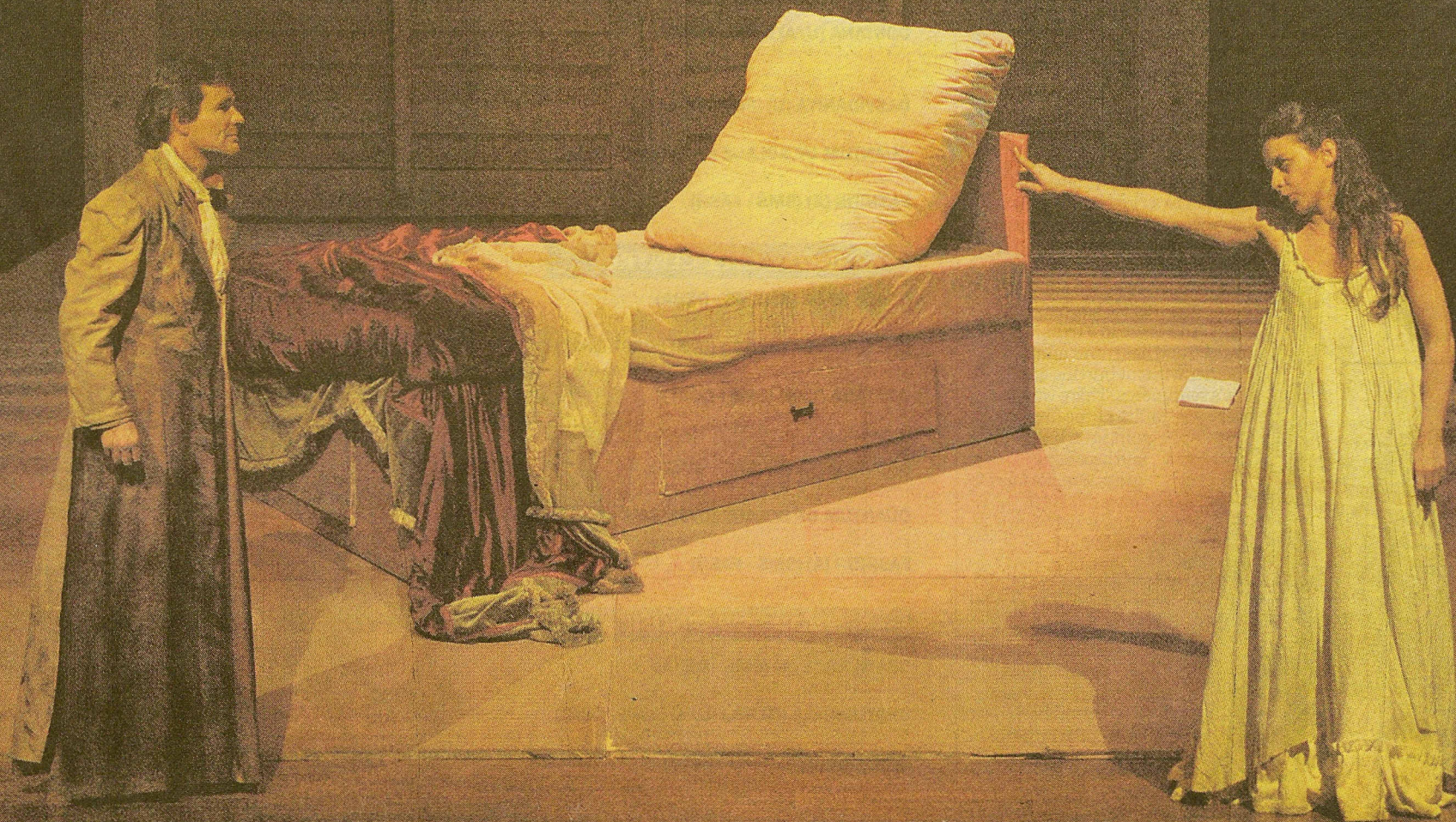


IN THE ACT



VERDI'S OPERA *LA TRAVIATA* BROUGHT ALIVE 18TH CENTURY VIENNA IN A CITY AUDITORIUM. **BARUN CHANDA** CAUGHT THE RIVETING ACTION

AN ITALIAN AFFAIR



PICTURE BY SANJOY CHATTOPADHYAYA

Certain days I have ceased to be amazed at my luck. Saturday, November 15, 2008 is one of them. First, I receive a Kafkaesque invitation, a pass for two, to come and watch *Violetta, A Traviata*, adapted from *La Traviata*, an opera by Giuseppe Verdi. I say Kafkaesque because I have absolutely no idea as to who sent it to me.

But wait. My lucky day, “evening” to be more exact, hasn’t even begun. I arrive at the ICCR auditorium, miraculously allowed to pass through the elaborate police cordon on Ho Chi Minh Sarani by just waving my *Traviata* card like a magic wand. But when I enter the auditorium I am in for a nasty surprise. It’s full.

I am suddenly reminded of the enigmatic last line on the card. “Pass for two. On first come, first served basis”.

Why did they write that? Have they issued more cards than the actual number of seats? My heart sank. Just then, a gentleman, an official of ICCR as I was to learn later, was coming up the steps. Seeing me he halts. “Come come, I’ll find a seat for you.”

He escorts me past rows and rows of jam-packed seats. I look around with guilty diffidence. “Are you sure there are empty seats ahead?” I ask. My escort smiles patiently and walks on. He stops at the front row, beckoning me to an empty seat. As I gratefully sink back into the chair I realise the old “Ray stamp”, faded and tarnished after 37 years, still works at times.

But there is some delay. Italian and Indian officials move frantically up and down the aisle in expectation of the chief guest. Presently, governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi arrives, escorted

by Bharati Ray, and is seated a few seats to my right on the front row. I simply roll up my eyes and smile to myself. See, you’ve got company.

The play hasn’t started yet. Time enough to do a little flashback.

Of doomed love

La Traviata was first staged in 1853 and pronounced a disaster by Verdi himself. Portions of the opera were rewritten by the author and reintroduced to the public in 1854. Since then, *La Traviata* has come to be accepted as one of the most popular Italian operas of all time. The opera owes its storyline to another classic, Alexander Dumas’s *La Dame aux Camélias* (*The Lady of Camélias*).

Even if you do not understand a word of Italian, the broad contours of the story are not difficult to follow. In any case, the storyline of *La Traviata* (meaning, a woman led astray) is not new. If you are old enough or a film buff, you might remember seeing the all-time classic *Camille*, featuring the unforgettable Greta Garbo and Robert Taylor.

In the opera, it’s a doomed love story between Violetta Valery, a famous Parisian courtesan of the 18th century, and Alfredo Germont, a man of gentry. The relationship is doomed not just because Violetta is suffering from tuberculosis, quite incurable those days, but also because any relationship with a woman of “ill repute” would mean social ostracisation for the entire Germont family.

Stagecraft

A quick cut to present. There is a hush. The

orchestra starts playing from an improvised well to the left of stage. What strikes you hard is the sheer starkness of the stage. A two-in-one huge Venetian door, some 15ft tall, with wooden shutters stands as the only prop in the background. The front stage is level and narrow. Then the wooden floor climbs up steeply, like the graduated version of a pyramid, to the lone bed on which Violetta lies, consumed by consumption, past hallucinatory memories and an inexorable sense of impending tragedy, her death.

The bed itself deserves special mention. It’s dimensionally unequal, the leg facing the audience appreciably taller than the other three legs to give level space for Violetta to lie down.

At length, she opens her eyes. She takes out a crumpled letter and reads it over and over again. After ministrations from her maid Annina, she gets up from the bed, oscillating between feverish energy and a state of collapse. At one time, she opens the hidden cupboards of the bed, rummaging through her dresses, each one a painful memory of happier bygone days.

Now she is in a state of delusion. She imagines Alfredo is with her and carries an animated conversation with him. But then fantasy gives way to reality. A stranger appears at Violetta’s door. It is Alfredo’s father Georgio come to beseech her to desist from this disastrous relationship.

After extracting a promise from Violetta to leave Alfredo, Georgio leaves. Slowly, but inexorably, life oozes out of her body. At the end Alfredo arrives. Even Georgio makes a return, truly repentant to have caused her so much unhappiness. Violetta dies, literally, in her lover’s arms.

The last syllables of her song hang in the air. There is a sudden silence. And then, the deafening applause. The lead actors — Violetta, Alfredo, Georgio and Annina — take a bow. And then again. The chorus in jet black attire now appears before the audience. It’s their turn to take a bow. The applause carries on. The Italian gentlemen from the second row cry out, “Bravo, bravo!” Well done.

Voices linger on

As I said before, even if you don’t understand Italian, what stays with you long after the play is over is the quality of the voices. Aude Priya (you wouldn’t believe she was born in Delhi) as Violetta Valery is a soprano, with a voice as clear as a crystal bell. Franck Asparté as Alfredo, a tenor, is actually an award-winning performer at San Remo’s international singing competition. To boot, he dimples furiously. Emilio Marucci, as Alfredo’s father, has a rich baritone voice that you hear clearly from the last row.

Even more memorable is the fact that because of the smallness of the stage (the ones in Vienna are the size of a mini golf course) the actors have imaginatively used the entire auditorium as an extension. Alfredo actually comes down from the stage to the aisle, standing just 4ft away from me and sings back to Violetta. No Dolby, no surround sound can ever duplicate that tonal quality for me.

As I said, certain days I cease to be amazed at my luck.

Which is the best stage show you have seen in Calcutta? Tell t2@abppmail.com