

Back Home, At Last

By Kaveree Bamzai | Indian Express | 24 January, 1999

It's unfortunate that all movies about AIDS or gay men end up getting politicized. Mira Nair's adaptation of My Own Country, Abraham Verghese's moving account of working with HIV positive patients (or to use the PC term, people living with AIDS), was one such. At its first screening in India in the Capital last Sunday, there was much discussion among activists and documentary film-makers about whether the film was insulting to those with AIDS.

Perhaps it was, because Nair had suggested that the film could be used by AIDS related groups in their consciousness-raising drives. Oops. That was enough to set the cat among the well-dressed pigeons. Regardless of that, the film, made for Showtime, an American movie network owned by Viacom, is a faithful portrayal of a doctor's story, which is in fact the subheading of Verghese's moving account of working with HIV positive patients in Johnson City Tennessee.

Nair's touch, both delicate and angry, is everywhere (fortunately, after the disastrous polemics of Kama Sutra). Rajani, Verghese's wife, is a much softer version than in the doctor-writer's book, That was intentional, says Nair, because she was very uncomfortable with his depiction of someone as the bitchy wife, without her point of view.

It was equally uncomfortable for Abe, as Nair calls him, because here's a man, all of 43 years old, watching half his life unfold on screen. And a very intimate life it is, too- from his two sons, Steven and Jacob, to his first wife Rajani's obvious desolation (she's originally from Chennai) and his own brief descent into furious drinking. "For Abe, it was very tough to see his own life up there on the screen," says Nair, "because he is married again to another woman, Sylvia, and he has another child with her."

It sounds like a cliché, but only someone with AIDS could have had as much empathy with the subjects as Nair, a woman did, Vicky's tough gal suffering. Maddie's unwavering love for her AIDS-afflicted brother, and Lloyd and Hope's stiff upper lip are all shown just short of teary pathos. And then there's the woman's touch everywhere: the uncapped milk bottle lying by the kitchen sink, the single baby's shoe abandoned on the living-room floor, the plastic ball taping down the stairs in an empty house as the phone rings (it's Abraham calling for Rajani, who's gone to the hospital to deliver their second baby).

And since there's been so much talk of taking India to the West by Shekhar Kapur, I couldn't help but notice India everywhere in Nair's film-from the Darzi (a Delhi boutique) salwar-kameez worn by Rajani (dance Ellora Patnaik in a stunning debut) to the drunken song and dance that Abraham and his long-time friend, Allen.

It's a pity the 30th International Film Festival of India in Hyderabad had to lose out on Nair's film because use of an apparent delay in the couriering of the print. Having also lost out on Deepa Mehta's Earth (apparently, it was slated as the opening film, but after the Shiv Sena's attacks on her earlier film, Fire, the Directorate of Film festivals developed cold feet), they would have done well to retain at least Nair's goodwill by making sure My Own Country ended up as the closing film.

Especially as Nair was so keen on the feedback. Nair, who reworked the film on her own terms, rewriting the original screenplay with her longtime collaborator, Sooni Taraporevala, said: "When it

was screened on July 16 by Showtime, it went out into such a void and the print was already here so I thought I'd share it with my family and friends,"

She's taking it with her to the Berlin Film Festival, even as she's already at work on a \$20 million project, *The Woman Next Door*. And though she almost committed the suicidal error of making *My Own Country* a poster movie for AIDS patients, it is, as she later said much more than that: "It is about a man's journey through continents and cultures." Indeed, it is quite in keeping with her earlier work, especially, as she pointed out, *Mississippi Masala*, where she had worked in the Deep South and had dealt with a similar theme of displacement from Africa.

But there is something more visceral in this film, which has a lot to do with Verghese as played by Naveen Andrews. Nair said Abe was stunned by it, and frankly so were we. "When Naveen went to meet Abe in El Paso (that's where he now lives and has written his second novel. *The Tennis Partner*), he was very much the coarse, tough-talking East-Ender. After a week with him, as soon as he stepped off the plane, he was Abe, his drawl very much a mixture of accents, down to the way he pronounced his own wife's name."

Nair shot this film in 23 days in Toronto, Ontario, but apart from an irritating mike that keeps dropping into some frames, there's little to show that it was on such a tight schedule. She's going to show it to a larger audience in Delhi in March and one cannot but hope that it is seen not merely as a document on AIDS, but as a very intimate portrait of dislocation, disintegration and discovery.

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