

A Film Division Dynamic Duo

How a chance meeting in Dodge hall led to one of the year's most successful and beloved films.

Fall 2002

Screenwriter Sabrina Dhawan '02SOA still can't recall what brought her to campus that fall day in 1999 when she happened upon acclaimed film director Mira Nair waiting for the elevator on the first floor of Dodge Hall.

"I recognized her because she is a famous face in India," says Dhawan, who gathered up her courage, approached Nair nervously, and introduced herself. Nair, the director of *Mississippi Masala*, *The Perez Family*, *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love*, and the Oscar-nominated *Salaam Bombay!*, had just joined the film division faculty as an adjunct assistant professor, and she knew exactly who Dhawan was: someone had already told her Dhawan had talent. So instead of getting on the elevator, Nair invited her to have a cup of tea there in the Dodge Hall café.

They were both surprised at how much they had in common: they came from the same middle-class Punjabi society in Delhi, and neither had seen a film that represented the contemporary Indian life they knew and lived.

Before they parted, Dhawan passed along a sample of her writing. Nair read it that night and, the next morning, left a message on Dhawan's answering machine saying she loved her writing and wanted to work with her. The rest, as they say, is history.

Work together they did, and result is *Monsoon Wedding*, one of this year's most successful foreign films. Nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film earlier this year, it won the Golden Lion for Best Film at the Venice International Film Festival, where it premiered in late 2001. Critic Roger Ebert in the Chicago Sun-Times called it "one of those joyous films that leaps over national boundaries and celebrates universal human nature." Peter Travers in Rolling Stone said that Nair "aims for pure joy and achieves it."

A drama/comedy set in modern Delhi, *Monsoon Wedding* follows an upper-class family for five days and nights as the members prepare for the traditional and elaborate Punjabi wedding celebration. Dhawan wrote the script in three days and four nights for a revision class she took at the film school. “It’s easy to write about people you’ve known all your life,” she says, adding that the five different narratives she developed came out of her several attempts to discern some kind of plot.

As it turned out, each subplot from the original script made its way into the movie—including a potentially controversial one dealing with sexual abuse in an upper-class family. Dhawan wasn’t sure how the film would be received in her homeland since that subject had never been broached in the Indian media. However, after the Indian premiere at the Calcutta Film Festival, Dhawan was praised by filmmakers and critics for taking the risk. She also heard from her audience: “It was housewives, coming up to me thanking me and saying, ‘This is what happens, and this is how it happens.’”

Dhawan says working with Nair to produce *Monsoon Wedding* taught her that despite financial and time constraints (the budget was less than \$2 million, and the film was shot in just thirty days), it is still possible to make a successful film without sacrificing artistic aspirations. *Monsoon Wedding* has already grossed more than \$13 million, making it the highest-grossing Indian film ever released in the United States.

The idea, Nair says, was to shoot an interesting and layered story that invokes musical and visual Bollywood conventions and captures a time in Indian society where tradition and modernity clash at every turn. “If the film captures the masti—the intoxicating zest for life—of my people, then I will have done my work,” she says.



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