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Film Still: Ashes

He grew up in Chicago and was the quintessential hyper kid, who was more often than not caught break dancing, muttering Shakespeare or racing his bike. His presence didn't go unnoticed and one of his teachers goaded him into an open call where he bagged himself a role in a film titled *Touch & Go*. Soon, TV offers followed and Ajay was in the middle of a budding acting career. As puberty hit however, he chose to take a break from the world of cinema and went on to pursue his love for the stage. After high school, he enrolled at the *American Repertory Theatre Institute, Harvard University*.

'I think every actor needs to know how much blood they have to let for each job they do. Sometimes you don't need a springboard to your imagination, at others it's really difficult and you have to work very hard to bring him out. It changes as per the job. I felt, a good

training would teach me how to get into each role.' Once out of school, he returned to cinema with *SubUrbania*, where his role as the convenience store owner, won him an *Independent Spirit Award* nomination. Till date Ajay ensures that he is the headspace of any character he plays, however, big or small. 'After my first read - I write and draw for a while, I get involved with things that can bring me closer to the character and then I analyze and break him down piece-by-piece, bit-by-bit.'

His talent though undeniable, can't but help make one wonder - how many opportunities are really available for a brown actor, even in the contemporary Hollywood scenario of multicultural casting? 'The only difference between being a brown actor and just being an actor, is caring about it. I don't look at myself as anything other than what I am. Yes, I definitely think it's hard even now, coz people

have to qualify your presence so it can actually exist within the framework of the story being told. But it's not that I feel a sense of racial overtone. For me acting is a big game of "let's pretend".'

Be it a tiny slice of a role or a rock solid character, his conviction and ease on screen haven't gone unnoticed. As an actor he has found space on the big screen in films like *Office Space, K-Pax, It, Requiem for a Dream, The War Within, The Guru, Waterborne, The Loin of Punjab Presents* and a whole host of others; and on television with *30 Rock, The Sopranos, The West Wing, and Bored to Death*. Apart from his body of work as an actor, he also found the time to become involved with the Asian electronic music scene. His vocals have appeared on Talvin Singh's *Mercury Award* winning album *OK* and in several recordings with *Karsh Kale* and *The Midival Punditz*.

Versatility and flexibility when it comes to his various creative avatars flows easy. 'What I'm fundamentally trying to do is tell a story from a direct download of my subconscious, while directly contradicting that very story as well. It's like whatever I first think about, I have to think about its complete opposite immediately. I look at all that I do as a form of storytelling. Even if it's something very basic and people can laugh with me - that's cool. As long as I tell a story in the simplest form possible. For me simple is thrilling. When I do whatever it is I do I figure out what the story is and it doesn't always work but when it does it's gratifying.'

All through his many creative adventures, Ajay was busy scripting the story that has been a part of his mindscape for about a decade now. The story went on to become his directorial debut titled *Ashes*, a raw sort of crime drama that is currently doing the festival route and picking up its share of awards and acclaim

along the way. But like most indie-cinema the making of it hasn't been an easy process to say the least. 'Here I was in New York, one of the great cinema cities, and I didn't have anything. I was trying to make my film for an entire decade. The subject matter was very difficult for a lot of Indian people to handle in America, and for America to handle about India. It continues to contradict each other. The people who could have given me the money to make it in one go just never accepted it. Over time I realized no one was going to do that, so I decided I have to make it, and I had to get the money for it. That took about seven years, and the next four years was shooting, editing and completing it.'

*Ashes* is a touching story unravelling the lives of two brothers. As one brother plummets deeper into mental illness, the other, played by the first time director himself, copes by throwing himself into a community that

consumes him. 'A lot of people don't know this but it all started when I lost my sister to a depressive schizoid disorder. I was much younger and when it happened I was running with a group of people who were dealing and involved with drugs. Dealing was not as common as it is now, but it was becoming common and fast. It was a different time in America, and I wanted to capture that period. It was a very close period to me. So, my film's a reinvention and a memory poem to my sister and my family.'

Sensitive but edgy, his storytelling is as emotional as it is representative of community and structure, and within these paradoxes lies his artistic ability. As his film is now screened in festival after festival, and is watched by more and more people it has gradually begun to garner its share of praise and revelry - Ajay's run as a director has definitely begun and he is undoubtedly one to watch out for.