

Meet Me in Mumbai

UP-AND-COMING ACTRESS, FREIDA PINTO, TALKS ABOUT HER NEW MOVIE *SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE* AND HER EXPERIENCE WITH THE SLUM KIDS IN THE EVER-CROWDED STREETS OF MUMBAI, INDIA

text Adam Keleman

Freida Pinto, one of the stars of Danny Boyle's awarding-winning new film, *Slumdog Millionaire*, is stuck in heavy traffic on a blisteringly hot night in her hometown of Mumbai, India. At least this is what her publicist relays to me, apologizing profusely and promising to call back in an hour. When the phone rings again, I'm greeted by Pinto's lovely, musically inflected accent: "Traffic in Bombay is crazy. It's actually worse than New York. It easily will take you an hour to get anywhere." Danny Boyle, the cult filmmaker behind such international crossover hits as *Trainspotting* and *28 Days Later*, has produced a film about a boy breaking free from the slums in Mumbai. In her debut film, Pinto, 24, plays one of the slum girls, Latika, all grown up as the lead's love interest. Pinto may have been slowed down slightly by Bombay's congested highway roads, but she is about to rocket to stardom with her debut feature—a film she hopes will finally shed a true light on the beauty of her frenzied city.

Mumbai (or Bombay as we Westerners call it) is teeming with people overflowing at the sides, and cars piling up on the highways, one on to the next. "You know all those crowded trains they talk about in the film? I have traveled in those crowded trains. I've had people sweat on me," Pinto divulges, humorously indicating Bombay is not for the faint of heart. "When you're in Bombay, it becomes a way of life. It kind of toughens you...people are jumping into trains while they're moving." It is a system built

truly on synchronized chaos. But the locals are well adjusted to say the least. Pinto remarks, "The thing is, it is not at all hard... It is just normal for us...until someone points it out."

Growing up in Bombay, Pinto was immersed in the slums. "I didn't grow up in them," she corrects me. Pinto was fortunate enough to come from the suburbs. Her world, however, was never too far from the poverty-stricken ghettos the film so poetically depicts. "The slums are usually on the outskirts. Bombay is not like that. You can have your five-star hotel, and on the next side, you have slums...when you travel in the local transports, you have the local kids beg for food. It isn't a harsh reality for us, to be honest," Pinto says as she sends a short laugh through the phone line, "it is all intertwined very beautifully."

Frieda acknowledges the outsider's skewed perspective of the city, but she is banking on *Slumdog Millionaire* to turn that worldview around. "People are misled in a way when they watch other films on India. They think India is all about poverty," she denotes. "That is exactly what this film doesn't do." Danny Boyle has created a film that weaves in and out of the lower slums with unbridled kinetic energy, tearing apart the myths without pitying the poor. "[*Slumdog*] is portraying the slums of the city as part of the city, not as the sad part of the city," Pinto exclaims with absolute vigor.

Pinto dreamt of acting from an early age. She uses the word



"dramatic" to describe her early days in amateur theatre. Gallingly, it was the elusive Bollywood that hampered her big plans. "In India, to crack the film industry is the most difficult thing. You have to have some kind of pull, some kind of influence... maybe just getting into modeling would give me that visibility." For two and a half years, she modeled and dabbled in hosting travel shows after finishing university. "But then Danny Boyle happened, and *Slumdog* happened. That's how it all started actually, the acting thing," she imparts. She auditioned for an Indian casting agent who referred her to Boyle and the rest is history. This role of Latika, a slum girl recruited into prostitution, stemming from the land that gave birth to her, is a role Pinto was born to play. "Being from Bombay, I had an idea of what Danny would expect, you know, from me...like I mentioned earlier, at every traffic signal, kids would come beg for money. I would never advocate giving little kids money," she sternly points out. But in preparation for her role, she recalled the days she would give the slum kids "a chocolate and a pack of biscuits" in return for a chat. "Talking to them made me realize that they aren't really different, other than the situations and circumstances they have been living in... They are big time survivors, much better than we are, living in these flats and big houses." Bombay is much more than just a place filled with beggars and slumdogs. The social mapping is complicated, and Pinto feels

Slumdog will finally paint her beloved city as an incredible bundle of constantly moving and shifting cultures and people. No matter how crammed the streets may get.

The film's big splash at this year's Toronto Film Festival, winning the Audience Award, has put Pinto on the map, along with Bombay. Yes, Bollywood has always been a major staple of the global film industry, but *Slumdog* breathes new life into the historical city. "There have been a lot of films shot in Bombay with Bombay as a topic. But this film captures it in the most brilliant light," she says. "On one hand, you have the beauty of Bombay, and on the other hand, you have the ugliness. By the end of the film you come to appreciate it... In many ways, this is not only a tribute to Bombay, this is the best portrayal of Bombay so far." She even fondly contemplates working abroad: "I would love to do a lot of work in the West as well. It would be fun."

Pinto wants the world to see Bombay, her homeland, as thriving in the most progressive, yet human way, as any other city. "As of today, the people from the slums have water supply, they have education, some of them have air conditioning, some of them have mobile phones. In fact everyone has a mobile phone—the rickshaw driver has a mobile phone," she proclaims. Pinto thoroughly underscores the slum's current transformation with a last sobering quip. "Things are changing. It's not a sad situation anymore. People are moving up."