



“This has been one of the most difficult characters...”

THEATRE

Actress Nandita Das gets candid about playing a French lady in *Gates to India Song*, a theatrical venture that has been adapted from two books by one of France's greatest authors of the 20th century – Marguerite Duras



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The romance and mysticism of colonial India has been a subject of several great novels, and adapting two of them on stage will be Éric Vigner with *Gates to India Song*. Based on *India Song* and *The Vice-Consul* by French author Marguerite Duras, the play will celebrate the birth centenary of the author, who was born in Indochina, a French colony in Southeast Asia in 1914. The play is a story of silent passion and love between Anne-Marie Stretter, wife of French Ambassador to India who is in love with Vice Consul of Lahore at Embassy of France in Calcutta. The character, though French will be played by actress Nandita Das. Excerpts:

You had to play the role of a French woman living in colonial India. What preparation did it demand? How did you end up doing the play?

This is a unique play, as the writer, Marguerite Duras' work is specific, so before getting into the character, one needed to understand the writer, her thinking and her process of creating characters. She draws a lot from her own experiences. This has been one of the most difficult characters to play, as understanding the text itself took most of the time. But as one begins to, it starts to fall into place. I still cannot claim, I understand it fully, but I am glad that I got the opportunity to experience something new, to go beyond the comfort zone.

What were the challenges of playing Anne-Marie Stretter?

It is not as simplistic as playing Anne-Marie Stretter. I play the actor that is myself, then the collaborative writer, the beggar woman, who is also connected to Anne-Marie's character and then finally her. The challenge was not only the switch between these charac-

ters, but to understand the intent behind the feeling and form of this kind of literature.

The play is a case of role reversal, where an Indian is playing a French woman in a play about India; your take...

Art transcends boundaries and allows you to experiment without limitations. Human emotions and predicaments are universal, so I didn't have to be French to relate to the characters I play. I had to relate to those emotions, experiences that been very interesting.

What drew you to play this part?

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, a pure artiste, and someone who has followed and understands Duras' work inspired me to want to know the text and his process. I was drawn to the idea of experiencing something new. It was the journey of exploring a new way of looking at life and art that made me want to be part of this play. Eric is a passionate and committed artiste and there is a lot that I have learnt from him. We get too fixed in our ideas and sometimes these kinds of experiences are needed to push us to reinvent ourselves, to be more open to other ways of thinking.

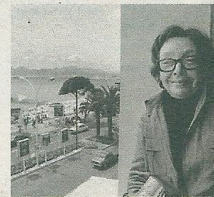
How does the story lend itself to the stage apart from its India connect?

I have not read the two novels, the *India Song* and the *Vice Consul*, which in fact is the real basis for this play. But the way Eric has weaved it together and it lends itself to a unique experience. For those who are open to experiencing something new, it is a must watch.

Gates to India Song is being performed as a part of Bonjour India festival.

TILL February 16 at Prithvi Theatre, Juhu; February 21 at NCPA, Nariman Point.

DAS ON DURAS



Writer Marguerite Duras is photographed, in May 1977, during the Cannes International Film Festival. PIC/AFP

“At first glance Duras' work seems intellectual, because it is not easy to understand. But as Eric gently takes us through the rehearsals, telling us anecdotes from her life, introducing her way of looking at life, we all started feeling her more. What I learnt about Duras was her connectedness to her self, her spontaneity, and the organic progression with which she writes. But as Eric says, “don't think, feel it in your body"! I am not wedded to the outcome, as the journey has been special – it's been the sole reason to be a part of this play.”