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Home > Kolkata > Talk

Friday , June 08, 2007

[Page One](#) | [News](#) | [Cinema](#) | [All Headlines](#)

TALK

Fate Of The Art

*Nemai Ghosh's collection of 90,000 photographs of Satyajit Ray gets another appeal for conservation. This time it comes with a documentary film directed by a Belgian jazz musician and admirer of Ray's films*

Shamik Bag

It was a chance discovery for Bo Van Der Werf, a jazz musician and composer in Belgium, who while rummaging through the office of Satyajit Ray in Kolkata stumbled upon a box filled with still photographs. The big red stamp on the lid of the box bore a legend — Copyright: Nemai Ghosh.

Bo's decision to come down to Kolkata eight years ago to shoot "a classic" documentary on Ray wasn't mere happenstance or a result of creative quirkiness. Ray, and his films, were not even chance discoveries, for ever since Bo watched a retrospective of Ray's films in Brussels, he was under a spell. "It was the spell of a faraway culture that was expressing its universality through its humanism. I started to be interested in cinema as a complex art form and not merely as entertainment. Ray's films, really, changed my life," Bo states.

But for viewers of Satyajit Ray Negatives, the Belgian's 52-minute film that was screened for the first time in India at Gorky Sadan recently, it was apparent that the film was as much about Ray as about the filmmaker's "artistic journey through the obsessive lens of Nemai Ghosh," mentions Bo.

It is a known fact that Ghosh, since the days of Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne, had shadowed Ray with his camera and ended up spending 25 years and taking "over 90,000 photographs of Ray," according to Ghosh. But the message Bo's documentary sends out in the end is not just one of a photographer's maniacal fixation with his subject, but also for the need of conserving the photographic "heritage".

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archive for the Ray negatives, Ghosh, when Bo met him in 1999, was busy air-conditioning the two rooms where the 90,000 negatives are kept, "fighting to preserve his treasure from time and humidity". Today, sitting at his Kalighat Road home and pointing to the wooden cabinets containing the negatives, Ghosh admits that it might just be a lost cause. "I can't keep the AC machine on 24 hours, and if I switch it off and on, there is added chance of humidity affecting the negatives. So what do I do?" he asks. "Nemai's work seemed to be vanishing in the collective memory," Bo adds. "Despite the exceptional quality and depth of this heritage, each photograph rendering all of Nemai's love and admiration, they are facing the threat of age. I was shocked to hear that he was not receiving any help."

The film that was broadcast on Belgian Television last year and at film festivals at Tehran, Budapest, Canada, Tiburon and Paris, nevertheless, views the work of Ray largely through the work of Ghosh. With Filipa Cardoso assisting, Bo's camera traces the steps of Ray to Nimtita where films like Jalsaghar and Devi were shot, and with actors Subir Banerjee and Uma Sen, visits the locale of Pather Panchali.

Possessing interviews of people who had been associated with Ray, like Madhabi Mukherjee, Dipankar Dey, Soumendu Roy, Sharmila Tagore, Soumitra Chatterjee, Subhendu Chatterjee, Chidananda Dasgupta, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Mrinal Sen, Dhritiman Chatterjee, Dinkar Kowshik, RP Gupta and Sandip Ray, Bo knows the footage, much of which had to be done away with at the editing table, is a veritable goldmine. "They are a treasure and all these information and testimonies are taken right from the source and coming from the hearts of people closely related to Ray. Hopefully, one day we will find someone interested in publishing these interviews," says the filmmaker is member of the jazz band, Octurn.

If the fulcrum of the film is Ghosh, "someone who has spent a lifetime for another", it is also about the "immense impact" Ray's artistry had on the documentary filmmaker. To sum up, Bo paraphrases noted film critic Derek Malcolm's opinion about Ray: "Most of Ray's films whisper quietly to us but shout inside".

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Top

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