

A production of  
White Crane Films | Dialectic

## THE SWEET REQUIEM

<http://thesweetrequiem.com>

Directed by  
Ritu Sarin & Tenzing Sonam



WORLD PREMIERE | OFFICIAL SELECTION  
TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL  
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## **LOGLINE**

When a young, exile Tibetan woman unexpectedly sees a man from her past, long-suppressed memories of her traumatic escape across the Himalayas are reignited and she is propelled on an obsessive search for reconciliation and closure.

## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

Dolkar, a 26-year-old exile Tibetan, lives in Delhi. 18 years ago, she escaped from Tibet with her father, making a perilous trek across the Himalayas that ended in tragedy. Dolkar has suppressed all recollection of that traumatic incident. But when she unexpectedly encounters Gompo, the guide who abandoned them during their journey, memories of her escape are reignited and she is propelled on an obsessive search for retribution and closure.

Flashbacks of her desperate journey with a small group through a harsh and desolate Himalayan terrain punctuate her growing predicament in the present as she follows Gompo through the claustrophobic alleys of the Tibetan refugee colony in Delhi. The two stories moving in tandem, both determined by a series of fateful choices, reach their conclusion as Dolkar and Gompo finally confront each other.

## **LONG SYNOPSIS**

DOLKAR, a 26-year-old Tibetan woman, lives in New Delhi where she works as a beautician in an upmarket salon. Outwardly fun-loving with a busy social life, she is secretly haunted by a deep sense of guilt over an incident that occurred when she was a child. 18 years ago, she escaped from Tibet with her father, making a hazardous trek across the Himalayas that ended in tragedy.

One evening, in Majnu ka Tila, the Tibetan refugee settlement in North Delhi, Dolkar suddenly comes across GOMPO, the guide who led them from Tibet, only to abandon them before they crossed the final pass to freedom. He doesn't recognise her but his unexpected appearance shakes Dolkar to the core. Memories of her escape and her feelings of guilt are reignited. In her mind, she has always blamed Gompo for what happened on the journey.

Gompo is a political activist who has recently escaped from Tibet. Two Tibetan men who are Chinese agents – catch up with him in Majnu ka Tila and confront him with a stark choice. Gompo has to make a decision that will determine the fate of his wife, imprisoned in Tibet for his political activities.

Mentally unravelling under the stress of seeing Gompo again, Dolkar is unable to accept him as an activist and is propelled by an ambiguous desire for retribution. She follows him obsessively through the narrow, ill-lit alleys of Majnu ka Tila, and discovers his meetings with the two Tibetan men.

Her increasingly urgent tracking of Gompo is interspersed by flashbacks of her desperate journey with her father and a small group through a harsh and desolate Himalayan terrain. These scenes – as they trudge, frostbitten, without food, constantly shadowed by hostile mountains and the fear of detection by Chinese border patrols, relentlessly pushed on by an increasingly panicky Gompo – punctuate Dolkar’s growing predicament in the present.

Caught in a web of political intrigue that is much larger than her personal quest, Dolkar must reconcile Gompo’s act of treachery that has troubled her all her life with the life-or-death situation he now faces.

The two stories moving in tandem, both determined by a series of fateful choices, reaches its conclusion as Dolkar finally confronts Gompo and the source of Dolkar’s long-buried anguish – her father’s murder by Chinese border guards on their final dash to freedom – is revealed.

## CAST

TENZIN DOLKER plays Dolkar, a young exile Tibetan woman living in Delhi. Tenzin Dolker was born in a Tibetan refugee settlement in South India. A dancer, yoga instructor and photographer, *The Sweet Requiem* is her acting debut.

JAMPA KALSANG plays Gompo, a guide who leads escaping Tibetans across the Himalayas. Jampa Kalsang was born in Kathmandu, Nepal to Tibetan refugee parents. He is one of the most experienced Tibetan actors in exile and has acted in a number of Tibetan films, including Ritu and Tenzing's first feature, *Dreaming Lhasa*.

## **DIRECTORS' STATEMENT**

The initial inspiration for the film came from an incident in September 2006 on the 5,800-metre Nangpa-La Pass on the Tibet-Nepal border. Chinese border guards opened fire on a group of escaping Tibetans and shot dead a 17-year-old nun. This cold-blooded killing was captured on video by a Romanian mountaineer and subsequently circulated on social media. It raised many questions in our minds: Who were these escapees and what was their journey like? Why, after nearly 50 years of Chinese occupation, were Tibetans still risking their lives to escape to India? And why were so many of them children?

Meanwhile, the larger political situation in Tibet continued to simmer at a critical point. Since 2009, 153 Tibetans have self-immolated in protest against Chinese rule, demanding freedom and the return of the Dalai Lama to his homeland. Despite the desperation and magnitude of these actions, the world remains largely ignorant of what is transpiring in Tibet. These events continue to impact the lives of exile Tibetans who are torn between an intense desire to do something to help their compatriots and a sense of helplessness that hobbles them from doing anything meaningful.

*The Sweet Requiem* is an attempt to weave together these disparate strands of the current Tibetan situation – both in exile and in Tibet – through an intimate and personal story that is part psycho-political thriller and part escape drama. At the same time, it is an exploration of the themes of exile, memory and guilt, and the unexpected consequences of the choices we make in life. It is a tale of suffering and forgiving, of deep inner anguish and the desperate need of the exile to find redemption and closure. In this, the story transcends its specific context and touches upon universal concerns. Rich in atmospheric detail and inner tension, the film also reflects our own belief in the Buddhist ideals of compassion and forgiveness, and the karmic notion of cause and effect and the importance of reconciliation.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

*The Sweet Requiem* is a film of two contrapuntal timelines: the escape from Tibet, which takes place in the past and is primarily physical in its momentum, and Dolkar's obsession with Gompo in the present, which is more psychological in nature. The physical locations of these two stories naturally lend themselves to an overall visual and aural schema and the challenge of the directors and DoP David McFarland was to find a look that would maximize the contrasting landscapes, both internal and external.

The film was shot in the Indian Himalayan region of Ladakh at altitudes of over 15,000 feet (4500 meters) in sub-zero temperatures, and immediately followed by a grueling shoot in Delhi where temperatures soared to 113°F (45°C). During the Ladakh shoot, two crew-members succumbed to altitude sickness and were unable to continue working.

The harsh and desolate mountain landscape of Ladakh, utterly devoid of any human or animal presence, was perfect for the escape scenes. The tensions, struggle and emotional turbulence faced by the small group played out against this vast and hostile terrain, the sheer scale of which seemed to render them insignificant.

The high altitude light, naturally brilliant and almost monochromatic – predominantly greys and blinding whites – added to the feeling that these were scenes from Dolkar's past, seen through the lens of her memory. The only sounds – wind, footsteps and the occasional dialogue – amplified their solitude. Except for one scene inside a nomad tent, the entire Ladakh shoot was filmed using natural light.

The scenes from the present, on the other hand, take place in the crowded and claustrophobic neighborhood of Majnu ka Tila, the self-contained Tibetan refugee enclave carved out within the giant metropolis of Delhi. Here, the challenge was to capture the moody atmosphere of its narrow lanes and alleys, shadows contrasted by tungsten and fluorescent washes, but without drawing too much attention to the film shoot.

Building on existing lighting, David improvised, using battery-operated LED lights and plastic jerrycans to keep movie lights to the minimum. Shot mostly at night, these scenes have a noirish feel, heightening Dolkar's inner turmoil and her sense of mounting trepidation. The majority of the film was shot handheld on the Arri Alexa.

Since there is no film industry within the Tibetan diaspora most of the actors were necessarily non-professional. Extensive casting was done among the exile Tibetan community in India and Nepal and several potential candidates were auditioned. Jampa Kalsang, the most experienced of exile Tibetan actors, played the role of the guide Gompo while 27-year-old Tenzin Dolker made her acting debut as Dolkar.

## KEY CREW BIOS:

### **RITU SARIN (Director/Producer) & TENZING SONAM (Director/Writer)**

Ritu was born in New Delhi. After graduating from Miranda House, Delhi University, she did her MFA in film and video from the California College of Arts.

Tenzing was born in Darjeeling in northeastern India to Tibetan refugee parents. He graduated from St Stephen's College, Delhi University, and then studied broadcast journalism at the University of California, Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism.

Working through their film company, White Crane Films, they have made more than 20 documentaries, several video installations and one dramatic feature. Their work has primarily focused on the subject of Tibet and has attempted to document, question and reflect on the issues of exile, identity, culture and politics that confront the Tibetan people.

Their debut feature film, *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005), was executive produced by Jeremy Thomas and Richard Gere. It had its world premiere at Toronto International Film Festival and its European premiere at San Sebastian International Film Festival. It is distributed in the US by First Run Features, and was released theatrically in the US. Its international sales agent is Hanway Films (UK). The film also had a limited theatrical release in Switzerland and the Netherlands.

Their feature documentary, *The Sun Behind the Clouds* (2009), premiered at the Palm Springs International Film Festival and won the Vaclav Havel Award at the One World Film Festival in Prague. It is distributed in the US by Zeitgeist Films and its international sales agent is Cat & Docs. It had a successful two-week run at New York's Film Forum before being released nationally across the US.

Their most recent feature documentary, *When Hari Got Married* (2012), was funded by ITVS International (USA), Films From the South (Norway) and the IDFA Fund (the Netherlands). It premiered at Films From the South, Oslo, and showed at DOK Leipzig and IDFA Amsterdam among other international film festivals. It was broadcast on national PBS in the US and on Arte in France and Germany. It also has the distinction of being one of the first documentary features to have a theatrical release in India through the multiplex chain, PVR Cinemas.

Other films include: the award-winning *The Reincarnation of Khensur Rinpoche* (1991), *The Trials of Telo Rinpoche* (1993), and *The Shadow Circus: The CIA in Tibet* (1998), all commissioned by the BBC and subsequently screened and broadcast throughout the world.

Their video installations include: *Some Questions on the Nature of Your Existence* (2007), which showed at Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary in Vienna, the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, and the Busan Biennale; *Burning Against the Dying of The Light*

(2015), solo exhibition at Khoj Studios, New Delhi. They were part of the 2017 Contour 8 Biennale, Belgium.

Ritu and Tenzing are the directors of the Dharamshala International Film Festival, which they founded in 2012 and is now considered to be one of India's leading independent film festivals.

They were awarded the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center Residency in 2017.

### **SHRIHARI SATHE (*Producer*)**

Shrihari Sathe is a New York and Mumbai based director and producer. Sathe produced Jaron Henrie-McCrea's *Pervertigo*, which world premiered at the 2012 Warsaw and Mumbai film festivals and was a part of the 2011 IFP Independent Filmmaker Labs. Sathe's follow up production, Eliza Hittman's *It Felt Like Love*, premiered at 2013 Sundance Film Festival and 2013 International Film Festival Rotterdam to great reviews. Sathe is a 2013 Sundance Institute Creative Producing Fellow and has received fellowships from the HFPA, PGA, IFP, Film Independent, and The Sundance Institute to name a few. He is an Independent Spirit Award nominee and a Gotham Award nominee.

Sathe is a Trans Atlantic Partners fellow (2013) and Cannes Producer's Network fellow (2014, 2015, 2016). He is a co-producer on Partho Sen-gupta's *Arunoday (Sunrise)*, which world premiered at the 2014 Busan International Film Festival, and Afia Nathaniel's *Dukhtar (Daughter)*, which world premiered at 2014 Toronto International Film Festival and was Pakistan's Official Submission for Foreign Language Film at the 87th Academy Awards®. Sathe's feature directorial debut – *Ek Hazarachi Note (1000 Rupee Note)* – won the Special Jury Award and Centenary Award for Best Film at the 2014 International Film Festival of India and has received over 30 awards. Sathe's produced, Elisabeth Subrin's *A Woman, A Part* which world premiered at the 2016 International Film Festival Rotterdam and co-produced Anthony Onah's *The Price* which world premiered at 2017 SXSW and Eliza Hittman's *Beach Rats*, a 2018 Sundance Film Festival winner. His latest two productions – Bassam Jarbawi's *Mafak (Screwdriver)* will have its world premiere at Giornate Degli Autori in Venice and Ritu Sarin & Tenzing Sonam's *The Sweet Requiem* will world premiere at 2018 Toronto International Film Festival.

In 2016 Sathe received the Cinereach Producer Award. He is an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Columbia University's School of the Arts and is a member of the Producers Guild of America and Indian Motion Picture Producers Association.

### **DAVID McFARLAND (*Director of Photography*)**

David McFarland is a Director of Photography based in Los Angeles. David began studying photography, art, and music at an early age. He is a graduate of Boston University where he studied cinematography and anthropology. His commercial work and feature films have taken him all around the globe and his work has been shown at most major film festivals.

His latest films- *The Ballad of Lefty Brown* (A24) and *The Price* (Samuel Goldwyn/ Orion Pictures) both premiered at SXSW - 2017. Most recently, he lensed *The Sweet Requiem* which will world premiere at Toronto International Film Festival – 2018 and *Mafak* (*Screwdriver*) which will world premiere at Giornate Degli Autori in Venice – 2018.

### **MICHAEL MONTES (Composer)**

Michael Montes is an American composer with extensive experience both as a recording artist and as a film and television composer. He has collaborated with noted filmmaker Bill Morrison, scoring his films *Ghost Trip* (2001) and *Trinity* (2002). He conceived and produced cellist Erik Friedlander's breakthrough solo album *Maldodor*. Several of his pieces are included in the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art.

His film scores include: *Don't Leave Home* (2018), *Always Shine* (2015), *Ping Pong Summer* (2014), *The Windmill Movie* (2008), and *One Day Crossing* (2001).

### **ARADHANA SETH (Production Designer)**

Aradhana Seth's Production Designer credits include *Fire, Earth, Don, West is West, Angry Indian Goddesses, The Hungry, Vara, One Night with the King, Easy, Admissions, Everybody Says I'm Fine, Leela, Karvaan* and *The Guru*. She worked as Art Director on *The Darjeeling Limited, The Bourne Supremacy* and *Stiff Upper Lips*.

Aradhana Seth has made over 18 documentary films (made for broadcast in India, Europe, the UK and the US) and a combination of audio-visuals, live news coverage, radio features and photographs. She has designed cafes and stores, helped create a book of photography between India and Mexico – *Vientos Paralelos* – with Graciela Iturbide, Raghu Rai and Sebastião Salgado, and researched the 'India' section of Richard M. Barsam's Non-fiction Film: A Critical History.

### **JABEEN MERCHANT (Editor)**

Jabeen Merchant has been editing films for 22 years. Trained at the Film and Television Institute of India, she has a wide and varied experience within the mainstream film industry as well as the independent filmmaking community. She has edited a range of fiction feature films, from the off-beat comedy *The President Is Coming* and the award winning children's film *Chhutkan ki Mahabharat* to commercially successful thrillers like *Manorama Six Feet Under* and *NH10*. She is also well known for her work editing and co-scripting a number of internationally celebrated feature length documentaries in collaboration with some of India's best filmmakers. Apart from editing, she teaches and writes, and is currently working on an independent film of her own.

## **KEY CREW**

Directed by	Ritu Sarin & Tenzing Sonam
Written by	Tenzing Sonam
Produced by	Ritu Sarin
Produced by	Shrihari Sathe
Executive Producers	Yodon Thonden. Francesca von Habsburg, Vishwanath Alluri
Director of Photography	David McFarland
Edited by	Jabeen Merchant
Production Designer	Aradhana Seth
Original Music	Michael Montes
Costume Designer	Himani Dehlvi
Make-Up Designer	Dhananjay M. Prajapati
Associate Producer	Rajesh Thanickan
Associate Director	Sonam Tseten

## **CAST (In order of appearance)**

Migmar	Rabyoung Thonden Gyalkhang
Young Dolkar	Tenzin Dechen
Tsering	Tashi Choedon
Dekyi	Tenzin Wangmo
Sontse	Tenzin Phuntsok
Dolkar	Tenzin Dolker
Sonam	Rinchen Palzom
Dorjee	Shavo Dorjee
Tendolma	Karma Choezom
Yangzom	Tenzin Tselha
Yangzom's Boyfriend	Tenzin Woesser

Activist Friend	Lhakpa Tsering
Gompo	Jampa Kalsang
Salon Client 1	Kamlu Hemrajani
Salon Manager	Nehmat Mongia
Dolkar's Mother	Tsetun Dolma
School Girl	Gunaika Taneja
School Girl's Mother	Richi Taneja
Salon Client 2	Geeta Sudan
Ghen-la	Nyima Dhondup
School Girl's Father	Manish Taneja
Spy 1	Lhakpa Tsering
Spy 2	Lhakpa Tsering
Cafe Waitress	Tenzin Tsephel
Doctor	Tenzin Sangmo
Gompo's Wife	Tenzin Paldon
Wangmo	Lobsang Dolkar
Restaurant Manager	Tenzin Tsewang