

# Play on Manto stories testifies against charges on him

Kavita Nagpal  
 review

The Sahitya Kala Parishad's annual Bharatendu Drama Festival from March 18-25 features eight of the best plays of the last year, there are plays I had not seen. For example the play *EK Kutte Ki Kahani* presented by Wings Cultural Society. The play takes stories from Sadat Hasan Manto to show how the case against him on grounds of pornographic writing was unjustified. The play opens with Manto on a train. He is disturbed and has been drinking. Announcing the date January 8, 1948, he realises he is in Lahore. He is obviously emotionally upset over the Partition of India. He talks of Hindustan and asks will they also divide the literature of India like they have divided everything else?

During his trial he is called mad and he visits a neurological doctor who begins speaking abruptly with him, but is shaken out of his complacency when he realises that Sadat Hasan is Manto. Manto says can one turn away from reality and remain a good person? How, can a writer turn away from real-

ity and remain a true writer? Then he speaks of curse words and shows how so called curse words are parts of daily speech.

Manto's stories *Thanda Gosht* and *Kali Shalwar* are enacted to show how the case against him on grounds of pornographic writing was wrong. Finally, Manto relates the story, the *Dog of Terthal* hills in Kashmir where the armies of the Pakistan and Hindustan are posted, soldiers who were once part of a single army.

The dog named "Chapad zhunn zhunn", first enters the Indian army post where he is fed and groomed. The dog then strays into the Pakistani side with his name and his being a Hindustani dog hung around his neck. The men suspect the dog. They place over the Pakistani ownership tag on the dog who runs away and when he is midway between the two camps fearing that the dog may be a spy, the two armies train their guns on him and shoot him dead.

The play as directed by the gifted actress Salima Raaza had a problem with speech. The patterns adopted by the entire cast was laboured and artificially slow giving the production a dated feel. The script by Danish Iqbal was good and Tarique Hameed gave a



Nandita Das and Suhass Ahuja (left) in a *Gates To India* Song scene. A still (right) from *EK Kutte Ki Kahani*.

credible performance despite the speech problem that afflicted the entire cast.

Asmita's production of Manto's stories that I saw earlier was a far superior piece. Using the chorus director Arvind Gaud cre-

ated some beautiful images in *Toba Tek Singh*, *Khol Do* and other stories. The character would get up from amongst the chorus which was seated on stage the entire time and enact the story. It was a seamless display by a talented cast.



The French embassy and the Institute Francaise in collaboration with the Alliance Francaise presented *Gates To India* Song at the residence of the residence of the French ambassador. The play is based on two novels by Marguerite

Duras *The India Song* and *The Vice Counsel* and it is directed by Eric Vigner. Mr Vigner has been associated with Ms Duras for two decades. It was in 1963 that he came across Ms. Duras after a workshop he conducted adapting her

novel *Summer Rain* for theatre. According to him she gave him the vocabulary and the fundamentals of the kind of theatre he wanted to create.

For Vigner, beyond speech and beyond semantics of language of each culture there is a universal understanding related to sound.

"The Vice-Counsel's truth is beyond words and it is revealed through the deafening scream, which is the single gesture, expressing both his horror at the manner in which the lepers in Calcutta were treated and his love for Anne-Marie Stetter. The discovery of the text informed what I wanted to do in theatre and hear something from literature," he says in his directorial note.

Eric was in India in 2011 when he brought the French play *The Barber of Seville* in an Albanian version to the Bharat Rang Mahotsava. This year, he was in India to tell the story of the Vice-Counsel's and the French ambassador's wife Anne-Marie Stetter's tragic silent passion. He has Indian actors to work with Ms. Marguerite Duras whose film writing based on her own writing *Hiroshima mon amour*, is world famous, and this is the world premier of her novel *India Song*.

The play was staged in the promenade at the residence of the French Ambassador. It opened in the courtyard with the entire cast reading from the book as they introduced each other, Ms Duras has this thing about the language of the play being destroyed when it is staged. She believes that the play should be read only. Next the cast moved to the dining room where the Vice Counsel from Lahore is introduced as he is shaving at the table. The books are consulted less often now and actors are performing.

In the third and final act there're no books at all. Here the actors are all dressed in formal evening attire for the ball.

The director's penchant for black and white is retained in all the costumes which are beautifully tailored. There is only one black dress that Anne-Marie wears after the lover leaves and she is desolate and tortured as she lies down on the floor of the area that leads onto the garden where the last scene is enacted.

The performances were all good with Nandita Das leading the troupe. The Vice-Counsel's scream where he says "I want to spend the night with you... Why can't I?" is most effective as uttered by Suhass Ahuja.