

# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

THURSDAY, SEPT. 15  
7 P.M. • HUMANITIES  
QUADRANGLE  
ALICE CINEMA

## MISSISSIPPI MASALA

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



Romance blooms for Denzel Washington and Sarita Choudhury in a culture-clash tale set around a delta motel, home to a family of Indian-Ugandan émigrés. “Part comedy, part drama, rooted in memoir and colonial history, the film that (director Mira) Nair imagined was a low-budget independent one with global settings and ambitions,” observed Bilal Qureshi.

MISSISSIPPI MASALA (1991) was developed by Nair (cited by Amardeep Singh as among the most prominent Indian diasporic filmmakers “whose work has helped transform the scope of contemporary world cinema”) and screenwriter Sooni Taraporevala. The two women met as undergraduates at Harvard in the seventies, and also collaborated on the Oscar-nominated SALAAM BOMBAY! (1988) and THE NAMESAKE (2006). With MISSISSIPPI MASALA, they created what Joyce Green MacDonald described as “a postcolonial revisitation of *Romeo and Juliet*.” “For me,” said Taraporevala, “the film primarily was about race relations and the hierarchy of racism that exists among people of color.” Nair remarked, “People think of racism as black versus white, but there’s a different kind of consciousness of color within minority groups.”



The “Juliet” in their story is Mina, played by London-born Sarita Choudhury in her first screen role. The role of Demetrius came at a key moment in Denzel Washington’s career, between his Academy Award for *GLORY* (1989) and his superstar-making performance in *MALCOLM X* (1992). Ruth Maxey noted that the “handsome, morally irreproachable, and deeply respectable” Demetrius recalls Sidney Poitier’s character in *GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER* (1967), a Black man burdened by the prejudices of those around him. The cast also includes the classically-trained British-Indian actor Roshan Seth; Sharmila Tagore, a star of Bengali and Hindi cinema who performed in five films by Satyajit Ray; Yale School of Drama graduate Charles S. Dutton in one of his earliest film roles; and Nair herself as “Gossip 1.”

Nair’s documentary background—she trained under D.A. Pennebaker at Harvard—gives the film “an unvarnished and immersive visual style” (Qureshi) and a “documentary realist aesthetic” (Singh). Owen Gleiberman called it “a neo-realist *WEST SIDE STORY*.” Nair and Taraporevala took many elements of the story—including an Indian woman running a liquor store and an African-American carpet cleaner named Demetrius—from real-life encounters during their road trip across the south in March, 1989. The selection of Greenwood, Mississippi, as the primary setting for the film hints at Nair’s interest in the deep history of racial conflict that shapes her characters’ actions. Located a few miles from where Emmett Till was lynched, the small town housed the Mississippi headquarters of the white-supremacist Citizens’ Council in the fifties. In the sixties, it was the site of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s first voting registration efforts in the region, and the place where Stokely Carmichael gave his first “Black Power” speech.

The film was released at a time when a very different political reality was believed to be at hand. From the opening of global markets and the end of the Soviet Union, to the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa and the arrival of a “new south” Democratic presidential candidate in the United States, Qureshi noted, “The possibilities were being felt all over the world as Nair’s film of southern futures arrived.” It was also a moment in which American cinemas were becoming more welcoming to filmmakers of color: other landmark American films from 1991 include Julie Dash’s *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST* and John Singleton’s *BOYZ N THE HOOD*. A sense of hopefulness fills *MISSISSIPPI MASALA*, and led critics to praise it as “charming and exuberant” (Gleiberman), “amazingly fresh and lively” (Dave Kehr), “delivered with enormous good humor and affection” (Ella Taylor), and “the freshest, most winning love story we’ve seen in ages” (Jay Carr). As Qureshi commented, “*MISSISSIPPI MASALA* endures not for its spicy and pungent aromas of cultural specificity or representational breakthrough but for (its) profound commitment to multiplicity. It is a timeless song for and to those who live—and love—in multitudes.”

DIRECTED BY **MIRA NAIR**  
SCREENPLAY BY **SOONI TARAPOREVALA**  
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **EDWARD LACHMAN**  
PRODUCED BY **CHANNEL FOUR FILM**  
(1991) 118 MINS.

STARRING **SARITA CHOUDHURY,**  
**DENZEL WASHINGTON, ROSHAN SETH,**  
**SHARMILA TAGORE, CHARLES S. DUTTON,**  
**JOE SENECA, RANJIT CHOWDHRY**

**DID YOU KNOW:** THE ABANDONED FAMILY HOME IN THE FILM, OVERLOOKING LAKE VICTORIA, IS NOW ONE OF MIRA NAIR’S RESIDENCES. SHE FOUND IT ON HER FIRST TRIP TO UGANDA, A RESEARCH AND SCOUTING TRIP FOR **MISSISSIPPI MASALA**. “I WANTED SOMETHING YOU COULD BE NOSTALGIC FOR. THE SUN WAS FALLING. IT WAS A COMPLETE RUIN. I FELL IN LOVE WITH IT INSTANTLY!”

**NEXT UP:** EDWARD YANG’S FINAL FILM—AND HIS MASTERPIECE—DEFTLY DETAILS THE LIVES OF THREE GENERATIONS OF A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY IN TAIPEI. AN ARCHIVAL 35MM PRINT OF **YI YI: A ONE AND A TWO...** SCREENS NEXT **THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, AT 7PM.**