

CINEMASTAGE

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By BINA SHARIF

MAN OF THE HEART

Written and performed by Sudipto Chatterjee
Directed by Suman Mukherjee



MAN OF THE HEART, a one-man multimedia musical performance piece is exactly what the title implies. Heart is the center of everything in this wonderful show and what is a better place than the heart itself. One can not go wrong if everything in the heart is mystic, mysterious, peaceful and musical, though the society in 19th Century and now in the 21st Century tries very hard to kill that very peace and harmony which Lalon Phokir {the 19th Century sage and mystic on whose life this show is based upon} tried so very hard to incorporate in his life and in his religion.

Lalon Phokir who was born in 1774 in a part of Bengal, which is now in Bangladesh. Bengal is known for its literature poetry and music. One of the greatest Bengali poets was of course Rabindranath Tagore and like him and many others Lalon composed hundreds of songs, which had one basic message, and that message was of peace inside of you, inside of your own body and inside of your heart. Lalon Phokir's religion was his own heart. He would rather compose a song and sing it to his disciples rather than going to Mecca. His unity between soul and body and the capacity to fight violence of all kinds especially the religious violence, which is ever present in almost every century, was achievable only by means of spiritual pacification. No one knows for sure if Lalon was born a Hindu or a Muslim, but the common belief is that he was born a Hindu who then converted to Islam. When he was alive, both Hindus and Muslims vilified him but after his death both religions want to claim him as their very own.

Sudipto Chatterjee, the actor and the writer really does justice to Lalon Phokir and his songs. Sudipto has a wonderfully strong and resonant voice, which fills the theater. Even though they are sung in Bengali (translations into English are projected on a screen), I liked the projection of slides right onto his very Sufi dervish white robe. There is a hilarious scene where the fundamentalist Hindu and a religious Mullah is projected on the opposite side of Lalon's robe where he makes fun of both of them. It's amazing how ridiculous they both, Hindu and Muslim sounded with their rhetoric of fundamentalism.

MAN OF THE HEART is very well directed by Suman Mukherjee. It's a very good idea to have slides and live musicians because it's a period piece based on a beautiful foreign language (Bengali) that is quite lyrical, but also one that works better for the New York audience with the multimedia esthetic. It's only fitting that this show is presented by East Coast Artists (Richard Schechner, Artistic Director, a lover of Indian culture and its melody).

Sudipto Chatterjee is a very strong presence and can sing well and brings Lalon's astute sense of humor to the surface. I enjoyed when the actor broke the fourth wall and became a narrator and historian of Lalon's life. My only reservation with the show is that it seemed a bit long and the songs, though lovely, were far too many which felt repetitious at times. I was also curious about the fact of him becoming a Muslim after being born a Hindu because to Lalon Phokir religion didn't really mean anything. His religion was a melodious song and it should be ours as well.