



SHAKESPEARE FOR ALL Kutumb members in a scene from "Saudagari". PHOTO: SHANKER CHAKRAVARTY

Venice meets Delhi

STAGE "Saudagari" talks politics with song-and-dance more sensitively than "The Merchant of Venice".

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Woi call nahi, koi message nahi" replaces "In sooth I know not why I am so sad" as the opening lines of "Saudagari" — a modern Hindi adaptation of Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice". Instead of Antonio, it is Bassanio's Delhi avatar — Ramji Lal (played by co-director Sumit Rawat) — who opens the play. And Antonio is Radha Didi (Pooja Aggarwal), a student leader at a Delhi college.

"Saudagari" opened last week at Hilley-ley, the annual fest of Kutumb Foundation, an NGO that runs after-school programmes for the underprivileged. Its directors and actors are all children who participate in Kutumb's programmes.

The adaptation is brilliant. Shylock, the historically-oppressed Jewish moneylender in the original, is Charandas (played by co-director Mohit), a Dalit and a computer hacker in "Saudagari". Humiliated for being a "quota" student since his schooldays, he stands up to his upper caste batchmate Radha in an election — which he loses. Sworn to revenge he uses his computer skills to frame Radha in a scam of illegally withdrawing college funds.

The script is in colloquial Dilli college lingo: a "saala" here and a "DK Bose" there. Actors run down the aisles, through the audience, yelling after their friends, just like on a college campus. They even distribute campaign pamphlets of the student union plenty of love struck Romeo

talk, accompanied with filmy song-and-dance dream sequences.

The plot is woven around several themes: the humiliation of a boy being slapped by a girl, an elder brother's attempts to police his sister's affections, the angst of being a Dalit and the lure of money. None of it seems contrived.

Mohit, in his black shirt and dishevelled hair plays the part of a bitter and angry young man, perfectly. Shylock's powerful speech "Hath not a Jew eyes?" is replaced with one closer to home. When accused of fraud, Charandas explodes with a righteous rage at the historical injustice heaped upon him and says, "Garini mein kya hamain dengue nahi hota, aur baarish mein malaria?" (Don't we Dalits, just like others, catch dengue in summer and malaria in the monsoon?)

Mohit's performance apart, the play is still very much a school skit — with its goof ups, muddled lines and time spent on depicting puppy love. Despite this the crowd loved it. There's plenty of slapstick humour, but the treatment of the issues the play deals with makes it a worthwhile watch.

Even if the politics of the play doesn't cut ice with you, watch it for the hilarious show by Charandas' jester-like sidekicks Golu and Mohi. Played by 14-year-old Manoj Kashyap and 12-year-old Ashraf.

The next two shows are at the India Habitat Centre amphitheatre on August 24 and 25 at 6 p.m. Entry is free.