

# Patterns of the psyche

## THEATRE

**Acushla** is a haunting production of great depth, writes

**Kamala Ramchandani**

re-read and assimilated if encountered on the printed page. This is not the case in a stage performance.

The script of *Acushla* incorporates both the positive and negative aspects of the verse form. At its best, it has lines of great beauty. The opening lines, for instance:

*"Once upon a dark night,  
there was silence./ Then, a little  
glow of tenderness, burning the  
night air/ And reaching for the  
sun."*

Then, the contrast of the conclusion:

*"I'll go alone, from rags to  
slumber/ Without the slightest  
strain."*

A PLAY being performed in a bank? Yes, indeed. On Saturday March 5

ANZ Grindlays Bank, Bhulabhai Desai Road, was the venue for a haunting performance of *Acushla*, written by Derek Antao and directed by Meher Jehangir.

The lobby of the bank had been converted into a mini auditorium for the preview, reclined against bolsters the whole effect was one of informal elegance.

The play is an exploration into the psyche of Sonia, a mentally disturbed woman. Her positive and negative thoughts are portrayed by two actress-dancers weaving in and out of the narrative as she recreates the unfulfilled life she lives with her bewildered, uncomprehending husband. She is a prisoner of her tortured mind and is eventually driven to suicide.

The play is written in verse: Antao, the Indian playwright, felt that no other form would do justice to the subject. Verse drama is not an easy medium to handle. However, the heightened dialogue is perfect for conveying multi-layered thoughts, particularly the seeing mental processes of a woman like Sonia. But it also runs the risk of conjuring up too many images which can be

**Acushla**  
Directed by Meher Jehangir

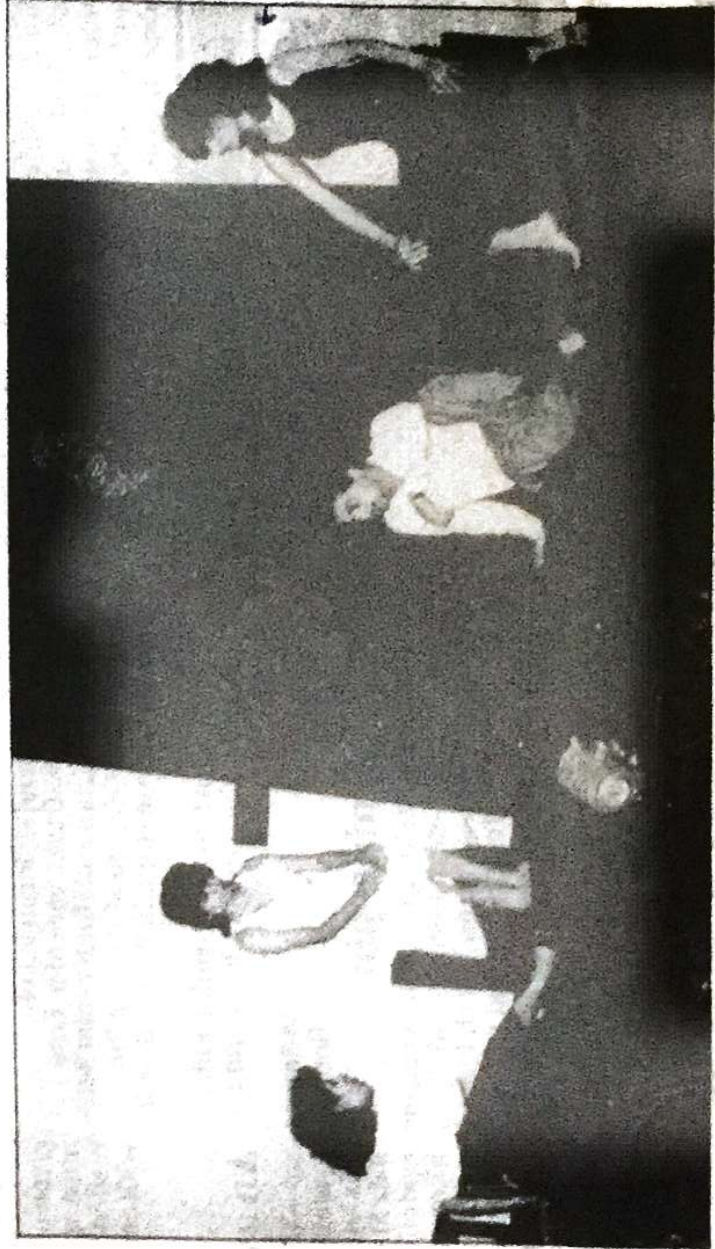
"against the poetry" so that they were never allowed to lapse into the declamatory style so beloved of many readers of verse.

Yasmin Kharas-Palsetia, who was unforgettable in the title role of *Agnes of God* showed the same skill in her portrayal of Sonia. Delicate, understated, she brought a poignant quality to her rendering of the doomed girl. She was well supported by Rumi Palsetia as Eddie: down-to-earth, weak, well meaning, yet unable to cope with Sonia's neuroticism, and wanting to get away from her for a little peace.

Acting apart, what lifted the play to a heightened plane was the inclusion of the dances, beautifully choreographed by Shiamak Davar and evocatively performed by Sita Mani and Khushnuma. Sita Mani in particular, as the dark, negative force, was riveting — her strong face and clean, cutting movements conveyed power.

Khushnuma, an international gold medalist ice-skater, was gentler, softer, the voice of innocence, fighting a losing battle against the forces of darkness.

The production was a study in black and white: the bare stage with a plain black curtain at the rear, the costumes in black and white, the spotlight creating black shadows around the white arc of light. The ambience was austere and nothing intruded on the starkness of the struggle between reason and madness.



A scene from Meher Jehangir's *Acushla*: portraying the primeval struggle between reason and madness