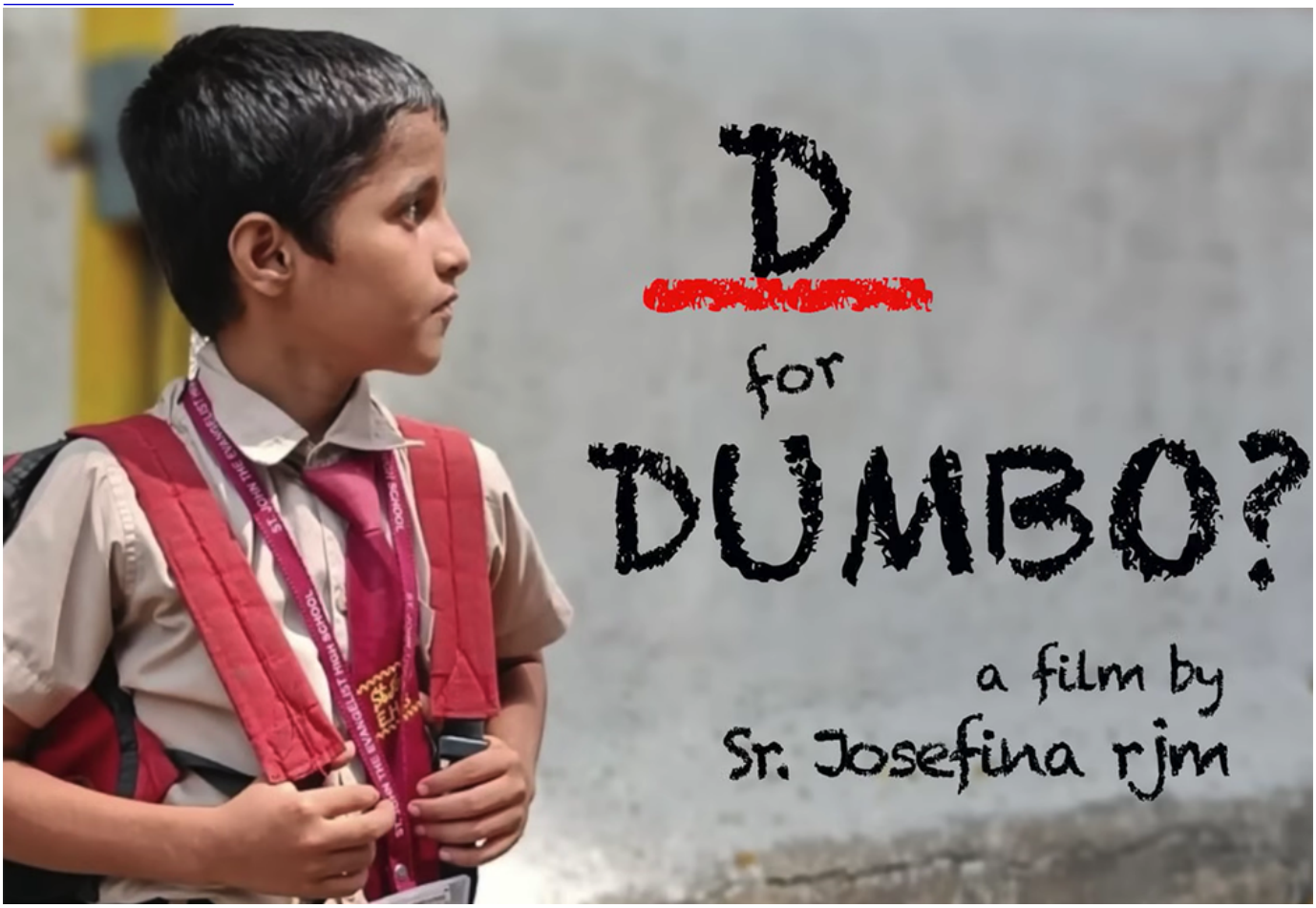
News
Arts and Media



A screenshot of Sr. Josefina Albuquerque's film "D for Dumbo?," which won the first prize awarded by the St. Paul's Communication Centre in Bandra, Mumbai, on Aug. 14. (GSR screenshot/YouTube)

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An Indian Catholic nun has won accolades with an award-winning short film and photographic documentation of tribal life in one of the last few surviving forests in the financial capital of the country.

For Sr. Josefina Albuquerque, from the congregation of Religious of Jesus and Mary in Mumbai, it's a dream come true after a 20-year stint teaching in top-ranked schools and being the principal of two high schools.

Her zero-budget movie, titled "D for Dumbo?" which was shot on a simple mobile phone, won the first prize awarded by the St. Paul's Communication Centre in Bandra, Mumbai, on Aug. 14.

The seven-minute film about a fourth grader who has difficulty learning math but excels in storytelling has also been selected for screening at the online ALP International Film Festival, showcasing independent films on Sept. 23-24.

"I am very humbled by the award and recognition," the 45-year-old Goan nun told UCA News.

Albuquerque, who was dressed in the traditional kurta churidar like many Indian women, said she always wanted "to reach out to and touch a wider, diverse audience with Gospel values rather than limiting herself to a classroom."

She continues to serve as the principal of St. Agnes High School in Mumbai, which also serves as the headquarters of the popular Bollywood film industry.

The nun said the inspiration for "D for Dumbo?" came from a real-life experience. Rudra Yadav studied in the fourth grade at St. John the Evangelist School run by her congregation in the Andheri suburb, where she was previously the principal for five years.

"Yadav, a slow learner, attended remedial classes as he could not cope with his studies. He could not complete a single sentence in English as his mother tongue was Hindi. He lived in a city slum," she recalled.

For her film, Albuquerque fictionalized his story and named the protagonist Sam. A slow learner, he faces ridicule in the class because he cannot recite multiplication tables as quickly as his peers.

"A teacher holds a creative storytelling class where she starts an open-ended story and midway asks students to take it forward. The other students struggle but when asked, Sam completes the story, thus turning the tables on those who ridicule him," the nun narrated.

"D for Dumbo?" was produced as part of her class project for the six-month Professional Filmmaking Course at St Paul's Communication Centre. Albuquerque filmed it at the St. John the Evangelist School campus. Her cast consisted of students attending summer classes.

"As a teacher for 20 years, I have come across students who have difficulties or disabilities, etc. But I believe no student is a duffer. If provided with proper environment and opportunities, they can be groomed well," the nun said.

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She cited the case of Boman Irani, a successful actor in Bollywood movies "who was called a duffer in school, but went on to become a great stage and film actor."

Albuquerque was presented the first prize at the Aug. 14 convocation by Naseeruddin Shah, one of Indian cinema and theatre's accomplished actor-directors. He applauded her short film saying he identified himself with the protagonist.

"The film's theme resonates with everyone on some level and I was delighted that Shah expressed his feelings," the nun said with a grin.

She recalled the film was shot in just two days on her mobile phone. "But it was hard work and took many days of preparation," she added, mentioning that writing the script was a challenge "as I had little training or experience in writing."

Cinematography and direction came naturally to her. "Before you actually make a movie, you make it in your mind," she revealed.

However, enrolling in the filmmaking course was not easy. "I had to convince my superiors for permission," said the nun.

What she was proposing to do was completely new and different for the Religious of Jesus and Mary, who are traditionally engaged mostly in running schools and social work initiatives.

But once the permission was granted to her, Albuquerque plunged wholeheartedly into learning the craft, enjoying different facets of filmmaking and photography along with her co-students.

She gives credit for the hands-on training to the film course's director, Satish Bhatia, a well-known cinematographer, and Pauline Fr. Renold Pascal, vice principal of the St. Paul's Communication Centre.

ALP International Film Festival will also be showcasing her documentary titled "Under the Banyan Tree: A Path to Self-Discovery." The four-minute documentary portrays the life of an engineer named Elijah Emmanual, who abandoned a well-paying and promising corporate job in search of meaning in life.

He came from Nashik city in the western state of Maharashtra and settled down in one of the hamlets in Aarey Forest.

"This 31-year-old engineer caught my attention as he walked barefoot, took classes for poor students and even taught music to them. He became an environmental activist and spent most of his time under a banyan tree," says Albuquerque.

Her engagement with tribal life in Aarey Forest led her to take observational photographs that portrayed a day in the life of a tribal family from their rising to calling it a day.

"I selected this tribal family for my assignment as I was intrigued by the tribal lifestyle during my walks in Aarey Forest," says the nun.

Photographing the tribal family gave her immense satisfaction and the resulting work even touched her colleagues and faculty at the St Paul's Communication Centre.

Albuquerque has now started to showcase her work on YouTube for a wider and diverse audience.

She has produced over 40 music videos titled "Give God a Chance," "Is God Calling You," "The Blessed One," "St. Claudine's Mission Today" and "Dream Big" and posted them on YouTube.

"This is my heart's calling. When I produce these videos and other works of art, I am totally immersed in God," she said, looking up to the skies.

The nun believes the media, with a huge, diverse, and wider audience, is one of the most powerful influencing tools.

"It has a transformative power to change the world and make it a better place," she said while making known her intentions to make use of it to the full potential to spread Gospel values.