Filmmaker Shlok Sharma’s powerful debut feature Haraamkhor portrays the tussle between innocent and forbidden love. Having worked closely with two of India’s most known and followed contemporary filmmakers Anurag Kashyap and Vishal Bhardwaj, Shlok’s film is one that is much anticipated. Based on a true events, Haraamkhor tells the story of a 15-year-old girl’s relationship with her teacher. Starring Nawazuddin Siddiqui and Shweta Tripathi in the lead, the film had its world premiere at the Indian Film Festival Of Los Angeles, 2015, yesterday night. Fresh off the screening Shlok Sharma, who has earlier helmed short films like Sujata, Bombay Mirror and Hidden Cricket, speaks to Long Live Cinema on the challenges of making his first feature and about the lessons he learnt from his mentors.

Tell us a bit about your background and how you got interested in films and filmmaking.
For as long as I remember, it was always meant to be films. I wrote my first script (or what I thought was a script) when I was in Class 9. I met Vishalji when I was only 16. He gave me a break when he asked me to join him on the production team of The Blue Umbrella. I was a production assistant on the film. I would stand in queues to book tickets for the entire crew, for almost months. Then, finally, everybody left for the location. At place we shot, the temperatures would drop down to -5 degrees Celsius. My job was to wake the crew up, organize hot water for them to bathe in, and get their breakfast and cars in place. All this may sound tedious, but trust me, it was the best learning experiences of my life! Anything that brought me closer to the process of filmmaking was perfect for me. It still is. If I hadn’t made it as a director, I’d have been a spot boy!

How did making short films help you while working on your feature Haraamkhor? Are making shorts the best step for aspiring filmmakers to get their features made?
Any form of expression that brings you closer to your dream of becoming a filmmaker is always great. Short films for me were definitely like baby steps to feature films. Although they both are very different formats (short films and feature films), shorts help me define who I am. And honestly, given a chance I’d still pounce on either of them with equal enthusiasm.

How did you arrive upon the idea that later became Haraamkhor and considering your love for short films, how did you decide that this should be a longer film?
It is always the subject or the story idea that prompts the duration. I had this subject (for Haraamkhor) in mind for a really long time. It is a real life incident that had happened to someone I knew very closely. There were two brothers- one was around 13 and the other around 11. One day, the elder one misbehaved with his father while they were at work in the fields. He hit his father, and the father, in an attempt to save
himself, asked the younger boy to hit his elder brother to stop him. The younger one charged at his brother and kept beating him till he stopped moving. He had, of course, killed his elder brother in a fit of rage. This story stuck with me ever since I had heard it. It was so powerful, that it didn’t even let me sleep.

How long did you take to script the film? And how many drafts did the script go through?
It took me around 3-4 days to write the script, around 12 days of pre-production and then 16 days of shoot. I am only thankful that the fact that it all happened so fast doesn’t come across in my film. And I am glad it worked for all of us. Of course, now I don’t intend to make anything in so much of a rush. I want to give each film the time it needs.

Did you have Nawaz in mind while writing the film? How was the casting for the rest of the lead characters done?
I always have Nawazbhai in mind when I write a film (smiles).. any film. I knew him since [Gangs Of] Wasseypur days. I knew that Shyam had to be played by him. I had worked with Shweta Tripathi in Sujata. She is an effortless performer. She, too, was the natural choice for Sandhya. Of course, for the rest of the cast, Mukesh Chhabra brought all of my characters to life.

The film is both light-hearted and deep at the same time. Did you try to give a distinct feel to both these elements in the film in terms of differences in lighting or music?
All these elements are prompted by the script. Siddharth Diwan, the DOP, is a very sharp and outstanding cinematographer. He knows how to enhance certain elements and how to subdue them depending on the story and the script. All that is purely his doing. Same goes for the music. Vishal Khurana knew the exact strings to pull up and let down, quite literally, to convey the right mood and what the characters were feeling.

What were the challenges you faced while making Haraamkhor?
I think the biggest challenge was to shoot a film in 16 days. And a feature film in 16 days could have only been attained with the backing of such a devoted and talented cast and crew. Everybody was on fire! The energy and aura of a superstar like Nawazuddin Siddiqui added fuel to our fire. When we began the pre-production, we had around 28 days to finish the shoot of our film. Eventually we had to slash it down to 20, simply because we had to attain what we had to in our shoestring budget, and this was the only way. But when we got down to actually shooting it, we managed to finish the film 4 days ahead of schedule.

You have the experience of assisting two filmmakers who can be referred to as contemporary masters of Hindi films. How did this experience of working with Vishal Bhardwaj and Anurag Kashyap shape you as a filmmaker and whose style is Haraamkhor more close to?
Vishalji and Anurag Sir are both my film schools. Obviously the way they work and think, is responsible for shaping my sensibility to an extent. But they both have always encouraged originality. It is like how parents teach you the rights and wrongs, sometimes through actions and sometimes through words. But when you arrive in the world, you are on your own. You express your own experiences. Haraamkhor is my own expression.

Who are the writers, filmmakers who have influenced you?
Of course, Anurag sir and Vishalji top my list. Then there is Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino and
Woody Allen to name a few.

Your film is the opening film at IFFLA. What are your thoughts of screening it at a festival like this? Festival screenings are always special. And, that, too, when we are opening the festival. Also, IFFLA is extra special because I was here with my first short film (Tubelight Ka Chand). And, now I am back with my first feature.