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The subject is cabaret women. Film maker Mira Nair catches moments in their lives and the result is controversial.

A review by Khalid Mohamed.

THE truth, says a lawyer in Strindberg's *Dream Play*, is anything that can be proved by two witnesses. It's also anything that can be photographed by one documentary film maker. The camera, catching life on the run, is a powerful persuader. So is the newsreel clip, with its grainy message from the real world.

Now Mira Nair's documentary *India Cabaret* sparked off a confused debate when it was shown at the Hyderabad Filmotsav and later at Bombay's Max Mueller Bhavan. It has been attacked as "exploitative", "half-baked" and what-not. On the other hand, it has been grudgingly admired. The way I see it, the film maker has summoned up all her honesty to play host to a small group of cabaret dancers. She has pitched us into their rough, outlandish milieu, developing an insight as she went along into this slice of commercial sex.

Often surprising herself with the frankness of her own questions, Nair is met with equal candour from the dancers, the cabaret joint's proprietor and the



SUPERWOMAN REKHA: Her eyes glow with independence.

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regular customers she interviews. Admittedly, the document could have degenerated into a giggle. Significantly, it didn't. In fact, it's evident that the film maker was staggered by what she had to go through, by the enormous torment that the women have sublimated, and by their adjustment to role-playing in a society through the best years of their lives.

None of the women encountered regret the irreversible step they have taken. Result: an understated treatment of what could so easily be sensationalist material. First off, you meet the cabaret women and hear their sometimes stoic and sometimes comic banter as, wired for sound, they put on pancake masks in damp backrooms. They change into belly-dancer bikinis, with those cheap velvet tassels and glass beads. And they contort their bodies to tinny western pop music being played by a faceless band in a dimly-lit dive at Ghatkopar. Nair, here, avoids the temptation to wallow in the garishness and inevitable horror stories. Instead, she maintains an ironic gaze by showing how the women don't take it lying down: they're considered fair game for anything but still they've survived on their own terms.

Call that romantic | simplistic | one-sided. But that's the way

it is. The trouble is that a public living by its newspapers, radio and television networks, has a certain inclination to distrust the documentary. What's a fact? Who's got a spare one to shoot anyway? It's believed — and in a country monopolised by the Films Division, the belief's even justified — that documentaries are laced with propaganda or compromised by the film makers' predispositions. Once in a gratifying while, though, a documentary gives you an assortment of random observations which in the aggregate ring true.

That's the major virtue of *India Cabaret*. Watching the women flirt with a sordid system, following them home after a hard day's night, accompanying them on a cosy taxi ride and even joining one of them on a trip to her "native place", the film achieves a fine balance between the sentimental and the objective. The outcome's definitely not for the voyeurs but for those with a genuine concern for the subject.

With the luck of a derby-winner, the film maker stumbles across Rekha, a cabaret queen with a no-nonsense and also bemused attitude to the sleaze and slime around her. Sitting casually on a staircase, swigging beer by evening on a terrace or just looking at the camera as if it was her best friend, she unwinds,

cracking jokes about Yamraj who was thrilled to invite a woman of the night into his den. She dismisses men and marriage as so much blah and her eyes glow with independence. She's extraordinary but you understand that she's not one of a kind, there are many spunky women like her and she becomes their spokeswoman with the cunning of a politician.

If there's superwoman Rekha on one end there are the soft-spoken ones on the other extreme. Like Rosy, a matchstick figure smiling widely. She's the kind of woman who hasn't had the luxury of reflecting on her condition. Trapped, she's like so many women in other professions, slaving to send money home, seeing that her family doesn't disintegrate. So, there's that sense of fulfillment in her manner and voice. The journey to her house on the outskirts of Hyderabad is correctly nostalgic and idyllic. If Rosy couldn't stay on in the village, if her dreams and the need to earn a subsistence took her to the cold-blooded city, her story is similar to so many displaced women's. Or for that matter also of men's.

Now the film may not be completely feminist and that's its only drawback. The feminism remains under the surface instead of something Nair could have

developed and made her work into a milestone. It lacks politics and even a stand which would have perhaps made the film not as comfortable to watch. What redeems it is a very palpable pro-woman's sensibility. She prefers to be subdued and without flaunting the cabaret women's sexuality, describes how they use the sexuality in their trade.

As in her earlier documentary *So Far from India* (dealing with a family whose son is an immigrant worker in America), she confronts believable people with all their humour and intelligence. This time, she meets a Mrs. Pujara whose husband is a cabaret addict and not ashamed of it. "You married me, you have to wait for me," the middle-order businessman tells his wife, adding that there's little difference between her and the women he ogles daily. In the dark all the bodies are the same, he laughs. His rank chauvinism makes you look the other way, you're that embarrassed if not ashamed.

As Mrs. Pujara potters through the household chores, or as she complains ever so shyly about the waywardness of her husband, she becomes the archetypal wife, accepting it all and keeping alive a traditional, even feudal set-up. The film maker, it's clear, would like the set-up to change. It's her job to tell the spectator this is how it is and ask what're you doing about it? Awareness can be spread by giving even a glimmer of the real picture.

It may be asked where are the chiselling procurers and pimps? Where's the bitching that's there in any professional clan? Moreover, why are some scenes staged? About the "staging", I feel that any documentary (unless it's a newsreel) has to recreate moments and even passages and here they're authentically-done and not creakily-contrived at all. As for the missing pimps and bitching, in a 60-minute documentary these are ancillary elements. If some details aren't underlined, it's because they form another story altogether.

The cabaret performances are done starkly, performed almost as mechanically as a religious ritual. Mitch Epstein's camerawork is so low-key that the atmosphere's more shadowy and soft than scabrous.

Incidentally, the project had started as a focus on Silk Smitha. When that didn't work out, the alternative was to take on anonymous cabaret dancers and advertently, widen the perspective. The statements made are not obvious. Nor are they blared in bold print. More importantly, the film transmits to the audience the strength of its cabaret women. As the guitars and drums raise a storm, the heroines are ready. And there's a dignity behind the bump-and-grind.

Here, then is superior documentary that makes you pine already for the next Mira Nair venture. This film maker's unquestionably sensitive: she knows that life is a question of living according to your feelings. And not being afraid of sharing them with your audience.