

The Namesake

Regular readers of these reviews will recognize that this writer has, among other biases, a penchant for films with a cross-cultural dimension, pictures that depict convincingly how disparate ways of life can clash, complicate, then enrich each other. The sparks from just such frictions can illuminate much, especially in the context of our multi-ethnic America. A prime—and stirring—example of how such cross-cultural currents can be the stuff of cinematic art is now at Washington area theaters: *The Namesake*.

Here the cultural elements that clash yet connect are Indian-American, Calcutta-New York, chapatti-white bread. The material is in the practiced hands of Mira Nair, an Indian-American director (born in India, educated at Harvard, long living in New York) who has made a specialty of mingling cross-cultural flavors in her work. Her film *Mississippi Masala* (1991) dealt with romance across the racial divide in the contemporary South. Another, *The Perez Family* (1995) treated Cubans adjusting to Miami, while her recent version (2004) of *Vanity Fair* added an Indian-inspired coda to the classic Victorian tale. Even one of her best films, *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), though taking place entirely in New Delhi, featured a Western-educated groom in the context of the wholly Indian family of the bride.

The Namesake, from a 2003 prize-winning novel by Jhumpa Lahari, follows a young Indian exchange student Ashoke Ganguli (Irrfan Khan) from the U.S. as he comes home in the 1977 to seek a bride in Calcutta. Young Ashima (Tabu), while having little to say about her match (it is arranged) becomes intrigued with the fellow by slipping her bare feet into his Western shoes. The Gangulis set up life in Yonkers, New York, where Ashoke pursues a fellowship and a career while Ashima must forsake her past (which includes training as a singer) and learn how to become an American housewife. Life in their grim, wintry flat is hard (Ashima writes her family that “New York is a lonely country”). They struggle, but like so many before them, they make it, including—after Ashoke gets a worthy job—a neat house in the suburbs.

The rest of their tale incorporates their two children, a girl (Sahira Nair) and, especially, their son Gogol (Kal Penn), named after his father’s favorite writer. This namesake is, of course, wholly American while “looking Indian,” a representative sample of the first generation immigrant who is alternately alienated from yet intrigued by his family origins. *The Namesake* becomes, then, Gogol’s story, and whether he should fully accept his own environment--like dating a rich white girl--or also embrace elements of his parent’s culture--like using his Indian name instead of the socially clumsy Gogol. His uncertain dance between his familiar world and his parent’s past is the crux of this winning and generous film.

While most of the picture was shot stateside, a long sequence of the family visiting the home country proves crucial to the essence of the film and to Gogol’s development. Nair’s ability to limn both the world of small-town New York and phantasmagoric Calcutta is unerring, with nice “fish-out-of-water”

elements in both contexts. The tenacity of traditions also is beautifully realized, such as how Ashima becomes fully attuned to American life yet still always, always wears a sari, or how the spiky-haired Gogol comes to shave his head as part of Hindi funeral ritual. Nair and her screenwriter Sooni Taraporevala are expert in calculating the balances of cultures in a whole catalogue of small gestures, near gaffes, gentle asides. The true passions of this family may never really erupt but they are finely sculpted beneath the surfaces.

The core cast is unfailingly persuasive. The exquisite Tabu (a major star in her country) carries herself with grace and ages with the same attribute. She subtly takes on American traits while never losing her Indian essence. While Ashima is typically reserved (no public shows of emotion or passion among these folks), Khan, as her husband, is even more strikingly restrained yet evinces stalwart responsibility and gravitas as the family's exemplar. The two make a screen couple that you truly believe in.

Contrasted with his parents is the loose, informal Gogol, played by Kal Penn, an actor best known as a comic stoner in *Harry and Kumar Go to White Castle*. The slacker style he displayed as Kumar in that film is periodically present—in comic exchanges with his uptight folks--but as the true namesake he shows many more dimensions. His big brown eyes and sideways smile can be used to subtle effect, and he is also convincing as a young man earnestly struggling with his identity. While it appears he already has another *Harry and Kumar* in the works, here's hoping he finds other richer roles down the line.

The Namesake opened in the DC area at exactly two cinemas. It is a modest film with a great heart (in English and Bengali), but it needs good word-of-mouth to be seen. I only hope it lasts long enough on some local screen for readers who read this column in April to get a chance see it.

("The Namesake" is rated PG-13).

(April 2007)

Postscript (May 2007)

In my April column above, I heartily endorsed Mira Nair's new film *The Namesake*. It traced the lives of an Indian-American family living in New York state and how they balanced their old and new loyalties and environments. I hoped that the film, which had no big name stars and little advance publicity, would receive good word-of-mouth so it could be seen by intelligent filmgoers with a yen for a winning story of cross-cultural sensitivity.

Well, to my considerable surprise and clear delight, *The Namesake* found many other positive (yes, rave) reviews and obviously became a movie that people could recommend to their friends without reservation. From its opening at two "art" houses, it has expanded to half-a-dozen cinemas, and, lo and behold, it has now hung around longer than a month and spread even to some far-flung multi-plexes (think: outlying suburbs like Gaithersburg, Greenbelt!). I hope audiences, and especially, families, are discovering a new kind of film that rarely reaches suburban screens--even one with Indian actors and subtitles.

