

Interview: Director Mira Nair on 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist'

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CHICAGO – In director Mira Nair's latest film – "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" – the issues that were presented seemed ripped from the headlines. Although this is a film dealing with profiling a Pakistani immigrant post September 11th, it has echoes in the media coverage of the recent Boston bombings.

In the film, the Pakistani named Changez (Riz Ahmed), attends an Ivy League school in America, hoping to work for a major financial corporation. When he scores the big firm, he is under the mentoring of Jim Cross (Kiefer Sutherland), who also steers him to an American girlfriend (Kate Hudson). This all comes crashing down, along with the World Trade Center, on September 11th, 2001. Post that event, the ramifications of profiling for a dark skinned Muslim man in America is the subject of Changez's transformation.



Director Mira Nair Sets Up a Shot for the Cast and Crew of 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist'
Photo credit: IFC Films

Director Mira Nair is an Academy Award-nominated veteran of over 20 films. Her breakthrough came in 1988, with "Salaam Bombay!", nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film. She followed that up with a differing slate of familiar films, including "Mississippi Marsala" (1991), "Monsoon Wedding" (2001), "Vanity Fair" (2004), "The Namesake" (2006) and the recent "Amelia" (2009). She was also selected to direct the India segment of the international short film collection regarding September 11th, entitled "11'09'01" (2002).

HollywoodChicago.com talked to Mira Nair via phone from the Tribeca Film Festival in New York City, where she is previewing "The Reluctant Fundamentalist."

HollywoodChicago.com: Given the recent speculation and profiling that came out of the American media during the recent Boston event, how much more relevant does it make your film in the wake of that incident?

Mira Nair: My film, alas, will always be timely. Because so much of what we see is a consequence of the reaction to that event. I made my film as someone who is at home in two cultures. I was painstaking in showing both sides, and treated them with love and respect, even during the unflinching look at moments that are not so pleasant. I made it as a lament to the idea that we're only given one side of the picture. I wanted to change a monologue to a dialogue, and make it happen, by adapting this wonderful mind game of a novel. I also wanted to create a complex but enjoyable human dimension, for people in both places.

HollywoodChicago.com: In an extraordinary moment in the film, the main character of Changez reacts to September 11th, and gives what I think is a truth regarding the attack. Do you think, after more than 10 years after that day, that the United States will ever recover from that blow?

Nair: I think there would be recovery from it, if the attitude were different. If it wasn't about 'us and them,' but rather trying to understand the human and complicated dimensions of the 'other,' recognizing in that other who we are. That's what I believe, if you don't know that – in the case of my film, a Pakistani – lives life like you do, with marriages, siblings, parents, adolescence and just regular life, a life in all its richness and what I call, 'the extraordinariness of ordinary life.' If you don't see that in another character, or never humanize that person, it becomes one long monologue, only about you. We are all part of a larger universe, increasingly a globalized universe.

HollywoodChicago.com: What sympathy do you have for males that went through the profiling that Changez went through in the film, and how can they heal from that circumstance?

Nair: You have to encourage stopping this dehumanization through fear. That is the only way.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you feel more handcuffed as a director doing an adaptation of a novel, as in this film and 'The Namesake,' as you do with an original screenplay?



Kate Hudson, Riz Ahmed in "The Reluctant Fundamentalist"
Photo credit: IFC Films

Nair: No, I never approach any piece of work in handcuffs. It doesn't suit me. I look at a book as a springboard for my imagination towards a film adaptation. The great privilege of being a director is choosing the universe you want to inhabit. And I inhabited the universe of 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist' for five years.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was that longer than usual?

Nair: It took three years to adapt the book into a screenplay, because the novel was written as a monologue. The book has Changez speaking to an American who is unnamed, so we had to change that into a narrative and dialogue.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is the second time you've communicated themes of September 11th. What are your reflections in your experience and the results of directing the India segment in the short film collection entitled '11'09"01'?

Nair: I never really thought of that film when I was making this film. People saw the connection, but I didn't. I was asked to make that film one year after September 11th, and it was a hard order during a complex and bewildering time. I looked for a true story that was happening in the papers at the time. That's why I picked the story of the young Pakistani man who doesn't come home on September 11th and his schoolteacher mother and shopkeeper father in Brooklyn, and the rumor that he could have been one of the hijackers. The common thread in both films is being seen as the 'other.'

HollywoodChicago.com: You are a participant in the 'Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative,' which mentors new filmmakers. What is your one sentence piece of advice that you first offer the aspiring filmmaker?

Nair: I tell them to make sure they have something to say, to take courage in being distinctive and to never do what they do as a stepping stone to something else, but to do it fully.

"The Reluctant Fundamentalist" continues its limited release in Chicago on May 3rd. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Riz Ahmed, Kate Hudson, Kiefer Sutherland, Liev Schreiber and Om Puri. Screenplay adapted by William Wheeler. Directed by Mira Nair. Rated "R"



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [8]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [7]

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