MIRA NAIR & JHUMPA LAHIRI: A DIALOGUE

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Celeste Bartos Forum

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening, my name is Paul Holdengraber, and I'm the director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, known as LIVE from the New York Public Library. My goal, as all of you know, is to make the lions roar, to oxygenate the Library, and to try to make this wonderful building levitate. What is LIVE? It's simply cognitive theater, and hopefully tonight you'll be able to witness this.

Fusion of cultures is really what Mira Nair and Jhumpa Lahiri's work is about. One of the more amusing moments I have experienced recently is when someone told me, "Oh you're having Jhumpa Lahiri at the Library speak with Mira Nair—she's the wonderful writer who wrote The Na-may-sak-ee." **(laughter)** It's a form of fusion of cultures, I'm sure. And fusion of cultures is really what happened in the last few weeks, where we had Werner Herzog talk here two weeks ago, Andre Aciman, the great writer of *Out of Egypt, Letters of Transit, False Papers*, and William T. Vollmann interrogating people around the world, asking them one simple question, which is "Why are you poor?" Tonight we have Mira Nair and Jhumpa Lahiri, as you know, and on March 26, I will have the pleasure of interviewing Clive James, the author of a remarkable collection which he put together over forty years, called *Cultural Amnesia*, where he talks about the period in Mittleuropa, Middle Europe, in a place where my parents and grandparents come from,

where intellectuals met around the terrace somewhere, on Stefan Zweig's terrace, in Salzburg, a terrace where intellectuals from all walks of life—writers, painters, poets—met, and which as you know, came to an end when Hitler destroyed it. And in a way, this gathering tonight is a testimony that this can never be really destroyed, a form of cosmopolitanism, a place with no boundaries, a place where people continue to talk despite the barbarity that one might find on the outside.

Join our email list if you would, if you would like to know about the events we have coming up. If you do join tonight, you will in fact be the recipient of one ticket to any of the upcoming events: Clive James, as I mentioned; Leslie Bennetts, who will be speaking and debating her new book called *The Feminine Mistake*; Jan Morris, probably the greatest travel writer, 81 years old, who will be coming here on the 13th of April; a tribute to Kapuscinski on April 29 that I'm putting together with PEN, will include Philip Gourevitch, Caroline Emcke, and many others; a celebration of Magnum photography; an evening with Rebecca Mead, who will be talking about one of the most important industries today—you've all guessed it, right?—the wedding industry; and then, Gunter Grass on June 27 will end our season here.

There will be a Q & A period after this conversation, I insist more on the Q than I possibly could—questions usually can be asked in about fifty-four seconds, so, questions rather than statements. I encourage you all to support the New York Public Library and the LIVE programs. We of course need your support and I know you can feel the urgency tonight to support us. I would like to also thank Mahnaz Ispahani Bartos and Adam Bartos, trustees of the Library who inspired me with this idea tonight, and James Finn from Fox Searchlight Pictures for facilitating.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London to Bengali partners, is the author of *The Interpreter of Maladies*, which won her a Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. She's also the author—and listen carefully—of *The Namesake*. Mira Nair was born in India, I remember when about a hundred years ago, as a very young professor at Williams College, she came to present in a very moving way, her movie, *Salaam Bombay*. Since then, and to great critical

acclaim, her films include *Mississippi Masala, Monsoon Wedding*, and *The Namesake*, which was released yesterday. Tomorrow, in the *New York Times*, you will be reading the wonderful review that Karen James wrote. You will learn that Mira Nair is working on her next film, starring Johnny Depp, entitled *Shantaram*.

What struck me are these words by Mira Nair, which circles back to the notion of cosmopolitanism, Mittleuropa and Vienna, to Clive James to *Cultural Amnesia*, to Andre Aciman to Jhumpa Lahiri's ruminations on this location, exile, and finally coming home. "The theme I'm most interested in," writes Mira Nair, "can a foreigner be a native? I'm interested in the seesaw of it, because I'm not sure in the deepest way that's at all possible. Ultimately, you have to understand where you come from, otherwise you're lost. The review ends with the quality I most admire, and to invent a word, nimbleness. American identity itself is changing, families are so fluid today. Fluidity," Mira Nair states, "is my anchor."

Ladies and gentleman, Mira Nair and Jhumpa Lahiri.

(applause)

MIRA NAIR: Thank you so much, Paul. My name is Mira Nair, rhymes with fire, but I should have told you that. I'm especially moved, really, to be here tonight, because this is the extraordinary Celeste Bartos room, I love this room, and I love Celeste Bartos, who helped me make my earliest movies, my documentaries, and *Salaam Bombay*, so it's a great, special tribute, I want to just thank Celeste for her support of experimental cinema, for her support of artists in general. But tonight, I'm so pleased that we are here tonight to talk about Na-may-sak-ee. **(laughter)** We used to call it Na-may-sak-ee while shooting the film, somehow Kal's friend read the whole book and said, I love Na-may-sak-ee, and that was that. But I'm especially happy because Jhumpa is here and we can have, I hope, a creative dialogue. We're going to go back and talk about what each other said to each other about making this film, book into a film, and then read some things from the book and show you some clips that emerged from those sections, as well as the departures from

the book, basically the process of adapting this amazing, exquisite book to the screen. And then show you a few clips, talk about them, and then open for what both of us would love to do, which is to have a dialogue with you.

To begin at the beginning, I bought this book because I loved, of course, like millions of others, Jhumpa's first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*. I bought it in a Sunday afternoon with my family up in my neighborhood but never opened it for about five or six months because I was shooting *Vanity Fair* and cutting it and completely absorbed in something else. Then, quite out of the blue, we live in three generations here in Manhattan—my in-laws, my husband and I, and my son, our son—and out of the blue my mother-in-law went in for an operation at a hospital here, and we had planned for her recovery, and that, it was botched up. And she died, practically in my arms and very unexpectedly, and it was something that was so shocking, and we had to bury her here in a snowing place, in New Jersey, and she had raised her whole life in East Africa, and I was absolutely devastated and not prepared. My first time, loss of a very close person. And I read this book in a plane—six weeks in that mourning—on a plane to India to shoot the finale of *Vanity Fair*, and I was so shocked that there was someone out there as acutely perceptive of the world and its feeling as Jhumpa, to write about what it felt like to lose a parent in a foreign country, which was exactly what I was feeling. So it was just like complete solace to me, that I read and reread this book, and when the plane landed, literally, I called my friend, Bart Walker, my agent, and said, please buy the rights, never thinking they would be available. But they were, and a week later, I was back in my office in Union Square, sitting with Jhumpa, explaining to her what I would like to do with the book.

I said to her that I wanted to make this happen to be a tale of not just the loss of a parent, but also about two cities that I had grown up in, in Calcutta for twelve years, and then in Manhattan, for more than twenty. And I saw it as a portrait of these cities, I saw it as—especially, I saw it as resting on two pillars. One, the adult love story between two strangers, Ashoke and Ashima, who marry and then come to this distant country to then find themselves and then fall in love. I loved that idea, it's an enchanting, sort of erotic idea to me, and I wanted to make that into a film, very much inspired also by great

Bengali filmmakers, Ritwik Ghatak and especially Satyajit Ray, who does this to such beauty, with such economy and sweetness, in the Apu trilogy. And then I said, then we would have Gogol as counterpoint to the parents, because what I wanted to do was to make a love song, was to kind of make a connection, a film about parents and children. I also told her, you know, how these actors would look, and how—because I love those early Bengali movies—how I would make each, who I was thinking of. And I sort of spelled out this idea to Jhumpa, and I wanted to actually ask you tonight, what you were thinking when I was blabbing on like that, selling myself. **(laughter)**

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Well, I remember that meeting very well, it was in the spring, and I remember because I was just pregnant with my daughter, my second child, at the time. And you know, so I just, I remember that time very vividly, and you know, as we were talking, I—well, first of all, I was so thrilled that Mira had read the book. I had met her, we had met once or twice before, in a kind of casual way. And, but beyond that, I had known her work for a very long time. I remember, I went to school in New York, at Barnard, and I remember going to see *Salaam Bombay*, getting on the train with my mother and my sister, bizarrely, were visiting, all huge, now we're like one big family, so. But I remember, they came to visit me one weekend, and we went downtown and saw the film. And, so I had been, in awe of her, really, for a very long time, of her work, and of her vision, and what she represented to me, as someone who was struggling to sort of understand both who I was and what I might potentially write about one day. And you know, I, by the time Mira and I met to have this meeting it was 2004, right? Spring of 2004, because my daughter was born in November. And I had begun *The Namesake* in—I had begun writing it, and this is really just, actually the day I first took pen to paper, in 1996. And the book took seven long, often interrupted, frustrated years to eventually be completed, and before I even took pen to paper, there was inspiration that was accumulating for me, for the story, long before that. So, you know, by the time we met, not only had the book been out for a good six or eight months, but it really felt...

MIRA NAIR: Distant.

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Distant. I just felt so beyond it in many ways, and partly it was because that's generally how I feel when I come to the end of something, it's just you know, complete formal separation from it, and I think that's important and necessary for me, and I imagine for many artists to just be able to move on and do the next thing. But also, I think because I was, you know, a new mother, and I already had a small son and I was expecting another, so there was a lot going on in my life personally at that time. And so it was just—it felt like the right time. There was a sort of open space. And so we spoke and what really impressed me most of all was this sense of urgency that Mira expressed for—the need she expressed to make the book. And I found it very moving that you know, that she had just come to it in this period of mourning and I—it was interesting for me because when I wrote the book, I mean, my parents are still alive so it's not an autobiographical book for me that way. It was something that I, you know, speculated about, wondered about, thought about, and I put those feelings into the book as I was writing it, but here was someone who had actually experienced—

MIRA NAIR: You had never experienced it, anything like this loss that you described.

JHUMPA LAHIRI: No, I mean, no, I'm very fortunate to have my mother and father alive still, I've never really lost anybody. And especially when I wrote the book, I mean, I've since lost my mother- and father-in-law, to whom I felt very close, but when I was writing the book, I didn't have any of, I had no sense of what it was like to lose a parent or a parent figure in my life. And really, what I was bringing to it was, on the one hand, just watching my parents losing people in another country, and what that was like, but more importantly I think, you know, and what you were responding to, it was—I was just coming to the age where people on this side were going. Not, you know, not my parents but their friends, you know, suddenly someone would go, someone would have a heart attack, someone would have cancer, I mean, people began dying and I started to observe how this was being handled by their friends and how, and...so that's what I put, that's the only experience I was bringing to it, was just sort of very distant and more curious than anything else of how might it be for me, or you know, when that day comes.

So I found it very moving that the book had touched Mira in that way, and I also felt that she represents something between the two generations that I write about in the book—that is, the generation of Gogol and his sister, which is more immediately connected to my own experiences, as someone who was, might as well have been born in this country, I was born in London but I came here when I was two, so basically I was not born but entirely raised in the United States. And then the generation of the parents, who are modeled not so much specifically on my parents but I was sort of conjuring the large, kind of collective family, sort of, that I...not the blood family, but the family of—

MIRA NAIR: The extended family.

JHUMPA LAHIRI: The extended family that my parents created here, of necessity, when they arrived. And I was really sort of thinking about all of those people in trying to draw the parents' characters. But Mira was in between, I mean, she was born in India, knew India, raised in India to a certain degree, and then came here also at a mature age, but at a young age as well, and was able to, you know, discover a whole new part of her and her life here in the West. And so I thought that she would have a very valuable ability to connect to those two generations in a way that even I, you know, I'm limited by who I am, as we all are, by our experiences. So I was very excited at the prospect of someone, you know—of you!—making this book into a movie.

MIRA NAIR: And it actually wasn't just me, it was also my dear friend and screenwriter Sooni, and she and I actually had traveled, uncannily, the same exact road, almost, I had done the exact road of the Gangulis, leaving Calcutta as I did, coming to Cambridge, Massachusetts and then New York City. Sooni had essentially the same thing from Bombay, and when I arrived on a scholarship at Harvard, eighteen and a half, nineteen, I asked if there were any other Indians, as all Indians ask **(laughter)**, and they said there were three. And one of them was a young woman from Bombay, and I remember crossing Radcliffe Yard to find Sooni, and we've close friends ever since. And so, when I told her that I want to make *The Namesake* she'd already read it and she said to me, "You know, we are just born to make this film."

But earlier on, I wanted to remind you that when I came to you, I said that we would not really—we would make it this balance between parents and children, and we would, in order to achieve that balance, remove, not deal with Gogol's high school and not deal with his Yale years. And that we would leap from adolescence to him being a dashing young man in New York City, et cetera, and therefore that would help me preserve the balance between Ashoke and Ashima, and I really wanted to make a love song to that generation, you know, because it is so rare to—I've not seen it yet on screen, this kind of idea of people who don't publicly, you know, our parents of that generation that they came from, especially Bengalis, but other cultures, less raucous than the Punjabis that I am from. But it isn't about this publicly proclamation of love, it isn't about Valentine's Day, it isn't about roses and diamonds, but it's about how you—how I would see my mother- and father-in-law just sitting having a cup of tea, and absolutely having only, not quite only eyes for each other, but just living in that moment with each other fully and completely. And I really wanted to try and achieve that, in contrast to what Gogol, who has all the journeys he makes with his lovers before he finds his way. I just thought maybe it would be nice for us to read, before we get into the departures from the novel, to read, if you would read something about the early part of the novel, of when Ashima, just before Ashima is to meet Ashoke, she's an obedient woman who's prepared herself to meet this bridegroom-to-be, and just before she enters the living room with the sets of parents, she does a extraordinary thing that absolutely captivated me.

JHUMPA LAHIRI: "It had been after tutoring one day that Ashima's mother had met her at the door, told her to go straight the bedroom and prepare herself; a man was waiting to see her. He was the third in as many months. The first had been a widower with four children. The second, a newspaper cartoonist who knew her father, had been hit by a bus in Esplanade and lost his left arm. To her great relief they had both rejected her. She was nineteen, in the middle of her studies, in no rush to be a bride. And so, obediently but without expectation, she had untangled and rebraided her hair, wiped away the kohl that had smudged below her eyes, patted some Cuticura powder from a velvet puff onto her skin. The sheer parrot green sari she pleated and tucked into her petticoat

had been laid out for her on the bed by her mother. Before entering the sitting room, Ashima had paused in the corridor. She could hear her mother saying, ‘She is fond of cooking, and she can knit extremely well. Within a week she finished this cardigan I am wearing.’

“Ashima smiled, amused by her mother’s salesmanship; it had taken her the better part of a year to finish the cardigan, and still her mother had had to do the sleeves. Glancing at the floor where visitors customarily removed their slippers, she noticed, beside two sets of chappals, a pair of men’s shoes that were not like any she’d ever seen on the streets and trams and buses of Calcutta, or even in the windows of Bata. They were brown shoes with black heels and off-white laces and stitching. There was a band of lentil-sized holes embossed on either side of each shoe, and at the tips was a pretty pattern pricked into the leather as if with a needle. Looking more closely, she saw the shoemaker’s name written on the insides, in gold lettering that had all but faded: something and sons, it said. She saw the size, eight and a half, and the initials U.S.A. And as her mother continued to sing her praises, Ashima, unable to resist a sudden and overwhelming urge, stepped into the shoes at her feet. Lingering sweat from the owner’s feet with hers, causing her heart to race; it was the closest she had ever experienced to the touch of a man. The leather was creased, heavy, and still warm. On the left shoe she noticed that one of the crisscrossing laces had missed a hole, and this oversight set her at ease.”

MIRA NAIR: Should we see the clip?

(film clip not transcribed)

(laughter/applause)

(film clip not transcribed)

MIRA NAIR: Let's stop here. We mean to introduce that second clip before you saw it, but it's a scene in the early part of the film when Ashoke gives the book of Gogol to his

adolescent son, in our film, on graduation day, but in your book, on his fourteenth birthday. But, do you want to say anything about it?

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Well, I thought we could eventually, now or at some point, talk a little bit about these, you know, sort of the way that the film takes the book and carves it up for its own purposes and to make the best film. And I think, you know, a question that I've been asked a lot recently is, you know, well how faithful is this to your book? And as if that is my main, you know, what concerns me the most. And I—it's an interesting question to be asked repeatedly, because that was never my hope, or my hope for what the film would eventually be. I think that, you know, to go back to that first meeting, what I sense was this extreme creative urgency, and I think that that's such a precious thing, whenever anybody has it, that degree of inspiration and that need to make something, a painting or a film or a book or whatever it is, that, you know, to the point of just moving forward. And I knew that Mira had this, and that whatever she was going to do would be a passionate, loving work. And that was really what was the most important thing to me in letting the book go, was that it should go into the arms of someone who not only understood the book and, you know, of course, it helped that she understood sort of the landscape of the book in all of those ways, but that she needed to make it, so, and that she would do it with that degree of care and excitement.

MIRA NAIR: Well, for me, for me, you know, Calcutta, because I love this city, and it's a formative city for my growing up. I used to—I grew up in Bhubaneswar which is three hundred miles south of Calcutta, and every summer for eight—twelve summers, we were shipped to my Mamajee, my mother's younger brother, and I learned to play cricket in Calcutta, I learned to go to poetry readings, and more than anything I learned, I met **Ravi Shankar,** who was a great radical Bengali playwright, and with him, made political sort of street theater. So I really had an interesting relationship to this city. Also as a young kid who was not at all Bengali, I lived in Alipur with the whiskey-drinking Punjabis, **(laughter)** but in the morning I would take the bus and go into this intellectual life for about ten hours every day and then return to the cocktail parties at night. So it was a very interesting—there's a long and old joke in India that Punjabis are the Philistines of India,

the peasants, the agricultural people, and the Bengalis of course have won all the Nobel Prizes and they are the most erudite. So never should a Punjabi understand a Bengali, but here I am. **(laughter)**

So, you know, I was very interested to make Calcutta a character in our film, you know. And then, not just Calcutta, but also these two great cities of New York City and Calcutta, which I knew so intimately that that was for me early on, the motif of how to deal with the transitions across thirty years of a story. So once I understood that I would film these two cities like almost they were one, because I thought there was a great synergy in the spirit of these cities, of the bridges, of the you know, the traffic of one and the trams of another, the culture as oxygen in both cities. There were so many things in spirit. So that was a big key for me as to how I would afford to lose Gogol's high school, afford to lose his Yale years, how do I propel the story, and yet have filmicly, have a character through those transitions.

The other thing in terms of changing it or—was to take the emotion that you had written and in some cases go further, you know, like, we should move on to this—the scene in which, perhaps you can read a paragraph of what we all read, about when Gogol's father dies. He, in the book, he remembers his father shaving his head out of respect for his father's death, that is a Bengali tradition, but in the book he did not shave his own head. And in—for us, for Sooni and I, we really wanted to have a dramatic way—we need to in movies, they are so immediate and so present we need to have a dramatic way to really signal the impact of such loss on Gogol in a physical way, in a totally physical way. And that kind of fire that confuses him, that regret that he feels, fueling the last chapter of our film.

Do you want to read that, that piece of—

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Sure, yeah, and I mean, before I do I'll just mention also that I thought it was a really great decision to do, to have Gogol actually shave his head rather than sort of remember and regret not doing it. Because I think, as with many other subtle,

not so subtle, changes and shifts that I, that the movie offers, what I appreciate so much is that I just view this film, this lovely, beautifully, carefully made film as an alternate take of the story that I wrote. And I think as a writer, I really appreciate that, because, you know, I mean, I'm just finishing up a book now, and the versions one goes through for every single, you know, every single story I've written in this new book—you know, there's, oh well, there's this, they can—the story can end with the character looking out the window, or maybe she's sitting at the table, or maybe she's doing this or maybe—and it's just this infinite process that the creator goes through and finally you decide, okay, this is it, and this is how the story's going to be. But you know that there're all of those other possible versions of something, and I think that it's so interesting to me as a writer to see an alternate version of my story, where certain things are manipulated in certain ways to tell the story in a slightly different way.

And so the movie has—you know, it was very illuminating for me, it continues to be illuminating for me as I watch it, because I realize the potential, the sort of, you know, the infinite potential in any given story. Because once we read something or see something, we think, oh, this is set in stone and it had to have been this way. But when you're inside of the creative process you realize that's not the case at all. And I know that as a writer, but I think having seen—I mean, I've never, obviously I've never had something I've written recreated this way. So this is the first time that I'm understanding, not only that, oh, well, these are the thirty-five other drafts of something sitting in the corner of my study, but that here's another take and it's actually been made into its own thing. So it's very interesting and informative and—

MIRA NAIR: And for me, music is actually a big part of it, you know.

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Yeah, yeah.

MIRA NAIR: It's a big part of it, I love music, I love to use music, you know, cinematically. And one of the departures, small departure I made from the book was to make Ashima a classical singer, an amateur classical singer, because I wanted to use that

music and I wanted to speak a sort of shorthand in the—again, eclipsing thirty years into two hours, when she loses everything, she at least, she finds her voice to continue and not live a defeatist life. So music also for this shaving of the head scene was an opportunity, some things that we witness so much as people who live between worlds, or people who live here, that you go into a barbershop to get your hair trendified, you know, and the—in this case, he's getting his head shaved but obviously the barber has no idea that is for respect for his father's death. So there is that kind of rap, there's a kind of hip-hop sound in the barbershop, and of course in the movie version, I commissioned that song, gave them the lyrics, "It's your father's on, I'm the chosen one," and it was a way to use a montage which we'll see, of what you had described so eloquently of his memory, you know, as a child. So music is a big clue for me in terms of moving forward in the story.

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Well, I'll read this paragraph in which—in the book, and this happens, it's interesting for us to talk now, because sometimes there'll be a sentence in my book that Mira will turn into a full-blown, dramatized scene in her film, and then there will be a chapter in my book that's condensed into a reference that allows us to understand that this has happened, or this will happen. So anyway, this is the version in the book. Gogol is coming back from Cleveland, where his father has died.

"On the way to Cleveland, the journey had felt endless, but this time, staring out the plane window, seeing nothing, all too quickly he feels the plane’s descent in his chest. Just before landing he goes into the bathroom, wretches into the tiny metal basin. He rinses his face and looks at himself in the mirror. Apart from a day’s growth on his face, he looks exactly the same. He remembers when his paternal grandfather died, sometime in the seventies, remembers his mother screaming when she walked in on his father, who was shaving off all his hair with a disposable razor. In the process his scalp had bled in numerous places, and for weeks he had worn a cap to work to hide the scabs. ‘Stop it, you’re hurting yourself,’ his mother had said. His father had shut the door, and locked it, and emerged shrunken and bald. Year later Gogol had learned the significance, that it was a Bengali son’s duty to shave his head in the wake of a parent’s death. But at the time

Gogol was too young to understand; when the bathroom door opened he had laughed at the sight of his hairless, grief-stricken father, and Sonia, just a baby, had cried."

(film clip not transcribed)

MIRA NAIR: I mean, for me, the film is really about movement and crossings, and cinema I think is really so potent to capture that. So for the whole film, treated airports very carefully, planes, crossings of any kind, footsteps. So we used that very carefully, I think, and the editing was a lot of layering of that type of desire to understand these neutered kind of spaces that we have to cross, whether to disconnect us from those we love or to connect us, so throughout in the film is that kind of layering which so helps me, propelling again those thirty years into two hours.

It's also really important for me to establish a kind of rhythm of laughter and sorry in any work I do, because that's what I love about life. And it made me remember like this one line in the book, it was just one line that when Gogol went to Calcutta and went jogging as a teenager his Grandmother sent a servant to run after him because she was terrified that he would be run over. It's one line in the book, and it's like a four-page comic sequence in the movie, because for me, firstly, that's lovely, and it's like, I love the Indian—I love what happens on a street, especially in Calcutta, and I could get the most extraordinary actors to do that, to run on streets and you know, have this hilarity. So, for me, because the film, and the book and the story is so deeply moving, it was really important to balance it with, I hope, a great sense of humor. But certainly humor, and the ability to laugh, I think, receives the sorrow that is to come more acutely. So that is what I was trying to do.

But, would you like to say any more before we open it to the audience to ask us questions?

JHUMPA LAHIRI: No, I mean, I think, you know, I think that all of these things as we, as the days pass, and you know, I've seen the movie now four times, and every time I

want to see it again. And obviously I have a different, you know, sort of set of interests in it and I—it is interesting to me because on the one hand, as I said, the book died for me after I wrote it and remains very dead for me, and it's, you know, I never, ever have the, you know, impulse to go back and when I read it, when I read from it, if I ever were to sit and read the whole book I would sit and rewrite the whole book because that's what happens. **(laughter)** But it's—

MIRA NAIR: Don't touch it. **(laughter)**

JHUMPA LAHIRI: But, you know, I just, I find I've learned so much about storytelling from this version of, from the film version. And also quite a bit about film itself, which I, you know, watch and admire along with everybody else in the world but really knew very little about it and I never really have studied film formally or anything like that. But just to be able to see how the movie was made and taken from this and reconstituted and converted and reshaped and also to go the one day I visited the set and to watch all of the intense labor, the collective effort, you know, all of that, you know, that goes into making film, it was really so interesting for me, deeply, deeply interesting and informative for me. And I think it will—I mean people have asked me if having a movie made of my book will change the way I write, and will I have, you know, will I write with an eye towards something becoming a film in the future. And I think the answer to that is no, because I still believe that my work is strictly to write and that fiction is my medium, that's all I'm concerned about and I have my hands more than full in terms of just trying to write something. But I think that at the same time it's taught me so much about the basic act of storytelling and that's what's been so valuable to me. That it, you know, regardless of the medium, that it's still a story.

MIRA NAIR: I mean, I'm—I love the detail in the book and I tried to use a lot of the detail but I also loved the details in *Interpreter of Maladies*. And every time, even once we had our shooting script, every time before we would shoot the next scene, I would read the book also again to make sure I hadn't missed any good things, like this lovely line, it was somewhere in the book, and we put it in the—of Ashoke saying, "You know,

with a president named Jimmy, what the hell am I supposed to do about Gogol?" you know. **(laugher)** And it was a lovely throwaway kind of line in the book and we found it and it gets the biggest laugh in the movie. But, so it was always that reminding myself of those details.

And one time I was preparing for the scene in which Ashima loses her husband and I wanted very much, because I get in my many years here, the thing that really alienates me is the American holidays. I have no relationship to Christmas, it really gets me, and Christmas lights and especially those reindeers and those absurd flamingoes and reindeers in the—oh my God, it's just like, where am I, you know? **(laughter)** Even twenty-five years, it still hurts me. So when Ashima was going to—when her husband was going to die in the film, and there's this fantastic passage where Jhumpa writes about her putting on the lights in the house and going outside—maybe not even going outside—putting on the lights in the house. And I thought that it would be amazing to put her in the garage, because it's such a symbol of America, you know, we don't have garages like that in India. And what we did in that garage, thanks to Stephanie Carol, my designer, is we put the whole life of Gogol and Ashima and Ashoke, the prams they had carried throughout the film, the blankets we knew, the cycles, and we put that in the garage as the, as she opened the garage door. And then she runs out, and I had preordained that they would be Christmas lights, because for me that's the loneliest, loneliest image, for me in America. And they were Christmas lights in this suburbia and the cold, of course, and the, you know mist that came out from her mouth and she screamed and cried but no one was there. And for me, that was a heightening of basically my own alienation about the holidays but also this idea came from *Interpreter of Maladies* where there is that lovely—Twinkle, I think—that lovely story where the girl keeps finding lights of Jesus Christ everywhere she looks in her suburban house and I love that story. So it was a way of dovetailing my own, you know, alienation and my own personal thing with not just this book too, but the other as well.

We should take this moment here and maybe start to ask questions with the audience. The movie, as you may know, is opened yesterday and I hope you all will see it, but for the

moment, any questions you might have for either of us, we would be happy to have answered. There are mikes on either side, yeah, or one side.

Q: Fifty-two seconds is a very short time, but even still, I'd like to take a moment to thank you both for sharing this wonderful conversation with us.

MIRA NAIR: My pleasure. **(applause)**

Q: From listening, I'm not sure to what extent the work was collaborative at all between the two of you at any given point—or three of you, with the screenwriter—either in the writing of the screenplay or in the making of the movie. And if there was a collaborative element, my question was did there ever come a point where the two of you had to wrestle with some difference of opinion about what might work best? And if that didn't happen, then the question for each of you is, was there something painful for you, Ms. Lahiri, ever in not—in having to sort of let go of something that isn't going to be in the move, and correspondingly for you, Ms. Nair, something for you that very painful about not being able to include because adaptation I'd imagine always involves these kinds of things.

MIRA NAIR: Thank you, you know, firstly, in my asking, I asked permission of Jhumpa only once. When I asked for the book, and I told her what I wanted to make. After that, I stopped asking permission. **(laughter)** I mean, it really is important, because what she said was, this is—you can have it, you know, and please make something beautiful and do your thing. So it's not really always checking with her in that sense, but it was very important to me to please her, to include her, because it's great talent and I really respond to that and this book really got me, you know. And it's not something for me to be hit by it and then put it aside and put the writer's intentions aside. So what we did after the initial conversation, Sooni and I just went off and did the drafts, you know. And only when we had a shooting script, which was about four drafts down, that I shared that with her, I sent it to Jhumpa, and then we organized for a day that we spent together in her home, and we went through everything and she had maybe two minor comments and

questions. And that was it. And of course, I really wanted, I mean, I cast Jhumpa in a brief role, and her baby, and about twenty members of her family both here and in Calcutta. And the paintings that she writes about, her grandfather's paintings, in the book, were actually hanging in her parents' home in Rhode Island and I loved those paintings and I asked specially if I could use them. And they are in the book and, you know. So like *Monsoon Wedding* was a film about my mad family, I really wanted *The Namesake* to be about Jhumpa's family.

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Mad family.

MIRA NAIR: Her mad family. **(laughter)** Yeah. So, you know, it was porous and embracing, but it wasn't about permission asking, you know? But, and I, as a result, we never had a tussle, we never had a tussle, I don't remember anything. There was one funny thing, my producer Lydia was telling me, reminding me yesterday, was, there was one scene we had in the editing changed the sequencing of. It was after, it was after Ashoke's, for Ashoke's funeral, the father's funeral, and we shot it with pumpkins in the front, like it was Thanksgiving. But in the cutting, I had already had the mother crying to Christmas lights the scene before, and so it wouldn't have worked, you know, for Americans. **(laughter)** And I had said, you know, please let's, what do we do about this damn pumpkin? And you know, Lydia was just sort of saying, oh, we deal with it, it's too much money for our kind of budget. But then Jhumpa saw the movie and she just was sobbing in my arms, and it was a fantastic thing, and then she said, "It's just the pumpkins." **(laughter)** You know? "It's just the pumpkin shot." And then, that was the permission we needed for like, digitizing the pumpkin away, (laughter) and now there's no pumpkin.

So that was actually, pretty much the limit of our non-tussle. **(laughter)** But thank you.

Q: Very nice.

Q: Hi. I'm Sandia, and before I ask my question I just want to say that someone once told me somewhere that we read to know that we're not alone, and when I finished Jhumpa's book that's exactly what I felt, so thank you, very much for that. And then, thanks to Mira for allowing that to be something that we can all share whether we have access to the book or not, and to also thank you for letting me be a part of the movie, I was one of the background people in the funeral scene, so that was a very moving moment for me.

MIRA NAIR: Oh, you were in the funeral!

Q: Yeah, I'm in the funeral scene. **(laughter)**

MIRA NAIR: And you're alive! **(laughter)**

Q: And I'm alive. I cried when Tabu cried, I really did cry on set, she's amazing, she's an amazing actress.

MIRA NAIR: So, what's your question, sweetie?

Q: My question is, when I finished reading the book I felt this sense of loss and this sense of wanting to hold onto things and to be very sort of tight-knit and close-knit, whereas when I finished seeing the movie I remember hearing I think three different characters say, "I want to be free," I want to be free in the sense of sort of letting go and at the same time returning. So, is that a deliberate choice, or is that an interpretation that I'm getting there, was there a reason why those things were there?

MIRA NAIR: It was very important, actually, when I think of making this film I really do think of none of the struggles because there was a kind of purity of action right from the beginning, I dropped everything to make this film, everyone came with me and we did it. So there was no real struggle in that sense because I was clear about what I was doing. But, the only challenge, quite a big challenge, was the ending of the movie. Endings are always like that. And the challenge we had was exactly this, how do we

combine it, how do we create a feeling? It's just a feeling in the audience that life is ahead of us. Gogol has to move on. As opposed to, oh my god, look at the trials and travails of our life, you know. For me that's vital, you know. And it was really the art—I hope there is an art in it—but, of editing, of putting it together and actually, the key then came from somebody in the audience in a preview had said, you know, we hear so much about Gogol and this book, what is this book about, THE OVERCOAT? And so that was the idea, to have Kal Penn's character actually read the book in voiceover in the train and connect that up with the Goddess Durga, you know, who I put all over the movie just to bless our movie, because Calcutta, we don't exist without the goddess anywhere.

So, the goddess helped me every time I wanted to have a transition that I didn't have worked out, I had the goddess in there. **(laughter)** And so the goddess came in, and this and that, and we put it together, and made this sense of buoyancy, which was beautiful. But it really came late in the game. But that's the kind of feeling one goes for, you know, but it's hard to achieve that unless you keep on trying and keep on honing the ending. But it was about, you know, giving the sense, like Jhumpa writes, what are books for? To travel the world without moving an inch. And I wanted that feeling in them movie, that you've traveled the world without moving an inch, you know. But you become like Gogol, you know, pack a pillow and blanket—like his father—see the world. And I think, to see the world is a very important lesson, and it's the most important lesson, and I think that America needs that lesson so bad. **(laughter)** So I thought, let me end on that lesson.

(applause)

Q: My friend here in the back really wants to be an actor, and I'm wondering if you can give him a part?

MIRA NAIR: Is that Kal?

KAL PENN: Yeah.

MIRA NAIR: Oh, my god! It's Kal Penn! Oh, that's great.

(applause)

KAL PENN: I'm here with Zohran.

MIRA NAIR: Oh, amazing! Kal has been, you know, when the downside of making successful movies like *Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle*, **(laughter)** is that they shoot sequels of *Harold and Kumar* and he's been shooting the sequel and missed all the fun of our New York opening and this is a major surprise.

KAL PENN: I had to come.

MIRA NAIR: I'd never seen him until today. And he's sitting with his casting agent, my fifteen-year old son, Zohran, **(laughter)** who made sure I cast Kal Penn. So Kal, come to the stage!

KAL PENN: Yeah?

MIRA NAIR: Yeah! **(applause)**

Wow. I made you much more handsome in the film. **(laughter)**

KAL PENN: Wow. Agreed.

MIRA NAIR: *Harold and Kumar*, now.

KAL PENN: Sorry, I'm a little...

MIRA NAIR: Oh, how nice to see you.

(applause)

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Nice to see you!

MIRA NAIR: Sit on the floor, like a good... **(laughter)** But here, Kal.

KAL PENN: All right. There we go.

MIRA NAIR: That's great to see you...oh.

KAL PENN: Yeah, you know, we were talking yesterday, and I decided...

MIRA NAIR: Massage this left foot, please. **(laughter)**

KAL PENN: In the movie you usually liked the right one. She makes all her actors massage her in the morning. **(laughter)** After yoga.

MIRA NAIR: Wow, you derailed us, here. We had a whole program.

KAL PENN: Sorry, it's very distracting, I'm sure. I couldn't stay in Louisiana anymore. **(laughter)**

MIRA NAIR: I can imagine. Welcome, welcome.

KAL PENN: Thank you.

MIRA NAIR: Maybe other questions will include you. **(laughter)** I'm going to move on to the questions.

Q: Thanks. Hi, my name is Swarta. I was wondering, if either, or all three of you, think that the specific choices that you made to keep certain parts of the book and then depart

from some—do you think the film speaks to a different audience than the book did? Did you intend to make it a different audience, or try to keep the same audience?

MIRA NAIR: Well, I just want as many bums on seats as possible. **(laughter)** Seriously and truly. And the thing was, I really wanted it to be a family film, even I hate that term, in a way. But I take my—every weekend, I take my fifteen-year old, and my eighty-six year old father-in-law to the movies, I like to do that. And I tell you, it is very hard to make a choice of what would suit all of us. **(laughter)** And what we would get something from. So I really, consciously wanted to make a film that we could see on a weekend, any given weekend, and each one of us could get something from. Which is why, early on, it was the parents' story, it was equally important to me as Gogol's story. But Gogol's story obviously was vital, it's the heart of the book, but it's also what would get the fifteen-year olds in the theater. But the idea was to make a film that all ages could see.

Q: Thank you.

Q: Hi, my name is Masiri Shama, and as an aspiring filmmaker I would like to thank you for your novels, and you for your films, they've been such an inspiration for me. My question has to do with the character Moushumi. I'd love to know where each of you were coming from in your portrayal of her, 'cause I noticed there was a lot of differences from the movie and the novel.

MIRA NAIR: Oh!

Q: Well, in the feeling... **(laughter)**

MIRA NAIR: I just loved, I just loved that she was a badass, I just loved that she was, you know, naughty and unpredictable, and that she wanted to be French, and **(laughter)** I loved that, because that's what it's more like than the mail-order bride who comes from the dark continent. That is what we see around us today, you know. But Jhumpa had written Moushumi in such a—I just wanted to make like Anna Karenina in a Goddard

movie, you know. And we actually hunted high and low before we cast Zuleikha, because of her look, you know, it was very important. So I don't even remember if I—well, we did a whole thing in the movie which I cut out, with her romance with Pierre, we called him Pierre because we kept it kind of, because she was involved with France, and we made Pierre from Dimitri which was quite hard, because...etcetera. But otherwise this was the whole romance thing that we actually filmed, one shot of, one scene of their encounter, but I didn't use it in the film. It was my audition for *9 1/2 Weeks: The Sequel*, **(laughter)** and it didn't deserve or need to be in the film. But it'll be in the deleted scenes. **(laughter**) But I don't know what else I did that was a departure, Jhumpa, did you...

JHUMPA LAHIRI: No, I didn't see her—the film version of Moushumi as really different from the character I had tried to conceive. And I remember, when one of our lunch-talks, we talked specifically about her. I think when I was writing her character I was sort of drawing on, you know, sort of—I wanted to make someone who was so similar to Gogol but so absolutely unlike him, because I think that, I hate that sense of, okay, well there's this one type of Indian-American kid out there. Because there's not. And they're millions of them, and they're each different and him or herself and I think as a writer, that's what I—because I'm writing so largely about this population, this cross-section of society, you know, it's important for me to just put them, as many out there as there are. And in this book, especially, I wanted a character who—and just for reasons of the plot—of someone that Gogol's character would seek refuge in in a moment of loss, to think, you know, to go home to something familiar and realize that that familiar something is utterly foreign to him. And to contrast that with the other women in his life who may look very different on the outside but may actually be much more compatible with who he is.

I mean, I think at the heart of the book is this question of who are we, and therefore, who are we meant to be with? And this is a question that is just present in all of our lives, but especially I think for people who are caught between worlds and have expectations of trying to you know, be with this sort of person or that person as representing something definitive and I don't believe it does. And I, I believe that the point is to just find someone

for yourself, and so that was, you know, my reasoning in drawing her character to be someone—to both understand why they would fall into this hasty marriage, and also why it was ultimately flawed from the beginning, the fact that they were...and to also contrast that with the parents' generation, where the fact that Ashoke and Ashima come from the same world is literally the glue that keeps them together, and to contrast their priorities, perhaps, and their outlook, to the next generation, where that glue isn't enough.

Q: Thank you.

MIRA NAIR: Don't become like Moushumi, now! **(laughter)**

Q: The question is for Jhumpa. But first of all, when I started reading the book, the details you captured about Ashima's emotions as an immigrant are just excellent. I mean, they are so subtle and well captured, it was just amazing.

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Thank you.

Q: In the same light, as a whiskey-drinking Punjabi in the U.S. and as a future parent, Gogol's character scares me. **(laughter)**

MIRA NAIR: You talking to me? **(laughter)**

Q: I'm talking to you and to Miss...well, in that light, Ashoke's experiences and Ashima's experiences, you know, when they see their son so detached and in fact embarrassed of the identity they are so proud of, you kept that out of the book. Is that deliberate, or...share some thoughts.

JHUMPA LAHIRI: I'm sorry, I'm—is this for me?

Q: Yes.

JHUMPA LAHIRI: I'm sorry, I'm not understanding the question exactly.

Q: Ashoke's and Ashima's experience when they're actually looking at Gogol, so detached from themselves, or in fact trying to detach himself from them, that pain, that emotion, is—that's, of course the focus is on Gogol, but the parents' experiences are...I want to say, he is not able to see what Ashoke and Ashima are going through, right, is that—

MIRA NAIR: That's the whole point.

JHUMPA LAHIRI: But I think that's the way it is, right? That there's the confusion, and miscommunication on both sides, but it's miscommunicating precisely because you can't see what the other person is thinking or feeling. But, I mean, I tried in the book, and I think the book is sort of Gogol's story...it doesn't really ever literally take over because we always return to Ashima in sections of the book. But I think I tried to make clear throughout, the parents disappointment, confusion, feeling that they had, you know, been betrayed somehow by their son's actions, choices, what have you, as the story progresses.

MIRA NAIR: But also their selflessness, I mean, the whole point is, of the parents, you know, that they see all this in Gogol but they don't judge him harshly, they don't lecture him. They have wisdom to wait, they have patience. And they are selfless. That is, at least in the film, that was a big part of what we did, so, maybe we should move on to the next question. Thank you.

Oh, this is Tilotama, from—

Q: Hello.

MIRA NAIR: Alice, from *Monsoon Wedding*. **(applause)**

Q: I found a lady outside who was selling tickets, I actually sneaked in. I wanted to ask you, Mira, there is this—when I read the book, I felt that, like most Bengali parents, and I'm a Bengali, our babas don't express themselves much, and they keep a lot in, like, men, were not really taught to express themselves. And I felt that in the book too, in Ashoke's character. But in the movie, I thought that Ashoke was expressing himself. And I wanted to ask you what motivated that choice, was it for us, the generation to empathize with that other generation, was it a bridge, or maybe, or did I read it differently?

MIRA NAIR: No, I really, as I said, really wanted to make an adult love story, kind of unabashedly. And my heroes in the Bengali movie tradition were like, the Satyajit Ray from Meghe Dhaja Tara from Kolkata movies and Soumitra Chatterjee from Aranyer Din Ratri, that kind of a hero, I mean, I'm really a film, I mean, I like to sell ticket, seriously, **(laughter)** and I like to have, you know, lovers, who really are meant for each other and you want to see them fall in love and what you don't see, what you don't see, arranged marriages in which they are strangers and then as they learn of each other, we, the audience, learns about them. So I wanted to very much build that element of this story, and Jhumpa had given me the kernel for Ashoke being self-effacing and quiet and unobtrusive and not really much of a person who declares himself. And Ashima being a little more expressive, but I wanted to make it a full-blown story, love story in that way, but still keep that quality of being self-contained. But in the eyes, in the expression, and in the love, you know, in the things that are not said, that was very important to me.

So, and having such extraordinary actors, like Irfan Khan and Tabu for those roles, why you—my own mantra when I'm shooting a movie is, maximize the moment, maximize it, you know. He has to look at her in a certain way that will make you ache when he does. And I don't have much time to do that. So I have to make every moment do at least three things. Every moment has to do many things. And so I put, you know, the lessons of my marriage also in that. **(laughter)** And, you know, it just spiced it up. **(laughter)** And it's like that, you're making a film, so you go full on. And so it wasn't, you know, he was self-effacing but he would move you tremendously, it was the aspiration.

Q: Last quick question: is it really impossible for a foreigner to be a native? Is that the answer?

MIRA NAIR: That'll be answered in the next film. **(laughter)**

Q: Ah. I'll wait. Thank you so much for the film. It's absolutely just...

MIRA NAIR: Thank you. Thank you, Alice.

Q: Hi. I saw the movie on Wednesday night, and one part I really liked about the movie was actually the music, and I wanted to ask you about your selection of Nitin Sawhney, and just sort of, any sort of guidance that you gave him, or any sort of—you know, if Jhumpa had any input on it, or what you were kind of looking for, in a selection of Nitin Sawhney? In the scene where Kal Penn is shaving his head, did he produce the hip-hope as well for that?

MIRA NAIR: You know, music for me is like, very, very important, and often when I am thinking of making a film, a piece of music plays with me in my head a lot, and I listen to it, and that kind of can give me a sign of what the sound of the film would be. And in the writing and thinking of *The Namesake*, it was a piece Nitin had written. Nitin Sawhney is a cutting edge musician in England, of Asian origin. And I love his music, but he had really not done much for films, and so I—but had this piece of music which he—and Bengal is a great tradition of music, folk music, the boatmen's songs, the BAUL 72:08 singers, and you, I love that tradition. And Nitin had taken a Bengali boatman's song and redone it, and that was actually the song that Ashima sings to comfort her husband in the film. So that was the piece of music that led me to Nitin, and we worked really, really closely over every note. And it was very careful stuff. But the song that you asked for, the rap song, was not to do with Nitin, we commissioned it separately with a group in Los Angeles. And I spoke with them at length about what the lyrics should be, and I asked them to put violins in, to help it have a kind of Indian through-line. So the found music, the non-orchestral score, is pretty much music I bring to the table, you

know, whether it's State of Bengal songs, it's just stuff that I think really helps the film, and I love to hear it, and for me, soundtracks and albums are a very important part of my films. But the orchestral score is entirely done by Nitin Sawhney and he's extraordinary, and with this film, I really wanted it to be a kind of flag of the creative power, everyone should, you know, as much as possible. He really brings such an amazing dimension to his music, because he makes it modern, but he uses all kinds of old, you know, sounds and instruments.

Q: Thank you.

Q: My question is about the differences between literature and film as a medium, which you talked about a little earlier, but the book is so much about interior spaces—do you ever think it's really possible to express the internal process through film without sort of sacrificing that process, that interior world to the larger story and to the medium, to the environment, and to sort of a more symbolic reading of our experiences?

MIRA NAIR: You know, for me, it's all about—it's equally about pace and rhythm, and the interiority sometimes, I tried to make a very quiet, in some ways, a film about quietude. A film about melancholy in some passages of it. And very different from the films I've made in the past. And sometimes spaces, like locations, really give me the key on how to make the whole intention of that—whatever the scene is, like Ashima looking at her, looking—on the first day in New York, looking at her husband leave to go in the snow to his work, and what is she gonna do in her house, all day, without anyone, in this cold place? But you can't sort of go on and on and on about that in a movie, but at the same time I wanted to capture that. And it was when we walked into this particular house in Yonkers, which was very angular, and there was a window there, and through the window, one could see these stairs, which Ashoke could climb and leave in her same sight. That window, that location, was a complete key in how to make that loneliness—to express and capture that loneliness in one frame, in one moment, so that you could get acutely what Jhumpa has a few pages to write about, but I have to sort of help you make

do, make you have that feeling, but also move on. And then amplify that feeling further, if you know, if I'm answering your question.

So you find frames, you find shots, that really go right to the heart of the matter, but in a way that hopefully has poetry in it, or has something in it. And of course music and all of that comes together to create that emotion. So, actually, the interiority, sometimes we changed it—like, in Jhumpa's writing, Gogol and Maxine, they don't break up in the present, as you read the book they've already broken up, when we come to them, in a certain chapter that Jhumpa wrote. But in the movie, we have to see that, we have to see that immediacy, we have to see why these two characters who love each other, what happens. So obviously then we wrote that scene, you know, about how, he's with his shaved head, and she can't recognize him. And it, you know. So sometimes we give words to things that have already happened in the story, and sometimes it is looking for the right image that will economically capture the emotion of the scene.

Q: Thanks.

MIRA NAIR: Thank you.

Q: Thank you for sharing this conversation with us. I feel as if since Kal has made a surprise visit, I should ask a question to Kal. I'm wondering, as an Indian-American, as someone sort of grown up in the United States, I assume, what was your sort of motivation, you sort of process, in sort of depicting this person, and you sort of, as Jhumpa expressed, there are obviously stereotypical people, and so you have Indian-Americans expressed in a certain way. But what was your sort of process, and sort of—and how careful were you in sort of depicting this character. And Mira, what was your motivation in selecting Kal, or what were you looking for in this sort of character.

KAL PENN: It's a good question. I based most of Gogol's character on the book, on the novel. And when I first read the novel, I think in '04 or '05, the thing that struck me about it what was something intangible, it really had nothing to do with the shared history or

the shared ethnicity. I was more attached to Gogol because of his passion for architecture, something that's grown to be one of my hobbies since working on the film. Because of the—you know, Gogol describes that fascination with the correlation between engineering and science and presumably politics in the world around him through architecture. Motivations like that—the relationships he has, the fact that he's attracted to very strong women throughout the course of the film. You know, he falls in love with Maxine presumably because she's pursuing an MFA and she's an artist. Moushumi has a PhD and gets offers to study, or teach rather, in France.

So those were the things that form an interesting character in my opinion, and for some reason it conjured up images of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Holden Caulfield, when I read that book when I was thirteen or fourteen. Clearly, two different books, but the reason I bring that up is that Holden Caulfield is a, you know, rich white kid who went to boarding school in New England, I'm obviously not, and yet, I was really attracted, attached to that book, to that character, and it's the same, similar, rather, with *The Namesake*. So, I didn't really try and look at issues of race or representation so long as I was able to do justice to the character and this was a really rare opportunity, because every intimate detail, from the circumstances of Gogol's birth, to where he lost his virginity, his first kiss, his ATM password, all of these very intimate details are laid out beautifully in the book. So that made—to have a manuscript like that to refer to was a really nice gift.

MIRA NAIR: And I wanted to maximize his talent. So, you know, I mean, again, the book gave us a big spine, but at the same time, I really wanted to, you know, he had to be active, as an active character. He had to make decisions, he had to not—he had to be, you know, forging his own journey, and that was something that was very important to us as we carved those scenes. And then, when I cast Kal—

KAL PENN: What was your motivation? **(laughter)**

MIRA NAIR: Ka-ching, ka-ching! **(laughter)** Just joking.

KAL PENN: Can I have some of that?

MIRA NAIR: When we get it! Well, really, I never, I never thought—I never knew Kal, and I never knew his comic films, and it was really Zohran and Sam Walker, these two fifteen-year olds, who took me by the hand long before and showed me Kal on the internet, and I said, you know, he's goofy, but I want a dashing young man. **(laughter)** Seriously! And then I get a letter from Kal, saying that he's an actor because he saw *Mississippi Masala* when he was thirteen, and he never knew that people like us could be on screen, and thank you, and that was all obviously quite seductive. **(laughter)** And he said could he come and audition for me, and meanwhile, there was this double track at home with Zohran saying, Mama, tell me in the morning it's Kal Penn, for a long time, this campaign went on. **(laughter)** And he came, and then read, and really, really affected me, because a, he was cute, **(laughter)** but he really had, like Jhumpa is saying about me, he had an urgency, a real hunger, to play this role. And he was really Gogol, he had negotiated what it felt like to be a kid who looked like him in a New Jersey classroom from day one probably. And in that sense, you know, as director, we look to actors to help us embody the character very much. So as authentic as they are, it helps me, you know. I was flirting of the idea of a Bollywood actor who had grown up in Switzerland, and I thought maybe he could swing it, because I was kind of greedy for audiences on both sides of the ocean and I didn't know anyone here off the top—you know, who would do this. But once I saw Kal, I just, that was it. It was really like that.

Q: It was a great casting, so thank you.

MIRA NAIR: Oh, thanks, thanks.

KAL PENN: Thank you. **(laughter)** This is all very new for me. Being taken seriously. **(laughter)** It's very nice.

Q: Continuing the line of character selection, when you read the book, Mira, did you automatically have people in your head that would be perfect for Ashoke, and Maxine, etcetera, when you read the book, and when you discussed with Jhumpa—did you, Jhumpa, like the ideas that she had for the casting, or was this a long process of having to, you know, interview people and trying to find the right people.

MIRA NAIR: You know, I think that in this film—I think every film has its own destiny in terms of actors and non-actors and people who end up in the films—but this film was unusual for me because every, practically every main character was supposed to be played by other people. And you know, it all came this way. Except for Ashoke, Irfan Khan, whom I knew very well, he's like a younger brother to me, I discovered him when he was eighteen, he was in *Salaam Bombay*. And I always looked for a part for him that could do his amazing talent justice.

So he was right off the bat, but Ashima, because, again, it's a Bengali film and I wanted to really make it authentic, I was looking at Bengali actresses. I had cast a young, wonderful actress like five months before shooting. And then as it came closer to shooting, she had signed up in another movie which enabled her not to come for rehearsal to my, this film. And I just can't accept that, you know. So it was very, especially this part, of Ashima, she has to see the whole map of life in this part. She has to go from being a bride to a widow and everything in between. And it was really desperate, and we had the choice—and I had to find an Ashima, the center of the film! And I knew Tabu, she's a great, great actress, we had, once, we were going to make a movie together so we knew each other very well, and I called her up, I think it was two weeks before shooting, and she didn't tell me that she already was in too many movies. But she had read the book, she loved the book, she knew me, she just cleared her deck, she never told me that she was in other films, and she came. And then when we finished shooting the movie, she—one day she just hands me the phone and it's like, the most important South Indian producer, and he's saying, "Thank you, basically you destroyed my film schedule, when you took my heroine away, but I thank you because she's so happy." And then I realized, after the shooting, what she had done to be in the film, you know, and so she was just,

like, it happened just like that. But she is an amazing actress, so I was very lucky to have her.

And Kal, I've sort of shared the story with you. Maxine, we went—you know, I met Natalie Portman for the role, and I met a couple of other actors, but I loved Jacinda from *The Human Stain*. I felt like she's such an—she has a face that expresses the intelligence and empathy at the same time, and that's a wonderful quality, and I loved her for that. And Zuleikha, Moushumi's role, was very hard to cast. We went all over this country, everywhere, London, India, everywhere. There were loads of actors, stars, in Bollywood, who wanted to play that part. But Zuleikha just—Cindy Tolan, our casting director, found her in LA, she had done *Hidalgo* and various other movies. And she just has the authority and certainly the appeal, but she really had that kind of mysterious quality that Moushumi should have. So casting is about intuition for me and, you know, and all that, but it's really great when it comes right.

Q: I just wanted to continue the question for Jhumpa—did you, what was it like to see your characters in life? Was it what you imagined when you were writing the book? Or was it a completely different sense and feeling?

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Well, as I—you know, the characters live for me now in two incarnations. Because when I write a book and I'm inventing characters, they come to life for me, but in a very...it's impossible to put into words, they're just sort of flickering images in the back of my head somewhere. And they're flesh and blood, or I'm trying to make them flesh and blood, in a very abstract way, out of words, and a very intangible thing. So they're back there, and I see them and I see their faces. But they're blurry, you know, it's like those images in a dream that just slip away. And so when I think of the book, and all of the characters I've ever written, that's how they exist and that's how they endure, in my memory, is as those kind of flickering, blurry images.

And it's—so when I saw the real, the incarnated, the actors, the flesh and blood literally on the screen, you know, they were different characters, and they were the characters that

Mira had created. And I didn't think of them—in this whole process I feel sort of like a grandmother, you know, because—and at first, I remember when I gave the book to Mira I felt like I was watching the child go off and forge her own way. I mean, sort of the book and Mira kind of came together and created a new thing. And now I just feel like the happy grandparent, because I know I'm connected to it, I know it's descended from me somehow, but it's sort of all of the pleasure without any of the pain. **(laughter)** And that's what so fun about all of this **(laughter)** for me, it's a very lovely kind of celebration of something I made, but so long ago and without that direct, you know, link, that dependence that you have with something that you really make. So, for me, you know, I think that the actors are—the whole film is superbly cast, and just really just right on every single person. But I had no, I mean, Mira, she included me, and as with everything else, she would keep me informed about who she was thinking of, and who was going to do it and who wasn't going to do it, but, you know, I didn't have any—I just trusted her. I just trusted her to find the right people and she did.

MIRA NAIR: Thank you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I suggest one great last question. **(laughter)**

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Pressure. **(laughter)**

Q: Gosh, I really hope I saved the best for last here. Okay, so—

MIRA NAIR: No pressure.

Q: Yes. Thank you very much for all three of you great artists, your work. I think that, you know, we have a book and a movie that are both titled *The Namesake* and so I think it's appropriate to end the discussion talking about the treatment of language, in both, actually both the film and the novel. So Mira, you were saying before when you were talking about the shaving of the head, how you wanted to have—for cinema to have a physical representation of the shaved head. And then I remembered, I just watched it this

afternoon, the movie, that I think it was the first time that Kal Penn's character says, he hugs his mother and says—

MIRA NAIR: Bengali. Yeah.

Q: —something in Bengali. And I don't know if it was the first time he spoke in Bengali, but it felt like the first time he spoke in Bengali. So I wanted you to comment a little bit on how you used these two languages and found a fluidity.

MIRA NAIR: Yeah. Well, I mean, growing up in India, we are very, very used to mixing at least two if not three languages in a sentence. Seriously. And because *Monsoon Wedding*, we did that, and we did that because it was a cheaply made film and we didn't have to ask anybody's permission, but otherwise distributors could not have any sense of how you do that? How do you do three languages in one sentence? What do you do? But we did that to great success in *Monsoon Wedding*. So I was very, very sure, in this film, that we would have a lot of Bengali spoken in it, because the intimacy, and intimate zone that we all, our parents share and in my case, I share, we speak in Hindustani at home. Period. Everything—our son—our language is very important to us. And I just couldn't imagine Ashoke and Ashima speaking anything but Bengali. And the sweetness—I love this language. It's a really musical language. And so it was very important that we get that Bengali right and we get it economic. I mean, a big—one thing I do do is I remove words a lot in the shooting. You know, it doesn't need words so often, so but, the Bengali was very important. And then, as you see the passage of years, even the parents use a little less Bengali, and a little more English mixed in, but of course the kids are only speaking, and will always speak, in this case of Gogol and Sonia, you know, with their American English. They'll understand Bengali, but they won't speak it. But that's what was so vital about giving Kal—Gogol—that line. Again, that was an entire invention of him shaving his head, and then coming back to the airport, his mother sees him, and his mother says, "You didn't have to do this, my son." And he says, "I wanted to," in Bengali. So that was the point, I mean, is to use the language also as a talisman, as something that he's

returning to. And because he's American, he can speak it naively, you know, in that way, because he would not have learned the way his parents speak it, you know.

Q: Identity was beautiful when he spoke in Bengali in that one moment, and I don't know if he ever spoke in Bengali again but it was very—it was very impactful. And similarly, when you choose to write, Jhumpa, in—I mean, you write in English, but your characters oftentimes they live in a world that's between two languages. How do you, how do you figure out what words to sometimes write in a different language and which words to translate, and how do you write—how do you treat language in writing?

JHUMPA LAHIRI: Well, I mean, it's a very—it's a question for me, but it's a question I ask constantly as I write. Because I do write about character who are, you know, fundamentally bilingual, and are either privy to two language or coming to English as a second language, but meanwhile English is my medium. And even though I sometimes will maybe use a word or something here and there, really, I'm bound to English. And so another thing that this film has done more authentically than my book—because it's a great source of frustration to me, to be honest, as a writer, when I'm writing characters, and they're speaking, and I have to force them to speak in English, because there's no way out. And you know, I'm not going to do things like a Beckett or someone mixing up language, no, I'm going to stick to English and make it plain and I just—because I'm limited that way. But it's frustrating to me, because I know when I'm writing the lines that they're saying, in my head I'm hearing them saying something completely different. But I have to force it out onto the page in English. So there's always a lack of reality for me when the characters are speaking. So it's really quite lovely to be able to see the film version of this story and to hear the characters speaking in Bengali, especially those early scenes between the parents, because as I wrote the scenes and I imagined the scenes long ago, that was purely the language that I was hearing, and I was simply doing the work of a translator in writing the dialogue. So it's wonderful that when I watch the film, because I know the language, I can hear it and I don't have to look at the subtitles and it's really—it's very special.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I would so much love for us to continue. I would love for instance to ask you a little bit more about Gogol, a writer I adore, particularly his digressions, you know, Nabokov once famously tried to describe the digressive style of Gogol and said, "If two parallel lines do not meet it is not because meet they cannot but because they have other things to do." **(laughter)** In any event, I would very, very much like to thank you all, thank you for this wonderful surprise visit, thank you for coming tonight.

(applause)