

Salaam Bombay!

By Dwight Brown | Hollywood Reporter | 13 September 1988

After four documentary works, the fourth being the , controversial *Children of Desired Sex* (1987), Indian-born film-maker Mira Nair marks her feature, fiction film debut with *Salaam Bombay!* the closing feature at the Gala Presentation for the Director's Fortnight at Cannes 1988. It's no wonder Nair's film was afforded this propitious honor.

In an auspicious film debut, director Mira Nair has crafted an urban masterpiece, a poignant movie that observantly chronicles a streetchild's nightmarish existence. *Salaam Bombay!* was shot, conceived, produced and directed by Nair. Her painful, perceptive look at the street-children of Bombay is a moving, dramatic work that undoubtedly will be the highlight of this year's New York Film Festival. Nair ferreted *Chiller Rooms* (children's institutions), brothels, jails and railway stations looking for young street toughs. From 130 kids, who participated in her theatre workshop, she made final selections. Cast as the leading urchin is Shafiq Syed, an eleven-year-old ragpicker. Adult supporting roles were filled by professionals. The mix of the natural and inexperienced with trained thespians works remarkably well. The kids exude a genuine, unbridled vitality; the adults emote and interpret.

The story is about a young boy named Krishna (Shafiq Syed) who is sent to Bombay from the outskirts of town on an errand. When he returns to the travelling circus he once belonged to, he discovers that the tents are gone and he's been left stranded. Relocating to the city centre to survive he becomes a 'Chaipau', a boy who delivers tea and bread. Ruefully, he saves his precious, hard-earned rupees so he can someday return to his mother's home. Daily deliveries to a brothel introduce the boy to an assortment of lowlife characters. There is Baba (Nana Patekar), the kingpin and drug lord of the red-light district, and Baba's flunky, Chillurn (Raghubir Yadav), a twenty-five-year-old drug-seller who takes the young charge under his untrustworthy wing. Baba's eight-year-old daughter Manju (Hansa Vithal) becomes Krishna's play-mate. Her mother, Rekha (Aneeta Kanwar), is a lady of the night who plies her trade as her daughter sits outside the brothel door. And Solasaal (Chanda Sharma) a.k.a. 'Sweet Sixteen' is a nervous, yet-to-be-deflowered prostitute who has captured Krishna's heart. Urban squalor is evidenced by abject poverty, desperate people and desperate living. Prostitution and drug-selling are products of necessity. And -through the eyes of the young, naive protagonist-we see these vocations as normal, everyday activities. Eventually, what was once a barely tolerable existence turns into one of indescribable hostility, jealousy and despair. Chillurn loses favor with Baba. Baba squires 'Sweet Sixteen' to Rekha's dismay. Chillurn, who is strung out on drugs, becomes completely dependent on Krishna. And Manju and Krishna are snared by the police. As the film skids to a close, all these personal stories intertwine and head for inescapable tragedy. The story was conceived by Nair and Sooni Taraporevala, but Taraporevala gets credit for merging the ideas into a comprehensible, powerful, vibrant screenplay.

The characters are colorful, memorable and out of the ordinary. Their odd relationships-Chillurn the big brother to Krishna, Rekha the prostitute and jealous wife of Baba, Krishna and Solasaal the unrequited lovers-defy imagination. Yet these relationships, formed to help each other cope in a depraved, unforgiving world, are never less than pure and natural. And, the events that lead these people's wretched lives to certain cataclysm, fall into place like a stacked deck of ominous Tarot cards. Mira Nair's direction is virtually undetectable. One is never cognizant that her cast is performing or that she is controlling their interactions. Her guidance is so discreet that seeing her film, her visions, is like being a tourist in a foreign hotel room who pulls back the curtains and

peers down on a grisly, dirty, unconscionable streetscene. That distinct feeling of estrangement, astonishment and disbelief has been masterfully created by this astute director.

Furthermore, when one considers that Nair is working with a host of unprofessional, untrained child actors, one must assume that her talent runs very deep indeed. Little Shafiq Syed, a bold, uninhibited youth who keeps the viewer riveted to the screen, is a superb casting choice. Vibrant and focused, his performance is surprisingly consistent and engaging. A solid supporting cast assists him, but some of them stand out dramatically: Aneeta Kanwar reigns supreme and sublime as a labourer in the world's oldest profession. Raghubir Yadav, mesmerizing as a depraved junkie, gives an Oscar-caliber portrayal. Almost as stunning is Nana Patekar, the menacing, foreboding Baba. All scenes in this gutter-level epic were shot in actual houses of prostitution, train stations or in Bombay homes. The cluttered, crowded streets are not back lots but teeming Indian boulevards. The costumes, production design (Mitch Epstein) and sound effects conjure images of a dense, intriguing and very foreign metropolis. Top-notch editing by Barry Alexander Brown and deft, revealing, photography by Sandi Sissel makes this 113-minute film move quickly. There's no time for boredom. The pacing, setting, characters and their ghastly fates give little time for attention to sway during this journey into the armpit of Bombay. Comparisons to Hector Babenco's *Pixote* are obvious. That film -bordered on the horrific. This thrilling film never reaches that kind of intensity. . . but it comes awfully close.

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