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Moving Castles

Generational growing pains tarnish Nair's family portrait

THE NAMESAKE: Directed by Mira Nair. Written by Sooni Taraporevala, based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri. Cinematography, Frederick Elmes. Music, Nitin Sawhney. Starring Kal Penn, Tabu, Irrfan Khan, Jacinda Barrett, Sahira Nair and Zuleikha Robinson. Fox Searchlight, 2007. PG-13. 122 minutes. ★★☆☆

Don't be fooled by the poster for *The Namesake*, which puts Kal Penn (*Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*) front and center. Though it's Penn's character, Gogol Ganguli, who is referenced in the title, his story is central only in the movie's second half. For the most part the film belongs to Gogol's intensely believable parents, Bengali immigrants Ashoke (Irrfan Khan) and Ashima (Bollywood star Tabu).

After a flashback, the film begins with the arranged marriage of Ashoke and Ashima. She likes his wingtips; he likes her poetry recital. (It doesn't hurt that she's exceptionally beautiful, either.) After a bright, joyous wedding ceremony, the young couple moves to cold, dingy New York, where years pass as the pair grows to know and love each other. They have one child, the meaningfully named Gogol, and then another. And then they move to the 'burbs.

And then the film leaps forward to Gogol's teen years, an unfortunate time for the young man and the film. Playing a character years younger than himself, Penn overacts, relying heavily on a pouting lower lip and slack face (a scene involving air guitar is almost painful to watch). Too much time is spent showing the Gangulis' children as willful, "typical" teens, and it feels like eons before we jump forward again, into what looks like the present day though, oddly, no one seems to own a cell phone.

The Namesake, based on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, is a return to a more intimate story for director Mira Nair (*Monsoon Wedding*), who last directed the lavish period piece *Vanity Fair*. *The Namesake* is concerned with the gap between parent and

child and with the ways different generations experience assimilation and culture as they move between India and America. It's also about finding yourself to be a separate person from your parents, one neither defined in opposition to them nor wholly in deference to their desires for you.

At times, the movie illustrates its themes beautifully: A scene where the whole Ganguli family stands in awe of the Taj Mahal is innocently wonderful, and later Gogol — now called Nick — has a wrenching reaction to a death in the family. But the story often seems to lack transitions, one event following another without a sense of continuity. Gogol, as a grown man, has a sweet-faced, wealthy, blonde girlfriend, Maxine (Jacinda Barrett), who makes countless and somewhat unconvincing social mistakes with his parents; her abrupt dismissal seems unfair, as the character is never shown to be quite as self-centered as the movie thinks she is. Gogol's subsequent lover, the sultry Moushumi (Zuleikha Robinson) is a stick figure of a character, all sleek outfits and mysterious, possibly decadent, past. It's no wonder Gogol needs to be on his own to figure himself out.

And it's no wonder that the film most succeeds in depicting Gogol's parents' relationship. Grounded, giving, welcoming and flawed, Ashoke and Ashima offer a different kind of cinematic romance, the care in the way they move together mirrored in the film's graceful scenes. Their path between past and present, one home and the other, is clear in Nair's visual juxtapositions: Calcutta and New York; bustling Soho and gray Yonkers; round-cheeked Maxine and elegant Ashima; Ashima's beautiful saris and her daughter's tank tops. Though Penn is a solid and often appealing presence, the scenes without his titular character give *The Namesake* its most strength and appeal. **EW**

The Namesake opens Friday, April 6 at the Bijou.