

cinema

The legend of Satyajit Ray haunts Abu Dhabi

His imprint has been so deep that it has survived reels and reels of cinema – and, years and years of time. Ray is now gone for almost two decades, but his work lives on. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Satyajit Ray may or may not have been the best moviemaker that India produced, but his name lingers on. Even today, almost two decades after he died in 1992, no discussion on cinema India is complete or perhaps satisfying without a memory trip down the streets and studios of Kolkata where the man transformed the country's celluloid scene from one of essentially regional to one of significantly international.

When his *Pather Panchali* was first noticed at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival, though through a minor prize, it was a call for the world to wake up to the glories of Indian movies.

It, therefore, did not come as big surprise to me when during a group interview at the ongoing Abu Dhabi Film Festival with the legendary French actor, Gerard Depardieu, he was so excited to know that I was from India, "the land of Mr Satyajit Ray". "I have a very great regard for him", Depardieu said time and again during the 25-minute interview. And I could see the five other journalists from all over the world with me that morning getting a little uneasy over Depardieu's constant references to Ray, and attention to me and all things Indian.

"It is a great country, and it is great because, as Mr Satyajit Ray said, it is nation of mathematical geniuses", the French star, who does not wish to be labelled as one, added.

Ray's imprint has been so deep that it has survived reels and reels of cinema – and, yes, years and years of time. He is now gone for almost two decades, but his work lives on, and, what is more, India is often synonymously identified with Ray. Much of the world is still passionate about the fascinatingly classic cinema he created.

So is Srijit Mukherji, the young director from Bengal, whose first film, *Autograph*, had its world premiere at the Festival the other evening. He describes his movie as a tribute to Ray, and has drawn inspiration from the Master's classic, *Nayak*.

Both *Autograph* and *Nayak* describe a journey, a man's journey into his past. *Nayak's* Arindam Mukherjee (essayed by Bengal's celebrated matinee idol of the time, Uttam Kumar) and *Autograph's* Arindam Mukherjee (as well, played by Prosenjit Chatterjee) are forced by circumstance to take a long, hard

look at a life gone by.

The Kumar character, a big star, is forced into a train from Kolkata to New Delhi (because the flights are full), and on board he meets Aditi Sengupta (Sharmila Tagore), a young journalist who edits a serious women's magazine. She has but contempt for the likes of Mukherjee, and sets out to trap him through an interview. The man falls for the bait, and confesses to her his affair with a married woman. But, finally, Sengupta does not publish the interview, for she begins to understand his pain and pathos that stem from his loneliness.

In *Autograph*, there is similar situation, where Arindam Mukherjee, also a famous star, pours his heart out to a theatre actress (Nandana Sen) he gets fond of during a film shoot. In a way, the similarity between the two movies ends there – with *Autograph's* physical journey taking place not on rails but on a cinema set.

With Sen, Chatterjee and Indraneil Sengupta (who portrays Sen's screen lover and director of the movie he is making with her in the lead and Chatterjee essaying a film star), *Autograph* turns out to be a movie within a movie, and the shift from one level to another has been handled with a degree of finesse.

The story revolves around three people from the world of arts: a young director, a superstar and a theatre actress. Thrown together on a cinema set, they find their lives somersaulting.

The *Autograph's* script splits into two parallel strands, playing with the blurred boundaries between reality and the make-believe world of Tollywood (in Kolkata) stardom. The film moves continuously between the man and the super hero, who is both the manipulator and the manipulated. Off the sets, he has no qualms about luring a woman to the couch with a hollow promise. Yet, he seems vulnerable enough to let a young director destroy his public hallow. Finally, he punishes the director by punishing himself.

With gripping performances by actor Chatterjee as Mukherjee, and Sengupta as the director who convinces the star to act in the movie, as well as his girlfriend (Sen), *Autograph* is certainly one of the better Indian pictures in recent months.

Srijit Mukherji told me during a chat at Abu Dhabi that his love and admiration for Ray began as a child of eight. "I saw *Goopy Gyne*



* A portrait of Satyajit Ray – even almost two decades after his death much of the world is still passionate about the fascinatingly classic cinema he created.

Bagha Byne (The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha) and was absolutely enthralled by it. It was only later that I could unravel the layers beneath the fable, its strong anti-war message, for instance. Ray had this enormous power to reach out to a child as he could to an adult with very simple text and visuals. He could move the most complex of minds with a stunning economy of words and frame of images".

Taking a captivating, thoughtful approach to celebrity culture and the pitfalls of the movie world, *Autograph* has also been inspired by Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*. In fact, *Wild Strawberries* too deals with man's loneliness and a sense of disappointed frustration with a life lived till then.

While Bergman's work conveys this through the life of an elderly doctor, who on a 400-mile car drive with his daughter-in-law from Stockholm to Lund, re-assesses his life, confronted as he is by old age, unfulfilled dreams and nightmares, Ray's *Nayak* or Hero, too finds himself re-examining his past, his utter egotistical existence and his selfish affair with a married woman.

Mukherji says that he had also been a great fan of Uttam Kumar. "His charisma eludes an explanation. Old women looked upon him as their son, young women probably wrote letters to him with their blood and men adulated him. He was a phenomenon, whose acting may have been mannered and stylised, but was delightful to watch. He was one of the first to adopt nuanced acting, which was otherwise very theatrical in Bengal, and the rest of India."

Mukherji avers that he can see parallels between Uttam Kumar and Prosenjit Chatterjee. "A lot of people may find this comparison sacrilegious, but well. Kumar went beyond being a matinee idol and held an industry together for three decades. He used to bail out producers with very average scripts by agreeing to act in their films. In the same way, Chatterjee has held the industry together for about a quarter century."

And Mukherji immortalises this in *Autograph* by naming Chatterjee's character as Arindam Mukherjee. Is this a tribute to Mukherji's yesteryear hero, Uttam Kumar, or Bengal's current heart-throb, Prosenjit Chatterjee?

I wonder.

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