In 1949 the Mother wrote and directed *Vers l’Avenir, or Towards the Future*, a one-act play, which was performed for the annual 1st December programme of the Ashram school. Our feature article in this issue offers a thoughtful interpretation of the play which highlights its idealism, examines the inner conflicts of its protagonists, and also reveals how the social and moral attitudes of those days shaped the audience’s reaction to its theme.
Towards the Future: a play written by the Mother

I discovered this play in 1995 while looking for a short play which would have only four or five characters. I started doing a bit of research before beginning rehearsals because besides directing it I was myself playing a role, so I had to be fully prepared before starting work. To my surprise, I found out that the play had not been performed again after it was first staged in 1949. In the forty-six years that separated that first production from ours most of the members of the original cast had passed away. Fortunately, the two main actresses were still there—Arati Das Gupta and Millie-di (Bratati Bhattacharya). Much of the information that I eventually gathered came from the conversations I had with them.

Before saying anything, it should be understood that this play was written for a performance which was going to be held within the next six months. It was not a literary piece written just for the pleasure of expressing oneself. In the early years of the Ashram school, the annual programme was a variety show in which a play was generally the main item. For some years the Mother chose French plays which were light-hearted comedies. Although the younger members enjoyed watching and acting in these plays, the older sadhaks found them a bit too light-hearted for their taste. Perhaps the Mother felt that it was better to write an original play, the theme of which was more in harmony with the atmosphere of the Ashram, and this is how she wrote the three plays which we find in her collected works. We must keep in mind that all three were written originally in French, and what we get to see in the Collected Works of the Mother is the English translation.

Towards the Future, or Vers l’Avenir as it is called in the original French, is the only proper play the Mother wrote, as the other two cannot strictly be called plays. The Great Secret is a series of monologues which were not even all written by the Mother, and The Ascent to Truth is a collection of short scenes with very simple dialogue and very little action, the structure of which does not correspond to the classical forms of drama. In contrast, Towards the Future has the structure of a one-act play—once the curtain goes up it only comes down at the end. There are no scene changes and no changes of costume or props. There is drama in the form of the inner conflicts of the protagonists and a complexity of emotions. The narrative is compact, and the action takes place in real time, within an hour. The Mother not only wrote this play for a performance but she also directed that first performance.

The basic story of Towards the Future concerns a woman who has a great urge to turn her life towards spiritual seeking and finds her opportunity when she sees that her husband has found another companion. The new woman is a singer and a clairvoyant, with the gift of being able to see some occult realities. She comes to their house when the wife is out, to ask the husband for help in her career. The husband, who is a poet, at once feels that he already knows this woman, perhaps from another birth. When the wife comes back she understands that her husband is torn between his loyalty to her and his realisation that the clairvoyant is the person he is destined to live with. She steps forward from the shadows where she had been standing and announces that she will leave so that her husband and the clairvoyant can make a new life together. She makes it clear that she has had a deep aspiration to lead a spiritual life and now she is free to follow that path.

The plot revolves around the three main characters—the wife, the poet and the clairvoyant. The two other characters, the painter and the schoolfriend, are there to serve a purpose. It is the presence of the schoolfriend which allows the audience to know what the wife is thinking: we come to know that she is dissatisfied with her life as she speaks with her friend. Their conversation also gives us a glimpse of the wife’s strength of character. The painter, on his part, takes the story forward by introducing the clairvoyant to the poet. The presence of these two characters also creates a variety of moods within the play and allows us to see certain facets of the main characters.

Right at the outset the Mother says that this play can be set in any culture because the theme is universal. Keeping this in mind, she has made the text free from all culture-specific words and she has not even given any names to the characters. They are
all identified by what they do or by a capacity they have. This is why the husband is simply called “the poet” and his friend is “the painter”, the woman who is the neighbour is the “clairvoyant musician” and there is a “schoolfriend”. The main protagonist, the wife of the poet, is simply called “She”.

I started by preparing for my own role, the role of the clairvoyant, before I could direct the others. In the English translation of the play she is called “the clairvoyant musician” but it would be more accurate to call her “the clairvoyant singer”. As this role had been played by Arati-di I spoke to her to find out what the Mother had told her about the role. It was during that conversation that I understood not only the nuances of the character of the clairvoyant but also through that I understood the tone of the whole play. Suddenly everything fell into place. The Mother had given very clear instructions about how that role had to be played and getting the performance of that character right was crucial to getting across the right message.

According to the Mother there are no villains in this play. All the three characters are sincere in what they are doing. It would be easy to assume that the poet is attracted to another woman, the clairvoyant, because he is looking for some novelty in his life and that the wife “catches” him red-handed, which prompts her to leave him out of anger and as a punishment. But this is not at all what the Mother had in mind. According to her, the poet and the clairvoyant recognise from the moment they meet that they have known each other for a long time, that they are soul-mates. It is the recognition of a deep inner relationship they already have. The entire play hinges on this very important fact. The relationship of the poet and the clairvoyant singer is not based on physical or emotional attractions. They are two souls who are destined to meet and continue their inner journey together, a journey which they had started in another life perhaps. Once they meet, “She” can follow her own destiny of leading a spiritual life.

As we began rehearsals I had assumed that the role of “She” was the most difficult to play but actually the other two main roles are also difficult because even unconsciously one must not give out the message that there is a play of passions. The Mother had insisted that the clairvoyant singer should not do anything that looks as if she is trying to attract the poet. The reason why the singer is called “the clairvoyant” is because she can see beyond the physical reality, and this already suggests that she is above the ordinary level on which most people live—she is not a frivolous woman.

Having understood that the clairvoyant singer is innocent, the next mistake that the reader or viewer of this play could make is to look on the poet as the flawed character. But in fact, he is not to be seen as a weak person either. He is someone who has a difficult choice before him when he meets the singer and realises that he is connected to her in some way already. The Mother, as the playwright, has made us aware of his unease in the relationship with his wife. Although he knows that he has not found the ideal

The Poet and She
relationship with his wife, he is not really thinking of leaving her. In fact, he is deeply worried about her future when he sees that he cannot even contemplate a new life with the singer without thinking of what would happen to his wife.

This leaves us with the final difficulty—that of interpreting the complex denouement at the end of the play, which in the view of the playwright is actually a happy ending, the problem presented at the beginning being resolved. Those who could not see that there was a problem at all could not see that the end brought a solution. The theme of the whole play was a bit too avant-garde for its time. After the performance, the French government officials, who were customarily invited to the annual programmes of the 1st and 2nd December, left without coming to thank the Mother as they usually did. It was clear that even they had been quite shocked by the story. The fact that the wife was leaving the husband was something that the people in the audience, Indian as well as French, found hard to accept. Many of those who had watched the play thought it was about infidelity and a wife abandoning her marital duties.

During the preparation of our performance in 1995 I got the impression that when the play had first been performed in 1949 it had left the viewers a bit uneasy. From what I gathered as I spoke to a number of people, it was a piece of writing which, being a work of fiction, was not given much importance by most. I also came to understand that it was the whole question of a man-woman relationship, its difficulties and its undertones of unhappiness, that had left everyone quite baffled and unsure of how to relate to it, and so the work was not taken up again for a performance on stage for all those years.

For many people who watched that performance it was difficult to grasp what exactly made the couple part ways so easily. They felt that the play was somehow justifying the way the poet is attracted to another woman even though he was married and the way he desires to be united to this woman about whom he knows so little and that too within minutes after having met her. The point that most people did not catch was that the husband and the wife were already dissatisfied with their lives but had not admitted this to each other. Perhaps the reason why this play was nearly forgotten was because there were many points that were not very obvious to the viewers. For example, it was unclear for many in the audience why the wife was leaving her husband. They wondered why she was not happy with him. After all, she wasn’t in a violent or abusive relationship. The poet has great respect for her, and in one scene in the play where the couple is together and alone, they seem to have a perfectly normal conversation. At no point during that scene do they seem unhappy together. It was difficult for people to understand that they both wanted something else, something more. It was also very intriguing for people to see the stand the wife takes in front of her husband’s sudden attraction for another woman. Why was she not hurt or angry? For 1949 the play offered too many unanswered questions.

There was clearly a gap between the playwright and her audience. The Mother surely took it for granted that everyone would understand that the couple in question was looking for a deep fulfilling companionship where the two could be united at all levels of their being. The wife says at the very beginning of the play that her life is empty. She points out to her schoolfriend that she and her husband are good friends and adds, “Esteem and mutual concessions create a harmony that makes life quite bearable; but is that happiness?” On his side the husband says, when he is alone, “I admire her, I feel a deep respect for her... But all that is not love... Love! What a dream! Will it ever become a reality?”

The Mother had obviously set her story in the Parisian artists’ milieu of the late 19th century in which she had lived and in which the concept of romantic love, or something more than that, was accepted and understood and where social conventions did not have the last word. But it was hard for the audience in Pondicherry to understand why anybody would want anything more than living without disagreements under one roof. In the Indian context of the times a loving companionship, even romantic love, was not essential to a harmonious married life. Marriage was more about duties than personal fulfilment.
The Mother intended to draw the attention of the audience to the great aspiration which was burning in the wife's heart. She had been inwardly preparing herself for a life in which she could serve a higher purpose when this incident takes place. The Mother would not have created a character who would set out on a spiritual path because she is bitter about her personal life. Sri Aurobindo has said that one must not turn to the spiritual life out of disgust or in an attitude of defeat towards ordinary life. He says that it should be out of a desire to make this life better and more meaningful than it is. This is why the last part of the play is so powerful and moving, because the wife wishes the poet and the singer a happy life and announces with joy that she is now going to start on a new path in her life. In the moment just before the curtain falls the poet takes the wife's hand and in a gesture of respect bends down to touch his forehead to it.

The Mother must have really worked hard to get this play ready for the stage. Firstly she wrote it well in advance, some time in the summer of 1949. Then she got the cast together, assembled them in a room in Golconde, and had the whole play read out to them. She organised the rehearsals and directed the actors and actresses. Training the actors was no easy job because the play was going to be performed in French, and some of the members in the cast were not familiar with the spoken form of the language. I am told that the rehearsals were held at Nanteuil, in one of the rooms where Sri Smriti is now located, so that no one would see the actors while they were working. After that she chose the costumes, taking saris from her own wardrobe for the actresses. In those days a makeshift stage was built at the western end of the Playground for the 1st December programme. That too was part of the preparations. The Mother had the backdrop painted and decided on the props. Sahana-di was asked to sing offstage the song which the poet hears and which is supposed to be the voice of the clairvoyant.

The first thing the Mother did after writing the play was to read it out to Sri Aurobindo to get his opinion and approval. Champaklal writes about this and recreates from memory their conversation:

When Mother came for Sri Aurobindo’s food tonight she brought yesterday’s file and started reading the sheets to him when he was taking food.
...
When Mother finished reading Sri Aurobindo nodded his head and said: Ah, ah.
Mother asked: How did you find it?
Sri Aurobindo: Very good.
Mother: Can it be played?
Sri Aurobindo: Yes, I suppose it can be played (and again he nodded his head).
Mother: Sahana will sing from the back stage. B’s voice is beautiful, has volume, it is sweet; she understands…. A, who read the Rose of God, has fine expression, eyes are rounded as required. V knows French well, but her part is brief. Men will be dressed in pants and ladies will be in saris because the modern dress is very ugly. [Champaklal Speaks, 1975, pp 76-7]
Many have assumed that the story is modelled on a chapter from the Mother’s own life, and that this was probably how the Mother and Henri Morisset separated. But in my opinion this assumption is incorrect, firstly, because the Mother never mentioned anything about it and secondly, because this is a story that could have happened to anyone in an urban context, especially in a European context. A married couple separating was not something so impossible, from a European perspective at least, that the reader or viewer would have to find a parallel in the Mother’s own life to see where the story came from. Some think that because the heroine has no name, is simply called “She”, that it must be a way of keeping the identity of the woman secret. As I have mentioned earlier none of the characters have a name, it is not the wife alone who is unnamed.

Moreover, to me it is clear that the story is set in the time in which it was written. There is a clear reference at the beginning of the play to “the marvellous teachings that guide our life”. In her last long monologue the wife says, “I shall go and join those through whom we have found the path, they who hold the eternal wisdom and who have, from a distance, guided our steps till now. Surely they will give me shelter.” This could be a reference to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and the Ashram. The woman wants to go to a spiritual community because she says “surely they will give me shelter”. Either the Mother meant by that a spiritual community somewhere in the world or she could have referred to the Ashram itself. If we take the second possibility to be true then the wife cannot be the Mother herself.

However, as I have mentioned earlier, there are indications that she might have drawn inspiration from incidents that she must have seen around her during her life in Paris. She not only knew several artists but was connected through them to many others who were a part of the cultural scene of that epoch. In this play most of the characters are engaged in some creative activity and earn a living from it. We have, thus, the artist, the poet and the singer.

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, in his biography of the Mother, points out that it is very strange that the poet and the clairvoyant are supposed to be neighbours, and that too for six months, but they have never seen each other. This may seem unusual for Indian towns but it is a perfectly normal situation in metropolitan cities like Paris where people live in apartment buildings and may never get to see or know the people who live in the next building.

The reaction of the audience to our 1995 performance was positive and there was a general appreciation of our work. The subject of the play did not bring up any specific comments because it seemed so normal—in fact, some even said that they had found the answers to questions and doubts which they had in their minds. In my desire to be faithful to the original production I had kept the ladies’ costumes the same as in the first one, but the men were in kurta-pyjama. Some in the cast had even felt, as we neared the performance day, that I should have gone all out to present it as a contemporary play and given the actors everyday contemporary clothes as costumes.

Indeed, today, fifteen years after our performance and sixty years after it was written, the Mother’s play Towards the Future has a contemporary feel and no one would feel uncomfortable watching it. In fact, the title says it all. The Future towards which the Mother was pointing has come, and now the audience would be able to understand the need for personal fulfilment in life, a fulfilment which goes beyond the satisfaction of finding a partner with whom one can live the dream of true love. As I write about this play and think over the issues it deals with, I feel that, with all the social and cultural changes that have taken place in India, even over the last decade, it will surely find an audience which will appreciate it. Today, even if it means going against social conventions, there is a greater acceptance of the individual’s need for spiritual fulfilment.

— Sunayana Panda

Sunayana Panda, who holds an MA in English Literature, was a student at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education. She is on the editorial team of The Golden Chain, the alumni journal of the SAICE, and has been actively involved in the staging of many of Sri Aurobindo’s literary works.