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LADY SWETTENHAM: A PLAY WITH MANY ROLES DONE BRILLIANTLY

By Kavita Nagpal Of The Asian Age

This time she presented Lady Swettenham, a play with many roles done brilliantly by Sabera. The show, which is the result of her attending Eugenio Barba's workshop in the Odin theatre. Odin does excellent work on the physical training of actors with an emphasis on communication on the representative level, of emotions, ideas and ideology. The play is directed by one of Odin theatre's most senior member, Tag Larson on a set devised by him.

Sabera tells the story of Sydney/Connie, the daughter of a Victorian middle-class family from Shrewsbury England. Her father was a house master till his death in 1887. Altering her body suitably, she portrays him with all his pomposity and his bossy attitude towards the family.

The eldest of six siblings, she was closest to her brother Clive, who is enacted here as a dandy full of himself and his new fiancée, Sabera is very conscious of voice changes and manages very well with two different male voices. Her home life is not congenial due to her overbearing father and the picture she paints of her fear and boredom is done with an effortless ease.

Her marriage to the unattractive Frank Swettenham is an excuse to leave the house. Right from the honeymoon to the point when they leave for Singapore, life is not the heaven Connie imagines it will be.

There are reasons for her medical problems later in life. Besides the fact of having had a mentally unstable uncle, it is not difficult to surmise that she proved to be unable to cope with the starchy society of colonial Singapore. And then perhaps subject to irrational outbursts, which no doubt caused embarrassment and sometimes offence to her social acquaintance.

This is the coup de theatre; when she plays five or six women's reaction to her bad behaviour in the club. Sabera is absolutely hilarious when she imitates, the false soprano tone of one woman, the hand wringing of another, her miming is superb. Besides her capacity to imitate and give meaning to her own state of mind, she also gives life to characters as widely differing as Kasim her servant in Singapore.

With one hand she plays Kasim in his straw hat and black pyjamas, thus creating a character out of literally nothing. She speaks to him in English and he speaks an accented English as a foreign language, which she does not understand. This exchange takes place when she is slowly getting drunk on gin. Kasim begs her to stop drinking. He finally takes away the bottle and ice when she is almost out. Her secretive drinking is very cleverly shown as she holds her gin bottle between her knees, and pours herself a drink as she speaks with her husband Frank, who has just returned from one of his long absences from Singapore in his job as assistant colonial secretary. She then hides the bottle under the table cloth.

The entire play is in flashback as an old Connie relates her story starting as an old woman seated in a wheelchair.

After her first nervous breakdown in 1887, she followed up the disgrace with another catastrophic

act, she got pregnant with another man. By this time their marriage was beyond repair. She was packed off to England.

She speaks of Frank trying to divorce her. The first time was in 1904. His refusal to return to her led to prolonged mental instability. After eight years in a mental asylum, she was discharged in 1912. She visited Malaya twice after this and both times she was well received. However, her last visit in 1928, due to letter sent by Frank to the governor, Connie was not given a good reception and this led to another breakdown.

Her last and final breakdown occurred in 1930. However, she continued to be admitted to Stanley house and died there in 1945 which is where the play ends.

Her attempts to get along with old age displays a spirited person who will never stop fighting, even when she receives the divorce decree.

The text for the play is adapted from Harold S. Barlow's biographer of Frank Swettenham in which he has painted him as an ambitious, sinister and corrupt man. And further, that part of his wife's instability was due his treatment of her. He dispatched her home in public ignominy in 1984. After failing his first attempt to divorce her in 1904, he had to wait till he was 88 succeed.

Frank Swettenham had successful career working in what was then Malaya or the Strait Settlements. He was the chief architect of the Federation, finally becoming the governor-general of Singapore. In his retirement he held several important assignments, including the joint chief censor during WWI.

There is no photograph of Sydney/Connie available even in the Strait Settlement archives. It is incredible that Sabera Shaik has managed to create a living picture Connie with the meagre material available to her.