

Educating Through Wit

THE PIONEER 13

ARTS

WEDNESDAY APRIL 12, 1995

Educating through wit

When the NSD-TIE invited Wolfgang Kolneder to produce a play for children, he had the advantage of a very talented cast along with an adept set and lights designer Nissar Allana, and to top it all a music director of the calibre of B V Karanth.

With such a formidable group of artistes, one would expect something more than just a competent production. Kolneder himself has a background of having done plays of the "theatre of the absurd" of playwrights like Ionesco, Beckett and Pinter. One expected that this experience would translate itself into elements of fantasy being used in the play.

Talking trees and animals, the river and the drain as characters, did exist in *Pani Phir Gaya Pani Par* and their visualisation through Kirti V Sharma's costumes and M Ilyas' masks were attractive. However, their stylisation through drama was too simplistic. The play has been adapted to Indian conditions from an original production by Grips Theatre.

Music, dance and song are the most effective tools of communication with children — and one wishes that much more of it had been used in the play. Except for Vani Tripathi, who also has a charming stage presence, there were no other singing voices. This is not to say that it

was not a neat production — except that one's expectations were higher.

Pani Phir Gaya Pani Par educates kids about water pollution. It shatters the myth that unlike cities, villages are free of environmental pollution. A father and son who get stifled by urban pollution decide to go to the countryside. In the village the city boy, Vicky (Abdul Latif), befriends the village lad, Bansi (Suwarn Rawat).

They take a voyage on the river in a raft and discover that there is a different set of problems in the villages. The water is highly polluted by human waste and dumping of hazardous chemicals by industries. This results in a chain of toxic deaths of animals and vegetation.

Many interesting characters have been introduced. The most effective among them were Laxmikant Shetgaonkar's rendition of Pillai, Jaya Barnela's Nati and Charru Sharma's Dadi.

Jyoti Dogra with her versatility in many different roles and Vani Tripathi with her clear diction and confident characterisation of the River were impressive. The duo also handled the fight between the river and the drain with gusto and good timing.

Manohar Khushalani

Ambitious Student Production on Oedipus

Ambitious production



FOOTLIGHTS

Manohar Khushalani

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.

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.

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. 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.

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

Problems of Survival

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 San-

skritayan. While this had a Brechtian alienation effect, at the same time, the three actors, Rajesh Tiwari, Shiv Gupta and A R Shammil were so cast as to represent three different aspects of Rahul's ideology.

This 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.

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

talist 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



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

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 capi-

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 boye tha jiska tune yahan/ Khon se sincha tha jise tu yahan/ Phool lagne ka us pe vakt aaya/ Nazre daarin na tu nazar aaya.* (You were nowhere to be seen when time came for you to enjoy the fruits of your own labour.)