

## Notes taken by students

International Symposium

Education and Gender Equality

Wellesley College, October 20 & 21, 2017

Discussion with Mira Nair following the screening of her film *Queen of Katwe* – Friday, 3:30 p.m. - 6:15 p.m.

### Speakers:

- Mira Nair, Filmmaker

### Moderator:

- Anjali Prabhu, Director of the Newhouse Center for the Humanities and Professor of French at Wellesley College

### Main points:

- Movies can give women a sense of empowerment. One of the best forms of education for a girl is seeing herself reflected in a story and being shown what she can achieve. A recent Oxford study has found that women who saw only Mira Nair's *Queen of Katwe* before an exam scored better than women who saw another Disney movie.
- A film that shows the complexity, unfairness, and humor of life is better than films that are overtly political. Mira Nair makes films about the intoxication of life. She became a fiction filmmaker because she was frustrated by the limited audience of documentaries, yet her films tend toward documentary and "cinéma vérité" — the narratives are layered and there is more density. For example, *Queen of Katwe* is the story of an entire village that gets the protagonist to the championships, rather than the story of the girl only.
- In filmmaking, one must remember that the heart is like an accordion — you must expand it and then shrink it to really show the pain. You need expansiveness. You need to laugh, to cry. Mira Nair believes it is a beautiful balance she yearns for in everything she does. One of the beauties of being creative is to inject pain into stories.
- Her ivy league American education gave her the "foolish confidence" ("and it really is foolish," she emphasizes) to do her own work and tell her own stories about India — the ugly parts of it. She wasn't going to wait around for somebody else to tell the story about her culture. Thus, *Salaam Bombay!*
- What is most important as a storyteller is to preserve your own voice. It is important to have the sense to say "no," or "no more." For example, when pitching *Mississippi Masala* with Denzel Washington, a studio executive told her to make room for a white lead. She refused and was shown the door. She encourages the audience not to be confused by the temptation to make the umpteenth story about a child of a different color just because people start approaching you after one successful film.
- Another example of preserving her voice: she casts people (especially child actors) for who they are. Disney asked her to cast Willow Smith for *Queen of Katwe* — instead, she chose to cast everybody from Katwe and from another village, children who knew their role because they lived it. Five of the children cast were from a dance troupe who had "luminous energy" and knew the discipline of being an artist. To make everything real, she workshopped acting for weeks and had a real chess teacher teach them chess.

**Best practices evoked regarding public policies, corporate actions, civil society or academic initiatives:**

- The world needs storytelling that illustrates sociological themes on a human level.
- It is powerful to show through stories what women can accomplish, as it can make them feel represented.
- Empower people to tell their own stories — Mira Nair used film profits for filmmaking workshops for East Africans.
- Work intimately with the local community for any project (even a film project!), casting local children who understand the characters because they live them rather than Hollywood stars.