

Sturla Gunnarsson's *Monsoon*

I'll Take the Rain

By Adam Nayman

AS A RULE, IT'S A LAST RESORT to talk about the weather, but Sturla Gunnarsson thinks it's very interesting. The Emmy- and Genie-award-winning filmmaker has revelled in extreme climates since his childhood in Iceland and says that he's at his happiest when contending with the elements. "I like weather," says Gunnarsson over lunch in downtown Toronto. "My comfort zone is just not in a moderate place. I like it to be really cold, really hot, really rainy or really windy. There's no such thing as bad weather. There are only bad clothes."

So you won't get any sob stories about a film crew getting soaked in this story about *Monsoon*, a majestic new documentary shot on location in India and beneath torrents of relentless rain. (The film will touch down this fall at the Toronto International Film Festival.) If Gunnarsson's previous David Suzuki doc, *Force of Nature*, was a wary meditation on climate change, *Monsoon* is an awestruck homage to a meteorological force that has continued unabated for thousands of years. "I think that [*Monsoon*] has a pagan soul in the same way that *Force of Nature* does," says Gunnarsson. "It speaks to the same idea that Suzuki has about the 'invisible tendrils of attraction,' which is what some people call love. There is that same sense of intuition, and of something numinous within nature."

Certainly some of the imagery in *Monsoon* touches on the supernatural: the repeated images of gathering clouds and drenched land- and cityscapes have an eerie beauty pitched somewhere between ancient paintings and CGI. "I wanted to do something really cinematic and which would play on a big screen," explains Gunnarsson, who shot *Monsoon* using high-definition 4K Red Epic cameras—the same ones used for some sequences in Jennifer Baichwal and Edward Burtynsky's similarly stunning *Watermark*. He says that what he was after in *Monsoon* was a combination of epic scale and intimacy, and that he wasn't about to sacrifice one for the other. Still, the most lingering images in the film are those that go big, and he's proud of them. "There is a shot near the end that overlooks the Bangladesh flood plains, and you're talking about thousands of kilometres [inside the frame]. You can see the curvature of the Earth."

Monsoon took shape after a meeting between Gunnarsson and



Monsoon (dir. Sturla Gunnarsson, 2014)

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producer Ina Fichman, who pitched him the project shortly after the release of *Force of Nature*. But it wasn't the first time that the director had considered making a movie on the topic. "I'd been thinking about it for a really long time, probably since I first heard the word 'monsoon,' which was just so romantic," he says. "When I made *Such a Long Journey*, I was [in India] just before the monsoon arrived. It was so trippy and druggy and interesting that it just got into my head."

Although it's a Canadian-French co-production directed by an



Icelandic filmmaker, *Monsoon* doesn't feel like the work of outsiders. Starting with the shoot for *Such a Long Journey*, his award-winning adaptation of Rohinton Mistry's Mumbai-based character drama, Gunnarsson is very familiar with India. "For whatever reason, I'm very comfortable there," he says. "I have photos from the set when I was directing *Such a Long Journey*, and while that was a very challenging production, I have this big shit-eating grin on my face in every single one. It's not an easy place to get things done: Sometimes, it's like you

can just do one task a day. In Bombay, you just try to drive to town and that's it for the day. In India, the three things you need to drive are good brakes, a good horn and good luck. But there is also something that transcends all that, and you just let things go."

That's a healthy philosophy for a film shoot that was designed to be at the mercy of the weather. Where other film shoots might try to shoot around rainfall, Gunnarsson was tracking overcast skies with the relentlessness of a bounty hunter. "It was just so capricious," he



Monsoon (dir. Sturla Gunnarsson, 2014)

says. “You have a crew and the meter is running. There’s only so much money and so much time. You’re reading the reports and saying ‘It should be raining here now, but it isn’t.’ You wonder if you should get on a plane and go to the next place. Or you get to the next place and the rain has stopped. Every night, we’d go to bed studying satellite images. And so we were like everyone else in India during monsoon season. We’re subject to the rain gods.”

This feeling of deference to the elements is a major theme in *Monsoon*, which focusses on a wide cross-section of human characters to complement its ephemeral, eponymous subject. The first character we meet is Akhila Prasad, a 12-year-old girl living with her family by the riverside in Kerala; they’re well accustomed to the effect that the monsoon will have on their immediate surroundings, but the film makes it clear that their preparations before the start of the rainy season are at best provisional. But then the same goes for Mr. Santosh, the director of an observatory dedicated to tracking the monsoon and predicting its severity from year to year. And then there is Bishnu Shastri, a Calcutta bookie who takes bets (and occasionally, a bath) on where the rain is going to start or stop next.

Gunnarsson carefully handpicked his cast one year before rolling cameras during a visit to India with his son. “Over the course of two weeks, we travelled the whole route,” he says. “I looked at the path of the monsoon and at the places where it was going to have the most dramatic impact, like the backwaters and the locations below sea level. And in Bombay, of course. The arrival of the monsoon in Bombay is always a mythological thing. We were looking for people whose lives would intersect with the monsoon in some way.”

One of the most interesting things about *Monsoon* is that while the people onscreen are charming, they’re also oddly passive; even the ones with big personalities, like the Calcutta bookie, radiate—but with ambivalence. Gunnarsson says that this shared sensation of being acted-upon is the access point to a larger philosophical truth. “I’ve been to places where the weather is big, like Iceland. But the monsoon is something that happens every year, since the beginning of time. There are stalactites in caves that can tell you how big the monsoons were thousands and thousands of years ago. You still don’t know, though, how big it will be. Or where it’s going to move. That defines the fatalism that you feel in India, I think. One year, a farmer will get all the rain he



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needs for his crops and thirty kilometres away, another guy will get nothing. And then the next year, it's totally reversed. The monsoon defines the conditions of existence in India."

It also defines many aspects of the culture, and while *Monsoon* is first and foremost a piece of reportage—it begins before the rainfall and continues on to its end—it has its reflective aspects as well. In perhaps the loveliest interlude, Gunnarsson interviews Moushumi Chatterjee, the star of the 1979 Bollywood classic *Manzil*. The film was famous for the participation of star Amitabh Bachchan, but as the sexagenarian actress explains, it was also unique for being filmed in the streets of Bombay rather than in a studio, and in the middle of the monsoon as well, which led to a lovers-in-the-deluge sequence (excerpted in *Monsoon*) that suggests a subcontinental gloss on *Singin' in the Rain*.

Gunnarsson says that he admires the guerilla ethos of *Manzil* and that he was inspired to know that shooting in the midst of such extreme conditions was possible. "You have to have stamina," he insists. "You have to keep going. When you're making a documentary, if you've been out there filming for 10 hours and then something amazing comes along, you can't stop. You have to shoot for another three hours or

however long it takes. This is a basic, fundamental rule. Have you ever talked to a filmmaker who got a movie made in the amount of time it was supposed to take?"

He says that it was this same quality of stamina that led him to select the relatively unheralded cinematographer Van Royko for the project. "He's really gifted, a Montreal boy. I thought he could match my stamina. Most people can't, and I'm fucking old. But I knew he was going to go toe-to-toe with me. A Red Epic isn't typically something you shoot a documentary on, but he had this amazing rig.... He had stripped it down so it was just this computer and a bunch of lenses. His muscle memory and facility with the camera is just incredible."

That ability to think and work on the fly is key to Gunnarsson, who has moved back and forth between documentaries and feature films for the last 20 years and admits to having a restless sensibility. "Robert Altman is sort of my hero," he says. "He had a lot of stamina. And all of his work is rooted in the real world. He didn't formally make documentaries, but I think his work has a documentary spirit. And you know, I'm not as political as I should be, and I've paid for it. So [with Altman] it's nice to see that there were other people who were that way and who survived and managed to have a career."

With *Monsoon*, Gunnarsson was determined not to compromise his vision even when it came to securing funding. "Both of us [Ina Fichman and I] have had experiences in the past where we've done films for broadcasters and tried to shoot the gap between television and a more cinematic vision. This time, we chose to make something cinematic and then there will be other things and commissions that come out of that later."

Gunnarsson believes that *Monsoon* is one of his most personal films, and while the filmmaker doesn't appear on camera, he's a definite presence via his voice-over, which is mostly unobtrusive but occasionally lets us know what's going on inside his head. Perhaps the key line in this film about the sheer power of Mother Nature is an aside dropped early on: "I am in a land of believers, but I am not one myself." It's less a case of a secular director in a religious country trying to draw a line in the sand than an artist trying to find some continuity between his subjects and himself—and finding it in the enormity of the monsoon itself.

"For me, the idea of faith is very intriguing. I went to a temple in India with my wife, who is a secular Sikh, and I found it so deeply moving. I was trying to explore this in the film. What is it about faith that touches me even though I'm not willing to become a believer? Before really thinking hard on it, I would have described myself as an atheist. After more reflection, though, I'd say I'm more agnostic. I'm willing to accept this feeling of mystery, even if whatever that is is never going to be something that I'll be able to explain or reason out."

It's this humility that finally makes *Monsoon* an emotionally engaging experience underneath its slick, accomplished surface textures. Gunnarsson is a seasoned filmmaker, and his wide and well-honed skill-set is evident in the film's visual and journalistic facility. At the same time, *Monsoon* has a spaciousness at its core, a sense of openness that shouldn't (and hopefully won't) be confused for a lack of intellectual rigor. There are no twists in *Monsoon*: its title is not a metaphor, and the rains come more or less on schedule, and with the requisite effect (which is devastating in places). And yet it's a powerful film, not in spite of its inexorability, but because of it. Maybe it's that Gunnarsson knows that in the end, talking about the weather really is sort of boring. The drama lies in just sitting back and watching (and feeling) it happen. As if we had any say in the matter.

Adam Nayman teaches film at U of T and Ryerson. His first book, *It Doesn't Suck: Showgirls* (ECW Press), was recently published.