

MIRA NAIR – GEOFFREY BAWA SPEECH

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I cannot recall when I first heard about Geoffrey Bawa – it is as if I have always known he existed. I have never had the luxury of a mentor, but am fortunate to have a few gurus in my own journey towards creativity: BKS Iyengar, Amrita Sher-Gil, Satyajit Ray, Cartier-Bresson, and even though he did never know it, Geoffrey Bawa. The cleanness of his palate, the flow in his spaces, the link between the outside and the inside, the absence of stridency matched with a sureness of his aesthetic - all of it has stirred in me, recognizing a giant of a man whom I look to as a guide as I make my gardens and my films. So it is a great honor for me to be in Colombo today on his birthday, to be among his friends and collaborators, to stay in his exquisite home, to walk the way he had walked. Yesterday afternoon, as the trustees and I sat on his long table discussing the deplorable state of the world, gazing upon the ancient frangipani, Lenin's legs, the doors made by the great artist Laki Senanyake, and all his carefully strewn objects around, an inexplicable calm fell over me - like he had left an ordained universe of his own in the care of great individuals who loved him. I thank you all.

I started out studying cinema verite- or "cinema of truth" – making documentary films of the extraordinariness of ordinary life. I would make my films in the villages of Gujarat and Cabarets in Bombay, show the films to unions and women's groups in my own country, then would ride the Greyhound Bus around the United States, showing these films to anyone who would have me. I would have to tolerate audiences who would ask me whether there was tap water in India and how come I spoke fluent English. I would retort by inviting them to visit India, warning them that my personal elephant would pick them up at the airport. In those years, I discovered the loneliness of being an artist. I didn't want to be a cultural ambassador for my country, educating Americans about my homeland. But back home, my

films were also alternative. Mired in the reality of the streets, faithful to the idea that truth is always stranger and more powerful than fiction, they were the opposite of Bollywood and I was an outsider. There is a saying in India – *dhobi ka kutta, na ghar na ghaatka*, which literally means ‘the washerman’s dog – neither at home nor of the street, yet at home everywhere.’” From those days onwards, I have learnt the importance of cultivating stamina, simply to keep going, to hone our great craft, to honour the handmade. I found that people who inhabit different worlds can see through each of them - it is such people who have a sense of modesty, who know that there are other ways of seeing, who develop genuine appreciation for, rather than mere charitable tolerance for other ways of life.

Geoffrey is a guru for me because he defied borders. It is perhaps because his feet were so solidly planted in his beloved Sri Lanka, that he had the freedom to fly in his creative work. After years of wandering the western world and receiving an education, Geoffrey Bawa returned to Sri Lanka looking for a kind of space that did not exist, so he decided to create it. Throughout his working life, Bawa refused to be defined by his ethnicity, his race, his gender, his clientele, or his past. Bawa’s eclectic vision, along with his ability to evolve and yet remain true to himself – comes along once in a generation, if that. He let functionality drive his design process - creating spaces that beg to be lived in, to be meditated in, to be slept in, to look anew at nature. His work is anti-ornament. Unwittingly, this thinking became a cornerstone of how I conceived space in my films - human stories within the urban swirl of Indian cities: the street children of *Salaam Bombay!*, the affection and dark secrets of family life in *Monsoon Wedding*, a portrait of my own hometown Delhi, capturing an India that lives in several centuries at once; *The Namesake*, which tied together many of my worlds: the Kolkata I had left behind as a teenager, the Cambridge where I went to college, and New York City, which I consider one of my homes. And recently, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* - a coming-of-age story of a young South Asian man as he makes his way across continents in an

increasingly interconnected islamophobic globalized post 9/11 world.

As a film director, I have always strived to make the audience experience my films in a visceral way, making stories that hopefully get under your skin and see the world in a way that has not often seen. For the most part, my work entails the creation of a safe environment in which my actors feel protected enough to fail, even to make fools of themselves. To work with human beings, to work with emotion, and to visualize the drama of humanity, I need to feel my blood go faster, you need to feel your heart beat. In the creative world – borders, by necessity, need to be fluid and porous. Talent knows no borders.

Recently, I had the good fortune to meet Richard Serra, now 80 years old and continuing to make radical, eternal sculpture - another anchor for me. He stunned me by saying: “Authenticity diminishes with practice.” I stopped him, promptly writing down his thought, and asked him how he preserved the austerity of his art. He said, an artist must struggle to remain naïve, must reinvent each time, to play games with himself, to not listen to the clamor of fame or opinion or judgment. Like Serra, Bawa was mistrustful of theorizing – he was constantly reinventing himself in order to avoid becoming a “prisoner of his own past.” He did this by allowing function to guide form – by allowing his work to grow out of his surroundings instead of simply resting on top of the land. He once said, “you must run with the site, after all, you don’t want to push nature out with building.” He did not care about critical response or being featured in the glossy pages of architectural magazines. Rather, if a building was useful and people enjoyed it – this was enough for him.

Some years ago, i brought my entire family to Sri Lanka on a journey that was an homage to Geoffrey Bawa: we stayed at Lunuganga, swam at bentota, marveled at kandalama. It was Lunuganga that opened my eyes and my heart. It was so fitting to learn that it was in creating his masterpiece in Lunuganga, that Geoffrey Bawa was propelled to become an architect of buildings.

Nature was his teacher, and continued to be. For years, my husband used to call me "Asantosh Jivano", a restless soul in his native gujarati. Now, 25 years later, that restless soul has become a *memsahib* gardener. I feel most at home in my equatorial garden in Kampala with my family. As a gardener, I am still young and naïve – but over the past 15 years, I have drawn on the work of Bawa and Roberto Burle Marx, both great landscape designers who shaped the environment to appear unfettered but yet manipulated it in a way that allows us to appreciate its wildness. Bawa especially – a notorious opponent of Modernism – openly rejected the geometry and order of popular western styles and redefined the concept of order within beauty. In Lunuganga, he created the impression of un-tampered nature by strategically placing manmade pieces intended to draw the viewer's attention to the unaltered beauty of the landscape.

The lessons from nature, from planting gardens, are also lessons that help me with making films. I aspire first and foremost to create Rhythm in any film, and listening to the rhythm of nature never ceases to be a great teacher. Ultimately, a flower will not bloom unless it is happy. The ebb and flow of life is in every leaf. To create my garden, to make films, is like yoga – it requires the art of resistance and surrender. I am always trying to create beauty, of course, but I also feel that a garden, like a building or the world of a film – must have a sense of wanting to be lived in. Bawa was a master of creating livable spaces. His work was not the art in and of itself - rather, it was the comingling of the space and the life within that creates the true art.

I grew up with the *guru shishya* tradition, which is the spiritual relationship in which a guru passes his or her knowledge onto a disciple. It was this that led me to create Maisha, which means "Life" in kiswahili, 9 years ago. Maisha is a filmmakers' lab that is based in Kampala, Uganda, that teaches the craft of film across East Africa: tanzania, kenya and rwanda. We train screenwriters, directors, cinematographers, and sound mixers to create a local film culture of excellence. The mantra that defines our work in Maisha is : if we don't tell our own stories, no one else will.

Despite having trained hundreds of writers, technicians, and filmmakers, Maisha has not had a permanent home – until now. At home, I designed my “garden of threes” as a way to represent my husband, our son, and I – and now the Maisha Kino Garden is the next step. It is filled with trees planted by every student and mentor who has passed through Maisha’s programs. As I walk through Maisha's forest studded with names, there are already some success stories: Lupita N'yongo, one of our earliest acting students, just won an oscar for her performance **in 12 Years a Slave, Ritesh Batra, one of our first students, just directed the acclaimed film, The LunchBox. Geoffrey Bawa's design continues to be a guiding torch as we finally build a roof on our heads to celebrate a decade of Maisha:** I am proud to have broken ground just last week on the Maisha Kino Garden designed by the newest Aga Khan prizewinning architect Raul Pantaleo. And soon I will rip off Geoffrey Bawa yet again – creating a serpentine wall - linking my home to Maisha.

In the creative world, borders, by necessity, need to be fluid and porous. Yet now more than ever, it is time for us to tell stories in which people can see themselves. Not just some people, but all. Not just in some places but everywhere. It takes courage to be original, especially for those who have been told for the past few centuries that the west is the mirror in which they should see their future. There is not just one truth, the truth, unless someone wants to make a divine claim. There are so many truths. It depends on who’s doing the looking, and from where?

Geoffrey Bawa and his band of artists, with their work, have brought us truth and beauty with feeling, spaces that reflect how they see their world. We need them more than ever in a world which markets beauty as commerce but finds truth increasingly unpalatable. As this world changes before our eyes, it becomes more and more necessary to join beauty with truth so we may give expressive freedom to those who call for a change in the world. Not simply in Gaza or Ukraine and Syria, but also in the violent attacks in Aluthgama - ironically, a stone's throw from the peace of Lunuganga. We need to bring this country back to being defined by artistry instead of war. That is it, that is the only revenge, to make work that destabilizes the dull competence

of most of what is produced, that infuses life with idiosyncrasy, whimsy, brutality, to use one's art and craft to hold a mirror to a society that is bent on creating walls instead of peace.

They called me *Pagli*, mad girl, when i was growing up, and there is little anyone can learn from a mad girl. But there is no doubt this mad girl has learnt a lot from Mr. Bawa, including how to nourish her madness into beauty. I salute him today, we all celebrate him as a beacon of clarity and madness in a complicated world. It is a great pleasure to be embraced by the Bawa family, and I leave you in the hope that all of you remain true to the twin goddesses, beauty and truth, as long there is fire in your hearts.

Mira Nair

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