

THEATRE

AACHE AACHE STHAN

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A production of Anya Theatre, "Aache Aache Sthan-There is still space for you" (Bengali, 120mins) is written and directed by Ramaprasad Banik. The title of the play is derived loosely from a Rabindranath Tagore poem. As the curtain unfolds, a city awakens amidst the high rise apartments and the low income group tenements. There are two ensemble groups. Members of the affluent group are standing, some with their backs to the audience. A young girl plays a small flute, imitating the sound of roosters, while others sway to a dance tune, and sing in chorus. The group consisting of the poor, are either sitting on the ground or lying on the floor, fully enjoying the musical beats. A girl brings in tea in a kettle for the less affluent. Ganesh or Ganesh kaka-uncle (Bibhas Chakra-varty) announces the time as 4.37am. The neighbourhood steadily stirs to life. Without many words being spoken, the play unfolds the different orderings of life. Two young men do their morning exercises. Vendors display magazines, balloons and other products on strings and push carts. In the backdrop there is a man and woman conversing.

Vignettes of life are illustrated with focus. Roshan (Parimal Mondal), the son of Krishnabar (Rajat Sen Gupta) and Malabika (Krishna Dutta), has robbed a liquor bottle from a party at Grand Hotel. He gifts the bottle to two unemployed youths, Nilu (Pradip Moulik) and Sunu (Partho Banerjee). Roshan's father Krishnabar is an MLA. A young girl, Tupu (Suchismita Bhattacharjee) enquires from a vendor, whether the latest copy of 'Sananda' magazine has arrived, which carries a special article on China. The girl draws the attention of the 'para' (Neighbour-hood) boys. Three boys and two girls sing a pop song 'Aha-Aha'. Baishakhi (Sushmita Hati) asks her middle class husband, Animesh (Debashish Roy Chowdhury) whether a woman should earn her living. The sun is about to set. Dropouts lay about, drinking and singing. Animesh's niece, Tupu is yet to return home, and Animesh and Baishakhi are worried. It is dusk, and Animesh watches the roadside, waiting for Tupu. The street boys leer at Tupu, as she returns from private tuition classes. While a clock tolls at night, dogs bark, and a vehicle screeches to a halt. Neighbours are stirred up, Krishnabar, MLA and his wife are worried over the absence of their son. Suddenly Ganesh Mitra walks in holding up completely drunk, Roshan. Ganesh introduces himself as an ex-factory worker, who is now selling 'bhajis' (fries) by the roadside. He has no identity card. Roshan has returned from a party at Grand Hotel, and was dropped off by Ceasar (Bhaskar Bhattacharjee), the son of Tuhin (Sanat Chandra), a police officer, who is DC, Detective Department, and Abheri (Sulakhana Chakravarty). Krishnabar MLA rings up Tuhin on the mobile, to convey that Roshan has at last returned home. He is extremely grateful and polite to Ganesh. The songs and the monologues are re-introced. Old man, Ganesh had quit his factory employment, in the early 1970s, on account of treachery by a union leader, Paresh Kundu.

The props of tall buildings, modest doors and shelves with utensils remain unchanged. Overhead is a panoramic view of Kolkata's skyline. Lawyer, Hiren (Sujit Mukherjee) relates a case in Panchyat village Jalangir, which he has taken up, where a goat was beaten to death, for straying and eating vegetables of land, owned by someone else. Animal lovers have evinced interest in the case. Roshan pays respects to Ganesh, who has no demands and is praised by everybody. Ganesh advises Roshan of not doing anything that would harm his family's reputation. As Tupu walks by, Roshan and his friends stare away. At Ceasar's house, Ceasar has been locked in a room as punishment. The father Tuhin, a police officer, studies his case reports by candle light, during a power cut. Sub- Inspector Somnath Sharma (Surajit Ghosh) informs that Ceasar has been involved in a case of assault on a police officer on duty, in a highly sensitive street, and rash driving. There was pressure from the police association to arrest Ceasar. When Ceasar emerges from his confined room, he alleges that his father had insulted his mother. The police officer's son had become the enemy of his father. When lawyer Hiren walks on the road, the street boys make the sound of a goat bleating.

Animesh reads to his wife, Baishakhi a letter from the municipal councillor, conveying that Animesh's Pishi (aunt) is down with cirrhosis. Tupu is the daughter of Animesh's Pishi. The old aunt requires treatment in the city, and Animesh is in anguish. A free bed has to be arranged and

finances obtained to cover the cost of medicines. But he would make no compromise. People in the neighbourhood become aware, and the young men are told to request the local MLA and the police officer. Removing goggles, purse and lipstick, Tupu along with Ganesh and others from the neighbourhood visit MLA Krishnabar's house. Roshan is quarrelling with his mother, Malabika. The MLA is not at home. Soon treatment for Tupu's mother is arranged, on the basis of MLA's recommendations. As responsible guardian of Tupu, Animesh observed that two local boys have been smelling of liquor. The MLA Krishnabar would not mind a match proposal of Tupu with his son, Roshan. A funeral procession brings the note of grief. Tupu's mother has died after spending 108 days in Kolkata, and Tupu has always considered the number to be auspicious. Tupu cries and stumbles, and is consoled by Ganesh. As the crematorium glow lights up the stage, Tupu pitches a bundle of currency notes into the fire.

Family facades soon crumble. Petty brickerings lead to the dismissal of maid, Alochaya (Shipra Dutt) from Aminesh and Baishakhi's household. News spreads that Tupu has conceived, and there are allegations on Roshan and Ceasar. There is no proof of who is responsible. Baishakhi fears that someone could throw aspersions on Animesh. When it emerges that Tupu's mother was actually a housemaid, Tupu is driven out of her cousin Animesh's house. Tupu takes shelter in Ganesh's garage living space, and addresses him as 'father'. She declines a pregnancy termination. Ganesh had no fortune with a wife, but is now blessed with a daughter. The neighbourhood friends do not support Ceasar and Roshan's conduct. It has been a rape of dignity. Malabika is informed of Tupu's conception and that Roshan is implicated, by the housemaid. She shakes and falls, and attempts to throttle son, Roshan. Ceasar's father, police officer, Tuhin visits Ganesh with fears of his public image. Tuhin alleges that Tupu is a hooker. Ganesh and lawyer, Hiren decline cash offers. Ganesh insists on a medical probe, and the new born's father, would have to marry Tupu. Ceasar's mother, Abheri would like Ceasar to marry Tupu.

Sub-Inspector Sharma has organized Ceasar's flight to Mumbai and Bangalore, and a Bangalore nursing home would grant a medical certificate. But Ceasar decides to attend Court on 17 December. Ceasar's mother wants to see an honest police officer. Two young men are tortured with roads and match sticks by the SI Police, to extract information on Ganesh and Tupu, who have gone in hiding. Police officer, Tuhin attempts suicide. When Ganesh and lawyer Hiren visit the police station, they are also assaulted. MLA Krishna-bar intervene and requests the police to stop torture. Tuhin's wife, Abheri feels that her husband's attempt at suicide was a means of escape, and threatens to disclose everything in court. The MLA's wife, Malabika is in a fit. The police withdraw cases against Ganesh and lawyer Hiren. But Ganesh has been evicted from the garage space by the landlord, following police enquiries. Ganesh and pregnant Tupu find shelter in the local club house. Nilu and Sunu limp back from the police lock-up, with severe injuries. Tupu requests for withdrawal of the legal cases against Roshan and Ceasar. She confesses that she was an accomplice, and did not oppose their advances.

"Aache Ache Sthan" which starts as a depiction of a Kolkata street, veers to other territories of moral anxieties and moral ambiguities. The characters exist as much as them-selves. Playing on a note of parody, the songs and dialogue, transport the spectator to beyond the frontiers of dreams and reality. The play invents itself before the audience, touching crucial questions of power, wealth, poverty and exploitation, provocation, detestation and human affection are simultaneous in the theatre documentary. The chorus songs and the gestures of the singers, besides functioning as punctuated pauses, automatically pilot the spectator in the dispersed resume. After Tupu conceives, the songs recede. Rama-prasad Banik's direction and music unite an infinity of fragments, leading to a dynamic narrative of melodrama and sentiments. Bibhas Chakrabarty and the cast give impeccable performances. Badal Das' lights and Gautam Basu's sets provide depth and style. □□□