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Mira Nair's **Amelia** takes flight





Amelia takes flight

Mira Nair's biopic on the legendary aviatrix is more than an adventure story, says **Arthur J Pais** – it is a tribute to the power of self-belief



Aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart is an American icon – but for filmmaker Mira Nair, who has directed the biopic of the legendary aviatrix and women's rights advocate, Earhart's appeal extends far beyond America.

Amelia, the biggest film in Nair's two-decade long career, opened October 23 and has already generated considerable Oscar buzz, thanks in part to the presence of two-time Oscar winner Hilary Swank in the title role.

It is axiomatic that a biopic works best when the chosen subject has an interesting narrative arc – and by this yardstick Earhart's life, beginning with her meteoric rise to worldwide fame in 1928 to the yet-unsolved mystery of her disappearance ten years later, is spot on.

Earhart, who became the first woman and only the second person to fly solo across the Atlantic in 1932, wrote the book *The Fun of It*, focusing on her adventure. Two years later, she became the first pilot to fly solo from Hawaii to California. In 1937, she and Fred Noonan took off from Miami on an around-the-world flight. After 22,000 miles of flying, they were last seen in Lae, New Guinea – from that point on, no one knows what happened to them, though the favorite speculation is that the plan was shot down by the Japanese, who enslaved her.

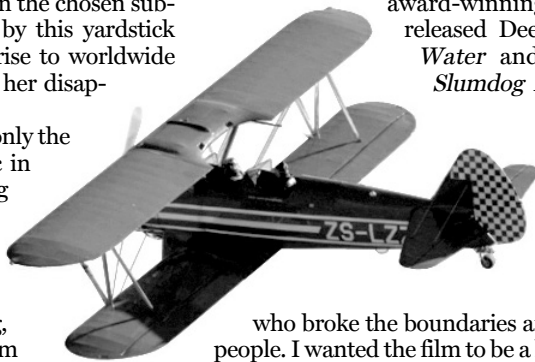
Nair refuses to speculate on the ending in the film. 'There is enough excitement and drama in the life she led,' the filmmaker laughs. The last 15 minutes of her biopic focuses on Earhart's final moments, but Nair says she has eschewed a 'neat' ending. 'You have to pay \$12.50 to know how the film ends,' says Nair on a laugh.

Earhart was known as much for her bold, uncompromising life as a woman ahead of her time as for her legendary flights. She took dangerous risks; she refused to see limits, and she became a symbol of the American spirit, Nair said. 'She is an inspiration to men and women across the world,' says the filmmaker, adding that it was her intent to make a rousing, adventure-filled biopic.

'Amelia declared there's more to life than being a passenger,'

Nair said. 'It is a call for every person to participate in life with passion and vigour. My film sums up these great qualities – but like I told my 18-year-old son, the film will not be like doing homework.'

Amelia is released by Fox Searchlight which also handled her last film, *The Namesake*, which earned a commendable \$14 million in North America. Searchlight is known for taking small (\$5 million) and medium range (\$25 million to \$35 million) quality movies and turning them into award-winning hits. In that vein, it had released Deepa Mehta's Oscar-nominated *Water* and, most famously last year, *Slumdog Millionaire* which went on to earn \$140 million in North America alone and rake in eight Oscars.



'*Amelia* is a love story and an action-adventure for the whole family,' Nair said in the production notes of the film, 'about a young woman

who broke the boundaries and gave a lot to many different people. I wanted the film to be a living, pulsating portrait of this woman who dared to dream of things that no one had ever done before. Amelia lived life as fully as possible and didn't put a lid on her emotions or her ambitions. She left behind a legend that I hope will continue to fuel a passion in people to accept no limits.'

The project came to Nair just when *Shantaram*, which she was to direct for producer and actor Johnny Depp, got shelved following the three-month Hollywood writer's strike and Depp moving on to other projects. 'I read the preliminary screenplay [for *Amelia*] and I was hooked,' Nair said. Tedd Watt, Avalon Pictures CEO and pioneering co-founder of the technology company Gateway Inc, initiated the movie project over two years ago.

'Everyone today knows about Amelia's disappearance, but very few people understand her life,' Watt wrote in the produc-

Amelia's high risk flight

Like any other film, *Amelia* comes with its in-built risks: Will audiences be primed for a period piece set in the 1920s and 1930s? Will the movie provide enough excitement to ensure a good draw in the opening weekend and good legs to run for a few weeks thereafter? How will critics react to the film [Screen International has already called it a staid film, too much in love with its heroine], and given how crucial the overseas box office is to success, will enough people abroad be interested in a biopic about an essentially American icon?

The inescapable bottom line is that *Amelia* has to gross at least \$120 million worldwide in theaters and ancillary income, including DVD sales, before it even recovers its production and advertising costs.

In Hollywood, where just about two dozen women directors have found distributors for their films, Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta (based in Toronto) and Gurinder Chadha (London and San Francisco) stand out. Radha Bharadwaj, who made the 1991 political thriller *Closet Land* for Universal, saw it flop badly and later blamed the studio for treating it like a mainstream film instead of letting it find its audiences slowly. She then made a television film, *Basil*, in 1998 which was taken out of her hands at the editing stage, and hasn't made a film since then.

In the list that follows, of filmmakers of Indian origin and their highest grossing films in North America, it is important to remember that the dollar value differs from time to time, and some of the collection figures will be bigger if the values are updated.

Also, it is crucial to note that a film has to earn two-and-a-half times its budget and marketing cost (which often equals the production cost) before it recovers its investment, and ancillary income from television licensing and DVD sales play a key role in this recovery. Thus, the highest grossing film is not necessarily a profitable film, if its costs are high.

The cost of a film is a key factor in calculating profits. M Night Shyamalan's third film *The Sixth Sense* cost \$55 million and earned a mammoth \$700 million worldwide. The Gurinder Chadha hit *Bend It Like Beckham* came in for about \$5 million and grossed about \$75 million worldwide, making it a big hit.

For Mira Nair, the 2004 *Vanity Fair* ranks as her highest grosser – but it cost \$25 million, and was not successful in foreign territories. In contrast, *The Namesake*, made on a much smaller budget, was a success in America, Canada and India and thus became profitable.

The top earners directed by filmmakers of Indian origin:

- M Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*, 1999: \$55 million cost; gross \$293 million in North America.
- Jay Chandrashekar's *Dukes of Hazzard*, 2005: Cost \$30 million; North American box office: \$80 million.
- Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham*, 2002: Cost \$5 million; North American take: \$32 million.
- Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth*, 1998: Cost \$25 million; North American take: \$30 million.
- Deepa Mehta's *Water*, 2005: Cost \$3 million; North American box office: \$4.5 million.
- Ismail Merchant's *The Mystic Masseur*, 2001: Cost \$2.5 million; North American take: \$400,000.

– Arthur J Pais



PARESH GANDHI

'Amelia gave me the key to the skies'

In the space of a week, director Mira Nair has had to do over two dozen press and television interviews besides taking part in a *New York Times*-organized Times Talks engagement alongside actor Hilary Swank. In the midst of that schedule, Nair took time off to discuss with *India Abroad* her biopic on Amelia Earhart.

How does a girl born in Bhubaneswar and one born in Kansas connect?

I was born in a small town in India, and Amelia Earhart was born in a small town in Kansas. I feel a great deal of affinity for her dreams. She wanted to experience the big world around her, and those were my dreams too, from my childhood.

When Bhubaneswar got its first airport, perhaps no one was more excited than I was. When the first plane — a Fokker, it was — arrived, I ran through the grass and temple compounds to see it land. I knew then that one day I would be on that plane. A few years later, I think I was 12, a young boy was in love with me. I told him, I can't be in love with you and I can't marry you because I want to see the world. He is still a very good friend (*laughs*) — of course, we are much older now and we have our own families.

In *Amelia*, there is a scene in which her father gives her a globe, and she begins learning and remembering the names of the countries. She always wanted to dis-

Joy of flying

Mira Nair's *Amelia* is the story of how dreams can take wings and soar, discovers **Arthur J Pais**

Two years ago, Mira Nair was wondering what she could do next following the shelving of *Shantaram*, a project featuring Johnny Depp.

That was when she got the offer to direct *Amelia* — a project that excited her for many reasons. For one thing, it would feature two-time Oscar winner Hilary Swank in the title role. For another, the movie would revolve around the life and times of one of America's enduring icons — a story, Nair felt, that would enthrall audiences around the world.

Though *Amelia* reportedly cost about half the \$80 million to \$100 million budget earmarked for *Shantaram*, it is still the biggest film, Nair has directed in a career spanning eight feature films. *Vanity Fair*, her other major Hollywood film with Reese Witherspoon in the lead, cost about \$23 million.

The biopic centers around the life of Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, who went on to set a whole slate of other records before mysteriously disappearing during a round the world flight in 1938.

Reading the script by the Oscar-winning Ron Bass (*Rain Man*) and Oscar nominee Anna Hamilton Phelan (*Gorillas in the Mist*), Nair discovered a protagonist who

led a bold and uncompromising life, a woman who was married to one of the famous men in America (played by Richard Gere) but who found love with another man (Ewan McGregor). Even more than her professional triumphs as a pilot, Nair found Earhart a strong advocate of women's rights.

Tedd Watt, aviator, movie producer and the pioneering co-founder of technology company Gateway, Inc., was the one who took the project to Nair. A self-avowed Earhart fan, Watt writes in the film's production notes: 'Ever since I was a little kid, I was fascinated with Amelia's disappearance. As I began reading about her, I became even more fascinated with her life than her disappearance. Everyone today knows about Amelia's disappearance, but very few people understand her life. I thought her tale could be an inspiration, as well as very entertaining.'

Like Watt, Nair is more interested in Earhart's accomplishments in life than in the controversies surrounding her disappearance. Bass and Phelan had to compress ten years of Earhart's life into a nearly two-hour long film and in the process, highlight the many facets of the central

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cover new lands and had a very adventurous mind. Her spirit needs to reach out to millions of people, especially Americans, who ought to look out to the world in bigger numbers.

You've promised your son that seeing *Amelia* will not be like doing homework.

I was conscious right from the start of this project that it should have the excitement of an adventure story, which it is, and the feel of an epic. I wanted my audience to be in the cockpit with Amelia. Whenever he would see the rough cut of the film, he would tell me, 'Mama, it is an action film.' I believe we have made a love story and action-adventure for the whole family, about a young woman from rural America who broke boundaries and gave a lot to many people. I knew this film wouldn't work unless it is a living and pulsating portrait of a woman who dared to dream of things that no one has ever done before.

What was it like working with Hilary Swank?

She has an extraordinary talent to master all the outward stuff, and then do something more. She takes the viewers into the heart and soul of Amelia and brings out in an extraordinary way Amelia's humility, self-effacing goofiness, determination and sudden bouts of girl-ishness.

You have called her a spiritual actor...

She acts from within, and she studied Amelia's personality with great enthusiasm. She even took a long time, about a month, to get Amelia's distinct speech pattern. I also discovered that she has quite a bit of Amelia in her — Hilary is an intuitive daredevil. She loves the roller-coaster life. She would happily jump out of in a parachute and come down just like Amelia, with legs swinging wildly.

You have called *Amelia* a yogini in the sky.

A yogi balances the two worlds — the physical and spiritual. I have been doing yoga for many years and it has taught me, among many things, to strive for a balanced life. I saw in *Amelia* a person who is ecstatic in the sky but also concerned about her life on earth. We have our own passions and our own responsibilities. How many of us try to balance the two? She loved nature and believed in its power. It is moving and sad that in the end, the oceans or the skies that swallowed her. And that's why I believe that no matter how you look at it, her story is a fascinating tale of mystery and tragedy.

Apart from *Amelia's* personal passion and her support for women's causes, what else appealed to you most about her?

I have read a lot of books and magazine

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Their mothers' daughters

Arthur J Pais on the influence their mothers had on director Mira Nair and actor Hilary Swank

Hilary Swank, one of Hollywood's most respected actors and the winner of two Oscars, glows when she talks about working with Mira Nair, who has directed many well-known Hollywood actors including Uma Thurman (in the award-winning television film *Hysterical Blindness*).

She has, Swank says, another heroine aside from Amelia Earhart, the legendary aviatrix whose character she plays in the upcoming biopic, to keep her grounded throughout the making of the film — her director Mira Nair. 'I think Mira is a kindred spirit of Amelia,' Swank says. 'She's a force of nature, a very strong woman who doesn't apologize for being strong.'

Swank, who has worked with eminent directors like Clint Eastwood (in *Million Dollar Baby*, which fetched her an Oscar), says 'It's wonderful to see a woman command respect the way she does, and have such a clear vision. It's a breath of fresh air.'

Swank, who like Mira loves educating the young, says: 'Amelia was such a trailblazer, and I think we have her to thank for girls today feeling like it's OK to follow a dream. She had a quality that I admire: the drive to follow her heart no matter what, even in a man's world. What I think the movie shows is that she lived life on her own terms, she believed in having fun and doing what you love, and also in helping other people, and she accomplished a lot because of all of that.'

Swank is drawn, like Nair, to projects in which women have strong roles. Soon she will appear in *Betty Anne Waters*, based on a true story about a working mother who goes through law school to free her wrongfully convicted brother who is serving a life sentence.

Nair, who runs a film school called Maisha in Uganda — the home of her husband, Columbia University Professor and well-regarded writer Mahmood Mamdani — discovered that Swank was also into India. She, of course, was aware that Richard Gere, who plays Amelia's husband, has

been a frequent traveller to India, where he visits the Dalai Lama and champions the Tibetan cause. Swank, Nair came to know, had also spent a couple of weeks in India, and among other things loves Indian food — thus, during the Toronto leg of the *Amelia* shoot, Nair took to sneaking into the actor's trailer to enjoy delicious Indian food.

At the Times Talks event organized by *The New York Times*, Nair also spoke of the homes she, along with her mother, started in order to rehabilitate children — first in Mumbai and then in other cities. Nair set up the *Salaam Balak* trust in 1988, soon after her first feature film *Salaam Bombay!* became an international hit. The trust offers a number of services to street children including shelters and vocational training; Nair said at least 5,000 children benefit from the programs it offers.

Swank, for her part, talked of her visit to India in 2006. She said she had searched online and discovered United Planet, an international non-profit organization that placed her as a volunteer in Palampur, a few hours drive from Delhi. Swank worked as teaching assistant and caregiver at an orphanage. While teaching English to children in the age group 4-13, the agency says, Swank 'created a playful environment to enhance the children's imaginations. She drew on boards with ink, showing the children how the alphabet is written so that they could then write it on their own. At the orphanage, she gave personal attention and care to children who rarely receive it.'

Swank and Nair paid tribute to their mothers at the *Times Talks* event. The actor spoke of how her mother, who had very limited resources, drove hundreds of miles to take Hilary to Hollywood so she could fulfil her dreams; her car often served as home to both mother and daughter. Nair in her turn recalled how her mother, the wife of a civil servant, spurned invitations to play cards with fashionable women and trade gossip, and instead worked to help the healthy children of leprosy patients. ■

Brevity the soul of film-making

It is a hat-trick year for Mira Nair. While *Amelia*, the biggest film of her two-decade long career, opens in 2,000 theaters in the United States and Canada, the director also has in theaters and festivals two shorts that are part of omnibus packages *New York, I Love You* and *8*.

The New Delhi and Harvard-educated Nair, who turned 52 recently, makes short films in between her features, and most of them are part of special two-disc DVD and Blu-ray editions released by Criterion, which also includes her best-known work *Monsoon Wedding*, which won the Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival in 2001.

Included in the Criterion package are *The Laughing Club of India* and *So Far From India*, shorts made in 1982. In the latter, Nair and photographer Mike Epstein (the two were married for a few years) follow an Indian immigrant from his home in New York to his old village in India.

Also forming part of the package is *India Cabaret*, a poignant study of strippers in Mumbai. 'I wanted to make it from the women's point of view,' Nair says in her production notes. 'I lived with a group of strippers and dancers for two or three months before I brought in the camera and sound, and then I followed them everywhere.'

She found in the process that life could be stranger, more powerful and more surprising than fiction. A dancer named Rosie, for instance, travels hundreds of miles across the country to give her mother money to pay the expenses of her sister's wedding — but the mother does not let her enter the village because she had sold her dignity as a stripper.

Criterion also includes short fiction films like *The Day the Mercedes Became a Hat*, the story of a white family leaving South Africa as apartheid comes to an end. And then there is the Nair-helmed segment from the 2002 film *11'09'101 - September 11*.

Nair's segment is inspired by the true story of a young Muslim who goes missing on 9/11 and is suspected of being a terrorist. It is only later that we learn he died trying to save lives at the Twin Towers.

'I really enjoy the challenge of telling a complicated story in very little time,' she says in the production notes for the new DVD and Blu-ray collection. 'It has a freewheeling aspect and yet a rigor to it. I love that. And many people I know do that for commercials and stuff, but I love to do that for a narrative. I'd rather make short films that mean something and that can be used forever than, say, a perfume commercial—which I've also done. So *The Day the Mercedes Became a Hat* [1993], for example, came out of wanting to tell something very complex but in a short period of time. I am attracted to that.'

Short films also provide 'a lovely excuse to work with actors I admire,' she says, 'as it's not a big deal to get them.' Most of her short films are shot in two or three days.

In *How Can It Be?* [2008], she cast Konkona Sen Sharma as a conflicted young Muslim wife in New York who decides to take her destiny in her own hands. In *Kosher Vegetarian*, she paired Irrfan Khan and Natalie Portman in a story set in New York's diamond district.

'Natalie Portman and I are friends,' she notes, 'and we always wanted to work together. In casting short films, especially, you need to speak in shorthand. It's like Marilyn Monroe was shorthand for sex — you have to cast everyone in that shorthand. So Natalie was perfect for *Kosher Vegetarian*, because she had to be a jewel — a bald jewel from a Jewish Orthodox community. And she is a jewel.'

Kosher Vegetarian is part of the *New York, I Love You* omnibus. In reviewing it, *The New York Times* had only singled out Nair and another director for special mention. When she makes a short film to be included in an omnibus like *8*, Nair says she feels honored that she is in the company of world-class filmmakers like Jane Campion and Wim Wenders.

Nair is often asked why she made the initial switch from short films and documentaries to full length features. 'Because I wanted an audience,' is her standard answer — and now, with the Criterion release, she has one even for her taut, gripping shorts. ■

— Arthur J Pais



Richard Gere, center, who plays publisher George Putnam, Amelia Earhart (Hilary Swank, left)'s husband