

Document Citation

Title	Salaam Bombay!
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Source	<i>Time Out New York</i>
Date	2002 Feb 07
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	79
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Salaam Bombay!, Nair, Mira, 1988

Fcl 7-14, 2002 p. 79

Salaam Bombay!

Dir. Mira Nair.

1988. N/R.

113mins. In

Hindi, with

subtitles. Shafiq

Syed, Aneeta

Kanwar, Nana

Patekar, Hansa

Vithal, Jamila.

The plight of street urchins has provided a

surefire tug at audiences' emotions since *Oliver Twist* first appeared. But Mira Nair, with her much-lauded 1988 feature debut *Salaam Bombay!*, turns the familiar form into something original and almost epic.



SO CLOSE BUT SO FAR AWAY Homeless Syed pines for Jamila.

How Nair made *Salaam*, which Film Forum is screening to herald the release of her latest work, *Monsoon Wedding*, is itself remarkable. A film of searing authenticity, *Salaam* was shot in the slums of Bombay and acted

largely by the homeless kids who Nair, a former documentarian, located there. In particular, she discovered a terrific actor in young Shafiq Syed, who stars as Chaipau, an adolescent who has wound up alone in Bombay after being abandoned by the circus troupe with which he was traveling. Despite his naiveté, Chaipau learns to survive by stealing and doing odd jobs for minimal rupees, and becomes embroiled in the lives of assorted dead-end and hard-luck cases.

The story eventually comes down to a tug-of-war between despair and hope, as chiefly embodied by Manju (Kanwar)—the daughter of a drug-dealing pimp and a prostitute—and Chaipau. Even at a tender age (she looks to be six or seven), Manju is disturbingly adept

at using her wiles to get what she wants; the brief glimpses Nair provides, as contrast, of Manju's inherent childlike sweetness make her a horrifying case study of the long-term effects of her environment. (Manju is also a dynamic example of Nair's talent for creating gripping secondary characters who underscore the experience of her leads, a key feature of her subsequent works.) Although Manju ultimately seems lost to us, we are given reason to believe that Chaipau just might have a chance. His cherubic face grows grim, his eyes harden and his body becomes ravaged. But he endures with his soul intact, and in the severe world Nair depicts without judgment, that is a monumental achievement. (Opens Fri; Film Forum.)—*Nicole Keeter*

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