

# The physician at the movies

Peter E. Dans, MD

## The Namesake

Starring Kal Penn, Tabu, Irrfan Khan, Jacinda Barrett, and Zuleikha Robinson.

Directed by Mira Nair. Rated R. Running time 122 minutes.

This is a film that I very much wanted to like, and there is much to commend it. The couple at its center is so representative of the genuineness of the Indian people, and the scenes in Calcutta (Kolkata, if you prefer) and Agra so vivid, that they evoked warm and nostalgic feelings of my time there in 1963. Yet the filmmakers and I parted company half-way through, when the film hit some inauthentic notes that caused me to stop being an engaged viewer and to become an external critic. Despite its beauty, and the remarkable color for which the director is known, the film seemed to drag to the two-hour mark. If you are going to see the film, **STOP READING HERE.**

*The Namesake* starts out well enough in the crowded Howrah railroad station, as Ashoke Ganguli (Irrfan Khan), a young student, settles in for his annual summer sojourn with his grandparents in the country. His carriage mate, the quintessential Indian philosopher, assumes an avuncular relationship to Ashoke, who is trying to read “The Overcoat” in his book of the collected stories of Nikolai Gogol. The older man keeps interrupting him with advice that he should see the world rather than read books about it. “Go to London, go to America,” he says. Ashoke replies that, to the contrary, his grandfather told him, “That’s what books are for, to travel the world without moving an inch.” Suddenly, there is a horrific crash and all the passengers seem to be dead until a rescuer sees the book on Ashoke’s chest moving and realizes that he is still alive. We next see him recovering at home with a broken leg and other injuries as a statue of a goddess is lifted outside his window, one of many Indian rituals faithfully pictured by Ms. Nair, the Calcutta-born director of *Monsoon Wedding*, *Salaam Bombay!*, and *Vanity Fair*. The accident presumably prompts Ashoke to emigrate to America to study.

In the next scene we see a lovely young lady, Ashima (Tabu), returning from school to find that her parents are entertaining Ashoke and his parents during his three-week return to arrange a marriage. On the way to the living room where her presence has been requested, she tries on Ashoke’s wing-tip shoes, which fascinate her. When she recites a stanza from a Wordsworth poem, Ashoke’s father finishes it, sealing the deal. On arriving in America, the couple settles into a cold apartment in what appears to be Queens. Ashima is freezing and unhappy as Ashoke immediately leaves for a faculty meeting at a local college. Parenthetically, the book of the same name by Jhumpa

Lahiri on which the film was based was set in Cambridge, with Ashoke teaching at MIT; it’s not clear why the venue was changed. Ashima tries to do the laundry in his absence, shrinks the clothes, and begins crying when Ashoke scolds her. She locks herself in a room before yielding to his apologies. She watches her husband go off to his world each day, leaving her in isolation. There is little time for these two strangers to get to know one another. So as not to alarm her family, Ashima sends them letters telling them how wonderful life is.



Tabu and Irrfan Khan in *The Namesake*.

Credit: Abbot Genser.

I began to stop suspending disbelief at the point when Ashima gives birth to the couple’s first child. The sequence was filmed in a hospital on Welfare (now Roosevelt) Island with the 59th Street Bridge in view. I was okay with the couple’s delay in naming the child (which must be done before babies are discharged). Our twins were Baby Boy A and B for a number of days while they were in intensive care at the Boston Lying-In. I was also all right when Ashoke suggests they name the baby Gogol as the formal name, and later will give him his “good” or “pet” name, Nikhil. What troubled me was the absence of the woman’s mother. Since both their families are decidedly middle-class and very traditional, I would have expected that either Ashima would have gone to India to have the baby or that the mother would have flown to the United States (which the family could afford) to help her care for the first-born, especially since it’s a boy. Indeed, this maternal presence is common in almost all cultures. It seemed that the filmmaker was making a conscious effort to show the competition between American and Indian cultures, rather than the couple blending with American culture. Ashima says, “I don’t want to raise our son in this lonely country.” Later the film



shows all the cultural downsides of living in a “foreign” land.

There’s a beautiful scene at the shore as Ashoke takes the young Gogol to the water’s edge, while Ashima stands next to the car holding their newborn girl Sonia and tells them to be careful. Realizing that he forgot his camera, he tells Gogol that they will just have to “remember the time we came so far that we could go no further.”

The children turn into intelligent adolescent brats treating their parents contemptuously. Gogol smokes pot with his friends, and in a particularly jarring scene he’s doing a wild dance while playing air guitar to blaring music in his room after his graduation. His father looks in at the door, stupefied. Finally, Gogol sees him and tells him that he’s all right, but makes no move to turn down the volume. Ashoke says that he has come to give him a present of Nikolai Gogol’s stories. Gogol finally lowers the volume, takes the book, and throws it on the desk. Ashoke quotes Dostoyevsky: “We all came out of Gogol’s Overcoat,” and recounts the story of the accident. Gogol wants to know if that’s all Ashoke thinks about when he sees him. Ashoke assures him that he reminds him of all that came after: “Every day since then has been a gift.”

Gogol becomes infatuated with a WASP girl when he matriculates at Yale, and spends the Christmas holidays with her parents at the Hamptons and in their posh New York apartment, while Ashima decorates her house with Christmas trimmings. This sets the scene for the most improbable events. Ashoke is set to go to Ohio to teach a six-month semester and asks Ashima to go with him. She refuses. This made no sense to me given that they have grown together for over twenty years and their love is palpable. We see Ashoke enter a barren apartment. Then we see him calling her from a phone booth in a hospital to say he’s got indigestion and that he’s been waiting for two hours and has yet to be seen, but he’s okay. Why call and worry her? Especially since any self-respecting moviegoer knows that he’s not long for this world, which Ashima learns much later, and becomes hysterical.

After Ashoke dies, Gogol goes to the apartment and has an epiphany. He goes all Bengali, shaving his head, dumping his WASP girl friend, having an Indian wake in America, and going back to Calcutta to scatter Ashoke’s ashes in the Hooghly, a tributary of the Ganges. He even follows the advice of his mother and her family that once he’s “had his fun,” he should marry a Bengali. Only the one he chooses is someone he appropriately turned up his nose at during his rebellious American period. She turns out to have become more Westernized and sexually liberated than even he, as she continues an affair with her Parisian boy friend after their marriage and is insensitive to things he considers personal between them. Sonia also does an almost 180 as she becomes a dutiful daughter but marries a non-Indian, which is okay with all.

There were particular scenes that resonated with me. The first was when grandma tells the servant to get only BATA brand shoes for Gogol when the family makes its sole trip to

Calcutta; that was the brand preferred by the middle class in 1963 as well. The second was when grandma sends her servant to run after Gogol when he decides to take a jog through the crowded streets (the former being credible, the latter, not). Mrs. Dutt, who administered our program, was equally solicitous to us “boys” (we were junior residents), even though she said we spoke “American,” not English. Also evocative were the many scenes of the very prominent Howrah Bridge; the people going down to the Hooghly River to pray and bathe: the incomparable Taj Mahal, and the contrast with the Victoria Memorial, which can’t hold a candle to it, and where I watched a snake charmer orchestrating a battle between a mongoose and a cobra. Ashoke’s name reminded me of taking a picture of a doctor named A. Ganguli standing proudly in front of his home office next to a sign indicating that he was a “gold medalist.” Finally, I could empathize with Gogol, who refuses to get into a rickshaw with his mother and sister because he can’t think of himself being pulled along by another human—which was my reaction. However, in *City of God*, the protagonist, a rickshaw driver, makes the case that this is how he can afford to raise his family and many middle- and upper-class Indians had no such qualms.

Maybe I’m being too Pollyanna-ish or just identifying with Ashoke, but I don’t think that, as much as the first generation Indians acculturated in America, they would be allowed to be so patronizing to their parents even if they were so inclined. I’d be interested in the take of readers of Indian descent.

## Waitress

Starring Keri Russell, Jeremy Sisto, Cheryl Hines, Nathan Fillion, and Andy Griffith.

Written and directed by Adrienne Shelly. Rated PG-13.

Running time 104 minutes.

Like *Sideways*, *Waitress* is another film over which the critics gushed, calling it “a little slice of heaven” (*Chicago Sun Times*) and “close to perfection” (*Wall Street Journal*). A glowing review in the “Family Filmgoer” section of the *Washington Post* noted that it is “not for middle schoolers.” That’s not much of a concession, given that it’s rated PG-13. To my mind, the most appealing things about this picture are the actress who plays the central role and the pie concept. But like those high-calorie showy desserts that are enticing until you take the first bite and come up with air and a cloying sweetness, the movie soon left me disappointed. The waitress Jenna, played by Keri Russell, best known as the star of the television show *Felicity*, is perky, attractive, and well-coiffed. I mention the latter because Russell was told to cut her hair at the beginning of *Felicity*’s second season, which was blamed for the series falling ratings.

Jenna makes to-die-for pies to which she gives names like “Kick in the pants” and “I hate my husband.” My first reaction was what is this pie genius doing playing a harassed waitress in



Keri Russell in *Waitress*.

Credit: Alan Markfield

Joe's Diner in the middle of nowhere? My second was how can this woman, who could have had her pick of the crop, marry an abusive creep like Earl (Jeremy Sisto), who drives up to the diner to take her home and honks the horn expecting her to run right out? He is a jealous control freak who takes the money she earns and knocks her around. When Jenna skips a period after Earl gets her drunk to have sex, she goes to her female OB-Gyn only to find that she has taken on a new *locum tenens*, handsome Dr. Pomater (Nathan Fillion), who confirms the pregnancy and congratulates her. She doesn't want Earl's baby or congratulations. "This is not a party," she says; so he "un-congratulates" her. She tells him she wants maximum drugs and complains that they never tell you about the downsides of pregnancy like "being nauseous." (This is one of my pet peeves. She meant "being nauseated" rather than "being nauseous" which means inducing nausea, but maybe this was a subtle commentary on the picture.)

Although she decides to carry the child, she has angry conversations with the poor thing, calling it an "alien" and a "parasite." In between vomiting, she makes "Damn you child," "I don't want Earl's Baby," "Pregnant, miserable, self-pitying loser," and "Baby screaming its head off in the middle of the

night and ruining my life" pies. At the second visit, she hops on the clueless but more than willing Dr. Pomater and they begin a torrid affair. When they are about to run away together, she breaks her water and has an unconvincing delivery. She refuses to look at the baby at first but finally does so and has an epiphany and says "Oh, my God" and decides to keep her. She tells Earl to hit the road and after meeting Pomater's very nice wife who came to do a residency at the hospital (that's why he came there in the first place) and seeing how much the wife adores him, she rejects his offer to run off with her and the baby, and dumps him too. She gets discharged prematurely when Earl refuses to pay the bill and goes off with her two waitress friends. Her pie-making came from being bonded with her genius pie-maker single mother and she replicates that with the daughter.

I'm not much into labels but it is fair to call this a feminist picture. The women are all strong and the men are all weak. Besides creepy Earl and the doctor who cheats on his sweet wife, the other men in the picture include Old Joe (Andy Griffith), the diner owner. Griffith makes the most of a small part as a cantankerous, dirty old man who stops by each day for a regimented lunch featuring Jenna's pie. He is especially good in the scene in which he describes his favorite pie. Then there's Cal (Lew Temple), the obnoxious diner manager, who is married but having sex in the kitchen with Becky (Cheryl Hines), Jenna's hard-boiled sidekick and adviser. Becky is also married and explains her affair by her inability to have sex with her husband, who presumably has been out of it for years from Alzheimer's. Finally, there's Ogie (Eddie Jemison), a nerd who is sweet on Dawn (Adrienne Shelly), the klutzy waitress of the trio. Jenna and Becky advise her to reject his requests for a date because he's a tax auditor, spouts terrible "spontaneous" poetry, is ugly, and has few social skills. He persists and marries Dawn in the diner. Ogie is the best of the lot; his support and Old Joe's legacy to Jenna after he dies during surgery help the three women establish their own diner.

My greatest disappointment with this picture is its trivialization of a very important issue, sex with patients. I became energized about this issue after hearing a family doctor, who was responsible for some of the babies he delivered in rural Maryland, tell the Board of Discipline that he had never heard in medical school that sex with patients was a no-no. I made sure that we included this subject in the required first-year course Ethics and Medical Care that I directed at Hopkins from 1983 to 1991. Some students later told me that it was not really covered in their clinical years, when, whatever their sexual orientation or gender, students found themselves attracted to their patients. Admittedly the subject is uncomfortable and one that no one likes to talk about, but it's important. Maybe medical schools and residency programs need the equivalent of those radio spots that advise parents to talk to their children about sex.

Addendum: One sad note about this film is that Adrienne



Marion Cotillard plays Edith Piaf in *La Vie En Rose*.

Photo credit Bruno Calvo.

Shelly, the screenwriter, director, and actress (Dawn) was murdered in her New York office/apartment shortly before the film opened. Because she was found hanging in the bathroom, it was thought to be suicide at first, but a shoeprint on the toilet led to an illegal immigrant from Ecuador whom Shelly had confronted about noise from his renovation of the apartment below.<sup>1</sup> The five-foot-two Shelly apparently slapped him and he knocked her unconscious. Fearing that he would be deported, he carried her up to her apartment and because he was only five feet tall had to climb on the toilet to hang her from the shower rod. Talk about truth being stranger than fiction.

#### Reference

1. Chung J. Adrienne Shelly's murder caused by construction noise. Gothamist.com 2006 Nov 7. [gothamist.com/2006/11/07/shellys\\_murder.php](http://gothamist.com/2006/11/07/shellys_murder.php).

#### La Vie en Rose

Starring Marion Cotillard, Sylvie Testud, Gerard Depardieu.  
Written and directed by Olivier Dahan. Rated PG-13. Running time 140 minutes.

This is a maddeningly confusing picture because of the extreme use of flash-forwards and -backs. It's also too long by twenty minutes. That said, it's worth seeing for the extraordinary performance of Marion Cotillard as Edith Piaf and,

of course, for the music. Both my guest and I unknowingly had the same reaction after seeing the film as the *Wall Street Journal* critic Jon Morgenstern, when he wrote: "In the spirit of Edith Piaf's signature song, I regret nothing about *La Vie en Rose*—not the narrative confusion, not the sketchy details, not the lack of historical context or the music-video editing."<sup>1</sup>

In some respects it's better than many of the straight-ahead biopics downplaying a star's seamier side. If anything, this film wallows in it. There's Piaf's mother, who begs for money and neglects Edith (named for the heroic nurse Edith Cavell), finally dropping her off at her mother's house. Her father returns from the front in World War I to find Edith full of sores, and takes her to his mother's house, a bordello in Brittany, while he pursues his career as a contortionist in the circus. Edith develops severe conjunctivitis in both eyes and is temporarily blinded. The prostitutes chip in for her to go to the shrine of Therese of Lisieux and she is cured (although her taking off the bandages over her eyes in broad daylight should have been accompanied by marked photophobia). Interestingly, this devotion to St. Therese continued throughout her life, as the film shows.

Her father comes back for Edith, and she joins him in the traveling circus and later on the streets of Paris. As a teenager, she and a friend, Momone (Sylvie Testud), sing for money in Pigalle under the auspices of Albert the pimp, who threatens them with being put to work as prostitutes if they don't bring in

## The physician at the movies

enough money. Meanwhile her daughter, Marcelle, born to her and a local delivery boy, dies of meningitis. She is discovered by Louis Lepage (Gerard Depardieu), who convinces her to change her outfits and gives her the new name of Piaf (“sparrow”) because of her four-foot-eight stature, the genesis of her nickname “Little Sparrow.” When Louis is murdered, ostensibly by Albert, she is accused of being an accessory to murder but is released. All this is packed into only twenty years.

Edith is fortunate to come under the tutelage of Raymond Aso (Marc Barbe), who polishes her singing and diction, while his colleague, Marguerite Monnot (Marie Armelle Deguy), writes the songs that make her famous. Her affair with Marcel Cerdan (Jean-Pierre Martins), the Algerian boxer and married father of three who beat Tony Zale for the world middleweight title in 1948, is the only one that the film focuses on, ignoring other celebrity lovers like Charlie Chaplin, Charles Aznavour, Yves Montand, etc. This is probably because Cerdan is said to have been “the love of her life”; a picture entitled *Edith and Marcel* was made in 1983 by Claude Lelouch, starring Marcel Junior. Cerdan’s death aboard an Air France plane that crashed in the Azores in 1949 was largely responsible for her subsequent despair, which, along with injuries in an automobile accident, led to her descent into morphine addiction and alcoholism.

Cotillard is remarkable in portraying the stooped-over hag-like Piaf, a transformation that took almost five hours of makeup artistry to achieve. As for the songs, she convincingly mimes Piaf, most of whose “greatest hits” are included. If you like Piaf, see the film, but be ready to be turned off by some scenes. It’s mostly in French with subtitles.

*La Vie en Rose* brought to mind the stories of Judy Garland and Billie Holiday, who also kept singing to the end with severe debilitating addictions. It raises the old question, “Does one have to go through all that depravity, drug and alcohol addiction, consorting with lowlifes, and having multiple lovers to live the lyrics or to be successful an artist?” When we had this conversation in another context, my wife Colette pointed to the happily married and certified genius Felix Mendelssohn, whose life, though short (he died at thirty-eight), mirrored his first name. Then again, he may have been the exception that proved the rule.

### References

1. Morgenstern J. ‘La Vie en Rose’ is stark, passionate Edith Piaf biopic. *Wall Street J* 2007 Jun 8: W1–W2.
2. Picturehouse. *La Vie en Rose* Production Notes. New York: Time-Warner; 2007.

Dr. Dans (AQA, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, 1960) is a member of *The Pharos’s* editorial board and has been its film critic since 1990. His address is:

11 Hickory Hill Road  
Cockeysville, Maryland 21030  
E-mail: pdans@comcast.net

## One of us

You would have loved to see them—  
fourteen kinetic bits of life,  
paddling in a fresh-hatched frenzy,  
a fountain for a pond.

Right here we’d rest your chair,  
the wig set aside, the sun warmed  
your body even to the cells  
taking over your bones.

Your patients got a little extra care,  
a mindful touch. Each minor complaint  
sanctified by their dying doctor living  
as if training would one day end.

I wasn’t there that last day,  
not by your bed to comprehend  
the remnants not entirely you,  
as dry as a grasshopper  
abandoned by the dawn.

I watch a bit more at the spot  
where you used to sit,  
while the last chill pales  
and new pink petals rise.



Erica Aitken

Wynne Morrison, MD

Dr. Morrison is assistant professor in the Department of Anesthesiology and Critical Care at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, and attending physician in Critical Care and Palliative Care at the Children’s hospital of Philadelphia. Her address is: 34th Street and Civic Center Boulevard, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. E-mail: morrisonw@email.chop.edu.