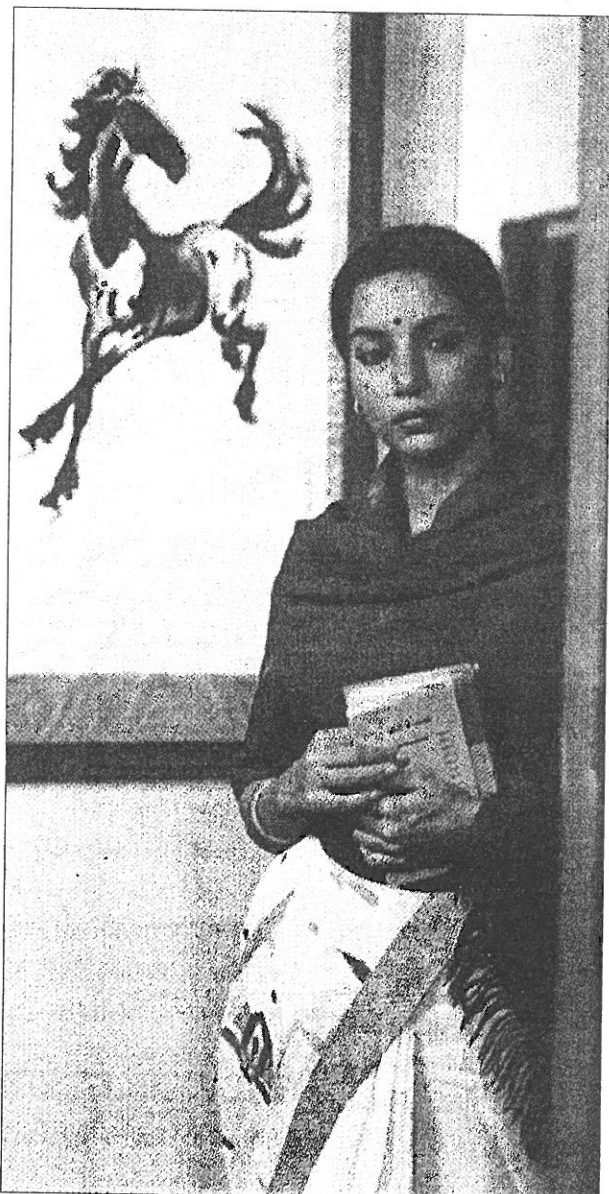


Ray and Sen highlight India film series



Suddenly One Day by Calcutta's Mrinal Sen is part of an upcoming Cinematheque series.



BY NOAH COWAN

Art-house aficionados are still mourning the death of famed Indian director Satyajit Ray.

Ray's demise was not unexpected: he was clearly on his last legs when he was awarded a lifetime achievement Oscar in March. At that time, I thought it would be interesting to learn how many of the assembled Hollywood crowd knew who Ray was (my guess, 25 per cent), and how many had seen one of his films (maybe 2 per cent).

Still, the Academy always gets it up for anyone struggling to survive, so Ray became Hollywood's hero for the night.

Toronto audiences have a chance to become better informed when Cinematheque Ontario screens Ray's last two films — in conjunction with other recent stellar Indian films — in its forthcoming Recent Films From India series.

The Oscar-night tribute was very fitting for the unique Mr. Ray. A love for '30s and '40s Hollywood cinema gave him respect for tight narratives (versus the dreamy languidness of his more Hindu-centric colleagues) and humanistic subject matters (Jean Renoir in particular). So even though his films were set in and to the music of his homeland, Ray looked for much of his aesthetic abroad.

As a result, Ray became one of the few non-Western directors seen consistently in American art houses. Recently, however, his work has not made it to the cinemas. Part of this is because of a general decline in the distribution of classic art masters.

But part of it also has to do with Ray's unwillingness to relinquish the stringent classicism that dominates his style, in an age where novelty (Almodovar) or maudlin melodrama (Tornatore) seem to be demanded of foreign-language

films.

Reviews of the two films shown in the series — *The Stranger* and *Ganashatru* — have been mixed. Both are based on classics of Western literature — Camus' *L'etranger* and Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* respectively. As such, they represent Ray doing what he does best: synthesizing Western and Eastern cultures in personal and engaging films.

At the risk of insulting the dead, I must say that I much prefer the works of Ray's "rival," Calcutta's Mrinal Sen. (I don't think any of his films have been released here, but David Overbey shows them religiously at the

RECENT FILMS FROM INDIA

Cinematheque Ontario, Backstage Cinema,
31 Balmulo St., 923-FILM, May 1-8

Festival of Festivals.)

I first saw Sen's work six years ago at the Festival. It was a lush, haunting film called *Khandahar: The Ruins*, which may be the best film ever made about the duties and responsibilities of an artist. His follow-up, *Suddenly One Day* — which, in some ways is the flip-side of *Khandahar* — is being shown as part of the Cinematheque series. I recommend it highly.

Suddenly One Day begins at the moment an upper middle-class Calcutta family realizes their patriarch has disappeared. The moody, aging writer has left no note and no explanation. His wife and the three children are nervous wrecks for the first few days, then become increasingly introverted and resigned to his disappearance. Prying neighbors and vulture relatives don't help matters much. Gradually, as the family discusses his life and their relationship with the man, we get a portrait of an artist increasingly obsessed with his own failure.

Sen does not dilute the emotional power of the film with endless flash-

backs — he makes only two very short, judicious introductions of other characters. The main characters are left to reconstruct their relationship with the writer largely through emotional outbursts and (amazingly) interacting with the physical space of this absence (that is, they act around where he should be).

The performances are breathtaking — particularly the incomparable Shabana Azmi, who plays his eldest daughter and the family member closest to the old man. Without ever declining into yecchy melodrama, she manages to show a dozen expressions of pain that wrench our souls. Really.

Sen has been a life-long Communist — but of the "fun" variety. That means that instead of engaging in boring polemics, he shows the ridiculous bourgeois pretensions of Calcutta's middle and upper classes with great wit and subtle irony. The humor constantly leavens what would otherwise be a very heavy and depressing movie.

Four other films of relatively high quality are being shown as part of the series. They are largely by younger directors, and provide a counterpoint to the two masters.

Aribam Syam Sharma's *The Chosen One* incorporates rare footage of the rituals of the Maibi cult in the story of a young woman who abandons her husband and child for the cult's guru.

Sivaprasad's *A Lake in Central Kerada* is a psychological thriller about a mysterious young woman who disrupts the lives of a fisherman and his wife.

Shaji's *Birth*, winner of more than a dozen international prizes, tells the tender tale of an old man who eagerly awaits the return of his son from university, unaware that he might have been murdered.

And Tapan Sinha's *The Death of a Doctor* recounts the story of an Indian doctor who discovers a vaccine for leprosy, only to have it claimed by two American doctors. ☞