want to make and show a visual story. Making any film for me is about the story, about the need to make the film. For a first feature, the usual process would be to develop the screenplay. Find a producer. Re-writes. Fix one's mind on a certain budget and then wait for the 'planets to align' and knock on every door looking for money. But then that would have been a pre-COVID process for someone like me.

This new pandemic era has changed many things, not least the making of a film. Yet it has not affected the sense and instinct for cinema and the cinematic, the story-telling.

Having recently almost morphed from being able-bodied to now being disabled, many new challenges presented themselves to me in the making of the film. What I had taken for granted, hoped for and needed, required subtle and overt revision. My constant has been cinema. As a film-maker, I did not see my disability as an issue; hence it was the one thing I could continue to focus upon.

I had no idea that 2020 would present me with the opportunity to work with a brilliant film-maker like Molly. I did recognise 2020 was far from the 'new normal' for someone in my condition and of my race and heritage. When Molly proposed we make a film together, it was both crazy and far from crazy at the same time. I could see a character and I could see showing his approach to the ongoing highs and lows of everyday living. My mind was already racing about how to go about crafting and shooting this film. With me in London and Molly in Tasmania, I knew we were working and making a film in a completely new way. This was going to be a World Cinema film in the truest sense.

My disability comes from a progressive degenerative spinal condition. The 23+ hours surgery to save my spine has been delayed for the foreseeable future. I am categorised as high risk. This has meant 'shielding' for me (and many others) from the very day lockdown came into effect, sheltering in place and no visitors (not even family or friends).

There were new challenges to face, challenges which had to be overcome without any assistance at all. Shielding as a disabled person, I was witnessing each step and misstep of the COVID response. The viral pandemic soon came to run parallel to the racial pandemic, which has

been running...since human evolution began. I wanted to be out there marching, protesting, but I knew I could not. 'I Can't Breathe' was not only the rallying cry on the outside but also on the inside.

How does one try to make some sort of sense out of all of this? In this case, through a great deal of self-analysis. As a disabled British person of Indian heritage, what does one think, say and do? How does one cope with the anxiety, the fears, the concern for loved ones? How does one approach one's mental well-being?

The character of Veyd gives us hope and optimism in these uncertain times. It is a portrait of an affectionate yet strong-willed character. His day to day existence through the continuing period of shielding sees him never give up. Despite the physical pain, the knowing and the not knowing what is transpiring in the outside world, Veyd has faith. He has hope for his todays and his tomorrows.

Production Notes (as written by Molly)

Shekhar is my friend, an actor and a film-maker. His personal situation is profoundly challenging, yet he manages to transcend it with grace and optimism.

Shekhar lives in London. We have, over the years, stayed in regular touch via email. When Shekhar's health is below par he will, instead of writing, sometimes send a video message. These intermittent video messages of his had a quality to them that had me think, there is a film here. When I kept returning to this thought, I approached Shekhar with the idea of making a documentary about him. He demurred - with his usual grace.

I'm the sort of film-maker who needs the committed participation of my talent, so I accepted Shekhar's position and I let it go. Still the video messages came, and still I couldn't shake the potential of such a project. I asked Shekhar once more and while he didn't shut the door, nor did he open it wide.

Then welcome to 2020, a year that was well and truly punctured by March's end. The UK had been especially clumsy in handling COVID-19 in the early days and so by April, London was in lockdown.

Shekhar, being physically compromised, was required to 'shield', which effectively meant there were no exceptions, no physical therapy, no medical appointments, nothing. Given that he was living at home alone, Shekhar was now totally isolated. Even his brother Shalinder, a doctor and Shekhar's primary support, couldn't visit Shekhar because of the punishing hours Shal was working on the hospital frontline, trying to save people from dying of Covid.

It was at this time that Shekhar and I committed to regular video calls, in order to help alleviate something of Shekhar's solitude. Every second day, his evening and my morning, we would spend an hour or so catching up, mainly talking about the pandemic and politics.

Ever the film-maker, this idea of making a film with Shekhar would not go away. It bounced around in my head with a constant thud like that of a ball against a wall and there was really only one way to make the bouncing stop. Instead of asking him directly this time, I sent Shekhar an email.

I must have made a better case than I had previously because Shekhar's reply was along the lines of..."This story is now bigger than being just about me so, yes, I'm up for it...I can create a character that I can perform".

I knew that we could make whatever we were going to make on a minimal budget but we necessarily needed to actually have that minimal budget. Enter the Adelaide Film Festival Investment Fund. Though the AFF was still deliberating whether they could even hold their festival that October, my guess was they might have some loose change in their investment fund. After all, COVID-19 had wreaked havoc throughout the screen sector. Making films is an intimate business, cast and crew work very closely together; productions were halted suddenly and those films that were working to tight schedules in anticipation of AFF in October, were not necessarily going to be able to deliver in time or, in some situations, might not deliver at all.

With this in mind, I approached the festival director, Mat Kesting, who manages the investment fund. He accepted the proposal but without giving any sense of our prospects.

Meanwhile regular catch-ups with Shekhar continued, although we didn't discuss the project at all. Whether it would come back to us or not was in the lap of the gods. Then five or six weeks later, the very week I was planning to contact AFF to get a definitive response, Mat called. He said that if we were still good to go, then AFF were in. Mat's timing was impeccable.

Shekhar and I went to work immediately. We increased our meetings to daily. Arrangements were made for Shekhar to receive a high-end smart phone and he began filming within days. Early in the shoot Shekhar revisited events and experiences within his frame of reference, before later extending his repertoire to capture the essence of what it is to be disabled and a person of colour, especially during a pandemic.

Initially the working title of this film was *Still Standing...or was it Standing Still?* I was never too sure and as a director and producer I ought to know the name of my film. Also, that title had me burst into Elton John's song of the same name everytime I mentioned it. Then we tried *ShoPaapaa*, which was entirely too mysterious to ever really work. Our eventual settling on *Running With Crutches*, a title that's almost the exact opposite to *Standing Still*, reflects on the character of Veyd, and

especially on Shekhar who plays him, the Shekhar who even from his hospital bed continues to make, or to imagine, new works of cinematic passion.

Shekhar shot every day, bar one, for fifty days. We were accumulating a tremendous amount of footage especially as Shekhar likes to tell long stories. Keep it short, I'd say. I can't, he'd reply. Towards the end of the shooting period we began the picture cut with Tania Nehme, the editor. We were very fortunate that the only constraint we really had was the AFF deadline, which necessitated a very limited time allocated to the picture edit and later the sound edit.

Creatively we could be bold. We built the story, set upon the style and established our rules early. Where we were relaxed was in duration. We could accept this film wherever it landed as long as it rolled in at over forty minutes (in pitching the film to the AFF, I had proposed 40 to 70 minutes...it's always better to under-sell and over-deliver). In the edit, the film quickly found its natural length at 95 minutes. We had a feature film on our hands and a stylistically complex one at that.

When it came to sound design, all the more so. Tom Heuzenroeder, the sound designer, had sonically very little to start with: the film's world is entirely contained within a sparse domestic space; there is no conventional story arc and not even a musical score.

We worked this film right up to the wire when it came to delivering for the Adelaide Film Festival. Sound mix by Tom and picture grade by longtime collaborator Mark Eland were still underway the week before Festival opening. The Festival were very accommodating throughout. It's tough to program a film when you know very little about its content and even less about its duration.

Mat Kesting noted at the AFF program launch that *Running with Crutches* (at that stage with its *ShoPaapaa* title) could well be the first feature film to deal with the contagions that rose to the fore in 2020. The production process certainly reflected this, with Molly in Tasmania, Tania in Melbourne, Tom in Adelaide, Mark in Sydney and Shekhar in London...a film made entirely remotely.

Cast and Crew

Cast

Veyd: **Shekhar Bassi**

Crew

Directors:

Shekhar Bassi is a screenwriter/filmmaker. A trained actor, Shekhar started out behind the camera as a screenwriter before setting out to direct film. His multi-award winning short films have screened at various festivals around the world including Adelaide, Tribeca, New York, Toronto and many more.

Molly Reynolds is a screen-based story-teller. She has written, directed and/or produced *The Waiting Room*, *Another Country*, *Still Our Country*, *What Makes Me*, *12 Canoes*, *Peter Churcher* and *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes*. More recently she directed the acclaimed feature documentary, *My Name is Gulpilil*. Her work has played at leading film and arts festivals, including the Cannes, Telluride and Adelaide Film Festivals.

Editor: Tania M. Nehme

Sound Designer: Tom Heuzenroeder

Camera: Shekhar Bassi

Colourist: Mark Eland

Producers: Rolf de Heer and Shalinder Bassi, Molly Reynolds

Presented by **Adelaide Film Festival** in association with **Intelligent Ink Films (UK)** and in partnership with **Fandango Australia** and **ABCG Film**.

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