The Great Secret

Ritaj Kalaskar ’19, organiser of the 1st December 2019 Programme, reflects.

It was quite early on in the year that Jhumur-di asked me to start thinking about what I would like to do for the 1st December programme. It may have been my liking for plays but I felt certain that a play must be staged. As I had previously taken part in and organised plays, I told her about my idea and she suggested a lot of plays which I then read. After a beautiful experience the previous year with Cristof’s French play, it was a given that he would be a core member of this year’s programme. After numerous discussions I finally asked him to write something. However that idea never manifested fully and he came up with the proposal of staging The Great Secret by the Mother which was similar to what I had in mind when I asked him to write.

I was initially worried that this play had only seven characters, but since many had stayed back last year and others weren’t too happy with their previous experiences only four signed up, which was a real shame. Nevertheless, a few more joined us over a period of time and it fit our requirements of a small but concentrated cast to play the characters that represent the epitome of humans in pioneering fields who are trapped on a lifeboat.

Cristof made the necessary modifications to the existing play leaving Mother’s passages untouched. However, we both felt that we needed to stage this play in 2019 with as much novelty, greatness and relevance as was done in 1954. This of course didn’t mean a radical modernization with accessories like smartphones, but through the addition of a new character, the environmentalist. Since we could not include it in the original play as it would have disturbed its continuity, we put it in a ‘prologue’ which also gave a context to the rest of the play and some breathing space for the audience before plunging into darkness and light. In the end we reached seventeen versions of the prologue and still it was not quite perfect although the scene of the environmentalist was very beautifully written and enacted by Anshul casting away all the clichés attached to such an idea. The other actors, Brihas, Jamshed, Baruni, Aditya and Chandrakant-bhai also contributed to the making of a very happy atmosphere.

We began rehearsals in July and we’d meet three or four times a week to work on the monologues, which were very tricky. Having done theatre classes with Maurice during my Free Progress years, I was aware of his experience and expertise and decided to call him to help us. Along with his friend Girolamo who sadly passed away midway,
we worked on diction, physical awareness, visualisation and other exercises twice a week from August; the rehearsals with Cristof continued. We also spent time on imagining the music, which was finally composed by my cousin Ishaan Devasthali and the poster and the brochure which were sketched by Sushanto-da.

The seven main actors were: Savera, Surya, Arjun, Auroakshay, Arjav, Monica (the only female actor to have been a part of the *The Great Secret* ever) and I. We spent a lot of time learning about the characters through books, biographies, letters, stories of survival, videos and monologues from movies. We often met without our directors and had enriching exchanges and productive rehearsals. Out of laziness most of us hadn’t learnt our lines till October which was a great disappointment and a point of frustration for both our directors. In November, we often split up the rehearsals and used to meet them one-on-one in the mornings and afternoons. Those in charge of the previous 1st Dec Programme also gave us feedback and suggestions which were very helpful.

In the meantime, ideas about the sets were discussed in late August and early September with Cristof and Vinay. When the idea came up about the boat moving from the stage towards the audience, I could immediately see it and feel it very concretely and nobody could convince me that it should be otherwise, in spite of the many who doubted and many who resisted it. Both our directors had previously taken part in versions that had a static boat so it was ambitious, but it was an attempt to use modern technology and expertise while keeping intact the old spirit and many of the old forms and settings. This could not have been possible without the tireless efforts put in by everyone at the House Maintenance Service, the Ashram department for which it was also something new.

Drawings, plans and samples for the sets were done in early October with the materials finalised by the end of the month. Actual work began only in November after the Knowledge programme highlights had been staged. Prafull-da’s
Sunayana ’79 reviews the School’s anniversary programme.

The Great Secret was first performed for the School’s anniversary in 1954. It is a play where six characters, all achievers in their fields, find themselves in a lifeboat after their ship sinks mid-ocean. There is a seventh person in the boat who is unknown to the others. As they have nothing else to do and as they think that they will not live much longer each one narrates the story of his life. The Unknown man gives a conclusion to this series of monologues.

The Great Secret is not really a play. The Mother herself describes it as “Six monologues and a conclusion”. The “play” ends when the shipwrecked people catch sight of a ship in the distance. There is no action as the characters are sitting in a boat from where they cannot go out. There is also no dialogue as each one says what he has to say and the next person begins when he has finished. So, it is clearly very difficult to present this piece of writing on the stage. But the 2019 stage version of it was innovative and impressive.

This presentation was very different from all previous productions. The main play was preceded by a prologue which gave a background to what was to follow. It showed the experts being given awards by the President for their achievements and also a conversation between them. In order to keep the story more in tune with our own times a new character was added to the prologue – the ecologist. In a short scene which was added to the original text we saw the ecologist share his thoughts with the artist and this completed the picture of the thought leaders. As this character does not appear in the text of the main play and so would not appear in the scene of the boat, he stays back and does not join the others who get on to the ship.

There was also another important element in this adaptation of the play. When it was first written and produced in 1954 all the characters were men. The six achievers – the scientist, the industrialist, the writer, the statesman, the athlete and the artist – were all men. But in this production the artist was played by a woman. Indeed now all these professions are practiced by women and perhaps in a future production all the characters could be women, including the Unknown person!

The show on 1st December 2019 was very special for another important feature. The organisers had the brilliant idea of making the boat move. This completely changed the play and made it more dynamic and visually more attractive. The boat moved so slowly that it was imperceptible but as the boat changed angles as it moved it showed the group, viewed by the spectators, from a different perspective after every few minutes. This gave the impression of the passage of time and also of changing scenes.

The two parts of the play were clearly different but what was remarkable was that the second half, which was the original play, carried a special atmosphere and was elevating. In spite of its being a series of monologues it held the attention of the spectators. The décor and the lights helped greatly in creating this intense experience. On the whole it was a satisfying performance.
and Rakesh-da’s help proved invaluable and they prepared me for every back-up option possible. While the metal structure was made by Divakar-bhai and his workers, Ambi and Akash, with inputs from Prabuddha-da worked on making it move. They looked into every detail and resolved every problem, sometimes with simple modifications to the wheels and sometimes with a complex solution – such as the gearbox and motor assembly given by Debabrata. The actors themselves didn’t have to spend more than ten days working on the sets as I wanted them to work on their parts and not be tired. A different set of volunteers Deeksha, Pracheta, Anya, Preeti and others, all of them artists, worked on the waves and on painting the set, with inputs from Habul-da. All of the lights as well as the lighting were mostly Vinay’s creativity, and Mahi-da with his dedicated team took our constant changes very calmly while tackling their own technical issues for which they did their level best. Prop changing is perhaps one of the least appreciated jobs but is also one of the most important ones on the final day and Praketa, Aaryan, Sumeru with Debashish-da and his workers executed it perfectly. It is noteworthy that every element of the set was either something reused from discarded materials, or when new material was obtained, it was done only after its future use was determined. We also made sure that it wasn’t damaged or modified until it reached its designated department after the wrap up.

Keeping aside all the practical matters, what I learnt is that one can never be adequately prepared for the problems that arise. We were lucky in more ways than we can count. For example, the motor that made the boat move had a clearance from the ground of just two millimetres and the rubber from the driving wheel tore off during the Dress Rehearsal leaving the boat static throughout but allowing us a full day to fix the issue. So many times, errors which could have been serious were miraculously made inconsequential. All this gigantic effort made by the make-up artists, the photographers, the cooks, and by everyone in this community together cannot be done by human beings alone.

Just like the characters in the play, there were times when we felt that there was no way out… but always a light appeared and we found an answer. I knew there would come a point when I would have to let things go, not in a negative sense, but more like surrender, and yet one tends to cling on to everything because one can, one wants to and one feels that one has the power to… However, the First December journey, once a team of people has given enough shape to it, has a life of its own and everyone becomes insignificant. It has its own ways of reaching its light and it almost painfully forces everyone to leave it all to Her.

It was an honour to give life to something so special and a privilege to watch it all come together and appreciate its inexplicable ways. I am sure I speak for everyone when I say that we are all very grateful to Her and to everyone near and far, old and young, who helped us to realise this and, in the process, created a vibrant atmosphere full of learning and experimentation and the space for a deeper self-reflection. ✰