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# Time In

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## TELEVISION

### Funny girl

Mira Nair's new documentary wonders if laughter is the best medicine **By Michael Freidson**

A group of factory workers, clad in dirty blue work shirts, trudge into a shoddy building in Bombay, India. Corralled into a dank locker room and looking tired, they slowly form a circle, swoop their arms up and do something unexpected: They burst into laughter. Loudly. For 20 minutes.

Their faces light up as the roar fills the room. Afterward, they say they feel rejuvenated and ready to start the day. The group is just one of the subcontinent's 450 "laughing clubs," some of which are profiled in *The Laughing Club of India*, a new documentary from filmmaker Mira Nair (*Salaam Bombay*, *Mississippi Masala*).

The clubs were conceived in 1995 by Dr. Madan Kataria (also known as the Guru of Giggling), who read a *Readers' Digest* headline—"Laughter is the Best Medicine"—and wondered if it was true. Practicing with a group of patients, he found daily meetings improved their health and decreased stress. Since then, laughing clubs have spread beyond the doctor and become a phenomenon in India, where its proponents consider it a fast, fun and, best of all, free cure. In the film, we meet a formerly grieving widow who didn't leave the house for six years until the chuckles saved her. An elderly man gleefully compares the practice to jogging, while a third member, a young engineering student who was paralyzed from the waist down by an accident, says the ha-has keep him from becoming a vegetable.

Nair, 43, is best known for her serious-minded fictional films about India or women's issues (in-

cluding 1996's *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love*). She last made documentaries in the '80s, when she studied with her "guru," D.A. Pennebaker (*Don't Look Back*, *The War Room*), and says she stopped making non-fiction films because she wasn't patient enough to wait

August to film for three weeks.

Nair believes such clubs are indigenous to India for good reason. "But it's not because we don't laugh a lot," she says. "It's ironic: We have social restrictions on women and so on, but it's also a culture that's at ease with expressing itself. It's not an uptight culture—the food, the spices, the costumes [all demonstrate that]. It's not at all about being repressed. So it's a good fit."

She notes that laughing clubs are also infiltrating other cultures; there are groups in France and Sweden, and Dr. Kataria has taught seminars in the United States. Last year, Nair screened the film at the Margaret Mead Festival and got a positive response. "I was dumbfounded," she says. "The Laughter Club of America came from Minneapolis and conducted a session after the screening. And in the Museum of Natural History, 200 people got onto the stage and went through the entire 35 minutes of laughing—and people in the audience, old folks who couldn't wheel them-

to work. It just helps people cope with their day better. I liked the absurdity of it all."

That may sound odd coming from someone who usually makes mostly humorless films about important issues, but Nair continues the lighthearted trend with her next film, the fictional comedy *Monsoon Wedding*, which debuted at this year's Cannes Film Festival. She's also currently editing *Hysterical Blindness*. That female-centric HBO movie, due next year and starring Uma Thurman and Juliette Lewis as two rowdy sisters, focuses on another oddly fascinating subculture: 1980s New Jersey. "It's about a white-trash life. I've made it Bollywood-style—we shot it with a handheld [camera]. And Uma and Juliette look very tawdry: big hair, acid-washed jeans and shoulder pads. It's a lively picture—even if it takes place in New Jersey."

One wonders whether this means Nair is poised to make the jump from indie to mainstream. "I'd love to shoot a blockbuster comedy, but I don't want to be inane," she



**CHUCKLEHEADS** Indian folk feel the medical benefits of busting a gut in Mira Nair's *The Laughing Club of India*.

for the story to happen. "But this one just called out to me," says Nair from her midtown office, where she edits all her films. "I was stuck in a traffic jam in Bombay, pissed off, 45 minutes late for an appointment, and these 200 women were crossing the highway in front of me, guffawing. It was like a Fellini movie. I said, I think there's something there." A Manhattan resident, she returned to her hometown of Bombay last

year. "I was laughing too. I got so many personal phone calls from sundry people saying, 'Where can we go in New York?'" (One place is Laughing Lotus Yoga Center; for more information, go to [www.laughinglotus.com](http://www.laughinglotus.com).)

Of course, more cynical city folk might say this stuff is corny, on the level of an Anthony Robbins self-help class. "Oh, it is totally stupid," Nair agrees—to a point. "When you do it, it seems

says. "I'd like to do a Tati-esque movie. There is a greater part of the world outside of America." In other words, no matter how many laughing club sessions she attends, she'll always remain Mira Nair, filmmaker with a message. "Hey, you can make the labels," she says with a laugh. "I'll just do the work!"

***The Laughing Club of India* airs Tuesday 28 at 7pm on Cinemax.**

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