



SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

The Music Room (Jalsaghar)

‘*The Music Room* is a deeply felt, extremely tedious film. On the one hand its western derivations are patent (the Greek-revival mansion no more than the Chekhovian theme). On the other hand its chief indigenous element, the Indian music, is simply uncongenial and tiresome to our ears. No doubt these are excellent musical performances for those who understand them, but they make us start counting the bulbs in the theatre chandelier.’

So wrote the American critic Stanley Kauffman, when the film was released in the United States in 1963. At the same time, his colleague on the *New York Times* – none other than Bosley Crowther who had dismissed *Pather Panchali* – wrote, ‘I wish I had space to be more voluble about the special felicities of this film – about the delicacy of the direction, about the performance that Chabi (sic) Biswas gives as the decaying landowner, about the pathos of Padma Devi as his wife, about the eloquence of the Indian music and the aura of the *mise en scène*.’

To Satyajit Ray’s surprise, *The Music Room (Jalsaghar)* is a film that excites passions abroad and enjoys a minor cult status. Its showing in Paris in 1981 was largely responsible for opening French eyes to Ray’s films after years of indifference. The anonymous London *Times* critic in 1962 felt that it ‘offered pleasures of unique delicacy and refinement’, and Derek Malcolm, writing in 1975, described it as Ray’s ‘most perfect film’. But when he made it in 1958, says Ray today, ‘I didn’t think of it as a film which would export at all.’

The Music Room is his only film, with the possible exception of *The Goddess*, in which the central character has no capacity for change. It shows a man living in his past, finally destroyed by his own inflexibility.

The film is based on a well-known Bengali short story by Tarasankar Banerjee. It drew Ray for several reasons: partly because the audience would know the story, partly because the main character interested him, but mostly because it offered legitimate scope for music and dancing, the ingredients that Bengali producers have always sought from a director. At a time when concerts of Indian classical music were full to overflowing, this would be the first film to employ such music and dancing as an integral part.

The fact was that in late 1956, after the failure of *Aparajito* at the box office, Satyajit Ray knew that he needed a winner. As he put it then, in a letter, ‘I am more or less back where I started from. Bank balance is low and the future looks none too rosy ... One thing is certain: I have to make money on [my next film] if I am to continue as a filmmaker and not revert to advertising.’

His intention had been that the film should be more frivolous than it turned out to be, using music of a lighter, less austere nature. But his true feelings towards the character and the music, combined with those of Vilayat Khan, the composer, ended by modifying the original idea. ‘In the process of writing the screenplay,’ remarks Ray today, ‘it became a fairly serious study of feudalism and also the music became very high-classical stuff.’ In May 1957, as shooting began, he wrote to Marie Seton that the film was ‘a rather showy

piece about a decadent music-loving zamindar and his fantastic efforts to uphold family prestige'; but in a letter of February 1958 it had become a 'brooding drama'.

The discovery of the palace was a story in itself. Ray and his team had just inspected their 30th nobleman's palace and rejected it, when an old man in a tea shop overheard them talking and suggested they visit the palace of the Chowdhurys at Nimtita on the border with East Pakistan (as it then was). Without much hope, they agreed to go.

'Nimtita turned out to be everything that the old man claimed – and more. No one could have described in words the feeling of utter desolation that surrounded the palace,' wrote Ray in his gem of an article 'Winding route to a music room'. The owner was a seventy-year-old zamindar who knew one of Ray's grand-uncles and who was the antithesis of Biswambhar Roy: he neither drank alcohol nor listened to music. But he had experience of that kind of behaviour through his late uncle Upendra Narayan Chowdhury, builder of the palace music room. (This last was the only disappointment for Ray; it was too small, so the film used a music room lovingly created by his art director Bansi Chandragupta.) By an amazing coincidence, Upendra Narayan was the very zamindar on whom the writer Banerjee had based his character, as Ray later discovered back in Calcutta when he told him about finding the palace at Nimtita.

The film's composer Vilayat Khan, like all the great Indian musicians until recent times, had grown up in the service of a rich patron and was wholly in sympathy with Biswambhar Roy; where Ray would have favoured 'an ironic edge' to the music, Vilayat Khan sought to convey only 'sweetness and greatness'. 'He wrote a lovely theme for Biswambhar Roy, which I was rather worried about,' says Ray. 'I wanted a more neutral kind of approach to the music to go with the zamindar, not suggesting that I was full of sympathy for him, but a kind of ambivalent attitude. But I liked Vilayat's theme as a piece of music and I felt the story would tell what I wanted to tell and the music would not interfere with my general attitude to feudalism.'

Though it has quite often been said that Ray shows his sympathy for the feudal order in his portrayal of Biswambhar Roy, there is not much evidence of this on the screen, other than by extrapolation from his clear contempt for the moneyed class personified by Ganguli, which has risen in India since the period depicted in the film. The zamindar, according to Eric Rhode for instance, 'is shown as the last representative of a civilisation Ray admires'. But according to Ray the film 'tries to show the inevitability of the old order being replaced by a new – but not necessarily better – system.' Certainly, there are aspects of the feudal world Ray does admire, but they are not those of, say, *Brideshead Revisited* many western admirers of the film adumbrate, that belong to a world of caste orthodoxy. 'The fact that the man doesn't know what is happening really, doesn't know the process of history, makes him a figure of pathos. He's pathetic, like a dinosaur that doesn't realise why it's being wiped out,' Ray says. 'But there is no doubt that the zamindars were real connoisseurs of music, and sponsors of music, and that musicians owed a great deal to them. Without the feudal lords music wouldn't have flourished the way it did, for long periods, starting from the Mughals.'

The Music Room still has the power to mesmerise us through its music, its expressionistic lighting, its utterly convincing sets (so much so that they at first fooled the *thumri* singer Akhtari Bai), and Chhabi Biswas' monumental

performance. Whether strutting around in sparkling white with a cockade and a riding crop, glancing in private at his meagre 'purse' for the dancer with disdainful resignation, subduing the vulgar Ganguli with a flick of his ivory cane, or staggering in drunken elation and depression around the music room, he is a formidable presence.

Andrew Robinson, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1989

THE MUSIC ROOM (JALSAGHAR)

Director: Satyajit Ray
Production Company: Satyajit Ray Productions
Producer: Satyajit Ray *
Assistant Directors: Sailen Dutta, Nityananda Dutta, Tapeswar Prasad
Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Based on a story by: Tarasankar Banerjee
Director of Photography: Subrata Mitra
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta
Sets: R.R. Sinde
Music: Vilayat Khan
Musicians: Dakshinamohan Thakur, Asish Kumar, Robin Majumdar, Imrat Khan
Sound: Durgadas Mitra

Cast

Chhabi Biswas (*Biswambhar Roy*)
Padma Devi (*Mahamaya, Biswambhar's wife*)
Pinaki Sen Gupta (*Bireswar, Biswambhar's son*)
Gangapada Bose (*Mahim Ganguli*)
Tulsi Lahiri (*Taraprasanna, the bearer*)
Kali Sarkar (*Ananta, the cook*)
Waheed Khan (*Ustad Ujir Khan*)
Roshan Kumari (*Krishna Bai*)
Begum Akhtar, Roshan Kumari, Waheed Khan, Bismillah Khan (*musician/dancers*)
Pratap Mukhopdya
Tarapada Nandy

India 1958
101 mins

* Uncredited

SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

The Music Room (Jalsaghar)

Mon 1 Aug 20:40; Sun 14 Aug 18:15

Charulata (The Lonely Wife)

Fri 5 Aug 18:20; Mon 8 Aug 18:15; Mon 15 Aug 14:30; Wed 17 Aug 20:40; Sat 27 Aug 12:00; Wed 31 Aug 20:45

Devi (The Goddess) + Pikoo

Sat 6 Aug 14:30 (+ pre-recorded intro by Sharmila Tagore); Sun 14 Aug 14:45

Teen Kanya (Three Daughters)

Sun 7 Aug 17:35; Sat 13 Aug 14:50

Kanchenjunga

Tue 9 Aug 18:20; Mon 15 Aug 20:50

The Expedition (Abhijan)

Wed 10 Aug 20:10; Sat 20 Aug 14:30

Kapurush (The Coward) + Mahapurush (The Holy Man)

Thu 11 Aug 18:00; Sat 20 Aug 20:20

Satyajit Ray Documentaries Programme 2

Tue 16 Aug 20:40; Wed 24 Aug 18:20

The Hero (Nayak)

Wed 17 Aug 18:10; Thu 25 Aug 20:40

Days and Nights in the Forest (Aranyer Din Ratri)

Thu 18 Aug 18:15; Sat 27 Aug 14:40

The Home and the World (Ghare Baire)

Sun 21 Aug 17:50; Wed 24 Aug 20:20

Peacock Theatre, 24 Aug – 3 Sep 2022

The Chess Players (Shatranj Ke Khilari)

Tue 23 Aug 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro by Shabana Azmi); Sun 28 Aug 14:40

Distant Thunder (Ashani Sanket) + Deliverance (Sadgati)

Sat 27 Aug 17:30; Mon 29 Aug 14:40

Enemy of the People (Ganashatru)

Sun 28 Aug 12:10; Tue 30 Aug 18:15 (+ intro by Ashvin Devasundaram)

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