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Moving beyond language

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The Hindu Director Eric Vigner. Photo: Special Arrangement

Eric Vigner, the French theatre director, will bring his production “Le Barbier de Seville” to India as part of the 13th Bharat Rang Mahotsav, set to start this Friday. The director of Brittany’s Drama Centre, Vigner is known for his keen interest in classical as well as contemporary texts. He was awarded the Chevalier de l’Ordre des arts et des lettres in 1998. In an e-mail interview, on his way to India, Vigner talks about his experiences in theatre. Excerpts from the interview.

Your body of theatre work spreads across a gamut. As an actor/director you did Shakespeare, Victor Hugo and Moliere, while always making it a point to work with contemporary works on the other hand. Is this a deliberate attempt as a director on your part to keep a balance between the past and the present?

I share the belief that one cannot invent the future without knowing the past. “The past is the future.” We need to precisely get to know the old theatre forms of all countries, as much as possible, from the cradle of theatre on, the Greek, the French Classical theatre from the 17th Century, the Noh Theatre, traditional Indian forms of theatre , the Russians... in order to invent new forms for the future. I need to be a specialist of my own theatre history, of the French classical, basic dramaturgical rules in order to be able to invent the contemporary form for a contemporary theatre.

Over the years, you have crossed over to work in productions in different languages, including Korean and the production you are bringing to India “Le Barbier de Seville” which is in Albanian. What motivates you to take up productions in languages you may not be very comfortable with and what are the challenges?

To begin with, I have to say that I was invited by the National Theater of Korea, the Albanian National Theater and the 7 Stages Theatre in Atlanta to work on the French repertory. I am interested in the other, and I like to discover and to share life, culture, art, the passion of theatre all over the world. Usually one may believe that language barrier is an obstacle, but if you do work in a language that you are not comfortable with, the main, common language between French, Korean, American, Albanian...

when we do theatre together, is the language of theatre itself. In my specific work with the actors, I work with the sound of the words, with sounds in any language, not only with the meaning of words. For example, one of my favourite subjects is to work on the “scream”, “the cry”, “the shout”. The scream is a universal sound. It might contain joy, suffering, death or birth and so on. For mere understanding, there is an “in-between-language”, for example between us, it’s the English language as we try to share some information. In the universal language of theatre there is a universal sound of theatre, common to all the cultures and theatres and territories, (quite similar to musical

feeling): that's what I believe. Foreign cultures meet and learn about each other.

In India, you are staging “Le Barbier de Seville” in Delhi and Chennai. What led you to choose this 2007 production for India? What defined your approach to this text written in 1773 when you first took it up?

This adaptation of “Le Barbier de Séville” is representative for my work in a foreign country — it received the international theatre prize of Butrint on its Balkan tour, 2007; it shows a successful collaboration between two cultures, between two languages, between the French classical theatre and the Albanian theatre.

The story of the play is simply universal, it's about love and jealousy, there is a choreographic work with the actors, and a famous young Albanian composer arranged the original live music for the play. So the public will discover the outcome of a journey in theatre, the French theatre, the Albanian theatre, the sound of the Albanian language through English subtitles of a French play of the 18th Century revived in an aesthetically contemporary theatre form.

Close to 30 productions in the past 25 years, how have you seen your personal theatre grammar evolve in this time frame?

Before becoming an actor and director, I did my Visual Arts diploma at the university. Every production is a part of my creative process, compared to the one of an artist, with different periods and different researches. With time, my grammar becomes more clear, precise, easier to transmit. Working in foreign cultures has helped a good deal to define the theatre I wish to do. That's why I founded in 2010, The Academie between seven young actors coming from seven countries – Morocco, Romania, Mali, Belgium, South Korea, Germany, Israel. We are taking the time we need to find our own theatrical grammar. With them, I'll work on the French classical theatre in comparison to contemporary playwrights. Then we'll go on tour in France and I hope around the world.

“Le Barbier De Seville” will be staged at the Kamani auditorium at 7 p.m. on Saturday.

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