

From a 'fog of grief,' Nair crafts a new passage to India

by David_Elliott

LOS ANGELES - Though fairly exhausted from recent press travels, Mira Nair is directing the scene in her hotel suite by putting you at ease.

"Let me make your tea," she says, pouring hot water into a cup. She adds a Nairean blend of cream, tea and honey. The cup, the courtesy and a warm smile speak of her Bengali heritage.

But when Nair speaks, it's in the assured briskness of a global director whose films are international. When not on the road, the short, ebullient woman is at home in Calcutta, in New York and in her home base of Kampala, Uganda, where she has a film school.

Nair, 49, enjoyed a 2001 hit with the comedy "Monsoon Wedding," having been a U.S.-educated export talent with "Salaam Bombay!" and "Mississippi Masala." She made a bustling, extravagant "Vanity Fair."

MIRA NAIR - Director Mira Nair, on the set of 'The Namesake,' wanted to make a family film suitable for both her son and her father-in-law. CNS Photo courtesy of Abbot Genser.

She recently released "The Namesake," from Jhumpa Lahiri's hit novel about a quiet, cultivated Bengali couple who sink American roots (and have kids) in tough New York.

She made this emotionally loaded film out of need:

"I am a shameless populist, and I am a parent. I look at these terrible insults to the intelligence called family pictures and I think: Who is satisfied by this? So I wanted a family film as involving for my 15-year-old son as for my father-in-law."

And she made it from loss:

"I read the novel by chance months after I bought it, when flying to India. I was in abject mourning at the time for my mother-in-law. She had just died in a New York hospital from malpractice. I was in a fog of grief."

She felt "a shock of recognition, from Jhumpa understanding what it's like to lose a parent in a country that is not your home. When I landed, I called my agent and asked him to get the rights, and just nine months later we were shooting. I dropped two other projects, a kind of fever possessed me, and if I had not felt such grief I probably would never have made this film."

Nair gave the novel for scripting to Sooni Taraporevela, "my best friend since I went to Harvard at 18. She was almost the only other Indian kid there, and I made a long trek to meet her. She'd left Bombay, I had left Calcutta and we became fast friends, and she later wrote many of my films. We were born to make this one."

There are great themes (birth, death, migration, ritual, love, family) but as Nair knows, that's not enough. "The people must compel you," she says, each word concise, "through and beyond the themes. But I did want to make a film of parents and children.

"You know, in Indian tradition life has four stages: the celibate youth, the householder, the worker or warrior in the world, and then, in old age, the renunciate. I feel I am in the cusp between the third and fourth stage, having become a mother and yet now knowing what it is to lose parents."

A bold caster, from Indian street youths to Reese Witherspoon (who was "Vanity Fair's" Becky Sharp), Nair chose regal Bollywood beauty Tabu ("It's her nickname") as new wife and homesick mother Ashima. Irrfan Khan is her emigre husband Ashoke; Nair "discovered him for 'Salaam, Bombay!' when he was quite young. Now, he is this amazingly ripe and dignified actor."

In a likely box-office bonus that is spot-on dramatically, American youth star Kal Penn plays the couple's U.S.-born son Gogol, named for the fabled Russian writer. Nair laughs, admitting she hasn't seen Penn's teen hit "Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle."

"Kal was urged on me by my son and a pal of his," she explains. "This young actor walks on water for teenagers, and is known for comedy. He went far beyond that for us." Of Indian heritage but born in Montclair, N.J., Penn had read Lahiri's novel on the recommendation of "Harold" co-star John Cho. Nair really brought him to India, notably in a key segment at the Taj Mahal.

"It was our last day of shooting," she says, "and a bit of a mob scene because of Tabu's fans. We were all knocked over by the Taj, where Kal got to play this boy brought to his knees by something wonderful in his heritage." (And, yes, she does know that Penn starred in "Van Wilder 2: The Rise of Taj.")

The Indian diaspora in America is no longer the cozy club Nair knew as a bright girl who came to film via Harvard, then acting and design. The explosive growth in South Asian Americans struck her a few years ago.

"When I got the Harvard Arts Medal," she says, "I thought about 50 people would be waiting for me. Turns out there were 1,500, mostly Asian. Back in '76, we had three South Asians in my class. I was so stunned, I made a joke that, 'Soon this country will be run by people who look like us.' It's a world of Gogols, a new world coming together despite its many problems."

That diaspora and India's rising, far-flung cachet as a hive of arts and business fed the happy fever for Nair's "Monsoon Wedding." Quite British yet deeply Indian, the film had an impact that astounds Nair, never an elitist but hardly mainstream by Hollywood standards:

"The film stole people's hearts. It's like what lovely Jim Broadbent told me: 'It's the antidepressant of my family.' Actually, when I was pitching 'Namesake' for money, they assumed it was another 'Monsoon.' I said no, no, we did that one.

"That was an intimate tale that suddenly made millions. But this is an epic story with 80 actors over 30 years, across two continents. My joke is that it's a non-Caucasian film on a Caucasian budget. Which means less than half the usual Hollywood money for a romantic comedy shot in Anywhere USA."

Nair got major Indo-Brit composer and pianist Niti Sawhney to do the lushly varied score, and David Lynch's famed cinematographer, Frederick Elmes. Using as visual templates photographs by Indian and American masters, she and Elmes worked out the unusually integrated palette.

"Fred had never been to India," she says. "He loves my sensibility, that each film has its own look. I know Calcutta and New York like the back of my hand, and there is great synergy of spirit between them: harbor, bridges, traffic, trams, cultures, arts.

"I decided to film the cities as if they were one, overlapping, so that when Ashima looks out her window and sees the bridge in Manhattan she almost felt it is the Howra bridge in Calcutta. Fred led us to a style that was other than the hand-held swirl of 'Monsoon Wedding.' You have to possess the world in a new way."

Brief sexual candor, a problem in Indian films despite the vast erotic trove of Hindu arts, led to some cryptic touches. "To show sexuality unbridled is still taboo there," Nair notes, "so I have discovered lovely ways around it. Like by emphasizing their legs and feet, a metaphor right out of the Kama Sutra, where feet like tendrils bind the lovers. In India we only had to cut one shot of Tabu's rear."

Nair's passage to her India, and her America, Britain and Africa, is often across the bridge of humor. Viewers laugh before deeper themes sink into them, and she feels the source is "just my personality. The rhythm of laughter and sorrow is a beautiful thing in life, so why not in films?"

"People are more responsive to melancholy things if they have laughed, not at gags but the human humor of actual lives. But you never know if you found the right rhythm. Then, when I first saw this with an audience, I was startled and overjoyed. They were laughing so much and then a few scenes later some were sobbing. This is the best: interactive cinema."

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