Enacting *Eric*

*Sunayana speaks to **Anshul '17** and **Shibani 'K1** who played the main roles of Eric and Aslaug in the 1st December Programme, 2017.*

Sunayana: Tell us how Sri Aurobindo's play *Eric* came to be chosen for the 1st December programme.

Anshul: Initially we wanted to do something different. Priyanka, Vinay and I took up the initiative. We first thought of Vikramorvasie. Then we decided to weave a play around Sri Aurobindo's lyrical poems where a group of seekers strive for the Truth, in a symbolic spiritual journey. We wanted to show the seekers' journey from a physical one to a psychological one with the help of lights and projections. There were two main poems ,"The Rishi" and "Ahana" around which we created the journey. But it was more of a mental construction rather than a creative vision which is the substance of any play.



Su: So at what point did you decide to abandon the idea?

Shibani: The script was changing every two weeks and the participants were discouraged. We had started off with a rather big batch which gradually became just the few of us. On 5th November we did our first reading of *Eric*.

Su: So was *Eric* chosen because there were only a few characters in it?

A: No. One day Cristof said, "Why don't we take up *Eric*?" He had suggested it earlier but this time it caught fire.

Sh: The funny thing is that Anshul and I were the most against taking it.

A: We were still persevering with our initial plan when I fell ill, then Priyanka fell ill, then Vinay subsequently.... That's when we bailed and decided to do *Eric*. Sanchari and Tanay were very happy because they were persevering in another way!

Su: Who helped with the back stage work?

Sh: Auroposée, Priyanka, Pushan, Arjav, Akash....

Su: The sets were quite minimalist.

A: Yes. The sets were actually made for our initial plan. When we decided to abandon that idea the elements of that same set were used for *Eric*. There was a mountain in that set so we used it for showing the landscape of Norway.

Su: Anshul's costume looked fine. It was the women's costumes that looked more 'contemporary' than Norwegian but they were beautiful. When I saw Shibani I thought, "In that sleeveless dress, the poor girl will freeze."

A: At first we had thought of very dark colours but we realised that they are not very suitable for stage lighting as they don't reflect as much as the lighter colours. That's why there were some bright colours in the costumes.

Su: Did you have to research a lot into Norwegian culture?

A: Yes, I read up quite a bit. I would listen to Norse music on YouTube; it's very enchanting. I

used to also watch the TV series *Vikings* while we were rehearsing. It's a series largely based on true historic events. This helped me further understand the culture.

Su: Did you read up about Nordic mythology?

Sh: Yes, we did that also.

Su: Eric, the hero of the play, is not a real person from history. Sri Aurobindo has been quite free with names and events. There was a king who tried to unite Norway but he wasn't called Eric. When you play a real or well-known mythological character then you read up about him or her and prepare yourself and try to be as close to him as possible. How did you prepare yourself for this role of Eric who is not based on any real person?

A: I based myself on the character of Eric created by Sri Aurobindo!

Su: What background information did you get about the play, about how it was written?

A: Interestingly Sri Aurobindo wrote this play after he came to Pondicherry in 1910.

Sh: It was a play that he corrected repeatedly during the course of some years. He took a special interest in it. Cristof was not particularly fond of this play. His favourites were the more classical ones, such as *Vasavadutta* and *Perseus*. But when he began working on *Eric* he said, "My God! I never realised how poetic this is!"

A: He said he thought *Eric* was one of the most poetic plays of Sri Aurobindo. I think it's amongst his favourites now.

Su: This play was last performed in 1975, "starring" Chhote and Leslie.

A: This play has been performed only three times for the 1st December programme, including this performance. I think in the 1950s it was performed with Mona-da playing Eric.

Su: The 1st December programme has a deadline. No matter what happens it has to be performed on the 1st of December. How did you manage with just 3 weeks in hand?

Sh: With the 1st December programme you can't say "I'll get up on the stage on the 1st without any preparation and outshine everyone, (*stagey méré débo!*)" When Mahi-da's team came to fix the lights we were ready with two thirds of the play. In one week we had learnt by heart the



major part of the play.

Su: Did you take the whole play or did you cut some portions because you were short of time?

Sh: It was mostly complete. We took out some lines from the second half of the play but Act 1 and 2 were intact.

Su: Until about two thirds of the play there are only three characters and there are monologues after monologues. So how did you work? How did you manage to learn such long monologues by heart?

Sh: We never thought that we had so much to learn. It just came. I related very well to my character. I felt I was Aslaug. I am a lot like her in real life — passionate, impulsive. I felt as if I was myself speaking, I didn't feel that I was learning someone else's words. If it had been some other character maybe I would have found it difficult.

Su: What kind of rehearsal schedules did you have?

Sh: As it was mostly just the two of us we spent the whole month working from morning till night. You can ask us about what was the schedule when we were not rehearsing for *Eric*.

A: After a while, we would even say our lines while just hanging out.

Sh: I started calling him "Eric" in real life.

A: And I saved her number as "Aslaug"!

Su: I am really curious to know how you managed to learn your long monologues by heart.

Sh: I find it more difficult when you have short lines and then someone else gives you an answer, because sometimes they are so similar. It can be confusing. If it's a monologue then there is a thought and you follow it. With short replies, sometimes it is the same thing with little

differences. That is so much harder to remember.

Su: Yes, sometimes you can get the wrong cue. You could make a mistake and start off on another piece of dialogue.

Sh: There was a particular place in the play where Anshul would always forget his line. It was a scene where I am really sad and he would just go blank. So I would silently mouth the words to prompt him. I was trying to remain in character and still silently prompt him.

Su: What were your main difficulties during the period of preparation?

A: There are some emotionally intimate scenes with intense dialogues in this play. Getting them right was difficult because we didn't know each other at all when we started. Secondly, the relationship of conflict with Swegn, the antagonism between Eric and Swegn still needed a lot of work. And the third difficulty was to get Hertha's character right. Hertha is an extremely complicated and nuanced character. It takes a lot of time to identify with so many layers at once.

Sh: Aslaug has just two layers. One layer is where she knows that something has to be done and the other layer is where she wants to follow her heart. But Hertha has so many thin layers in her character that it is very difficult to portray.



Su: I think Sanchari did a good job of it. What were the most memorable moments of this preparation?

A: Everyday was memorable. Every day we felt something new and the next day was even better. We lived a different life.

Sh: It was surreal! It was a surreal month we lived.

Su: Is there anything I have not asked but you would like to talk about?



Sh: I would like to add that this play has been one of the most revelatory experiences.

A: I concur. I have acted in plays before but there is something special about the 1st December. This was the first time that I was doing a 1st December programme and also the first time that I was doing a play written by Sri Aurobindo. Now I don't know whether it was because it was my first time but I tangibly felt something else at work. You know there are moments, like at the beginning of the competition season, when Mother says that she is there and you can access her guidance and power and she will help you. There are these moments of the year when there is a concentrated focus and a presence. I think that the 1st December programme is one such moment too, when everyone feels it. It is very concretely there.

Su: The fact that everyone is there together....

A: There is a collective aspiration that helps the individual aspiration.

Sh: I think there is an intensity. Usually, in our everyday life, our concentration is spread out. But, during this play, we were steeped in that, in the play, and we were trying to put it into action. The thing about acting is that you try to live it and you try to become it, by becoming what you are saying as sincerely as possible and so intensely, for so many days, for such long periods.

When anyone asked me, 'So, how's the 1st December preparation going?' my standard reply was, 'I have never been so concentrated in my entire life, so intensely and for so long a duration and every day. This intensity I have never felt before.'

A: I would also like to add that we had a strong feeling of Fate. There is a line at the end of the play about Fate, and we could feel the truth of those words. ⌘