

FILM

Bringing Bombay to the Big Screen

Talking with director Mira Nair

by ARTHUR RYEL-LINDSEY

On a crowded Bombay street in 1988, a homeless 11-year-old boy scratched out a living delivering tea to prostitutes, pimps, and pushers, only to have his money stolen by his closest friend. In 2001, a bride-to-be fretted with doubts and longing for a past lover while hundreds of guests and family members gathered for her long-awaited wedding. Last year, the desire for a place within the decadent parties and tall, muraled houses of the 19th century English elite consumed the heart of a working-class girl determined to make her mark on the world.

These are Mira Nair's films. They challenge cultural boundaries with an ease of movement only Nair herself could maintain.

Nair – pronounced like “fire” – lives in Kampala, Uganda and New York City. Between her travels back and forth, she is adapting her 2001 hit film “Monsoon Wedding” for Broadway and working on two new movies: “The Namesake,” based on a Jhumpa Lahiri novel, and “Gangsta M.D.,” an American remake of an Indian blockbuster comedy. She teaches film at Columbia University in New York and helps with the Salaam Baalak Trust, an organization she founded in 1988 with her mother, Praveen, to support homeless or working children in India.

“Mira has such a dynamic personality,” says Tula Goenka, an assistant professor at Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. Goenka worked with Nair as an assistant editor on “Salaam Bombay!” and “Mississippi Masala,” Nair's first two narrative films. “Mira is really a presence,” she said, “When she enters a room, she lights it up.”

Be prepared for a sudden glow. Nair will be speaking in Syracuse Oct. 6 as part of the Syracuse Symposium. The artistic festival's theme this year is “Borders.” Six of Nair's films will be screened in late September and early October.

Nair earned her reputation as a world-class filmmaker after “Salaam Bombay!,” her story of the dangerous lives of Indian street children, won her acclaim at the Cannes Film Festival and an Academy Award nomination. Since then, she has worked with the likes of Denzel Washington, Uma Thurman, and Reese Witherspoon and garnered numerous prestigious awards and project offers. When Nair was short listed to direct “Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix,” set to be released in 2007, she chose to film “The Namesake” instead.

Nair loves to tell stories. Occasionally, her South Asian accent dissolves into a fit of giggles. She laughed over the phone, speaking from her home in Uganda in late July.

Art Ryel Lindsey: You've taken a lot of risks as a filmmaker. With “Monsoon Wedding,” especially. You said you were convinced that it was going to be a small film. But then you were casting hundreds of actors.

Mira Nair: The whole time I was just thinking I was making a video or a home movie.

ARL: Yet, you pulled it off. I think that

about Sylvia Plath and “Vanity Fair” at the same time. And you chose “Vanity Fair.” Obviously, “The Namesake” is another major work by a very popular author right now. And then “Harry Potter.” How do you choose your scripts?

MN: Some things choose me. “Namesake” just possessed me from the beginning. So I dropped everything to make that. That was really like a calling. When something possesses me, then it's very easy to follow that possession. To surrender to it. I was both tempted to do “Harry

Potter” and yet so much in the stride of making “The Namesake” that it was very difficult to let the one go and to commit so many years to another. It's hard. It's like that. You make your choices.

ARL: What else comes to mind when you think of your own work?

MN: A point of view that isn't always seen.

ARL: There are many times in your films when you let the camera do the work – you follow things or dissect a scene with the camera – so it's interesting that you mention point of view.

MN: I often look for non-verbal ways to say things and visual ways that capture me. That's the joy of cinema.

ARL: John Lahr wrote in *The New Yorker* that “the making of happiness was both Nair's ambition and her profession.” How do you feel about happiness in your films?

MN: For me, life must inform art. That's when art becomes really explosive. I want to definitely recognize happiness in my films. But the tragedy, the sort of madness of life, the darkness of life is also made more acute when you see it next to happiness. And that's what I strive to capture.

ARL: Do you watch your films and feel that happiness?

MN: In “Monsoon Wedding.” My whole family's in it. Whenever anybody wants to visit, they just put it on. ■

Arthur Ryel-Lindsey has bachelor's degrees in film and English from The Ohio State University.



Associated Press

Filmmaker Mira Nair will speak at Syracuse Symposium October 6.

speaks to the determination that a lot of people have been seeing in your films.

MN: That's true, that's true. I'm definitely pig-headed.

ARL: “Monsoon Wedding” was billed as a family flick, but was still very sensual and very sexual. Is that something you look for in your scripts and in the visuals?

MN: It's not that I look for it, but it's very important that the subject grabs me visually and allows me to be inventive and to take new risks each time. I can't just do something again because I've done it once before. I can never do that. I will never do that, because life is short and there's no point repeating yourself. I'm a real communicator, so the criteria was always for me: if a film is offered to me, can anybody else make this film or must it be me? Or do I have a way that nobody else can do it? That's key. With “Harry Potter,” a number of great filmmakers can make that movie. It didn't have to be me.

ARL: You were presented with doing a film

Mira Nair Film Festival

Sept. 26: “Salaam Bombay!” (1988)

Sept. 27: “Mississippi Masala” (1991)

Sept. 28: “Monsoon Wedding” (2001)

Sept. 29: “Hysterical Blindness” and “11'09'01 – September 11” (2002)

Oct. 4: “Vanity Fair” (2004)

All films will be shown at 7 p.m. in Crouse Hall at Syracuse University.

Mira Nair will speak on Oct. 6 at 7:30 p.m. in Grant Auditorium (College of Law).

For more info visit: www.symposium.syr.edu or www.salaambaalaktrust.com