The Ascent to Truth

Participants remember the play that the Mother wrote and directed 50 years ago.

In the very early years the Annual Programmes of the School on the 1st and 2nd of December were held in the Playground. There was a temporary stage put up at the far end of the ground, towards the Guest House, which had a keet roof and the spectators sat in the open air. At first the cultural programme was only a variety programme and the participants were the students of the School. Often a play was performed along with the other items. Gradually, the programmes became more elaborate and the preparation was started well in advance. Some citizens of Pondicherry, especially from the French administration, were invited by the Mother to watch the show.

In 1956 the place where the Theatre was going to be built was acquired. There used to be a series of warehouses there, just like the ones which are still there across the street. In those times the place was considered very far away as most people walked or rode on bicycles to go from one place to the other. The main reason for buying that property was that even though the space was very large, the price being



Group photo of the participants 50 years after the play was staged. Those who were absent were inserted using Photoshop.

GIST OF THE PLAY

"L'Ascension vers la Vérité" or "The Ascent to Truth" is a drama of life with a prologue, seven stages and an epilogue. There are 12 persons — a philanthropist, a pessimist, a scientist, an artist, three students, two lovers, an ascetic and two aspirants — who come together with a common goal: the discovery of the ultimate Truth of life. In a combined effort they begin the ascent of a sacred mountain whose summit leads to the Truth. But at various stages of the ascent and for various reasons, all give up the climb except the two aspirants. Resisting valiantly all the trials, they lift themselves up by a supreme effort to the summit in full light.

They are surrounded by the sparkling, dazzling Truth. Nothing else exists except the small bit of rock which is hardly wide enough for the four feet to stand upon. Then they discover on the other side of the bottomless abyss, the new World. In Mother's words, "ce sommet resplendissant de lumière éclatante, ces formes parfaites, cette harmonie merveilleuse, la Terre promise, la Terre nouvelle!"

But how does one get there? With an absolute and complete surrender to the Divine Will and full faith in the Divine Grace, they jump fearlessly and borne upon invisible wings, by a miraculous power, they arrive in the new World, ready to learn to live the New Life.

THE CAST :

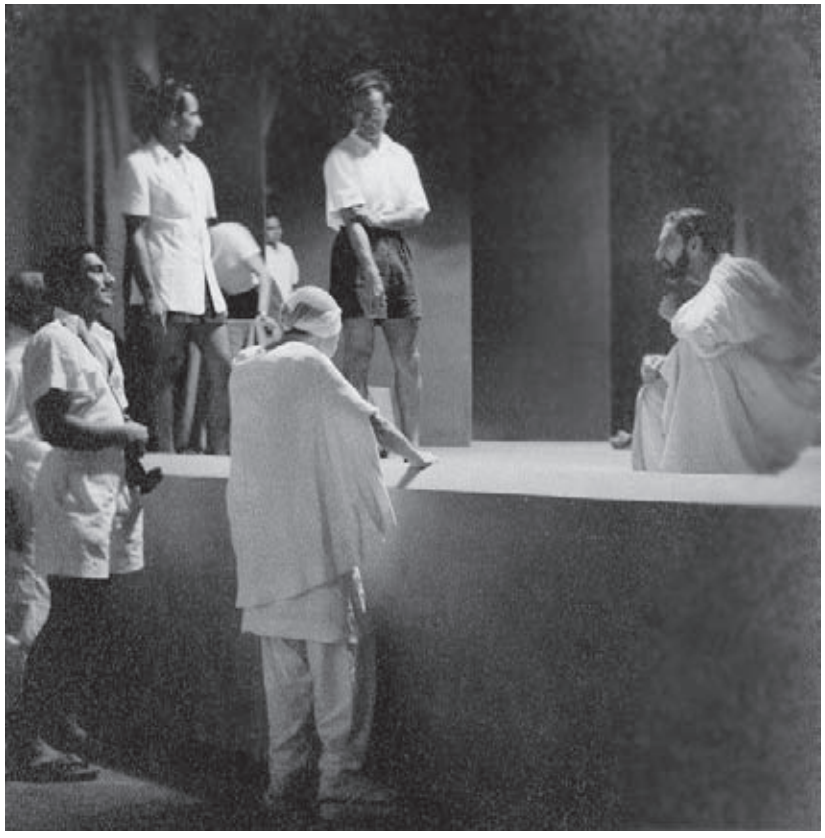
The philanthropist	-	Ramraj Sehgal
The pessimist	-	Braj Kishore
The scientist	-	Richard P
The artist	-	Manoj D.G.
Three students	-	Prabir Nahar, Jo, Madhusudan Patel
Two lovers	-	Parul Chakraborty, Badol Chakraborty
The ascetic	-	Ranajit Sarkar
Two aspirants	-	Ajit Sarkar, Tara Jauhar



Prologue — the group in the Artist's studio before the journey

asked was relatively low because it was situated on the outskirts of the town. Udar-da, who handled the purchase of the plot, was in charge of the construction too. The basic structure has remained practically unchanged since then even though some major renovations of the stage and the technicians' room at the back were done in 1972, for Sri Aurobindo's centenary. At that time an orchestra pit had been made in front of the stage, but as there was never a live orchestra which played in that pit the only purpose it served was to hide the prompter — the person who helps actors when they forget their lines. Some years later it was filled in and this created the extension of the stage in front.

The first Annual Programme of the 1st December to be held there was in 1956. By then a decade had passed since the first celebration of the 1st December and an entire organisation had been put in place. The teams which took charge of the costumes and backdrops had gained in experience. The Mother was very much involved in the planning and execution of the entire show. Not only did She take decisions about the cast and the costumes but she actually wrote the script of some of the programmes. This is how we have today in Her collected works the three plays: "Vers l'Avenir", "Le Grand Secret" and "L'Ascension vers la Vérité".



The Mother directing one of the plays for the 1st Dec. Programme, 1956

The opening of the Theatre was going to be an important event but the construction was not yet over and so the work had to continue through the night in order to finish it before D-day. As it is people have always waited eagerly for the performance of the 1st December but in 1956 there was the added excitement of watching a play in the new Theatre Hall. (Actually the space is not really a hall since one of the sides is left entirely open. This is very good for ventilation but very bad for acoustics, especially when one wants to do a play and the actors can't always be in front of a microphone. For 1956, however, it was an achievement of sorts for the Ashram to have its own permanent auditorium.)

How important this space was can be understood from the fact that in February 1958 the Mother's 80th birthday was celebrated here with a March Past in the courtyard and a performance on the stage after that. The Mother took the salute standing on the little cement dais which is at the centre of the courtyard and on which we all go and sit when we are bored or just want to take the air.

For this first representation at the Theatre the Mother wrote the play "L'Ascension Vers la Vérité" ("The Ascent to Truth") and She also directed it. This was a short play and there were two other items in the programme that evening — Sri Aurobindo's "Conversations of the Dead" and "A Parable of the Gods", a dance-drama with dialogues in Sanskrit from the Upanishads. Some of those who participated in the play recently had an informal get-together in Pondicherry to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the staging of the play. This also naturally coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Ashram Theatre. Going back 50 years down memory lane, the participants of the play reminisced moments spent together and specially those invaluable ones spent with the Mother while She personally directed, corrected and worked with them. Some of them write about their experience.

"She was pushing us to exceed ourselves"

Richard '56 *looks back at the Mother's marvellous and mysterious ways of dealing with Her children.*

For this play, the Mother chose all the roles Herself and each of us participants got a cyclostyled copy of the text. We were all called to the long veranda in the Guest House. This was unusual as I do not remember Her using this veranda before or after. It is the one that leads to the room Sri Aurobindo lived in before moving to the Ashram Main building. She sat at the eastern end and we, as well as those who accompanied Her in the Playground, sat in front. I believe Diana too was there, since it was she who conducted the practice during the months that followed.

The Mother had the whole reading recorded by Vishwanath-da, so that we could listen to Her way of pronunciation. Perhaps that is why we sat upstairs away from the noise of the Guest House and the Playground. Diana would play the recording for us. As far as I can remember she did not give us instructions as we practiced. I believe we all sat and read our texts first and a little later we did our rehearsals on the stage. The only thing she reminded us was to know our lines by heart! She really gave us freedom to discover our own expression.

A few words about Diana will make it clear that Mother chose her to guide us for reasons quite beyond the ken of mortal mind.

She lived as a recluse in a small room that the Mother had selected for her. It was attached to a local temple which had a fairly large garden with coconut trees and a large temple tank full of large fish no one ever disturbed. Her head was shaven clean and she wore a white shirt and longer-than-usual white shorts. She would go out occasionally by car to visit certain temples. I learnt this from Jyotin-da who accompaned her on these excursions. During one of these he brought back a new colour of the Adoration flower from Tiruvannamalai and planted it in Pradyot-da's garden (Consul House). In fact the first Adoration tree we had in the Ashram grew in Diana's garden.

The Mother chose me to be the scientist in this play. In fact I feel She must have been able to work on a certain aspect or facet of our nature when She gave us a particular role to enact. She would usually give me the part of a villain or a devil, allowing me to express what was not at all part of my outward or surface personality! But in this case it was different. This was the work dearest to my heart at that time. I was actively involved in the science "Laboratoire", in the small room for Natural History.



The Scientist and the Artist

When we look back at that time when the Mother was actively guiding all the movements of our life as well as the development of the Ashram, we realise that She was constantly moving forward and encouraging all to progress constantly. During all the various practices and plays and demonstrations we did in those days, we felt Her pushing us to exceed ourselves.

Two incidents stand out and are unforgettable. The first was after the dress rehearsal, which the Mother came to see in the Theatre (the old Rally Godown). The play had gone off well. So

pleased were we with ourselves that we thought we would not need to practice any more before the 1st December. Our hopes however were short-lived. The Mother told Diana that we should continue to practice normally till the day of the performance.

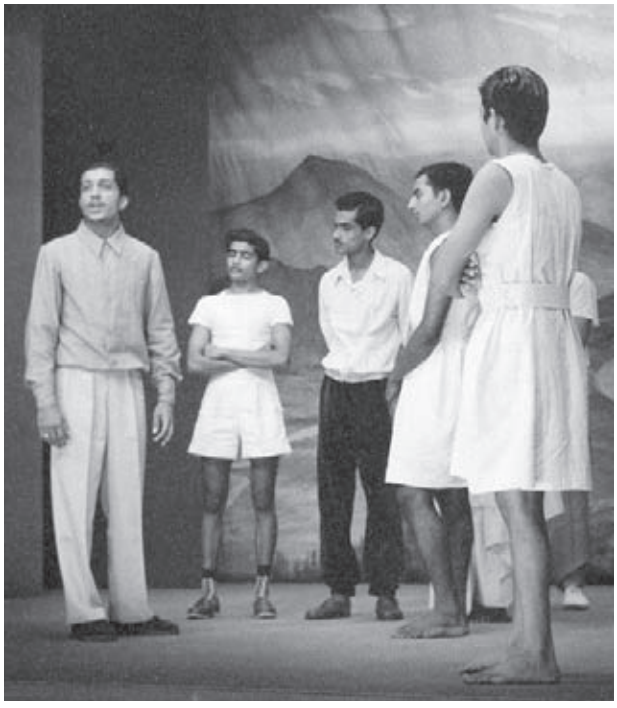
The second incident took place on 1st December. After the play, the Mother called us into the little room that had been arranged for Her. Since the Theatre had just been completed — no more temporary stages put up in the Playground — this room looked more like a store-room than a room fit for the Mother. I feel She could adapt to all conditions and create Her own presence anywhere.

After congratulating us on the performance very warmly indeed and most affectionately, She looked around to give us something. Picking a very large sprig of "Harmony" She did something most unexpected. With great force She started tearing off smaller sprigs and giving each one of us a piece, with a broad smile and a word of praise. I could not believe my eyes. I would have imagined She would have cut them off daintily with a pair of scissors!

Aim for Perfection

Ramraj Sehgal '61

When you attempt to recall a big event that happened some 50 years ago, it is surprising how your memory comes to your help. Though I must admit that there are bound to be some losses or inaccuracies in the narration of the event, I do sympathize with my memory. It has done its best.



The defection of the Philanthropist

There are 12 characters in this play and Mother Herself chose the 12 boys and girls to play them. I remember who they were and what roles they had performed. I was a philanthropist and I was the first one to get off the stage! She had spoken to each one of us individually. I remember Her asking me in the Tennis Court, "Do you speak French?" I was shocked with the question considering that French was our medium of instruction. I murmured, "Yes, I do." She smiled and walked away. The mystery of this question unfolded some three weeks later. We were asked to come to Her room in the Playground on 1st September. That day I was running a high temperature and my father informed the Mother that I was unwell. But I decided to go nevertheless. As I entered the room, She smiled at me and asked Gauri-di to provide me a cushion. She did not want me to sit on the floor.

She read the entire play at the end of which She announced each individual's role. We were then given our respective parts to learn. Within a few days, individual rehearsals began in the Guest House. She corrected our deliveries. Once She was satisfied, the venue shifted to the Theatre. In the beginning, it was once a week and later it became more frequent. She would stand at the end of the Theatre and watch us. Then She would come on stage and point out our mistakes and we would do it again. This went on for a few weeks.

Then came the final rehearsal. She sat in Her

usual place and watched us with great attention. After the show, She came up to the stage and made Her comments. It was quite encouraging though She did point out certain flaws.

The final day had arrived. We assembled before the play and She came back-stage and gave us an encouraging smile. When the curtains came down, we eagerly met Her in Her little room. She smiled at us and said, "You did well." She gave us some flowers. An eventful evening had come to an end.

Many years later, when I recall this unique experience, I realize that my greatest learning has been that whatever we do, we must aim for Perfection.

L'Ascention vers la Vérité

Brajkishore '61

C'est avec surprise et joie que j'ai reçu la nouvelle que je participais dans une pièce que Mère venait d'écrire et que je devais jouer le rôle du Pessimiste.

Je crois au début quand la que Mère nous a réunis c'était sous la véranda de Sri Aurobindo, où Elle l'a vu pour la première fois.

Elle nous a fait lire le texte dans sa pièce au terrain de jeu où Elle avait commencé ses classes des *Prières et Méditations*. À cette époque Elle était toujours accompagnée d'une Française nommée Diana. Ce jour-là Mère semblait se concentrer sur la prononciation. Mais Elle a signalé qu'Elle avait, après tant d'années ici, perdu son acuité pour les sons français et s'en remettait à l'oreille de Diana. Elles ont échangé de petits commentaires après la lecture de chacun. Quand j'ai lu Mère a hoché la tête et a prononcé le nom de Bharati-di[1]. Pour quelques personnes Elle a dit qu'il y avait l'influence de l'anglais dans leur accent.

Quand les répétitions ont commencé sur la scène, il fallait jouer aussi avec le corps. Chaque jour je me sentais de plus en plus misérable. Que faire de ce corps qui ne voulait pas s'exprimer? L'ego probablement opposait une résistance supplémentaire à s'identifier avec un rôle négatif.

Un jour Mère m'a dit : "Tu n'as pas envie de le faire?"

J'étais bien attaché à rester là et j'ai répondu : "Je veux bien!" Cela m'a secoué peut-être mais ce n'était qu'un départ.

Bientôt un jour Mère a démontré avec son propre corps ce qu'il fallait faire. Elle a joué mon rôle, sur toute la longueur de la scène en diagonale. Elle l'a fait avec un tel abandon que cela m'a cassé complètement. Cela dépassait tout ce que j'aurais pu imaginer....



Le Pessimiste

Dès ce jour le corps a commencé à s'ouvrir. Je respirais enfin.

Se tenir sur cette scène fut une expérience, celle d'être devant une grandeur indéfinissable.

Quand Mère nous a vus après le spectacle Elle m'a dit : "On t'a bien applaudi !"

Les meilleurs artistes de l'Ashram avaient travaillé de longues heures pour terminer les toiles de fond.

Ce fut une saison de grande activité dans une atmosphère de collaboration.

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1. Nom indien d'une Française (Suzanne Karpelès), professeur de frainçais dans notre école entre '52 et '68. Elle jouissait d'une grande intimité avec la Mère.

Learning Under Her Guidance

Badol Chakraborty '61H

I came to know that the Mother had chosen me and my sister to play the role of the Lovers. I accepted my role happily. It was the Mother who directed and guided us all throughout. Practices were often held on the first floor of the Guest House or Dortoir Annexe, as it was named later on. An iron railing was fixed on the staircase wall to enable the Mother to climb upstairs for the drama practice.

Regarding our French diction and pronunciation, the Mother appointed Diana to help us. I trained myself under her guidance and tried to do to the best of my abilities.

Much to my dismay, a few days before the final rehearsal my voice failed due to a severe cold. I went to the Mother and She saw my miserable condition. She immediately gave me a ginger lozenge which worked like a miracle! Lo! After taking the lozenge I was completely cured the next day.

The whole drama was enacted very well by all the actors. I felt I should have acted more freely as a lover. After the play, when we all went to see the Mother, She praised all of us. When She looked at me, I saw a sign of satisfaction. Yet in Her smile I could intuitively read an expression which said that more could have been achieved by improving my part as a lover. She perhaps wanted my acting to be more natural. Even without Her uttering any words I could feel, know and realise that with a conscious effort for perfection I could have done much better. After all it is the perfection in the performance of the actors that tangibly conveys the theme to the audience.

We have to remember though, that while for the play the Mother wanted the act of the lover to be more natural, in reality She generally disregards human love, as we have to turn to the true love, the "Divine Love" which never betrays. In fact the world-evolution itself is a play conducted by the Supreme Shakti whose aim is to see humanity turn consciously towards the Truth. On their upward march human beings are faced by the power of Maya which pulls them downwards but the Divine Grace is always present to help those who sincerely yearn to overcome it.



The Lovers find their ideal abode

Carried on Her Wings of Love

Parul Chakraborty '61

In 1956 on the 1st of December, Mother's play, "L'Ascension vers la Vérité", was staged in our Theatre for the first time. Mother had selected the entire cast. My brother and I were chosen for the role of the 'Lovers'.

Being too shy and self-conscious on the stage, I felt I would not be able to do justice to this role. So after a great inner conflict I picked up courage to go and confess my difficulty to the Mother and request Her to select someone else.

Mother drew me to Herself, clasped me close and ever so lovingly explained to me that She had chosen me because I had a good French pronunciation. She also wished for a brother and sister duo for these roles as She wanted affinities between the two 'Lovers'. She thought my brother and I fulfilled Her requirements.

Mother then got up from the chair and announced that She would do my part with me. Drawing me very close to Her, She put Her left arm around my waist; I put my own around Hers. We were one in body, mind and heart, in our thoughts and emotions, One Soul. She poured Her love into me that will sustain me for lives to come! She leaned towards me, Her head resting on mine. Slowly we walked clasping each other, I, completely enamoured and transported into another world! Then She spoke to me in such endearing, unforgettable words: "See how beautiful everything is! We are so happy together like this and we shall remain so together always strong in body, harmonious in our thoughts and happy in our union. Think only I exist for you and nothing can separate us. How beautiful! What a splendour! How marvellous!"

She loosened Her clasp and reluctantly I came back to my earthly self to realise how She had carried me 'There' on Her wings of Love.

A Lesson in Aesthetics

R. Prabhakar (Batti) '58

I was never one for "acting" (theatre) though on 4-5 occasions I had managed to get embroiled or enrolled. The closest I came to the stage was as a stage-hand. This was during the staging of the Mother's play — "L'Ascension Vers la Vérité". It was an extremely lucky stroke as it gave me an opportunity to watch Her sit and shout instructions from the auditorium, come up on stage to give closer attention and even a push.

I remember an incident during one of the rehearsals. This happened when I walked in to place a large sketch of Her painting depicting a steep cliff which the aspirants in the drama had resolved to ascend. The scene was the drawing room of the Artist where all aspirants were to meet to plan the ascent. I came and placed the sketch plonk in the centre. Immediately came Her voice from the auditorium: "Ah! monsieur, pas de symétrie" (Ah! Sir, no symmetry). I moved it a little off centre and that was appreciated by a "Ça va" (That's alright).

This episode irreversibly changed my fixed notion about the importance of symmetry in art. I learned that such symmetry is more suited for geometry and not necessarily a "thing of beauty". ⌘



The Aspirants at the Summit

A life consecrated to union with the Divine is the only life worth living.

The Mother (CWM, 15: 200)