

THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



'Stories in a Song': The Many Stories a Play Sings

Language: English/ Hindi

Concept: Shubha Mudgal and Aneesh Pradhan

Direction: Sunil Shanbag

It's true that there's no dearth of musical plays in the realm of theatre, just like there's no dearth of music in India. Whenever Indian folk musical sensibilities have been brought to the contemporary stage, almost all audiences have enjoyed it dearly. Juxtaposing this revered form of theatre with the stories behind the music that makes these plays, "Stories in a Song" is a marriage of entertainment and learning for the audience. What better way to make the audiences aware about the roots of the music they so enjoy, than to bring its background to the forefront?

Conceived by Shubha Mudgal and Aneesh Pradhan, and directed by Sunil Shanbag, "Stories in a Song" boasts of an ensemble brimming with talent and a musical score that makes you tap your feet. Different snippets of the play offer different stories erupting within each song, taking the audience to those corners of history that haven't seen much crowd. The play starts slow with a story about the Tawaifs of Benares and their connection to Gandhiji and the National Freedom Movement, with the story standing out (adapted by Aslam Pervez from Amritlal Nagar's Yeh Kothewaliyan), but the performances seeming awkward at first. Like most things in life, the play is instantly lifted by music, and only gets better and better as it continues.

More stories decorate the stage, each one bringing with it the history of Indian music. Ashok Mishra's adaptation of Qurat-ul-Ain Haider's *Chandni Begum* underlines the struggle of traditional folk performers; Purva Naresh and Raj Kapoor's adaptation of Gulab Bai's *Bahadur Ladki* invokes in the audience a mixture of laughter and understanding. *Sufi basant* written by Aslam Pervez takes us to Delhi's Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya and Amir Khusrau's celebration of Basant Panchmi, and *Kajri Akhada* brings forth the story of Kajri singing and writing, and the playful competitions that often lit up Akhadas. Especially standing out as different from the others is *Hindustani Airs* written by Vikram Phukan, where the cultural pollination of Western and Indian music during the British rule holds the audience's attention unblinkingly. Meher Mistry's impeccable British accent and mannerisms are delightful to watch, and the nuanced singing by Mistry and Avantika Ganguly creates musical fireworks. The entire cast does an excellent job, but Namit Das often steals the show

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with his effortlessly flawless singing and comedic impressions of Englishmen. Shubhrajyoti Bharat's characterisation for the many different roles he plays is highly commendable, and Gagan Riar's musical sensibilities and acting enliven the play throughout.

Though the audience does not leave the theatre changed, it leaves the theatre in a happy mood, a musical mood, and having learnt a lot about their country's musical roots.