

## CENTRE STAGE

This month, Nandita Das practices and preaches the importance of reinvention and artistic experimentation. By Palak Malik



Nandita Das (top); a still from the Indo-French production *Gates to India Song*, to be showcased in Delhi as part of the Bonjour India festival



**T**he first Indian to be inducted into the International Women's Forum Hall of Fame, Washington D.C.,

for her contribution to the arts, actor-director-philanthropist Nandita Das, is someone who seems to shy away from the limelight. But her body of work over the last 25 years is privy to the fact that she feels no such thing when in front of her eclectic audience. This month she makes another one of her choice appearances, on stage, as a lead in the theatrical piece *Gates to India Song*. Figuring on the itinerary for Bonjour India Festival, this play is directed by Eric Vigner, and is based on famous French writer Marguerite Duras's works – the novel *The Vice-Consul*, and a play *India Song*.

### What is this play about?

It is a love story, caught at the climax of its passion. But it is hard to explain in one line. This is a very unique play, as Duras's work is very specific, so the role I play is of a French Ambassador's wife, Anne-Marie Stretter. At the same time, I also play the actor, then the collaborative writer, the beggar woman, who is also connected to Anne-Marie's character. The challenge was not only the switch between these characters, but to understand the intent behind the emotions and this kind of literature

and theatre. Human emotions are always universal, so I do understand Anne-Marie, although willing your own doom – the impossible love, is not an ordinary emotion. It is intriguing to know someone like her!

### What made you pick this role?

When I first read the script, to be honest, I didn't understand anything. I thought it was too esoteric for me. But the director, Eric Vigner is a pure artiste, someone who has followed and understood Duras' work. He made me curious about experiencing something new. I accepted the project primarily because of Eric and his passion for trying out new ways of doing theatre and interpreting literature. I still can't claim I understand it fully, but I am glad that I got the opportunity to experience something new, to push my own boundaries, to go beyond my comfort zone. That has been the primary motivation. In India, we are too busy worrying about 'what will work' and therefore are afraid of trying new things. I can't make a generalised statement about French theatre, but the commitment and purity of intent that I see in Eric and his team is very inspiring. We get too fixed in our ideas and sometimes such experiences are needed to push us to reinvent ourselves, to be more open to other ways of thinking. But as Eric says, "Don't think, feel it in your body!"

## **How do you feel about the theatre scene in India?**

The Indian theatre scene comprises of a lot of theatre in various languages. We have heard many exciting stories about groups like the Indian Progressive Theatre Association (IPTA), who did great plays and with a social conscience. Theatre has evolved, more in its form, while contemporary original plays are still not that many.

## **Is it difficult to survive in the theatre industry in India?**

I would imagine so. Sadly, that is why most theatre actors need to do films and television work to make ends meet. That is why my husband and I formed Chhoti Productions, to support quality films and theatre and also making it viable for all involved.

## **What kind of feedback have you got for this particular play?**

Since it is not a mainstream play, we have seen a range of reactions – from those who don't relate to it to those who are completely taken in by it. I think those who have come with an open mind to experience something new have gone back very happy! They may not 'understand' everything, but they will 'feel' something powerful and memorable.

*(For event details, log on to [Bonjour-india.in](http://Bonjour-india.in))*