

Natural born storyteller

A passion for Burlington, N.L., is fuelling a social enterprise cluster that includes a TV show, an inn, a music festival, and a creative outlet for one of Canada's favourite comedians

Shaun Majumder

Shaun Majumder recently wrapped season one of *Majumder Manor*, which aired on the W Network. The 12-part series is the realization of a long-held dream of Majumder's to give back to his hometown, Burlington, located on the Baie Verte Peninsula in central Newfoundland. Because the series documents a real chapter in Majumder's life and that of Burlington's 350 residents, most would categorize it as a reality show. "*Majumder Manor* is too real to be a reality show," he says, laughing. "I call it a comedic documentary series."

The 41-year-old Gemini-award-winning comedian, best known for starring in CBC-TV's *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, has honed his performing chops over 20-plus years in the entertainment business.

The storyline is that he and his relatives and friends hope to bring the world to the rugged shores of "the Burl." To do so, they plan to build a deluxe eco-inn with a five-star restaurant. An on-site greenhouse will provide fresh produce, and plans are in the works for surrounding exclusive cabins called "pods."

Ultimately, they hope to help launch complementary local businesses and services in the area, which includes the small towns of Middle Arm and Smith's Harbour. A business framework is already in place thanks to the creation of the Burlington Community Business Initiative (BCBI) and the BSM Manor (BSM). Together, the BCBI and BSM will help other local entrepreneurs with business plan development, small-business training, and micro-loans.

Although Majumder lives in California with his fiancée, actor Shelby Fenner, he visits Burlington often; Majumder's father, Mani, and his stepmother, Leisel, live there, as do relatives of his late mother, Marian Bartlett. The budding entrepreneur believes what he calls "community buy-in" is essential to the manor's long-term success.



Peter Blackie and Shaun Majumder on set at *Majumder Manor*.



SANDOR FIZLI

Both Majumder and the W Network seem satisfied with the show's inaugural season. "The [ratings] numbers are strong, and the reaction has been really great, so I have my fingers crossed for a second season," he says. He's grateful to the network for taking a hands-off approach, allowing Majumder and local Newfoundland producers and brothers Peter and Rob Blackie to use the "authentic voice" of Newfoundland in the scripts.

For Peter Blackie, all good things start with a simple idea and sense of commitment. In the case of the show and Majumder's real desire to help build a future for his hometown, Blackie's own interests in the plight of outports converged. "It's important to note that we're not against urban growth," says Blackie via email. "What we're interested in is striking a balance so that we don't blindly advance one at the cost of the other. For us, finding a path to a new future involves input from the whole Newfoundland and Labrador family!"

The show's narration is provided by Majumder's 22 *Minutes* co-host and long-time friend, Mark Critch. "Every day is an adventure with Shaun, and every day is fun," says Critch. "You never know what will happen or where you'll end up." Critch didn't hesitate to take part in the project. "When Shaun first told me about the series, I thought it sounded like a crazy idea, but if anyone can do it, he can." Academy-award-winning film producer Michael Donovan, the CEO of Halifax-based DHX Media Ltd. and 22 *Minutes*'s executive producer, says the buzz on *Majumder Manor* is excellent. "Shaun is a great comedian and a great talent," he says. "He can do anything if he believes in it enough."

The love and respect that Majumder has for his family, friends, and community is obvious in every frame of the series. And peppered throughout is his signature comedic timing. "When I was growing up, humour was all around me and used in a joyous way," he says. "Newfoundlanders are born storytellers; they like to spin a tale."

— MARJORIE SIMMINS