



last word ■ Nandita Das

A relationship on trial

I always knew that I would do a project on gender equality, but didn't think it would be a play about people like 'us'. While I have been exposed to theatre from an early age, I have neither watched many plays, nor am I knowledgeable enough to take the plunge. But maybe this naivety and ignorance will free me from the medium's grammar and its boundaries.

I find it annoying when people ask me questions like: "How do you balance work and family life?", "Will you continue acting, now that you are a mother?", "How do you deal with the guilt of leaving your child when you go to work?" The answer is easy: "I am the divine Durga and I work with my ten hands, just like every other woman, who tightrope walks and juggles at the same time." But what I want to ask is: "Why don't men ever get asked such questions?" I find that inequality among people like us is subtle and deceptive, and therefore more complex.

The play is about a lawyer couple who end up fighting a case against each other for the first time. How the battle in court starts to impact their relationship at home is what the play peels, layer by layer. It is not a courtroom drama, but an exploration of a relationship, caught between the worlds of modernity and tradition. The idea of doing a play came less from the desire to work with a new medium, which is exciting and challenging, but more from the desire to share my angst, my frustration about the limits we

face, as women, in spite of all our 'progress'—both from the outside and within.

I began work on the script last year, with a couple of writers. After many drafts and titles, it is now called: *Between the Lines*. Initially, I took on the project thinking it was a good way of working from home and doing something creative, but it wasn't as simple as that. When as an actor I mouth lines like, "What I like most is to be immersed in something and not worry about 200 other things...", I know the play is a slice of my life, and that of many other women.

Unlike the actor hat, which is worn for short bursts, the director/writer hat demands far more time and commitment, like what I gave to *Firaaq*, my directorial debut film. I am not sure why with this play I

decided to make my life more difficult with so many firsts—writing and directing, and then acting with my husband, Subodh, who makes his debut as actor and theatre producer. Perhaps to keep it all in the... couple!

There are days when I wake up feeling very nervous, as expectations are rather high. Being in the public domain has its pressures, and anonymity, its freedom. I miss the latter more than ever, as I want to try out things without the burden of having to succeed. I have always taken pride in not fearing failure, but there are days I am not so fearless! Thankfully, there are also days when I am just happy to have the opportunity to explore a subject so close to my heart and a new medium to play with.

Like all things, I want the journey to be the best part. Writing, directing and acting in this play is even more special, because life and work are mirroring each other in so many ways. To be up, close and personal with your own warts and that of your partner's can sometimes be disconcerting, especially when it's the story of a couple portrayed by a real-life couple. Hope the magic will work.

Thankfully, I have enough family and friends, who will be brutally honest with their feedback, as we do our first round in Mumbai, Delhi, Ahmedabad and Kolkata. And if you happen to catch it, you don't hesitate either! That will only help the play, as we continue our story-telling journey.

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