San Francisco International Film Festival 2010 Part 4: An Indian masterpiece

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on the 2010 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 22-May 6.

The work of renowned Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray has been showcased by the San Francisco film festival since its launch in 1957, the year the festival premiered the director's first film, *Pather Panchali*. The festival has since shown more films by Ray than by any other director. In 1992, it posthumously awarded him the Akira Kurosawa Award for Lifetime Achievement in Directing.

Ray (1921-1992), born in Kolkata, West Bengal, is one of the most prominent directors in the history of Indian cinema. A prolific artist, he directed 36 films, including features, documentaries and short subjects. Among his most celebrated are the Apu trilogy: *Pather Panchali* (1955), which concerns itself with the grim struggle for survival of a poor Bengali family and is the first movie from post-independent India to attract major international critical attention, *Aparajito* (1956), and *Apur Sansar* (1959). The three films are based on a modern classic of Bengali literature, the semi-autobiographical novels of Bibhuti Bhusan Banerjee. (See: "'Art wedded to truth must, in the end, have its rewards'")

In 1947 Ray co-founded the Calcutta Film Society, which screened American, European and Soviet films. Significantly, the Society was established the year of the India-Pakistan partition, a tragedy of immense proportions. One million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims died in its aftermath, and some 14 million people were forced to leave their homes—the greatest human migration ever recorded. The trauma of this communalist nightmare undoubtedly helped shape Ray's evolution, including his cosmopolitan appetite for world cinema.

Ray was drawn into independent filmmaking after meeting French filmmaker Jean Renoir in Kolkata in 1949. He assisted Renoir with his 1951 movie set in Bengal, *The River*. *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica,1948) was also hugely influential on Ray, a film he viewed during a trip to Europe in 1950. The Italian neo-realist classic was one of close to 100 movies he saw during his several months on the continent.

In the mid-1950s, American filmmaker John Huston became impressed with Ray during a trip to Kolkata. Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa was also acquainted with the Indian director, about whom he said, "To have not seen the films of Ray is to have lived in the world without ever having seen the moon and the sun." Like Charlie Chaplin, Ray, an accomplished musician, composed music for many of his films and wrote all of his own scripts.

Ray's cinema, marked by a variety of cultural influences, conflicted with the commercial mainstream Hindi cinema of the mid 1950s. It embodied an alternative tradition, a serious realistic strain of filmmaking, rather than the dominant style of fantasy and melodrama characteristic of the song and dance epics of Bollywood, India's "national" cinema style. Ray's films aspired to something more universal.

Jalsaghar (1958) [*The Music Room*], considered to be one of Ray's masterpieces, was screened at the San Francisco festival this year. The film has been restored by Academy Film Archive with funding provided by the Film Foundation, the organization devoted to preserving and repairing important films, set up by director Martin Scorsese and others in 1990. (Renoir's *The River*, coincidentally, is another of the Foundation's projects.) According to the Film Foundation, "When the Academy Film Archive restored Ray's film, it had to work with extremely compromised and damaged materials—the finished product is something close to a miracle."

Based on a novel by the Bengali writer Tarashankar Banerjee, the movie, commented Ray, is a "story of decaying feudalism, embellished with music."

In 1930s Bengal (in northeastern India), Huzur Biswambhar Roy (Chhabi Biswas) is one of the last of the *zamindar*, originally hereditary tax-collectors established by the British colonialists as landowners, who flourished in the 19th Century. From the flat roof of his dilapidated palace overlooking a property steadily being eroded by a river, he lounges majestically on a stuffed chair. "What month is it?" Roy carelessly asks one of his servants, who is clearly alarmed by his master's distracted mental state. The question would appear to indicate something about how "out of date" (literally) and distanced from reality the landowner is.

Little is left of the privileged state to which his aristocratic bloodline once entitled him. He retains nostalgia and delusions of grandeur, but his cash is rapidly running out. He risks being overtaken in every sphere by his closest neighbor, the vulgar moneylender Mahim Ganguly (Gangapada Basu), a lower-caste parvenu. Ganguly has wealth, which provides him with a new mansion, electricity and a car, while Roy can barely afford to maintain his cherished, but aging horse and ceremonial elephant.

Roy's passion is music, or more precisely, his music room. Its mammoth, candlelit chandelier and columns—with peeling paint—are the vestiges of former magnificence. Roy recalls his son's initiation ceremony for which famous musicians were hired. It was a display of opulence that was paid for by pawning his wife's jewelry.

The next concert takes place on a stormy night. As the recital gets underway, Roy notices an insect trapped in his drinking glass. An ominous sign. He soon learns that his wife and son have perished in the tempest, after he has autocratically ordered them to return from a trip in time for the occasion. The music room is closed up. The aging aristocrat falls into depression.

After a long period of withdrawal, Roy is again roused to compete with Ganguly and prove that "blood" is what matters. He depletes the remainder of his resources for one last concert. Toasting the portraits of his ancestors, he notices a spider crawling over his own painted image. Even the smallest creatures have no respect for his station. There is nothing left but to succumb to this cruel reality.

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Jalsaghar is an elegant film. Understated grey tones enhance its chronicling of the death agony of a social era. Images are saturated with a historical consciousness that coalesce around the great performance of Chhabi Biswas as the protagonist. (After Biswas [1900-1962], one of Bengal's leading character actors, was killed in an automobile accident, Ray admitted that he did not write a single male, middle-aged part that called for a high degree of professional talent.)

Cinema rarely achieves such a masterful combining of high art and politics. The film's delicate subtlety and quiet mood give way when the musical interludes erupt. It would be hard to top the dance segment performed by Indian classical dancer Roshan Kumari in the film's final concert. With bells on her ankles to augment the rhythm, Kumari's precise facial expressions and movements tell a story in the structure of a Kathak dance. (Kathak is the Sanskrit expression for "s/he who tells a story.") This amazing performance can be viewed on YouTube.

The movie's treatment of Roy is rich and complex. He is a self-involved fossil, pathetic from many points of view, and his fate is an inevitable consequence of social progress, yet it is also personally tragic. The passing away of old ruling classes always has its fascinating, colorful, painful side. The landlord's attachment to music is not feigned. And the film poses the question, perhaps inadvertently—will the new bourgeois elite have the same feeling for art? Roy's demise has Shakespearian overtones, which bring to mind the words of the Player King in *Hamlet*: "Our wills and fates do so contrary run/ That our devices still are overthrown,/ Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own."

Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky

In *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*, Dutch-born director Jan Kounen recounts the relationship between French fashion designer Chanel and Russian composer Stravinsky in a project whose sumptuous costume and décor attempt to mask an ideological and dramatic thinness.

In Paris 1913, an unknown Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel (1883-1971) hears the premier of Igor Stravinsky's (1882-1971) "The Rite of Spring" at the Theatre Des Champs-Elysées. The piece provokes a riot because of its radical musical structure.

Seven years later, Chanel, now a success, meets Stravinsky, a penniless refugee from the Russian Revolution, and invites him and his family to stay at her luxurious villa. The composer feverishly composes, the designer slinks around in her exquisite creations, while Stravinsky's neglected wife suffers from tuberculosis. Romance is as inescapable as its unhappy consequences. But the creative—and business—flow is uninterrupted. Coco develops her legendary perfume.

Anna Mouglalis as Chanel is fine and moves well in her costumes, while Mads Mikkelsen portrays the composer as a humorless, repressed stiff. Little is made of a time period that encompasses World War I and the Russian Revolution.

In fact, the film's production notes provide a clearer picture of the artistically fertile circles that Chanel and Stravinsky inhabited. Chanel collaborated with Jean Cocteau and Pablo Picasso for the theater; she financially supported Stravinsky, impresario Sergei Diaghilev, writer and poet Raymond Radiguet, and the surrealist poet Pierre Reverdy.

Appropriately, she is quoted as saying, "I created fashion for a quarter of a century. Why? Because I knew how to talk about my era."

And in 1920, according to the notes, Stravinsky associated in Paris with Cocteau, Picasso and legendary choreographer George Balanchine. After the death of his daughter and wife in 1938 and 1939, respectively, Stravinsky settled in Hollywood near the home of composer Arnold Schoenberg. There he met many European exiles such as conductor Otto Klemperer, writers Thomas Mann and Franz Werfel, and pianist Arthur Rubinstein, as well as British writers Dylan Thomas, Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden. Stravinsky advised Charlie Chaplin on his film scores.

State the movie's production notes: "Since 1913, the historical work ['The Rite of Spring'] has been considered to be the paragon of the modern era and remains the most choreographed pieces of ballet music of all time: after Nijinsky, Maurice Béjart, Pina Bausch, Martha Graham and Angelin Preljocaj have all staged this musical monument. More than a score, 'The Rite of Spring' remains a living arena for pioneering ideas and artistic liberty."

Virtually nothing of these extraordinary times and figures is captured in this flashy dual biography.

Julia

French director Erick Zonka's 2008 movie *Julia* was introduced at the San Francisco festival by critic Roger Ebert, who was recognized at a special event May 1 for having "enhanced the public's knowledge and appreciation of world cinema for more than 40 years." On hand to pay tribute were filmmakers Philip Kaufman, Errol Morris, Jason Reitman and Terry Zwigoff. In 1975, Ebert won the first Pulitzer Prize ever awarded for film criticism.

Starring Tilda Swinton in the title role, Zonka's film is essentially a pointless exercise in extreme behavior. The movie's production notes get it right: Julia is "an alcoholic…a manipulative, unreliable, compulsive liar, all strung out beneath her still flamboyant exterior…her alcohol-induced confusion daily reinforces her sense that life has dealt her a losing hand…. As the story unfolds, Julia's journey becomes a headlong flight on a collision course, but somehow she makes the choice of life over death."

The filmmakers depict Julia's crazed, out-of-control behavior in a superficial fashion, as a thing in itself, detached from life around her. The approach is fairly typical in French filmmaking in particular at the moment. Not really willing, or able, to explore what goes on between people in our tense, volatile times, the filmmakers take the easy way out: emotional or sexual fireworks, that go nowhere in the end. They never ask, or don't permit themselves to ask, what is the source of anti-social and violent behavior? What type of environment produces people who are as unhinged as Julia? Not much is really taken seriously. The results are weak.

When the emotional and physical commotion dies down, what's left is a banal moralizing—and *Julia* is a case where some effort has gone into squeezing out a moral. The filmmakers offer us the erroneous—and lazy—notion that the world is made up of individual psychologies and if people could just "straighten themselves out," by some heroic effort ("*somehow* make the choice of life over death"), heaven might be created on earth.

The unfortunate part is that Zonka's two previous films, *Le petit voleur* [*The Little Thief*] (1999) and *La vie rêvée des anges* [*The Dreamlife of Angels*] (1998) were decent.

To be continued

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