

## Document Citation

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## THE NAMESAKE

A 20th Century Fox release of a Fox Searchlight Pictures/Entertainment Farm/UTV Motion Pictures presentation of a Mirabi Films and Cine Mosaic production. Produced by Lydia Dean Pilcher, Mira Nair. Executive producers, Yasushi Kotani, Taizo Son, Ronnie Screwvala. Co-producers, Lori Keith Douglas, Yukie Kito, Zarina Screwvala.

Directed by Mira Nair. Screenplay, Sooni Taraporevala, based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri. Camera (Deluxe color), Frederick Elmes; editor, Allyson C. Johnson; music, Nitin Sawhney; music supervisor, Linda Cohen; production designer, Stephanie Carroll; art directors, Suttirat Larlarb, Tanmoy Chakroborty (India); set decorators, Lydia Marks, Sharmishta Roy (India); costume designer, Arjun Bhasin; sound (Dolby/DTS/SDDS), Ed Novick; supervising sound editor, Dave Paterson; associate producer, Dinaz Stafford; assistant directors, Michael DeCasper, Dylan Gray (India); second unit camera, Jay J. Odedra; casting, Cindy Tolan; India casting, Tess Joseph. **Reviewed at Telluride Film Festival, Sept. 2, 2006. (Also in Toronto Film Festival — Special Presentations.)** Running time: 122 MIN.

Gogol ..... Kal Penn  
Ashima ..... Tabu  
Ashoke ..... Irrfan Khan  
Maxine ..... Jacinda Barrett  
Moushumi  
Mazumdar ..... Zuleikha Robinson  
(English, Bengali, Hindi dialogue)

### By SCOTT FOUNDAS

**I**n the capable hands of director Mira Nair (bouncing back from the critically and commercially disappointing "Vanity Fair"), Jhumpa Lahiri's wildly popular novel about two generations of a Bengali family receives a loving, deeply felt screen translation that should appease fans of the book while making many new converts. Bolstered by Nair's lush visual style and superb performances from ace Bollywood thespis Irrfan Khan, Tabu and "Harold & Kumar" star Kal Penn (in his first dramatic lead), Fox Searchlight can expect above-average arthouse business for this audience-pleasing March release.

Though the condensing of Lahiri's episodic, decades-spanning narrative into two compact hours of screen-time makes for a pic occasionally overstuffed with incident, "The Namesake" remains a richly compelling story of family and self-discovery.

Tale begins in Calcutta in the late 1970s, where a young man, Ashoke (Khan), who has recently survived a horrific train accident, enters into an arranged marriage with the beautiful Ashima (Tabu), whom he has never met before. Together, they travel to New York City, where they settle in a ramshackle cold water flat and begin their new American lives.



Tabu, Kal Penn and Jacinda Barrett star in Mira Nair's "The Namesake," about two generations of a Bengali family.

Despite all the modern conveniences of a big U.S. city — in one scene, Ashima excitedly writes home that, in America, one can use the gas 24 hours a day — the adjustment is a difficult one, and these early scenes are particularly impressive for the subtlety with which Nair and her actors map out the lives of two people who are strangers to each other acclimating to life in a strange land.

When Ashima gives birth to a baby boy, she and Ashoke are informed that, counter to Indian custom — where years sometimes pass before a child is given a proper name — the baby must be named before it can leave the hospital. So, they settle on the "good name" of Nikhil and the "pet name" of Gogol, after Ashoke's favorite writer.

But several years later, on Nikhil/Gogol's first day of elementary school, the boy decides to continue going by Gogol, in effect making that his "good name." It is a choice that reverberates throughout the rest of the film, as the sense of a name — and the history it carries with it — becomes a lyrical metaphor for the character's own struggle to assert his identity.

Cut to a modern-day high school classroom, where Gogol (now played by Penn) is a moody, shaggy-haired, pot-smoking senior, predictably furious at his parents for giving him such a dumb name. This Gogol is as American as they come, as evidenced by his bratty behavior during a family vacation to India, where he consistently disparages the country for its evident backwardness; and later, by his romance with a WASP-y Manhattan princess

(Jacinda Barrett), who invites Gogol (now known as "Nick") for weekends at Oyster Bay and says things like "Everyone loves truffles."

Culture-clash moments like those border on cliché, especially since Barrett's character isn't developed much beyond her surface of money-eyed privilege. Better drawn is Gogol's subsequent girlfriend, a fellow Bengali named Moushumi (sultry Zuleikha Robinson), who, like Gogol himself, finds herself torn between obeisance to tradition and pursuing her own desires.

If that conflict isn't exactly new in cinema, it's nevertheless rendered by "The Namesake" with a sensitivity and emotional resonance that elude most films on the subject of cultural assimilation. That's largely thanks to the delicate balance Nair and screenwriter Sooni Taraporevala strike between the story's two generational threads, so that Ashima and Ashoke remain significant presences in the second half, even after the primary focus shifts to Nick/Gogol.

Penn — who has long seemed one of the brightest and most likable young comic talents around — shows serious dramatic chops as he takes us on Nick/Gogol's expansive odyssey from the proverbial American-Born Confused Desi to a confident young man with a sure sense of his past, his present and his future.

Shot on location in New York and India, pic boasts excellent tech contributions on all fronts, particularly the warm, rich colors of Frederick Elmes' cinematography and Stephanie Carroll's production design, and the varied Western and Eastern influences of composer/DJ Nitin Sawhney's original score.