

Headline: Ray of light still shines in the dark;Tribute;Satyajit Ray;Film;Screen
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The author Andrew Robinson recalls his meetings with the film director Satyajit Ray, one of the giants of world cinema.

YOU MIGHT not think that Satyajit Ray and John Huston, the larger-than-life director of *The Maltese Falcon* and *Moby Dick*, would have much in common. But when I was writing a biography of Ray in the 1980s, I received a letter from Huston about Ray and his work. "I recognised the footage as the work of a great filmmaker. I liked Ray enormously on first encounter. Everything he did and said supported my feelings on viewing the film."

The footage in question was from Ray's maiden venture, *Pather Panchali*. Huston saw it in a rough cut in Calcutta in 1954 and strongly recommended it to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where the film received its world premiere in 1955. Today, on the 50th anniversary of its release, *Pather Panchali* has become an enduring classic of world cinema, besides being the film that put Indian cinema on the international map. Even if you see nothing else by Satyajit Ray, none of his more than 30 feature films, you have to see *Pather Panchali*. This film, alone, was probably what persuaded the Hollywood Academy to give Ray an Oscar for lifetime achievement just before his death in 1992.

Akira Kurosawa, perhaps the greatest of Ray's admirers among his fellow directors, told me: "Mr Ray is a wonderful and respectful man. I feel that he is a 'giant' of the movie industry." Kurosawa's first impression of Ray when they met in Japan was of his great height, his candid manner and his piercing gaze. "It came to me spontaneously that such sublime creations could only be the work of such a man."

I too had the same feeling of harmony between the man and his films when I first met Ray. He had come to London to give an on-stage interview at the National Film Theatre in 1982, and the organisers had put him in the Savoy Hotel near by. I went there for an interview and almost immediately we started talking in detail about his films and his life. The conversation lasted more than three hours. His extraordinary articulacy did not strike me until afterwards, when I discovered from my tape-recording that he spoke in complete sentences, with punctuation. But I remember being surprised by the ease with which he fitted into a British context while remaining uniquely himself. Only when I got to know him better did he admit: "I don't feel very creative when I'm abroad somehow. I need to be in my chair in Calcutta!"

Eight months later, I arrived in Calcutta for the first time to watch the shooting of Ray's lavish period film *The Home and the World*, based on the novel by Rabindranath Tagore. I was commissioned to cover it for *American Cinematographer* - the ideal excuse to pry into every aspect of its production.

I soon got to know the city from a unique perspective: Ray on the hunt for props, costumes and materials to suit Tagore's period settings, in the shops and homes of his intricate network of relatives, friends and contacts. "Come any time. We are very busy shopping around getting props from people's houses," Ray had told me over the phone at my hotel -and he meant exactly that. I tagged along as he and

his assistants went calmly in pursuit of a wind-up gramophone of circa 1907 vintage, a pistol that originally belonged to Tagore's grandfather, imitation classical figurines and other objets d'art, and bric-a-brac of all kinds from a shop stuffed with the relics of the Raj. Everything we collected was put into his Ambassador car (a version of the 1950s Morris Oxford ubiquitous in India), then we all climbed in too and bumped over Calcutta's potholes towards the studios. I could imagine no other world-famous film director used to operating quite like this.

When I first entered his flat, I found Ray discussing the exact kind of button required by one of his costume designs with a member of his production team. This was typical of his attention to detail. No director, including Chaplin, was more personally responsible for his films. He wrote his scripts solo. He designed the sets and costumes. He acted out the roles for his actors with consummate nuance.

He operated the camera and he edited each frame. He composed the music. He even designed the credits and posters, having earlier worked as a graphic designer and illustrator.

Almost the only thing he chose not to do was act for his camera. He spurned offers from other directors too. Why not act, Marlon Brando once asked Ray in a televised conversation. "No, it's better behind the camera," he replied firmly (and a shade tactlessly). "It would be too tedious."

Calcutta is more prosperous today, but in Ray's time it was a byword for poverty and deprivation. The day I first visited the studios with him, there was an extended power cut and the studios were lit by hurricane lamps. Ray examined the almost-finished set and instructed his art director on the precise manner in which the curtains should fall, the shape of the half-moon windows above the doors and other details. "It looks rather spectral, doesn't it?" he said with a smile.

In the clear light of day, I realised what I had missed on our nocturnal visit: the primitive lighting arrangements, the lack of air-conditioning and the ineffective soundproofing. There were some very persistent pigeons roosting in the roof of the studio, which had sometimes to be driven off with stones so that shooting could continue. One of Ray's assistant directors volunteered: "We are proof against all hazards." Ray remarked, without a trace of affectation: "After all, we do have the bare essentials -and the rest is here, in my head. I don't think you need any more than that really."

About creativity, he once told me: "This whole business of creation, of the ideas that come in a flash, cannot be explained by science. I don't know what can explain it but I know that the best ideas come at moments when you're not even thinking of it. It's a very private thing really."

Satyajit himself was certainly very much a private person. Although he knew himself extremely well, he was guarded about revealing that knowledge to anyone else. This protective shell led many people, both at home in Bengal and in the wider world, to think of Ray as aloof and arrogant. But I never felt he was. I have yet to meet anyone with a genuine feeling for a subject that interested Ray who did not enjoy talking to him about it -cinema, music, painting, literature, a new scientific theory, cricket, the fast-changing face of Calcutta, or any of a host of other things, often quite unexpected. Late in life, he even developed an addiction to the one-armed bandits at a casino in Kathmandu.

"He's become a slot-machine freak," said his son with a grin, who shot a television film there based on one of his father's novellas.

Ray's friend James Ivory wrote to me that seeing Pather Panchali in the USA in the late 1950s "literally changed my life" -it set him on the road to directing films in

India, and then in the West. Satyajit Ray and his films changed my life too, and I shall forever be grateful to him.

FIVE SATYAJIT RAY FILMS NOT TO MISS:

* *Pather Panchali* (1955) - Ray's debut, and the first of the immortal Apu Trilogy (the other two in the series are *Aparajito* and *The World of Apu*). Probably Ray's most lyrical film, and still his most celebrated.

* *The Music Room* (1958) - An expressionist film, charged with beauty and dark passions, it opened French eyes to Ray in the 1980s.

* *Charulata* (1964) - To connoisseurs, perhaps Ray's most accomplished film (and his own favourite), for its ravishing and flawless evocation of the 19th-century Bengal renaissance.

* *Days and Nights in the Forest* (1969) - This wincingly funny comedy displays Ray's brilliant manipulation of ensembles and his unparalleled penetration of both masculine and feminine psychology.

* *The Chess Players* (1977) - Ray's only feature film in Hindi and with a Western star (Richard Attenborough), it interweaves the rivalry of two chess playing nawabs with the British colonial takeover of Lucknow in 1856.