

**Interview with Chris Smith -
The Director**

Selma: This is a universal story of intersecting lives, the criss-cross between transience and permanence, the rural and the urban, it could have been set anywhere, why the decision to shoot the film in Goa?

Chris: I had stayed at the hotel that is featured in the film a few years earlier while working on another film. I was intrigued by the world that we experienced within the hotel and always thought it would be a great setting for a film. I also was very attracted to the geography of the town - where you have this bustling, energetic and visually stunning little city that surrounds this very quiet, tranquil elevated area. Metaphorically it was a perfect setting for this story.

Selma: The film wonderfully explores two themes very relevant to Goa, without featuring a single Goan, that of an unmitigated migration of India's impoverished masses at one end, and an elite, Indian middle-class cannibalising land resources at the other end. How did you investigate these themes? Was this a conscious decision or was it incidental?

Chris: We went to India with intention of collaborating with our actors and crew to create something that was as authentic as possible. Most of these decisions were just natural evolutions that came out of long discussions we had internally as we made the film.

Selma: Did you feel at any point the pressure to interject a Goan point of view into the film?

Chris: We were working with a local team, so we tried to interject their view as best we could.

The Pool : The Secret Chronicler of Human Misery



A garden-variety philosopher with a dark secret seeking redemption; a brooding, estranged daughter sulking by the poolside is the stuff of hackneyed stereotypes on screen. Except, the drama-film *The Pool* is not about these lives, it's about Venkatesh, part-time room-boy at a seedy Goan tourist hotel and full-time Secret Chronicler of Human Misery.

The original story by writer Randy Russell was set in the mid-western state of Iowa, America, but Director Chris Smith made the decision to adapt it and shoot on location in Goa. The film opens with Venkatesh merging inconspicuously into a nondescript, crowded market which could be anywhere in India, deftly blurring the lines between Goa and India, a distinction most Goans will insist upon. Venkatesh the dark, gawky migrant room-boy with a squalid overhanging shirt worn three sizes too large, is everything India despises about the "other." His life, and that of his Sancho Panza friend, Jhangir the orphan *chaiwallah*, is essentially invisible to us. They exist in the blurry backdrop of our consciousness, sweeping our roads, clearing away garbage, bringing us our tea but never intruding into our clean, sterile world of garbage recycling and health conscious living. Instead, Venkatesh and Jhangir are the very antithesis of our aspirations and middle-class vigilance; they love oily food, a Chaka-Chak campaign to rid Panjim of plastic only interferes with their business of selling plastic bags, they think nothing of killing rabbits to survive and dabble briefly with the idea of peddling drugs. Their lives are transient. They shun attachments, even of the human kind which might tie them down and wear them out.



Selma: The script is amazingly accurate in its colloquialisms. Who wrote the script? Did you have help from the child actors themselves to portray the language of the street?

Chris: I wrote most of the scenes, but we always left it up to the actors to put the ideas into their own words.

Selma: Who did you think would be the target audience for the film?

Chris: I was just trying to make the best film possible - so I didn't focus on audience while we were shooting.

(email interview)

From the safety of Venkatesh's tree-perch, he views the silent drama of "another world" unfolding around a pool of water. People from Delhi or Bombay who live in huge homes which lie vacant for most part of the year, who have pools they never swim in, who accumulate things for which they have no need, and yet their lives are pockets of condescended misery tucked into awkward silences, unspoken emotions and estrangement from the people they love. The view from the perch reveals the squalidness of affluence.

Venkatesh's only aspiration is to dive into the cool waters of the pool. He insinuates himself into the lives of these people posing as a casual labourer but the angst-ridden father, a brilliant understated performance by Nana Patekar, recognises him for what he is; a voyeur in their lives and the secret chronicler of their misery. He hires Venkatesh to assist with garden chores and so begins a curious friendship-triangle, unwittingly making Venkatesh the only human link between the father and his daughter.

The effortless script, direction and editing makes me think, Director Chris Smith has fallen into the pit of our collective anxiety entirely by accident. How could an "outsider" have so accurately captured the zeitgeist of our times, the complexity of our moral quandaries regarding an unmitigated migration of impoverished labour into Goa and the cannibalisation of land resources by an elite, seemingly uncaring Indian middle-class? Without offering a Goan viewpoint on either of these issues, Chris nonetheless cements our common humanity. He forces us to seek solutions which don't dehumanise entire sections of society or turn these issues into mere effigies to be burned on the pyre of jingoistic regional politics. Not since *Salaam Bombay* has a film articulated with such sincerity the bleak incompatibilities between rural and urban India, between an educated, Anglophile India born to privilege and one confined to tradition and superstition, between vagrancy and possession, fulfilment and hopelessness. The Pool, winner of the Special Jury Prize, 2007 Sundance Film Festival, is a moving portrait of a changing Goa.