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By Shanta Gokhale

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SEPARATING THE BEST FROM THE
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Beyond the gate

Gates to India Song, which premiered at Prithvi Theatre last week, evoked two distinct spectra of responses. One comprised bewilderment, impatience, boredom; the other, bewilderment, patience, fascination. I moved into the second spectrum when something early on in the one hour 40 minute uninterrupted running time of the piece compelled my attention. It was the background track of a woman's voice speaking in French. French, like Persian, is capable of pleasing the ear even when the words mean nothing to you, or, as in this case, are deliberately engineered to mean nothing to you.

Conceived and directed by Eric Vigner, head of the CDDB Theatre in Lorient, France, and enacted by Nandita Das, Suhaas Ahuja, Subodh Maskara, Jim Sarbh and Neeraj Kabi, *Gates to India Song* is a part of the Bonjour India Festival. It attempts to transpose an aesthetic of theatre rooted in France to India through English, using Indian actors in an effort to forge links between the two cultures.

Vigner calls *Gates to India Song* a theatrical piece rather than a play, because it is not what we understand by the word play. It is not a linear story told through psychologically observed characters located in a recognisable setting. It is an artificial construction that transports you to an elusive terrain inhabited by human bodies, objects, scenic elements and sound. In effect, it harks back to the French nouveau roman (new novel) and nouvelle vague (new wave cinema), to which Marguerite Duras, on whose texts the piece is based, contributed in a seminal way.

The source texts of the piece are Duras' novel, *The Vice-Consul* and her play, *India Song*, neither of which attracted rave notices at the time of their publication. *The Vice-Consul* is an enigmatic novel, located in a Calcutta of Duras' imagination. Into this hot and humid city (the French were never there as rulers) arrives the Vice-Consul of Lahore, disgraced for a misdemeanour and awaiting his next appointment. He meets and falls passionately in love with Anne-Marie Stretter, the beautiful wife of the French Ambassador. The impossible love consumes both totally.

India Song was commissioned by Britain's National Theatre in 1972 but never performed. In this play, the actors do not speak. Instead, four recorded voices recall the events of one night at a party held at the French Embassy in Calcutta, the same as in *The Vice-Consul*. Referring to her work for cinema and theatre, Duras wrote, "Acting doesn't bring anything to a text. On the contrary, it detracts from it — lessens its immediacy and depth, weakens its muscles and dilutes its blood."

Inspired by Duras' work and her vision of theatre, Vigner gives us a theatrical piece in which text, both as sense and sound, reigns supreme, and



Suhaas Ahuja makes neutrally spoken lines sound intense in *Gates to India Song*

acting as we understand it, is suppressed. What we get instead are slow, choreographed movements, starkly white costumes underlining a rejection of overt emotion, controlled speech orchestrated to a narrow range of pitch and volume, a layered sound-track, and judiciously used gestures that create moments of drama. One moment is when Ahuja, playing the Vice-Consul, crumbles to the ground in a superb three-part movement. Another is when Das, playing Anne-Marie Stretter, walks up to Ahuja, closes his eyes with one hand and lays her head briefly against his shoulder. There is also a vocal gesture, Ahuja's scream, that condenses his agony into a single line, "Let me stay one night".

In this kind of director-driven theatre, there's always a danger of actors losing energy and focus. After all, they are human beings, not marionettes. This happened a couple of times in the show I saw at Prithvi, but fortunately without snapping the overall rhythm and tension of the piece. Otherwise, the actors moved and spoke well and with conviction. Ahuja has an arresting stage presence and the capacity to make neutrally spoken lines sound intense. Das has, besides beauty of face and movement, a lovely, rounded voice that is well utilised in the two snatches of song that she sings.

Speaking of how he sees the art of theatre, Eric Vigner draws a parallel with painting. "When Cézanne paints apples and says, 'It is with an apple that I want to amaze Paris', his subject is not the apple. His subject is painting. The same goes for theatre. It is not the story we are actually attached to, but the theatre itself."

Gates to India Song reflects this highly esoteric approach to theatre. Not everyone will find it inviting. But I did.