



Nair filming a documentary with Maisha alumni in Katwe. Inset: Nair



INSPIRE

Roll model

Filmmaker **MIRA NAIR**, the first woman to win the Golden Lion award, has always managed to put the spotlight on women. She tells AARTI VIRANI why women need to tell their own stories

Director Mira Nair is borderline breathless, trekking up a hill that leads to her garden-clad bungalow in Kampala—one of the many cities she lovingly calls home. “Nostalgia is useless,” she says, describing her peripatetic life that consists of shuttling between Uganda, India and the United States. “One has to fully embrace a place to be engaged.”

The illustrious Odisha-born filmmaker, who turns 57 this month, knows a thing or two about meaningful immersion. In 2004, she founded the Maisha Film Lab, a Uganda-based non-profit that trains up-and-coming filmmakers. Noteworthy graduates include Ritesh Batra of *The Lunchbox* and Academy-winner Lupita Nyong’o of *12 Years A Slave* fame.

Nair has just returned from filming in the slums of Katwe (alongside a clutch of Maisha alumni) where a chess coach, Robert Katende, taught slum children the game in exchange for porridge. “Our film is inspired by a Mandela quote: ‘Difficulties break some men,’” she says,

I PLEDGE...

“To invite two women from the subcontinent to be students at the Maisha Film Labs in Kampala, Zanzibar and Kigali, in 2015.” —**MIRA NAIR**

pausing for effect, “...but make others.” It’s the unofficial prequel to a much splashier Hollywood production: in December, she will start shooting *Queen Of Katwe*, a made-for-Disney feature that traces the real-life story of Katende’s star pupil, Phiona Mutesi, a corn-seller-turned-chess prodigy. “Chess is such an extraordinary metaphor for life,” says Nair. “Tactical, all while [requiring you to] maintaining a singular focus.”

Nair might as well be describing a strategy that’s steered her own juggernaut-like career. While her feature films have tackled everything from an interracial romance in the American deep South (*Mississippi Masala*) to the intricacies of an upper-middle class Punjabi family in New Delhi (*Monsoon Wedding*), she has always dismantled stereotypes and gravitated to those on society’s margins. She started with lesser-known documentaries, like *India Cabaret*, an unflinching gaze at female strippers in Bombay nightclubs, which she made to probe into Indian clichés surrounding “immoral” women nearly 30 years ago. “Old attitudes die hard and there are still compartments and boxes we’re put into as women,” she laments. “We have to create powerful counter-models.”

Indian cinema, even the commercial kind, offers no shortage of layered female portrayals, Nair insists. She singles out Nargis’s iconic *Mother India*, circa 1957—“sure, she was the sacrificing village mother but she was also the embodiment of strength and power”—and Vidya Balan as a pregnant software engineer in Sujoy Ghosh’s 2012 thriller, *Kahaani*. “It’s all about creating women who are familiar but complex,” continues Nair. “If we don’t tell our own stories, no one else ever will.” ■