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MOVIES

BRIDGING WORLDS

The story of 'The Namesake' brings different talents together

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

When actor Kal Penn (lately of Fox's "24") read Pulitzer Prize-winner Jhumpa Lahiri's 2004 best-selling novel "The Namesake," he felt an intense connection with it. Finding out director Mira Nair ("Monsoon Wedding," "Vanity Fair")



SALAAM BOMBAY, AND NEW YORK Director Mira Nair (standing) with (from l.) Kal Penn, Tabu and Irfan Khan filming "The Namesake," about Indian immigrants and their Americanized son.

was turning it into a film made him determined to become involved.

"When I read the book, I identified with it the same way I identified with 'The Catcher in the Rye,'" says Penn, 29, who stars in the film, which opens Friday. "[My character] Gogol is an American kid of Indian descent who grows up in Massachusetts — in the film it's switched to New York — but it wasn't because of a shared background. He's totally different from me, but I really identified with him and I really wanted to play the part.

"I was aggressive in finding Mira and trying to get an appointment to see her."

Happily, Nair's teenage son — a huge fan of the 2004 comedy hit "Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle," which Penn starred in with John Cho — was already laying the groundwork, urging his mother to cast the co-star of one his favorite films.

In the novel and film, we watch as two people from Calcutta in an arranged marriage slowly fall in love while dealing with the challenges of starting a new life in America — not the least of which is the undreamed of behavior of their children. Nair, the accomplished Indian filmmaker, of course gets every novel with the slightest connection to India sent her way, but this one, she says, was special.

"I was just possessed by it," says Nair, who was offered the chance to do a "Harry Potter" film but turned it down to keep her commitment to "The Namesake."

"Mostly because Lahiri understood what it was like [for children of immigrants] to bury a parent in a land that is not fully home. I was reading it during a period of mourning for my mother-in-law, and when I read this book ... I felt there was someone there in the world who knew. There was great solace in it. And the rest of it is, uncannily, the road I have traveled myself."

For Lahiri, who lives in New York, Nair was "the ideal person" to turn the novel into a movie (she had already turned down one offer to film it). And Lahiri certainly knew that, with the project in Nair's hands, she wouldn't need to second-guess.

"It was wonderful to be able to hand it over to her," says Lahiri. "I just knew from our very first meeting that something really interesting was going to come out of it all." ♦