

'Deceptions' is Fun for All

Breaking away from the revues and musicals showing on Bombay stages is Pearl Padamsee's *Deceptions*, that rounds up the city's top theatrical talent. BOMBAY previews a raunchy French farce where free love means fun for all.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 7 pm the hall of J.B. Petit School for Girls, Fort. A row of chairs against the far wall is the audience. Other chairs strategically placed, mark out the boundaries of the make-believe stage or performing arena. This space encloses some of the country's top histrionic talent — Naseeruddin Shah, Ratna Pathak-Shah, Pearl Padamsee, well-known faces like tv personality Sabira Merchant and model Zenobia Shroff.

Naseeruddin (Le Vicomte de Valmont) walks about intently and reveals a plan to Sabira (La Marquise de Merteuil). He wants to seduce Ratna (Madame de Tourvel) who is staying with his aunt, Pearl (Madame de Rosemonde). "She is my plan," he tells Sabira, "...To seduce a woman famous for strict morals, religious fervour and the happiness of her marriage: what could be more prestigious?" Merteuil, who as the play proceeds emerges as having complete power over Valmont, does not seem to be impressed with his prey, who at 22 has a two-year-old marriage. "I think there is something very degrading about having a husband for a rival," she says. "It's humiliating if you fail, and commonplace if you succeed. Where is he anyway?" Far away in Burgundy, fighting "some labyrinthine case". The scene proceeds.

At the end of it, Pearl rasps sharply, "Slow fade, cross stage..." A light scramble, and a new scene begins. Without stage lights, or proper sound effects (except for a tape recorder playing music in the appropriate places), or costumes, a different age switches on at the call of her directions. Her voice streaks across the small hall, and: new locales, new country, new moods.

The play, Magnum Productions' *Deceptions* is set in France of the 1780s, and though characteristic of the life and times of the French then, is still relevant enough. Says director Pearl, "The play is about love, lust, revenge, cruelty, betrayal, deception, truth, frailty, violence, manipulation and sexual politics. These are universal elements." The stylised bows and forms of address are typically French, straight out of the days of Marie Antoinette, and the reign of the aristocracy. Beneath the elaborate bows and kisses, the men and women weave their webs of intrigue around each other.

Deceptions is actually the desi title for *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Christopher Hampton, based on a French novel of the same name by Choderlos de Laclos. It is said that Marie Antoinette kept a bound copy of the novel in her private library. Forty years after its publication in 1782, the book was publicly incinerated. Hampton's translation was first performed in 1985 in London and continues to draw audiences. For the Bombaywala, Pearl has done away with the French title "because it is too complicated" and

