

Document Citation

Title	Time to make a move
Author(s)	Tom Hutchinson
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Shatranj ke khilari (The chess players), Ray, Satyajit, 1977

Time to make a move

ALTHOUGH The Chess Players (A: Academy Cinema One) may differ in subject matter from previous films by the great Indian director, Satyajit Ray, it has one feeling in common with those more contemporary works: compassion. It may be his first historical drama but, as with all his films, one emerges from it feeling enriched by a loving comprehension of the ways of human beings.

The story concerns an incident in 1856, when the British reneged on their own treaty and annexed the Indian state of Oudh, taking the crown from King Wajid with whom they had a long friendship. The never-setting sun of Empire looked morally very bloodshot indeed.

In reconstructing that event, Ray does not hammer at the imperialists as though they were tentpegs of evil; he is more concerned with human nature than British perfidy. So that the General (Richard Attenborough), who is sent to wrest the king's abdication from him, has his own ethical doubts beneath the Scottish crust of his manner, while the king (Amjad Khan), a poet and voluptuary, secretly believes that he has been a bad ruler although loved by his people.

But Ray deals with that episode as though it were

almost an off-stage issue to what is his main narrative, which concerns the obsession of two Lucknow noblemen, Mirza (Sanjeev Kumar) and Mir (Saeed Jaffrey), for the game of chess. Huddled, as at a perpetual seance, over the game their addiction is as comic as it is profound, allowing Mir's wife easily to cuckold him, while Mirza's wife is driven to the desperation of violence by his mania: "It was better when you were deceiving me with that singing woman."

The two strands of story plait into the climax: the king gives up his throne and Mir turns on Mirza who has hinted at the wife's infidelity. The reconciliation is as expediently pathetic as their lives: "Who else would we play chess with?"

Ray's style is of an irony deepening into minor tragedy—not the tragedy of great men but of small, fallible people brought down by their own natures, not realising that Fate is playing them. The momentum may be judged as slow, but its accumulation of detail, its comedy, its emotional complexity and its remarkable sense of period makes it a most satisfying experience. We feel an understanding of a people at a particular time, partake of a culture in a specific place. Satyajit Ray's achievement may be diminished slightly as a peak when compared with the rest of his Himalaya-range but, as an artist, he still towers.