Joyless Films
and
Artists Public Domain Present

# Zero bridge

a film by Tariq Tapa

*In occupied Kashmir, where every day is another lesson in survival,*
*a teenage petty criminal's last chance at escape is threatened*
*when he faces a moral crisis over his last victim.*

**Film Selected for the 65th Venice Film Festival: World Premiere**

65 MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
VENEZIA 2008

# s y n o p s i s

*Zero Bridge* is the story of Dilawar, a rebellious seventeen-year-old Kashmiri boy who lives on the outskirts of Srinagar city City with his strict uncle Ali, a mason who took in Dilawar after he was abandoned by his adoptive mother. To help make ends meet, Dilawar recently abandoned school to become an apprentice in his uncle's mason crew. Dilawar hates his current life and secretly plans to leave his uncle to join his adoptive mother in Delhi. To do so, he supplements his income by participating in some shady activities: taking money to do math assignments from his old school classmates, and by picking pockets in the city's markets.

While on an errand at the shipping office, Dilawar meets Bani, a bright young woman who recently returned to Srinagar after completing her studies in America. Although Dilawar recognizes Bani as one of his recent pickpocket victims, Bani does not recognize him. Over the course of many visits to the shipping office, Dilawar warms up to Bani. He eventually enlists her help with the math assignments, although Bani is unaware that she is helping him earn extra money. They enjoy each other's company, and their friendship gently grows. Meanwhile, Dilawar continues his other illegal activities, undeterred. The consequences of his actions eventually cause havoc in Dilawar and Bani's life, threatening their friendship and both of their futures.

# d i r e c t o r ’ s  s t a t e m e n t

My earliest memories of Kashmir are of my cousins and I playing with our grandmother by the Jhelum River near our houseboat beneath Zero Bridge. Every summer my father brought my mother and I to Kashmir to visit his family. When war broke in 1989, the visits stopped. My parents later divorced, and I became absorbed in my own life like a typical American teenager. Years passed before I went back to reconnect with my relatives.

After multiple trips, I eventually decided to make a film in Kashmir because I found that none of the outside voices describing it accurately captured the daily lives of average Kashmiri people. I thought that a film introducing the lives of a few Kashmiri citizens and their daily hopes and fears would show their humanity more intimately than the usual Western documentaries on the Kashmir Situation or the Bollywood products, which treat Kashmir purely as an exotic backdrop.

**-- *Tariq Tapa***

# a b o u t  t h e  d i r e c t o r

Tariq Tapa was born in New York City. He received a Bachelor's Degree in English at Rice University in Houston, Texas. In 2004, he enrolled in the Graduate Film Directing Program at the California Institute of the Arts, where he made several short films, including *Custody* (2005, 10 mins), which was a Finalist at the 2006 Student Academy Awards and went on to screen at the Museum of Modern Art (August 2006) and at the Centre Pompidou (March 2007).

In 2006 he received a U.S. Fulbright Scholarship to Kashmir, India where he made his thesis (and debut) feature film *Zero Bridge* by himself, while staying with relatives from September 2006 until June 2007.

# f i l m o g r a p h y

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|---|---|
| *Custody* | (2005, 10 mins) |
| *Meet Me at the Gates of Paradise* | (2006, 20 mins) |
| *The Guard* | (2006, 26 mins) |
| *Zero Bridge* | (2008, 93 mins) |

# Production Notes

## Interviews with the Director

### How did the story come about? Was it scripted?

*I was in Kashmir for three months before I started writing the story for* Zero Bridge*. I waited a few months because I wanted to write something ethnographically accurate to Kashmir, but at the same time I wanted to write about matters close to my heart. I wrote a 140-page screenplay for* Zero Bridge *in 2 weeks*.

*But immediately upon finishing it, I realized it was useless. None of the first-time actors I wanted to cast would understand how to analyze a script the way a trained actor would, much less make sense of the weird strange screenplay format. (In fact, one of the actors, Ali Muhammed, was illiterate. He decided to learn his entire part by heart, bless him. He usually could perform a scene after hearing the story read aloud only once). So I threw away that script and decided to make things much more simpleinstinctive.*

*Instead, I wrote a detailed 10-page scene outline that just described the important scenes, who was in them, what happened and why, what the important dialogue was, and distilled and connected them all in a way that flowed like a story and that now closely resembles the finished movie.*
*Some of the dialogue was improvised and some was decided in advance.*

*Some of the inspiration to make* Zero Bridge *and to show the daily lives of Kashmiri people came from the neo-realist filmmakers before me, particularly the films of Ermanno Olmi. I was inspired by the invisibility, spontaneity, modesty, and respectfulness that I saw in their Mr. Olmi's work. I decided to rigorously apply those same qualities to all aspects of the production – casting, locations, dialogue, camera, music – while remembering to keep things as personal as possible, including adding touches of humor wherever appropriate. Humor is an essential tool to cope with the daily injustices of Kashmiri life, which meant that humor was also essential when portraying Kashmiri life.*

### What was your process for casting and rehearsing with the lead?

*First, I did the traditional casting method for the role of Dilawar and his friends. My cousin EImran (who was helping me as a production assistant) and I went around the city on bicycles with a bucket of glue and a brush to plaster a stack of audition posters. I also paid the government propaganda channels to run an ad on TV, as a crawling text at the bottom of the screen. I looked at about 70 boys who showed up to audition for Dilawar. I had them do different physical activities, tell some stories from their life about when they felt most ashamed, most proud, etc. to try to see how they presented themselves, how accessible they were to their emotions, and if they could relax with somebody watching them do something intimate physical activity, like washing their face. After a month, I still hadn't found my lead. The night before the last audition call, I was in a panic because we had to start shooting rehearsing in three weeks.*

*That night, my cousin Imran and I were playing chess when I suddenly knew that he was Dilawar. I didn't want to just come right out and ask him to do it, so I began to test him in little ways. I began inviting him into the acting workshops I was holding and examined how he did with the other (first-time) actors. He did very well, really bringing his own similar personal history to the role and enhancing what I had written. So I offered him the lead part. I handed him a 500-page notebook and told him to fill up the notebooks with Dilawar's thoughts, as if they were his own. That helped him get into character, and it kept him occupied while I continued pre-production.*

*I also showed him "The 400 Blows" and "Il Posto". He got very excited about being in a film like this. All he had ever seen before were Bollywood romances and Hollywood action movies; never movies about someone just like himself, movies withstarring people who had never performed before. That's when he began to see my point that almost anyone can act, as long as the person is correctly cast, made to feel like a collaborator, and is given simple, specific directions to keep his performance as unself-conscious and as physical as possible.*

## How did you cast the other leads?

*The week I arrived in Kashmir, my first task was to figure out what the casting pool was like. To do this, I had a ruse: I offered my filmmaker services to small businesses in need of some promotional videos. One of these companies was a 40-man mason outfit. I went to their site and shot for a whole day while the construction crew was doing its work. It was there that I met Ali Muhammed. He was interested in what I was doing and we became friends. I knew he had to have a part in the movie I was going to make, even though, at that time, I didn't yet have a story chosen.*

*I insisted on casting exclusively first-time, non-professional performers, people who didn't have aspirations to act for the camera. This was generally met with a lot of resistance. People in Kashmir didn't understand why I didn't have any dance sequences, or why there was no propaganda. What kind of movie was I really trying to make? Many people were suspicious.*

*After casting Ali and Imran, I still had to cast Bani. I found Bani after posting notices at several girls technical colleges – not at drama schools there are no drama schools – in the city. I decided to cast Taniya for the role after I had her practice several scenes with Imran. Once I saw the chemistry between them, I knew it would work.*

*That was enough to start shooting. During the frequent interruptions in shooting, I often ran into people who I used to fill out the bit players.*

## What was the experience like making a film in Kashmir?

*Kashmir is an occupied territory partitioned between of India and Pakistan, , basically a war zone. This situation causes logistical nightmares simply because one has no control over one's own destiny in a place where personal safety, civil rights, a fixed price economy, communications, and infrastructure are all deeply, maddeningly uncertain most of the time. A lot of time was spent waiting, planning, anticipating, dealing with*

*endless setbacks – such as strikes, violence, protests, curfews.*

*There were also natural setbacks, such as snowstorms and avalanches, which, because of the poor infrastructure in the region, could bring the whole city to a halt for days on end. This happened regularly. So, there would often be little to eat because the main supplies road had been cut off, and there were no gas canisters to cook with or to keep warm in winter. A lot of shooting time was taken just driving around on a motorcycle, going from one black market to another, looking for gas to buy.*

*Overcoming any one of the possible obstacles was a matter of luck and physical endurance. The likelihood of overcoming many such obstacles in a single day, or the odds of myself plus three other actors overcoming many of these obstacles in the same window of time decreases the odds of getting to shoot done pretty dramatically. Trying to plan something as seemingly simple as three people meeting one another at a location just to shoot a simple dialogue scene for two hours becomes a real struggle. I had to reorganize the shooting schedule constantly. There was no rest from these for 9 months.*

## Did you encounter anything dangerous while filming?

*My first production office was in a very poor, very conservative religious neighborhood. When the news came that Saddam Hussein was hanged, the residents of that neighborhood erupted in violent protests. In the midst of these protests, I had the auditions for the part of Dilawar. One morning I found a scarecrow made from a potato-sack hanging by a noose from a post in front of my window. There was a sign pinned to the front of the scarecrow – EVIL MR. BUSH – and people began to stone it and then set fire to it. Stones went through our window and broke the glass. I didn't think anyone knew who I was or that I had an American passport, because they could see that physically I was a Kashmiri and spoke some of their language. But still, I was worried that things would get even more out of hand. I called off auditions and set up a new office in a new neighborhood, which turned out to be much, much worse.*

*A few weeks later, I arrived at the new office to find that there was an angry mob of about a hundred men, waiting in front of my door. They were there to confront me about some rumors they had heard that I was a foreigner making a pornographic film. Of course they had no proof of this, they were just a belligerent group of idle men looking for an excuse to cause trouble. Then, someone threw a flaming bottle through the window and set fire to the office. That's when people just went completely crazy and it became a free-for-all. Then someone grabbed the keys of my motorcycle so I couldn't make a fast getaway. I panicked and just started running for my life. I passed by a man who saw what was happening. He got on his motorcycle, swung around, I hopped on and we got away. From then on, I decided that having an office was too visible, that I should not announce my presence anymore because it was attracting too much hostility.*

*Unfortunately, the story doesn't end there. After a few days, there was a knock on my family's door. It was the police coming to take me away. The police told me I was guilty of causing a disturbance, and of making a pornographic film. I had to go down to the police station, and spent weeks doing damage control on this insane situation. I had to give depositions, was made to wait in offices for days on end. I was being ground up in the gears of police state machinery, all because of some idle person's hearsay. What a real reminder it was of what many people go through regularly in Kashmir, only usually*

*much worse. The oddest thing of all was that this whole episode (my brief incarceration and the investigation) all came months after I had written the fictional story of Dilawar and his similar ordeal.*

## Describe a typical shooting day.

*My cousin Hilal (who acted as my assistant-director) would call the actors before hand to let them know when and where to show up. Then, on the day of the shoot, Hilal, Imran (Dilawar) and I would pile onto our motorcycle to go to the shooting location. Once at the location, we usually had to observe the custom of sitting and having tea with the location owner. While my cousins did this I'd get the camera and microphones set up.*

*If I couldn't use the shotgun mike because of too much wind noise, then I'd wire the actors for sound. If it was an indoor scene, like in the office, I would gaff tape the microphones body transmitters to the ceiling instead of to the actors waists, and then dangle the mike wires down to just above the actors heads. This way I could circumvent the lack of a boom operator. As long as I knew the shot would be framed tightly on the actor's faces, the "dumb-booms" would hear everything clearly.*

*Then we'd actually get the scene on its feet and shoot it. I'd make performance adjustments to Imran in English and in Kashmiri, but I could only communicate to Ali through Hilal's translation. Frequently I would ask Imran to draw his performance from the 500-pages of character thoughts, which he wrote in Dilawar's notebook. (Later I recorded him reading this aloud and used it as voice-over).*

*Monitoring both picture and sound while also directing the actors and giving notes on their performances all at the same time was hard at times. But sometimes it could be a lot of fun, because it gives the feeling of seeing and hearing exactly what you're getting as it's happening, just like shooting a documentary. But it is also quite draining. It was hard to shoot more than five hours a day, maybe two days a week.*

*While shooting, I kept the story outline folded up in my pocket. I referred to it all the time to explain the action to the actors (or to Hilal, the translator). I never storyboarded any shots, but I did decide whose point-of-view each scene was from, and what the turning point of each scene was. Then, all I had to do was just make sure that those two things were clear and convincing in the actors' performances. Those were my only two criteria. It usually only took a few hours to get a scene done.*

*Once we started to shoot, things tended to happen very quickly. Getting to shoot something was a real struggle because of all the outside chaos and the problems it created. Once we managed to get all the actors in the right location, at the right time, on a given day, the actual shooting itself would be fairly fast. Maybe because we didn't get to shoot as often as we wished and we became conditioned to expect another disaster to strike any moment, we realized we wouldn't get the opportunity again (similar to shooting a documentary). The result was that it focused everyone's energy – mine and the actors' – so we actually wound up doing most scenes only a few times, some even just once. Occasionally, I would re-shoot on a different day a few scenes I felt could have been better or different, but the re-shoots always lacked that same intensity of knowing we had only one chance to get it right.*

## How did you capture and translate scenes? Or keep your equipment safe?

*I went to Kashmir with my MacBook, external drives, and a one-chip Sony Handicam (which I used to capture the mini DV tapes). To protect this equipment from condensation resulting from temperature changes, or from the dust and insects, I kept all the equipment in a few layers of Ziploc bags.*

*Every day after a shoot, I would capture the day's tapes into the MacBook. Because Kashmir can be quite cold in the winter, and there is no central heating. I would wait for the portable gas heater to get the room temperature up to 50°F before I turned on the equipment. While the tapes were being captured, I'd charge the camera batteries and plan the next day of shooting.*

*When the day's tapes were captured, Hilal would look at the footage in Final Cut Pro and transcribe the dialogue in English into a MS Word document, indicating the beginning of each sentence by its corresponding timecode.*

## Where did you get the music? How did you record the sound?

*For the music of the film, I wanted to use very traditional Kashmiri folk songs that everyone in Kashmir would know. I had learned the Kashmiri folk songs from the cassettes my father used to play on the car radio when I was growing up. Years later, I found myself finally not only appreciating this music but actually being quite moved by it. Not knowing anything about music, I just wanted something simple, easy to remember, that could capture a variety of moods depending on where and how I wanted to use it in the film.*

*I met the leader of the musician group, Niyaz, during one of the audition sessions. When we started talking about music, I played some of these folk songs for him on my computer. Later, Niyaz and I met four other musicians in a friend's small house in the middle of a quiet field – the perfect place to have a recording session, because there was no traffic, and certainly no electricity or air conditioners. (One actual technical advantage of making a film in Kashmir is that it's easy to record great sound). I gaff-taped two ends of a rope between the two corners of the quietest room in the house, so that the rope hung across, like a laundry line. Then, I clipped all three microphones I had onto the rope, so that they faced downward, towards the corner of the room. The musicians ssait close together in the corner and played, so that their acoustics would flowed outward nicely and hit the sweet spot on the mikes. For a few hours, they played the same theme over and over again, in a variety of instrumentations and tempos and keys.*

*I recorded all the ambient sound for the film as well. On days when our shoot got cancelled (which was quite often), I would often keep up creative morale by visiting the location anyway, alone, except I would bring along my microphones and mini-disc recorder, tuck my Sony headphones underneath my wool cap incognito-style, and would just make many ambient recordings at each location in the movie, from multiple angles and with multiple microphones. So, when I returned, I had a whole sound library of native, distinctly Kashmiri ambient tracks and effects to work with.*

## Talk about the editing process.

*When I returned from Kashmir, my co-editor and I took three months sifting through all the 50 hours of video, the 20 hours of audio, and all 15000 pages of time-coded translations saved as MS Word files. Most of the material recorded for the production consisted less of extensive coverage of the same material, and more of different stories I was originally trying to tell in this one movie.*

*We went through all of that material a second time, and started "lining" the transcripts the way assistant editors traditionally do with a screenplay (in which they make vertical lines showing how a given scene was covered during the production). Except, we didn't have a traditional shooting script, so we lined printed versions of the transcribed dialogue.*

*We also made index cards for each scene, and organized them on a wall cork board – just the whole story of the movie laid out on the wall. We rearranged the cards several times for a week or two as we tried to find scenes that would "hang together" as groups, to try to build sequences.*

*Based on the arrangement of the cards, we made our first assembly, which came out to 3hrs and 6 mins and which we screened around Thanksgiving 2007. In that version, there were several more supporting characters and subplots in Dilawar's life, and every single character had an interior monologue playing as a voice-over. Eventually, we cut almost all of that material and focused the story on Dilawar's main dilemma.*

*In September, I had moved back to Los Angeles to begin my last year of study at Cal Arts. My co-editor remained in San Francisco. We each had one external hard drive with exact copies of the original media. We shared Final Cut Pro project files through emails. We would alternate editing the film sequences. When one of the editors finished an editing pass on a sequence, we would email it to each other (the recipient would download it, open it, and re-link media). We would discuss the latest edit, before the other editor tackled the sequence further.*

*Over the course of the winter months, we went through twenty-four versions of the film, each version getting progressively shorter, tighter, denser; until we finally locked picture at 96 minutes on my birthday, March 9th, 2008.*

## How did you prepare the film for its launch?

*I applied and was quite honored to be invited to the 2008 IFP [Independent Feature Project] Narrative Lab, where I got to meet other filmmakers and distinguished members of the independent film world. The film got a good reaction and we received tons of support from IFP, which was just the perfect place for us to be with where we were with the film and how we needed to start thinking about positioning it to festivals. Then, shortly after the Lab, we began receiving invitations to some high-profile film festivals. I was excited, but needed help bridging the gap in order to attend and screen at a large festival. IFP really came through again in a big way. Through the generous efforts of [IFP Executive Director] Michelle Byrd, I was quite blessed to be put in touch with Hunter Gray and Paul Mezey of Artists Public Domain.*

# p r i n c i p a l  c a s t  b i o s

**Mohamad Emran Tapa** (Dilawar) is Tariq's first cousin. He attends Greenland High School in Nigeen District, Srinagar where he lives with his family. *Zero Bridge* is his debut.

**Ali Muhammed Dar** (Uncle Ali) is a full-time mason and carpenter who lives with his family in Nishat District, Srinagar. *Zero Bridge* is his debut.

**Taniya Khan** (Bani Sheikh) studied computer science at St. Xavier in Shimla, India. She lives with her family in Ladakh, Kashmir. *Zero Bridge* is her debut.

# p r i n c i p a l  c r e w  b i o s

**Josee Lajoie** (Co-Producer, Co-Editor) was born and raised in Montreal, Canada, where she received a Bachelor's in electrical engineering and a Master's in computer graphics. In the United States, she began her second career as a filmmaker when she received a Master of Fine Arts from the experimental animation program at Cal Arts. She now works as a technical director of animation in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she lives and collaborates with Tariq.

**Hilal Ah. Langoo** (Co-Producer, Translator, Assistant Director) is Tariq's first cousin. He studies computer science in Nishat District, Srinagar where he lives with his mother and sisters, who also appear in *Zero Bridge* as Bani's family. This is his first foray into filmmaking.

**Ben Huff** (Sound Editor and Mixer) is a sound designer and documentary filmmaker currently living in Southern California. He is a recent graduate of the film & video Master's program at California Institute of the Arts. His most recent project, *Never Mind the Fences* focuses on the underground music scene in Wichita, Kansas. Aside from his film work, Ben is also a prolific musician who produces and performs around Los Angeles.

# a r t i s t s  p u b l i c  d o m a i n

Artists Public Domain, Inc (APD) is a supporting organization and public charity as recognized by the IRS in section 501(c)(3). APD was formed to assist in creative endeavors in the arts, specifically those relating to film and video. APD supports the Independent Feature Project (IFP) with cash donations that directly fund grants to filmmakers and programs at the IFP. APD also funds and produces short films, features and documentaries. The organization also donates post-production services and office space to low budget features and documentaries.

Artists Public Domain is run by a board of five people, all of whom have other full time

jobs in film. The board is made up of Tyler Brodie and Hunter Gray of Verisimilitude Films, Paul Mezey of Journeyman Pictures, Alex Orlovsky of Hunting Lane Films, and Michelle Byrd of the IFP. APD has no employees and no board member is paid for their time, allowing for low overhead and all of its resources to go directly to projects and grants.

In the last year APD has supported film and video projects of fiction, non-fiction, and experimental nature ranging in budget from $8,000 to $120,000. While there are no strict guidelines as to what projects are selected or how they are executed, they all seek success in conveying the vision of the artist as opposed to creating commercial profit.

# p r e s s

*FILMMAKER Magazine* Names Tariq Tapa one of its "25 New Faces of Independent Film", Summer 2008.

"Everything I used to make this movie, from soup to nuts, fit in one little backpack," says Tariq Tapa, whose Zero Bridge, a neorealist tale of unexpected friendship and moral complication set in the Indian-occupied city of Srinagar, Kashmir, is set to explode on the festival circuit this year. Tapa, who not only directed this first feature but shot, edited and recorded sound for it, says he wish he'd had one extra crew member, but "financial and logistically, it wasn't possible. Also, I didn't know what would come up in [Kashmir], and I didn't want anything to happen [to the crew member] and have it on my conscience."

Tapa was born in New York City to a Kashmiri Muslim father and American Jewish mother. "I spent every summer and extended vacations [in Kashmir] with my father's side of the family," he says. "But when the war began in '89, I didn't see them in a decade. When I went back in 2002, my cousins and I had grown apart. I thought it would be interesting to make a movie because no one knows about daily life in Kashmir, and it was also a way for me to reconnect with my family and heritage."

The L.A.-based Tapa, who graduated from CalArts and whose short films have screened at the Centre Pompidou and the Museum of Modern Art, received a Fulbright Scholarship to travel to Kashmir and make Zero Bridge. The film tells the story of a teenage pickpocket, Dilawar, who plans to escape from both Kashmir and his strict uncle but whose plans are complicated when he forms a bond with a woman whose passport he has stolen. Tapa says that his first job when arriving in Srinagar was to convince the community there that he "was on their side." He says, "Tempers could flare very quickly because of cultural and political issues [having to do with] traditional and conservative Muslim. We were often mistaken for doing something illicit. Or, they didn't understand the kind of movie we were making. They'd say, 'Where are all the tiger and the dancing women?' I'd say, 'Well, it's a story about people's lives,' but the concept of this kind of movie doesn't exist over there." In order to teach the community, including the non-actors who star in the film, about his kind of filmmaking, Tapa showed them DVDs of such movies as *The Tree of Wooden Clogs, The Bicycle Thief,* and *Il Posto*.

After surviving production — "We were constantly getting interrupted; there'd be a car bomb, or a policeman nearby would get shot," he remembers — and a lengthy postproduction process that included 93 separate cuts, Tapa, who also attended the IFP Rough Cut Lab in 2008, now expects to premiere his film at one of this season's top festivals. He's also preparing two more features: Young Offender, which he'll shoot in Texas, and then, in 2010, another picture to be shot in Srinagar. He says he will "absolutely preserve the same level of intimacy in production [as the no-crew Zero Bridge]... but I would really like to bring along one or two other crew members."

— Scott Macaulay

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and

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present

a film by
TARIQ TAPA

# ZERO BRIDGE

MOHAMAD IMRAN TAPA

TANIYA KHAN

ALI MOHAMMAD DAR

Written and Directed by
TARIQ TAPA

Producers
HILAL AHMED LANGOO
JOSEE LAJOIE

Executive Producers
TYLER BRODIE
HUNTER GRAY
PAUL MEZEY

Executive Producers
CALVIN PREECE
ED BRANSTETTER

Editors
JOSEE LAJOIE
TARIQ TAPA

Sound Editor/Mixer
BEN HUFF