



Valentine's Day: 35th Anniversary Screening

Mississippi Masala

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Directed by: Mira Nair

©/Presented by: SCS Films Inc

Presented in association with:

Odyssey Entertainment, Cinecom International,
Film Four International

Production Company: Mirabai Films

In association with: MovieWorks,

Black River Productions

Executive Producer: Cherie L. Rodgers

Produced by: Michael Nozik, Mira Nair

Co-producer: Mitch Epstein

Associate Producer: Lydia Pilcher

Uganda Production Executive: Anis Mamdani

Production Auditor: Michael McCormick

Production Co-ordinator: Tom Vranesich

Unit Production Manager: Lydia Pilcher

Unit Manager: Eva M. Silvester

Post-production Supervisor: Susan Lazarus

1st Assistant Director: Michael Zimbrich

2nd Assistant Directors: Noga Isackson,

Dinaz Stafford, Linda Wilson

Script Supervisor: Nilita Vachani

Mississippi Casting: Judy Claman

New York Casting: Simon/Kumin Casting

Uganda Casting: Dinaz Stafford

London Casting: Susie Figgis

Additional Indian Casting: Uma da Cunha

Screenplay: Sooni Taraporevala

Director of Photography: Ed Lachman

1st Assistant Camera: Cris Lombardi

2nd Assistant Camera: Kate Butler

Key Grip: Tim Pershing

Steadicam: Ted Churchill

Gaffer: Daniel Ehrenbard

Mississippi Still Photographer: Birney Imes

Uganda Still Photographer: John Panikar

Editor: Roberto Silvi

Associate Film Editor: Tula Goenka

1st Assistant Film Editor: Marissa Littlefield

2nd Assistant Film Editor: Paige M. Sibley

Production Designer: Mitch Epstein

Art Director: Jefferson Sage

Art Department Co-ordinator: Tracy Heather Strain

Set Decorator: Jeanette Scott

Set Dressers: Cedric Johnson, David Weathers,

Ameeta Nanji

Charge Scenic: David Crank

Leadman: Jeffrey B. Hartmann

2nd Scenic Artist: Jennifer C. Debell

Property Master: Maureen Farley

Construction Co-ordinator: Kenneth D. Nelson

Mississippi Costume Designer: Ellen Luner

Uganda Costume Designer: Susan Lyall

India Costume Designer: Kinnari Panikar

Make-up Artists: Mustaque Ashrafi, Edna M. Sheen

Hair Stylist: Ken Walker

Title Illustrations: Ameeta Nanji

Main/End Titles Designed and Produced by:

Balsmeyer & Everett Inc

Opticals: The Effects House

Music Composed by: L. Subramaniam

Mississippi Music Consultant: Adam Bartos

Production Sound Mixer: Alex Griswold

Re-recording Mixer: Rick Dior

Supervising Sound Editor: Margie Crimmins

Sound Editor: Mary Ellen Porto

Grateful Thanks...: Eric Albertson, Farrukh Dhondy

Cast:

Denzel Washington (*Demetrius*)

Sarita Choudhury (*Mina*)

Roshan Seth (*Jay*)

Sharmila Tagore (*Kinnu*)

Following the critical and box-office success of her 1988 debut feature, *Salaam Bombay!* – at the time one of the highest-grossing exports in Indian film history – director Mira Nair chose for her next project a romance between an Indian American woman and an African American man. The subject emerged from her observations of the unifying and dividing forces among BIPOC communities in the United States. ‘Growing up in India, it’s so apparent, the consciousness we have of degrees of colour,’ Nair told *BOMB* magazine in 1991. ‘So coming from that and witnessing it in an American context – I was intrigued.’

The background for the story began when Nair landed as an Indian student at Harvard. She found herself accessible to both white and Black communities; as she has put it, ‘a third-world sister to the Black community and kosher to the others – yet there were always these invisible lines. I felt that there was an interesting hierarchy where brown was between Black and white.’

Nair decided to set the film, initially titled *Twice Removed*, in the deep American South. She knew Indians who had settled and owned businesses there, and she was fascinated by their presence in a region with a long, troubled history of racial oppression and tension. The film’s two narrative strands – the interracial romance and the Ugandan Indians living in exile in the U.S. – would affect and reflect upon each other.

Nair’s longtime friend Sooni Taraporevala wrote the film’s screenplay. The director and screenwriter had collaborated on *Salaam Bombay!*, and the success of that project practically guaranteed that they would work together again. ‘We share a worldview,’ Nair has explained of her creative partnership with Taraporevala, who would go on to script such Nair films as *My Own Country* (1998) and *The Namesake*.

Already a rising Hollywood star who had recently won an Academy Award for his work in 1989’s *Glory*, Denzel Washington was cast as Demetrius, the romantic lead whom Nair modelled after a real carpet cleaner she had met while conducting preproduction research in Mississippi. Washington’s participation was a major coup for Nair, who had been abandoned by her original financial backers after Ben Kingsley dropped out of the role of Ugandan Indian exile Jay. (Other potential financial backers suggested to Nair that she cast Caucasians in lead roles.) Lauded British Indian actor Roshan Seth took on the part of Jay, while fellow British Indian Sarita Choudhury made her acting debut as Mina, Jay’s daughter and Demetrius’s love interest.

‘I was looking for an Indian woman who could understand the Indian ethos ... as well as having a free-spirited side to her,’ Nair told the Australian television program *The Movie Show*. ‘Because she’s a “masala”, after all, and has to represent the hybrid quality of going to prayers in the morning and the disco at night.’ Seventy-five young Indian women auditioned for the role before Nair chose Choudhury: ‘From the moment I saw her, I knew this was Mina,’ the director has said. Many other roles – the film’s end credits list over 60 speaking parts – were filled by local actors and non-actors.

Nair’s directorial career had begun in documentary filmmaking, and so she planned *Mississippi Masala* with an eye for the authentic. This necessitated unconventional production choices, such as shooting on location in Uganda, a

Charles S. Dutton (*Tyrone*)
 Joe Seneca (*Williben*)
 Ranjit Chowdhry (*Anil*)
 Mohan Gokhale (*Pontiac*)
 Mohan Agashe (*Kanti Napkin*)
 Tico Wells (*Dexter*)
 Yvette Hawkins (*Aunt Rose*)
 Anjan Srivastava (*Jammubhai*)
 Dipti Suthar (*Chanda*)
 Yarsha Thaker (*Kusumben*)
 Ashok Lath (*Harry Patel*)
 Natalie Oliver (*Alicia LeShay*)
 Karen Pinkston (*Mrs Morgan*)
 Willy Cobbs (*Skillet*)
 Mira Nair (*gossip 1*)
 Rajika Puri (*gossip 2*)
 Sharon Williams (*Tadice*)
 Cyreio Hughes (*dj*)
 Stacy Swinford (*Bubba*)
 Rick Senn (*Piggly Wiggly checker*)
 Haffey, Jim (*white truck driver*)
 Dillon Rozell Gross (*police officer*)
 Larry Haggard (*Joe*)
 E.W. Colvin (*Grandcraw*)
 Joyce Murrah (*lady at Lusco's*)
 Kevin McNeil (*Clarence*)
 Reverend Fred Matthews (*grandaddy*)
 Mahlon Bouldin (*student*)
 Buddy St. Amant (*Biloxi cop*)
 James Dale (*businessman*)
 Ben Burford (*bank manager*)
 Sam Sherrill (*Phinia T. Turnbull*)
 Alix Henry Sanders (*barber*)
 Jerone Wiggins (*James*)
 Sadie Carr (*Mildre*)
 Richard Crick (*white customer*)
 Alix W. Sanders (*postman*)
 Jaimini Thaker (*Kanti Bhai*)
 Hollis Pippin (*Sylvester Artiste III*)
 Dewey Buffington (*evangelist*)
 Tony McGhee (*rapper 1*)
 J.D. Barrett (*rapper 2*)
 Tre'demont Spearman (*rapper 3*)
 Argentina Moore (*rapper 4*)
 Nora Boland (*Shop-at-Home anchorperson 1*)
 Patsy Garrett (*Shop-at-Home anchorperson 2*)
 Konga Mbandu (*Okelo*)
 Sahira Nair (*young Mina*)
 Michael Wawuyo (*soldier on bus*)
 Phavin Parbario (*young Jay*)
 Emanuel Mudara (*young Okelo*)
 Immaculate Byakatonda (*Okelo's mother*)
 Amrit Panesar (*Mrs Bedi*)
 Jimmy Din (*Bharat*)
 Bonnie M. Lubega (*teacher*)
 Sammy E.D. Senkumba, Mayambala Ssekasi
 (*taxi drivers*)
 Joseph Olita (*Idi Amin*)
 USA-UK 1991
 118 mins
 Digital 4K (restoration)

country where no major film had been shot since *The African Queen* (1951). Sets and costumes replicated the look of 1970s Uganda, and Nair even enlisted Kenyan actor Joseph Olita to play Ugandan dictator Idi Amin for a few brief moments.

Most of the film's scenes that take place in the American South were shot in Greenwood, Mississippi. Wary of a production that might depict small-town southern culture in an unfavourable light, Greenwood residents questioned Nair as to whether she was making a film in the style of *Mississippi Burning*, the 1988 policier based on the mid-sixties murder of civil rights activists. Nair warded off scrutiny by offering reassurance that *Mississippi Masala* was a 'love story, trying to make it sound as insipid as possible.'

Released in the United States in early 1992, *Mississippi Masala* received nearly universal acclaim from audiences and critics alike, bridging the gap between the art houses that turned Nair's previous film into an indie success and the multiplexes that would soon turn Washington into a superstar. *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Nation*, *People*, *Rolling Stone*, and Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert all hailed *Mississippi Masala* as moving and insightful, and the film won the Golden Osella for Best Original Screenplay at the Venice International Film Festival as well as the Special Critics Award at the São Paulo International Film Festival.

'It was the first Black and brown interracial love story, and I haven't seen anything like that since,' said Nair when reflecting on the film and its legacy in 2021, adding that 'if we don't tell our own stories, no one will.'

Janus Films press notes

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