Ambitious Student Production on Oedipus

WEDNESDAY APRIL 5, 1995

ARTS

THE PIONEER 13

Ambitious production

FOOTLIGHTS

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Shanshah Oedipus

The present batch of students of Shri Ram Centre Acting Course is an enthusiastic lot. One has seen two earlier productions of this batch, *Neelkanth Nirala* and *Bhartendu* directed by resident director of SRC, Sanjay Upadhyay.

Their latest production *Shanshah Oedipus*, based on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, is directed by the NSD graduate, Pradeep Vernekar, who is a senior lecturer at the Lalit Kala Akademi in Goa.

Sanjay Upadhyay's earlier productions displayed the students' right training and orientation. They showed that the students were being exposed to the kind of text essential for good grooming of a theatre person.

Now, after the completion of the first year, the students took up an ambitious production of a script which has in it the complexity and sensitivity of an epic like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Sophocles', the playwright of the fifth century BC, belonged to a time when Athens was at the peak of its cultural, political and economic development. Even if he were to be compared with his great fellow Greek tragedians, Aeschylus and Euripides, he would be considered peerless in creating drama based on perplexing dilemmas of human experience.

His plays brought him recognition and respect during his lifetime itself. Something not many playwrights have been fortunate to receive. Among others, no less a person than Aristotle believed that *Oedipus Rex*, was Sophocles' greatest work.

Obviously, a student production cannot be reviewed by the same yardstick as a professional one, and one year is not sufficient for trainees to mature into full-fledged actors. Keeping this in view, it is heartening to learn that Panna Bharat Ram has decided to extend the acting course to two years.

The set design of the play had two pillars on an elevated platform, with a long flight of steps, at the bottom of which was lit an urn which emitted perfumed smoke. The combination of the smoke and Girdhari's mood lighting created the right kind of atmosphere for a classical play. Nevertheless, the performance of the actors was quite uneven.

The play demonstrates the inability of a man to escape from his own destiny. Oedipus' fate traps him as he unknowingly kills his own father, Laius, and marries his mother Jocasta, putting her in an unenviable predicament of begetting a father from a father and children from a child. Oedipus discovers this truth through a self-destructive obsession to unearth the facts about Laius' slayer

In fact, when Murad Ali Khan was on stage as Tiraceous, the old prophet, one felt like walking out. However, later the show gelled together and one was glad that one had stayed on. One wonders why the director had not restrained Murad from putting up a performance so obviously shabby that it threatened to ruin the entire show.

The play opens in Thebus, where death has cast its shadow through a dreaded epidemic. Shanshah Oedipus is informed that according to Lord Apollo, a curse has befallen the city. This is because of a tainted act which caused the murder of King Laius. According to him only the exile of the perpetrator of the heinous crime would rid the city of the pall of gloom.

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Oedipus discovers this truth through a self-destructive obsession to unearth the facts about Laius' slayer. The result of his investigation leads Jocasta to hang herself as he himself undergoes the torture of becoming self blinded.

In Sophoclean drama, disaster or misfortune are never a chance happenstance. There is always a meaning behind grief. Tragedy always metamorphoses into a honing of the spirit. Death and agony are always a regeneration. The Greek chorus interprets tragedy to keep the balance.

However, with the exception of Vandana Gupta and Sarita Jha, the chorus which is such an important element of a Greek play was weak and tripped repeatedly on their dialogues. Neelam Ghildyal was too restrained as Jocasta.

This criticism aside, the actors' performances were by and large adequate. Ujjwal Singh Rana, in particular, shone as Oedipus as he displayed a good range of emotions. J N Kaushal's translation was easy on the ears as it gave a good feel of the classic.