

## THEATRE

# In dialogue with diversity

Ila Arun talks about adapting and performing her latest play “Namaste”.

SWATI DAFTUAR

The energy Ila Arun exudes isn't confined to any one medium, and on stage, it finds its place yet again, infusing each dialogue and action with vigour and life. Of course, in “Namaste: Jai Shri Krishna”, a play that recently debuted in the city, Arun doesn't just play her role to perfection; she also displays her ability to adapt and pen a script peppered with easy, effortless comedy and contemporary, contemplative observations.

Originally Tom Dudzick's ‘Greetings!’, the play, presented by the FICCI Ladies Organisation (FLO) and MTS India, transforms into a very Indian and very relevant take on the clash between new and old world values in the country today. “To adapt a play to a particular context, you need to identify and be familiar with the context you are adapting it to; you need to know its pulse. And then, after I have transported it to

this context, I forget the previous one. The characters are now the ones in the adaptation, and they are the ones I have to work with. In this instance, while the original play was set around Christmas, I got the opportunity to set the adaptation around Krishna Janamashthami.”

Very current, the play uses frequent present day references from popular culture and politics. “When one translates a play, it can't be done like a movie. One has to write the entire thing and everything about this play – the nuances, the style, the language – I have worked on everything while scripting it”.

A play that questions the ever present question of God, atheism and personal beliefs, “Namaste” brings into focus religion, but doesn't preach, instead making sure to take each point of view into account. “The philosophy behind Krishna, what he says in the ‘Gita’, I wanted to bring that

on stage. And I wanted to highlight the problem today, of how religion is constantly misinterpreted, and how we need to not preach to people, but talking and understanding both the older and the younger generation.”

For Arun, the play serves as a platform to showcase both the clash of modern and traditional values, as well as a solution that can bridge this gap. “It's a little of both. Till your roots are not deep, till you don't understand and respect your culture, you will be without substance. Similarly, if you are too rigid, unwilling to accept change and modernity, you will be limited in your outlook. This play is not just about religion, it is a way to bridge that very wide gap and to show that in order to bridge that gap, dialogues are very important”.

Her association with Sunai Theatre Group has spanned three decades now, and Arun thanks her



a very strong team at Sunai theatre. I give them hundred per cent credit. They read a lot, and I write very fast. I have adapted around 10 plays for them over the years and K. K. Raina has found them. For the upcoming Ibsen Theatre Festival, I am adapting an Ibsen play and setting it in Kashmir.”

While known for her incredibly catchy and now almost legendary songs, Arun's career began with theatre. “I was originally a theatre actress, I used to be part of the Rabindra Manch in Jaipur, and then I got a scholarship by the Rajasthan Sangeet Natak Akademi to do a small short term course in NSD. Theatre has always been the first love, and it is what I use in my songs also”.

For Arun, it was important to keep the play funny. “People have no time

**BUILDING BRIDGES A scene from the play.**

to sit and listen to long, serious dialogues.”

Associated with folk and regional music and theatre for years now, Arun hopes that the new government will pay more attention to the revival of Hindi and other regional languages. “Already, there is work being done to revive folk art and theatre. Bollywood has a big role to play in this. People know that piracy of English songs doesn't work anymore, so they have taken to using folk songs in movies. If you offered regional and folk music to people otherwise, it would get little attention, but in movies and Bollywood, it becomes a sugar coated pill.”