

JUST
IN4 TDP behind political
murders, says Jagan5 Police, Maoists trade
charges over torching
of tribal houses in6 Indian doctors
stranded in Shenzhen
leave for Macau7 Left
Kolk

THEATRE

Soundless interludes



Vikram Phukan

MAY 22, 2017 21:43 IST

UPDATED: MAY 22, 2017 21:43 IST

SHARE ARTICLE



PRINT



Last month, a discussion following a performance of a new contemporary dance piece, *Say, What?*, unfolded in an intriguing manner. The performance had just taken place at Bandra's Mumbai Assembly, and its founder-director, Preeti Gaonkar was seated at the centre of the performing area alongside dance-makers Avantika Bahl and Vishal Sarvaiya. Gaonkar and Bahl seemed to be engrossed in a private tête-à-tête, because Sarvaiya, who is deaf, could only 'listen' in by looking across at the sign language interpreter, who in turn faced the audience, that consisted of, in large numbers, members of the city's deaf community. For the uninitiated, the invigorating conversations appeared to be taking place at multiple levels. It was an immediate visual metaphor for the kind of collisions that were part of Bahl and Sarvaiya's hour-long performance piece, performed in complete silence, without even the salve of a pre-recorded

soundscape, although there were interludes in which sign language was employed.

Moments of frisson

For those of us who are 'hearing,' the amorphous wordlessness allowed us to focus on the piece as a steady flow of visual motifs, full of short and succinct manoeuvres that we could project on to expansive storyboards of our own making, boxing our characters in or setting them free. We were helped in no small part by the subtle shifts in Arghya Lahiri's lighting that opened up spaces while shutting out entire worlds, affording the characters a clandestine landscape all to themselves.

It was a compelling two-spirited interaction with the attendant exchange of energies that often makes a pas de deux so irresistible, even if the parameters of said exchange were familiar, even predictable. Quite frequently, contemporary dance duets fall back on their own platitudes and drills. In *Say, What?* the two players circling the turf were not exactly kindred spirits, but the crisscrossing of their lives or identities still yielded moments of frisson that were impossibly precious and rare. It kept us on tenterhooks about what we may encounter, even if a completely satisfying pay-off isn't usually forthcoming in a circular piece that brings us right back to where we begin.

Occasionally, the onerous meaning-making was interrupted by more literal intercessions. An enterprising lady, who presumably knew sign language like the back of her hand, proceeded to translate each passage to a friend in hushed whispers. As I leaned in, I was able to put together scattered conversations between Bahl and Sarvaiya. There were instances of classroom bullying – de rigueur in the lives of those who are 'different' – and everyday discussions about films. One of them preferred *Lord of the Rings* to the *Harry Potter* series. Another moment had the audience in splits: Bahl attempting to describe the reverse-ageing in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* in signage. I was happy, even smug, to be in on the joke, but wondered if the humour was in the gestures, or in the ideas contained within. I was sure much had been lost in the translation afforded only by Chinese whispers.

A special space

I thought about my fellow-watchers, and how they were experiencing the piece. For them, the passages in signage would likely be akin to what we call 'plain old text'. Yet, while some of us have tired of text in live performances and crave instead visceral experiences delivered by other agents, to deaf viewers, not accustomed to seeing their own lives on the Indian screen or stage, perhaps even a routine conversation enacted on stage is radical in itself. Of course, the chats were peppered with more figurative interludes that had to be interpreted differently. The coexistence of several kinds of spectatorship was stimulating even for those who may have felt excluded from any part of the performance (like yours truly).

Yet, it isn't quite the same as watching a performance in an alien language with an audience of mostly native speakers. It is an altogether different experience, it is the adrenaline-inducing realisation of having broken into an underground club, with its own codes and settings, which appears to have miraculously materialised around you without even a by-your-leave. It is a realisation that carries the charge of entitlement and access, and the weight of our preconceived notions, but the value of being present in such a milieu, however fleetingly and however anonymously, given the circumstances, cannot be undermined.

Burden of privilege

Bahl's masterstroke is the counterpoint she has chosen for herself in *Say, What?*, that allows us to be a part of this uncommon excursion. Yet, she must bear the burden of her privilege, as do we. She appears to enter the space as a moderating influence, with Sarvaiya cast in the mould of a force of nature that refuses to be tamed. An outsider's attempt at such a rapprochement is rife with implications, but Sarvaiya and Bahl attempt to neutralise this with empathy, and work towards creating a somewhat platonic dynamic that is devoid of power struggles.

Bahl has also experimented with altering the coded gestures of sign language, which can be looked at as a kind of appropriation problematic in some ways, not least because that kind of agency only operates in one direction. In the post-show discussion, some audience-members expressed how the embellishments threw them off, used as they were to more conventional meanings for specific gestures. Changing familiar patterns of sign language can be likened to the garbling of verbal speech, but where words (or even letters or sounds) broken off bit by bit disappear into a pit of diminishing returns, in *Say, What?* there is no escaping the expressiveness of a body in motion that can never be stripped of meaning or personality, or the voice of its soul. There are multiple questions about the nature of communication itself that the piece raises, but does little to resolve or even sufficiently marinate, but ultimately, it does hold its own as a human document of considerable power that can deliver the most wonderful of dividends in the right setting.

The writer is a playwright and stage critic

Say, What? will be performed at The Afterclap, Thane on May 26 at 8 p.m. and at Sitara Studio, Dadar on May 28 at 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. More details are on bookmyshow.com

Printable version | May 23, 2017 8:47:50 AM |
<http://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/theatre/soundless-interludes/article18525634.ece>

© The Hindu