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The Spirit of Survival

Spotlight on street children and new immigrants

By Ashok Jethanandani

She wanted real street kids to act in her film about street kids. So director Mira Nair recruited 130 such children off the streets of Bombay to take part in a theater workshop. "At first the children were very curious as to why I was interested in them," she recalls, "since movies were to them about stars and not ordinary people."

But the workshop did wonders for the children's confidence and sense of self-worth. So natural was their performance in front of the camera that the professional actors in the film - Raghubir Yadav, Nana Patekar, Anita Kanwar, and Shaukat Azmi - had to work hard to match their authenticity. Writer Sooni Taraporewala even incorporated some of the children's own stories into the script.

When it was screened at the Cannes Film Festival this year, the film won not only the Camera D'Or for the Director's Best First Feature, but also the Prix du Public for the Most Popular Film. Due to demand, it had to be screened repeatedly, leaving audiences deeply moved and cheering at the end of each show. *Salaam Bombay!* makes its Bay Area premiere on October 13 at the Eleventh Annual Mill Valley Film Festival.

Presented by the Fireman's Fund Foundation, the festival is scheduled Oc-

tober 6-13 with over 42 films, tributes, videos, and seminars. Films from American independents, Europe, USSR, Japan, Australia, Canada, and India will be screened. Among the American entries is *West is West*, San Francisco filmmaker David Rathod's first feature film. *Salaam Bombay!* will be screened on the closing night, with director Mira Nair and co-producer Mitch Epstein present in person.

Making films about marginal people in society has always been a priority for Mira Nair. In 1985, her hour-long documentary *India Cabaret*, based on the lives of two cabaret dancers in Bombay, Rekha and Rosie, was screened on American public television. Nair showed her characters as simple women who had migrated from villages, who had families and relatives, and who had learned to live with dignity in a hostile urban environment.

Salaam Bombay! is about Krishna (Shafiq Syed), a ten-year-old boy who is abandoned by a travelling circus. He

comes to Bombay with dreams of saving Rs. 500 and returning to his village. In the city, he quickly develops the necessary survival skills, starting his career at the bottom of the street hierarchy - delivering tea. Krishna quickly discovers other children like himself. Solasaal is a rebellious Nepali girl forcibly sold into prostitution. They come across Baba

(Nana Patekar), the volatile boss of the red-light district in Kamathipura, and Chillum (Raghubir Yadav), a veteran of the city's underworld.

Acting in the film was bound to transform the lives of the street children. "It was easy to be inspired by their spirit of survival and their tremendous sense of

"It was easy to be inspired by their spirit of survival and their tremendous sense of individualism," says Mira Nair.

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individualism," says Nair. "We were careful that they should not suddenly lose those qualities just because we were making a film with them. I would rather have not made *Salaam Bombay!* at all than have that happen."



A slice of American reality: a scene from *West is West*

Oct. 6-13, Mill Valley Film Festival. *West is West* on Oct. 7, 8. *Salaam Bombay!* on Oct. 13. Check Events Calendar for details.