Playing with Life by Manohar Khushalani



THE PIONEER

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Playing with life

FOOTLIGHTS

Manohar Khushalani

Zehreela Nehla

Meetha Dehla

Lok Sanskriti staged the second play in its festival *Jad Jaughter*—Joseph Kesselring's *Arsenic and the old lace* adapted by Prakash Bhatia into *Shatranj* as *Zehreela Nehla Meetha Dehla* and directed by Prabha Tank at SRC.

While lacking the verve and abandon of the first play, *Pati Gaye Ke Kaisa*, the comedy nevertheless had a punch thanks to some excellent performances by Shiv Jain, Indu Vaidyal, Ramesh Thakur and Deepak Mukerji.

Delhi is an extremely relaxed performer and Ramesh impressed with the counterpoint of his characterisation of a plastic surgeon, always worried, when in the bottle before you could spell house. Deepak Mukerji displayed versatility as he tackled two radically different roles in the two plays of the Lok Sanskriti festival. While in *Pati Gaye Ke Kaisa* he did the role of Dhirenji, a romantic that who fancied himself as he really, in *Zehreela Nehla Meetha Dehla* he was Naresh Bahadur, a foul villain, a short tempered bully, a dangerous killer on the loose and Gabbar Singh of Dhoby Ghat all rolled in one. However the production was marred by lack of clarity of speech of Maker Jain who was doing a major role of the chief protagonist Deepak Bahadur.

Two senile old sisters Rama and Sushila make a massive cut of releasing lonely and ageing men of their agony by poisoning them to death. Most appropriately, the curtain opens with the haunting music of a famous Hindi starrer mystery, *Jeete Jaad Jaad*, and the entire action takes place over one night. The house appears to be deceptively peaceful.

The only one breaking up the peace, with his trumpet, is the neighbor, Jang Bahadur, who fancies himself to be Field Marshal Montgomery (Montgomery!) and who obligingly digs up the graves for all the dead bodies, supplied by the two sweet, thinking them to be those of war heroes. Action hots up when the only sane member of the family, Dinesh Bahadur, discovers one such dead body. His ex lovely of this discovery, his long estranged brother, Harish Bahadur, also arrives with one dead body and one plastic surgeon in tow.

The dead bodies get exchanged between opening and closing bits of a trunk. Varnish has been given a number of faces by Dr Alam, the plastic surgeon, and the latest one is of the filmy dacoit from Sholay, which Dr Alam claims was an accident, since he was drunk during the operation. While Deepak wants to transfer the blame of the murders to his lunatic brother Jang, and protect his name, Suresh rejects this a completely with them, refuses for ghoulish dirt that body count is equal to his own.

Prabha Tank was able to inject an atmosphere of quiet uneasy necessary for generating the scary situations. She was aided by the subdued characterisation of mild domestic by Shiv and Indu, but Maker Jain must undergo rigorous speech training before the production is presented again.