

Contemporary Indian theatre was a smash hit at the recent Biennale Bonn arts festival. Clearly, Europe, which has always been fascinated by classical Indian traditions, is curious about what preoccupies the country's artists today, says Meher Marfatia

Frau Ismat in Bonn

Naseeruddin Shah has just learnt a thing or two. At the recent Biennale Bonn, where the actor-director's Motley Theatre Company staged *Ismat Apa Ke Naam* before riveted local audiences, a roundabout exercise first required him to translate feminist writer Ismat Chughtai's trio of 1940s' stories from the original Urdu to English. The lines were then reinterpreted in German for an engrossed house there.

The experience stands the acid test of a long-held claim: theatre has its own special language. "Lesson One is that theatrical language transcends physical language," Shah says. Anxious that theirs wasn't a spectacular machine-driven production with elaborate sets and a huge cast as Europeans might expect, he and wife Ratna Pathak, co-starring in the three-character play, were rewarded with rapt attention early into the performance. "There are quiet audiences and quiet audiences. But we sensed attentive-quiet, not bored-quiet," Ratna remarks.

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—Organiser Elena Kruskemper

What could possibly connect urban European sensibilities with small town-India foibles that Chughtai explored in works set in Meerut or Lucknow? "It was like venturing into virgin territory," Naseeruddin admits. "There arose another aspect the encounter taught: perform only to communicate, not worrying about laughs coming a little late or the tempo slackening. In fact it was a relief not to have instant and constant reaction. One gets more than one needs of this from familiar audiences understanding the same language."

Motley is one of 13 groups invited by Biennale Bonn organiser Elena Kruskemper. Also showcasing Indian art, dance, music, film

and literature, the 10-day festival most vitally and widely represented theatre. This contingent included the National School of Drama, Chorus Repertory Theatre, Adishakti, Naya Theatre, the Indian Shakespeare Company and Rage Productions with their respective directors (most of whom double-teamed themselves as their plays' writers) Abhilash Pillai, Ratan Thiyam, Veenapani Chawla, Habib Tanvir, Roysten Abel and Rahul da Cunha.

If Europe has always been fascinated by classical Indian traditions, it is clearly curious about what preoccupies the country's artists today. Explaining why the beam shone on India this season, Kruskemper says, "We want to investigate how the enormous political, social and economic changes India is undergoing affect the work of its contemporary artists. How do art forms deal with these transitions, are they visible differently in various parts of the country?"

Indian theatre has always been globe-trotting, no stranger particularly to US and UK shores. Gurcharan Das's *Mira* and Partap Sharma's *Touch of Brightness* crossed the Atlantic in the 1960s, followed by the touring plays of Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad. Now it is Europe which searches for revealing insights into India's current concerns. The excitement is generated not among Indian emigrants but in the questioning minds of Europeans eager to genuinely grasp the realism and relevance of our issues of the day.

With his *Pune Highway* reaping enough raves to be invited to Amsterdam and Antwerp next April, Rahul da Cunha is sweeping yet suc-

cinct when he says, "I'd thought they'd see it from a touristy angle—'Oh, okay, this comes from India'—like looking at a gift shop. It actually turned out to be our most satisfying show, appreciated without the facileness of language command." Feeling this despite his scripts proving more dialogue-heavy than others, da Cunha is left with the impression that viewers were grateful to be given part of a world they know nothing about. "There's a growing hunger to figure out what's happening on the mean streets of Bombay," he says. Interestingly, headphones provided to hear *Pune Highway* with in German came off about 15 minutes after it

started; to an extent because this is a play in English, relatively more familiar than regional Indian languages.

Identifying a "metaphysical inclination" common to Indians and Germans, Pondicherry-based Veenapani Chawla acknowledges that Peter Brook brought a great awareness of the Mahabharata to Europe. The Q&A session after her play *Bharnala*, exploring Arjuna's final year of exile, indicated a broad universality of thought and understanding beyond superficial narrative structure. "2006 seems to be the year of India in Europe," says Chawla. "Contemporary theatre in India has come of age. For decades people have been working profoundly in every possible genre of the form. I wonder if there is a country as fertile as ours in producing such a diversity of genres in theatre."

Ratan Thiyam is equally gratified with the response to *Uttar Priyadarshi*, as much a chronicle of Emperor Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism as a comment on the insurgency rocking Thiyam's home-state Manipur. A respected regular at international platforms like the Avignon Festival in France and director of the Festival of India in Germany in 1989-'90, he enjoys seeing his "language of expression" received with rare sensitivity. And predicts: "In the very near future the gap between oriental and occidental expressions in art will be blended. I think the bridge is already established."



MEMORIES OF LUCKNOW: Ratna Pathak Shah in *Ismat Aapa Ke Naam*



RAVE REVIEWS: Rehaan Engineer rehearses for *Pune Highway*