

Indian plays' return to UC Berkeley stage

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Nearly a century has gone by since an Indian play was performed at the University of California, Berkeley. That was back in 1914, when an Orientalist interpretation of a 10-act Sanskrit play graced the Greek Theatre, complete with decorative circus elephants, oxen and camels.

Enter Sudipto Chatterjee, an assistant professor in the Department of Theater, Dance & Performance Studies and the moving force behind staging this fall a new series of programmes dealing with Indian drama.

The lineup includes two new plays, a student workshop on Indian theater, a public

lecture by a director and visiting artist-in-residence about Indian theater, and academic roundtables looking at globalism, poverty and organs trafficking. Chatterjee, author of 14 plays and translations in English and Bengali and the former artistic director of the Epic Actors' Workshop and Choir in New York City, aims to entertain, but also hopes to challenge and educate audiences.

The Man of the Heart

Chatterjee will start off by performing at the Durham Studio Theater September 22-23 in his own one-man play, "The Man of the Heart," about Lalon Phokir, a legendary mystic from the Baul sect of traveling minstrels and philosophers from the countryside of Bengal. Phokir also was a prolific composer and vocalist from the 1800s, said to have lived to the age of 116, a release from the UC Berkeley said.

Directing the play will be Suman Mukherjee, one of India's premiere young directors and a visiting artist-in-residence this semester at the Townsend Center for the Humanities.

The play - what Chatterjee likens to "scholarship as dialogue" - will offer a mixture of performance, non-traditional text, live and recorded music, and audio visuals recorded by Chatterjee and Mukherjee during anthropological and ethnomusicological research in Bangladesh and India.

Chatterjee said he's been intrigued by Lalon since the age of 5 or 6, when he heard a Baul singer from the country pass his home every day singing various compositions from Lalon's rich repertoire, estimated at more than 1,000 songs passed down orally. Chatterjee taught himself the melodic songs he heard, aided by listening to vinyl records of Lalon songs in his father's collection and studying their extensive liner notes.

"Lalon sang in conundrums, funny covert riddles," said Chatterjee, comparing him to American poet and playwright EE Cummings. It was the only way Bauls could pass along information about their secret practices, which included Tantric sex, he said.

Lalon angered Hindus, Muslims and others by refusing to answer if he had been born Hindu or Muslim and insisting that what is in the heart matters more than whether someone worships in a mosque, temple, cathedral or synagogue. At one point, Muslim mullahs issued a fatwa, a legal pronouncement in Islam issued by

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a religious law specialist, against Lalon, while Hindu conservatives sent their goons to attack him physically, Chatterjee said.

But since Lalon's death and ever-growing popularity, he said, Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh have built a protective mausoleum over his grave, while the Hindu majority in West Bengal has claimed him as an icon of secularism.

"Man of the Heart" will include Lalon's songs recorded by Chatterjee, with their references to Sufism, the poet Rumi and Islam. Live music also will be performed with live Bengali folk instruments. A retired physics professor from Cal Poly Pomona, Soumya Chakravarti, will play the mandolin-like ektara and dotara.

Chatterjee said he will sing Lalon's songs, despite some doubt expressed by the Baul community about whether a non-Baul can do so. "I feel like I have an inner connection that goes beyond the urban-countryside divides," he said. "I'm moved to tears when I sing, and I don't know why, because I'm an atheist. It's almost like I'm in a trance."

Chatterjee and Mukherjee will host a discussion at 4 p.m., Thursday, September 15, at the Townsend Center for the Humanities, 220 Stephens Hall, titled "Act Locally, Perform Globally."

Harvest

Chatterjee next will move to the future by directing on campus in November his West Coast premiere of "Harvest," a darkly comic and unsettling tale of globalism and organ harvesting in India written by playwright Manjula Padmanabhan, who will be on campus during the play's run. The Center for South Asia Studies also will host an exhibition on campus of Padmanabhan's graphic art.

After reading a copy of "Harvest" sent to him by a colleague in Australia a few years ago, Chatterjee said he was "totally stunned." The play won the Onassis Award in Athens when it was first performed in the late '90s and was an instant success in academic circles.

"The play is set in the future, at a time when multinational companies have gone to the Third World not for software, minerals or fabric, but to harvest organs for their rich customers in America," Chatterjee said. "It's about India and the gritty Third World reality."

In "Harvest," Om, a just-laid-off breadwinner for a struggling Indian family living in a cramped Bombay tenement, decides to sell his organs to a shadowy company called Interplanta in hopes of reversing his financial plight. Om's family is monitored around the clock, receiving frequent video phone-type inquiries and directives from the supposed organ recipient, an icy young blonde named Ginni. Om's mother falls into a stupor, constantly absorbed by programmes on the TV provided by Interplanta. The family's lives continue to go awry.

William Worthen, chair of UC Berkeley's Department of Theater, Dance & Performance, said he included it in "The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama," one of the most widely used books of its kind in the United States.

"I thought that it would make a good addition for undergraduate teaching in the sphere of world drama in English, especially given its postcolonial thematics," said Worthen.

The play may be set in the future, but it reflects contemporary conditions as well, Chatterjee said.

India, one-third the size of the United States, has three times the population and almost 30 per cent of its employable labor force out of work, he said, and the country's biggest problems are overpopulation and inadequate education.

The exploitation of Indians by foreign organ traffickers has been well documented by authorities, including UC Berkeley anthropologists Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Lawrence Cohen, through the UC Berkeley-based Organs Watch center.

In addition to its performance in UC Berkeley's Durham Studio Theater November 12-18, "Harvest" will be performed by some of

Chatterjee's former colleagues in Philadelphia in mid-September
and by the East Coast Artists in New York City in January.

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