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# 'I'm still waiting for my dream home'

► Four years after making *Slumdog Millionaire*, child star Rubina Ali is hoping to finally move into the home promised to her by the director. Turn over to read our exclusive interview, as Helen Roberts meets the 13-year-old...



PHOTO: TANZEEL UR REHMAN AND REX FEATURES





► ‘I’m still waiting for my dream home’

by Helen Roberts

She was plucked from obscurity and India’s overcrowded Mumbai slums to star in the eight-Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*, and promised a proper home by the director. Now, four years later – after having to sleep on the street when her family’s shack in the shanty town burnt down – Rubina Ali is close to realising her dream.

She is about to get the keys to a flat just a couple of weeks after celebrating her 13th birthday. Currently living in a one-bedroom rented apartment while she waits for the Jai Ho Trust – established with financial support from the film’s director Danny Boyle and producer Christian Colson to ensure the welfare of the movie’s child stars – to finalise the deal on her home, she is cautiously excited.

“I only wish that this time there won’t be too many delays and I and my family will really be able settle down in it,” says the teenager, who played the role of a young Latika in the hit film.

Once before, Rubina was told a home was almost ready for her and her family – and she’d even chosen the pink decor for her bedroom – only for it to fall through at the last minute.

“It’s taking a long time for the trust to find us a good home,” she explains. “The location just keeps changing; we have no idea why.”

Excited about her future

Instead of worrying though, Rubina, who won the Screen Actors Guild Award for outstanding performance in a motion picture, is busy studying at the prestigious Asima High School, an English medium school, in plush Bandra West, made possible again thanks to the Trust, and acting in her spare time. “My life has changed so much since Danny Boyle gave me the amazing opportunity,” she smiles. “He is a kind and lovely man. Before him we used to live in a smelly house and shared our toilet with neighbours, but at 13 my life is so different and I’m excited about my future.”

Rubina has a lot to be proud of. From living in a cramped shack, which had an open drain right in front of the door, her family has been able to move up into a bigger apartment in a relatively better area of Mumbai. They are all eager to have a place to finally call their own thanks to the little girl’s fortune, which changed all their lives almost overnight.

After the glamour of trips to Los Angeles for the Oscars, a tea party in Westminster, London – to congratulate the Oscar winners – and a visit to Hong Kong to shoot a dance number



for a TV channel among others, Rubina has also acted in a TV drink commercial with Hollywood actress Nicole Kidman. Directed by Elizabeth filmmaker Shekhar Kapur, it was produced by Ridley Scott. Rubina reportedly earned thousands of pounds more than she did for *Slumdog Millionaire* even though it only took three days to shoot the ad.

She also released her autobiography *Slumgirl Dreaming – Rubina’s Journey to the Stars*, in September 2009, for which she reportedly received an advance of £20,000 (Dh115,500).

Her latest film, *Lord Owen’s Lady*, in which she co-stars with Anthony Hopkins and *Slumdog’s* Azharuddin Mohammad Ismail,

PHOTOS: SUPPLIED AND REX FEATURES



Top left: Rubina with her co-stars in *Slumdog Millionaire*; left, the building that houses her flat. The child star, above, is proud she will soon have her own house

is scheduled for release later this year. Right now, Rubina’s waiting to complete her studies. While she has many plans for her acting career, her main aim is to star in a film with her idol, Bollywood star Salman Khan. “I know all his films,” she says. “I only go to the cinema to watch him. He’s amazing.”

Rubina’s father, Rafiq Qureshi, wants her to concentrate on her studies at the moment, but that hasn’t stopped her worldwide popularity growing. Her Facebook page already has over 800 ‘likes’ and is continually increasing. “I love going on and seeing who has messaged me and the lovely things people have written,” she says.

It’s all a far cry from the future Rubina

imagined growing up surrounded by rubbish and toxic waste in a slum near Bandra East. Her family of seven, including her father, stepmother Munni (Rubina’s biological mother, Khushi, abandoned her when she was four, and even though she made a brief appearance after Rubina’s Oscar win, she hasn’t heard from her since) and her two brothers and two sisters squeezed into an 11-square-metre hut made of brick walls and corrugated iron roofs.

But when a family friend heard of auditions taking place nearby for a film, Rubina’s father thought his daughter would shine.

“I knew Rubina wanted to act, she was a natural, so I thought I’d take her along and see what happens,” he says.

Life-changing moment

After Rubina was chosen, she was paid an upfront amount of Rs45,000 (around Dh3,300), a figure her family had never seen before. It was a huge help as Rafiq only brings home Rs8,000 a month working as a carpenter.

“Just to be paid that much was amazing,” she says. “It changed our family’s life.” They repainted the inside of their slum, bought a TV and a used laptop and lived a better quality of life. But once the month-long filming in Goa, and the trips to Los Angeles and the Oscars were over, it was back to the slums for Rubina.

Luckily, thanks to the ceaseless media glare on the children who were thrust into the limelight after the success of the movie, and a public outcry that they were still living in squalor although the movie was making millions at the box office, Boyle stepped in and promised to give the two slum children houses in Mumbai. He also helped to set up the Trust to help Rubina and Azharuddin pay for a good education until they are 18.

While Azhar moved into a brand new 23-square-metre flat in Vile Parle, a middle-class suburb in Mumbai, courtesy of the Trust in 2009, Rubina is still waiting to get the keys to her promised home. Reports say that bureaucracy and red tape are to blame.

Rubina has been on the move since finishing the movie. Her shantytown shack was demolished in 2009 to make way for a new railway line, and her second home was gutted in a huge slum fire in March last year, burning all her Oscar and film memorabilia and her favourite dresses. Now she is grateful that the long wait for her own home is almost over.

“We thought we were moving into a new place a couple of months ago,” she says. “It was all planned. I had chosen my own bedroom, the colour scheme and everything. I wanted pink, it was perfect but then it changed again.”

The 33-square-metre feet flat they’ve now been promised in Bandra West is still under construction – windows are yet to be put in, the floor hasn’t been laid, there’s no plumbing



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or electricity and it needs painting. "I'm a little disappointed because the new place isn't as big as the last one that they promised," Rubina says. "The last one was perfect, this place isn't so perfect because we'll all have to squeeze into one room again but I'm still excited because this place has its own kitchen, shower and toilet, something I never had in the slum."

**Feet firmly on the ground**

But Rubina will miss her old friends and neighbours. "Even though our home used to smell awful I loved my neighbours and close family nearby," she says. "We were a close community; everyone's so nice. But I'll visit them every Sunday for sure."

Rubina is refreshingly down-to-earth even though she's still recognised from *Slumdog*. "I loved doing the movie," she smiles. "I remember this really pretty girl playing with me all the time on set. She was lovely and very beautiful. But I didn't realise that it was actually Freida Pinto, and the older version of my role, until after the shoot when I finally watched the film."

"I like people coming up to me and chatting. Most people sing the *Jai Ho* song to me when they see me, it's funny."

"I was never treated as a star then or now. I have always just been Rubina. I know many actors let all the fame go to their head and they think they're special but I'm not like that. I'm just normal Rubina," she says, adding that she is happy "no one has ever been nasty to me."



Rubina with Danny Boyle, the man who "changed my life"

I've not experienced any jealousy or bitterness; everyone has been so kind and lovely, very supportive."

Meanwhile, her autobiography is earning her Rs250,000 every six months in royalties since it was published. "I still want to be an actress when I grow up. I want to win more Oscars, but for now I'm just trying to learn English and obtain good grades at school," she smiles.

And get the key to her front door, of course.

PHOTO: GULF NEWS ARCHIVE

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