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MISSISSIPPI MASALA

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(SAMUEL GOLDWYN)

Color/1.85/Dolby

118 Mins.

Cast: Denzel Washington, Sarita Choudhury, Roshan Seth, Sharmila Tagore, Charles S. Dutton, Joe Seneca, Ranjit Chowdhry, Mohan Gokhale, Mohan Agashe, Tico Wells, Yvette Hawkins, Anjan Srivastava, Ashok Lath, Konga Mbandu, Natalie Oliver, Sahira Nair.

Credits: Directed by Mira Nair. Produced by Michael Nozik, Nair. Written by Sooni Taraporevala. Director of photography: Ed Lachman. Production designer/co-producer: Mitch Epstein. Edited by Roberto Sivi. Music by L. Subramaniam. Executive producer: Cherie Rodgers. Associate producer: Lydia Dean Pilcher.

There's a party going on in Mira Nair's fresh new film, filled to bursting with radiant good will and acutely funny human observation.
92-26

One hesitates using such a cornball designation as "a feel good movie" to describe *Mississippi Masala*, and yet that is exactly what it is. The happiness it inspires in the viewer is not the formulaic, grating cheeriness of some Hollywood pablum, but the relieved, blissful reaction to the experience of watching real people of color going about their uniquely everyday lives. Director Mira Nair (*Salaam Bombay!*) is working in the tradition of cinema humanists like De Sica, Renoir, Ozu and, of course, Satyajit Ray in her abiding, palpable love of all of her characters and the sheer joy she takes in their contemplation. There's a marvelous sense of discovery, which is fully extended to the audience, in Nair's depiction of this Southern, intercultural "masala" (the Indian term for a collection of hot spices of different colors). The climax—a simple matter of "will boy get girl?"—is charged with the kind of romantic suspense that makes its happy outcome seem triumphant.

The film begins in Africa during Idi Amin's purge of the Indian population from that country. Jay (Roshan Seth) takes his wife Kinnu (Sharmila Tagore) and daughter Mina (Sarita Choudhury), to Greenwood, Mississippi, where they eke out a living that is a marked contrast to their former lives of landed privilege. Kinnu works in a liquor store, Mina is a maid in an Indian-run motel and the passively disconsolate Jay whiles his days away, dreaming of returning to Africa and reclaiming his lost wealth. By chance, Mina meets Demetrius (Denzel Washington), a black who has his own carpet cleaning company. Their romance sets their respective families and communities on their ears, prejudice among minorities being a very real thing.

Nair presents an exhilarating picture of America as we know it today—a roisterously interracial society, where Indians work front desks, eat at Chinese restaurants and go dancing in black discos. This breath of reality is sweet, indeed: We are blessed worlds away from the movies' usual whitebread neighborhoods or cliched presentations of minority existence (inevitably, all street violence or Cosby-clean). Basically, these are people just concerned with making it through the day to a paycheck at the end of the week. The clash of cultures is at once funny and affecting and, with the exception of some too-broadly drawn buffoonish Indians, all the characters have a dignity and quiet humor that leave their mark on the memory. A barbecue scene where Mina is introduced to Demetrius' family and home cookin' is acutely observed and funny, having the archetypal quality of photos in a dear, worn album. A gaudy Indian wedding is also suffused with behavioral comedy. Cinematographer Ed Lachman does impressive work, although some of his lighting on the black actors is insufficient. The romance of the two surpassingly comely leads is given its full due in a sexy, prototypical late-night phone conversation, each of them lying in bed, sweating out the Southern night. There's a striking use of color in the scene of them strolling along a beach, with Mina's bright orange outfit a fluttering beacon of hope against the downcast gray sky and sea. A perky, hip music score helps things out immensely.

Washington again proves himself a worthy black Everyman, a real individual, full of natural humor and ardent curiosity, a justifiably proud working stiff. Choudhury is a find—lushly gorgeous, with a suggestive, husky, American-accented voice, truly a product of dual cultures in her jeans and saris. Tagore, forever assured of a place in film history as Satyajit Ray's ultimate muse, is distinguished and moving as her mother. The aquiline Seth, however, is a passive drag as Jay. He seems to carry his inner pain and African nostalgia around with him like a cross, while his wife and daughter obviously do the yeoman's share of work. It's hard to muster much sympathy for such unrelieved self-pity. Joe Seneca as Demetrius' aged father has moments of real power. Especially telling are the scenes with his white employers in the restaurant where he works as a superannuated but very capable waiter. Charles Dutton as a beamingly good-natured friend has an overflowing, rambunctious charm. It's a pleasure to spend time with these folk.

—David Noh