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TIMES

"As An Animator, You See Life In Slow Motion!"

The wondrous world of Ishaan Awasthi in *Taare Zameen Par* began with the animation of the title sequence. The lively three-minute vignette, filled with brightly-coloured fish and fly-slaying frogs, nectar-dripping flowers and morphing peacocks, cutely-designed spaceships and voluminous hippos opened a window to a new world, and offered an insight into the mind and heart of the film's little protagonist. It also charmingly set the stage for the story of a boy who saw life differently. This imaginary and imaginative world should have been created by an innocent child's mind but it wasn't. It was dreamt of and brought to life by Dhimant Vyas, an animation expert whose mind is the next best to a child's.

"I see life in slow motion," Dhimant says, smiling while looking benignly at sugar being stirred in his cup of tea, "I see spaces in between continuous movement as naturally as my eyes can see movement between two static shots. It's a gift that most good animators have." Unassuming and reticent, Dhimant comes alive when explaining the skills that helped him create the title animation sequence for *Taare...*

Actually, he wasn't even supposed to do it since Aamir Khan had commissioned a "big" production house to execute the animation. After seven to eight months on the job and just two months before the scheduled release of *Taare...*, the "big" company showed Aamir what it had created, and the producer-director rejected it outright. Aamir then called in Dhimant for consultation. He had a look at Dhimant's portfolio, especially the stop motion clay animation work he had done for a



Animator Dhimant Vyas. Below: animation work in *Taare Zameen Par*

London-based company on a television programme called *Creature Comfort*. "Aamir was earlier interested in 2-D animation with a painterly look," recalls Dhimant, "but when he saw the quality of stop motion clay animation, he accepted it as the better option and told me to start thinking of ideas."

Dhimant put his child-like mind at work and storyboarded the first drawings of what eventually became the title sequence. "We changed a few things but essentially we agreed to go with what I had storyboarded," says Dhimant. "Aamir gave me a free hand, telling me to add and subtract from the animation whatever I thought best. I had his trust and that helped me immensely in ex-

ploring new ideas."

Within six weeks, Dhimant delivered the finished project. "Animation is a very tedious, meticulous and time-consuming process," says Dhimant. "The four of us - I and three of my people making clay models - worked 18 hours a day for six weeks; we would manage to shoot only three to four seconds of footage daily. It was back-breaking work but the end results were very satisfying."

All animation work is tedious and laborious. There is no easy way to make animation sequences, though the use of computers does help. Animation in 2-D is a simpler option; it involves creating panels (drawn-and-coloured frames) on computers which allow a great deal of storage and duplication. Once the basic designs of characters and their body parts are finalised, much of the animation depends on cutting and pasting the required expressions and body parts, a process employed in films like *The Return Of Hanuman*. The flip side of 2-D animation is that the final results can look slightly plastic, flat and boring.

Animation in 3-D is immensely more difficult and complex since it involves

creation of 3-D images of the location and characters. The process is time-consuming and expensive, and it can take three to four years with 400 people working on it to complete just one film in 3-D, as was the case with *Shrek*. The final product can seem amazingly real but the cost is prohibitive.

There are two other processes for animation and these don't make much use of computers. One is the age-old art of drawing and handpainting each and every frame, a process that Disney used to employ for its animation films earlier and which India's Gitanjali Rao is presently using for the animation film she is making; and the other is called stop motion clay animation, which was used in films like *Chicken Run*; till *Taare...*, it had never been used in Indian films earlier.

"My choice was to do the *Taare...* sequence in stop motion clay animation because it is the only process in which the texture of the animated object is visible and consistent," explains Dhimant, "and in the context of the child in the film, clay seemed the perfect medium."

Once the concept was agreed upon by both Aamir and Dhimant, stop motion clay animation made Dhimant's life easier. Though the work is back-breaking and requires great patience and skill, this process is simpler than most other forms of animation. Clay animation required Dhimant to get proper clay models made of all the characters in the animation sequence - fish, peacock, birds *et al* - which, naturally, had the 3-D look. He placed them down against the required flat background and shot the sequence from the top angle, frame by frame, with a still camera, Nikon 400D. The most difficult part ought to have been coordination of diverse movements of various characters or objects to achieve seamless continuity within the sequen-

ce. For instance, at a particular point, a school of fish is moving, first slowly and then speedily, at the top of the frame while a series of other big and small fish are moving at their own pace in the same sequence. In order to achieve this, after shooting one frame, Dhimant would physically move all the fish (and everything else in

the frame) into position for the next shot, which is why the process is known as stop motion. Considering that he had to shoot 25 frames for each second of footage, Dhimant had to move, simultaneously, multiple characters to make each one's movement seem perfect. The idea itself is mind-boggling: to move about 7-8 objects 25 times for 25 shots to can just one second of the footage and to move them in such a manner that each object's movement is fluid and seamless!

For one particular sequence, an earthworm is shown gliding along the tree branch gracefully, and below, on the pond, perched on leaves, are a few frogs, croaking. The earthworm falls off the branch and the elongated tongues of these frogs reach out to grab it. On the screen, the sequence unfolds so smoothly that it is difficult to imagine that it was shot one frame at a time or 25 frames to achieve one second of the scene. "I moved the earthworm every second frame since it had to look slow and graceful," explains Dhimant, "but the movement of the frogs was much faster



Aamir Khan observes as Dhimant Vyas works on the animation. Below: two characters for animation

and I had to move them every frame."

In another sequence, a peacock morphs into a flower, but for that Dhimant had ten different clay models made of the various stages of transition and the complex results were easily achieved.

"Creating movement out of static frames and shifting the characters in each frame to achieve it, for me, was the easiest part!" laughs Dhimant. "It comes with training, of course. I can coordinate movement for a dozen characters in the same shot without breaking into a sweat. I've done it earlier during my stint in London with Aardman Animations, the company which had created *Chicken Run*."

Dhimant's talent found an amazing outlet in *Taare...* and he is very grateful to Aamir for that. In terms of money, the job earned him about Rs. 15 lakh though he normally charges about Rs. 12,000 per second of animation, which is not too expensive going by the market rates. He's desperately hoping to work on a full-length animation film but he has not had much luck so far. "I'm doing a few ad films and MTV promos, and I am negotiating to storyboard some action sequences for a film, but getting to do an animation feature would be fantastic."

It would really be wonderful, not just for Dhimant or the production house which makes him that offer but also for the Indian film industry. India would finally be able to create an animation film that may then rank among the best in the world.

For filmmakers who want to take up Dhimant's offer, he can be contacted by e-mail at dhimantvyas@yahoo.com.

- Surindra Bhatia

