

THE DISCIPLE

Chaitanya Tamhane, India

BY LAWRENCE GARCIA

The Disciple, Chaitanya Tamhane's second feature, is a film fundamentally concerned with the burden of tradition. Spanning roughly 16 years, it follows Sharad Nerulkar (Aditya Modak), a Hindustani vocalist whom we meet at age 24, as he navigates the world of Indian classical music—a centuries-old tradition that, most proximately to our idealistic protagonist, is defined by three primary figures, one of whom is physically absent. The latter is a legendary guru, Maai (Sumitra Bhawe), an ascetic who reportedly shunned public performances and the recording of her music and teaching, whose memory casts a long shadow across the film. The other two are former students of hers: Sharad's teacher Guruji (Arun Dravid), who is at one point introduced as "Mumbai's best-kept secret" (which should give an indication of his humble-at-best means), and Sharad's father (Kiran Yadnyopavit), whose own musical career ended in bitter failure.

However devoted Sharad is to the former and ambivalent toward the latter, both relationships inform—not to say structure—his experience. It is often said, rather fatuously, that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it, as though our involvement in history were just a problem of knowledge. Certainly, no one could accuse Sharad of denying the Hindustani tradition and his own cultural context. What he eventually learns, though, is that it is one thing to recognize the contingent structures one is enmeshed in and quite another to transform them, the latter being the ineluctable promise of the contemporary. Still, if transformation *is* to somehow occur, one might well start by identifying the structure.

The Disciple takes the form of an ironic quest: the story of a striving artist attempting to evade the spectre of his father's failure. This generic template being all too familiar, Tamhane (who won the Best Screenplay award

at last year's Venice Film Festival, as well as a Netflix deal) establishes from the outset a kind of syncopated narrative rhythm, keeping our knowledge of Sharad and his own self-awareness just out of sync. Impressively, Tamhane manages to do this not by withholding the expected comic markers of humiliation and disappointment (at his lowest, a thirtysomething Sharad considers replying to a negative YouTube comment on one of his performances), but by shifting the timbre and focus of any given scene through meticulous staging. Building on the visual style he employed in his previous film, *Court* (2014)—one which largely comprised static wide shots of densely populated spaces—Tamhane here employs a number of slow, unobtrusive camera movements and push-ins, an approach more suited to conveying Sharad's inner conflict, which is often detectable only by inference. Likewise, the director's casually elliptical narrative construction tends to delay or even neutralize the causal function of any given passage. Thus, we are often free to revel in texture and environment: the serene, scenic pleasures of an outdoor concert at dawn; the lambent glow of a Mumbai freeway at night; the spatial openness of a cricket field set against an overcast city skyline.

Mainly, though, Tamhane transforms Sharad's story through canny structural fillips. Early on, following the young musician's lackluster showing at a house concert and prior to Guruji's assessment of it, Tamhane interpolates a scene of the two at a doctor's office—a beat that serves to shift focus away from the anticipated judgment, which is itself underplayed when it finally does arrive. Similarly, when Sharad gets another chance to prove himself but begins to display pre-show nerves, Tamhane delivers neither crushing humiliation nor triumphant redemption: instead, he simply skips past the (evidently successful)

performance's immediate aftermath, a simple dissolve carrying us across an indeterminate number of years to a quiet motorcycle ride. Even the flashback scenes to Sharad's childhood, in which his father first inspires him to take up music, manage to go beyond their expected expository function: the first offers what looks like a touching father-son moment, but turns out to be overbearing instruction; the second reverses the dynamic, initially seeming like another instance of paternal control, only to later reveal Sharad as a willing and eager participant. In both cases, because of the limited context we have regarding Sharad's present-day family situation—his mother is never seen, only heard, while his father appears only in flashbacks—these scenes cannot be easily assimilated into an arc of either frustration or fulfillment.

In Sharad's relationship to both his father and his broader Hindustani lineage, then, *The Disciple* posits a situation in which the problem of knowledge has become intertwined with a problem of ordering—of how one is to relate to a pre-existing template, structure, or history. This problem is not one caused by a lack of sufficient information: previously accessible only through lifelong devotion, the Hindustani tradition has been considerably opened up by modern technology, a fact that is implicitly reflected in Sharad's part-time job selling CDs of lesser-known classical musicians. Indeed, through recording and dis-

tribution technologies, Sharad and his contemporaries have access to a broader range of classical music than his father, Guruji, or Maai ever did. (He even has illicitly recorded tapes of one of Maai's lectures, which were passed down to him by his father, and which he listens to intermittently across the film.) The real crux of the issue is that keeping a tradition alive requires more than just replicating existing forms: to compel conviction (not just attention), an artist must be able to transform them as well. (Tamhane, himself a relatively young filmmaker at 34, who is navigating contemporary production landscapes and disparate national traditions, seems to understand this intuitively.) The question is whether Sharad can grasp this before it is too late.

The Disciple is not the kind of film to answer this directly, but it does align our view of Sharad with his own self-awareness at one key point: a childhood flashback set to Maai literally voicing his greatest anxieties regarding both his father and Guruji. In retrospect, this scene, which departs from the film's otherwise externalized viewpoint, marks a decisive break. If we previously felt we had a grasp on Sharad, that impression now becomes increasingly untenable. This is clearest during a very late flashback (long after we've seen him in his thirties, his career having all but stalled) in which Sharad, still in his twenties, meets with a respected music critic who proceeds to lambaste both Guruji and Maai—a scene that,

due to its exacting placement within the narrative, resounds as a kind of structural coup. Had it been presented chronologically, the results may have been clichéd or even banal, the entire encounter functioning as little more than a precipitating event; but placed where it is, it brings into question all our previous judgments of Sharad, making it difficult to distinguish between a life of passive inertia and hard-won belief. For the viewer, any future interpretations of his actions can now be only tentative; it becomes impossible to regard him with comic or ironic detachment any longer.

In other words, while it would be easy enough to take Sharad's story as a parable of Sisyphean striving, this risks underestimating the film's full resonance. *The Disciple's* final minutes leap forward one final time, finding Sharad now married and a father, having abandoned his musical career to launch a company devoted to promoting North Indian classical music. In a different movie, this would be a kind of ironic capper; here, though, it is not so easy to tease apart despair from peace, resignation from quiet contentment. The beauty of the ending is that Sharad has in some sense moved beyond our judgment; it matters little whether or not we imagine him happy. Recognizing that we are, all of us, fools of time, *The Disciple* may even be said to fulfill the wish of Chaplin's *Limelight* (1952), leaving us with the most that perhaps anyone can ask for: some truth, and a little dignity.



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