

Direction : Eric Vigner

Writer : Marguerite Duras

Cast : Nandita Das, Suhaas Ahuja, Subodh Maskara, Jim Sarbh, Neeraj Kabi

GATES TO INDIA SONG Play Review

Deepa Punjani

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GATES TO INDIA SONG Review

The festival Bonjour India 2013's presentation of GATES TO INDIA SONG directed by Eric Vigner is a simple yet remarkable piece of theatre. The director's long-time fascination with Marguerite Duras has yet again enabled him to create a production that does the formidable writer justice. It is not easy to stage Duras but having assimilated Duras' thoughts about acting and theatre, the director lets us on to experience the rich writing that is never straightforward, yet all the more beautiful, poignant and even lyrical for its non-linearity and circularity. It also highlights the question of love, eternal in Duras' writing - love in all its complexity, love that is willing to forgive transgressions and ugliness, and where nothing is ever too shocking. Love, we realise, in the Durassian context is a philosophy unto itself.

Schedule

No upcoming shows.



But how do we get to the heart of this writing? Duras has an answer that Vigner has internalised in the staging.

"This winter, I'm going to do some theatre, and I hope to do something completely new- create theatre that is read, not acted. Acting detracts from the text without adding anything; instead, it compromises the text's presence, its profundity, its muscle and blood. That's what I think these days, but then, that's what I've been thinking for awhile. In fact, deep down, that's what I've always thought about theatre."

(From the chapter Le Théâtre in the book La Vie Matérielle -- P.O.L. Editions 1987. Translated by Cole Swensen and Morgan Dowsett)

Duras' reflections thus find resonance in Vigner's production through a minimalist set design with a long table and chairs as the centrepiece and the four actors who double up as narrators and characters. What may have appeared as a stylistic choice in another production appears here entirely natural and right for the story of Anne-Marie-Stretter, Duras' heroine in Calcutta in the 1930s. Duras who never set foot in India conjures up the city through her vivid imagination, including the French Embassy in which the sensational climax of this love story is set. But there is nothing of the exotic in her narration. On the contrary there is a marked sensitivity, heightened by the backdrop of lamps which are lit towards the end in Vigner's staging. The Ganges is evoked in its profundity and not as casual tokenism towards a culture, both foreign and intriguing.

There are actually two stories that we are treated to simultaneously; one of the poor, pregnant girl who is forced to leave her country Vietnam (Duras herself spent her childhood and adolescence in Vietnam) and who plods her way to India to survive amongst the impoverished in Calcutta. The other story is of the listless Anne-Marie Stretter, married to the French Ambassador, but whose physical and mental suffocation become painfully apparent. The two stories, given Duras' layered writing, never seem separate though, and in fact as we listen in to Peter Morgan, the prime narrator and Anne-Marie Stretter's biographer, we sense a deep connection that transcends any literal explanation, or any one reading. This too is a beautiful thing about Duras' writing, and something that has also been noted about other feminist literature - the quality of the palimpsest.

The tragedy of Anne-Marie Stretter and that of the Vice-Consul of Lahore who falls in love with her is built up without the direct participation of the two. There are but few moments of intimacy between them, and yet the atmosphere is charged. Their turmoil is played out in the gambit of their individual conflicts, especially so in the case of the Vice-Consul of Lahore, whose troubled past impinges on his present.

Suhaas Ahuja stands out in his portrayal of the Vice-Consul. For a moment you might wonder if his clean, baby face will be up to the searing agonies of his character's soul, but as soon as he begins to speak, you know the man has got it. Nandita Das as Anne-Marie Stretter warms to her character slowly, and it would be nice if she were to spend a more lingering moment to let the persona of her character settle in. But she carries herself with poise, which is equally important for her character. Unlike the others in his team who have spent a good deal of time as actors, Subodh Maskara's performance as the Ambassador pales. He manages however to bring the desired levity to his character. Jim Sarbh with his dark eyebrows and curly hair that is slickly groomed makes the perfect young attache Charles Rossett who works with the Ambassador. There is a scene in which he plays with the gun to great effect, underlining the tension and the mysterious nature of the Vice-Consul's 'terrible' doings in Lahore. Neeraj Kabi makes an apt Peter Morgan, clearly relishing his role.

By doing away with histrionics and grand gestures, Vigner allows us to explore the writing in its minute and layered detail. This also takes the burden away from the actors to 'perform'. This is a story that needs to be heard without artifice and that is what Vigner has been able to successfully achieve in tandem with his actors, his stage design, the light design by Frank Thevenon and the sound design by John Kaced. The green lamp shade and the piano strains accentuate the ambience. Also noteworthy are the costumes provided by Maxmiliano Modesti and Rajesh Pratap Singh. The whites and the browns, and the careful attention to the embroidery suggest that detailing matters. It's all very simple and yet very tastefully done. Morgan Dowsett, who translated Duras' text, is also the assistant director on this fine production. Audiences tend to be restless when they see something that is not familiar to them. But those willing to invest their attention will encounter an unusual beauty.

Deepa Punjani is the Editor of this website.