

# WOMAN ON TOP

After dabbling with film technology, supervising scripts, marketing and developing e-commerce projects, **Shailja Gupta** has finally managed to make her first independent feature film, *Walkaway*. **Rhea Dhanbhoora** talks to the multi-talented marketing head of Red Chillies Entertainment USA

>> Apart from being an independent filmmaker and marketing head, Shailja also spends her time pursuing pottery and painting

Jaina Kumar | HRM



## SHAILJA SAYS

### When you're not chasing career goals...

I go on holidays, watch plays, symphonies and films and dabble with painting and sculpture.

### The people who inspire you...

Praveen Vajpeyi, my first boss, who taught me how to think digital design and Shah Rukh Khan, my mentor in the film industry, who taught me about passion for work and the importance of failure.

### Something we don't know about you...

I don't plan and think ahead. I just want to do some good work and do different stuff.

Shuffling between New York to Mumbai can't be easy, but Shailja Gupta does it all and still has time for her hobbies and boyfriend. We talk to her about her independent film, *Walkaway* and being a part of the Toronto International Film Festival's Summit.

### Did you plan your life the way it has panned out?

I never had a master plan. Everything I did was out of instinct, but I always wanted to do something creative. Once I decided to make a film, I joined New York Film Academy for a filmmaking course. I worked as an assistant script supervisor for the movie *Raincoat* and spent two years on sets, observing the filmmaking process while working on technology projects for a film production house. After running a technology company for 10 years, I directed my first feature film *Walkaway* and marketed a film internationally (*Chokher Bali*), did digital marketing and merchandising for *Ra.One* and now for *Chennai Express* and *Happy New Year*. I also worked as a publicity designer and developed websites and e-commerce projects for films and took two years off to hold exhibitions for my pottery, sculpture and painting.

### You're the head of Red Chillies in the USA — how did that happen?

I was working for a web design company and Shah Rukh Khan was assigned there. We met and worked on a project called *srkworld.com*. Unfortunately, that project didn't take off because of the dotcom bust. I took a break to help Shah Rukh with *Ra.One*, heading the digital merchandising and licensing products. After that, we decided to open Red Chillies in the US.

### Was it difficult to break into the market of another country?

The idea was to have a presence in America and evaluate opportunities and collaborations. It's too new to get going on a project, but the opportunities are endless and I am in the process of meeting different kinds of people.

### What was it like doing the digital marketing for *Ra.One*?

This has been one of the craziest and coolest projects that I have worked on! Travelling to China, exploring and working with factories, working with Google and creating the first gadget for a film promotion was amazing. *Ra.One's* digital merchandising and marketing was something that had never been done for a film in terms of the tie-ups that we had.

### Tell us about your work with Disney.

I worked with Indigames, which has

## WALKAWAY

Shailja's first movie is a light romantic comedy/ drama. It's the story of four Indian couples living in New York, at different stages of their relationships. From Soham & Nidhi, struggling to connect two years into their arranged marriage and Shridhar & Genevieve, an engaged couple trying to integrate her French family into his Tamil Brahmin family, to Vinay & Sia, a new couple set up by their parents, getting sucked into the Big Fat Indian Wedding drama and Darius & Anu, Vinay & Sia's roommates, having a casual fling — the stories are about each one constantly struggling with their own desires and expectations.

been acquired by Disney, on the mobile game development for *Ra.One*. It turned out to be one of the most successful mobile games developed for a film.

### Tell us more about being invited to the Toronto International Film Festival's Asian Summit.

Being a part of this festival is an honour and it was a great experience. I have participated in TIFF before, so they knew me. Since they had a section on Bollywood, they felt that it was a good fit to invite me. It was my second time after *Chokher Bali*. It was larger, brighter and crazier. TIFF's towering building, Tiff Bell Lightbox, looked intimidating but within minutes of checking into my hotel, walking to the registration office and getting my industry badge, I felt at home.

### How did the panel discussion at the festival go?

It was about Bollywood and the independent industry in India. Since I am an independent filmmaker as well as part of one of the biggest Bollywood production houses, I could speak from both sides. I spoke about the plight of independent filmmaking, while understanding that huge production houses have their reasons to make the kind of films that they do.

### *Walkaway*, your maiden film, has garnered a lot of interest. Were you drawing from personal experiences?

The film was the most rewarding and painful learning experience. I shot the film in 28 days on a tight budget. I drew inspiration from friends all across the world as I saw them, living conventional lives and moving seamlessly from one phase of their life to the next; as if following a template. I found this template driven life very intriguing.

### With such a busy schedule, do you have time for love?

I'm not married yet because I don't believe in the institution of marriage. But, my boyfriend Kurush and I have been together for the last eight years in New York.

### Tell us about your love for pottery.

I love working on creative projects. So, when I got an opportunity to learn pottery and sculpture, I jumped at the chance. I had an exhibition recently and I still work on such projects when I can.