

THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



The Lesson

Language: English

Playwright: Eugene Ionesco

Director: Sukant Goel

The small room in St. Andrew's Centre for Philosophy and Performing Arts holds an audience of around 50, all seated by two sides of the rectangular set. The set looks like a large but narrow sandbox with glass borders, but the audience soon finds out it will serve more as a tennis ground, what with the spectators' heads repeatedly moving from right to left, both actors on stage demanding equal attention.

Two chairs are seated on the sand, opposite each other. Below one of the chairs are small books and notebooks all scattered in the sand. After some eerie soprano notes that are played while the audience gets seated, Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson* comes to life at this quaint setting in Bandra, Mumbai.

What starts with a kindly and seemingly well-mannered professor (Atul Kumar), a wary and worried maid (Anna Ador), and a bright young lady who shows up as a promising student (Jaya Virley), soon undergoes an absurd turn of events (what else were you expecting from Ionesco?).

The professor's calm attempts at explaining arithmetic on an imaginary blackboard turn into controlling and dominating screeches about language directed at the student. The student's sweet, patient and resilient attitude soon witnesses a toothache which ultimately manifests itself into an acute pain in the entire body. The maid's behaviour gets more wary as the play progresses and her several ambiguous warnings to the professor fall on deaf ears. Things get worse, more exaggerated, more oblique, and then they fall back in place. The finalé is a haunting scene enacted with just the right amount of crazy by Atul Kumar and Jaya Virley, and the right amount of exaggeration by Anna Ador. By the end, the professor holds total power over the student and it is revealed that this escalation of rage and control is a pattern that has made many innocent pupils its victim.

Hidden in this narrative is a satirization and critique of fascism and totalitarianism, calling out the abuse of power in oppressive regimes. There are many instances where this can be observed - like when the professor, after committing a crime is rid of his

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fears as the maid asks him to tie a band around his arm showcasing his political affiliation to those in power. The professor's control-hungry behaviour is one that does not care about the pupil's health, one that turns a blind eye to her concerns and a deaf ear to her screams of pain. Ionesco wanted to warn the audience of such abuse of power, and though this particular performance does not bring anything new in the way it was treated, Sukant Goel delivered this warning to Indian audiences with finesse in a time when it is needed. The relevance of this play, of course, is heightened by the current politics in India. The fascist saffronization that is seeping deeper and deeper into the nation comes with a similar obsession with the politics of language as does the professor in the play, and that is merely one of the warning signs that must be noted from this satire.