The Travails of Travel

14 THE PIONEER

WEDNESDAY MAY 10, 1995

ARTS

The travails of travel

FOOTLIGHTS

Manohar Khushalani

Rahul by SRC Rep

Shri Ram Centre Repertory put up its latest production, *Rahul*, at its main auditorium. The play was based on the life story and ideas of Rahul Sanskritayan, the famous Indian traveller, poet, thinker and writer who died in April 1963 and who again made news last year when his statue was installed in Darjeeling and a street there was named after him.

The set consisted of a low circular platform with three ramps. The play opened with the poet on a wheelchair silhouetted in the beam which projected onto the cyclorama, a slide of Rahul's facial close-up. The slide is becoming a frequently used device and the director tried to create a variation by installing a smaller screen in front of the cyclorama. Thus the pictures were projected on the two planes and this gave some depth to the two-dimensional images.

Sanjay Upadhyay, the resident theatre director of SRC Repertory, has been consistent in his choice of scripts both for the acting course as well as the repertory. After working on difficult subjects like Nirala, Mahendra Simir and Bhartendu, he decided to evolve the story of the mercurial Rahul Sanskritayan, in collaboration with the scriptwriter Anubha.

The script was developed by Anubha in an interactive free flowing style. This was aided by the style of presentation in which Rahul was represented by three actors who took over from each other very smoothly.

This representation of the same character by different actors prevented the audience from getting empathetically involved in the life story of Sankritayan. While this had a Brechtian alienation effect, at the same time, the three actors, Rajesh Tiwari, Shiv Gupta and A R Shammi were so cast as to represent three different aspects of Rahul's ideology.

Thus focus was more on ideas than on the story line. The repertory does not have a single actor powerful enough to project the gigantic personality. The subdivision, therefore, served the purpose of exploring the multi-dimensional personality of Rahul.



Telling the tale of the mercurial Sanskritayan

A man of strong likes and dislikes, he had a blind love for the Hindi language. But this did not create an inhibiting effect on his personality. The fact that he knew 40 languages proved that he was not a psychophant and was a linguist in a true sense.

His political ideology swung from Marxism and socialism to religion. Thus he could encompass opposing ideologies by taking the best from each of them during various phases of his life. His embracing different communities and getting absorbed in their culture displayed a kind of universal outlook and made him into a sort of radical humanist or a neo humanist.

Soviet Union was like a second homeland for him. Here he had a wife Lola (Manisha Shivam) and son Igor (Dhruv Jyoti Sengupta). This relationship was examined with compassion. The fact that Rahul had many wives and mistresses was projected with a sensitive understanding of a creative mind. In fact if anything, the production put Sanskritayan too much on a pedestal and did not examine his failings with the ruthlessness of an objective mind.

If this aspect had been strengthened, it could have become a powerful production. Certain emotional aspects were tackled with an intellectual dispassionateness — for instance Rahul being torn between different countries and wives. How the giant mind could resolve personal dilemmas was reflected by the statement he made to his Indian wife Kamla: "I know I have to provide for you materially because you live in a capitalist society. I do not have to worry much about Lola and Igor since a socialist state provides for its citizens."

Rahul's childhood marriage, and more marriages later, his embracing the Buddhist faith, his travels to China, Tibet, Nepal and Sri Lanka, his involvement in the freedom movement as well as the peasant rebellion, are some of the many aspects of his story which would be too difficult to encompass. Sanjay Upadhyay's choice of a semi-documentary style of presentation can therefore be understood. But perhaps some playwright could also attempt to capture the emotional drama behind the dilemmas of the man who tragically died a schizophrenic.

What Sanskritayan wrote after Tilak's death hold's good for him too: *Beej boya tha jiska tune yahan/ Khoon se sincha tha jise tu yahan/ Phool lagne ka us pe vakt aaya/ Nazre daurin na tu nazar aaya.* (You were nowhere to be seen when time came for you to enjoy the fruits of your own labour.)