

An unconventional hero

Actor Suhas discusses his new film *Writer Padmabhushan*



Middle class tale Tina Shilparaj and Suhas in the film. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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The premise of the Telugu film *Writer Padmabhushan*, directed by Shanmukha Prashanth, is anything but larger than life. In this family dramedy headlined by Suhas, the protagonist is a 25-year-old aspiring writer from Vijayawada. His book gets published but there are not enough takers. The film scheduled to release on February 3 will be Suhas' first as a hero to court theatres. His earlier film as a solo lead, *Colour Photo*, which won the National Award for best Telugu feature film, was a direct digital release on Aha during the pandemic.

Suhas says that *Writer Padmabhushan* was also completed during the pandemic but the producers, his friends Anurag Reddy and Sharath Chandra of Chai Bisket Films, waited for the right time to release the film in theatres. "Shanmukha Prashanth was an assistant director for *Colour Photo*, and I have known him since our short-film days. He narrated *Writer Padmabhushan* on the sets of *Family Drama* (a neo-noir drama on SonyLIV for

which Prashanth was a co-writer). I loved the story and we pitched it to Anurag and Sharath *anna*. The project went on the floor but soon there was a second lockdown."

Suhas was anxious that this film too should not end up as a digital release. In Telugu film circles, actors and directors who have consecutive digital releases often got slotted into the OTT space and considered not viable for the box office.

Suhas believes that the reading culture is still prevalent. "My character likes to be surrounded by books and works in a library. The story deals with his ambition and his family situation." Ashish Vidyarthi and Rohini essay the roles of his parents.

Although the promos are filled with witty lines, Suhas says there will be a surprise element in the last 20 minutes that will make viewers think about the film.

A recent film that got viewers talking about Suhas' performance but did not let the actor leverage it for publicity was the Telugu

thriller, *HIT 2*; viewers were aware that discussing his role would have been a spoiler. Suhas says with a laugh, "For *HIT 2*, I had to wait patiently till the film finished its successful run in the theatres and arrived on OTT platforms so that I could discuss it after more people watched it."

When writer and director Sailesh Kolanu wanted him to play the antagonist, Suhas had asked him again to be doubly sure. "Sailesh was aware of my work in short films and was confident that I could do it."

Prior to *HIT 2*, Suhas had played a menacing character in *Family Drama*. "Ideally I would like to take up varied roles to showcase my talent."

Life after *Colour Photo*

At the moment, Suhas has seven films in the pipeline and plays the lead in all of them. This, he says, is possible only because of the appreciation he and the team of *Colour Photo* received.

Suhas reckons that life has changed after *Colour Photo*. "Producers and directors are willing to cast me as a lead actor." He believes that some of his forthcoming films including *Writer Padmabhushan*, *Ambajipet Marriage Band* and *Anand Rao Adventures* will help strengthen his credibility in Telugu cinema.

His interest in acting began during his college days in Vijayawada while pursuing B.Sc in Computer Science. Suhas considers actor Teja Kakumanu his guru. "I was content doing dance performances but he encouraged me to do a one-act play in college. The claps I got for it motivated me to act more." If not for the dramatics club and Teja's encouragement, Suhas doubts if he would have become an actor.



After *Colour Photo*, producers and directors are willing to cast me as a lead actor



Dream debut Sidhanshu (left); Sanjeev Sivan with Soubin Shahir (below) SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The story is of a young boy Paakaran, a daily wage worker in a fishing cooperative who lives with his mother. He lives by the idyllic backwaters of Kuttanad in Kerala and develops a special bond with the flowing water and dreams of becoming a boatman like his father who had died in a boat capsized. The discovery of a floating body in the water changes Paakaran's life.

Anticipating the challenge of casting his son in a role where the character appears in every frame of the film, Sanjeev and his wife, actor-filmmaker Deepti Pillay Sivan sent him for a couple of acting workshops in Mumbai. "He worked hard, prepared himself well and presented himself to me. Only then I was convinced. He earned this role," says the proud father.

Joining in the conversation, the 12-year-old describes the feeling when he was first told he would be part of the film: "I always wanted to act and would nag my parents but when it happened it came as a huge surprise and I was super excited," he says adding he realised the value of the opportunity and wanted to do his best. "I used to practice my dialogues in front of the mirror. Not wanting to disappoint my dad drove me to give my best."

Sanjeev cast a neighbourhood woman Sarita who had no acting experience, in the role of Paakaran's mother. "Sidhanshu is quite friendly with Sarita and when I noticed their bonding I felt it will work well for the film. Needless to say, their chemistry was an asset to the film," says Sanjeev.

He found his son to be too nervous the first day. "On day 2, I found a change in him. Every shot was okayed in the first take and the film, meant for a 28-day shoot, got completed in 15 days," says Sanjeev.

"It was like sitting for a Board exam," laughs Sidhanshu. "Trying to understand the character and looking at the world from his perspective helped me perform better and kept up the confidence throughout," says Sidhanshu who's the third generation Sivan and the first one to be in front of the camera.

Life in the backwaters

Documentary filmmaker-director Sanjeev Sivan and his 12-year-old debutant actor son Sidhanshu Sivan speak on the making of the Malayalam film *Ozhuki ozhuki ozhuki*

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On January 4, 2023, the Kuttanad-based Malayalam lyricist and poet Beeyar Prasad aka B Rajendraprasad passed away owing to complications from a brain haemorrhage. Had he been around, he would have been proud of how a short story that he had shared with Sanjeev Sivan fructified into a feature film that is now awaiting release.

"In 2021, Prasad narrated the story in a nutshell to me. At that time, his health didn't allow him to develop the subject, but knowing my penchant for universal themes, he suggested I take it forward. I wrote my version and went ahead with the shooting. He had seen most parts of the film but, unfortunately, he's not with us anymore," says Sanjeev speaking to us over the phone from Kochi.

The 90-minute feature film

Ozhuki ozhuki ozhuki is a significant film for Sanjeev, the youngest of the Sivan brothers – following Santosh and Sangeeth – as it marks the acting debut of his 12-year-old son Sidhanshu Sanjeev Sivan, though the script was readied long before the decision to cast him was made. "When the story was narrated to my mother-in-law, she suggested that we cast Sidhanshu in the role of the young boy, who is pivotal to the film. It was her dream to see Sidhanshu as an actor," says Sanjeev.

