

# FROM HERE TO BOMBAY

## West Side Filmmaker Triumphs In Cannes

By Gerard Raymond

"It's really like coming home, in a way," said West Side filmmaker Mira Nair, a native of India, referring to her first feature film, *Salaam Bombay!*, which was selected to premiere next week at the prestigious New York Film Festival.

Nair's new film comes to New York with some impressive credentials: it won both the Camera D'Or (Best First Feature Film) and the Prix du Public (Most Popular Film) at the 1988 Cannes Film Festival. *Salaam Bombay!* will be released commercially in 30 cities in



Mira Nair directs two cast members in a scene from her award-winning film *Salaam Bombay!*

America with its New York engagement at Lincoln Plaza Cinema beginning October 9.

*Salaam Bombay!* is set in the streets of Bombay and its protagonists are the street kids of that teeming city. In an unusual mix of documentary style filmmaking and fiction, Nair employed the street kids themselves to act out their story (there are only four professional actors in the film).

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The film follows the adventures of Krishna, a 10-year old boy, who is abandoned by a travelling circus. He has enough money to buy himself a train ticket to "the big city" — Bombay. Soon he finds work as a "teaboy" carrying tea to the residents of Grant Street, a red-light district in the city. Through him, the audience gets acquainted with the prostitutes and the madams of the Grant Street brothels, the pimps and the drug pushers, the hordes of children who live out their entire lives on the streets of the metropolis and their nemeses, the Dickensian "chiller rooms," government-run homes for vagrants.

"Bombay is where the Hollywood of India is — where all the dreams are spun — and the kids really gravitate towards the city," said Nair who was born in Orissa, a state in the east of India. She left her native land at the age of 19, with a scholarship to Harvard. Nair had some amateur theater experience from the University of Delhi prior to her departure, but at Harvard she took a course in photography which she found "visually compelling and challenging."

There she met her husband, Mitch Epstein, who is a photographer and the executive producer of her films. "At that point I fell into documentary filmmaking, which was a marriage of my interests in the visual arts, theater and life as it is lived," Nair said.

Between 1979 and 1987, she produced four documentaries, which have been well received at numerous international film festivals. Her film *India Cabaret* generated much controversy when it was released in India in 1985. "It's a film about strippers in Bombay and it doesn't pity them, but celebrates their strength, their resilience and their sense of humor," she said. "They are very savvy, strong women with an incredibly straightforward awareness of living and working in a society which uses them and condemns them."

Although documentary filmmaking is a field which Nair said she learns a lot from, and is something that she has been very involved with, she has also found it frustrating. "I was impatient to want to control all its dimensions," she said. "I say this while being utterly respectful of that gift of the everyday moment. While I was working in documentary I was impatient sometimes, many times, with waiting for something to happen and not having it happen like I hoped it would."

"On the other hand, I would be completely humbled by something you cannot recreate on film," she continued. "So the challenge was actually to try and get that type of edge and moment of a documentary in something that can be controlled." It is the desire to have control and also reach an audience usually denied to documentary filmmakers that propelled Nair towards the

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The street children of Bombay are featured in Mira Nair's award-winning film, *Salaam Bombay!*.

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— Mira Nair, filmmaker

fiction feature.

In order to achieve a documentary truth within fiction, Nair and her assistants organized a workshop with the street kids of Bombay. They scoured key areas around the location of Grant Street where they intended to shoot their film: railway station platforms, the beaches and other places where the kids hang out. After two weeks of recruiting, 130 children showed up for an audition. After weeding them down to 24, they conducted workshops for seven weeks under the direction of Barry John, a Peter Brook-inspired theater director from Nair's University of Delhi days.

The children were told initially that they were working on a play; in movie-mad Bombay the prospect of acting in a film would have caused a near riot. Nair explained that the environment that was created was one that the children loved, but it was explained to them that they had to follow rules like showing up on time every day and not dropping out in the middle of the workshop.

The script was written in nine months by Nair and collaborator Sooni Taraporevala, after they spent 15 months researching their subject. "We talked to a lot of people in jails, in brothels, in the streets and the gangs," Nair said. She explained that the idea of the workshop was to incorporate details and phrases that the kids would contribute into the written script and not to improvise it.

What happened to the children after the film was made? "Perhaps we got more out

of the kids than they got out of us, but we tried very hard to make it a two-way process," said Nair. "We were always very aware that in this process, we would be affecting their lives in some way, and that we would be changed, too. So, the entire thrust of the operation was to really create something more permanent; not just for our kids, but for kids like them." Dinaz Stafford, one of the assistant directors, is a child psychologist, and she remained with 17 kids who stayed on after the shoot. She offered that if they would meet her half-way, she would attempt to provide the opportunities for them to achieve what they wanted.

"We had some success stories, and some which were not so successful," acknowledged Nair. "Some of the kids are still struggling." This November, however, the newly formed "Salaam Bombay Trust" will enable them to open a learning center for 30 children in Bombay. UNICEF and other organizations will hold charity premieres of the film to raise money for the center.

Nair's profits from the film in India will be donated to the center as well. "It is a source of great pride to us that the center is literally self-financed by the movie," she said. "It's a movie that has really been created by the kids and is about them, too."

Mira Nair said she hopes people who see *Salaam Bombay!* will not remember just the depression and misery. "I hope it also reveals the spirit of survival in such children," she said, "and their constant fight to live with resilience, humor and strength." ☆