

Morton Marcus: 'The Namesake' doesn't work

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Critics from coast to coast, and right here in River City, have nothing but praise for Mira Nair's "The Namesake" I'm afraid I don't agree. As far as I'm concerned, the film falls head over celluloid into one of cinema's oldest pitfalls in making a novel into a film.

When you think about it, you can see the problem immediately, right? How do you get dozens of characters and hundreds of incidents into about two hours of viewing time? That's the challenge for the adapting screenwriter.

Ideally, the answer is that you show the whole book. And that's been possible in the past 30 years with TV miniseries and PBS "Masterpiece Theater" productions. Such novels as Evelyn Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited" showed almost every word of the novel [except for 20 lines of dialogue] in its 12 one-hour episodes. But that was an hour per show that ran over a 12-week period. How do you do a complete novel for a single theater sitting?

The most famous attempt at filming an entire novel for theater viewing was Erich von Stroheim's 1924 adaptation of Frank Norris' "McTeague" Von Stroheim's final version, retitled "Greed," was nine hours long, and after three more cuts, the last done by a studio editor without von Stroheim's approval, ran two and a half hours, was shown in two sittings, and was a tattered, barely comprehensible collection of fragments.

Over the years, most film directors have settled for concentrating on highlights of a novel — the book's major characters in its most famous scenes — usually to the disappointment of those in the audience who cherished the book. The alternative, which we saw with von Stroheim, resulted in a sketchy glimpse of people and incidents, as if the viewer were rushing through a bustling city on a speeding train. Unfortunately, Mira Nair and her longtime screenwriter, Sooni Taraporevala, have chosen von Stroheim's "whole book" approach to put Jhumpa Lahari's bestselling novel, "The Namesake," on the screen. The result is, alas, predictable.

In trying to cover the 25-year experience of two generations of Bengali immigrants in the United States, Nair leaps from one highlight to another so the viewer only has glimpses of the mother and father's character and life in America, and then their children's. Everything is rushed, episodic, spotty, and in the end superficial. What is Asoke, the father's, profession? Why is Ashima, his wife, so moody and ill at ease all the time? Why and how does she become a librarian? And why does Gogol, the namesake of the film's title, not appear until halfway through the film?

By the time he enters, the viewer's concentration is focused on his parents, and it is an annoying surprise to shift attention to him, realizing that he, not his parents, is the main concern of the film,

The film — as well as the book — honors and tells the story of an immigrant group coming to the fore of American life. And that's as it should be. We need to hear, see and understand every immigrant's story as we have in the recent past with such excellent films as "Avalon" and "In America" In comparison, "The Namesake," with its rushed scenes and undeveloped characters, leaves the viewer cold with its cliched episodes of culture clash and adjustment we've encountered all too often in other immigrant films.

Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program, 'Cinema Scene,' on channels 27 and 72, every Thursday and Sunday at 8:30 p.m. He leads film discussions at the Nickelodeon theater the first and third Saturday of the month. Contact him at wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com.

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