

IN THE ACT

American Steve Clorefeine directs a Bengali piece at the Bard's house; Natyamela begins with fewer plays. Plus, a visual treat

Straight from the heart

Two eyes opening and closing in a basket, newspaper ads for lipliners and Isabgol, social turbulence and rallies, fear of the dark — all of these coalesce in *Jhuki*, directed by Steve Clorefeine. The play will be staged on February 23 at 6pm on the Jorasanko Rabintra Bharati University (RBU) campus.

A writer, director and performer from America with over 30 years of experience and accolades, Clorefeine built *Jhuki* from a four-week workshop with RBU drama students.

Most elements of *Jhuki* are known to the Bengali audience: the clowning, bits of mime, body movements, dance, even the flag-waving and music. The surprise lies in the way they come together in the courtyard of Maharshi Bhavan.

Clorefeine calls *Jhuki* a "theatre event, not a play". It is a collage involving three main stories and four short stories. This is not acting in the conventional sense. The work comes through improvisations.

To begin with, the students selected from BA and MA courses were urged to search within themselves, "to stretch beyond what comes easy from the mind and what is known". They were encouraged to talk about themselves or, better still, enact.

Clorefeine just introduced the play with a dialogue between "archetypal characters out of time and space". The rest had to come



Steve Clorefeine with Rabindra Bharati University students on the Jorasanko campus.
Picture by Aranya Sen

from the students, the script, the costume and the movements.

Jayanta Chatterjee was asked to narrate his dream of a film about a middle-aged

artist, a youth like himself and two rivers. Another "main story" was contributed by Anirban Bhattacharya; it's about his obsession with the bright shirts of his two best

friends and the way their paths separate after school. Manoj Das describes his terror during a nocturnal jaunt past a crematorium.

The presentations differ with choral groups aiding the monologues. Other narratives and images, like a vivacious folk dance and figures walking like clock dolls, flash on and off.

Whatever the mood, *Jhuki* remains a celebration, perhaps because the director himself enjoyed it immensely.

"I feel deeply honoured to be able to set a performance in the house of Tagore. That is sacred to me. The students are very special, being so receptive and hungry for theatre," said Clorefeine, who first came to Santiniketan 11 years ago. He was at RBU for a two-day workshop in 2007.

Clorefeine has however deliberately avoided using Indian music (except a flute piece by Steven Gorn) and Rabindrasangeet because he wanted to widen the experience for the audience with a medley of American folk, jazz and Western classical.

"A cultural exchange like this is a stretch for everyone," added Clorefeine, glad that he could use Ben E. King's song *Stand By Me*.

"I have waited 25 years to be able to use this song in a theatrical performance," he smiled.