

Satyajit Ray's underseen classic comes to Coolidge Corner

By Odie Henderson

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The late Indian director, Satyajit Ray, is best known for his influential “Apu Trilogy,” a Bengali language film series comprising “*Pather Panchali*” (1955), “*Aparajito*” (1956) and “*The World of Apu*” (1959). Adapted from two Bengali novels by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Ray’s trilogy is a bildungsroman that follows Apu from childhood to parenthood. These films are well-known contributions to Indian and world cinema, and remain Ray’s signature works.

Now, one of Ray’s lesser-known films, the 1970 dramedy “*Days and Nights in the Forest*,” has been given a 4K restoration by Janus Films. It’s playing at Coolidge Corner Theatre for a short run starting this Friday. If you haven’t seen any of the work of this great, humanist director, this particular film is a good place to start.

In a letter to a friend, Ray’s own description of the film was apt: “The first half has the appearance of a light comedy, but there’s a steady modulation to a serious key.” Through a familiar story of four men on a road trip of self-discovery, the director’s lyricism, sharp humor, and compassion for characters of all castes and classes shines through.

Like the “Apu Trilogy,” this is an adaptation. According to the press notes, Ray bought the rights to Sunil Gango-



Scenes from “*Days and Nights in the Forest*” by director Satyajit Ray.

padhyay’s 1968 novel after reading a Bengali magazine advertisement outline. He made extensive changes to the characters’ personalities and the narrative, shaping it into his own vision. The film is led by the wealthy and overconfident Asim, played by Ray regular Soumitra Chatterjee. The director made 14 films with Chatterjee, who also played Apu in “*The World of Apu*.”

Asim’s band of brothers includes the shy Sanjoy (Subhendu Chatterjee) and the jokester Shekhar (Rabi Ghosh) who, despite his penchant for debauchery, becomes the voice of reason. Rounding

out the quartet is Hari (Samit Bhanja), whose breakup with a woman has so traumatized him that his friends planned this excursion just to distract him. Before the trip ends, they’ll be forced to come to grips with their own attitudes towards those less fortunate, and will also learn some hard truths about themselves.

The adventure in rural Palamu, one of India’s tribal lands, begins with an example of how these men use class to get their way. They bribe a watchman into letting them stay at a sylvan guesthouse without a reservation. The impover-



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ished watchman risks his job because he desperately needs the money to help his very ill wife. The guys also rudely employ a servant, whom they mistreat at their peril.

This study of the fragile male ego is complemented by several female characters who know more than they let on, and are wise enough to know when to reveal the truth (or if they should reveal it at all). There’s the tribal Santhal woman, Duli (Simi Garewal), who attracts Hari’s attention. The other men are intrigued by their fellow middle class urbanites Aparna (Sharmila Tagore) and

her sister-in-law Jaya (Kaberi Bose), who invite them to brunch at their house.

Drunkenness prevents the meetup initially, but a later get-together with Aparna and Jaya results in the film’s signature sequence. A simple memory game implicitly reveals more about the characters than any direct dialogue can. This is a superb scene, one that impressed Wes Anderson so much that he cribbed it for one of his films. Anderson sheepishly points out this theft in the recorded introduction that plays before “*Days and Nights in the Forest*.”

If you need an American comparison to get you to see this superb example of directorial craft and beautiful black and white cinematography, think about the films of John Cassavetes. I could visualize Cassavetes, Ben Gazzara, and Peter Falk as the men and Gena Rowlands as an Aparna equivalent.

In an article on “*Days and Nights in the Forest*” in her 1976 book, “*Reeling*,” Pauline Kael wrote that “Ray’s work at its best, like this, has an extraordinary rightness in every aspect of its selection and presentation — the timing, performance, cutting, music — which seem to place it beyond discussion.” You can’t get a better recommendation than that.

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