An Unfinished Letter (Iti Mrinalini): Movie Review

The Bottom Line

An addicting shot of melodrama from and about the Bengali film industry.

Director

Aparna Sen

Screenwriters/story

Aparna Sen, Ranjan Ghosh

Cast

Aparna Sen, Konkona Sen Sharma, Rajat Kapoor, Priyanshu Chatterjee

The frame of reference for western cineastes to the sensibilities of the Bengali film An Unfinished Letter (Iti Mrinalini) would be a deep dive into the lush melodrama of Douglas Sirk along with a dramatic examination of the transitory nature of romantic passions found in Max Ophüls, all set in the world of Bengali intellectuals and the region’s film industry. In other words, it’s not a movie for the Bollywood crowd, despite its movie world setting. It’s heavy-duty melodrama with a fatalistic impulse that ties every tragedy into larger events within the subcontinent while exploiting the presence of two lovely icons of India’s film world.

Those would be the film’s star, director and co-writer, Aparna Sen, and Konkona Sen Sharma, her real-life daughter. Boasting the facial beauty for which Bengali women are renowned and more than resembling one another, they credibly play a famous film actress at two different stages of her life.

The theatrical options outside of Bengal for this film, which played at the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, would seem to be limited to festival exposure and lovers of sophisticated Indian regional cinema.

The movie first introduces us to Mrinalini (Seth) on what she intends to be her final night on earth. A bowl of white pills at her side as a restless wind blows through windows and open doorways, she pens a suicide note — shades of Ophüls’ Letter From an Unknown Woman — to explain her decision. Only as the movie flashes back to the loves and tragedies that mark her passage through life, she keeps tearing up each letter.

Men dominate her memories. The only prominent women in her story are a daughter and servant. Her early pre-stardom life — all this, of course played by Sen Sharma, is dealt with in a few efficient scenes of Bengal students, lounging in coffee houses while discussing politics and Tagore’s poetry, or browsing the street-front book stalls as they walk and talk.

Suddenly, Mrinalini is a star and secret lover of her married director, who carries the pretentious name of Siddhartha Sarkar (Rajat Kapoor). Their love child is kept hidden from the media but eventually she is discovered. Mrinalini later becomes involved although not romantically with a prize-winning novelist (Priyanshu Chatterjee), who tries to convince her there are other kinds of love than the sexual variety.

Mrinalini’s movie life and real life become so entwined — hard to say which contains the more melodrama.
— that even she exclaims at one point, "My life seems to be a series of make-believe." Well, yes, it does.

The joy of the film lies not with the mechanical plot, some of it predictable once one catches on to how her catastrophes are linked to larger ones in Indian society. Rather its pleasures are found in its anxious beautiful women, the lushness of the music, art direction and costumes and a sense that society, an entirely alien force outside those nighttime windows, is conspiring to ruin lives and despoil love.

Venue: Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles
Production company: Shree Venkatesh Films Pvt.
Cast: Aparna Sen, Konkona Sen Sharma, Rajat Kapoor, Priyanshu Chatterjee, Suzanne Bernert, Koushik Sen
Director: Aparna Sen
Screenwriters/story: Aparna Sen, Ranjan Ghosh
Producers: Shrikant Mohta, Mahendra Soni
Director of photography: Somak Mukherjee
Production designer: Sabami Das
Music: Debajyoti Mishra
Editor: Rabi Ranjan Maitra
No rating, 130 minutes