



**JALSAGHAR (THE MUSIC ROOM)** is an LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd film release from the Criterion Collection.

**India 1958 black-and-white 100 minutes live action feature musical drama**  
**Satyajit Ray Productions Producer: Satyajit Ray**

**16 of a possible 20 points**

**\*\*\*\* of a possible \*\*\*\*\***

**Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance**  
**(j) designates a juvenile performer**

**Points:**

- 1 Direction: Satyajit Ray**
- 1 Editing: Dulal Dutta**
- 2 Cinematography: Subrata Mitra\***
- 2 Lighting**
- 1 Screenplay: Satyajit Ray from the short story "Jalsaghar" by Tarasankar Banerji**
- 2 Music: Vilayat Khan\***
- 2 Art Direction: Bansi Chandragupta\***
- 2 Sound: Durgadas Mitra\***
- 1 Acting**
- 2 Creativity**

**16 total points**

**Cast: Chhabi Biswas (Biswambhar Roy, zamindar, a patron of the arts), Padma Devi (Mahamaya, Biswambhar's wife), Pinaki Sen Gupta (j) (Khoka, a.k.a. Bireswar, son of Biswambhar and Mahamaya), Gangapada Bose\* (Mahim Ganguli), Tulsi Lahiri\***

(Tarapasanna, the estate manager), Kali Sarkar\* (cook), Waheed Khan (Ustad Ujir Khan), Roshan Kumari\* (Krishna Bai, dancer)

**Musicians and Dancers:** Begum Akhtar (singer), Waheed Khan (sitar player), Bismillah Khan (shehnai player)

**Offscreen Musicians:** Dakshinamohan Thakur, Asish Kumar (tamboura player), Robin Majumdar (singer-composer), Imrat Khan (sitar player)

**Singers:** Akhtri Bai (the thumri, romantic song) and Salamat Ali Khan (Kheyal, art song)

**JALSAGHAR (THE MUSIC ROOM)** is director Satyajit Ray's most musical drama, an attempt to introduce Indian classical music to both Western audiences and to Bollywood-saturated locals. Its failings derive from the double purpose set by Ray. To achieve maximum audience numbers, he chose to cast screen idol Chhabi Biswas in the lead role of Biswambhar Roy, a music-adoring aristocrat who neglects his estate and squanders inherited funds to appease a lust for sponsoring lavish concerts at his mansion.

An early half-hour flashback shows us an appalling price this zamindar pays for his obsession. Both wife and only child are drowned by a storm during an ill-advised journey home demanded by a peremptory paterfamilias. By using this reversion to the past early in the film, Ray provides audiences a rationale to explain the despairing indifference to humanity exhibited by his main character in later scenes.

Only the prospect of one-upmanship over nouveau-riche neighbor Ganguli stirs him from torpor. He, Biswambhar, will prove the superiority of good breeding and proper education over affectations of the younger man, whose interest in music is secondary to gluttony. Ganguli is occupied at concerts almost continuously with eating and drinking, much to the annoyance of real connoisseurs around him.

Choosing to set his tale at an estate disastrously close to the land-devouring Padma River, the director found visual exteriors perfectly matching story details. An eroding landscape, alternately dusty and flooded, paralleled the decaying life of raja-like Roy, who insists on being treated as royalty by peers and servants though signally lacking the wisdom and leadership that role requires. Persisting in using candles rather than electricity for illumination and electing infrequent elephant or horseback rides over car travel, the zamindar clings tenaciously to an unrecoverable past, neither understanding nor adopting progressive measures which would make life more comfortable for his servants.

Nor is the protagonist merely a patron of musicians. He has some musical talent himself, as witness his esraj playing as Khoka practices singing.

Since Roy is perched atop his palace in the opening scene of **JALSAGHAR**, he has nowhere to go but down as the story of a misspent life progresses. His decline parallels ruination of the family estate after son Khoka's death. Bats flit about in unswept corridors, a lone dog stirs up

dust wherever it travels, spiders and cobwebs accumulate, a prized mirror clouds with grime. Signs of decadence appear throughout the mansion and a dwindling band of servants reduces to loyal, underpaid duo.

Yet there's one extended moment of glory remaining the owner. He unwisely expends the last of his funds treating neighbors to an incredible display of classical Indian choreography, executed with astonishing precision and speed by Roshan Kumari as hotshot dancer Krishna Bai. After hearing about her great success at a jalsa held at moneylender Ganguli's house, Roy cannot resist arranging a second local soiree for that gifted performer. Forgetting an abysmal conclusion to his last extravaganza, the lethargic landowner stirs to life, ordering Bai be approached and hired.

With renewed vitality and optimism, cook Ananta peels off furniture covers, dusts and polishes the great music room chandelier, cheerfully flings himself into old housekeeping routines.

Estate manager Taraprassana reacts in thundercloud fashion, thinking only of a final financial folly he must witness. His loyalty to a dying family, like Ananta's, reveals superior humanity of theoretical dependents.

Director Ray uses this third musical interlude to showcase classical Indian dance, embellishing it further with close-ups of stamping feet and reflected views in a huge mirror revealing nimbleness and exactitude of the dancer.

When visiting Ganguli, with characteristic neglect of social niceties, offers Krishna Bai money spontaneously at her dance's conclusion, his offering is forestalled by Roy's cane. Even if it means expending his last few coins, the host insists upon customary privilege of first compensation. Achieving that, and receiving appreciative thanks from invited guests, the zamindar has no further reason to continue existing.

After fueling himself with alcohol, he makes an inglorious, disorderly exit through a fatal wild ride on a steed no longer affordable to maintain. But he actually dies earlier, a moment after extending material patronage to cherished terpsichorean.

Roy's honor departs with his treasury, leaving behind a purposeless, bankrupt simulacrum of a nobleman, one who has outlived a way of life, family, and income.

Has his demise the dimension of tragedy? Not really. The man never reached greatness. His fall is a minor one, sad end to a fool's folly, predictable and cautionary.

Musical art can and will survive without upper-class sponsorship. But an inflexibly conservative patron eventually degenerates into mere tolerated anachronism, present in body, soul and mind chained evermore to the past. A predicament created voluntarily by destructive personal choices.

Those surviving the master's suicide have little but nostalgic memories of better times, their own finances and houses in jeopardy. This utter disregard for consequences to those

around him make the music patron's actions appear unfeeling and selfish. Auto-destruction is not merely his own business. It's ruinous to staff as well.

Ray here shows lamentable results of an unhealthy fixation on art alone. When awareness of human needs for companionship and affection are sacrificed to sheer sensory voluptuousness of sound, what is lost spiritually exceeds any offsetting gain in artistic discrimination.

Must traditions always make way for novelties? Which are truly better?

The film director chooses not to directly comment.

Disregarding adaptation invites disaster. Ossifying oneself voluntarily replaces vital motion with paralysis. When such behavior persists, it becomes a growing, deadly cancer. Blindly resisting change is clearly no ticket to happiness.

Bansi Chandragupta's set decorations thoroughly capture the toxic twilight atmosphere of souring patrimony conveyed by Tarasankar Banerjee's short story "Jalsaghar," literary source for Ray's movie. However, this achievement is somewhat diluted by overly blatant symbolism, each prop becoming a sign for something else, such as an overturned model ship foretelling watery doom awaiting Roy's wife and son. Similarly, a trapped insect flounders helplessly in the host's glass during a jalsa, its powerlessness and dangerously precarious position paralleling that of the drink's owner. Still, authenticity and placement of objects indicate plenty of research and careful arrangement, visible in dispersed bolsters lying unattended where users left them and candles in the music room's grandiose chandelier individually burning out in early morning.

Virtuoso music dominates many scenes, performed by masters especially recruited for this production, such as sitarist Vilayat Khan and his younger brother Imrat, a surbahar expert. They play a duet accompanying scenes where the music room is reopened after a long period of desuetude.

Far less satisfactory is the playing of Chhabi Biswas as a music lover. He seems almost as bored a listener as his copycat neighbor, nowhere showing natural harmony with the rhythms he's hearing. Roy is overshadowed repeatedly in music room scenes by anonymous guests whose knowledge of classical structure far exceeds his own. Biswas's only believable musical moment comes when strains of "Colonel Bogey's March," a familiar British pop tune, reach his ears. In what might be construed more as knee-jerk patriotism than true antipathy, his character responds with acidic aversion. Casting someone reportedly tone-deaf as a music maven was counterintuitive and unrealistic. His reactions are rigidly mechanical, unrelated to sound order, dexterity of fingering, or metrical changes. It's far too apparent he is being directed to do certain things at specific times, something which ought to be invisible, not transparent.

Pinaki Sen Gupta is, as usual, more adequate than compelling as a young adolescent. His

Khoka is sufficiently credible as a singer and does manage to convey filial affection. None of an adolescent's self-will is exhibited, however.

As the boy's mother and Roy's wife, Padma Devi injects humor and warmth into several brief appearances. Her maternal instincts attempt to shield both father and son. Unfortunately, cultural folkways prohibit the woman from openly challenging her husband, ultimately leading to familial dissolution.

Gangapada Bose's Mahim Ganguli is a progressive, uncouth, social-clambering mimic, too innocent and frank in pursuit of recognition from hereditary rulers to be accused of malevolence or deceitfulness. Roy's downfall is not of his engineering. Indeed, Mahim is almost comical, certainly no villain.

Estate manager Tarapasanna, a judicious realist, and Ananta, ever-loyal personal attendant, are adroitly played by Talsa Lahiri and Kali Sarkar, respectively. Their willingness to serve faithfully an undeserving master generates sympathy. For they, too, are trapped in roles not of their designing, following conventions to disaster.

Wonderful close-ups of such disparate elements as dancing feet, a spider, Roy's restraining cane, and the music room's swaying chandelier are sandwiched between long shots of elephant, river, passing trucks, neglected hallways, morose dog, and parched land which once had been field or garden. When the camera dollies in on something, it proceeds forward in restrained, small movements, preferring discretion to probing inspection or passionate involvement.

But when a drunken owner resolves upon a quick ride to end his shame, or a dancer whirls and thumps in accelerating exultation, Dulal Dutta's editing resorts to matching speedy cuts. These contrast acutely with a generally torpid pace in other passages, one which occasionally induces viewer detachment. Dutta coordinates his punctuation with music rhythms, allowing them to determine intervals between camera repositionings.

Illumination and sound recording are unusually polished for a Satyajit Ray film, making viewing and auditing this one a pleasure. Particularly spectacular is sonic and visual artistry in JALSAGHAR's climactic storm episode, where external flashes of lightning and peals of thunder are counterpointed with sounds coming from the music room itself.

JALSAGHAR makes an excellent introduction to the films of Satyajit Ray and is a masterfully lavish showpiece of Indian music. It's highly recommended for older teens and any adults willing to explore unfamiliar cultures.

Criterion's dvd release version includes the following: a 131-minute documentary directed by Shyam Benegal highlighting the director at work on his feature THE HOME AND THE WORLD; a sixteen-minute interview with director Mira Nair about her appreciation of mentor Ray's Bengali productions; an eleven-minute 1981 French television interview involving Satyajit Ray, film critic Michel Ciment, and film director Claude Sautet; a 1963 essay by Ray himself about choosing the film's location, published in 1976 as part of the collection

**Our Films, Their Films; a 1986 interview of Ray by Andrew Robinson which focuses on music heard in THE MUSIC ROOM; an eighteen-minute audio interview of Ray by Robinson about the making of JALSAGHAR; and an essay on THE MUSIC ROOM by critic Philip Kemp.**