

THEATRE

N A R A K E R D A R J A

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Theatre Commune entered its 38th year of theatre production, with a New Bengali play, "Naraker Darja—Door to Hell" (1hr 25 mins). Jean-Paul Sartre's "Huis Clos—Closed Doors" is the inspirational source of the play. Translated from the English version of Sartre's play, and directed by Nilkantha Sen Gupta, "Naraker Darja" avoids a straight life story, and adopts a more artful and intricate presentation. The micro-cosmos of the stage deals with life and death, and throws in pain, comedy and satire in good measure. It is afterlife, and there are off stage sounds of rustling mind and a storm. An off stage voice (of Nilkantha Sen Gupta) counts 5, 174, 158, 13, 10.... and the curtain opens to red glow lights. Three chairs, a small table and a door facing the audience comprise the decor. Sporting a beard, and dressed in a pink shirt, tie and dark trousers, Abanish Roy (Prasenjit Sen Gupta) enquires of 'That room'. The chowkidar (Soumya Pal) is unable to throw any light on the weapons of torture, and the torture chamber. Abanish does not know where to search.

There are no mirrors in the room. Abanish's search for his old toothbrush is futile, Abanish cannot forget the little things associated with man's dignity. There are peeks of musical strings, as Abanish again raises the question : "Where is the torture chamber?" Abanish remembers being immersed in water. The eyes of a man sees the world passing by. The tooth brush, the bed, and the interrogation chamber have disappeared. Abanish is convinced that apparently nobody sleeps. He lies on the white divan. The chowkidar compliments him on being romantic. Abanish ruminates that when eyelids are closed, it is darkness and rest. Since nobody is required to sleep, the place is without eyelids. While there is no chance of sleep, Abanish wonders as to what would happen to dreams. He recalls the outside varandah, stairs, rooms and walls. On holidays, the chowkidar visits his uncle. There are no light switches in the room, and the current is never off. Unlimited electricity produces perennial electric lights, and eyelids are always open. Suddenly there is a resonance tone on the calling bell, hung by a wire.

On the table, there is a paper cutting knife, but no writing papers. The chowkidar leaves. When Abanish calls, there is no response. Later the chowkidar returns with a lady, dressed in a yellow sari and blouse. The chowkidar tells Ellora Dutta (Kajal Sen Gupta) that Abanish would explain the small things like calling bell and tooth brush. Ellora enquires of the oppression laboratory with whipping and upside-down hangings. She mistakes Abanish as the torturer. Then who is the torturer? Torturers live in fear, but Abanish does not feel scared. The door is locked, and there is no way of going outside. Abanish looks forward to gentle and meek behaviour with the lady. Ellora notices that Abanish is twitching his face, chins and eyebrows. He has now control over his facial movements. While Ellora has arrived one week earlier, Damini Bhargava (Swati Biswas), dressed in printed full sleeve top and a flowing pink skirt, has just arrived. In the after life, the departed souls recall and peer into their earthly lives. Damini glimpses her sister trying to get tears. Ellora's husband is bed ridden, and there is a gas cylinder burst. Abanish had faced bullets. The protagonists feel that dead people are never so lively, in the domain of absence and non presence.

Abanish had been working in Delhi as a journalist, and was absent for a month. Ellora is from Bardhaman. Abanish sees a photo, but there are no tears. He feels hot, and is keen to open his shirt buttons. Damini objects. Abanish remembers working in a newspaper office. It is hot and humid. As the patterning of memories and thoughts emerge, the protagonists, Ellora, Damini and Abanish stand in a single file and stare at past situations, with details on dresses and working environments. Damini is curious whether they had met earlier, when alive. Ellora had worked as post office clerk. Abanish is emphatic that there was no chance of meeting earlier, as he was in Delhi.

Ellora ponders on the sudden meeting, and feels everything is programmed and nothing accidental. All three are together, and "they" await Damini does not comprehend as to why she has been sent. She was married off to a sixty-two-year-old man, aged enough to be her father. The former lover wanted to elope, but was struck by pneumonia, Abanish recalls being a political reporter of a newspaper in Delhi. He had picked up his wife from 'garbage'. Damini feels that they were criminals and companions from hell. The souls have petrified and gone stale. The torture sufferers were now together for endless times. The torturer remains missing. Ellora wants to torture each other separately. She sings a Hindi film song. Damini searches for a mirror, as part of a search for things without speaking. She almost faints. Abanish tries to listen to conversations in his newspaper, office, and looks here and there. Damini recalls six big mirrors in a room, and stares at imagined photos on walls. Others cannot see her. Ellora acts as mirror to Damini, and Damini finds her lipstick smudged. As Ellora grows fond of Damini, the tastes, movements and vocal sounds of the two ladies blend. While Ellora looks forward to friendship, Abanish tells the girls to keep quiet. He stares at the floor, and ignores the presence of others.

Ellora circles Abanish, and stares into his eyes. Abanish places his hands on Damini's shoulders from behind. Memories of a life once lived exposes Abanish of having ill treated his wife. His blood stained coat was given to his wife. Abanish would return home drunk at nights, and his wife would wait for him, without tears nor remorse. Abanish would sleep with a young maid. Recriminations on the past continue. Ellora's husband Subrata would sleep with other girls. She had kept the gas cylinder open, leading to the cylinder burst, as Subrata smoked at night. Damini was unfaithful, and had drowned her child in a river, after tying the baby with a stone. The protagonists are full of hatred and exchange charges. Abanish had leaked the union government's budget to UP sugar barons. Ellora cries. Abanish suggests mutual assistance, and love and affections could lead to survival. There is darkness in the room. Ellora rejects mercy and sympathy, as Abanish's acts with his wife were unforgivable. Damini expresses love for Abanish. There is a realization in Abanish that they no longer belong to the world, and the world has abandoned them. He gets violent with Ellora. Abanish's shirt had twelve bullet holes. Damini wants to run away and appeals for the door to be opened. Ellora and Damini appeal for freedom and redemption.

The door opens, and the spectator hears an off-stage voice counting numbers, Abanish is on his knees with outstretched hands before the door. Ellora tells him to flee, as the door is open. Damini is also told to run as she is free. Nobody escapes, and the decision is to stay together. Damini picks up a knife, and stabs Ellora, but poison, knife and rope are ineffective in the next

world. Death is eternal, and the protagonists entwine their hands. The chowkidar, sitting on a stool, watches the arguments and recriminations. Nilkantha Sen Gupta throws the three main characters in stifling seclusion. The characters recall the oppression and physical torture in their personal earthly lives, though the tyranny is not always political. The dead build up a living theatre where the collective structure is of an intolerant society. Whatever the social and personal experiences, recall of the past becomes an attack of depersonalization, where the ghost protagonists are confronted by words and faint memories of their earlier lives. The dialogue, memories and the current attractions and repulsions compose a poetic unity. While each character is questioned by another, the process of questioning confers an interrogative existence. The incorporated sounds provoke astonishment, grief and joy. Nilkantha's brilliant production and direction offers witty and cruel dialogue without any pauses. The portrayals are enthusiastic and entirely unsentimental. The commendable performances have the right ideals in looking at the era. □□□