

Rising Star: Azhar Saleem



My interest in filmmaking began early. It started with a passion for animation, but because I was too impatient to do stop-frame I turned to live-action filming. My early efforts spanned genres; one moment a western, the next science fiction. At that time I shot everything in-camera and if I wanted to put music onto the film, I'd hold a tape recorder by my side and press play on it as I hit record on the camera! All this helped later as I now tend to see what I'm shooting as an edited film in my head.

My passion turned into a career when I saw how film was such a powerful medium to tell stories. Being in the cinema at the age of 12 and watching a 1000-strong audience laughing, screaming and jumping all at the same time was such an awe-inspiring thing for me.

I continued making short films with friends at school, becoming known as the guy who would pressure students into starring in films over the weekend. I've taken a pretty straightforward approach in my filmmaking education, having studied Media Production at Staffordshire University. My tutor, John Holden, there was instrumental to where I am now; so many things he taught me that still reverberate in my head when I'm shooting!

After university I worked for a year in a production company that made music videos but became jaded by the small budgets and the lack of diversity in this field so I decided to go to film school and spent two years at the London Film School.

In my last year at LFS, I entered the Kodak Student Commercials Awards for 2005. I'd never done an ad before and shooting a 30 second spot for Pilsner Urquell was such a liberating experience for me. I had immense amounts of fun and enjoyed the process of creating a simple story with beautiful visuals and great performances. With my short films, I always felt they had to mean something, but with this I could just have fun!

The ad won two awards at the ceremony, Best Post Production and Joint 2nd in Brief. My success led to the chance to direct my next commercial, a one-minute trailer for the London Film School's 50th Anniversary.

I initially thought the school would want a generic ad for the film school, like 'here's the studio, here's the editing facilities, here's the canteen,' so I purposefully wrote something that was totally opposed to that and let my imagination run free, never thinking they'd take me up on it. In fact they loved it and I pitched up against six other students in front of LFS staff and advertising professionals. I was successful and began straight away on pre-production.

This was by far the biggest project I had undertaken in my career. We were kindly sponsored by Kodak, Panavision, Technicolor and Pogo Films. Because of this we had the fantastic chance of shooting on 35mm anamorphic with whatever kit we wanted. Not only that but we got to do a 2K DI on the finished commercial. I had a fantastic producer, Lysander Ashton, who marshalled the cast and crew of sixty over three days of filming.

The ad was a great success and most importantly the school loved it. It's shown before all their screenings at the film school, as well as various anniversary events in the UK and abroad. Though I think the greatest achievement was that it got me noticed by several commercial production companies. Only a mere two months after graduating from film school I was signed to Moon Films who represent me internationally for commercials. As a young director starting out on my career, I thought they were a great company to be a part of. Everyone is extremely friendly and helpful and you're made to feel welcome in the company. With a small roster of directors compared to other production companies, I felt it would be a great place to start and grow as I wouldn't get lost amidst a huge number of directing talent.

Last month, the LFS Ad was nominated for a Young Director Award at the Cannes Golden Lions Festival. I got my first taste of Cannes and loved it. I'm hoping the nomination will begin to open more doors within the advertising community.

For the future, I'm still continuing writing my own short films as well as collaborating with other writers. I want to balance my commercials with short films and build up a body of work that will help to take me to the next step: features films.

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