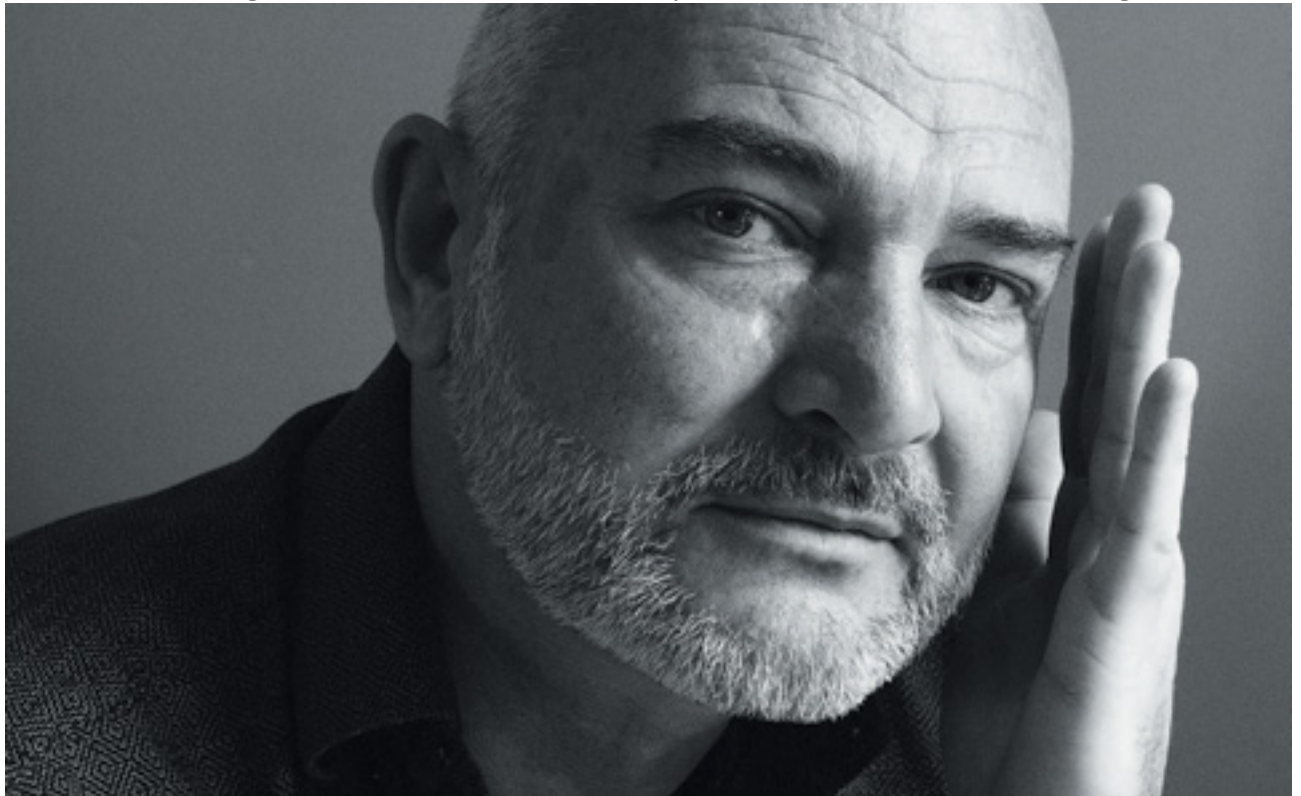


By Saumya Ancheri on February 01 2013 4.08pm

French passage

*Theatre director Éric Vigner hopes to bridge Marguerite Duras's imagined India with reality in **Gates to India Song***



In 1924, Elizabeth Striedter, the wife of a French governor, arrived in Vietnam amid rumours of having driven a lover to suicide. Among those captivated by Striedter's allure was Marguerite Duras, then a 10-year-old leading a hardscrabble childhood in Vietnam, who would later ascribe to Striedter the inspiration for her acclaimed writing career. Duras reincarnated Striedter in her fiction as the siren Anne-Marie Stretter, a governor's wife who left a trail of pining men as she traversed several of Duras's novels, plays and films. Duras herself had a tumultuous love life and a charged political engagement, and her lyrical, allusive writing echoes with despair, alienation, death, consuming love, and crimes of passion.

Stretter is the magnetic core of Éric Vigner's play *Gates to India Song*, co-produced by Institut Français en Inde and CDDB – Théâtre de Lorient. Vigner, who is known for his theatrical engagement with Duras's work, was approached after his show with an Albanian cast of *Le Barbier de Séville* at the 2011 Bharat Rang Mahotsav by Aruna Adiceam, cultural attaché at the French embassy in Delhi, to stage a production with an Indian cast for the Bonjour India Festival. *Gates to India Song* is based on the encounter between Stretter and a disgraced French vice-consul in Kolkata, both of whom appear in Duras's 1966 novel *The Vice-Consul* and Duras's groundbreaking 1975 film *India Song* (whose soundtrack, incidentally, is from her own radio staging in 1973). Vigner's play will also feature Carlos d'Alessio's tango "India Song", of which the fictional vice-consul said, "That tune makes me want to love." Vigner and assistant director Morgan Dowsett visited India thrice over two years to select the venues. *Gates to India Song* will have its world premiere in Mumbai, with shows at Prithvi Theatre and the National Centre for the Performing Arts, followed by a site-specific performance at Tagore

House in Kolkata and at the French ambassador's residence in New Delhi. Vigner spoke to *Time Out* about the enterprise.

What did you think of Anne-Marie Stretter, and was it hard to cast her?

Anne-Marie Stretter is more than a character, she is the feminine part of the universe, of the world, of life. Everything is possible with Anne-Marie Stretter. The central theme of the play, of the novel, of the film is the same – it's the question of love. In love, the feminine world meets the masculine world, but it's an impossible love. It's like if the planet Venus meets the planet Mars, there would be an explosion and we'd have to do it again. So this character is very large, it's like in a tragedy, it's not normal or casual or a domestic thing. I cast Nandita Das because she's not only an actress, she's also a woman; she's at the forefront of her field in India; she's not completely in Bollywood; she's politically engaged; she does independent films. I had to find an actress able to understand this specific world. For example, Delphine Seyrig, the actress in the film *India Song*, was *the* actress of the independent cinema in France at that time.

***India Song* seems rather detached from the subcontinent: the film is shot in France, it's about foreigners who struggle to "bear the idea of India", and Duras didn't want to connect to Calcutta while she was writing it. Tell us about your choice to ground it here.**

Yes, that's the point of it, because for me, the interest is to give it reality. This story is a fiction. There was no French ambassador in Calcutta in the 1930s. Marguerite Duras never put her feet in India. She was born near Saigon and she spent 17 years in Vietnam, so she's linked a little with Asiatic culture. But the most interesting thing for me is the moment where the imagined India meets the reality of India and what happens, now, in India, with this text. I don't want the actors to imitate French people in an embassy in 1930. I want them to be completely in the present, here, now, and to work through this story on this question of love which is eternal. The title, *Gates to India Song*, is a kind of homage... Gateway to India. It's an invitation to the audience to discover the work of one of the most important writers in France in the twentieth century. It will surprise the audience because it's a different theatre from the usual. It's a literary experience.

Tell us about meeting Duras in 1995 when you staged a blend of her novel *Summer Rain* and film script *Hiroshima mon Amour*?

I was in love. And she was in love. I was very impressed because I was young, I was 33, and Marguerite Duras was a kind of monument, *the* French litterateur. I was very shy, nervous. We arrived at Normandy, and she opens the door and she embraces my friend. She sees me out of the corner of her eye – she doesn't know me – and she says, "Him! I recognise him." And five minutes later, we talk to each other like we know each other for eternity. We were completely connected and it was a pleasure to be with her. She came several times to see the show. She said to a journalist, "The text is not so good, but the direction is wonderful. We'll do other ones together!"

What inspires you to dramatise her works?

I think she tried to manifest in her work this mysterious thing that is love – absolute love, like the love of God, love to death. Absolute love is not possible to live with in real life, it's only something you can express through a different medium like theatre, literature or art. It's like a source: I take the book, I dive into it and it gives me energy and I would like to communicate this energy to the actors and to the audience.

Gates to India Song will be staged on Thur Feb 14.