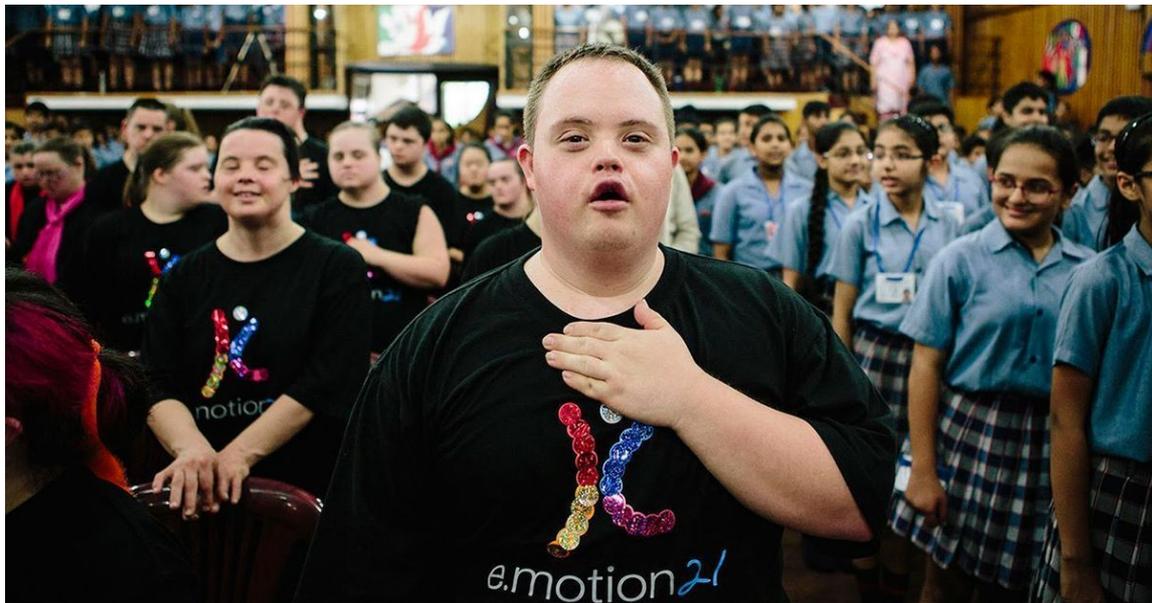


[DOCUMENTARY CHANNEL](#)

Stories of love and dance in ‘Raising the Bar’, Onir’s documentary about children with Down syndrome

The India-Australia collaboration follows the experiences of six families across the world.



Raising the Bar | Mind Blowing Films

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[Sruthi Ganapathy Raman](#)

A group of girls in Melbourne alight from a bus bearing a large poster of the Netflix show *Stranger Things*. Seconds later, they break into a dance routine led by Alle Sayers, a smiling teenager.

Sayers has Down syndrome, a genetic condition that impairs cognitive functioning. The scene is from *Raising the Bar*, a documentary by Onir about the role of dance in the lives of a group of children with the condition. Onir’s 70-minute film covers several cities including Melbourne, Delhi, Mumbai and Ichalkaranji in Maharashtra as it traces the journeys of six children with the genetic disorder who congregate at the 2015 World Down Syndrome Congress in Chennai. Mitu Bhowmick Lange and e.motion21, an Australian non-profit, have co-produced the film.

Raising the Bar, which was premiered at the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne in 2016, was screened in Mumbai last week. “I was worried about how the children would trust me and interact with me because that was very important for the film,”

Onir said. “The difficult part was to know the family before shooting and gaining their trust so that they would not be conscious. That process was rewarding.”

Raising the Bar.

Alle Sayers’s mother Cate Sayers founded e.motion21, an Australian organisation that offers dance and fitness classes to children with Down syndrome. “At two in the morning one night, my husband and I, through tears, just looked at each other and said we have to choose a path and that we will be her champions,” Cate Sayers says through tears in the documentary. “A path where we make sure that she would show the world how awesome she was.”

The documentary features interviews with the families of six children with Down syndrome, including the Sayers, across India and Australia. Relationships, brotherhood, love, and most importantly, parenthood, is the focus of *Raising the Bar*.

Onir explained that he wanted to stay away from depicting the medical aspects of the syndrome and focus on universal experiences like love and friendship. “I just thought about the important things in our lives today,” he said. “There is friendship, love, acceptance, education, job, security, laughter and old age. All these are common things, that they are also worried about. My focus was their emotional aspect of life.”

Raising the Bar marks Onir’s return to documentary filmmaking. He started his career 25 years ago with *Fallen Hero* (1992), a documentary about the Bengali painter Bijan Choudhury. In the interim, he has made several feature films including *My Brother...Nikhil* (2005), *I Am* (2011), *Shab* (2017) and the recently released *Kuchh Bheege Alfaaz*(2018).

Speaking about the inspiration for *Raising the Bar*, he said, “Mitu [Lange] was down in Bombay a couple of years ago and she was looking for a documentary filmmaker who would be sensitive enough to deal with something like this. Mitu’s daughter too has Down syndrome and I immediately accepted the project. That is how the journey began.”

The documentary also explores the emotions of the parents of children with the disorder. “The mothers were telling me that they were really skeptical about opening up because there are a lot of people who just use these kind of things for their own benefit,” Onir said. “But they felt that they could trust me. Honestly I did not have to try hard. I spent time with the children, talking and playing with them.”

Establishing trust was key to the filmmaking process. “I remember one day I was spending time with one of the kids Aarshya, and we had gone to her school,” Onir said. “As she was coming down the stairs, she left her mother’s hand and came and held mine. For me that was a moment of trust from her.”



Raising the Bar. Image credit: Mind Blowing Films.

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