

Stories of Resilience

An Interview with Filmmaker Shubham Chhabra

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Fig. 1 | Filmmaker Shubham Chhabra at the KDocsFF screening event for his two films. Rattanphoto, 2024.

As part of the ARTS 4800 Practicum course in the Faculty of Arts at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, I was placed with KDocsFF, where I had the opportunity to apply the skills and knowledge I gained throughout my undergraduate degree. While my History degree doesn't directly align with filmmaking, it has fostered a deep appreciation for individual stories within a broader societal context. Being a part of KDocsFF allowed me to merge this appreciation for storytelling with the power of film to amplify social justice issues.

Through this placement, I was introduced to director, producer, writer, and recipient of the KDocsFF Emerging Filmmaker Residency Prize, Shubham Chhabra (Fig. 1). I had the opportunity to collaborate with Chhabra on several occasions, most notably by assisting KDocsFF with the screening of his films, *Cash Cows* (Honeywagon Media, 2023), a drama-comedy (Fig. 2), and the rough cut of his upcoming documentary *Working Title* (Honeywagon Media, 2024), both of which explore the lives and commodification of international students in Canada as they strive to build better lives for themselves. The test screening event for Chhabra was aimed at gathering audience feedback to help guide and refine his documentary toward its final cut. One of my primary responsibilities for the event was to create an audience feedback form.

In our conversation, we discussed the challenges of navigating multiple roles as a director, producer, and writer, his creative process, and the themes of immigration, resilience, and identity that influence his filmmaking. Chhabra also shared insights he gained from his KDocsFF residency and his time spent in



Fig. 2 | Promotional poster for *Cash Cows*. Honeywagon Media, 2023.

the KDocs Social Justice lab. Here is a look at our conversation, where he reflects on his experiences and shares details of his future projects.

Kiran Johal: With experience as a filmmaker, director, and producer, you bring a unique perspective to each role. Can you tell us how you first got into filmmaking? Among directing, producing, and writing, which resonates with you most creatively, and why?

Shubham Chhabra: From attempting to make my first short film at the age of 12, sharing my vision through the camera has always been a core part of how I express myself. My love for filmmaking reignited when I took an arts elective at Langara College, Intro to Film, which inspired me to seriously consider it as a career. Since then, it has been a wonderful journey, from going to film school to working on blockbuster features to doing my own projects like *Cash Cows*, progressing one step at a time.

Directing resonates with me the most because I love taking stories with a strong foundation and adding my own perspective and skills to them. I also find it to be the most enjoyable aspect of filmmaking. Being on set, tackling challenges in the moment, and bringing it all to the screen is [. . .] a privilege and an exhilarating experience. I feel incredibly lucky to do what I love. Writing and producing are my second loves, as they are crucial to supporting a director's career—especially for an emerging director like me.

KJ: Your journey to Canada as an international student seems to be an essential part of both your personal story and also your filmmaking perspective. How has that experience as an immigrant shaped the way that you approach storytelling?

SC: It has informed it if not 100%, then most of it, because you can only tell stories that, A, you have lived, and then B, you also have experienced—either directly or by proxy. I think me being here, realizing that there are a lot of stories that come from someone of my background that aren't being told, has been important. It's almost like I'm a director because I'm able to tell stories based on my experience here in Canada. If that wasn't the case, I'm sure I'd be telling different stories, but not to the same degree, not with the same tone, and not within the same universe that my priorities exist in right now.

KJ: Your upcoming documentary, *Working Title*, explores the lives and commodification of international students in Canada. What sparked the idea for this project, and why do you think it's important to explore this subject now?

SC: I think it touched on holding people accountable and also shedding more light [on the issue]. I think the reason it's important now is because, a year and a half ago, when I pitched the project, I could start to see the international student pathway, and people were being talked about a bit more. As our economy was getting a little more stressed—like, the recession and the post-COVID fallout, and everything—I could start to see it happening, and that's when I pitched the idea.

Throughout making it, it has really become a hot topic now. I think it is done by design from the government—that's just my personal perspective on it. It's really about naming and calling people out for problems that they didn't cause or can't really cause, even from a mathematical point of view.

Social media and news organizations weren't doing a great job of providing an unbiased point of view, and also they were talking about the people as numbers, just policies, and how they're affecting Canada—not talking about people as individuals, and not sharing their personal stories. That's when the idea came about: to shed some light on individual stories with the goal of creating understanding and empathy. Also, to talk about the issue at the heart of it, which is how this “problem” became a problem. I mean, having roughly a million people on temporary status, who are by design promised this pathway to study, work, and stay—and then somewhere between work and study, barriers are being put up that say, “Hey, you can't stay,” but that was the whole point of the program in itself. If Canada didn't have those pathways, I don't think this “problem” would even be a problem.

KJ: I know you faced some challenges finding subjects for this film, as many recently immigrated international students were hesitant to speak about their experiences on camera. So, when creating a documentary like *Working Title*, how did you go about selecting the subjects to feature? What steps did you take to ensure a balanced and diverse perspective on such a complex issue?

SC: I just went to [. . .] the basic pillars and stakeholders in the sphere, which include, colleges, government, international

students themselves, aggregators, immigration lawyers, and consultants. I went from that and started to reach out to a few people within those spheres. I had great success with [both] the researchers and the teaching side of things because there were a couple people in the documentary who were researching the same topic as the doc, which was great because it allowed them to talk about it within the same story structure.

With the government, [my producer and I]—we knocked on all the doors, and most answers were either just a written template response, or nobody got back to us for months on months. We've been doing this for, I guess we really started to reach out to people [about] a year ago, at least, and we haven't received any solid commitment from a government perspective. We did receive great input from the teachers, the researchers who we can talk about in the documentary, from immigration consultants themselves as well, and then also [for] international students it was a little tricky, because being somebody on a temporary status, it does come with a lot of insecurity, and speaking your story, or speaking badly about somebody, doesn't really resonate with, the vulnerabilities that you have right now.

[There] was a lot of talking to international students, confirming with them what our goal with the doc is, how we plan to present the point of view, and that they have full authority over how we use their footage and to be able to really create that safe space. In the rough-cut stage that you saw, the anonymous guy, you know, to be able to really confirm to him, that I know you are actively involved in a scam, we know that—just sharing, it's really important because I know this guy is going through a lot, he's having a lot of mental health struggles. I'm like, this will help somebody in the same shoes in future, just to know your story and know there's people out there. That was the angle where he was willing to talk about it while, still creating that anonymity for him.

That was my approach, and it was a lot more word of mouth, too. The researchers that I talked with [recommended] some people, and there were just a lot of recommendations here and there. I think that worked out the best because, once they knew about what the topic is and how I'm approaching it, they were able to pitch it just a bit better.

KJ: What role do you see that this documentary will play in this ongoing conversation about immigration and international students in Canada, and what do you feel is the core message, or feeling, that you're trying to get the audience to take away from this work?

SC: To create understanding and empathy, and also to look at this problem as not being an international student problem, but being a policy problem and a corporate greed problem. I think, by taking it from a bit of a wider perspective on how these issues came to be, not just blaming X amount of people for being in a system.

KJ: In your short film and documentary, you've chosen to focus on South Asian immigrants. What draws you to these subjects, and why do you feel telling these specific stories is important?

SC: I think it starts with tell what you know. I feel my perspective gives me confidence in being able to justify telling these stories to the 100% truthfulness that I can. Also, at least now, what we



Fig. 3 | Group photo of the host and panelists at the KDdocsFF screening event for filmmaker-in-residence Shubham Chhabra. Rattanphoto, 2024.

see—at least in terms of the topic of the documentary and the short—is that [there are] a lot of South Asian students coming from India, mainly from Punjab. It is about the majority story that I'm trying to tell. I also think that helps narrow down the narrative a bit more, and it gives people a personality [with] which they can connect, because just the topic of immigration, and even international students [who are] not South Asian, it's so big and so nuanced that I think I won't be doing justice just talking about something in a bigger format.

KJ: Recently, KDdocs hosted a screening for your two films, *Cash Cows* and a rough cut of *Working Title* (Fig. 3). As a practicum student, I helped organize the event and had the chance to experience the audience's reaction firsthand. It was amazing to see how engaged they were. How did the audience's response feel from your perspective? Was there any feedback that surprised you or influenced the direction of your work?

SC: It was great! I mentioned it in the screening as well, that not a lot of people get to screen their rough cuts and get feedback that they can actually implement and I feel that's just the best way to do it. I am super thankful to, Greg (Chan, KDdocsFF Community Outreach Director), KDdocs, and you as well for organizing that [audience feedback] form [. . .] which gave us, something that I don't really necessarily have to remember but I can refer back to and people really shared, important stuff and it was detailed to a point where I got what they were taking from it. It did confirm for me that it is engaging for people to a point where it creates more curiosity about the programs, [and] about how things came about to be.

One interesting thing that I didn't really think of initially was [the prominence of] our researchers, Lilach (Marom, Assistant Professor SFU) and Lisa (Brunner, Postdoctoral Fellow at UBC Centre for Migration Studies), and then also [teacher] Teresa (Corney) [. . .]. They were a good chunk of the whole narrative. There was a lot of feedback like, "I don't see that many South Asian faces in there," but from my perspective, I didn't really think of them as not being South Asian or being White. I just thought of them as being a professional opinion, a well-informed opinion. I got that note a few times, which made me think a bit more about

how it reflects. I already had an immigration consultant and international student success platform. It's an online community—both of their perspectives: the consultant, she's from Spain, and the student success platform—she is a former international student, now a successful business owner. I think I'll add their perspective in as well, just to make it a bit more diverse. Which again, it wasn't something that I was really thinking about or noticed, but I got that note a few times, so I thought, maybe this is something I should think about.

KJ: Your acclaimed short film *Cash Cows* has won multiple awards, including recognition at the Mighty Asian Moviemaking Marathon, the Sundar Prize Film Festival, and a nomination for the DGC's Best Short Film award. You also received the Best Emerging Filmmaker Residency Prize for this work (Fig. 4). Can you tell us about that experience and how the residency, which provided access to the KDocsFF Social Justice Lab and consultations with film studies faculty, influenced your creative process?

SC: Oh, big time. I'll talk about the consults first, because [I spoke] with Sean Farnel, who is a big-time producer. He did *To Kill a Tiger*. He's very well connected. There are a couple of other docs that are doing festival runs, and he's really well connected with the community, and also just with the documentary filmmaking world. He was very valuable in providing feedback, and I purposely kind of spread out his consults throughout the project and residency, so I could get the best out of it as the project evolved. Diego (De la Rocha, KPU Entertainment Arts/Animator) guided me through some animation and gave me some good ideas on how to approach it with the low budget we have. Also, Ian Frayne (KPU English Student and Actor)—he gave me some acting advice, which I didn't really implement into the doc, but there are a couple of narrative projects that are in the pipeline for next year, which I think would be really beneficial for me as a director talking to an actor and getting that consult, which is a really wonderful and important relationship on set.

The lab itself gave me an office to kind of work from, and just really a space that was all my own, and I was able to utilize it. I was able to set up some software that really helped me get through it. It also kind of worked as a meeting point for a lot of the meetings, and to get some planning done.

KJ: You mentioned Sean Farnel, who is a regular consultant with KDocsFF, and I was actually planning to ask about him as well. How was your experience working with Sean, who specializes in creative, marketing, and distribution services for documentaries? Can you share some insights from that collaboration and what you gained from it?

SC: He has given me a really good cheat sheet for a festival [. . .] plan that he himself uses, and he was kind enough to share that template with me. For this project, doing a solid festival run is my goal, because it's already going to be on Telus for X amount of time so, I think that really helped me start thinking about the festival circuit way in advance, and then prepping my list, and then seeing what works, what doesn't work, just hitting the targets that I want to. I think it really helped formalize it and just really kind of put it into place quite well.



Fig. 4 | Shubham Chhabra accepting KDocsFF Best Emerging Filmmaker Residency Prize from KDocFF's Greg Chan. Charlie Beerling Photography, 2024.

KJ: In *Cash Cows*, you explored the subject of international students through a comedy-drama lens, while your upcoming documentary *Working Title* delves into the same subject but in a documentary format. How did the experience of tackling the same subject in these two very different genres go for you?

SC: It was really fun. Narrative just gets me excited. Being able to play with the stereotypical stupidity of it all, like on set, and even in the prep, that was just the best time ever. We were just laughing consistently on set, and just getting to create something that's in a very high energy [environment], and there's deadlines, [there are] three days to shoot, we have to cut [the film] down in seven days, do all the sound and everything. That was a really good experience.

The reasoning for it is because a doc audience and a short film narrative audience, they're two different audiences with very little overlap, and I wanted to just get this message to as many people as possible, just to get this idea out, and tell them that stories like these exist. I think a short form really helps in doing a lot of festival runs, getting a lot of screenings, getting in front of a lot of people. It's like when you write a story and you're working on a story—it just, something clicks in, and you're like, "This is me. I am the only person who can do it in this time and space right now." That's something that just kept me going with it.

KJ: Currently, your documentary is titled *Working Title*. Where are you in the process of choosing a final title and how do you approach finding one that you feel fits the story?

SC: I'm very convinced—let's say 95%, it's [going to] be *Pakke* or *Pakka*. Which I feel is the strongest point of the doc to end on that. Also, I think *Pakka*, the word, does mean *resilient* and to be strong and that's the story of all international students—that's something that is common throughout, regardless of what educational or financial background you come from. Also, I think it's short, it's catchy, it just flows much better than *Working Title*. Also, for people who don't know Punjabi, it creates intrigue. So, I think that kind of fulfills another goal—people reading it on a poster and then that just kind of makes them lean in a bit more.

KJ: We talked about this briefly after the screening, and I think the title you suggested would be a great fit. The final poem in the documentary really moved me, and it seemed to have an emotional impact on a few other audience members as well. Although I'm not an international student myself, I could still deeply feel the emotions and experiences the poem speaks to. So, if you decide to go with that title, I think it would be a great choice.

SC: That's why it's so universal, and I think it works.

KJ: Where can audiences watch *Cash Cows*, and also your upcoming documentary *Working Title*?

SC: *Cash Cows* is just finishing its festival run. Now, we're [going to] be looking into some distribution at the traditional platforms: Crave, Air Canada. I think that's a dream of mine—to just have it on Air Canada for people to watch while they're flying. We're looking for distribution. I don't want to just sit on it for too long, so we'll do that initial couple of months of [pushing], and [. . .] if it's not distributed somewhere, we'll just put it on YouTube for people to share. It's 10 minutes—it's an easy watch, it's a fun watch.

The documentary, that'll be out in early spring on Telus, and they are very kind with the distribution. If we get some distribution, or if we get a festival circuit going on, then they're more than happy to hold the release. We'll ideally get some festivals done with this, but also I would want it to be on Telus so people can watch it right away.

KJ: Does that mean it's only accessible to Telus customers, or is it available to everyone?

SC: No, that's only accessible to Telus Optik TV subscribers, but in [the fall]. It really changes with every single edition that they do. That's the general timeline: early spring, they would release [it] on Telus Optik TV, and then in the fall, I think they put it on their YouTube channel.

KJ: With the residency coming to an end and *Working Title* in its final stages, what's next for you as a filmmaker? Are there any upcoming projects or new directions you're excited to explore?

SC: Excitingly, [. . . there is] one project that we were working on pitching for the past three years, and a writer friend of mine wrote it five years ago. It's a passion project for him, and then I took on that passion, and now it's a passion project for me. We're co-directing it. He wrote it, and it's about a universe where winning a dance competition will solve your life problems. It's about a struggling ballerina and a guy in a wheelchair stuck in a

dead-end job. They both team up to win a dance competition to save their independence and regain their individuality. That's the narrative short. It's also funded by Telus Story Hive, their narrative platform, which we'll start [soon]. We've already kind of started prep on it a little bit, but we'll get on it next year, and it's going to be a short—around 20-25 minutes. We're really excited about it. All the hard work and all the rejections of three years finally paid off, because one big thing for that is casting for somebody in a wheelchair and then having them dance, which was a big hurdle for getting funding from [funding bodies] for the past three years. We didn't really have that person, [and] we still don't, but at least it's funded. Now, we have to find them, and [that] just gives us more of a reason. ■