Between two worlds

By John Petrakis in the May 15, 2007 issue

It seems like yesterday that Indian-born director Mira Nair burst onto the international scene with *Salaam Bombay!* about the street children of that sprawling Asian city. In fact, it has been almost 20 years. During that time Nair has carved out an impressive career with such culturally sensitive films as *Mississippi Masala*, *Kama Sutra* and *Monsoon Wedding*. She now adds to that august list with *The Namesake.*

Based on the popular 2003 novel by Jhumpa Lahiri (who also won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for her debut collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*), *The Namesake* is a coming-to-America story, which is almost a movie genre in itself (think of *In America*, *Avalon*, *The Godfather*, to name just a few examples). What distinguishes *Namesake* from many of these other films is the way it keeps one eye trained on the old world—in this case the steaming streets of Calcutta—even as it focuses on the new world, represented by New York City.

The story begins in the 1970s as a soft-spoken engineering student named Ashoke Ganguli (the wonderful Irfan Khan), who has moved to the U.S. to study and teach, returns to his ancestral home in Calcutta to find a bride. He is fortunate enough to be set up with the brave and beautiful Ashima (the equally wonderful Tabu). After a series of ornate wedding rituals they move to America, where Ashima suffers the slings and arrows of a totally foreign land with its different weather, different

language, different social hierarchies and different values.

The first act, which includes the couple's backstory, the move to America and the birth of their children, displays the most skillful direction Nair has ever done. Working from a script by her sometime-collaborator Sooni Taraporevala (whom she met while they were both studying at Harvard), Nair shows a skillful and extremely gentle touch as she allows specific images—some symbolic, some not—to move the tale forward while withholding some key information, allowing viewers to figure out why the two of them make the decisions that they do.

For example, on the day that Ashima first meets Ashoke, before she enters the room to lay eyes on her potential husband-to-be, she tries on his sweat-stained, American-made two-tone shoes—a gesture that symbolizes not only her first steps to a new world and a new life, but also her willingness to establish intimacy with the reserved Ashoke.

Nair, who loves to use color and movement to suggest life and change, employs a series of contrasts throughout the film to portray the difficulties of the journey away from family and friends—hot versus cold, East versus West, modesty versus overt affection. Her most telling contrast is between the rich primary colors of Calcutta and the dark, dreary palette of New York. Nair has worked with her talented cinematographer, Frederick Elmes (who shot David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*), to drain the lifeblood out the American scene, most notably in a memorable shot of a bridge through the hospital window when Ashima gives birth to her son.

The maturation of the son, whom they name Gogol after Ashoke's favorite writer, the Russian Nikolai Gogol, signals the start of the film's second act—which is involving but not nearly as memorable as the film's opening. Gogol (played by Kal Penn, best known for goofy comedy roles) has difficulty straddling the two worlds, and in rebellion he tries to eliminate his Indian half. This effort includes trying to abandon the name Gogol. He also dives into Western culture and seeks out the whitest, blondest, richest and prettiest woman he can find (Jacinda Barrett.) But family events soon force him to reevaluate his staunch position on his heritage, a transformation that begins with a magical family trip to the Taj Mahal.

There isn't anything unique or monumental in the plot. Just as the novel is celebrated mostly for its wonderful prose and description, the film version works because of its many inspired moments—moments that capture the chilly day when

Gogol first sees the ocean, the way that he runs his hands over the exterior of the Taj Mahal, and the look in his eyes when he realizes that accepting his past is not just a simple matter of rejecting the present.

Perhaps the most moving scene of all is when Ashoke, during a trip for ice cream with his son, tells him that the choice of the name Gogol was based on the Russian's famous story "The Overcoat." Earlier in the film, Ashoke had quoted Dostoevsky, who once declared that "we have all come out of Gogol's overcoat." The beauty of this moving film that we understand that "all" includes any of us who trade off one dream for another.