

American Museum of the

Moving Image

www.movingimage.us

MIRA NAIR RETROSPECTIVE

August 21–29, 2004

Sunday, August 29

5:00 p.m. PREVIEW SCREENING AND PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH MIRA NAIR

VANITY FAIR

2004, 140 mins., Focus Features. 35mm print courtesy Focus Features.

Directed by Mira Nair. Based on the novel by William Makepeace Thackeray. Written by Matthew Faulk, Julian Fellowes, and Mark Skeet. Produced by Howard Cohen, Pippa Cross, and Jonathan Lynn. Photographed by Declan Quinn. Original music by Mychael Danna and Terry Davies. Edited by Allyson C. Johnson. Production design by Maria Djurkovic. Art direction by Sam Stokes and Lucinda Thomson. Costume design by Beatrix Aruna Pasztor. Principal cast: Reese Witherspoon (as Becky Sharp), James Purefoy (Rawdon Crawley), Romola Garai (Amelia Sedley), Jonathan Rhys-Meyers (George Osborne), Gabriel Byrne (Steyne), Jim Broadbent (Mr. Osbourne), Bob Hoskins (Pitt the Elder), Rhys Ifans (Dobbin).

Screening followed by a Pinewood Dialogue with Mira Nair, moderated by David Schwartz, Chief Curator of Film.

From an interview with Mira Nair in *Connecting, British Council* (January 2003):

Do you feel this is a significant departure for you, recreating a distant historical period in a country far from India?

Yes and no. Yes, because I have never filmed English culture in any of my work, and no, because I have made period films before (*Kama Sutra*, *The Perez Family*) and the process of mounting a period film is familiar. In some stylistic ways, it is not a departure at all: like *Monsoon Wedding* and *Salaam Bombay!*, *Vanity Fair* too is a swirling ensemble piece, dense and layered, about a certain society at a particular point of time. Upon reflection, I've seen that the influence of Indian, so-called Bollywood, films—specifically our unabashed emotional directness, the freewheeling use of music, the emphasis on elemental motivations and values—is a thread running consistently through every one of my films. Even when exploring foreign worlds, I have taken the bones and flesh of those societies and tried to infuse them with the spirit of where I'm from. With *Vanity Fair*, I jokingly call it *The Return of the Native*.

*What particularly drew you to Thackeray and have you always enjoyed *Vanity Fair*?*

I knew the book well in my early college days, but I rediscovered the banquet of it a few months ago when I was offered the film. Looking at pre-Victorian London to adapt

Thackeray's gloriously entertaining saga, *Vanity Fair*, I find an enormous panorama of themes familiar to our society and to our cinema: a woman who defies her poverty-stricken background to clamber up the social ladder, unrequited love, seduction through song, a mother's sacrifice for her child, a true gentleman in a corrupt world...the catalogue of human stories remains the same. I love the possibility of linking the human folly of *Vanity Fair* with the idea of evoking something spiritual. It is, after all, a story that comes down to basic human ambition, asking the essential yogic question: Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? Or, having it, is satisfied?

When I was offered the film, I happened to be reading a book my husband had given me, *Exterminate the Brutes* by Sven Lindquist. It basically describes the discrepancy between the reality of what colonizers did in the colonies vs. what they reported back home, thus creating a real sense of moral corruption in England at the time. This corruption, hugely fuelled by the monies coming in from the colonies, was what created the "new money society" which is the setting of *Vanity Fair*. The new middle class, having tasted the fruits of exploitation in the colonies, now aspired for what the titled aristocracy had. The myth of the English gentleman, who could go to India and return a nabob, widely prevailed. Every male character in our story either works in India or does business there. So the theme of the influence and lure of the colonies is one I'm weaving into the aesthetic, the politics and even the shooting of *Vanity Fair*—I have, rather mischievously, written in three days of shooting in India as well!

How "modern" does the work seem to you? Social dislocation, warfare, women's empowerment—the themes are there. Is it your intent to make them overtly relevant to today?

Human drama, ambition and its resulting folly, is never out of date. And while we're not doing anything wildly gimmicky like updating the costumes, etc., we're not exactly going to be that sedate drawing-room-comedy-of-manners-type film either. The film will pulsate with life, that's certain. If I can illuminate the spiritual question at the centre of the film—the question of what we aspire for in our lives, and when we achieve it, are we satisfied?—then this film, like Thackeray's great book, will always remain modern.

Does it interest you that Thackeray was born in Calcutta and was the son of an East India Company official?

Yes, of course it does. My belief is that the only time Thackeray ever experienced truly unconditional all-embracing love was in his first six years in India, until he was sent away to school in England and packed off from home to home. This memory of his first home nourished him throughout his life, and he weaves much of it into the great human tapestry that he wrote in *Vanity Fair*.

Will this have a strongly British cast and production team?

Reese Witherspoon, an American, will play Becky Sharp. The remainder of my wish list are mostly English: Daniel Craig, Tilda Swinton, Jim Broadbent, Alan Bates and so many other wonderful actors. The production team is essentially my film family that travels with me everywhere: Indians, South African, Irish, Americans, whatever.

You haven't filmed in Britain before. Are you looking forward to this and do you think it will be a new kind of experience for you?

Of course! What is there not to look forward to? (Except the cold and damp!) The idea is to live life fully, and I intend to do that in England as well!

From an article in *The Europe Intelligence Wire* (Feb. 28th, 2004):

Acclaimed Indian director Mira Nair said she has wrapped up shooting of her film *Vanity Fair*, which has Hollywood actress Reese Witherspoon in the lead, in the western state of Rajasthan.

Nair, who in 2001 won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival for her film *Monsoon Wedding* and secured a Golden Globe nomination the same year in the best foreign language film category, said she had been filming some scenes at the imposing Mehrangarh fort in Jodhpur, in the heart of the desert state. Nair, in an interview broadcast on television channel NDTV, said it was “wonderful” to have completed the shoot. “It’s been a real saga,” she said of the making of the movie, parts of which were shot in England and parts in the desert state of Rajasthan. “It’s been a huge film. The editing of the film is as painstaking as the shooting of the film, but it’s wonderful because I have finished the film,” she said.

Vanity Fair is based on William Makepeace Thackeray’s classic novel and tells the story of a young woman’s struggle up the social ladder in Victorian England. Witherspoon, famous for her *Legally Blonde* role, plays the female lead as the ambitious and never-say-die Rebecca Sharp.

Nair said Witherspoon’s pregnancy in the midst of filming had not been a handicap. “When she got pregnant early on in the film...I had the advantage of her luminosity...Reese always plays the perky young thing...Becky Sharp is a full-blown woman; I really wanted Reese to be a full-blown woman.” Witherspoon, in a separate interview on the same channel, said that it had been advantageous working with a female director during her pregnancy and added that the crew had been “very supportive.” She told NDTV she had long been very “impressed” by Nair and her work and this had prompted her to accept the role.

According to reports, some of Witherspoon’s costumes have been designed by leading Indian designer Manish Malhotra and that prominent Bollywood choreographer Farah Khan had also worked on the project with Nair.

Nair said audiences and the film fraternity in the west were “fascinated” by Bollywood—India’s prolific Hindi film industry based in the western commercial city of Bombay. “But the way you and I know the common Bollywood film, it will never make it anywhere outside our borders,” she said, adding that to ensure the fascination was enduring, it was essential to have universal themes and good quality films.

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of discussions with key creative figures in film, television, and digital media, are made possible with a generous grant from the Pinewood Foundation.

The American Museum of the Moving Image is grateful for the generous support of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals. The Museum receives vital funding from the City of New York through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Economic Development Corporation. Additional government support is provided by the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historical Preservation). The Museum occupies a building owned by the City of New York, and wishes to acknowledge the leadership and assistance of Michael R. Bloomberg, Mayor, Helen Marshall, Queens Borough President, City Council member Eric Gioia, and the entire New York City Council under the leadership of Speaker Gifford Miller.