

India's first recording artist

Go back in time with a new play inspired by the true story of India's first recording artist. Director Mukul Ahmed talks to the *Weekender* about the Datia Incident.

Jump back to 1902; Fred Gaisberg is traveling across India capturing the exotic sounds of the east, to be played on his miraculous new machine: the gramophone. He wants to record the beautiful voice of Gauhar Jaan, a young courtesan famed for both her musical prowess and her arrogance. Gaisberg meets several travellers on his journey who recount the famous Datia Incident where the Maharaja and Gauhar Jaan engaged in a fierce battle of egos, the outcome of which threatens Gaisberg's mission.

"It's an interesting story; Indian people know about Gauhar Jaan as the first vocalist but we wanted

to bring it to British audiences," Mukul told the *Weekender*.

Other singers at the time were afraid of recording their voices, he said. "She took a risk. Male singers were afraid of the machine; they were superstitious about it swallowing their voice, and others thought if people could record their voices they could copy them and steal their trade," he said.

The other main change Gauhar triggered was creating what we now know as singles or individual tracks. "Indian classical music was sung for six to eight hours; she compressed it because the length of records meant they could only record a few minutes," Mukul said. "There's the genius; she's the first one who actually compressed the length of her songs to two minutes and maintained the musical integrity."

Throughout her life, Gauhar "gave voice to oppressed Indian

female performers" in an industry extremely dominated by male performers. "It opened doors for female singers, dancers, people started recording, and gaining financial security," Mukul said.

The singer didn't talk about being a feminist but "she did it through her work," the director said. "She gave a voice to other women performers, then male performers started recording," he said. She also sang in English. The "very local Indian story" is also a global one, Mukul said.

"She was the first superstar - she's very famous in India. Her face was on matchboxes in Austria, when King George visited India she performed in front of him. Both her parents were European and her mother, who was also an accomplished musician, converted to Islam. Her colourful story captured my imagination."

Iconic and pioneering, Gauhar died penniless after her lover stole her money. "She helped to make music democratised and reached normal households," Mukul said. "Her story is tragedy, victory, and legacy. She gave women power and dignity."

An accompanying exhibition is also running at the Omnibus during the month of April and will allow visitors the opportunity to delve deeper into the life of Gauhar Jaan.

Gauhar Jaan: The Datia Incident is at Omnibus Theatre, 1 Clapham Common Northside, SW4 0QW, from April 10-29 at 7:30pm (and 4pm Sundays). Admission: £15/£12 concession. Phone: 0207 622 4105. www.omnibus-clapham.org



Jeremy Irons reads T. S. Eliot at Southwark Cathedral

CATCH ACADEMY Award-winning actor **Jeremy Irons** live in the flesh as he performs a reading of **T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets** in **Southwark Cathedral**.

The Faber Members event celebrates the release of *The Poems of T. S. Eliot* read by Jeremy Irons. Originally broadcast on BBC Radio 4, this perceptive reading illuminates the work of the iconic poet in all its complexity.

Originally published in 1943, *Four Quartets* contains some of the most musical and unforgettable passages in twentieth-century poetry. Its

four parts, *Burnt Norton*, *East Coker*, *The Dry Salvages*, and *Little Gidding* present a rigorous meditation on the spiritual, philosophical and personal themes which preoccupied T. S. Eliot.

Jeremy Irons is also a Golden Globe, Emmy, Tony, and Screen Actors Guild award winner, as well as the recipient of an Honorary César Award. His film highlights include *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *The Mission*, *Dead Ringers*, *Damage*, *M. Butterfly* and *Lolita*. He performs this reading in the atmospheric Southwark Cathedral: the oldest Gothic

church in London. Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, who is buried in the Cathedral, was described by T. S. Eliot as 'the first great preacher of the English Catholic Church' and inspired Eliot's poem 'The Journey of the Magi'.

The *Poems of T. S. Eliot* Read by Jeremy Irons will be available on CD and download. There will be cash bar at the event and CDs will be on sale.

Jeremy Irons is reading Four Quartets at Southwark Cathedral, SE1 9DA, on Monday 9 April at 7:30pm. Admission: £12/£10 concession. www.faber.co.uk/

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