

## Document Citation

|               |                                      |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|
| Title         | <b>Prosaic nations</b>               |
| Author(s)     | Michael Atkinson<br>Michael Atkinson |
| Source        | <i>Village Voice</i>                 |
| Date          | 2002 Feb 26                          |
| Type          | review                               |
| Language      | English<br>English                   |
| Pagination    | 104                                  |
| No. of Pages  | 1                                    |
| Subjects      |                                      |
| Film Subjects | Monsoon wedding, Nair, Mira, 2001    |

# PROSAIC NATIONS

VV 2/26/02  
p. 104

BY MICHAEL ATKINSON

## MONSOON WEDDING

Directed by Mira Nair

Written by Sabrina Dhawan

USA Opens February 22

## BIG BAD LOVE

Directed by Arliss Howard

Written by Howard & James Howard

IFC Opens February 22

## THE CHERRY ORCHARD

Written and directed by Michael Cacoyannis,

from the play by Anton Chekhov

Kino Opens February 22

With its lunatic genre freak-outs and intimidating quantity, Indian cinema is as difficult to nail down as a blob of mercury, but you'd never know it from the rare imported samples. What we see are Westernized half-breeds, divested of poverty and safety-padded for weekends at the middle-class art house. (The recent exception is Santosh Sivan's chilly indie *The Terrorist*, itself out of sync with India's uncorkable snap-crackle-pop.) Mira Nair's new *Monsoon Wedding* is the prototype: Delhi-set, yet sourced out of Hollywood chestnuts (*Father of the Bride*, for starters) and fastidiously divested of exotic Bollywood high jinks. The pervasive reach of American Everything is part of the fabric. Nair has, in fact, globalized her own movie, a loose and swoony wedding comedy that has less to say about its society than Nancy Savoca's *True Love* or even Robert Altman's *A Wedding* said about theirs.

The director—whose “international productions” following her debut, *Salaam Bombay!*, include *Mississippi Masala*, *The Perez Family*, and *Kama Sutra*—is no stranger to blithe assimilation. Occupying a well-manicured landscape festooned with orange marigolds and peopled by hip-hop-accented teens and *Cosmo* girls, *Monsoon Wedding* is an air-conditioned bus tour of Punjabi ritual. Nair stuffs the film with dancing, henna, ornamentation, and group song, but her narrative clichés and telegraphed episodes smell of old soap opera. The thicket of exposition (the work of rookie screenwriter Sabrina Dhawan) is dense, but it boils down to the stormy days preceding the arranged marriage of Aditi (Vasundhara Das, as dewy and saucer-eyed as Winona Ryder used to be) to Hemant (Parvin Dabas). Aditi loves a good-for-nothing married man, and petulantly considers her



AN AIR-CONDITIONED BUS TOUR OF PUNJABI RITUAL: SHOME IN *MONSOON WEDDING*

husband-to-be—who has flown in from Houston—her ticket out of misery. The upcoming day is also a significant trial for her financially strapped father, Lalit (Naseeruddin Shah), who handles the affair's speed bumps with Spencer Tracy-esque disgruntlement.

Nair manages her subplots by keeping them gauze-thin: Lalit's young, boarding-school-bound son just wants to dance (“I'm not going! I hate you!”); two cousins strike up a lazy romance; the wedding's larcenous event manager (Vijay Raaz) clumsily courts the maid (Tilotama Shome). The language—Delhi's stew of Hindi, Punjabi, and English, often cocktailed together in the same sentence—has plenty of spice, but the dialogue remains predictable. Nair flounders for drama until the family's adopted cousin (Shefali Shetty) releases her cannons on a pedophile uncle, a tangent that

provides the hamstrung Lalit with a few badly needed dimensions and a heroic denouement.

You rescue pleasures from the florid sitcom boisterousness wherever you can: the untroubled gaiety of the wedding guests partying in a torrential downpour, the strange chastity of even the sexiest characters, the mysterious maid who nibbles on marigolds in slow motion and asks suddenly of her nervous suitor, “What happened?” when nothing happened at all. Top prizewinner at last year's presumably doleful Venice Film Festival, *Monsoon Wedding* could just as easily have been a WB-style series—Raj TV's answer to *Felicity*.