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JAMES
IVORY

MASTER OF THE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF INDIA



‘I still dream about India’

Director **James Ivory**, winner of the **India Abroad Friend of India Award 2013**, speaks to **Aseem Chhabra** in his most eloquent interview yet about his elegant and memorable films set India



PHILIPPE WOJAZER/REUTERS

Director James Ivory, left, and the late producer Ismail Merchant arrive at the Deauville American Film Festival in France, where Ivory was honored, in 2003. Their partnership lasted over four decades, till Merchant's death in May 2005.

James Ivory
For elegantly creating a classic genre; for a repertoire of exquisitely crafted films; for taking India to the world through cinema.

James Ivory's association with India goes back nearly six decades when he first made two documentaries about India. He later directed six features in India — each an iconic representation of India of that time period.

Ivory, 86, recently sat in the sprawling garden of his country home in upstate New York with **Aseem Chhabra** and spoke about his memories of working in India and the associations he made with Indians — actors and filmmakers.

He said he still dreams about India.

Jim, this will take you back several decades, but when you think of the early days of shooting *The Householder*, what are the memories that come to your mind?

It was a very long time ago — wasn't it? We set up our company and then in 1962 we made *The Householder*. But I

remember it very clearly.

We made four feature films in a row and I think of that time as a heroic period in the history of MIP (*Merchant Ivory Productions*). We had no money and it was very hard to raise money to make the kind of films we wanted to make.

It was also a time when there was very little modern equipment in India. And it was almost impossible to bring things in easily, particularly sound equipment. Somehow we managed, but it was always a struggle.

But there was a big film industry in India.

There was, but I remember we only had four lights to make *The Householder*. I don't know how we did it, but our cameraman Subrata Mitra (*Satyajit Ray's cameraman in the early days*) somehow pulled it through.

When we made *Shakespeare Wallah* it was much better. Plus we couldn't see our rushes. We weren't near any place where we could project rushes with sound. For *The Householder* we found a movie theater that allowed us to watch the silent picture rushes.

Also recording equipment in India only worked inside studios. But we couldn't take the sound equipment outside.

It wasn't until we made *Bombay Talkie* in Bombay that we were finally able to see the rushes at night in a comfortable movie theater.

***The Guru* was your first color film, but**



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the budget was very high.

We made *The Guru* for 20th Century Fox with their blocked rupees. It was the first time an American studio was going to finance the film, in India but it was a bureaucratic nightmare to free up that money.

By the time you made *The Guru*, the company had become quite big. You even had British actors — Michael York and Rita Tushingham acting in it.

Well, don't forget we also had some of the leading Indian actors in it as well — Utpal Dutt, Aparna Sen. There was Madhur Jaffrey and others.

I loved how you opened *Bombay Talkie* with that giant typewriter set. It was not a spoof, but your exploration of how over-the-top Hindi cinema could be.

The film was set in the Bombay film industry. We shot a lot of it in studios, particularly the opening scene of Helen dancing on a giant typewriter. That red typewriter is still — after all the films I have made and all of the places I have shot in; The Chateau of Versailles and in Florence — that typewriter is still my favorite set.

Ismail (*Merchant*) wrote in his autobiography that you had a dream about that typewriter.

No, well maybe it was also a dream. But I remember I saw a Bombay film where a girl was sitting in a giant martini glass, with her legs hanging over the edge. I think that's what gave me the idea of a giant typewriter.

Let's talk about your early days of working with Ruth (*Prawer Jhabvala*). She was initially reluctant to work with you.

No, she was willing to give us her works immediately.

But she first pretended on the phone that she was her mother-in-law.

But that's because people were calling her all the time and bothering her and she would say she was her mother-in-law.

Ruth never liked to talk on the phone. Her entire life, if the phone would ring, Jhab (*her husband Cyrus Jhabvala*) would always answer it. Or one of us would answer the phone. She didn't like talking on the phone.

And you immediately developed a creative working relationship with her?

Yes, but not that much during *The Householder*. She wrote the script herself straight out of her head. She didn't need to sit with the novel. I had no real involvement in it. But with *Shakespeare Wallah*, *The Guru* and *Bombay Talkie* we worked together on those screenplays.

They were all ideas I had concocted. I think especially with *Shakespeare Wallah* she felt she had a wonderful scope to write a very interesting screenplay.

How would you both work when she was in India and you in New York? Telephone calls would have been expensive. And Ruth didn't like phone calls?



Above, *The Householder*, the first Merchant Ivory Productions film. It was followed by four India-centric films in a row and James Ivory thinks of that time as a heroic period in the history of MIP. Below, *Heat And Dust*, which was made two decades later, was Ivory's last film set in India.



We would write those air letters back and forth. All my letters and hers are now in an archive, so someday someone can get industrious and see how we were communicating with each other.

We were talking about the characters and the situations. I would give her my ideas and she liked them or didn't like them.

Sometimes she would send three air letters — all part of one long letter. And when we were further along she would start to write the script and send me parts of it.

I am fascinated by how this creative trust developed between you two. She wrote practically all of your scripts, right?

Yes, only once or twice I worked with someone else.

So she knew exactly what you wanted.

No, not always. Sometimes she didn't know. But we had to work it out. I remember we were in the midst of shooting *Hullabaloo Over Georgie And Bonnie's Pictures* in Jodhpur. She was in Delhi sending me scenes. Or she would try to dictate them over the telephone. But you remember phones in those days — making trunk calls and lines getting cut off?

I wasn't quite sure what I was making. The scenes kept coming, but I was never clear what the film was about.

Didn't you have a full bound script?

No, we started with a bunch of pages and some vague idea. Ismail had planned to shoot certain scenes first.

It was a bit chaotic.

The actors were fine with it?

Oh, they were very professional people — Peggy Ashcroft, Saeed Jaffrey, Victor Banerjee, who we had seen in Satyajit Ray's *The Chess Players*.

You are talking about actors — Shashi Kapoor was in practically every Indian film of yours. What did you and Ismail see in him as actor? Because his career hadn't become that big in India at the time of *The Householder*.

Both he and Leela Naidu had only made a few films at that time. The only real professional in *The Householder* was Durga Khote who had made many many films.

Shashi had a tremendous vitality and charm. He was incredibly good looking and he became a very good friend.

He trusted us and we trusted him.

He started making more and more films in Bombay, but always gave his dates to us.

But you also found an actor in him that hadn't been discovered in Bombay.

He was a good actor. It was there, but it was a different kind of acting than what he was expected to do in a Bombay film, which was look marvelous, sing and dance.

And what about Madhur?

Madhur was not the expected choice for *Shakespeare Wallah* — a role she became famous for. No one thought she was the right type to play the Bombay film star. But she jumped right into it.

And you cast her again and again, even giving her an older role in *Heat And Dust*.

I didn't want her to play Shashi's mother in *Heat And Dust*. That was shocking to me that someone of the same age as Shashi

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would play his mother. But she insisted that she play that part of the Begum.

So, we agreed and this spectacular henna colored wig was ordered from London. And she was marvelous. Of course, royal ladies in those days got married at the age of 15, so it wasn't impossible.

By the time you came back to make *Heat And Dust* in 1982, had India changed?

By that time it was easier to get finance and equipment. The Bombay industry was at much more par with the West.

There were money problems with *Heat And Dust* also.

They were towards the end. Shashi ended up paying the hotel bills.

I am very interested in the relationship you and Ismail formed with Satyajit Ray.

I met him first when I was making my documentary *The Delhi Way*. When I went to Calcutta, I called him up — his number was in the phone book. I told him who I was and that I wanted to meet him and see *The Music Room*. He said sure.

We met and he arranged for a screening at the Tollygunge Studio. He sat with me since it was not subtitled. I thought it was one of the most marvelous movies I had seen.

I then asked him why it hadn't been shown in the West and he said he felt technically it was not up to the mark. Of course in time, it was distributed in the West. It became such a hit in France. (*It*) played there nearly a year.

He trusted you, even though you were a young filmmaker.

I had made two documentaries. When we made *The Householder* we shot it in English and Hindi and there was a lot of footage. We showed him the English cut to get some ideas of how to finally shape the film. He liked it and he said he would recut it.

He said it would be on one condition — he had to be allowed to do what he wanted to do. If we didn't like it, we could put it back.

So, we were in his edit room with Dulal Dutta (*Ray's regular editor*), and he would be standing and every so often he would yell 'Cut!' and I would jump. He was a tall man and incredibly dynamic.

(*Ustad*) Ali Akbar Khan had been hired to do the music for the film, but he just disappeared. Ray said he would organize the music for us. He had another composer who worked with him, Jyotirindra Moitra.

The night before we were going to record with Ray and Moitra, Ali Akbar Khan turned up and said his spies had told him that we were about to record the soundtrack.

Eventually we used some part of his music in the English version along with that of Moitra.

Did you pay Ray anything?

Not for editing, although I am sure we paid his expenses.

By *Shakespeare Wallah* we had a contract. It was an incredible score. He had just finished *Charulata* and it was at the height of his creative period.

After *Heat And Dust*, you did not make another film in India. I know you got busy with your E M Foster adaptations and other films, but did you consider making another film in India?

Ruth and I wrote a screenplay, which later became the novel *Three Continents*. And that screenplay was set in New



From left, James Ivory, Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Ismail Merchant receive a British Academy film fellowship in London in 2002. Most of their films were scripted by Jhabvala.

MICHAEL CRABTREE/REUTERS

York, London, and Rajasthan and Delhi. She and I couldn't agree on the weight of the principal characters. But meanwhile we had already taken the rights for *A Room With A View*; she had already scripted that novel as well.

Ismail suggested we could sort the *Three Continents* issue later, and focus on the other script since we had paid so much money to E M Forster's estate.

But after that I never found time for a project in India. We were making our American films and then we moved to our French films phase.

If you think of the time when you first met Ismail, could you have imagined that you would come this far?

I hadn't started making features yet. I didn't really know what was possible until I made my first feature. It was when I was about to make *Shakespeare Wallah* when I began to see that he and I together could do all sorts of things.

I still had no clear picture of how my life was going to be.

After *Shakespeare Wallah*, part of my ambition was fueled by working with Ruth. I had an ongoing writer. And I knew she also would want to write similar kind of screenplays.

But none of this would have been possible had it not been for the understanding that Ismail was going to ease the producing part in India.

And he did.

I would have been utterly helpless if I did it on my own.

No foreigner can possibly go to India and make a film on his own.

Do you think your films were observations about India

from the lens of a foreigner?

Of course. Would you say that about E M Forster's *Passage to India*?

Yes!

So what the foreigner sees also has a value. Our films about England are equally films made by foreigners. Ruth had grown up there, but by then she had become an American. And I think it produced a certain amount of resentment.

What about in India, do you think people resented your work?

Oh yes, for sure. There was the kind of critical reception, where people said, 'He doesn't know much about India,' Or 'He's saying things that people visiting India would say.' It's a normal reaction.

Did it bother you, this reaction?

No, not anymore. It did then. Ruth had totally submerged herself in Indian life and then to be told she didn't get the nuances right seemed unfair.

Do you have any regrets about life?

I regret that Ismail is not here. That's my biggest regret. I also regret that Ruth is not here.

When was the last you went to India?

It was in 2006 a year after Ismail passed away. I do imagine going again sometimes.

I dream that I am in India. But I have lost touch with the India that I knew. Remember I went there only a few years after Independence. That's all gone. And Delhi is unrecognizable. ■

Young with the desire to make a different kind of cinema in India

James Ivory made an immense contribution in sharing India with viewers in the West, notes **Aseem Chhabra**

Before the Oscar nominations for celebrated films like *The Remains Of The Day*, *Howards End* and *A Room With A View* that charmed critics and audiences alike and made Florence a must-visit destination, James Ivory, and his late partner and producer Ismail Merchant spent many years making real indie films in India and honing their talents.

The two met in New York six decades ago, introduced by their common actor friends Madhur Jaffrey and her then husband Saeed Jaffrey. They were young with the desire to make a different kind of cinema in India, at least partly inspired by the early works of Satyajit Ray. The friendships they forged with India and Indians gave the world the unique cinema that we still cherish.

Despite their divorce, the Jaffreys stayed close to the Merchant Ivory team, often performing in their films. Madhur, who later became a renowned cookbook writer, would describe her friendship with the two men as an intense sibling connection.

Ismail Merchant always dreamed of becoming a legendary producer quite like the Hollywood greats of that era. In Ivory he saw the talent of a man who would execute that dream by directing films set in India.

In all the years Merchant and Ivory made films, getting financing was always a challenge, but it was more so in their early years. Actors are full of stories of the tight financial situations, but Merchant was a magician of a producer who somehow through his charm and business sense, managed to set everything right.

During a trip to Kolkata in the late 1950s, Ivory met Ray. The older Bengali filmmaker must have been intrigued to meet a young American who had made two short documentaries on India and now wanted to make features in India. Ray held a private screening of *The Music Room* (1958) for Ivory.

Ray later did an edit of *The Householder* (1963) — the first film directed by Ivory, and scored the soundtrack for his next film *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965). In 2007 Wes Anderson set his quirky comedy *The Darjeeling Limited* in India. As a tribute he used much of Ray's previously written scores in the film. *The Darjeeling Limited* soundtrack includes Ray's score for *Shakespeare Wallah*.

The more important Ray connection was that Ivory and Merchant decided to work with the great director's regu-



James Ivory invites India Abroad into his home in upstate New York.

PARESH GANDHI

lar cameraman — Subrata Mitra (*The Apu Trilogy*, *Devi*, *Charulata*). Mitra shot the first four Merchant Ivory films set in India — *The Householder*, *Shakespeare Wallah*, *The Guru* and *Bombay Talkie*.

The Householder and *Shakespeare Wallah* were both shot in black and white. The films have been restored and are available on the Criterion Collection. In both films Mitra lovingly captures a lost era — something audiences would only find in the films of Satyajit Ray.

Another fortuitous connection came with British-German author Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who was then living in India with her architect husband. Merchant and Ivory initially contacted Jhabvala to secure the rights to her novel *The Householder*. Jhabvala wrote the script of the film, and ended up making a lifelong commitment of collaborating with Ivory.

By the time *Shakespeare Wallah* had been made Ivory realized that he and Jhabvala could work well together.

"After *Shakespeare Wallah*, part of my ambition was fueled by working with Ruth," Ivory told me recently. "I had an ongoing writer. And I knew she also would want to write similar kind of screen-plays."

That collaboration would result in some of the most remarkable screenplays of the last century. Jhabvala won two Oscars for her adapted screenplays for *Howards End* and *A Room With A View*.

The four early films explore life in India from the perspective of outsiders — the eyes of Jhabvala and Ivory.

The Householder is a sweet tale of a young married couple — played by the good looking Shashi Kapoor and Leela Naidu coping with pressures of life from work as well as within the home (Durga Khote played Kapoor's noisy and overbearing mother).

Shakespeare Wallah — the story of a traveling team of British actors (inspired by Shashi Kapoor's in-law, the Kendal family), played the high art of Shakespearean theater against the backdrop of the loud Bombay film industry. *Shakespeare Wallah* traveled to the Berlin Film Festival where Madhur Jaffrey won the Silver Bear for best actress.

A few years later Ivory made his even more ambitious project *The Guru*, examining the hippie culture and the West's fascination with Eastern religions and practices. *The Guru* unfortunately did not succeed at the box office. Ivory went on to make *Bombay Talkie* where Jennifer Kendal played an American author in love with a married Hindi film actor, Shashi Kapoor, her husband in real life.

The film explored the Bombay film industry, opening with Helen dancing on a giant red typewriter, to the Kishore Kumar song *Typewriter Tip, Tip, Tip Karta Hai*. The song can be seen on YouTube and Ivory says the set is his favorite.

Ivory returned to India with two more films — *Hullabaloo Over Georgie And Bonnie's Pictures*, a British television production about a group of conspirators set to steal paintings from the royal collection.

In 1983 Ivory directed *Heat And Dust*, based on Jhabvala's 1975 Booker Prize-winning novel. A complex film with a massive star cast, *Heat And Dust* looked at Britain's relationship with India through two parallel stories, one before, and the other after Independence.

I arrived in New York in 1981 and still remember the massive reception for *Heat And Dust*. An hour before the screening a long line formed outside Manhattan's Pars Theatre on 58th Street. I remember thinking how wonderful it was that a film about India, with Shashi Kapoor in the lead had been accepted so openly by New Yorkers.

Roger Ebert called *Heat And Dust* 'seductive'. 'It contains wonderful sights and sounds and textures,' he wrote.

James Ivory was the master of capturing those sights and sounds of India that most Indians failed to observe. He has made an immense contribution in examining this aspect of India and sharing it with viewers in the West. ■

'He trusts his actors and lets them be'

Madhur Jaffrey shares her experiences of working with director James Ivory with **Aseem Chhabra**

Madhur Jaffrey's first film project was James Ivory's *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965). She played the role of a spoiled Hindi film actress, which fetched her the Silver Bear for best actress at the Berlin International Film Festival (1965 was a big India year at Berlin as Satyajit Ray won the Silver Bear for best director for *Charulata*).

Jaffrey was already an integral part of the Merchant Ivory Productions, which also included novelist and scriptwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. Jaffrey then acted in three other films directed by Ivory – *The Guru*, (1969), *Autobiography of a Princess* (1975) and *Heat and Dust* (1983). Later in 1999 she co-directed *Cotton Mary* with Ismail Merchant and also acted in the film.

Jaffrey spoke to *India Abroad* from her country home in upstate New York, where she spends part of her time with husband Sanford Allen, a concert violinist.

Tell me about James Ivory as a director and what are your memories of working with him, especially on *Shakespeare Wallah*?

Jim is not a very aggressive director, in the sense that he doesn't make you do this and that. Put one finger up and say this and then let your voice go down. There are directors who are like that. I find he trusts people and he lets them be. Even when something is wrong he doesn't force you one way or the other.

I came to *Shakespeare Wallah* with a fully developed idea of the character, based on Ruth's writing. I did what I felt was right and Jim let me be. I think for some actors the greatest thing a director can do is to let them know that they have got it.

He's very good at how the film is shot, how it looks, how emotionally the scene goes. I trusted him implicitly, that he will decide up to the point of what I was wearing and he had a lot to say about my hair. Because the final look is very important to him. Somehow that is also the part of the character.

Like in *Heat And Dust* he wanted my hair to have *mehendi* (henna) in it, that sort of look. Or the *paan* chewing he made me do. I would get the sense of the character from the costumes. Then from there I would build my own character. And then he is wonderful.

But then *Shakespeare Wallah* was your first film and it was a big role of a moody, demanding actress. Did you discuss much with him?

No not really, because he is not that kind of a person. You don't discuss acting with him. At least he doesn't do that with me. Maybe sometimes I would discuss with Ruth.

I remember I got a telegram from Jim before *Shakespeare Wallah*. He asked me to buy an outlandish sweater that my character would wear. I happened to be in Switzerland on my way to India and I bought a sweater with stripes going diagonally. He gave the sense of her through the visual sense.

I think one of the most complex roles you played for



GABE PALACIO/IMAGEDIRECT

Actress Madhur Jaffrey with James Ivory, left, and Ismail Merchant at an event in New York City in 2001. She was friends with both of them before she started working in their films. She is said to have introduced them to each other.

Merchant Ivory was in the *Autobiography Of A Princess*.

And that too — the two-tone chiffon sari I wore and he made Ismail get the jewels. The jewels would come everyday from the famous shop Garrard of London. Then Jim had the idea of the hair and we discussed that. The part itself he trusted me with. I think he did the same with James Mason.

Would you do any rehearsals? Especially with *Autobiography Of A Princess*?

Of course with that we rehearsed for a day. It was like a play and then we shot it from beginning to the end.

Any memory of that shoot?

My memory is that it started with Ismail and Jim saying that (Laurence) Olivier was going to play the part and then (John) Gielgud. And each time I got so excited. Then when they got James Mason, it was a bit of let down.

I adored him, but I didn't think of him as an actor in the same category. I started looking at him and when I talked to people who had worked with him, they all said he was such a difficult man.

Yet we met the night before we rehearsed and he was affable. His wife was there and she was a vegetarian and I thought this is all very interesting.

He came for the shoot and had learned all his lines and I had not. Because there was always the issue with the

money and Jim and Ismail would keep changing the dates. Then finally Ismail said next day we are shooting and I was like 'Oh my god, I still didn't know my lines.'

And James Mason came in – obviously he knew his lines and he went around rehearsing his props. I would always do the homework, but this time I didn't think things would move so fast.

But James Mason was incredible. Most of the time the stars leave when their shoot is over. But he sat on a little box. It is the background of stage actors that makes you help other actors.

Jim told me that you had wanted to play Shashi Kapoor's mother in *Heat And Dust*, but he thought you were too young to do so.

I don't know who he had in his mind, but he said to me, 'I can't have you play the Begum because that would be so ungallant of me.' He was concerned since I had played Shashi's love interest in *Shakespeare Wallah*. And I said I could play anything.

What are your earliest memories of meeting Ismail and Jim? You were all young and excited about making films.

I met Jim in the late '50s. We used to



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‘James was as precious as ivory in his creativity’

In 1977, **Victor Banerjee** was cast in his first film role by Satyajit Ray to play Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's prime minister in *The Chess Players*. Banerjee was singled out for his supporting role and that performance convinced James Ivory and Ismail Merchant to cast him as Georgie — the maharaja set to steal his own art, in the British television drama *Hullabaloo Over Georgie And Bonnie's Pictures*.

Banerjee was in Mussoorie from where he e-mailed **Aseem Chhabra** a brief note about his memory of working with Ivory and Merchant on *Hullabaloo*.

“James was not just artistic, but an art lover as well, and that made his approach to the making of *Hullabaloo* an irritating distraction while he was literally surrounded by hundreds of masterpieces of Rajasthani and Mughal miniatures in the vaults of Bapji (*Maharaja Gaj Singh*), the Maharaja of Jodhpur.”

“The explosive chemistry of opposites that prevailed in the hilarious relationship between Ismail the producer and James the creator made working with the duo an unforgettable experience. James was as precious as ivory in his creativity as Ismail was unbearable as a merchant.” ■



Madhur Jaffrey's first film project was James Ivory's *Shakespeare Wallah*. She acted in three other films directed by James Ivory: *The Guru*, *Autobiography Of A Princess* and *Heat And Dust*.

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meet a lot at the old Asia Society and we all had common interests — film, painting and theater. We would go out to picnics and to the seaside. That is when Saeed and I were together.

Jim told me that Saeed was the first he met in the circle.

That's right. He had gone to see him because he was looking for someone to do the narration for the *The Sword And The Flute*. Saeed was in a Lorca play at that time and Jim thought he was the ideal person to do the narration. We knew Ismail separately and we thought they both should meet. We all had similar ambitions and dreams at that time.

The first ever role I did for him was in *The Delhi Way*, where I had a little voice of a woman at a flower show. And that's when James said let's do a film in India. Saeed and I would talk about going to India and starting our

own traveling theater company. That's how we started writing the screenplay what became *Shakespeare Wallah*. We used to sit on the floor in Jim's apartment in the 60s between Lexington and Third. He had very little furniture.

And then Saeed and I got divorced and Jim was very angry so he didn't cast him in the film.

By then Jim and Ismail were making *The Householder* in India and they got to know the Kendals. Ruth, I had known from before. Jim suggested to Ruth that I was going to play the film star in *Shakespeare Wallah*, and I didn't look like, since I was thin and wore glasses, which I threw away. So Ruth's first reaction was no she can't play the movie star.

Of course, I did play the part.

When I came to Kasauli for the shoot, I had been throwing up along the journey. And the crew took a look at me and said, 'She's going to play the movie star?' So I had to fight a few battles for that part.

And Ismail was the magician producer...

He was. He really made things happen, when nothing was possible. When there was no money or no actor to

play a certain part. There's a scene in *Shakespeare Wallah* where he put on a moustache and sat behind me, while I was watching a performance of *Hamlet*. Someone else was to sit there, but since no one showed up, Ismail, said 'I will do it!'

He was always in a rush to shoot even when people weren't ready, because money was often a problem.

It's interesting that in this indie world of yours there was so much creative energy, with Ruth's writing and Jim making these films. And such remarkable films came out.

There were no indie films at that time, other than Satyajit Ray's films. I loved what was Bollywood, but good films were very rare.

You never acted with James after *Heat And Dust*. You did co-direct and act in *Cotton Mary*.

No I didn't. They had moved on to the European films.

Would you joke with Jim and suggest it to him?

I would sometimes. But he had his own path cut out. He was tired of the Indian films. And Ruth was tired of India as well. And they wanted to move on to the European world they knew better. ■

'Jim didn't always know what he wanted, but he always knew what he didn't want'

Acclaimed director-actor
Aparna Sen on what it
was to work with James
Ivory

My first memories of a Merchant Ivory film are that of *Shakespeare Wallah*, which I loved. There is a lot of connection with *Shakespeare Wallah* because I remember watching *Henry the Fifth* in school, which had Felicity Kendal.

I have also seen other later films of James Ivory and, of course, I have worked in *The Guru*.

I cast Jennifer Kendal for my first film *36 Chowringhee Lane*. Jennifer was part of the group, Shakespearewallah. In fact, all three from the group — Jennifer, her father Geoffrey Kendal and mother Laura Kendal — were in the film.

Ismail (*Merchant*) asked me to work in *The Guru* when I was working in another film. My teacher on stage, Utpal Dutt, was also going to be in the film. And, of course, I said yes.

I was very young and expecting my first baby. I remember Jim was very kind. When we were shooting in Benaras, he made me do a scene over and over and over again. At one point I was a little annoyed and said, 'Well, what is it that you want?'

It was very funny because I never saw Jim ever lose his temper. If somebody else was annoyed, he would grin. And he kept pulling his nose, which got redder and redder and said, 'Well, I don't know what I want, but I know what I don't want.'

So, no matter how annoyed I was at that time, those words stayed with me because I think as a film director it is very important to know what you don't want.

You don't always know what you want — because if you always know what you want, then you are not leaving any room for the unexpected.

So, that was Jim.

I remember I was shooting a Hindi film and they just came to the set and Ismail said we want you in our film *The Guru*. They paid me some measly amount, which was quite a lot at that time — something like Rs 20,000. I was just a beginner. I remember with that money I bought an air conditioner, a whole lot of furniture. Things were really cheap at that time. I was living in Calcutta.

And what was nice was going to London for the dubbing.

That was my first trip. My ex-husband and I went to London. I was huge with my pregnancy at that time. But I was allowed to fly. I remember they took me to a discotheque. Now at that time I was such a greenhorn that I



Aparna Sen in *Bombay Talkie*. She also worked with James Ivory on *The Guru* and *Hullabaloo Over Georgie And Bonnie's Pictures* and says she never saw him lose his temper.

didn't know what a discotheque was.

There weren't any in India then. For some reason I thought we were going to a striptease. And I didn't know if I wanted to go there. So I said, 'What, they are going to take their clothes off?' And Jim started laughing.

So they were playing all sorts of music and people were having all sorts of cocktails and when the waiter came to me I asked for Horlicks. It was very naïve. And Jim said, 'Aparna you can't have Horlicks here.' So then I probably settled for some soft drink.

It was always fun working with them.

I still remember that nobody told me that I was to do a kissing scene with Shashi Kapoor in *Bombay Talkie* (her second film with Merchant Ivory).

Shashi said, 'We are going to do a kiss,' and I said 'What rubbish!'

So, I came to Jim, and he is again pulling his nose and said, 'Yeah, you have to. You have to. You play his wife.' I said, 'But nobody told me.' He said, 'It's important, it is needed.'

Finally, we did it.

I was very annoyed with both Shashi and Jim because nobody had really told me. It was very embarrassing in (West) Bengal because when the film was released there were catcalls and people were saying 'Oh, Aparna! We will go and tell your dad,' and stuff like that.

It was really very annoying.

I didn't dare and see the film in the theatres in (West)

Bengal because I was well known as a young, emerging star and people were just threatening to tell my dad!

There was another time that I remember, which was quite funny. During *Bombay Talkie*, Subrata (the legendary cinematographer Subrata Mitra) was lighting a very difficult room where there were mirrors all over and taking oodles of time.

He took a long time; the results were fantastic, of course. Shashi at one point just lost his cool and said, 'I am not in the mood' and walked off.

As he was walking off I remember Jim pulling his nose again and asking Shashi, 'Well, when do you think you will get back into the mood?'

Shashi said, 'I don't know, maybe half an hour.'

Then he came back, of course, and did the shot.

It was very funny. I was just watching the whole thing. In fact, every time something unpleasant happened Jim's first reaction was to laugh. He was a like a child. What I liked was that Jim didn't lose his cool. He kept grinning.

Jim and Ismail used to have arguments, but Ismail was very, very protective about Jim and of the film. I never saw Jim lose his temper; sometimes Ismail would if things were taking long. Jim was always laid-back. They were a very good team.

Ismail was prone to getting angry. He was a very flamboyant. He was generous, he was warm, he would get angry. Then he would overwhelm you with gifts. I remember he came to see me after my daughter was born and he brought a very nice gold chain.

It was very nice working with them. Jim had this thing about repeating his actors. He repeated me in *Hullabaloo Over Georgie and Bonnie's Pictures*. Many filmmakers do and some don't.

Hullabaloo was also great fun. We were shooting in Jodhpur at the Umaid Bhawan Palace. It was very interesting work and thanks to them we worked with some very interesting people like Peggy Ashcroft.

She was very funny, but she was also very wonderful because she used to read Yeats out and he is one of my favorite poets.

When we worked together, I asked them, 'Why me? I am not a Rajput princess.' Both Jim and Ismail said, 'We want to work with you because we like to repeat our actors.' They were always very good



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The laugh that got her a film role

All musician Asha Puthli had to do was laugh out loud in the room next to where a Merchant Ivory film was being shot. The next thing she knew she was in the film, she tells **Aseem Chhabra**.

Grammy Hall of Fame jazz and pop musician Asha Puthli happened to be at the right place for the launch of her film career. She quite literally had James Ivory and Ismail Merchant cast her as an extra in a party scene in *The Guru*. Later she played in the ensemble film *Savages* (1972) — about a group of forest people who become ‘civilized’ once they enter a mansion in Westchester County.

Puthli who now spends time between her homes in California and Florida, revisits her memories of working with James Ivory.

You once told me a funny story about being in a house where *The Guru* was being shot.

I was right on Juhu beach in Mrs Swaminathan's house, this lady I used to know. Ismail with his usual charm must have gotten the place for the film. We weren't part of the film and they were shooting in the other room.

We could hear Ismail through the door as he had a *Mughal-e-Azam* style of being a producer. Ismail yelled out ‘Quiet on the set.’ I couldn't resist bursting into laughter, because of the way he said it. I guess subconsciously I deliberately laughed loudly since I wanted to be discovered.

The door burst open and Ismail walked in and asked, ‘Who was it laughing?’ I said, ‘Oh I am so sorry Mr Merchant, I didn't know my laugh was that loud.’ And he said, ‘No, we want you in the film. Put her in a sari Mrs Swaminathan...’

To this day I do not know if it was his idea or Jim's. I think the only use of me in that movie was my laugh.

Do you remember Jim directing at that point? What was he like?

At that point all he told me was where to stand. He would block our move-

ment. But basically for acting he left us to use our own techniques. He had very good actors working with him.

What about when you worked with him for *Savages*?

I remember three words he said to

friends of my aunt Kamladevi Chattopadhyay (*Indian freedom fighter-social reformer*).

In *Savages* I played a forest girl who transforms into a Black maid. Later once Jim said to me you should play



James Ivory received multiple Oscar nominations for direction.

me: ‘It's too much’ (*she laughs*). I suppose he wanted me to tone down my performance.

What are your memories of Jim on the set?

He was very quiet and reserved. We were a family at one point. I spent Christmas with them. Ruth was also there and also Jhab (*the architect Cyrus Jhabvala*). Jim would be quiet and then he would chuckle. I knew Ruth and Jhab separately because they were

Josephine Baker (*singer-dancer*) or another actress who was mixed and sang. And I told him if he and Ismail were to make that film, I would do that.

Initially, *Savages* was supposed to be another film called *Sunnyside Up* about two cross-dressers and I was in that film. But Jim kept me in the contract even with *Savages*. It was about the rise and fall of civilization and in some way very inspired by Luis Buneul's *The Exterminating Angel*. ■

‘Jim didn't always know what he wanted, but he always knew what he didn't want’

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with me.

I never saw that film so later when I was to come to New York, I wrote to them saying, ‘You horrible men, you never showed me *Hullabaloo Over Georgie And Bonnie's Pictures*,’ and they said, ‘Yes, we are two horrible men and now that you are in New York, come and have dinner with us’.

And so I went and Ruth (*novelist and scriptwriter Ruth Praver Jhabvala*) was also there. We had Indian food at a very nice restaurant. It was very nice and Jim, Ruth, Ismail and I had dinner and that was the last I saw of Jim. I never met him again.

I would describe him as a quiet person with a quiet sense of humor. He is quite lovely and I would love to meet him again.

Two of the Merchant Ivory films I loved are *Howards End* and *The Remains Of The Day*. I also saw *Autobiography Of A Princess*, which I liked very much. I liked Madhur Jaffrey. She came to the New York Film Festival of which she is a patron. I keep meeting her now and again.

I used to meet Ismail. I met him in Locarno when my film *Mr And Mrs Iyer* was being shown and there was some talk of doing a film with him. His nephew was interested in producing *Gulel*. But it all fell apart after Ismail passed away. It was very, very hard for them.

Merchant Ivory were not the first ones who brought India to the world; Satyajit Ray did it before them. But I think their body of work is good; it's interesting and they explored the unexpected, which I liked very much.

Jim would let you do your own thing. He used to explain the scene to you and expected you to do your own thing. Until he was satisfied he would keep making you do it.

As I said, he didn't always know what he wanted, but he always knew what he didn't want. ■

Aparna Sen spoke to Vaihayasi Pande Daniel and Prasanna D Zore in New Delhi and Aseem Chhabra in New York.