

“When We Dead Awaken”
Ibsen Comes ALIVE in Mumbai!

by Ila Arun



For the last two years, awake or dreaming, I have had only one thing on my mind-Ibsen. Immersed in adapting “Peer Gynt” in Hindi, my mind has been working on having an Ibsen Theatre Festival in Mumbai. Finally, Peer Gynt is ready as “Pir Ghani” and the date for the festival draws near. My dream has been realized.

Born under the Zodiac sign, Pisces, (a sign I humbly share with Henrik Ibsen), in a city on the outskirts of the vast, lonely deserts of Rajasthan, perhaps it was destiny that I would be drawn towards water, inspired by Neptune, God of springs, rivers and the seas. And as the Piscean dreamer, I have been initiated from birth into a world of fantasy, making my several worlds between deserts, water and mountains explode into another sphere of fantasy, the theatre.

It was in this world that I came upon the work of Henrik Ibsen. Then in 2010, I was invited to adapt and direct a play by Ibsen for the DADA Festival in New Delhi. Somehow, I was fascinated by the possibilities that “The Lady from the Sea” offered, especially in the folk tradition. And that was the beginning of my ‘obsession’ with Ibsen. As I worked on the script, placing the story in the arid areas of Rajasthan, it seemed to me as if Ibsen in the 19th century in faraway Norway was addressing issues in Indian society! I could almost feel the relevance of Ibsen in our society even today and I realised that culturally and emotionally, Indians and Norwegians were not too far apart. Ibsen had managed to encapsulate our concerns--women’s issues, relationships, family ties in a changing society—with such skill and understanding, that each one of his readers could empathise and connect with his characters. The adaptation, titled “*Mareechika*” (Mirage) was a great success and I rode high on the waves that hit the shores of India and Norway, literally, since subsequently, thanks to the Norwegian Embassy in India, we actually crossed the seas to Norway as invitees to the Ibsen Festival in Oslo in 2012.

My love affair with Ibsen reached a climax when I saw that Ibsen was an icon for people from all walks of life. My horizon expanded and I realized that like Varanasi, Oslo too is a city of temples, its theatres, where people worship their literary gods in awed silence.

Like one obsessed, I saw everything associated with Ibsen and in that chill weather, I embraced him like a shawl, wrapping each memory into my very being. And in the course of my visit, I met three wonderful 'Ibsen' people—Kare Conradi, Ruth Wilhelmine Meyer and Helge Lien. Their performances impressed me so much that I was determined to see these artistes perform before an Indian audience. Thus began the idea of an Ibsen Festival in Mumbai. Ruth is singing on Ibsen's themes in jazz form while Corey will give an hour-long performance of "Peer Gynt" which we have seen him present at Oslo. It will be a challenge indeed for our theatre group performing "Pir Ghani" to witness his unforgettable performance.

We are indeed grateful to the Norwegian Embassy for making the Ibsen festival possible.

About the author:

- Writer, actor, singer, dancer, composer—Ila Arun wears many hats. She has adapted several International playwrights- -Henrik Ibsen, Mario Vargas Llosa, Athol Fugard, Terence Rattigan, Alexei Arbuzov, Tom Dudzick—and these performances have received accolades from audiences and critics alike. Her original play "Riyaz" has had over a hundred performances all over India. Her theatre group, SURNAI, "a soulful voice of the performing arts", is known for its commitment to meaningful theatre. As a singer and composer, she blends the rural and the urban traditions of India. Her songs are dramatized to give an evocative pictorial view of all the different aspects of our country – its moods and seasons, fairs and festivals, the sensuousness of the monsoons, the romance of the desert, the beauty and elegance of palace life, the rusticity of the gypsies and the gay abandon of youth. Besides starring in several films, she has sung as playback singer and received an award as Best Female Singer at the Filmfare Awards for her rendering of "Choli ke Peechhe Kya Hai" in "Khalnayak". She has also sung the hit song "Ringa Ringa" with Alka Yagnik, in "Slumdog Millionaire". Ila has released several albums with Tips Music, under her banner "Antardhwani Productions".
- Ila is popular with the young and old alike and after almost 30 years of her first album, Banjaran, she is still a voice to reckon with in the fields of music, theatre and films.
- Antardhwani, Ila's own banner, has been known for its association with music, theatre and TV. Antardhwani is the umbrella for the theatre group Surnai, which is the theatre wing of Antardhwani. Surnai Theatre Group started with a bang in Mumbai in 1982, with its folk music extravaganza, 'A Musical Sandstorm', at the then newly opened Prithvi Theatre in Mumbai. Since that time, Antardhwani and Surnai have made a name in the field of the performing arts, presenting plays, musical performances and TV shows which have been eagerly watched by thousands of people all over India. We are proud to present the first Ibsen Theatre Festival in Mumbai from October 31 to November 2, with the support of the Norwegian Embassy and mfa of Norway.