

**“Phera” – A Welcome Diversion from the Usual
A Review by Narayan Majumdar**

On a cold December day in suburban New Jersey, Kallol, the largest and oldest Bengali cultural association in the state, had a great surprise for us the theater lovers. With the staging of seven plays in a single day, Kallol started their first Bengali Drama Festival, which according to the officials will be an annual event from now on. Almost all the plays demonstrated the tremendous theatrical talents of the performers, especially their enthusiasm and passion for theater was extremely contagious. However, of all the plays, the one which touched me most, the play which stirred the souls of most of the first generation immigrant Bengalis that evening was, “Phera”, a production by Ethnomedia. It is often very difficult to speak the hard truth, especially if that truth is about our loved ones, the ones we care for. Sudipta Bhawmik, the playwright and director, built up the courage to do just that in his highly emotional drama, “Phera”.

Although the play is setup in a suburban small town of West Bengal, in India, it can be said with most certainty that the thoughts are universal for any society in the world, for any immigrant in USA. Almost any immigrant can readily identify with the characters and the incidents of the play. Maybe for that reason, during the entire ninety minutes of the play, the audience sat down almost mesmerized only to occasionally break out in applause during the scene transitions.

The story line however is deceptively simple. Sukomol, the protagonist who lives and works in USA, suddenly, arrives at his home to the utmost surprise and joy of his parents Satyasadhan and Mrinmoyee and his sister Sikha. Later in the afternoon, Sukomol breaks to his would-be father-in law Ramapada and his mother that he has come back for good and would like to work in India or possibly set up a chemical plant in his hometown. Mrinmoyee is delighted at the prospect of her son staying back in India, but Ramapada rebukes him for his naivety and foolishness. Being a failed politician himself, Ramapada reminds Sukomol of how impossible it is to build anything in West Bengal with its business hostile political environment. At this moment comes Bibhas, Sukomol’s childhood friend and gives him hope by promising that he will make all arrangements to make Sukomol’s dream a reality with the help of the local member of the legislative assembly. However, in the very next scene in an interesting twist, Bibhas confides to Sukomol that all that he had said was pure bluff, just to settle a score with his political rival Ramapada. He advises Sukomol to go back to USA and even pleads to take him along. Sukomol gets another jolt when his fiancée Krishnaa makes it very clear that her only goal in life is to go to America, and if Sukomol decides to stay back in India, she’ll do it alone. However, the final blow comes when Sukomol overhears his father who almost breaks down at the possibility that the flow of dollars is about to stop. Satyasadhan, who himself is an immigrant from Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), struggled all his life to take care of his family, his parents, his brothers and sisters. He never had the chance of enjoying the slightest of luxury. Now, with his son working in USA and with his regular dollar remittances, Satyasadhan has started to get used to the better things of life, the small luxuries like traveling in a rented car and having a luxury

bathroom. He dreads at the possibility of losing his current life and going back to the days of hardship. Only, Mrinmoyee, the eternal mother, tries to defend her son's decision to the last moment. On the surface, it may seem that the dramatist has portrayed Satyasadhan, Ramapada, Bibhas, Krishna to be selfish and mean, who are only interested in using Sukomol to serve their needs, but a deeper analysis tells us that all of these characters are helpless victims of circumstances, either social, political or economic circumstances. It is very hard to make a judgment as to who is right and who is wrong. We don't even have the rights to do so. All the characters are well justified in their positions and logic, and that unfortunately is life. The eternal struggle between the love for our homeland and the demands of reality plagues all of us immigrants, almost every day. This is where the play excels, to speak the harsh truth in very simple terms. It also raises some fundamental questions about the concept of national identity, about our duties towards our country and towards our family. To whom are we more obliged, the political entity that happens to be the country where we grew up or to those people whose love and care nurtured us and helped us grow to individual human beings?

The play builds up wonderfully with conflict after conflict leading to the ultimate climax (which I will withhold purposefully). The superb acting performances by the entire cast helped carry the play with its emotional ups and downs. The strong emotions of the last scene brought tears to many eyes. Special mention needs to be made for the wonderful performances made by Indranil (in the role of Bibhas), Sankar Ghosal (Satyasadhan) and Tandra (Sikha). Lilabati Mazumdar (Mrinmoyee), Aprajita Das (Krishna) and Pinaki Dutta (Sukomol) also excelled in portraying their characters. It is indeed hard to believe that none of the performers are professional actors (although I learnt that many of them have been trained professionally). Sudipta Bhawmik, not only excelled as a brilliant playwright, but he also demonstrated his skill as an expert director. His attention to details, the small touches of day-to-day actions, the beautifully composed frames, all speak of talent and experience. Sudipta also did a wonderful job in the role of Ramapada, the politician.

Special mention needs to be made about the musical score. Partha Sarathi Mukherjee, the composer, played most of the pieces live using his keyboard and he poured in all his emotions to his music. The music not only helped to heighten the emotions but also served as the binding agent between the scenes and sequences building up the mood and expectations.

Plays like "Phera" happen few and far between. Thanks to Ethnomedia for producing such a play that talks about us, about our lives, about our pains. The play is a nice diversion from the typical comedies and farces that are being produced and promoted in the Diaspora. "Phera" made one thing very clear and that is, we no longer need to wait for the so-called professional theater groups from India to see good Bengali theater. I wish more people get to see "Phera" and more plays like this are staged in this country where we can see the reflections of ourselves. I feel, we the immigrant audience are now ready for some serious introspection.