



EARLY YEARS

Accomplished Film Director/Writer/Producer Mira Nair was born in India and educated at Delhi University and at Harvard. Mira Nair began her film career as an actor and then turned to directing award-winning documentaries, including *So Far From India* and *India Cabaret*. Her debut feature film, *Salaam Bombay* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1988

Born in Bhubaneswar, a small town 300 miles south of Calcutta Mira is the youngest of three children from a middle-class family; her father was a civil servant, and her mother was a social worker. The only Hollywood film she saw as a child was *Dr. Zhivago*, which came to the movie house in her town. At 13, Mira first left her hometown to attend an Irish Catholic missionary school in Simla. From there she went to Delhi University to study sociology. Here, Nair became involved in political street theater and performed for three years in an amateur drama company in Delhi, working with director Barry John (John subsequently conducted drama workshops for the children in *Salaam Bombay!*) and later Joseph Chaikin of the Open Theater in New York. At 19, she came to the United States with a scholarship to Harvard, where she became disillusioned with the conservative theater program and was soon drawn to filmmaking.

CAREER

Mira worked with filmmakers Alfred Guzzetti, Richard Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker on her early films. Her student work and her first independent films were documentaries exploring the culture and traditions of India and their impact on the lives of ordinary people. Her student thesis film, *Jama Masjid Street Journal* (1979), explores her relationship with her country through images of the streets of Old Delhi. Her second film, *So Far From India* (1982), is a double portrait of an Indian news dealer in a New York subway and his pregnant wife in India awaiting his return. The film won Best Documentary prizes at the American Film Festival and New York's Global Village Film Festival. In 1985, Nair directed *India Cabaret*, "For me, it was inspirational to make a film about survivors who don't need your pity and who are totally aware of where they are," she explains. Her next film, *Children of a Desired Sex* (1987), was made for a current affairs program for international television, and looked at the dilemma facing women who discover that their fetus is female, while living in a society that favors male offspring.

The huge international success *Salaam Bombay* happened when in 1987, Nair chose to depart from documentary filmmaking because "I got tired of waiting for things to happen- I wanted to make things happen. I wanted to choose what happened to a character, choose the light, and choose the actor's underwear." She said. Building on her experience in theater and documentary film, Nair and her scriptwriter, Sooni Taraporevala, a college friend of Nair's and a native of Bombay, conducted a three-month workshop with 30 street children who would perform in the feature film. In *Salaam Bombay!* Nair set out to "portray the reality of children who are denied a childhood, children who survive on the streets with resilience, humor, flamboyance and dignity.

Drawn to the idea of making a film that dealt in some way with the hierarchy of color, Nair's *Mississippi Masala* was a film about an interracial love story. The film brought a

standing ovation at the Sundance Film Festival in 1992, and three major awards at the Venice Film Festival.

Nair's subsequent films include *The Perez Family* (1993), about an exiled Cuban family in Miami; and the sensuous *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1997) which was inspired by a Hindu erotic manual, written around 300 AD. Nair feels the film has relevance to contemporary life in the United States, where sex is "devoid" of a connection to spirituality, and in India, where the historical connection has been lost. "So much of our religious literature, even in the 13th century and earlier, was about this interconnection of the eros and the divine. And then through the years of English domination and Victorian mores of sex, sin and savagery, it got far more twisted and perverted to become what it is now, basically taboo." The film broke box-office records in Japan and the Far East, and was an art-house hit in America, but was banned in India. Legal battles over censorship of the film went all the way to the Supreme Court. In 1988 Nair directed *My Own Country*, which bagged the NAACP award for best fiction feature. She returned to the documentary form in August 1999 with *The Laughing Club of India*, which was awarded The Special Jury Prize in the Festival International de Programmes Audiovisuels 2000.

In the summer of 2000, Nair shot *Monsoon Wedding* in 30 days, a story of a Punjabi wedding starring Naseeruddin Shah and an ensemble of Indian actors. Winner of the Golden Lion at the 2001 Venice Film Festival, *Monsoon Wedding* also won a Golden Globe nomination for Best Foreign Language Film and opened worldwide to tremendous critical and commercial acclaim.

An original HBO film, *Hysterical Blindness* received great critical acclaim and the highest ratings for HBO, garnering an audience of 15 million, a Golden Globe for Uma Thurman, and 3 Emmy Awards.

Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Nair joined a group of 11 renowned filmmakers; each commissioned to direct a film that was 11 minutes, 9 seconds and one frame long. Nair's film is a true story of a mother's search for her son who did not return home on that fateful day. Nair yielded the director's seat in 2003 to produce a documentary directed by Dinaz Stafford that explores the ancient rice farming technique practiced by the Garos of Meghalaya.

Released in 2004, *Vanity Fair*, a provocative period tale set in post-colonial potrays Reese Witherspoon as Becky Sharp, a woman who defies her poverty-stricken background to clamber up the social ladder.

Nair's upcoming projects include Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* for HBO, and Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*; there are also plans to take *Monsoon Wedding* to Broadway. Mirabai Films is establishing an annual filmmaker's laboratory, Maisha, which will be dedicated to the support of visionary screenwriters and directors in East Africa and South Asia. The first lab, which will focus on screenwriting, will be launched in August 2005 in Kampala, Uganda.

Art is a passion or it is nothing. - Robert Fry (Vision and Design)
