



presents

THESE BIRDS WALK

A film by
Omar Mullick & Bassam Tariq



72 mins. • USA, Pakistan • In Urdu with English subtitles • Canon 5D mkII

www.oscilloscope.net/thesebirdswalk

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THE FILM

In Karachi, Pakistan, a runaway boy's life hangs on one critical question: where is home? The streets, an orphanage, or with the family he fled in the first place? Simultaneously heart-wrenching and life-affirming, THESE BIRDS WALK documents the struggles of these wayward street children and the samaritans looking out for them in an ethereal and inspirational story of resilience.

SYNOPSIS

Filmed over nearly three years, THESE BIRDS WALK is the story of Omar, a high-spirited young boy of 9 or 10 who is living in a house for runaways; he has fled his difficult rural home life for the dangerous streets of Karachi, and is trying to find a safe haven somewhere amidst the chaos of his country and his family.

Attempting to help him is Asad, a young ambulance driver who works for the dispatch center adjacent to the runaways' home. A former street kid, Asad sees something of himself in these children, and reluctantly but regularly risks his life to reunite them with their families.

Hanging over both of them, though only briefly glimpsed in the film, is the presence of the founder of both the orphanage and the ambulance dispatch center: Abdul Sattar Edhi, the most deeply revered philanthropist in Pakistan. Edhi has established a system of nursing homes, women's shelters, orphanages and hospitals – a large army of humanitarians gathered in his name to fight the country's rampant gang violence, ethnic conflict and poverty.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

THESE BIRDS WALK, on the face of it, is about a challenge and a boy. On the one hand, the film is the narrative of Omar, a runaway boy in Karachi at a house for runaways and his effort to get home; and ambulance driver Asad, who is charged with returning the boy and his friends to their homes.

Hanging over the narrative is a challenge, launched early in the film, by the aging humanitarian Abdul Sattar Edhi, the gruff national saint of Pakistan. He is founder of the Edhi Foundation, which provides a sanctuary, employment and welfare services for our protagonists and the country that binds them. He initially refused outright to be in a film about his work, but relented if we met his requirement. His challenge was this: if we wanted to know him, we should go to the ordinary people who work for him and whom he serves. If wanted to know his story, it was there.

Our film is a literal, even stubborn visual response. Edhi may bookend the film, but his presence is one that hangs irrevocably over all these lives. And the struggles these ordinary characters face to save and be saved under the roof of a private welfare institution represent a microcosm of the country at large.

The reason for making this film at this particular time was born of an impulse to look closely at the work of a humanitarian often deemed publicly to be a saint. His challenge is both the arc of the film and also the manner in which we look at lives and a country often reduced to socio-political categories in the public discourse. The universals of small daily lives,--these people's concerns for maintaining and forging bonds of family--sidestep the academic and political categories used to understand the nation and lend the viewer an intimacy that provides a human take on boyhood, manhood, and family.

This film is a narrative plunge in to a few small lives and one in particular of a runaway boy birdcaged by his home, the streets and the runaway institution that may be his only sanctuary. And finally it is about an old man, and one of his drivers, standing at the gates trying to set some of these boys free.

- Omar Mullick and Bassam Tariq

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Abdul Sattar Edhi

Abdul Sattar Edhi or Edhi as he is known, is a Pakistani philanthropist known for his international humanitarian work. He is the founder and head of the Edhi Foundation, a non-profit social welfare program in Pakistan. Together with his wife, Bilquis Edhi, he has received many prizes and international awards for his work, including the 1986 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service, the Lenin Peace Prize and the Balzan Prize for Humanity, Peace and Brotherhood. He is considered one of the most influential Muslims in the world and in 2012 he was nominated by Pakistan's government for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Edhi Foundation

Edhi established his first welfare center with roughly \$50. What started as a one-man show operating from a single room in Karachi is now the Edhi Foundation, the largest welfare organization in Pakistan. The foundation has over 300 centers across the country, in big cities, small towns and remote rural areas, providing homes for orphans and street children, medical aid, family planning and emergency assistance. According to the Guinness World Records, the Edhi Foundation has the largest private ambulance service network in the world. It also owns air ambulances, providing quick access to far-flung areas.

In Karachi alone, the Edhi Foundation runs 8 hospitals providing free medical care, eye hospitals, diabetic centers, surgical units, a 4- bed cancer hospital and mobile dispensaries. In addition to these the Foundation also manages two blood banks in Karachi.

Edhi is to Karachi what Mother Teresa was to the poor of Calcutta. Edhi and wife Bilquis have spent a lifetime working for people and their welfare work to date remains unparalleled in Pakistan. They are both very private people who shun publicity. They have had little formal education, and are totally committed to the cause of helping the poor and needy.

OSCILLOSCOPE LABORATORIES ON THESE BIRDS WALK

The minute we saw the first footage of *THESE BIRDS WALK*, we knew it was an incredibly special film. We love documentaries and have been a part of many great ones over the past number of years, and so we are always excited to find a film that manages to capture such important, touching content with beauty, delicacy, and grace. It's a rare feat. In as much as the footage in *THESE BIRDS WALK* is unprecedented in its access to a world and a people who are far too often unseen in our country, it is ultimately Omar and Bassam's ability as filmmakers to craft this footage into something so unique—somehow ethereal yet direct, poetic yet urgent—that makes this such a powerful and unforgettable film. It is also a film that, in every way, embodies what we strive to achieve and support at Oscilloscope.

Upon our initial discussions with Omar and Bassam, it was immediately clear they inherently understood how to take the great specificity of their footage and turn it into a final film with universal interest and impact. Their storytelling was always going to be relying first and foremost on one thing - emotion. Rather than present a barrage of facts or talking heads to address the issues at hand, they instead were presenting us with moments - moments often wrought with excitement, danger, sadness, humor, and ambiguity. They simply unfold before us, without any commentary or manipulation. From these moments, a portrait of these children's daily lives emerge and whatever your background, it is virtually impossible not to be moved while watching the film.

Yet for all the difficult terrain TBW covers, it ultimately conveys a sense of hope - a belief that, in spite of everything, people can help one another, children can be survivors, and the world is often full of beauty. Omar and Bassam's remarkable ability to convey all this within the context of their story is truly impressive. It is a vital, human story. It floored us from the first

time we saw it, and could not be a better fit with everything O-scope stands for.

- David Laub and Dan Berger, Executive Producers, Oscilloscope Laboratories

SUBJECT BIOS

Abdul Sattar Edhi is a humanitarian whose institution almost single-handedly props up the welfare needs of Pakistan. The Edhi Foundation provides the largest privately funded ambulance service, orphanage and hospital services in the country. In a country rife with nepotism, he prompts extraordinary trust in donors who have seen him make his life and its work among the poor.

Omar is a 9 or 10 year old Pashtun boy whom we find at the Edhi home for runaways in Karachi, Pakistan. At times swaggering and others utterly unraveled, he is someone who must navigate the violence of other boys, his own explosive personality, and the brute realities of family life wherever he can make or find it.

Asad is an ambulance driver, smart mouthed and at times cynical who becomes the reluctant champion of these runaway boys. Having to make his own living, while also contend with the weight of trying to return these children home, he is himself a product of a streetwise youth and little support, still trying to cling to his humanity.

Q&A WITH FILMMAKERS OMAR MULLICK AND BASSAM TARIQ

What was the genesis of this film – and how did you initially envision it?

The original idea was to make a film about Abdul Sattar Edhi. I think at that time we might have had different ideas on what an Edhi film should look like, but we both had the same creative ambitions to build something unique. The first week we arrived in Karachi we put up a whiteboard and wrote on it “no voiceover/talking heads.”

We really had no idea what to expect from Abdul Sattar Edhi, as he is an incredibly private man that is very good at sticking to his PR points in front of a camera. We were able to meet him when he visited New York City about three years ago. Mr. Edhi said he looked forward to our arrival in Pakistan, where he would offer us complete access to all his facilities. Yet when we met him there, he turned us (and our cameras) away. He seemed tired of the media covering his story and was frustrated with the lack of results. He threw a challenge at us: that if we want to know him we shouldn’t look at him, but look at his work. We didn’t know it at the time, but that was the start of our film.

We wanted to use Edhi as a springboard to tell a larger story about Karachi and the trials of the city. When we first planned to go into Pakistan, the country was dealing with the largest number internally displaced refugees due to the Taliban in the northwest of the country, and Edhi was instrumental in finding homes for the people. But that story quickly fell to the wayside as the refugees were able to move back to their homes, and we decided a story that specific might have served better as a news video piece or an article. Our ambitions were to make a timeless and visually arresting film, not one that felt quickly dated. The best films, non-fiction or fiction, are timeless - - appreciated for more than just the topics they tackle, but also for the craft, the editing, the cinematography, the score.

How did you find Omar and Asad, and how did you know that they would be the film’s subjects?

While touring the Edhi facilities (which include mental health care, womens’ shelters, orphanages, and more) we stumbled upon this small runaway home for boys in one of the most unstable areas of Karachi. The kids there all had families and were waiting for a relative or someone to find them and take them back home. Unlike Edhi’s other centers, the adults were barely present. It felt like Lord of the Flies with brown kids. These boys fled their families and their homes yet still yearned to be with them. That conflict really struck a chord with us, so we decided to begin our filming at the runaway home.

Omar was the first kid we met at the runaway home. Just in the first couple of hours, we saw him singing beautiful Islamic folk songs, cursing like a sailor, fighting with kids twice his height and then crying in embrace of his friend. He was a handful.

The runaway home is connected to an ambulance dispatching service, and Asad is a driver that was stationed there. We were poor filmmakers who couldn’t afford taxis or a driver, so Asad would feel bad for us and give us rides back home. On these rides, Asad would crack the dirtiest jokes and openly share the inner workings of the foundation. He stuck out from most of the

ambulance drivers because he was the youngest, most energetic and savvy out of the bunch.

Asad and Omar are growing up in difficult circumstances, but they're not looking for anyone's pity. They demand your respect and don't want to be treated as victims. Many times people in the developing world are simplified into symbols of hope or products of tyranny. We wanted to sidestep those conversations. Omar and Asad are more than just icons, they are people who deal with depression, family and growing up, just like we all have to.

In the film, you have almost a really notable intimacy with Omar. How did you gain his trust?

We filmed with Omar for about two to three months at the runaway home. I think we were able to build the trust with these kids because we didn't have a fixer and spoke Urdu fairly well. We're also young ourselves, so we made sure we played along with them. It also didn't hurt that we looked like one of them. It was easy for them to see us as their older brother or uncle.

There is a stunning scene where Omar goes running into a crowd, and the camera follows him at the same pace- was this planned out, or was it simply something that happened?

The shrine scene was not planned. The Mazar was something we knew Omar wanted to visit, along with the ocean which he had never seen before, from which is taken the opening scene of the film. The pursuit to follow him through the market and shrine was anything but structured, though. He was stopped by a security guard, we ran past people with him, and at one point the lens was knocked against someone's back and it had to be adjusted while running, just to keep up. On the walk back down, we also apologized to someone we accidentally fell into as we ran up. Soon afterwards, there was a bombing at the Shrine. The commotion meant that we were not allowed to return. We did stop back there during that trip and left on good terms.

Omar and the other children at the orphanage seem devoutly religious. Is the Edhi orphanage a religious institution?

The Edhi Foundation is not a religious institution. Though Edhi himself is a devout Muslim, he doesn't preach Islam nor does he like to talk about his own ritualistic practice. It makes us cringe when people call Edhi "the Mother Teresa of Pakistan." Mother Teresa, bless her heart and her work, was part of a larger religious institution and missionary group, Edhi shuns from proselytizing and speaks of God in very universal terms.

Something many people in the media tend to dismiss or only associate with the extremists in the region is how religion is part and parcel of the lives of many Pakistanis. More than just the call to prayer blanketing the skies of Karachi five times a day, the buses, the rickshaws, the cars, the billboards, the writings on the walls all call on a Divine concern in ordinary lives.

Asad seems nervous about driving Omar back to his home, stating that it's a dangerous area in Taliban territory. How often do the Edhi drivers have to make these dangerous journeys? Have there been any incidents with Edhi drivers in dangerous parts of Pakistan? Did you yourselves feel danger while filming?

There is a wall of photos in the main Edhi center honoring all the ambulance drivers who have died while on duty. The photos keep on getting smaller as they need to make more room for more photos of the fallen. Karachi is notorious for its ethnic violence and gang warfare. When the police are running away from the gunfights, the ambulance drivers are running in to pick up the bodies of the fallen. It used to be said that Edhi drivers were always safe from the gun violence and looting since they were apolitical and working for an honorable cause, but unfortunately the times are changing and ambulance drivers are dying in armed robberies and bombings weekly.

We came to Karachi when the drivers' casualties were increasing. They decided to take Omar home right before dawn because they wanted to get the kid home as quietly as possible. We always had the ambulance lights on and someone lying down on the stretcher in the back to make it seem like we were transporting a sick patient. We hid our cameras and boom mics as much as we could. It was a little scary, but we were more concerned on how Omar was feeling and how he would be received when we reunited him with his family.

This film marks Oscilloscope's first venture into producing territory. How did this come about?

We met David Laub at the Sundance Summit during the Sundance Producer's Lab in July 2012. We hit it off pretty quickly when he mentioned an obscure Peter Jackson film, "Forgotten Silver." Since we all lived in NYC, we did something that many sales agents tell you not to do, show distributors a cut of your film before it premieres. We were always huge fans of Oscilloscope and David was genuinely interested in helping us even before he saw our film. We felt it wouldn't hurt to show him a cut, at the least, we will get some great advice.

Two weeks later, before many film festivals announce their selections they made us an offer on the phone. We didn't expect it at all. The rest is unfolding now.

TEAM BIOS:

Omar Mullick (co-director/co-producer/director of photography) is a photographer, cinematographer and filmmaker. His work as a photographer has appeared in the New York Times and National Geographic, and has received multiple awards. His project 'Can't Take It With You' was featured in a solo show at the Gallery FCB in Chelsea, New York. Selected works have shown at the Safe-T gallery in Dumbo. Commercial works include skate videos and television shows for MTV. This is his first feature film. In 2012, Omar was selected as one of 25 New Faces of Independent Film by Filmmaker Magazine.

Bassam Tariq (co-director/co-producer) is an independent producer who has produced feature stories for TIME magazine, Boing Boing, Atlas Obscura and Huffington Post. He is also the co-creator of the viral travel blog 30 Mosques in 30 Days in where him and a friend traveled across America highlighting the lives of American Muslims. The project was highlighted by NPR, BBC, Huffington Post and named CNN's Top Newsmakers of 2010. This is his first feature film. In 2012, Bassam was selected as one of 25 New Faces of Independent Film by Filmmaker Magazine.

Sonejuhi Sinha (editor/producer) is a New York-based editor working at Final Cut Edit. She has edited several music videos for MTV and MTV2 UK, high profile commercials for award winning Ad campaigns and a 30 minute series, Provocateur, for the Sundance Channel. She recently edited a high profile commercial for AIDS Awareness, garnering recognition from ADcritic, Creativity, and winning 2 Lions at Cannes. She is currently working on two feature documentaries due for completion in 2012.

Valentina Canavesio (producer/PMD) has worked as a producer on documentaries and magazine TV shows worldwide. She is the founder of Ayoka Productions, a non-profit that uses short films to highlight inspiring grassroots initiatives. Valentina also works as a one-woman crew all over Africa and Asia, shooting and editing videos for NGOs and the UN. In 2010, she was invited as an up-and-coming filmmaker to the Berlinale Talent Campus. She is currently directing her first feature film.

CREDITS

OSCILLOSCOPE LABORATORIES
presents a film by OMAR MULLICK and BASSAM TARIQ

"THESE BIRDS WALK"

Cinematography by OMAR MULLICK
Edited by SONEJUHI SINHA
Music by TODD REYNOLDS
Color by CHRIS RYAN
Sound by DAMIAN VOLPE

Executive Producers DANIEL BERGER DAVID LAUB

Produced by OMAR MULLICK BASSAM TARIQ
VALENTINA CANAVESIO SONEJUHI SINHA

Directed by OMAR MULLICK and BASSAM TARIQ

CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Omar
Abdul Sattar Edhi
Humeira
Asad Ghor
Shehr Ali
Mumtaz
Saib
Mumtaz
Rafiullah

Pakistan/ USA, 2012, color, 72min.

This film would not have been made possible without:

Sundance Institute
IFP
Cinereach
NYSCA