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'Days and Nights in the Forest': American Premiere at the Inner Circle

By Gary Arnold

More or less by default, the Inner Circle has landed the American premiere of Satyajit Ray's beautifully titled and often beautifully felt comedy, "Days and Nights in the Forest."

The film, which opens today, should prove emotionally rewarding for patrons with an experienced, ongoing interest in the foreign-film market and the work of Satyajit Ray. "Days and Nights" is a flawed and perhaps "specialized" entertainment, yet it's also distinctive, quietly affecting, abundantly humane. It's the sort of deceptively unassuming movie that becomes more involving as it goes along and stays with you longer than you think it will.

Needless to say, it would also be helpful if local moviegoers repaid the Circle's interest in launching a neglected film by a great director. "Days and Nights" was shot in 1969 and introduced the following year at the Berlin festival. An enthusiastic response at the 1970 New York festival attracted an American distributor, Contemporary, but the company didn't get a nibble until the management of the Circle came along.

The material will be familiar to people who've seen the Eric Rohmer movies, "My Night at Maud's," "Claire's Knee" and "La Collectionneuse." Ray's characters are the Indian equivalent of Rohmer's — members of the "intelligentsia," the professional and leisure classes—and he observes similar romantic encounters and conflicts of manners and feelings in a similarly discreet, leisurely, unemphatic style.

For my taste, Ray's observation and understanding of these types are both more satisfying and more profound than Rohmer's. To put it another way, "Days and Nights in the Forest" seems as satisfying as "My Night at Maud's," the best

of Rohmer's civilized comedies. Rohmer's subsequent work has revealed a certain shallowness of feeling, a tendency toward caricature.

Ray is perhaps the least condescending director alive, and his film radiates a magnanimity of spirit, a breadth of affection and toleration that one misses in repeated exposures to Rohmer. The milieus are the same, but in the final analysis, Ray seems to possess a finer sensibility.

Ray's scenario involves four bachelor friends from Calcutta who have motored into the countryside for a brief holiday. The party consists of Ashim (Soumitra Chatterjee), a bored, self-assured young socialite; Sanjoy (Subhendu Chatterjee), a diffident young bureaucrat; Harinath (Samit Bhanja), a dumb, handsome athlete; and Sekhar (Rohi Ghose), the prattling, comical, endearing (and probably homosexual) mascot of the group.

The ostensible reason for the holiday is therapy for the athlete, a star cricketer who has just broken with his fiancée. The friends settle into a state-owned resort facility, vainly congratulating themselves on their ability to secure entrance without advance reservations and impervious to the difficulties their bribery and tenancy may create for the peasant caretaker, who's in no position to oppose them.

Ray recognizes the egotism and thoughtlessness of these men, but he never tries to "get" them. He's content to let them reveal themselves, to illuminate

the uncertainties of changes of feeling they experience in the course of a few days. The crucial experiences are new romantic attachments—the athlete is violently attracted to a voluptuous peasant girl; the bureaucrat is reluctant to respond to the overtures of a sensuous widow, the daughter-in-law of a nearby country gentleman; and the socialite finds

his self-esteem deflated but his better instincts at once agitated and enchanted by the country gentleman's daughter, a beautiful, per-

ceptive, independent young woman.

The latter relationship is the only one with "lasting" possibilities, uniting the most conscious of the men with the most conscious of the women, and it receives the greatest dramatic elaboration. It also reunites Soumitra Chatterjee and Sharmila Tagore, who were paired romantically in Ray's "The World of Apu" and "Devi," and from the moment the magnificent Miss Tagore appears on the screen, it's difficult not to

become infatuated with her and the film.

As a matter of fact, all three actresses—Miss Tagore, Simi as the local wench and Kaberi Bose as the widow—are pretty splendid creatures, guaranteed to make the men look a bit overmatched. However, Miss Tagore remains the principal spellbinder. At the age of 14, as Apu's young bride, she appeared to be the most beautiful adolescent actress since Elizabeth Taylor. Here, a decade later, she appears to be undergoing Tay-

lor's kind of physical ripening while demonstrating far more assurance and discretion as an actress. Presumably, she's been able to mature under considerably less commercial and mercenary auspices.

You may need to make some allowances for the look of the film. I think "Days and Nights in the Forest" is a movie that needs to be in color, that audiences might be more receptive to it if it had a distinctive subdued color design like "Elvira Madigan"

or "Claire's Knee." At the very least, it needs less severe contrasts in black and white. Despite his reputation, it's doubtful if Ray has ever had more than about \$50,000 with which to shoot a film, and it's obvious that he's forced to contend with a ferocious sun—the contrasts are frequently so harsh that the Indian countryside resembles a lunar landscape.

here, while Johnny Carson excuse the pressures of both money and time that sabotaged the pictorial and atmospheric possibilities in this setting and story. It's regrettable because the picture really ought to look as luminous as it feels. Still, the quality of Ray's sensibility is such that it neutralizes the flaws.

"Days and Nights in the Forest" can't put up much of a front, but its human and emotional resources are fundamentally sound and deep. If you don't mind the inconveniences, you may find this one of Ray's most appealing and memorable films.

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