

# THEATRE FESTIVAL'19

## THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



### Chandala, the Impure

**Language:** Tamil

**Playwright:** William Shakespeare/ Koumarane Valavane

**Director:** Koumarane Valavane

**Company:** Indianostrum Theatre

'Chandala, the Impure', Indianostrum Theatre's Tamil adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, is widely lauded as a play that speaks for its time. Playwright and director, Koumarane Valavane makes several bold social and political statements, interweaving love, pain and vengeance. The play rightly places the Shakespearean narrative in the Indian context, intensely contemplating and deliberating social vices like caste hierarchy and discrimination, in the process. The play had previously been staged on several widely acclaimed platforms like Meta Awards 2019 and Ranga Shankara Theatre Festival 2018. Their latest performance was a part National School of Drama's Bharath Rang Mahotsav 2020.

'Chandala' has created a niche for itself among the several other Indian adaptations of Shakespeare plays and performances. It owes this partly to the popularity of Shakespearean theatre among Indian audience and partly to the political debates that invites ones attention to. Director Koumarane states that even though the play adopts certain tropes from the original text, Chandala has an identity of its own, it is Indian. The play is inherently 'Indian' because the Indian narrative has seeped into the very roots of the play. This extends beyond the space- time narrative. The director explains that every transformation in the play from the original to the Indian, served a purpose. It is not possible to have a family feud like the Montagues and Capulets in a village like Villupuram in Tamil Nadu. The audience would find it difficult to relate to the replication of the classic balcony scene in an Indian context. Finding Indian alternatives for these instances without digressing from the larger narrative, he says, was one of the challenges that the production encountered. The genius of the play resides in providing the old narrative a new perspective and new meaning.

The dynamics between the characters on stage also contributed substantially to the assimilation of the plot into the Indian context. Both Jack and Janani were characters who questioned the conventions of society and the caste system. Moreover, they were

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unable to perceive love in a way that the others did. The internal and the external conflict, resulting from this disillusionment with the world, is manifested through their thought processes in the play. Janani is mute but her convictions are stronger than that of any other. The personification of Cupid and her combination scenes with Cupid made her character more sound and wholesome. Presenting Janani as an assertive, bold young woman, who defied her limitations for love is one of the unique elements in the play. Moreover, the story of Jack and Janani was inspired from the real life narrative of Kausalya and Shankar, victims of caste discrimination and honour killing in India. Janani not just represented Kausalya but internalized her too. This explicit digression from Juliet's character was one of the most striking aspects of the play. The detailing in the supporting characters like Janani's maid and Jack's uncle also contributed to the development of the plot.

The play also successfully represented the mundane lives of lower caste people in India. The adult film theatre where Jack and Janani first meets, the street dance sequence where Janani's brother kills Jack's friend and the 'Kaalivesha' that Jack's uncle performs at the end of the play, were some of the tropes that were used to construct this world within the play. This was complemented by Tamil film songs from the 90s and Malayalam folk songs. The incorporation of folk music and art made the narrative more realistic. One of the actors explained that the impact the music and the setting would on the audience differs with space. What it conveys in an auditorium would be different from what it does in an intimate space like that of Indianostrum theatre. Therefore, the space and the crowd are decisive factors in the reception of the play.

In short, what gives 'Chandala' its own identity is its reimagination of an already popular Shakespeare narrative. It invites the audience to detach themselves from the stereotypical narrative and see it through the Indian perspective. The political and social predicaments that it addresses leave the audience disturbed and restless, therefore, inspiring them to get out of their comfort zones and think out of the box. Finally, the play emphasizes that there is nothing constant in the world where the people are fickle minded and emotions are fleeting. Only love and human conscience can resolve these predicaments and these become the central themes of the play and rightly so.