

Public Affairs Representative Nicole Fries interviewed famous Indian American film director Mira Nair who presented her latest film, "The Namesake", at the Frankfurt Book Fair. October 10, 2006.

File: namesake.WMV

Interviewer: How did you come about the book *The Namesake*? Did you come about it by chance, or were you specifically looking to make a film about an Indian family emigrating to the United States.

Mira Nair: I came about *The Namesake* absolutely by chance. I had loved Jhumpa's first book, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, and bought a copy of *The Namesake*, but forgot about it – I didn't read it. And I was deeply involved in the shooting of *Vanity Fair*, and then somebody very beloved to me died, and I was in mourning and had to bury her in America, and in that state of mourning I went on a plane to India to shoot *Vanity Fair*, and I happened to pick up that book of *Namesake*, and read it on the plane. Absolutely arbitrary. I was only booked to make two films, completely financed films, but when I read *The Namesake*, I felt such a deep sense of connection to the story and to the solace that I needed for the grief I was feeling, and it just possessed me. And the plane landed, and I called my agent, and we bought the rights, and they were amazingly enough still available, and eight months later we were shooting the movie. So it was kind of like a fever. Really.

Interviewer: I mean, the book *The Namesake* obviously had a connection with your own background. Will you tell us a bit about your own background as an Indian going to America and living there?

Mira Nair: Well, like in *The Namesake* I also came from Orissa, which is a smaller state south of Karnataka, but I grew up going in the summers to Karnataka, so I know the city very well. And again, like in *The Namesake*, I got a scholarship to go to Cambridge, Massachusetts, I studied at Harvard. I was 19 years old when I first left India and then moved to New York City as a struggling documentary film maker, and then as a feature films. And lived through, you know, the time where India was barely known in the Western complex, and certainly not in America, and to now, when there is this explosion of South Asian confidence. So *The Namesake* is a 30-year-saga which not only gives me the chance to pick the incredible beauty and refinement of the 70s in Karnataka, a period I lived in in my parents' time and generation, as well as Manhattan today with its clubs, and its cool, and its South Asian music, and its fashion, I mean, the confidence. It gave me the place to do all these things, which I like. I like the circus of life in New York. But at its heart the film is about people like me, and like millions of others, who have left one home for another, who combine

the old ways and the new ways, who struggled to know, what or who are we, you know, what am I, you know, what is my identity? And it was only when I first began to use the confusion of living in so many worlds as I do, I made that confusion a part of my world, that my life became clear to me.

Interviewer: So you basically had the same journey as, for example the children have in the book *The Namesake*. They live in and they are born in America, they grow up there, but they grow up in a very traditional family, and their parents are still clinging on to the old traditions, but the kids are obviously US-born. So did you feel that clash of cultures?

Mira Nair: I am not in that tradition at all. Because I am born and raised in India, you know.

Interviewer: Right.

Mira Nair: And I believe so much that is, because my roots are so strong, that I can fly. I really believe that I was spared the confusion of being a minority Indian kid in an American classroom. I was spared, you know, the extremes of consciousness you have being different. I grew up where everyone looked like me, and everyone was from my place. And you know, that gives me actually a hell of a lot of confidence. You know, because I can deal with the world. So actually, in terms of identifying... I identify with a lot of them, but I would say the parents – they are more traditional than I am, but they're much more ... [coughs]