

An Obituary of Comedy: The Life and Times of Munnu Shahbaz Kalandar Khan

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(This article originally appeared in the Daily Dusk, January 16th 2007 Edition)

The Famed Wrestler, Actor and Politician dead at 71.

In the small village of Chuung, just on the Punjabi border to India, Munnu Shahbaz Kalandar Khan was born into a house of 12 children, in the year 1936. Being the youngest, he sought out attention more than any of his siblings, who considered him to be more of a nuisance than anything. They were quick to dismiss him and did not notice when he ran away from home to seek out attention from the world, at the age of 15. He would later recall meeting his parents many years past, his parents apologizing for genuinely forgetting he was ever born in the first place.

A year or so of attention seeking later, Munnu joined a traveling wrestling troupe to tour various locations all across the Punjab region. By age 20, he was the Provincial Champion in the All India Kabbadi Tournaments. He went on to lose the National Championship to the Regional Champion and would-be Indian Screen Legend S K P D R Wadia.

Undeterred by the loss, for the next ten years Munnu would wrestle his way through different leagues. It was during the latter half of his

ten year tenure that Munnu grew weary of his opponents and sought out animals and beasts to wrestle. His first and last match of this outing (and his entire wrestling career) was with Harry the Hippopotamus of the Harold and Harold Traveling Circus, which at the time was visiting the city of Lahore. The match took place in a giant tub of water, complete with glass shields for the spectators to witness the event under one of the largest tents Lahore would ever see. Spectators described the match as one sided and Sir Reginald Lionel Windsworth described the match in Englishmen's Lahore Gazette as, "A plethora of mistakes and complete absence of human sense."

Munnu met and married his first wife Nurse Francesca De Souza, who was one of the nurses that tended to him while he was recovering at the hospital. The next ten years of his life are not known, though it is very well known that De Souza's influence of a 'free spirit' was well noticeable by now. His venture into drugs and alcohol stem from De Souza's liberal views and encouragements. It would also mark the beginning of their marriage's disintegration and ultimately, their divorce in 1978.

After attending rehabilitation therapy in the United States, Munnu returned with new vigor and enthusiasm to Pakistan. Having seen various motion pictures in the United States, he decided to try his hand at acting. In 1979, under the banner of the newly formed Tarana Films, famed Lollywood director Furkan Fazal Faheem signed Munnu in his first ever Punjabi venture, "Tu Mera Pra Nahin" (you are not my brother) a power family drama about two brothers set around the formation of Pakistan.

FFF describes his experience working with Munnu: "Now here was a chap who had determination. He had no idea where he was going, but by God, he was going to get there!" The aging director spoke of the actor with hearty laughter, "I remember he could not read the script, so we brought in my secretary Momina to read the script out

to him so that he could learn it." After the shoot, Momina Batool showed up with Munnu at the premiere of the picture, the couple stole the show by announcing their engagement.

TMPN was Munnu's first hit and it brought him to the attention of many fans nationwide becoming the first motion picture to open across all three of Pakistan's cinema screens. On the other side of the border, his antagonist, S K P D R Wadia had his first blockbuster "Ma" (mother). It became the first Indian movie to be nominated and win an Oscar for best foreign feature.

The mid-eighties saw a string of hits for Munnu, from the rampant comedy "Jigger, tu ney mera tanga dekhay hai kahin?" (friend, where's my cart?) to the gangster thriller "Aankh maar ta hai?!" (you dare look badly at me?!) to the drama "Yeh Saas Kabhi Bhahu Nahin Thee" (this mother-in-law was never a daughter-in-law). These movies were an example of his diverse acting capabilities. Munnu was not known for his romantic roles, however, movies like "Ishq, Nazla Zukham De Wich" (love in the time of flu) a loose adaptation of Love in the Time of Cholera, drew throngs the audiences in by the thousands.

It was around this time that he ventured across the border on the invitation of S K P D R Wadia to co-star with him in the grandest of Indian cinematic ventures, "Mera Ghorda Mar Gaya" (my horse is dead). But it seemed that the stars were not aligned for Munna who dropped out on the venture due to creative differences.

This would ultimately mark his decline in the Pakistani film industry and once again, Munnu was drawn in to vices during this time of distress. Sometime in the mid 90s, his career and films went through a mini revival brought on about by a motorcycle advertisement campaign based on his famed character, "Basant Khan". This would incite Munnu and his friend, director FF Faheem, to produce a sequel to their initial collaboration, entitled "Tu Mera Pra Hai" (you

are my brother) based on the lives of the children of the original characters. Munnu played the lead role and his own father, for which he was awarded — for the first and last time — best acting role in the Television and Motion Picture Society of Pakistan Awards.

Riding on the rollercoaster of his success, Munnu would work with FFF again on another sequel of the franchise; entitled “Tu Mera Baab Nahin” (you are not my father). Unfortunately, due to political pressure and an extremely controversial script, the project has never seen the light of day.

Having tasted the bitter taste of Pakistani law, Munnu tried his hand at Politics, running for the National Assembly successfully from the small town of Vehardi. He would ultimately run for Prime Minister in what could best be described as a “Shock and Awe” campaign. Though he didn't have a coherent campaign message or objective, he would travel to each village, town and city and challenge its mayor, governor, minister to a wrestling match. No politician ever accepted and Munnu considered this to be an indication of his imminent landslide victory. Though that was not the case as Munnu lost the election and ultimately his political ambitions.

Not much is known about Munnu's last days. He lived quietly, with his wife, in Karachi, living on the coast. When asked why Karachi and why its coast, he told a television reporter, “Because when I first came to Karachi, I had never seen the ocean in my life. Then I came, I saw the ocean and I also saw the ocean of life. It tends to suck you in at times, its bitter to taste, its everywhere and you can't drink it, but it sure is fun to just surrender to it and let it take you places.

He is survived by his wife and four children, two from the previous marriage and two from his second. All of the children now successful and living their own lives have never discussed their lives and their father with the press on any occasion. The matter of his passing was uneventful.

He died quietly in his sleep on January 15th, 2007 and is buried in the Clifton Graveyard.

