

## A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH MIRA NAIR

The immigrant's sense of dislocation resonates in the films of Mira Nair, who often focuses on different permutations of the outsider—Bombay street urchins in *Salaam Bombay!*, Cuban immigrants in *The Perez Family*, a sixteenth-century Indian servant girl in *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love*—and their disconnection from the social order around them. Nair's films often focus on complex female characters, and examine the complications that arise from the intermingling of ethnicities, traditions, and classes. In this talk, Nair discusses the examination of sociopolitical exclusion in her past work and in her adaptation of William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*.

### A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Vanity Fair*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (August 29, 2004):

**SCHWARTZ:** The director of *Salaam Bombay!*, *Mississippi Masala*, *Monsoon Wedding*, *Vanity Fair*: Mira Nair. (Applause) Congratulations. And you're the first guest to bring her own water, so that was... (Laughter) You didn't have to do that, but we appreciate it.

**NAIR:** Gandhi taught me a few things. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** Whenever you hear that a filmmaker is going to take on the challenge of directing a classic, eight- or nine-hundred-page novel, your first, your honest response is: How can they do it? Just tell about your—the history with this novel, *Vanity Fair*, and then your decision to direct this.

**NAIR:** Well, we are all born with sort of colonial hangovers in India, and steeped in English literature, whether we like it or not. And as it happened, one of the most influential teachers in my upbringing was Sister Joseph Catherine, an Irish Catholic nun who introduced me to Shakespeare and Blake and Keats and Shelley at the age of fifteen. And I read *Vanity Fair*, not on the syllabus but kind of under the covers, when I was sixteen years old. It's the sort of novel... Well, first, I loved Becky Sharp, and I always remember her, the character Becky Sharp, because she was a lot like we were, you know? Girls who didn't have it all on a platter, and had to make [their] own way. But then, it was such a banquet of a novel that I used to keep

re-reading it every few years. Every few years, it gave me something different. But I never thought to make it a movie or anything. Two years ago exactly, Focus Features, who was distributing *Monsoon Wedding*, which was kind of running away with itself, asked me to direct...

**SCHWARTZ:** It was a huge hit, international hit, big success, yeah.

**NAIR:** Yeah, yeah, and they didn't expect it, I don't think, to be that way. And they said, "What about doing our next biggest thing?" And it was *Vanity Fair*, without them realizing that I'd actually had this long history with it. So I said yes instantly. But they had developed the script over ten years, various writers and so on. And the script was not what I loved about *Vanity Fair*, it was much more—almost the tale of Madonna. And I didn't... (Laughter) It was just a star vehicle of the most, in a sense, boldest sort. And I just loved the incredible tapestry of humankind that Thackeray had woven, and had woven with such a clear eye, and with such a political view, and with such a fine cross-section of colony and empire, which certainly, Austen and all of those then had no awareness of—or I shouldn't say "no," but I didn't get it from any of them. It was really our world—but seen through an Englishman—or an Englishman who was born in India. So it was quite interesting.

**SCHWARTZ:** Right. And I think you described Thackeray as the equivalent of a cinéma vérité filmmaker of his time.

**NAIR:** Well, because he wrote the *cinéma vérité* of his day in the novel. He wrote [The] Figaro [Triology], he wrote about the plays that were happening, he wrote about the food people loved. He wrote seven pages about the brocade vests that Jos Sedley had tailored near Bhajiwala, in Bengal, every time he chose to come back to England, to show what a nabob he had become. He wrote about all these things with great joy. He was a real foodie and a real fashionista, Thackeray. (Laughter) He was. As I am. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** The character Becky Sharp, could you talk a bit about how your approach to her is different than Thackeray's? There's a lot of ambiguity about her that's really interesting.

**NAIR:** Well, you know, Thackeray wrote this as a page-turner, he wrote it as a monthly tabloid; he had to sell it by the chapter. And it was very interesting: in the summer, after I said yes in May, I went back to Kampala, where I live in the summer, and I had taken everything there was about the milieu in which Thackeray wrote this novel. And in there were actual manuscripts, notes from his editor, from the tabloid, saying, "Listen, make your—you're enjoying your heroine [Becky Sharp] too much. Got to make her basically bitchier. Make Amelia the sweeter person," etc. He was trying to crank up the, you know, the volume on various things. And Thackeray would capitulate. But not happily. At least in my view, not happily. He would suddenly screech about Becky's lack of maternal instinct (which of course I preserved). But other things, other things. Like, he would say, oh—he would make rumors up in one line, and then leave them and not resolve them. Things like that. But I think that Thackeray was the ultimate outsider in his own society. He observed England, because he was raised somewhere else and then came. And in making Becky Sharp, he actually created a great outsider, like himself. An outsider to his society, but wanting to belong, you know, wanting to be an insider.

**SCHWARTZ:** Right. Which obviously, would be a theme that you'd be interested in, just because of your life. You've been an outsider—entered differently...

**NAIR:** Depends which point of view. (Laughter) As President [Ferdinand] Marcos says, when he came here and he was described as the president of the Far East, he said, "Far from where?" (Laughter) So I don't know. "Outsider from where?" is the question.

**SCHWARTZ:** Yeah. Well, you've been interested in people who try to fit into worlds. *Salaam Bombay!*, which is about a boy in poverty in Bombay. He survives by his wits on the streets. And in a way, you seem to be interested in these people who go into a world and take an outside view and make it...

**NAIR:** I'm most inspired, really, by survivors of all kinds. And especially survivors who don't have time to pity themselves or don't have that inclination—like Becky Sharp. I think that there's a great lesson, and it gives me a spring to my step, and it sort of questions the whole basis of what—in this society, especially—we think we need, you know? Because survivors just survive, you know; manage.

**SCHWARTZ:** Of course, the novel ends with this question about who of us really is happy, and who of us really has what we desire. And there is this question, in a way, is all this striving of Becky Sharp's really worth it? She's admirable, and she rises to the top, but you also really make it clear that—what is it that she's really achieving?

**NAIR:** But it's not just Becky Sharp, that question, what I—that's why I love this novel, is that question is asked of us all, and of us—all the characters. Everybody in *Vanity Fair*, like in life—all want something they cannot get. You know? (Laughs) And they're all striving for something. And some of us are blind along the way, and some of us know the journey we are on. But everybody, from old [George] Osborne, who loves his son but will not make peace with him; Rawdon [Crawley], who finally finds the love of his life, and they're both rascals—too much rascal, perhaps, for each other... Whatever. Everybody—and [William] Dobbin, obviously, suffering for Amelia [Sedley], and Amelia not even noticing Dobbin—everybody is wanting something more, you know? And in the process, things can happen which make you oblivious to what is precious.

**SCHWARTZ:** You worked on this with the great screenwriter Julian Fellowes. And could you talk a

bit about how that process worked, how you collaborated?

**NAIR:** Sure. I spent about two months on my own, first charting the map of life, as I call it, from the novel; and very clearly, you know, what I would want in addition to Becky Sharp, and how I would want to see Becky Sharp, you know, because I come... In Bombay, there's a lovely phrase which—"paisa va sul." "Paisa va sul" is slang for the street, where they say, "Give me my money's worth." So I very much want to make movies that are "paisa va sul," you know? So it is no fun to make a movie where you hate the protagonist—like, you just can't stand her from the beginning—without it mattering in some greater way. So one big invention that I began with was the beginning of showing you where Becky comes from. This was suggested in the book. And Thackeray was a great—he used to make great etchings to accompany his tabloid. So he had a wonderful etching, which was the inspiration for the beginning, which was of Becky Sharp—a young Becky—doing puppets. And I thought that was a great symbol of everything that she will do in her life. So I wanted a scene, one scene, which had to say many things, because the studio wanted basically for me to start with Reese Witherspoon, as Becky Sharp, entering, and that was that. But I thought I would spend twenty minutes convincing the audience to be on my side with Becky if I started just with Reese grown up. So we had that one scene, where we invented the throughline of the painting, because again...

You know, in India, we are used to these themes; we are brought up on these themes—of the girl who goes from rags to riches, who rises through the seduction of singing, of a moral gentleman in a corrupt world—of all these themes—a mother sacrificing her son. These are themes that are the milk of Indian cinema, kind of. And one of the things, which is in any cinema, is that you want the appeal; you want the audience with you, you know? So I wanted to have a hook. And the hook we created, the painting of [The Marquess of] Steyne coming in when she's seven, when she's running her father's business—for you to feel what it is to be a motherless child. I wanted you to feel that instantly, you know? So I didn't have to win you over as Becky's escapades started.

**SCHWARTZ:** Yeah. And then there was a very interesting moment in the end. You talk about maternal instinct. Just that little touch when her son is taking his first steps, and she's too busy with her own painting...

**NAIR:** Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's... I like that. I think that we all suffer from folly, and we shouldn't think that we are above folly.

**SCHWARTZ:** Another thing about the opening scene that was so important for the rest of the film is that it's a transaction, that there's haggling over money.

**NAIR:** It's all about money.

**SCHWARTZ:** And almost every single scene in the film—maybe not a hundred percent—is about money, about needing money, making money.

**NAIR:** Absolutely. It's the first close-up of the film—is money, the transaction of money. And I'm glad you mention it, because that is the whole foundation of the whole striving for class and money and hierarchy and status, and that's what Thackeray is talking about. But enjoying himself while talking. But that's the basis. Money and then class—well, class is money and then race, you know? And then how England at the time that he wrote *Vanity Fair* was an England that was getting fat on the spoils of India. Basically, the middle class now had money, and they wanted the status of the titled. But they couldn't, because that was straitjacketed, and how do you find a Jamaican heiress that you can buy and buy a title, you know? So many—I haven't—I've only seen one other *Vanity Fair*. But many *Vanity Fairs* have been made, but nobody thinks to go and use this theme that he has spelled out so beautifully of race, and class, and colony, and empire.

**SCHWARTZ:** You know, Becky is materialistic, but you do make it clear that there's genuine love, for example, for her husband before he goes off to war. I don't know if it has to do with your approach to the character that's different...

**NAIR:** Well, I wanted a credible love story. They did love each other, I thought, in the book. But I really wanted it to have... I thought that they were like an earlier avatar of Bonnie and Clyde, you know?

(Laughter) I thought of them like that. Like they... It's just got to be, you know, it's just—you have to feel the heat, you know? And that's the tragedy. Because if you don't feel the heat, you won't feel the pain when he leaves her.

**SCHWARTZ:** Now, obviously, the casting of Reese Witherspoon is a major, major choice. And could you talk about that, the decision to use her? And also, when you cast a star like that, who's made—in a way, she's made movies where she's played climbers. Her mainstream movies, like *Election* and *Legally Blonde*... So a star brings all of her past movies into play.

**NAIR:** Well, Reese sort of actually... It was a Becky Sharp move. She called me up... (Laughter) a year before I was offered *Vanity Fair*, maybe eight months before, and said... There was no *Vanity Fair* on the horizon, of any kind. And she said, "I'm Reese Witherspoon. I love your films, and I would love to work with you. And please, can we meet?" And I had, of course, seen *Election*, and I had seen *Man in the Moon*, which I had loved. And my son made me see *Legally Blonde*, between the phone call and the meeting, (Laughter) and I thought it was pretty extraordinary, in fact. And anyway, met her happily. And it was a very direct meeting and she offered me two films that she wanted me to direct her in. But they weren't my thing. And we just started a friendship. Then six months later, I was offered *Vanity Fair*, and I returned the phone call, and she said yes instantly, and the studio was really delighted.

I mean, because Reese has not just the great intelligence (without which you can't play Becky Sharp), but she has that minx—the lovely Thackeray word—the minx-like character; and this appeal, this fantastic thing called appeal, which makes actors movie stars, and which would keep me—and the audience in my pocket, I thought. Which would keep me—allow me to be cunning with Becky. And then for me, the surprise as a director, because it's not interesting for me to cast an actor who I've seen do exactly that before. I want to discover something. Otherwise, it's like wearing old shoes, in a way. So I wanted to see if we could go on this journey to make her a complete womanly creature with great complexes and great, you know, range of emotion. And that was what was so

extraordinary about working with Reese, because she really applies herself, and she's impeccably prepared, and she really trusted me, and we had this great journey.

**SCHWARTZ:** Yeah. And there's just an interesting sexual chemistry and tension between not just her and her husband, but other characters in the film—with Steyne, with George. There's just a lot going on.

**NAIR:** That's my middle name. (Laughter) Just kidding. It used to be, in India, when I was fighting battles for un-banning *Kama Sutra*—then it used to be my middle name. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** You talked about giving the audience their money's worth. And there's so much in every frame. Every section of every frame is just filled with so much detail. I'm just wondering how you deal with what was really a small budget for this movie. I mean, how does that affect—how does the size of the budget affect how you're going to make a period film, how you're going to pay attention to things like production design and costume?

**NAIR:** You know, making *Monsoon Wedding* on a million dollars is like making this...

**SCHWARTZ:** A million dollars?

**NAIR:** ...this *Vanity Fair* on 23 million. Yeah. *Monsoon* was a million. That was because we chose to make it on a million, and then we had a plan. You know, and we had to make a plan; we didn't have... So it's the same kind of energy, and the same kind of thought. Basically, it's—you have to know exactly what you want to do, and then have a very strategized plan to make it happen, so that your money goes on the screen in such a big way that people are not even realizing that you don't have it. (Laughter) So... And it sounds complicated, that sentence, but all... What I started off, even before we began rewriting the new script with Julian, is to say, "I have four set-pieces." You know, "Let's make four large set-pieces." One was the Vauxhall picnic; the other was Waterloo; the other was the escape from Brussels; and the ball, the Duchess of Richmond's ball. So how do I then really put the money there? The way to do that is to then put twelve scenes that otherwise took place in

empty rooms, and interiors, and drawing rooms—and places that you imagine period films to be shot in—[and] bring them out to these scenes.

For instance, Amelia and George having that spat as they're walking into Waterloo, into the ballroom, in Brussels, where she says, "Why—we don't know anybody, why are we going?" And he says, "I wish you would get—" basically, their first marital quarrel. And that was in the dressing room, while she dressed for the ball, which is a scene you might have seen hundreds of times. But because I would have a day to shoot that scene in the interior, I instead brought that day to my exterior, so it gave me more money to populate the exterior, and fill it with mangy dogs and drunk people and sailors and hundreds of people, and all that, so that it wouldn't just be one shot of Becky arriving in the ball, which is what it was meant for. So when you do a big scene for one shot, for Becky arriving, it's not "paise va sul"—you don't get your money's worth, you know? (Laughter) So I put other things, like Amelia and George having a spat, or Dobbin saying farewell to Amelia, or... Basically, how to make—give me more money and time to do these scenes, but in a grand way, so that you'll really feel the fulcrum of what was Waterloo in *Vanity Fair*. Waterloo changed everything, every character's fortune, in *Vanity Fair*. So I really wanted it to be this momentous thing, you know? So—like that. So it's strategizing and planning, and then spending the money in a very wise way.

**SCHWARTZ:** The color is so rich and lush throughout the movie. At the time that the film is set, the British Empire was so vast and there were so many influences coming in from India, from all parts of the world; and that sort of justified, I guess, why the costumes could be so colorful—the men's costumes, even.

**NAIR:** Well, he [Thackeray] really told us a lot about the costuming; he really wrote with pleasure about the costume. But a big criteria for me was to work with people who had never worked on an English period movie. Because, you know, I couldn't really be dragged to see those movies, most of them. And I didn't want that kind of well-bred patina that goes with them. And I love Beatrix Pasztor—she's a visionary costume designer from Hungary. She did *The Fisher King*—that's how much I loved her,

yeah, for a long time. And Becky was a style-setter. She never had money, but she used to do things with rope and fabric and feather and fur, and make herself look more distinctive than the heiress next to her in the diamonds, you know? And that's what Beatrix also did. And because, again, of this intersection with colony, I wanted to goad that palette with indigos, and crimsons, and so on. But we also kept it very filthy and dirty and dusty. I tried to get the whole reality of what it is like to live in dysfunctional aristocratic English families, you know? (Laughter) I mean, they're deeply dysfunctional—like many aristocratic families. But you don't see that. You don't see the kind of drag with which they drag on their fancy wig when the rich heiress comes over, and the kind of normalness, normalcy with which—how we are today. Like, "Oh, God, do I really have to wash up?" It's the same deal. But it just was such a pleasure to bring all that to life.

**SCHWARTZ:** That's right, the typical period film just makes you want to look at all these old houses, and want to live there, and make you feel like everything's beautiful.

**NAIR:** You, maybe. (Laughter) Not me.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) If you could compare your approach to Thackeray to Stanley Kubrick's approach, because of course he adapted *Barry Lyndon*. So I don't know if that was a factor...

**NAIR:** Well, I love that. I saw the film again while we were shooting this one. I think it's a very different approach—only because of pace, because of the zany—sort of the much zanier pace, I would say, of this film. And it was multi-layered, the story, versus *Barry Lyndon*, which is much simpler, in terms of the three characters—not huge. And this is, like, vast amounts of people and their history. I took some tips from the humanity—the unfolding quality of his scenes. He had such bravery, to let you just feel that pace, you know? I love that. So some of that I learned from him. But otherwise, we just have a different take. His is cooler, and mine is much hotter. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** The question that begs to be asked is the relation of Indian cinema, because the vitality of

Indian films seems to show up in some way in your movies.

**NAIR:** Well, I'm sort of an odd bird, because I don't really belong to the Bollywood system or to the commercial Indian system, and I've always done sort of an oblique thing from it. But I enjoy a lot and learn a lot from it, besides the themes I mentioned that were common. Emotional intent of a scene is very important in Indian cinema. I wouldn't say Bollywood, because Bollywood sort of implies a kind of high kitsch. I'm talking now much deeper, like the Gurudutts [Shirali] or the old Raj Kapoor and the great commercials from commercial directors, you know? And that kind of emotional intent of every scene—especially when you're doing so many parallel stories at once, and trying to do so many things in every one scene—that learning, or that emotional dagger-in-your-heart kind of thing, is from Indian cinema, in the sense that...

I'll give you an example, of when Dobbin comes to ask Osborne to come to George and Amelia's marriage, to forgive George before he goes to war. And he says, "But George married Amelia this morning" (Dobbin has to tell him). And I just told Rhys Ifans, "You love Amelia, and even though you have made this marriage happen to save Amelia, you cannot bring yourself to say that line." And what I said was, "It's a dagger in your heart. So say it with that in mind." And that's something that an Indian audience will expect to see, is—Rhys Ifans just not being able to say that line, you know? And of course, he's such a fine actor. And actors also love that kind of—I mean, at least my actors (Laughter)—love that type of specific direction. So that the intent of every scene, emotional intent, is, I would say, from India—an influence of India.

**SCHWARTZ:** You were an actor for a while before you went into photography, so I'm sure your acting background comes a lot into play in your work with actors. I mean, clearly.

**NAIR:** That's right. I just love actors, and I know that it's not enough... Like, many directors don't talk to actors much, and I talk to actors a lot. And I like to create an atmosphere where we can all make fools of ourselves, as I always say. (Laughter) So immediately, people start laughing and, you know,

the ice is broken. But yeah, I love to work with actors, yeah.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) Okay, yeah, if you could [talk] a bit about your ideas behind the big dance sequence towards the end...

**NAIR:** Well, in the book it's seven or eight pages, where Becky is dressed in next to nothing, as a slave girl, with Steyne dressed as her pasha and her owner. And they're playing the game of dame charades on the theme of slavery, in front of the king and all the other ladies of the court, and they're guessing words. That's the scene; it's a very extravagant party for the king. And this was pre-Victorian, so this was the time that England was really given to excess and flamboyance. And I just took the same elements and the same intent of that scene and thought it was just far more cinematic, instead of them sprouting words, to dance. And because we were talking about, again, this colony and empire, the intersection with clothing and music and all those ideas—and money, of course—I thought to use the music as well. So that was... It's just taking seven pages of not very cinematic action and making it cinematic.

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay, a question in the back here.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Given how thoroughly enjoyable this film is, what are you thinking of doing next? (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay, this—he cannot wait to see your next movie. So what are you thinking of doing next?

**NAIR:** I'm doing a beautiful, beautiful book that knocked my socks off in February, when I went to film the ending of this movie: *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*—who is a great writer, and a New Yorker, and who won the Pulitzer for her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, and this is her debut novel. And it just moved me. It's about—it's sort of the road I've traveled, in a way. It's about a young couple who leave Calcutta in the sixties to come to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then contemporary New York. Especially after this film, which I have really beloved for a long time, this particular story—I just felt this visceral need to make films—well, see my own story, my own people, through my lens, because, especially now,

we are everywhere. And we are also on the roads that I live on, in the sense that it's a part of my everyday life. And I'd love to try and capture that in a film.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) Okay. If you could talk about the dedication to Edward Saïd.

**NAIR:** Edward opened our eyes to so much in the world, and his writing... Well, anyway, he was also a great movie buff. And he was my neighbor. And we had a great, wonderful friendship, and I miss him dearly. We had two pretty lovely conversations about *Vanity Fair* when I was writing—working on the script—because he lived literally next door. And he loved my films, and he would come to every film of mine. Because he had written on *Vanity Fair* in one of his books—again, this intersection of colony and empire—I would talk with him. And he would love that. He loves—he had such a curious mind. So for me, it's also, of course, about his political work, but also how much he inspired me, and how much I miss him.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) What so intrigues you about... After all the great movies you made, what do you enjoy...?

**NAIR:** (Laughs) What do I still like about it [making films]?

**SCHWARTZ:** Yes.

**NAIR:** Well, you know, what I really like about it is that I only do what I want to do, and nobody can get me to do anything else. Even when it's been really crazy and lonely—especially in the beginning, when I made films and documentaries on India, and I lived here, and I made films there. In India, they didn't want to see the documentaries; and here, I would take them under my arm and go on the Greyhound and go anywhere. For \$300 a pop, I would show films and talk about them. And people would look at these films and say, "You have running water in India?" (Laughter) You know? Or they said, "Do you live in tree houses?" And I would say, "My elevator broke down, but yeah, I do," you know. (Laughter) Or I would try to make jokes. But inside, I would think, "Who am I making films for?" I would feel terribly lonely. And so in a way, I didn't get off that part, except I started making feature

films, fiction films, which was with *Salaam Bombay!*, a kind of combination of real life plus fiction.

So anyway, that was what I wanted, is to communicate with people. Anyway, what I was trying to say is that I haven't capitulated to something that was expected of me. I've kind of—even though it was lonely, and even though it was always a struggle in some senses, I kind of bashed on. And now I find, to my surprise, that I have an audience. And that just constantly disarms me. I love it, but it's also not—I'm not used to it. But now a lot of people come to me for my sensibility. Like when Focus Features offered me this film, they were fully aware that they wouldn't be getting Merchant Ivory, you know? That they would get my film, you know? And they loved that, also. They want that. I've just been asked to make [a] *Harry Potter* [sequel], and I'm not sure if I'm going to say "Yes" or "No"... (Laughter) But—and Harry may be dressed in a sari very soon! (Laughter, applause) Don't quote me, please! (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) So how do you deal with nineteenth-century dialogue, making it accessible for a modern audience?

**NAIR:** We didn't consciously want to do that. We didn't want to modernize the dialogue—especially Julian. He's so sort of—he feels very much at home in an extremely—I don't know if it's early nineteenth century, exactly, way of speaking, but we very much went... I mean, like, "I bet on that," like, when Becky says, "I bet on that." It sounds very modern, but it's actually from the book, you know? Odd things like that are very strangely modern.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What stuck out for me was "sucking up".

**NAIR:** Oh, that's a perfect English expression. "You can suck up all you wish, once I'm warm." It's a perfect—it's a completely English expression. Yeah. I can guarantee that. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** I thought we invented sucking up.

**NAIR:** No, no, no, the English. (Laughter) Snubbing and sucking up, they did that very well, both of them. Yes.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) Okay, if you could compare the process of adaptation versus starting with an original script.

**NAIR:** Well, it's much harder with an original script, in a way, because you have to invent everything. And while it is liberating, it can also be very woolly—to really pickle it in the way a classic is pickled is a beautiful thing. The key to classics—it really helped that I've loved this novel for many, many years, and I wasn't doing a quick swat on it. Similarly, Julian, he had also loved this thing. So when you have lived with something a long enough time, even though you're not thinking of adapting it, the distillation somehow really was much quicker. Becky and Rawdon, Amelia and Dobbin as counterpoint, Osborne. Anything that made me really cry, I put in, you know? (Laughter) Like, Osborne hating his son, and then striking him off the family bible; Amelia sacrificing her son... These are things I just understood that the audience would care—they would care about. My people like this, you know? I literally went like that. But I also knew it very well, so I didn't get that confused. And then Julian equally knew it, and we really just had a love fest. We really liked each other. And actually, not to sound like I'm a hustler for it, but we wrote a book on the making of *Vanity Fair* [*Vanity Fair: Bringing Thackeray's Timeless Novel to the Screen*], which is in the bookstores now. It's a beautiful coffee-table book. But it has actual, really truthful, no puff-piece, e-mails between Julian and me over about five months making the script. So it's a very good, truthful way to show how we milked the novel at every single moment that we could.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) Okay, how you were able to break into a world dominated by white male directors... (Laughter)

**NAIR:** Well, actually, that's—in the answer to my previous question—it was not a striving to belong to the A-list; I just didn't care, you know? And it was difficult, you know, not to want to... You know, like, I'll... Anyway. So it wasn't like a—it wasn't a striving of mine. What I wanted to do was actually only to do what I wanted to do, and hope that I could manage to make that work. And so I chose not to... If I had gone there to “throw my sari in the ring,” (laughs) I would get only teenage comedies and girl-coming-of-age-type movies; that's how they

ghettoize, mostly, women directors. If you want to start in Hollywood. But I never wanted that. So I just used to—that's why I produce my own films. Usually, I produce my own films. Because, like in *Mississippi Masala*, I just put the money together. In every single film of mine. It is the rare film that I would accept from the outside—like *Vanity Fair*, because of obvious reasons (“I love this book,” and so on). But I think that's what's different with my trajectory than a Hollywood situation. And that's what I like—to answer the young man's question—is now they come to me knowing that they're going to get a sensibility. And it's one of my big criteria, when people come to me with outside film, an idea; then I think, “Can anybody else do this movie?” And if anybody else can do it, then I don't do it. Because then why do it, you know?

**SCHWARTZ:** I want to see one last question, which is: You started off making documentaries. And I assume with documentaries, it's always a discovery process as you go. You obviously had such strong ideas about what you wanted to do with *Vanity Fair*. But what surprised you along the way? Like, what did you learn about the material? In the process of making the film, was there anything that surprised you?

**NAIR:** Well, two things. In reading about London, in early-nineteenth-century London, the milieu of *Vanity Fair*, that it was the filthiest, most cacophonous city. And people could not hear themselves talk outside, and they literally described the crap, and the cold, and all this stuff. And I had never seen that on screen. And that's what I wanted to set out. And what surprised me, very interestingly, was when I would ask for, like, pigs from the early nineteenth century, they actually have a medieval piggery society. (Laughter) This is a weird answer to your question. But it's true. So it was, like, how to make those streets...

The greatest surprise was when my friend who edited *Salaam Bombay!*, Barry [Alexander] Brown, came to visit, and he—on set, when we had these huge streets of all kinds of vendors. You saw it. He said, “You know, this is like *Salaam Bombay!*,” he said. And it was really not what I had intended or thought about consciously, but that's what we had done, which was great. But the other surprise was that the question that Thackeray asks: “Which of us



is happy in this world? Which of us, having met his desire, is content?" That question is completely timeless; that is the essential question. And that every—to plumb that question in every character's journey that I was trying to tell was actually plumbing it or mining it so that it would come to the

forefront as a question that we as a modern audience would ask ourselves after seeing the film.

**SCHWARTZ:** And we'll leave it unanswered... Thanks a lot! (Applause)

**NAIR:** Thank you very much. Thank you.

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