

# Culinary act



Live kitchen has been a fashion in city as many well-known chefs nowadays are giving live demos of their culinary skills. But an actor doing the same in front of the theatre audience was quite unexpected. At first look, we anticipated some cooking class by Seema Bhargava Pahlwa, well-known for her role (Badki) in *Hum Log* in 1980s, as she stirred the cauldron to prepare some *saag*. However, a well-written narration was not about the recipe, but the pain and anguish of the class IV staff, which is often overlooked by the society. *Saag Meat*, a play written by Bhisam Sahni, is a satire on the middle class which doesn't value the class IV staff. It was recently performed at Bakhta's Experimental Theatre Weekend to a packed house.

The character (Sumitra) belongs to a well-off family and she is talking about her daily household chores and domestic help. She is praising her servant and points at his absence just because of the good work he had done. "After an incident, the servant took his own life. Though the family is responsible for it, they don't consider it as a big issue. They remember him for the services he provided. They have nothing to do with his feelings, pain and trauma. She again and again says 'chula gony bechura'. I am agitated to see how insensitive society has become. We get to know about the atrocities towards the servants by all kinds of people, be it rich, professional or mid-

**SEEMA BHARGAVA PAHWAS**, known for her role in *Hum Log*, amalgamated theatre and cooking to address the pain and anguish of the class IV staff. She spoke to **KARAN BHARDWAJ** about the inclusion of interactive tools in her future projects

dle class," the actor told us adding that she wished to enact the play before every house. "That's the need of hour. I wish I could forcibly ask people to watch the play to make them realise what they do to other humans. By the end of the show, I was also teary-eyed along with the audience," she said.

Bhargava staged the play first in 1981.



The idea of including cooking in narration was introduced recently. "I wanted to experiment with the style. So I added cooking which bridges the gap between the actor and the audience," she said. In the end, the audience was also served. "It was interesting to see people's reaction while I was adding ingredients to it. Since they knew they would be tasting it, they

would ask me if I correctly put salt and pepper. I think I managed a decent dish," said the actor, who treated some 250 people during the recent show.

Bhargava is now working on Sahni's another story *Phoolan*. It talks about the loneliness of a woman who is obsessed with her cat. "She doesn't have kids so she is in love with her cat. However, one day, the cat also runs away. So the lady is talking about her fondness for the animal and how she was dependent on her. Interestingly, till the half of the play, you don't even know she is talking about the cat," she said. For this, she is again planning to perform along with cooking. "I am thinking to interact with the audience in a new style. I will ask them to assist in the cook-out session. They can chop ingredients and be part of it," she said.

The actor was last seen in Rajat Kapoor's *Aankhon Dekhi*. Her forthcoming projects include Yash Raj's *Dum Lagao Ke Haisla* and Umesh Shukla's *Mere Apne*. For the past five years, she has been part of Naseeruddin Shah's Motley theatre group. "We staged *Saag Meat* in Lahore too where people were bowled over by the tasty food," she said. Though she continues to bask in the past glory of *Hum Log*, she expects some admiration for cooking too. "I cook a lot for my family, so why not for the audience? I hope somebody people would come to me and say, 'maame aapka saag chahka hain, autograph milega kya?'" she quipped.

## Grief, guilt and betrayal

Albert Camus' famous play, *The Misunderstanding*, was adapted by Bengali-Hindi group Sansaptak with Rajasthan's Kalbeliya music community as its focus. The director chatted with **UTPAL K BANERJEE**



mouthed, a lyric intoned or a gyration spun; for every stretch of dialogue; in the true Kalbeliya tradition. Excerpts from an interview with the director.

**■ How did Camus enter into your reckoning?**

I was fascinated since my college days by Camus' writings. My first adaptation was his play *Just Assassins* on the Bolshevik Revolution into *Na Hanyate* in 1994. The play is still staged by Sansaptak. Since 2013, we're celebrating Camus' Birth Centenary Year through seminars, discussions and now a new play.

**■ How did you think of locating Camus in Rajasthan?**

Camus' characters are marked by monetary motif, while I thought of changing it to revenge against the wrong-doing of the males. I happened to visit the Kalbeliya community in 2009 and was struck by the social and mental deprivation suffered by them in the hands of men. Eloquent singers and dancers, the women are all considered as available sex workers. They're gypsies still, unlike the Langas and Manganiyars: the other natural musicians of Rajasthan. I thought their accumulated grievances against men would provide me the backdrop of the habitual killings in the play: which our audience may not otherwise accept.

**■ How did you collect their lyrics and music?**

Although some rare CDs are available, theirs is essentially an oral tradition. I made recordings and was hugely helped by the eminent ethnologist Komal Kothari in Jodhpur and his group Rupayan.

**■ But how about the translations?**

I did the Bengali translations myself, besides using some original rhymes that I had composed earlier. But now I'm advised about making a Hindi version, where the rhymes would sound far nearer the Rajasthani intonations.

**■ You've used plenty of expletives in the women's dialogue and made the young girl repeatedly kick the prostrate old man...**

Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a French-Algeria born author, journalist and philosopher, whose views contributed to the rise of the philosophy of absurdism. He wrote that his whole life was devoted to opposing the philosophy of nihilism, while still delving deeply into individual and sexual freedom. Nor was he a proponent of existentialism, rejecting this particular label and any ideological associations to say, "I am not an existentialist. Jean Paul Sartre and I are always surprised to see our names linked..."

*The Misunderstanding* (*Le Malentendu*, 1944), penned in occupied France by Camus, focusses on his idea of the absurd. In the story, Martha and her mother — together with a taciturn old man — run a guest house in which they murder rich solitary travellers. The only son Jan returns home that he had left 20 years ago: with ample money for his mother. Let alone welcoming the prodigal youth, his mother does not recognise him. Jan registers under a false name. Martha is cold, declining to answer personal questions. Mother even fails to respond when Jan hints at his purpose in coming or asks if she had a son. When Jan becomes enthusiastic about Martha, she rejects the shared moment and determines to kill him, bringing him some drugged tea. When Jan falls asleep, Martha takes his money, they proceed to do their destined job and throw the body in the river. In the morning, the old man finds Jan's dropped passport and they realise — without emotion — what they have done. Mother decides to drown herself, disregarding Martha's protests. Martha is left alone with her deep, suppressed anger.

The play is a highly subjective presentation by Camus of the human condition as he saw it in the desperate circumstances of 1942-43. It reflects several aspects of Camus' life: he had left Algeria, to which he was deeply attached, leaving his wife and friends behind, he was depressed with tuberculosis and living under threat of execution as a propaganda agent of the French Resistance.

*Mritanchand* (*Post-death Rituals*), presented recently by the noted Bengali-Hindi group, Sansaptak, follows faithfully Camus' storyline but situates it squarely in Rajasthan's Kalbeliya musical community. Written and directed by the veteran Torit Mitra, mother (Ruma Bose) and daughter (Sreenoyee Dasgupta) are an eloquently-furious, fire-spewing duet jaded with the masculine gender and, having been constantly deceived, hell-bent on wreaking their vengeance. The old man is the mother's old flame — their lascivious landlord



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die class." the actor told us adding that she wished to enact the play before every house. "That's the need of hour. I wish I could forcibly ask people to watch the play to make them realise what they do to other humans. By the end of the show, I was also teary-eyed along with the audience," she said.

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ate group. "We staged Saag Meat in Lahore too where people were bowled over by the tasty food," she said. Though she continues to bask in the past glory of Hum Log, she expects some admiration for cooking too. "I cook a lot for my family, so why not for the audience? I hope someday people would come to me and say, 'maine aapka saag chakka hain, autograph milega kya?'" she quipped.

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You'll be surprised how many explicitly abusive words the marginalised Kalbelias — who dare not register themselves as OBCs still — use in their spoken language all the time. And the kicks are the outward expression of intense resentment against the male.

## Search of spirituality

UK-based Indian poet-playwright Gopi Warrier's two plays — *Ego of the Yogis* and *Polyester Lordship* — have evoked rave reviews in London.

Dealing with corporate responsibility and the search for spirituality reflecting contemporary times, the plays are being staged at the Steiner Theatre since April 1. Directed by Alex Crampton, the cast includes leading British actors Sarah Hall, Tim Heath, Sanjive Hayre (who has acted as Jawaharlal Nehru), Lloyd Morris, Gillian Kirkpatrick, Tim Hilborne and Paul Piggott. On selected days there are discussions with writers, intellectuals, corporate leaders and spiritual teachers on the issues raised in the play. The premiere was marked by a brief talk by Sir Andrew Likierman,

Indian poet-playwright GOPI WARRIER'S two plays, *Ego of the Yogis* and *Polyester Lordship*, are being staged at the Steiner Theatre in London

the Dean of London Business School and a Director of the Bank of England and Barclays Bank during the interval. An alumnus of London Business School, Warrier moved to Britain from Kerala after completing his graduation.

He conceptualised both the plays. *Polyester Lordship* portrays the absence of corporate social responsibility to

workers and consumers in the often-corrupt world of international business, while *Ego of the Yogis* is a more regretful yet romantic evocation of the search for true love and of the contamination of yoga and spirituality in the Western world and in India.

The highlight in the play *Ego of the Yogis* is it's for the first time that the great Sage Adi Shankara's famous Sanskrit poem *Kanakadhara Stavam* — which he recites in the house of a poor woman who gives him alms — is sung on the theatre stage in London. Another important showpiece in the *Ego of the Yogis* is how the latest Japanese research mathematically proves the illusory nature of the world as the Hindus always believed. IANS



## All wool and a yard wide

CHINTAN UPADHYAY's latest works use second-hand knitted garments as a metaphor for 'faceless people of our city.' He tells DIVYA KAUSHIK how his present installations are similar to his baby series

Doesn't the city also think like this? Do we ever want to know who these people are who work for us, who live on the streets? I want to talk about the idea of memories attached to objects in these works.

These are also narratives about domestic and public spaces — people we meet and see but don't care to know. These forms have been used as a metaphor to describe the people who migrate to other cities with certain dreams. The transformation that takes place in people is reflected in these pieces," shares Upadhyay and on why wool as a medium, he adds, "First, wool is a medium that can be stretched easily. Second, when it is old wool develops a certain texture that lends a desired kind of look to the installations. Wool also has a personal connection as I remember

my mother knitting sweaters. The other important thing is that wool is related to each one of us, it is easy with the material to imagine a personality, totally stranger to us, someone we might see but do not recognise."

Upadhyay's art practice has remained focussed on ideas of mass production, production of desires and colossal wastes and mechanical artificiality of modern landscapes. These themes have found echoes in both his gallery bound and site-specific works. "I have been working with site-specific projects since over a decade. In



2010/11, I was working in El Salvador on a residency project where I asked residents to give me their second-hand clothes. The works made with this cloth and filled with sand were installed on the beach and soon the entire area looks like a land inundated with bodies. There has always been a sense of death in my work, though not in a morbid way. Even my babies are never

alive, they will never talk and they are genetically controlled but there is so much life going around them. The idea of working with second hand clothes came from there and when Renu Modi asked me to work on a show last year, I knew I could create another site-specific story," says Upadhyay.

Just like his baby sculptures which



have a multitude of narratives imprinted on them, his present works too are multi-layered. On one hand, Upadhyay seeks to talk about the dignity of labour, and "about those invisible people we do not notice in our daily lives." And on the other, he questions the faceless façade of an urban space and city life where we are all strangers scared of "each other's strangeness." Whether it is a wall-mounted installations created by stitching dozens of woollen clothes together or photographs of a person whose face and entire body has been concealed with a woollen garment, or small boxes stuffed with toy-like woollen shapes, there is a sense of both the bizarre and the obvious.

The title of the exhibition signifies the popular attitude, "Let it be!" The artist says that the title also opens a window towards Bollywood, which has depicted many stories of how people move from one place to the other with dreams and desires. The exhibition will continue till May 31.



At a first glance, woollen structures with extensions that appear like limbs of a shapeless form remind of hand-stitched stuffed dolls that are rarity in the commercial world now. While some simply appear like a heap of old clothes tied together, there are art pieces that take a form of a human figure minus the face. Woollen garments tied like a turban give the impression of face to these forms. These dolls or faceless forms and figures in stuffed woollen garments are Chintan Upadhyay's recent medium to convey his thoughts on migration and changing face of the city and its people. Though the artist insists "that there is no specific interpretation that he wants to convey or force on the viewers" once you will be face-to-face with these forms, you will be forced to think about societal changes that you see around on day-to-day basis.

The artist, who is known for his baby series and for adding a quirky element, is a known name in Indian contemporary art. The last one of his 'baby artwork' was a 10-foot-high fibreglass head at India Art Fair earlier this year. However, Upadhyay is currently on a different trajectory. For his latest solo art show, titled *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron-Redux* at Gallery Espace, Upadhyay has used second-hand knitted garments to create a metaphor for "the faceless people of our city." For the show beginning tomorrow, the gallery space has been converted into what looks like Sarojini Nagar market, the walls and floor of the gallery replete with sculptural installations and photographs of faceless forms and figures in stuffed woollen garments. "Certain garments have been bought from the Sarojini Nagar market from the shop selling second-hand stuff. I didn't want to take clothes from someone as I was avoiding any sort of association in these artworks. I did not want any connections to be traced back to the person who wore them.