

NAME: Mira Nair

LOCATION: Kampala, Uganda, and New York City. Nair was born in Bhubaneswar, India.

BACKGROUND: Nair writes, directs, and produces films. Her credits include *Amelia*, *The Namesake*, *Monsoon Wedding*, *Kama Sutra*, and *Salaam Bombay!*, which was nominated for an Academy Award. In 2004, Nair founded **Maisha**, an organization that trains aspiring filmmakers in East Africa.



Candid Camerawoman

Far from Hollywood, Mira Nair directs the next generation of filmmakers

About Maisha: “I’ve lived in Uganda since 1989, when I filmed *Mississippi Masala* here. The dignity, power, and real beauty of Kampala is such a contrast to the way Hollywood portrays Africa. Their version is a Masai warrior on the horizon and Kim Basinger in the foreground having a nervous breakdown in a nameless country. There is such a vibrant writing and theater tradition in the local languages in Uganda—but no film training. I thought this was something I could provide, and so I founded Maisha, which means ‘life’ in Swahili. In the last six years, it’s grown from one filmmaking workshop to nine programs offered throughout the year in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda.”

The goal: “The mantra of Maisha is, ‘If we don’t tell our own stories, then no one else will.’ Seeing people who look like us, have our dramas, and speak our languages is a very empowering thing. My hope is not just to train young people to make films that are palatable to the international audience. The point is to create a local film culture in East Africa. That has the power to make ripples. We’re one of the first training institutes for film on the continent, and we’ve produced a group of extremely able alumni. On days that I’m hit in the gut by the struggles of filmmaking, I’m always heartened by the work of our students.”

On creating change: “My film *Salaam Bombay!*, about street kids in India, led to the founding of the Salaam Baalak Trust, which runs educational programs and shelters throughout the country. The organization is now 22 years old, has 5,000 children in it, and has directly altered government policy on homeless youth. I think cinema can also change people’s ways of thinking. My next film in that light is *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, from the wonderful book by Mohsin Hamid. It’s about a young Pakistani man who has a love affair with America. Then his worldview begins to change. We have a notion of what Pakistan and Islam are like, but people don’t know the subcontinent’s point of view. These are questions I want to explore.”

The power of cinema: “The other day I watched the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami’s film *Certified Copy*. It gave me so much energy to see how one could view the world with as much specificity as he did. You rarely see that kind of depth in American cinema. Because of the focus on the marketplace, there’s a certain expectation of how quick, glossy, and charming a film should be. But there are other ways of making movies. And there are other places to see. When captured beautifully, people are relatable—they are you and me. The more local and specific a story is, the more universal it becomes. Cinema taps into that human connection more powerfully and more entertainingly than any other medium. So see films from other countries, and don’t think of them as foreign.” **A**