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THE

Alchemist

From starring in Kenneth Branagh's *Death On The Nile* this month alongside a sublime cast, to bagging the lead role in the prestige project *Codename: Johnny Walker*, **Ali Fazal** is officially Hollywood's favourite Indian actor. But the Lucknow-bred, Doon-educated artist remains deeply connected to his roots, with the hotly anticipated second season of *Mirzapur* - in which he plays the lead - ticking ominously around the corner

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **BIKRAMJIT BOSE** STYLED BY **RAHUL VIJAY** WRITTEN BY **NIDHI GUPTA**



If you scroll deep down Ali Fazal's Instagram page, a place saturated with selfies and strange dramatic monologues for captions, you'll find this sweet photo of him, his partner Richa Chadha and three other actor friends huddled on a Goa beach. Fazal has just wrapped Kenneth Branagh's *Death On The Nile*. He's left London's punishing cold behind, but kept the chevron moustache. Their faces are lit up by warm late-afternoon sunlight. It's the first day of 2020.

His *Mirzapur* fans call for Guddu's vengeance in comments; like they've done for over a year on everything he posts, ever since the web series broke through. Fazal will continue to be mildly amused, mostly perplexed by this. But there, sitting on that sheet embroidered with the words "I'm Marvelous", with "some of the most gorgeous women, goddesses and travellers in my life," he appears content. "Look up guys, hope lingers," he wrote.

2020 had been building up to be a landmark year in Fazal's life and career. Three years ago, with his performance opposite Dame Judi Dench in Stephen Frears' critically praised *Victoria & Abdul*, his actorly capabilities came into relief in a manner they hadn't done before. Then, in 2018, he proved he's got range with his turn as the swole, hulkish Guddu in *Mirzapur*.

After nearly a decade of bit parts in ensemble casts and lead roles in underwhelming dramas – his comic timing and presence always noteworthy – Fazal was making smarter choices, and showcasing his capacity to lead. Not since the late Irrfan Khan has an Indian actor been able to stand in for the provincial and the intercontinental with such alacrity.

But then the universe had plans of its own. The pandemic interrupted his wedding prep and threw production and release schedules off-kilter. As Bollywood's power hierarchies shuddered under the weight of the nepotism debate, and the untimely loss of some of the industry's brightest actors, Fazal was also reckoning with the demise of his mother, lost to a long illness.

"I've been on autopilot ever since," he says over a Zoom call one recent afternoon. He's sitting in the study of his Bandra home, a bright Desigual tee stretched over his large frame; moustache gone, bedhead intact. To his right is a wall of books, featuring Chomsky, Freud, Nietzsche. Behind his left shoulder, a vintage Remington typewriter that he bought with his mother, sits under a spotlight.

He remembers an anecdote about his mother. "You know how growing up you're told tales from *Aesop's Fables* or *Moby Dick*?" he says. "The first bedtime story

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my mother told me involved an Italian mafia family living in New York. Years later, when I was watching a film called *The Godfather*, it felt like I'd heard the story before. When I asked her about it, she said she thought it was a cool story. She was a fan of Robert Duvall, but she introduced me to Marlon Brando. I was a bit obsessed with him growing up."

"But anyway, I've got support from some unexpected places. Therapy helps; Richa has really been there." Fazal has kept himself occupied, almost out of necessity. He has re-read *Manufacturing Consent*; been blown away by Charlie Kaufman's *I'm Thinking Of Ending Things*; and watched *The Social Dilemma*. The last one moved him enough to shoot off a Hindi dubbing proposal to Netflix.

Fazal is very proud of *Tasveer*, a short animation film put together in collaboration with Ashutosh Pathak and Neel Adhikari during the lockdown. As we talk, an email in his inbox informs him that the short has been selected for Dharamshala International Film Festival's virtual edition (October 29-November 4). He has also, with his friend and collaborator Hussain Dalal, written and acted in a feature-length film that follows two people stuck in one house; a film that he hopes to ship off to festivals and that will "poke, question, go down to the roots of hate in society" – but without being preachy.

"With this lockdown, I feel there's a churning, learning, a centring for a lot of us," Fazal muses. "Sometimes, it feels like the world has been preparing you for something. Or maybe not. Maybe we're all just fooling ourselves."

Ali Fazal, turning 34 this month, has had an unusual trajectory to stardom. He didn't go to drama school. He doesn't belong to a family with deep roots in cinema. He has had to "work it" to stay visible and relevant. "I spent the early years of my childhood in Lucknow, living with my mother and my maternal grandparents," Fazal is recounting. "My grandfather was a wrestler, a pahalwan, part of an akhara in old Lucknow. He came from a family that practised Unani medicine; so

obviously, my career options were limited and had to be serious-minded, not *shaukeen*."

While at Doon School, Fazal was a sports enthusiast, keen on playing basketball professionally. He tried theatre after an injury dashed that dream. He played a small role in a school production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, an experience he chalks up as "interesting". He also remembers the late Tom Alter often dropping by for a round of cricket; and being enamoured of this "good looking Bob Christo who spoke beautiful, fluent Urdu."

After graduating from St Xaviers, Mumbai, in Economics, Fazal was gearing up for a career in the global development sector, beginning with a stint at the UNDP. On the side, he secretly worked on his first film project. Syed Akhtar Mirza's *Ek Tho Chance* never saw the light of day, but Fazal was hooked. "*Ek chaska chadhata hai*. You're standing there for a limited amount of time, but for that time, you have the power to decide the twitches on their faces."

Around this time, Mira Nair's *The Namesake* arrived. Fazal remembers marvelling at Irrfan Khan's performance and the fact that eyes around the world were on this man. "I never got to meet him," he says, "But I followed everything he did. I watched *Puzzle* recently, his last Hollywood film. I've always thought there was a Brando-esque quality to his work. It's actors like him, and my directors, who have taught me everything I know about cinema."

With the rise of streaming platforms, Fazal's career reached an inflection point. The digital revolution has democratised entertainment. It unlocked audiences for industries from the East and the global South (re: *Sacred Games* and *La Casa de Papel*, Turkish dizi, Korean horror). It also gave pop culture a facelift; now reflecting a more diverse, inclusive, real world. Someone like Fazal, with his good North Indian genes and ability to emote with nuance, had an unprecedented advantage to cross over.

"People [in the West] are now more open to writing parts that can have actors cast from across the canvas," For reference, he mentions British writer, rapper and actor Riz Ahmed. "This is very hard to do because you have to get geography out of your head. Naturally, not all movies can do that – an Indian film about a farmer in the hinterland can't cast Tom Cruise."



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ASSISTANT STYLIST:
SELMAN FAZIL
PRODUCTION: **MEGHA MEHTA,
ANOMALY PRODUCTION**



It is “blind casting” when Dev Patel plays David Copperfield; or Himesh Patel stars in *The Aeronauts*, a film set in the 1800s; or even when Kumail Nanjiani has a place in *The Eternals*. It is also when Fazal gets to participate in an upcoming British web-series that is a “period piece”; or is cast as Andrew Katchadourian, Gal Gadot’s cousin, in *Death On The Nile*.

“Agatha Christie obviously wrote him as a white person. In the 1978 film adaptation, the legendary actor George Kennedy played him. The character is still fully British, with a pretty thick accent,” says Fazal. “I think, generally the entire cast is a notch younger this time, and we all eventually become suspects. Ken’s kept the world that Christie built, but there are lots of plot twists and turns.”

His lips are sealed on the matter of whether Armie Hammer’s character did it – which should follow if Branagh’s loyal to the plot in the novel – but has plenty to say about working with the giant of English cinema. “As actors, when we walk onto a set, we have an idea of what we’re going to do,” says Fazal. “The best part about working with Ken is that since he’s an actor as well, he gets this approach and breaks it down. He helps you reinvent yourself right in that moment.”

“He’s very methodical. For Andrew, we tried different accents, looks, eyes – and slowly we arrived at the person you see on screen. Ken will keep coming to you and asking if you’re okay, if you want another take. Take 70 takes if you have to, he’ll say... This process made me feel really comfortable because I’m coming from across the globe, and it’s very intimidating to walk in and just have your A-game on.”

Meanwhile, in the new season of *Mirzapur*, Fazal takes over as captain of the ship. He’s full of praise for the way directors Gurmeet Singh and Puneet Krishna approach the project, but its outlandish popularity continues to baffle him. In fact, he confesses, he hasn’t actually watched all of it.

“I hate to see myself on screen”, but he also hasn’t been completely on board with the gore and violence. He was shocked into action when a group of teenage boys put up an IG post toting guns and tagged him. “We never got to their parents, but were able to track them down and explain exactly what they did wrong,” he recalls.

“I get that it’s art and we need to leave it alone to move us in whatever way it can.” Still, “I’ve made some conscious choices with Guddu this time.” One of them is to not curse. His character has “grown a lot”, in intellect and maturity, now that he no longer has his brainier brother (played by Vikrant Massey) to lean on.

“This season is a different take on *Mirzapur*; but we’ve kept the flavour intact. Of course, you know, cursing is common parlance in that part of the world, even used affectionately in places like Benares. But I didn’t think my character needed it. I don’t know if it will make a difference,” he shrugs, “but it’s a little candy for myself.”

Death On The Nile and *Mirzapur* S2 arrive on the same day; at which time Fazal should have landed in Egypt to be on the jury for El Gouna’s short film competition. Soon after, the pandemic permitting, he’ll be in an LA studio shooting for the lead role in *Codename: Johnny Walker* (working title), a war film from a prestigious Hollywood production house.

“It’s based on a bestselling book, being adapted for the screen by Alan Wenkus who we know for *Straight Outta Compton*,” says Fazal. “It tells the true story of an interpreter during the Iraq War who ended up spending a lot of time with the Navy SEALs, going beyond his job description to help them out and even save lives. This is a guy who was specially trained in hand combat because as an interpreter you are not allowed to carry ammunition with you.”

“The SEALs put in a request at the Pentagon to transport the guy to safety,” he continues. “Just last year, he got his citizenship in America. Now he’s living somewhere in Southern California.” Fazal hasn’t spoken with him yet, but has taken up boxing, perhaps to begin getting back into shape for what will be a physically demanding project.

Looking back on his oeuvre, Fazal frankly admits: “I was drifting and sifting through the cards that I was dealt for a while. But I’m trying harder to steer my career in the direction I want.” His partner, Richa Chadha has helped “bring about a lot of maturity to my craft”. “She has brought back the same discipline that I used to have when I played sports. She has centred me spiritually.”

The wedding will happen, maybe next year; but in the meantime, there is work to do. There might be big opportunities for Fazal on the other side of the world, but he says he hasn’t seriously considered moving base. Instead, he’s hoping to delve deeper into the trade of film-making (write, edit, direct). Potentially launch a production house with Chadha. Continue to spotlight worthy social initiatives on his Instagram, like Mayank Gandhi’s Global Parli (a grassroots agriculture reform movement).

“Great art, fortunately or unfortunately, comes out of depressions in human history,” he says. “I’m not an opportunist. But I do feel it is our responsibility as artists to create content that resonates globally and speaks to the zeitgeist.” He catches himself. “But anyway. Who knows what the future really holds?” **GG**