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INDIAN EXPRESS

Mumbai Calling
January 25th, 2010

<http://epaper.indianexpress.com/IE/IEH/2010/02/04/ArticleHtms...>

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As Lucy Liu's directorial venture *Meena* nears completion, the team members talk about the project



DIPTI NAGPAUL-D'SOUZA AND RITIKA JAIN

IT is indeed a challenge to bring out a camera on Mumbai streets and remain unnoticed. But Hollywood actor Lucy Liu (of *Charlie's Angel* and *Kill Bill* fame) did manage to evade the public eye for a few days as she shot here in Mumbai for her directorial debut *Meena*, a 30-minute narrative-style documentary, which is one of six such features that make up the American tele-series *Half the Sky* based on the book by Pulitzer Prize winners Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn.

As Liu wraps up her shoot and readies to leave

for Los Angeles, she finally gives in. "Directing a film in India has been absolutely amazing. I'm honoured to be a part of this project, talking about empowerment of women and girls around the world." She refers to the six-part series that looks at a variety of countries and cultures—Ethiopia, Somaliland, Cambodia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India—and explores gender inequality through the issues of health, education, economics and sexual violence. Each episode, directed by various popular actresses like Angelina Jolie, Scarlett Johanson and Ashley Judd, profiles a woman who has journeyed from tragedy to triumph.

The feature that Liu is directing tells the true story of Meena Hasina, a woman who was sold into a brothel as a child and who ultimately escaped to become an advocate for the rights of girls and women. It stars Tannishtha Chatterjee as the protagonist and Himani Shivpuri as the brothel owner. Chatterjee says that Liu chose her for the film after seeing her in Sarah Gavron's *Brick Lane*. "The producers then got in touch with me directly," she says.

Varun Shah, the unit production manager for the series, explains that the film is a narrative-style documentary. "The real-life Meena will be talking about her life once the story has been re-enacted." The pre-production and production work in India took over two months though Liu's schedule is as short as 14 days. "She has directed the film along with Megan Aarons and Collin Gray who are siblings and Lucy's childhood friends."

The film has been shot chiefly in the narrow alleys of Versova Village and a bungalow in Andheri. Though unfamiliar to the country, Liu took to the landscape and milieu and didn't consider it as an extraordinary challenge, asserts Shah. "However, it's interesting to note that the entire film has been shot through a still camera, which is an emerging trend abroad. The DSLR cameras, Canon D5 and D7, gave us some very interesting results which helped keep our budget under control."

About Liu, both Chatterjee and Shah are all praises. The former feels that it was great that as an outsider, she didn't attach any "exotic" value to the approach of the story. "She was understanding and above all, very sensitive towards the issue," says Chatterjee. Shah finds it commendable that despite being a huge name, Liu came without any emotional baggage. "She had a clear vision and was sensitive to the production challenges. So if we had to shoot in a number of alleys, she brought it down to only three. And she never had any "special" needs and ate and behaved just like the rest of the staff."



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