

The Metamorphoses of Rudali

Rudali a piece of short fiction in Bengali by Mahasweta Devi, has been adapted and produced as a play in Hindi by Usha Ganguli of the theatre group Rangakarmee. It has been playing to packed houses for a year now, and has drawn the favourable attention of both critics and a theatre audience more used to theatre in Bengali than Hindi. In both incarnations of *Rudali*, it has been a woman auteur who has wrought and rewrought this text which revolves around the life of a poor, lowcaste village woman, Sanichari. Each version-fiction, play-is mediated by the differing purpose and agenda of its respective auteur, resulting in strikingly different texts which have one feature in common-they are widely perceived as woman-intensive projects and received as feminist texts. This paper sets out to study how and why the versions are different and what the changes signify, leading to an analysis of how the women auteurs propel their respective works towards very different aims.

Since this paper will be using the conceptual term 'feminist' as a defining and categorizing word, it is important to establish just what it implies. At this juncture, in this country, it is an overloaded, problematic term. Widely seen as an imported western concept, strongly identified with white bourgeois concerns and issues, it is often aligned with elite urban intellectualism, frequently seen as reductive or limiting. Ironically this causes many liberated, activist, progressive women working with women's issues and development in this country to shy away from the label of 'feminism' while practising it in their lives and work. Usha Ganguli expresses this paradox: 'I feel that I differ from the way people tend to use the term feminism. This term has nowadays become a fashionable one, and I don't believe in a particular brand of feminism. Therefore I don't want the play [*Rudali*] to be labelled as feminist. On the other hand, I believe in the liberation of women and their freedom, and I'm trying my best as a person, as a teacher and as a theatre worker, to work towards that.'¹ Nor is this ambiguity exclusive to India. Within the USA itself there is a split between a section of black women activists and the feminism they see as rooted in anglo-saxon bourgeois concerns. But if one detaches the word 'feminist' from specific

identifications, it can be used as a convenient umbrella term encompassing any person, element, process, form or production that promotes women's development towards equality, agency and empowerment-which is the general sense in which it has been used in this paper.

Mahasweta Devi is firm in rejecting the idea that her text could be especially identified with women in any way, since, for her, gender is subsumed into the discourse of class. To emphasize the former at the expense of the latter is a 'denial of history as she sees it'.²

'For you it may be important that this story is written by a woman, another woman has adapted it into a play, and yet another adapted it into a film. But I think that a writer has written the story, a director has adapted it into a play and another directed the film. It is not very important to me whether it was done by a woman or not . . . I write as a writer, not as a woman ... When I write I never think of myself as a woman. I have written a story called *Chotty Munda and His Arrow* which is about a tribal man. *Aranyer Adhikar* is about male tribals. So what? These are stories of people's struggle, their confrontation with the system ... I look at the class, not at the gender problem. Take a story like *Ganesh Mahima* -it is about a woman. But I have written it from the class point of view. In *Rudali* you have a character like Dulan who knows how to use the system. In my stories men and women alike belong to different classes.

She may see her text as part of the discourse of class rather than gender, but to Usha Ganguli *Rudali* is powerful precisely because it is a woman's story:

Gautam Ghosh first told me about this *Rudali* story long ago, but I never thought of turning it into a play at that time. After *Court Martial* I felt I had to do something meaningful ... I was disturbed. I wanted to write about Indian women, about their problems, their sufferings, social prejudices etc. I produced *Bama* at that time, which contained three different stories of three different women, but there were no Indian women in it. 'What about her story, her struggle?' This question was haunting me all the time ... I went to Delhi to submit two projects ... On my return journey I was alone and I was thinking. Suddenly *Rudali*, which I had read long ago, came to mind, and I started writing down a few things. Initially I wrote two scenes: in one Sanichari wears the

earrings, and the other was Parbatia's confrontation with Sanichari. Incidentally, neither of the scenes are in the original story. I couldn't stop thinking of *Rudali* ... I was worried as to what to do next, all I knew was that I must do something meaningful. There are two subjects that I have wanted to work with. One is how the political parties are exploiting our religion ... The other subject is the women's problem. I haven't found any suitable Indian play dealing with these problems ... If a man had directed *Rudali* I know it would have been totally different. For example, the relationship between Sanichari and Bikhni was based solely on my inner experiences. I also wanted to show different kinds and shades of women in *Rudali*.⁴

By interpreting it as a woman's story, she strips the original text of its class specificity, and in the process dehistoricizes it, not entirely, perhaps, but certainly to some extent: ,

Sanichari and Bikhni don't appeal to me simply because they belong to a different class. There is something very human in them, and that breaks the class barrier. Everybody is able to communicate with them, their struggle becomes everybody's struggle ... I strongly believe that *Rudali* is a women's text. I believe that the Indian woman, whether it's Sanichari or someone from the middle or upper class, is highly exploited in our society. Somehow in *Rudali* I see Sanichari protesting against society on the whole. Somebody told me that *Rudali* is a play about a village. I don't agree. It is not about a particular village or a city or even about a particular character, but about all of us: Sanichari represents women in general. It is the humanistic element that makes it acceptable to all of us ...

The easy term 'all of us' with its humanist, universalizing, all-embracing connotations in fact disguises an opposite significance. It signifies something closer to 'those like us'. In other words it is exclusive rather than inclusive, and presupposes a consonance of values, tastes, and ideas which in turn presupposes specifics of class and social background.

This leads us straight to my next point, which concerns aims-what is the purpose of each of these texts? At whom are they aimed? The Mahasweta Devi story grows organically from her own firsthand knowledge of the specific socio-economic and historic situation she is writing about. Hers is not an urban 'idea' of rural reality, derived at one remove from other media, although the

ideological filter which mediates the choice and viewpoint of what she depicts determines an agenda which shapes the text.

A major concern of her text is to establish itself as reality, not fiction. This is done in several ways. There are various techniques by which she historicizes the text [discussed in detail in the longer work], her refusal to individuate Sanichari—who could far too easily be positioned and perceived as the 'heroine' of the story—through physical or psychological description, to decontextualize her or put her centre-stage out of proportion to her role as part of a community. There is the materiality of the text, its relentless desentimentalization, the reiterated message that considerations of the stomach are primary, beyond censure, outweighing emotion or socio-religious convention, and the driving force behind all action. No romantic clichés are permitted to stand, nor idealized notions of village life. Material details of food production, labour, the struggle to survive, are stressed. The harsh realities of poverty, exploitation and death are exposed in brutal detail with all their attendant degradation. Even the characters in the story are not intended to be fictional. They—or their prototypes—exist outside the story.

Real details of real poverty, learnt at firsthand. Real characters with real life histories. And a text which is not constructed as a linear narrative. The narrative makes no attempt to move aggressively or concentratedly to a denouement: this is to be read as reality, not fiction; not even a 'fictionalizing' of the real. The 'storyline' is scarcely privileged over the space given to segments of oral history or social critique. There is no concern with building character, atmosphere or suspense. The narrative begins informally, slips into a life at some indistinct point. There is no dramatic opening incident, no frozen moment lending purpose and justification to the starting point: there is, in other words, no acknowledgement of a fictionalization. The opening paragraph itself casually spans years of Sanichari's life. The same freedom from temporal linearity continues to mark the narrative. The narrating voice moves back in time in an informal, arbitrary manner, stopping to comment and to add contextual details which continuously anchor the private story in the more public history. This loosely looped narrative approach closely approximates the oral form of reminiscence and conversation, the 'primary source' of journalistic reporting and oral history. As in life, there is space for digression, comment.

And yet, the anti-fictiveness of the work must itself be seen as a deliberate construct, part of an agenda, deliberately aimed at creating the effect of documentary realism. The author uses the movement of Sanichari's evolution to empowerment as the organizing principle around

which other aspects of the agenda, such as the critique of the socio-economic system, are arranged. She uses the composite character of Dulan Ganju to embody the politicized subaltern. She skillfully breaks narration with dialogue, 'showing' rather than 'telling'-allowing the characters to speak for themselves and simultaneously establishing authenticity. She punctuates this discourse of deprivation with death, orchestrating it so that each death grows progressively closer and more devastating to the central character, maintaining as ironic counterpoint those other deaths, the deaths of the rich. Her masterful use of irony is perhaps her most powerful stylistic tool. In her hands, the social custom of *rudalis* accumulates rich layers of ironic symbolism, variously explicated by Dulan and Sanichari, until it takes on all the power of a weapon of subversion. In fact, the entire text is infused with ironic comment, not least from her own stance of 'no comment' while narrating the most outrageously hypocritical events. The savage wit of her ironic tone is as powerful an indictment as the one she so carefully builds up through her text-achieved not with the crusading righteous indignation of the outraged outsider but, much more tellingly, with the cutting cynicism of the insider to whom none of this, alas, is new.

As Mahasweta Devi herself claims, her work as a journalist, creative writer and activist overlap: 'As a journalist I play the same role as an editor. I travel extensively in the villages and collect information about people's sufferings, complaints, political exploitation, their protests and write about these in the press. . . . As an editor, journalist and writer I experience no conflict between the three roles.' *Rudali* is activist fiction. It sets out to support-by enlightening, educating, celebrating, reaffirming and inspiring-the process of struggle she writes about. It participates in the struggle by accusing, exposing, attacking the exploitative system the struggle targets and the individuals through whom this system functions. just as Dulan's work in *Rudali* is consciousness-raising, *Rudali's* work is conscientizing. Mahasweta Devi's creative writing is as much part of her deeply engaged, politicized and committed consciousness as is any other form of activism, and it works towards the same goal. *Rudali*, for example, is more than journalism, more than fiction, and wholly political.

There is, in her work, an awareness of an urban literate audience insofar as she takes care to explode comfortable myths about rural village life. But this awareness does not lead to any compromise in presentation nor any attempt at 'translating' for the benefit of those unfamiliar

with the milieu she depicts. When Mahasweta Devi was questioned about the harsh, often shocking-to urban middle-class sensibilities-content of many of her stories, she firmly rejected the idea that she wrote to shock, or, as she put it, used her writing as a 'stunt'. Urban society was ignorant about rural life, and therefore perceived the grim facts as sensationalism. 'In Kalahandi they are selling their children. You have not seen it, but it is real. I cannot help it, it happens to be a fact that my readership is middle class. If they do not know about these things what can I do about it?'⁷ Experience and factual detail is the ground on which her fiction is inscribed.

The opposite process pertains in the case of the play. The starting impulse there is to produce good theatre for an urban audience, theatre which will address concerns common to 'all of us'. A text is chosen which offers material for such theatre. Studies are undertaken to research the factual detail necessary to create an 'authentic' atmosphere. These are adapted or rejected according to the requirements of that theatre and that audience. Thus the play, both in its construct of the 'real' and its attempts to make that 'reality' more accessible to those unfamiliar with it, is wholly urban.

Also, Usha Ganguli's commitment to socio-realistic proscenium theatre, with its imperatives of a linear storyline and definite structure, causes her to interpret the original text to fit in with the demands and restrictions of this performance form, resulting in significant structural changes.

These basic realignments of perspective govern the adaptation. Undoubtedly a creative adaptation need not faithfully echo the original, and if the director had claimed only a basic inspiration from the original, a kind of 'loosely based on' status, the terms of this analysis would have been very different. However, the opposite is true. The director has striven to be faithful to the original, down to inviting the author to participate in the adaptation/ script writing process; and the author, self-confessedly wary about her work being turned into plays and films, has approved of the production, affirming in public that the director has retained the spirit of the original: Whenever someone adapts my story into a play or a film, I always fear that the stress will be shifted. The play has retained the stress as it is in my story ... not deviated from it.⁸

In this context, changes and their meaning accrue a special significance. Many of these are microlevel shifts and alterations which cohere to form a web of signification, reflecting fundamental ideological positions. As we study the minutiae of microlevel changes within scenes, patterns emerge. These change-patterns group themselves around basic shifts in perception and agenda. Let us identify the main differences of emphasis and direction between the play and the original text.

One category of changes dusters around Usha Ganguli's gendered perception of *Rudali* as a woman's story. In the play Sanichari is constructed as the central character, and the entire text is her story. It opens and closes with her, and she is present in every scene. Tightly constructed, the movement of the play is to first establish the harsh, poverty-ridden situation of her life, then her solitude as one by one her family drops away, then the discovery of caring and friendship through Bikhni-with, for the first time, companionship, cemented through the new profession they adopt as rudalis-then the return to solitude and finally the realization that life goes on and one survives. The original text does not privilege the story of Sanichari to the same degree. Her life is woven into the fabric of a larger socio-economic critique.

In the play Sanichari, from the beginning, is a matriarch, a woman of agency. Usha Ganguli comments on the feminist connotations of this: 'In our Indian society men see women ... from a different point of view. For them Sanichari's character would have been very weak, very soft, helpless. They would have made her a victim. Sanichari is very hardworking, there is no doubt about that. But she is not a helpless victim.'⁹ In fact, the figure of Sanichari in the play-long-suffering, enduring, stoic--echoes the seminal *Mother Courage*,¹⁰ a theatre image comfortable and familiar to urban audiences who have seen her reincarnated in many languages. This idea of Woman as noble endurer, survivor, fits more easily into a tradition of perceiving Woman as victim. The story, on the other hand, traces Sanichari's gradual evolution to empowerment. Survival through struggle, is the central message of the story. Survival despite despair, is the message of the play.

The process of constructing Sanichari as a figure of authority in the play, as the provider and decision-maker in her home, has a reductive effect on the familial and community male-female relationships which are sympathetically developed in detail in the original story, such as Sanichari's relationships with her husband (absent from the play), her son and Dulan Ganju.

Sensitively depicted, strongly acted, the relationship between the two peers, Bikhni and Sanichari, makes a powerful feminist statement about female bonding. Again, the play develops it with a slight but telling shift in focus, with one intimate scene of physical and emotional tenderness. Moreover by isolating and detailing this single close relationship in Sanichari's life, its centrality is highlighted-it is the emotional focus of the play. The story balances it against the other closenesses Sanichari has experienced, with her husband, and, more foregrounded, with her son.

The subject of prostitutes is treated with interesting differences in the two texts. Both include the community and profession of prostitutes within the space of the narrative, but they are imaged differently. The play presents them as bold, earthy and energetic, not suffering victims. Yet it also slips in the question of social-moral acceptability by raising the issue of izzat, positioning 'decent' women versus 'indecent' ones. This divide is totally absent from the perspective of the story, which strongly presents prostitutes as just like the other villagers, poor, exploited, struggling to feed themselves. Any immorality or social shame associated with them exists only in the eyes of the upper classes, who are held responsible for their condition anyway.

No doubt the author of the story and the auteur of the production equally feel that theirs is the more 'realistic' stance-as no doubt each is, the former in the rural, the latter in the urban middle-class context. Usha Ganguli explains that she feels it unrealistic that prostitutes would give up their profession to become rudalis. In the last sequence we see that . . . one of them leaves the group to go off with a man. They have a profession, they cannot just become rudalis overnight! This is life, and ... realism.'ll). As Sanichari argues in the play, the profession of rudali is 'better' than that of prostitution; by urging them to switch she is improving their lot. This slippage results in prostitution and funeral wailing being counterposed. Usha Ganguli sees them as mutually exclusive professions. The story presents no such dichotomy. It is quite clear that the women, including Sanichari and Bikhni, do other kinds of work round the year, and act as rudalis only when the occasion arises. In other words, one can be both a prostitute and a rudali, and there is no question of giving up one profession for the other.

Another category of changes clusters around Usha Ganguli's perception of what constitutes 'reality'. Like Mahasweta Devi, she is firm in her rejection of any romanticization or sentimentalization of the treatment: 'I didn't want to treat this story in a sentimental way and make it a mere melodrama.'¹² In that sense both texts adopt a non-idealized approach. But Mahasweta Devi's affirmation of community seems idealized to Usha Ganguli's urban sensibilities. She prefers to present both positive and negative characters, and does not reconcile Sanichari and Parbatia at the end ('I was very disturbed about the ending of the play. Mahaswetadi's story ends in idealisin ... but I felt that this was not real, this was not how things happen in life.'¹³)

With both Mahasweta Devi and Usha Ganguli using the yardstick of 'realism' to measure their texts, the question of whose perception is more 'realistic' emphasizes the provisional nature of that term itself. Both study detail and fact-and then present them as part of their own agenda. Mahasweta Devi's experience of the rural condition is the base of what she writes about; her choice of what to depict and how to depict it is ideologically motivated. Her writing is activist; and her stance is unequivocal. She has taken sides, and declared it, and her fiction takes sides as well. The illusory stance of 'objectivity' is totally irrelevant to her writing. Not so with the play text. Usha Ganguli has her own agenda. She aims to present a powerful tale of the harsh reality of a woman's life in rural India, a tale of struggle and survival, But other media shape and filter her knowledge of that 'reality' rather than firsthand experience. She feels obliged to take a more 'objective', non-'idealized' stance from her less engaged urban position, to build an image of reality which her urban audience will have no hesitation in accepting as authentic. This includes an artificial language and shifts of characterization, and is an urbanized construct which functions from a position of sympathy, not active engagement.

A third category of changes coheres around Usha Ganguli's choice of medium and genre. At this stage of her theatre activity, she believes that social realism and proscenium theatre is the most effective and powerful form, and the one she prefers over others. Drawing on close observation she suggests the material details of a particular social setting to create an impression of realism. She constructs a strong storyline with a definite trajectory of beginning, middle and end. Each scene is carefully balanced between stillness and action. Visual and aural motifs are woven through the text (the *chakki*, for example). The dull colours of costumes and sets are interspersed with vivid, colourful settings for dramatic contrast and tension (the *mela*, the funerals, the *randipatti*). Sequences of stylization integrate with and highlight by contrast the naturalism of the acting and movement, as in the tightly choreographed mourning sequence at the end of the play. Usha Ganguli's priority is to create good theatre (meaningful, and therefore the content is important) but above all, emotionally powerful, gripping theatre, directed at an urban audience. She constructs her text and her production to that end. Mahasweta Devi's priority is activist intervention, through her writing, in the struggle of the tribals, bonded labour and rural dispossessed she works amidst. She constructs her fiction to that end.

What does this mapping of shifts and divergences signify other than that two individuals have created two differing texts? To begin with, Mahasweta Devi is one of our most important writers, not least because she happens to be a woman, involved in work which fuses her activism and her creative writing. She has managed to suture the split between these two fields of activity so that, as she says, her work as activist, journalist/editor and creative writer complement one another and overlap. She inscribes the discourse of gender within that of class without in any way reducing or devaluing the former's significance; and *Rudali*, though written from a 'class point of view' as she says, is an important feminist text, making important feminist statements.

Usha Ganguli has established a reputation for serious theatre work, both as a director and as an actress. Committed to what she calls 'serious, meaningful' theatre in Hindi in an urban situation, she has directed plays with large all-male casts and themes which do not attempt to foreground women's issues. This is the first time she has addressed a text which, as she sees it, has for its subject the Indian woman. Her adaptation of *Rudali* is also a powerful women's text which communicates a feminist message.

Apart from the confusion and ambiguity surrounding the umbrella term 'feminism' itself (discussed earlier) there are deeper tensions fissuring the field of 'feminist' awareness and engagement. The divide between activists and theorists/writers/ intellectuals is one of them. The divide between rural and urban perspectives is another. That between differing politics and ideologies is a third; that between the upper and middle-class and working or lower class, a fourth. The result is many differing forms and directions of feminist activity, one could say many differing feminisms.

In this context *Rudali* is uniquely significant because it foregrounds these differences. Here we have two important women practitioners in the field of cultural production, who see themselves as progressive, and who are responsible for works which are widely perceived as feminist-or, if one quarrels with that term, as important from a women's perspective. We see how their texts are shaped by an agenda, by priorities which are in turn determined by a basic ideological position and by the purpose of the text: in one case, activist intervention, in the other, performance for an urban audience. The metamorphoses of *Rudali* allow us to address the simultaneity and asymmetry of feminist stances and positions in this country today.

Notes

- 1 Interview with Usha Ganguli on 20.4.93.
- 2 Comment by Samik Bandyopadhyay during the interview with Mahasweta Devi
- 3 Interview with Mahasweta Devi on 26.5.93.
- 4 Interview with Usha Ganguli on 20.4.93.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Statement by Mahasweta Devi at the World Book Fair, Frankfurt, 1986, as part of the Indian Presentation. Unpublished essay.
- 7 Interview with Mahasweta Devi on 26.5.93.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Interview with Usha Ganguli on 22.4.93
- 10 Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage*, one of his most widely performed and translated plays.
- 11 Interview with Usha Ganguli on 20.4.93
- 12 Ibid
- 13 Ibid.

(Extract from *Rudali* by Mahasweta Devi

Translated by Anjum Katyal)

She returned home with a bundle of twigs, laid down the bundle, straightened up and saw the man.

A stranger. Shaven head, bare feet.

'Is Bikhni dead?'

In a trice she had understood everything. She asked, 'Are you her nephew-in-law?' 'Yes.' She felt a landslide within. But many deaths, deceptions, injustices had hardened her endurance and selfcontrol. She asked the outsider to sit down. She herself sat down, sat silently for a while, then quietly asked, 'How many days ago?' Four days.'

Sanichari counted backwards and said, The day I went to Gambhir Singh's. What happened?'

'Asthma, complicated by a chest cold.' 'Something that started here or there?' 'She drank a glass of cold sherbet on the way.' 'Then?'

She recalled how fond Bikhni was of coloured sherbets, digestive tablets and candied fruit.

Then the wheezing became worse. My brother-in-law works in a hospital, he called a doctor, we started medicines and injections: I never did that.'

She would catch a few cockroaches, boil them and give Bikhni the water to drink. It always helped her asthma. 'Did she get to meet her son?'

'He didn't come. I'll be going to his place next, to give him the news. Did my aunt leave any belongings here?'

'You call her your aunt now, she died in your house, but all these days we didn't even know she had a family of her own, she was roaming the countryside alone, homeless . . .'

'I didn't know, or I'd have fetched her before

'You'd better be off. You have a bus to catch, it's a long way from here.'

He left. Sanichari sat by herself and tried to comprehend the situation. What did she feel? Grief? No, not grief, fear. Her husband died, her son died, her grandson left, her daughter-in-law ran away-there has always been grief in her life. But she never felt this devouring fear before. Bikhni's death affects her livelihood, her profession, that's why she's experiencing this fear. And why, after all? Because she's old. Amongst them, one works, if one can, till one's dying breath. Ageing means growing old. Growing old means not being able to work. And that means death. Sanichari's aunt had lived till such an old age that they carried her in and out of

the house like a bundle. In winter, they left her outside while they all went off to work, and came home to find her as stiff as wood, dead. Sanichari didn't want to die like that. And why should she die? Her husband died, her son died, she didn't die of grief. No one does. After the worst disasters people gradually bathe, eat, chase away the goat nibbling the chillies in the yard. But without food, people die. If Sanichari has survived so much grief, she'll survive the loss of Bikhni. She's devastated, but she won't cry. Money, rice, new clothes-without getting these in return, crying is a useless luxury.

Sanichari went to see Uulan.

VOICE (OFF) I've come from Jujumai.

Sanichari eagerly goes to the door. A man enters.

SANICHARI Bikhni hasn't come?

NEPHEW She ...

SANICHARI What's happened to her?! NEPHEW While going from here ... on the bus ... she ate something on the way. And the day after the wedding she ate all sorts of stale leftovers ...

SANICHARI An old habit of hers.

NEPHEW She got cholera from eating all that. She died within two days in my house.

SANICHARI Didn't you get her treated? NEPHEW How I tried to take her to the hospital! But she wouldn't agree to go.

SANICHARI Wouldn't agree, or did you hold back for fear of the expense? NEPHEW Has my aunt left any of her things here?

SANICHARI Why?

NEPHEW I'm her nephew, she was very fond of me, so I thought ... SANICHARI Where were you when your beloved aunt was roaming the streets with nowhere to go? (Pause) Well, you'd better carry on. If you hurry you'll catch the eight o'clock bus.

The nephew glares angrily at her, then stamps his foot and storms out. Sanichari walks slowly back to the charpoy. She picks up Bikhni's clothes from where she had hung them, and looks at them. Clutching them to her, she breaks into tears, sobbing painfully. After a while the sobs cease. She gets up and replaces the clothes. The scene ends.

Rudali Questions of Language and Audience

In December 1992 Rangakarmee, a Hindi theatre group working in Calcutta-which has a prominent Bengali theatre-literate audience produced *Rudali*, a Hindi adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's short story of the same name. Usha Ganguli directs and plays the main role. The play, which has had over 50 shows; has begun to draw a steady, enthusiastic audience, an unusual phenomenon for a Hindi play in Calcutta. This raises interesting questions: Just how language-specific is theatre? Is it possible for a keen theatre audience to respond to plays in a language other than their own? Do other considerations, such as venue, content, purpose, genre, mediate audience response in ways we do not usually foreground?

These were some of the issues which the team of STQ researchers discussed when they met and talked with the people closely involved with the *Rudali* project: SAMIK BANDYOPADHYAY theatre critic and scholar, who was adviser to the adaptation/translation/script writing process; MAHASWETA DEVI, activist writer, whose original text was adapted into the play; USHA GANGULI, director, script writer and main actress; YAMA SHROFF actress, who played the other main character, Bikhni; OM PARE:EK, actor and senior Rangakarmee member, who played the role of Dulan; SAMAR CHATTERJEE, one of the script writers who formed part of the script writing workshop which led to the creation of the final Hindi script; and other members of the cast and crew. Extracts from the interviews and discussions that followed, thematically clustered, are grouped below.

Looking at the way in which Rangakarmee was formed, it is possible to trace an identification with certain kinds of theatre practice and certain kinds of demands that seemed to exist among some practitioners of the Hindi theatre, especially with regard to the kind of audience that they wanted, and the way in which they would have to structure their work to make their theatre interesting to this audience. The point of departure was therefore the desire for communication with a broader cross-section of people, and also the imperative to work with material which would relate directly to their lives as well as to the lives of the larger audience.

This group was formed in January 1976 with the declared 'fundamental objectives of promoting a socially conscious and responsible theatre movement, producing those dramas which, irrespective of political views, would be useful to society; presenting such socially responsible dramas among the common people in metropolitan (situations) to reach a wider audience so that Hindi theatre could become mass-based.'

In order to explore the background against and from which Rangakarmee, with its well-defined theatre aims, emerged, STQ had a long talk with SAMIK BANDYOPADHYAY, which is summarized below.

Hindi theatre in West Bengal remained marginal despite the fact that there were several active groups engaged in the regular production of plays in Hindi over a period of twenty years. From the very beginning these groups depended on the Hindi speaking business community which was, and still is, its main sponsor. These productions are limited to four to six shows and the groups never attempted to reach the cross-section of the Hindi speaking/Hindi knowing population. The pattern that emerges from the activities and functioning of these groups is interesting: each group is centred around an individual who gives it its identity. A group does not necessarily mean a collective of theatre persons actively engaged in the functioning of the group. An actor-managerial tradition is promoted, which in fact can be seen as a continuation of the Anglo-American influence in our theatre. Productions are centred around the actor-manager who invites people and organizes a team of actors and actresses for each production. This pattern is true of some of the important Bengali theatre groups as well.

In this context Rangakarmee can be seen as a significant departure from the dominant pattern of theatre in West Bengal in general, and Hindi theatre in particular. Rangakarmee is gradually evolving a counter pattern. It is the theatre of the ensemble, of the group or the collective that has given Rangakarmee an identity beyond the reach of the actor-managerial tradition. Theatre of the ensemble is not just a gimmick to win over the audience. It is the result of Rangakarmee's evolution through productions of classics and realistic plays in creating a theatre out of everyday life, insignificant events or situations, from the collective experience of the so-called faceless people. Even in the heyday of experimental theatre Rangakarmee didn't opt for avant-garde experimentation with form but decided to stick to realistic theatre. The group preferred to explore and expand the boundaries of the realistic

/naturalistic theatre in a restrained but successful way. The first few productions of Rangakarmee were classics already adapted and produced successfully in the Bengali theatre: *Gudia Ghar* (1981), Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, earlier adapted in Bengali and produced as *Putul Kheia* by Sombhu Mitra [famous Bengali actor/director and founder of the theatre group Bohurupee]; and *Parichay* (1978), adapted from Ajitesh Banerjee's [actor/director and founder of the Bengali theatre group Nandikar] *Jakhan Eka* based on Wesker's *Roots*, were two well known and faithful adaptations from popular classics. In their Hindi adaptation no attempt was made to shift from the original texts or from their Bengali adaptations to make them something different, but even while being faithful to the texts a creative interpretation was attempted in each case. Eminent theatre persons were invited to produce these classics in Hindi for Rangakarmee: Tripti Mitra [famous Bengali actress] directed *Gudia Ghar*, M . K. Raina [well-known theatre director] directed *Ma* (1983) and Rudraprasad Sengupta [Bengali theatre actor/director] directed *Parichay*. Usha Ganguli acted in all three productions, assisted the directors, and took care of organizational problems.

The production of classics in Hindi drew the attention of an audience never before addressed by the community-oriented Hindi theatre. This new audience, which was a cross-section of all Hindi speaking people of

Calcutta and beyond, as well as of the Hindi knowing people, was initially interested in these adaptations of classics but soon became interested in Rangakarmee productions in general. The support given by this audience encouraged Rangakarmee to make a break and attempt new ventures. Productions like *Lok Katha* (1987) or *Holi* (1989), based on promising works, were given a new life in these fresh adaptations. On the organizational side, these productions allowed Rangakarmee to work as a group with a number of dedicated core members contributing significantly, not only as theatre activists but also as mature actors. In their last five plays Usha Ganguli appeared on stage only twice though she directed them all. Interestingly, all five productions, *Mahabhoj* (1984), *Lok Katha*, *Holi*, *Court Martial* (1991) and *Rudali* (1992) have a large cast: *Mahabhoj* has a cast of fifty-three characters, *Lok Katha* has forty-five, *Rudali* thirty and *Court Martial* has an all-male cast of fifteen.

This was followed by a discussion between SAMIK BANDYOPADHYAY and USHA GANGULI which further explored the process of evolution that led to the formation of Rangakarmee and the crystallization of its theatre philosophy.

SB; When did you first become conscious that the Hindi theatre scene in which you had started working was not your theatre?

UG: When I joined Sangeet Kala Mandir and did my first play *Mrichchakatikam*. I joined that theatre because basically I was a dancer. When I started I was excited. I was attending rehearsals regularly. After working there for three/four months I was very upset. As a dancer I am used to discipline and I was missing that. The whole atmosphere was different. I was doing my own lines. The director was from Anamika but there was no direction at all. I was expecting something else. You know, I was meeting Keyadi [Keya Chakravorty, Bengali actress associated with Nandikar] and Rudraprasad [Sengupta] and other Bengali theatre people regularly at that time and came to know a different way of doing theatre. I was not getting what I wanted. Also the organization was formed by the Birlas, and as a middle-class person I always had an uneasy feeling ... Though as an actress I was respected, I always felt uneasy. If rehearsal time was 6.30 they would come at 7 pm ... sit and gossip and discuss other theatre people till 7.30 pm and then the rehearsal would start. After half an hour there would be a break and we would eat lots of samosas and sweets.

After six months they made me an executive member of the group and then the first tussle started. I selected a play called *Mr Abhirnamyu* for production which the committee rejected, because in the play there was a character called Mr Kejriwal. They said, 'No we can't show him as the one who exploits.' There was another very interesting play *Kisi Ek Phool Ke Maam* which was also rejected because 'the audience won't take this play, they will leave the hall.' There were six meetings and I said that if they rejected this play then I would resign. I also suggested a few other titles including *Ashadh Ke Ek Din* but none of them was accepted ...

There was no direction, no purpose behind doing theatre, no philosophy. You know, I was married to a man who was a communist, a very progressive person, and all my friends were from Bengali theatre. I was going to the coffee house regularly, *maraoing adda* for two-three hours, meeting new people. I came from a different world and was meeting people from a

different culture, meeting new people and discovering new things and I thought, I must have my own group.

SB: At that stage did you ever get involved in any political movement as such?

UG: Some political activists thought that they could use me in the cultural wing of the CPI. They put a lot of pressure on me, saying, 'You must come and do some cultural work for us.' So I went there. They asked me to come at 6.30 pm and I was sitting there waiting for them but nobody turned up. I was so disturbed. It was just like Sangeet Kala Mandir. My husband and friends said, 'If you want to do serious work, independent work, you must come out of the Birla group.' This gave me the push.

SB: Did you take part in any other group's productions?

UG: Anamika [a Hindi theatre group] invited me to play a role in *Adhe Adhure*.

SB: Was the experience different from the Sangeet Kala Mandir experience?

UG: Yes, it was very different. After the Anamika festival regular shows started at Kalamandir Basement. The audience was from the upper class only. There were no students, no housewives-there was no audience from the lower or middle class. Whenever you go to Kalamandir Basement you see the same people, same faces.

SB: So what were the problems you faced, and how did you form the group?

UG: At that time our aim was to introduce a new kind of theatre for the Hindi speaking people. 'Come out of Kalamandir' was our slogan. For one year we met regularly. We didn't perform anything, just discussed. Most of the actors were from north Calcutta, they were from a different class and most of them were unemployed, students or ordinary office goers. They were entirely different from the Sangeet Kala Mandir crowd. At that time there were no Bengali actors in the group. They only came in after *Lok Katha*.

For a year or so we were fighting about the name of the group. Some people said, why Rangakarmee? Why not a nice, beautiful name? Over sixteen meetings I insisted on Rangakarmee because I felt that one should remain a theatre worker. Some said, '*Worker se kya hoga?*' Then some people started dropping out. About thirty or so remained with us and formed the core group.

After one year we did three short plays, and then Wesker's *Roots* in Hindi. After two years again there was a big change. At that time Atmanand Singh was the secretary. There was a proposal that one Mr Kapoor, a shop owner from north Calcutta, should be taken on the executive committee. I opposed it. Why should we take someone on the executive committee just because he has money? They said that he was a very resourceful person and would give us funds. My argument was that he was not a theatre person and we should not take him onto the executive committee because he was not even a general member. On that issue Atmanand Singh and some others left and the group was divided ... For a few years Om Pareek and myself were running the organization.

In an interview with USHA GANGULI, STQ asked her about Rangakarntee's audience.

UG: We thought that by producing socially meaningful plays we would be able to reach an audience. Before Rangakarmee became active, the Hindi theatre audience was limited to the upper class only. Schoolteachers, housewives, clerks and students, who make up the middle class audience, were not to be found at these shows, which were usually held at expensive theatres like Kalamandir. The classics I produced were considered good productions, and from the very beginning drew a large audience. Now people are even coming from the suburbs and districts to see our shows. This is something we never expected, and this has given me a lot of confidence. Whenever I am not acting I sit with the audience and watch their reactions, I try and meet them after the shows to talk to them. I am interested in their psychology. As a play *Lok Katha* is very simple and very moving, it breaks the barrier between the artist and the audience. There is one scene in which I run through the hall screaming for help as I am being chased by *goondas*. There were moments when people from the audience were so involved that they started shouting 'Sister, we'll take care of them.' *Lok Katha* is a very disturbing play based on a real story, and I feel it's as important as *Rudali*.

With the success of *Rudali* I may feel a bit relaxed, yet I am disturbed. I feel theatre in general is still not attracting the masses, and I feel one group alone can't do it. There should be a more organized theatre movement in our country, because so far we have only succeeded in reaching a small section of the masses. I am very unhappy about it. Indian theatre activities at the moment are not regular or encouraging. Most theatre people are joining other media. This temporary excitement and success [after *Rudali*] is all very well, but the whole situation doesn't

look very good. From the beginning of my career, I have always been going to people, going to villages, to suburbs, to the big cities, to theatre groups, and even performing without money. For the last fifteen years I have been trying to reach my audience, but now people are coming to me, this is like a dream come true. Now there is no language barrier, it is no more a Hindi theatre, it is a theatre of Calcutta, of West Bengal.

OM PAREEK, *senior Rangakarmee member, spoke to STQ about the kind of theatre they were trying to do:*

STQ: How do you see yourself after all these years, after going through the whole process of producing plays, working backstage, acting, taking care of other organizational problems? How does it affect you now?

OP: I am very influenced by this experience. I am from Rajasthan. I belong to a conservative family. After I came to Calcutta I changed completely. Theatre has educated me. My attitudes have changed. When I joined theatre I didn't know what theatre was. Slowly I learned what serious theatre is.

In the beginning we used to go to different houses and request people, 'Please, come and see our work.' We continued this for some years. It would have continued even today, but we don't need to nowadays. *Rudali* gets a full house half an hour after the counter is opened. I think that we have succeeded in creating a new audience and through this process I have learned a lot of things. Personally it was a kind of social reform for me. You will have noticed that all our productions are very simple-there is no business of expensive costumes or make-up. We believe that an actor should act like a human being.

STQ: What are you trying to achieve through this realistic approach?

OP: We want to know the human being and represent 'human' problems, and we want to do that as human beings, and not as actors. To give you an example, we have staged *Ma* [the Gorky-Brecht *Mother*] and *Lok Katha*. We once performed at Brigade Parade Ground during a CPI rally. After the play was over a group of women came to see us. They said that the play was about their problems, about their life. They must have felt that way because we presented common people as common people, as normal human beings. We spoke their language.

Further sessions with actors and actresses substantiated the points raised above. Interviews With YAMA SHROFF and RAJESH SHARMA:

YS: It's true that the Rangakarmee audience is different. The major part of the audience consists of the Bengali theatre goers. Regular shows are held at Academy [of Fine Arts] and Sisir Manch and these are halls to which the Bengali theatre goers go. Basically you build up an audience according to the places you perform in. [In this city the] Hindi speaking audience as such, I don't think are serious theatre goers. I won't say that they lack sensitivity, but they are not theatre people. They see good theatre, but entertainment theatre. What Rangakarmee does is good theatre and serious theatre. Bengal with its history and background in theatre-a Bengali audience sees theatre with a totally different eye, in a totally different way.

RS: There was a time when we used to go to the schools, colleges, to the slums and sell tickets. Now we get a full house so easily. It shows that if you work honestly and sincerely the audience will be with you, wherever you are. Whenever you go to the audience they will come to you too. *Rudali* has proved this. This is such a serious kind of communication, which we have been able to achieve through *Rudali*, where the audience is with you, reacting to whatever you are saying.

The extent to which this original aim of broadening the audience for Hindi theatre in a city that is not Hindi-speaking has succeeded, serves not only to gauge the effectiveness of this group and its ideas in particular, it addresses also the larger question of an audience-spectrum for 'Indian' theatre, or even for the possibility of an 'Indian' theatre itself.

A review of the Rangakarmee productions since its inception shows its attempt to engage theatrically both with scripts accepted as classical, and with directors who had different methods of working. The group seems to have gone through a process of collective preparation, trying to find its own style of functioning, its own production values and its identity through theatre work. The specific character of the group began to evolve through questioning the methods and the texts that the group was working with. Slowly Rangakarmee began to probe the problems of language, of theatre cultures, in an attempt to clarify what they wished to communicate as a theatre group.

Discussion between SAMIK BANDYOPADHYAY and USHA GANGULI:

UG: When we invited Rudraprasad and Tripti Mitra, they did not know the Hindi language. There is a lot of difference between Bengali and Hindi, but they were directing the plays, the scenes in Bengali ... I don't know how to say this, but you see ... the language was different.

SB: Yes, theatre is very, very language specific.

UG: So, you see it was difficult. When I was doing *Nora*, it was disturbing. See, Tripti's approach was emotional and since Hindi is different from Bengali I faced a lot of difficulties ... I liked Raina's *Mother* because it was more appealing to me. Honestly speaking, when people saw me acting on stage in *A Doll's House* they felt that they were seeing two different actresses.

SB: There are instances when a director goes to different places, different cultures and does a play. For example Fritz Benevitz [German director, associated with the Weimar National Theatre], who does not work any more for the German stage, but travels to Phillipines, to Bangladesh, to India, organizes workshops and produces plays in local languages which he doesn't know. His argument is, 'I know the text in German, and I teach you the blocking, the movements and the gestures, and I don't care much about your language.' My question to you is this: Would you at all accept this position? Can there be a solid, good theatre out of this, where language and culture are unfamiliar, where you go for a short stay and come back? Even a kind of theoretical case has been built up for this. Somebody says, Well, when you are not responding to language at all, then you took for pure gesture, and there are certain universal human gestures, movements, and these we'll discover. So it becomes more pure theatre, real theatre.' How do you react to this?

UG: I won't do it. Simply because ninety per cent of such works which I have seen were not satisfactory at all, even when the language was the same. For example, I have seen Satyadev Dubey's own production here in Calcutta, but the production suffered a lot. Why? I have seen his own work, and the same work directed by him for another group. When I was working with Manuel [Lutgenhorst] and Rustom Bharucha [theatre scholar and director] in *Request Concert*, Manuel didn't know our language, but the play was without words and we were trying to invent something. Objectively, that production was based on gestures only and I

believe something may have come out of such experimentations-though it was a different kind of experiment altogether. But I saw the video recording later and I was not satisfied. There was a challenge in it and I was happy working with Manuel. I think if you organize a real workshop, if you work hard, if the team works together along with the director, you may bring out something. I am not talking about the so-called 'formal' workshops where you get a fee and give seven days, the kind of workshops taking place all over India nowadays. I am sorry to say this. But if you know exactly what you are going to do, and if you work hard to achieve that, then you may get good things done.

... the period between 1977-79 ... the consciousness of doing meaningful theatre came from this experience. I became more and more educated and conscious. I grew slowly ... At that time I also had questions in my mind about selection. [Rudraprasad Sengupta] suggested *Rani Kahini* which they had produced earlier. But I thought, why should we do it? These plays were suggested because of us, those who can act. But why should we select a play only because some of us can act in it? We should create new actors ...

What emerged clearly was the concern with evolving a theatre language for a specific kind of audience, coming to grips with questions of why and for whom one was working. Against this background we approached MAHASWETA DEVI, whose story forms the text of the play, and whose own career as activist and writer is deeply engaged with these very issues-of language and audience; of whom one addresses, and how, and for what purpose.

Interview with MAHASWETA DEVI, at which SAMIK BANDYOPADHYAY was also present:

STQ: Almost all your stories have something unique in them-at least to our middle-class experience it feels like that. For example, the very profession of a rudali is something new which is not in our middle-class experience. How do you bring such elements into your stories ?

MD: The middle class does not produce anything. The middle class is a mere purchaser. It does not till the land or grow rice, but eats it. I have extended my experiences, direct experiences, differently in my stories. When it comes to writing I use myths, legend, history, folk and oral traditions which I have borrowed, extended and dissected. If you do not know

something it does not become unique. In Kalahandi they are selling their children. You have not seen it, but it is real. But I cannot help it. It happens to be a fact that my readership is middle-class. If they do not know about these things what can I do about it? Now they are becoming aware of these things.

SB: I don't think that your stories are meant to shock the middle class.

MD: No, not at all. I do not write weird things, I never write for a stunt.

STQ: Do you think that you consciously write for the middle class?

MD: Out of the question. Instead I have attacked the middle class more than once. I have written about its tragic existence in society, for example in *Behula* Or in *Shishu*. Until and unless you read these things in *The Statesman* or any other newspaper you won't believe it.

STQ: Do you think that the theatrical form can retain the stress of your stories?

MD: I do not know exactly. Those who have seen *Rudali* like it very much. The reaction is very good. I do not know if all of them have read the original story. There are people who have read the story and seen the play. They too liked the play. But definitely, because theatre is visual, it will reach more people. Most of my stories are translated into Hindi and they indeed have travelled far, reached [inaccessible] interior places also. Some of them are adapted into plays which are being performed. These are mostly small groups, but they often let me know about the performance. I think I have succeeded in reaching a fairly good reading public. From the left of the left to the tribals who know Hindi, they are reading my stories. *Aranyer Adhikar* is very popular among the tribals. *Rudali* was written long ago. If the play manages to revive interest it is fair and good. I don't mind if it is done in the form of theatre. If it works then it is fine with me. My only point is-let it reach people. It must work.

STQ: And without distortion.

MD: That is the primary condition. I always say that. Without naming names, I can say that it always makes me weary whenever my stories are adapted into a play or a film. In most cases I do not even go to see them.

STQ: Have you seen any of the stage productions of the plays you have adapted?

MD: Yes I have seen Shyamanand Jalan's Hindi *Hazar Churasi* (script by Shyamanand Jalan and Abhijit Dutt), another production of the same play by Feisal Alkazi [young Delhi director], produced by Ruchika of New Delhi, but in that sense within limits Durgapur's Arc Theatre's production was good. *Jal* and *Bichhan* produced by Tritirtha of Balurghat-both were very good, it was a rewarding experience to watch them.

STQ: Did you ever read some of your stories to the very people about whom you write?

MD: I would like to narrate an interesting experience in this respect. Whenever I talk to them about my writing I discuss my stories with them. But usually I go there mainly to work. They like my stories. Those who can read have read my stories also.

What I do nowadays is that I narrate the stories to them. They find it very amusing. They identify the characters easily. You may know the name of Vijaydan Detha, he is a very important writer and he actually belongs to the community of the traditional storytellers of Rajasthan. He regularly organizes storytelling sessions in his own village, Burundi. He came to see me here some time ago. He said that he had taken several of my books, *Jangal Kahani*, *Chotty Munda Ka Tir*, *Hazar Churasi Ki Ma* and *Ghaurati Ghatai* in which one will find stories like *Rudali*, and he has translated them into Rajasthani and narrated them during those village sessions. He even sang some of the stories I have written in the form of poetry to the illiterate public and those become extremely popular.

STQ: You have said that you have taken from oral tradition, from folk.....

MD: Yes I always do.

STQ: ... and used them in your stories. Now these stories are going back to the oral tradition once again. How do you react to this process?

MD: I am doing my job, and I am doing it because I believe in it. When I wrote my first book *Jhansir Rani* I travelled to all those places where Rani of Jhansi fought with the British. I travelled to places like Gwalior, Banda, Hamidpur, Kalti, Urcha, Laltapur and other places ... now I have forgotten some of the names ... At that time I collected a lot from oral tradition and I used it in my book also. No one talked about oral tradition at that time, in the fifties. It is fully established today that oral tradition is a vital source of Indian history, it is a part of Indian history. Oral tradition must be treated as historical material. Indian people may be illiterate, but they are not uncultured, they are not unsophisticated or uncivilized. Whatever be their experience, be it about Santhal rebellion or Munda rebellion, everything has been retained in songs, in long narrative poems and things like that. I think I am the first Indian writer who realized the importance of collecting these things, and I collected them consciously and also used them. After twenty years, after the Naxalite movement, in the eighties came the subaltern outlook and the importance of oral history has been established. I have done my part and am still continuing my work. I never look back. There are so many things to do. I have taken from oral tradition, used it, and now my work is going back to oral tradition ... yes, this kind of 'give and take' is something that is bound to happen and it should be like this. I do not wonder at it, I'm not highly surprised. No, nothing like that.

SB: Mahaswetadi uses oral tradition, but she is not writing for the oral tradition. She is using oral tradition and making an extremely critical, conscious use of oral tradition. So there are portions where the oral tradition becomes a critique of reality and reality becomes a critique of oral tradition. It is a complex dialectical process and it continues. None of the stories written by Mahaswetadi are moulded into the form of oral tradition as such. When somebody like Vijaydan Detha takes these stories to Rajasthan, he is not taking the stories, the narratives, the texts as they are written. Because these stories are not meant for those people, they are meant for a literate readership. Vijaydan Detha is one of those very few people who can do it. He is

one of the greatest collectors of oral traditions, the oral stories. *Charandas Chor, Duvidha*, are from his collection. He is the kind of person who can take these texts and virtually translate them into the oral traditional stories. We do not know what kind of changes he makes ...

MD: It does not matter at all.

SB: The point is that the original text does not reach the people in Rajasthan as it is. When Mahasweta speaks to the tribal people she speaks a different language. She can speak a number of languages and she writes in another language.

MD: I narrate the experiences I have and they identify with them.

STQ: The way your stories are finding a place in the oral tradition proves the usefulness of the process you have started with *Jhansir Rani*.

MD: Gaddar [activist poet from Andhra] has told me that they have translated *Aranyer Adhikar* into Telugu and out of that they have produced a play in the ballet form. This has become extremely successful. Gaddar told me, 'Amma, I am taking your stories everywhere: That is fine. It is working and it is the most important thing to me.

SB: And the text has the energy.

MD: He finds it useful. It is the most important thing. Vijaydan Detha has also found it useful. Gaddar is finding it useful.

The talk with Mahasweta Devi foregrounds the whole area of translation and adaptation from one language to another, from one medium to another, from one culture to another. All these shifts and crossovers are central to Rudali, where we have a story turned into a play, translated from Bengali to Hindi and performed for, aimed at, an urban theatre audience unfamiliar with the rural Bihar of the original setting. The following discussion with SAMIIK BANDYOPADHYAY takes up issues of adaptation and translation in theatre in Bengal today, with particular reference to Rudali.

STQ: What are the main challenges to adaptation/ translation of literary works into theatre ?

SB: There is no work, whether it is theatre, literature or film, which is not essentially a product of a culture with its own condition, with its own language, with its own idioms. Now, when we approach this work only as receivers then what we are basically interested in is to be outsiders, take whatever comes through the cultural barriers-it is always 'out there' and works at that level. But if we are not to be receivers but creative interveners, creative activists with that particular work, then it becomes an act of responsibility to mediate between two cultures. And only then does that work make its proper impact. Then you are no longer a casual receiver of that work but you are creatively interacting with it. I have doubts about the very word 'translation', because 'translation' is so close to the word 'transfer'. It almost presumes that there is something at point A which has to be transferred to point B and that this has to be accomplished at the simplest possible level. This I don't find exciting at all. Rather, this grappling with culture, interacting with culture, gives you the advantage of learning your own culture better. Because only then do you have to be aware of the differences, understand the differences, realize the differences and work at the level of the differences. It is not just a question of simplifying and transferring or absorbing it into our culture, but maybe enlarging, sharpening the sense of the difference and you go on interacting only with the sense of the difference. And in the process you try to get closer to the other culture, and you know the other culture better and you know your culture better. And thus it becomes an active, creative intervention, an act of creative interaction. That is what it has to be. When I speak of cultures, I am extending the meaning of culture a little bit. At one level it's a question of-say translating a Bengali text into English-it's a question of 'national' culture. Maybe it's a question of translating a written text into an act or performance or a piece of theatre. Again, you are not speaking of 'national' cultures but of idiomatic cultures. It means that cinema, theatre or literature has its own culture. It has its own history, own tradition, its own habits of reception-and all that constitutes a theatre culture, a cinema culture or a literature culture.

STQ: You mean the formal qualities of each particular medium ...

SB: The formal qualities, the reception habits, the history and tradition of that particular form-all that go into the making of the culture.

STQ: Do you think that this is where our adaptations/ translations fail?

SB: I have been watching theatre very closely for forty years. What I have noticed in Indian theatre, and Bengali theatre in particular, is a kind of shortsightedness about other national cultures and about what I am calling idiomatic cultures, of other forms, of other conventions. So it's almost a kind of a cult where you stick yourself within a very limited short history of Bengali theatre and you work from within it. And because you have turned it into a cult you now develop blinkers and can't see beyond. This is an essential limitation of Bengali theatre. For example I consider Dr Sriram Lagoo the greatest stage actor in the realistic mode in India at present and I consider that Sombhu Mitra is a much lesser actor on the stage than Sriram Lagoo. For the simple reason that Sombhu babu has just developed a voice and his entire theatre, entire performance is virtually concentrated in the voice. He doesn't use his eyes, his muscles, not even his face. So it's the voice, the magic voice. It's almost spiritual-the god man's magic voice. I discovered Dr. Lagoo much later [with] his wonderful sense of detail working at every level ... I once asked him, how did it come? He was so simple and casual about it ... He said-Hollywood cinema. He said that he grew up with Frederick March, with the whole generation of actors of the thirties and forties. And for him that was the model for realistic acting. Now, this kind of an exposure, this kind of an open-minded understanding of 'What am I doing? Why am I doing it?'-is not there in Bengali theatre. But when you watch Dr Lagoo on stage what you see is not film acting. This man is aware of the difference. Aware of the difference because he has watched and studied and responded to both theatre and cinema. Lagoo acts differently on the screen from the stage, but with total awareness. So he was not copying or imitating Hollywood, he was learning the craft which also comes in handy when he is doing modern realistic theatre. This is something that is beyond Bengali theatre. So, for example Dr Lagoo can go into melodrama-but that little bit of an extension, that little bit of leap beyond the real, which you can see happening before you ...

STQ: A theatre which depends on voice too much perhaps also makes the plays more and more dialogue-oriented ...

SB: It is not a question of dialogue only ... even your presence on the stage with your arms and limbs-your whole human physique-but you are not using it. You are using the voice and building up a persona out of the voice. The voice and not the body plays the persona, not even movements in the picture frame space you have opened up on the stage. There is a contradiction, a very essential contradiction. So, what happens when this man responds to a play? He fails-because he gets into a mechanical translation act where he translates the play in terms of his own limitations. So this has been the basic theory-every Bengali theatre group, when they take on a foreign play, they just translate it in terms of these limitations and not in terms of the strength of the particular play.

STQ: In *Nilam, Nilam* [Miller's *The Price* in the Bengali adaptation produced by Gandhar, directed by Asit Mukherjee] the reference to fencing did not work at all in the otherwise well adapted play. In our culture we don't have a tradition of this game. We never play with swords.

SB: I can give you another example from Ajitesh [*Banerjee's*] *Manjari Amer Manjari*. When Ajitesh adapted *Cherry Orchard* into Bengali ... Madam Ranevskaya has this lover who lives in Paris. In Ajitesh's adaptation he lives in Benaras. And you can see the cultural difference . . . This was an objection first raised by Annada Shankar Roy [Bengali poet/thinker]. I had gone to interview Annada Shankar and he knew that I had started writing about theatre. So he was asking me about the new plays. I spoke about *Manjari Amer Manjari* -he was very excited about it. I said that it was a good adaptation, it was not a cherry orchard but a mango orchard and the location was Purulia. The first question he asked me was, 'What about Madam Ranevskaya's lover-the lover in Paris?' I said he was in Benaras. He said, 'My goodness, then this is not *Cherry Orchard*.' Later I thought it was a wonderful point. You can see the cultural divide. At the same time what is very interesting is that, given the kind of decadent feudal family in Purulia, a woman, a widow in that family, obviously can't have a glamorous lover in a posh metropolis like

Paris. It's historically not possible. But what Ajitesh was obviously thinking was, 'Well, this woman can have a decadent feudal babu with whom she had an affair who is now settled in Benaras.' Because Benaras is the place for the widows, and also the place for these old lechers who have all along supported the baijis. From Paris to Benaras sounds awful--but no doubt Ajitesh thought that would work in his adaptation. Paris represents flamboyance, sexuality ... Benaras is the burning ghats ... but Ajitesh has something else in mind also which is the Lukhnowvi-Benarasi culture, the culture of the baijis. So very interesting work can be done even in this way if you are interacting creatively. Rather than just taking it over, tuning things, keeping certain things which stick out like a sore thumb because you don't know how to change over. This is what has happened most of the time. For example, it has always been my complaint about people who are working within the picture-frame space of the proscenium theatre ... by its very definition this theatre gives you a frame which needs a picture in it. If you are composing within this three-dimensional picture frame you should have a sense of space. The frame space. And you should have a sense of painting - colour, light, composition, weight, mass, volume. 'Talk to any of our major theatre directors, and you come up with a blank. The fact is that you can go to the houses, to the drawing rooms of any of our major theatre directors, and you won't find a single print. Not even a single good theatre poster. For obviously painting does not exist for these people.

STQ: Coming back to the translation/adaptation business, the other problem we face is the problem of language. A knowledge of both languages and the cultures which they express remains a major area in translation/adaptation work which is grossly neglected. How does Ushadi approach and negotiate this problem?

SB: What I appreciate about Usha is the fact that she is aware of her problems. When you talk to Usha you realize that she speaks Bengali, is married to a Bengali, has lived in Calcutta for a long time. But Usha does not know the nuances of the Bengali language. Usha has other limitations also-it's the culture of the Hindi theatre. But Usha is conscious of these limitations. And therefore she tries to struggle with them, grapple with them. So in this particular case she makes translation a major factor in *Rudali*. The whole operation of bringing in three Bengali script writers on to the project. At one level she is working from within the Bengali culture at the language level, and on

the other hand also at the theatre level. If you look at the three script writers you find one of them [Samar Chatterjee] is a playwright, the other two (Partha Banerjee, Subir Mukherjee) are film script writers who worked as a team and they knew the method of translating a narrative into the structure of a film-breaking it up into episodes, sequences, shots. She wanted something of that break up the text into sequences, episodes and give a structure which is not the structure of a conventional play. After reading the story Usha breaks the story up into a kind of continuous twelve or fourteen scenes. This is not how a play is written. This is how a film is made. So she was doing something, maybe not very consciously, but somehow she had felt that trying to turn *Rudali* into a conventional Hindi or Bengali play would not work, that it would destroy the narrative movement of the story. To retain that ... a film can capture more of the narrative flow of the text than theatre for the simple reason that in theatre you have the curtains, you have the change of scenes-which would always clutter up and clamp the narrative-these are part and parcel of the proscenium theatre convention. But cinema allows you the freedom of moving from one scene to another without any break. Usha does things instinctively-she has a very strong feel for the theatre.

She somehow felt that asking a man to dramatize this story would not work, because the dramatization would follow the convention of Hindi or Bengali theatre. At the same time she knew that after all she was going to produce a play, so she involved Samar babu, a conventional theatre person from Chandannagar. So right at that point she was facing up to the problems of translation-from Bengali to Hindi, from story to theatre, and even trying in a way to skip the play and move from fiction to theatre.

STQ: So, on one hand she wanted to be very faithful to the story, on the other probably she wanted to open up new areas. The way the play is visualized, for example, there is no colour, limited use of light, the grandeur of theatre is missing-there is nothing in the play which is extraordinarily scenic, yet there is something in the play that holds our attention, and probably there lies the success of this adaptation.

SB: The other important thing that you may have noticed is that there is a denigration at the theory level in India, in theatre particularly-the denigration of realism. Realism, some people think, is over, through. I think theatre in India still needs a very strong dose of realism. We never had it in

our theatre. For example, the entire convention of Bengali theatre or Hindi theatre with the Parsi implication was always there. Bengali theatre was considerably determined-we talk about Bengali *jatra* which has no bearing on Bengali theatre. There is no historical evidence that Bengali *jatra* had any bearing on Bengali theatre. It is the Bengali/Parsi theatre which overpowered the *jatra*. So what you see in *jatra* today is really the late nineteenth century Bengali theatre-taken over and retaining its strength, its power, which the Bengali theatre has now lost. So somehow we never had a realistic tradition. In a way Usha's work, her entire corpus, is an exploration of realism. For example [a senior theatre critic] makes this statement which is straight from the most banal kind of text book dramaturgy, that the play should have ended when this woman who never cried cries. The curtain should fall on that.

STQ: The film actually ends with this scene.

SB: Very understandable. I can imagine. Because the film follows that code and that code is the most illiterate kind of code. But the entire thing, the whole play, stands on mourning. The mourning that continues. It's not a question of this woman crying. The mourning becomes a living, a cruel living. And that is at the core of realism. That is what realism is all about. Why do we say that Chekhov is the greatest realist? In the Cherry Orchard after these people have left and we have sympathies for them, the old servant comes onto the stage and collapses. It does not end with the cherry orchard being torn down or the people going out, losing everything, history coming to an end. But history does not come to an end, it continues. And it continues with the indifference of the rich to this faithful servant. So that strength of the real, that continuous process and its celebration-rather than celebration of the single dramatic moment, of tears coming in *Rudali*- makes realism so important.

Rudali the Making of a Production

With the aim of documenting the birth of a play-from conception through incubation, evolution, development, preparation, to the final production-a team of STQ researchers met and interviewed almost everyone associated or involved with the *Rudali* production, which included, apart from the full-time Rangakarmee members, several 'outsiders' like the professional script writers and actresses from other Hindi theatre groups. The result was a fairly comprehensive overview, from several angles, of the entire production process.

Reproduced below are extracts from the various interviews, assembled to convey the experience of working towards a theatre production.

Preparing to Begin:

Narendra Roy (*Rangakarmee member, assistant script writer*): Ushadi read the story first in 1986. She gave it to me to read. I said to her, let's make a play out of it. Then came *Court Martial* and we were very busy with that production. When it came to *Rudali* I assisted her in script writing. As you know there were other script writers also. [These were Partha Banerjee, Subir Mukherjee, and Samar Chatterjee, who worked on the initial Bengali adaptation; Usha Ganguli who did the final Hindi version, and adviser/consultant Samik Bandyopadhyay.]

Writing the Script

Samar Chatterjee: It was a very interesting collaboration, a form of combined writing where two/three playwrights would write the script first in Bengali and then it would be translated into Hindi. We were given the story first, which we all read and then started discussing the scene division. Myself, Ushadi, Parthada, Rolida (Subir Mukherjee) and Narendra would discuss each scene and give our opinions about ways of constructing them. Some of these suggestions were accepted, some got modified or changed after discussion. Once we got the scenes right, they were given to the playwrights for the writing of dialogues. Initially I thought that Parthada would write the dialogues alone because that was the plan.

Later Ushadi requested me to write also. I protested, 'How can I do that? It has been decided that Parthada will write it alone.' But she insisted, 'Both of you should write. You too have been writing plays for quite some time. This will give us a chance to compare and maybe we will be able to select the best sections from both versions and create a new one. It will be a cocktail, but not in the bad sense of the word: So we did that.

During our work Ushadi often talked about her ideas for the treatment of different scenes. She gave the script its final touch, as she was translating the play into Hindi. The story is placed in a Hindi-speaking belt in Chhotanagpur district, but we had to write it in Bengali. As it was translated into Hindi it improved a lot. It took about a month and half to complete it. When the final script was ready Ushadi invited all of us to a special reading session and asked for comments and suggestions. Each one of us gave our views, commented on the script, talked about certain flaws like the lack of dramatic elements in a particular scene, which were again discussed and either incorporated or rejected.

The discussions on scene division were very interesting because you got a lot of different outlooks. You know, individually our outlooks differ. I found this very exciting.

Narendra Roy: We started working as a team. During the script writing period, as soon as a scene was ready we had a reading session and then we all took part in the discussion. We discussed the language. For example there was a mix-up of two different languages: Bhojपुरi and Hindi. So I pointed that out in the final reading session, saying that it was okay upto the fourth scene, and fifth scene onward there was a mix-up here and there.

Usha Ganguli: Suggestion is the best thing in theatre, rather than too many words. Whether one is planning the stage decor, or acting or writing dialogues, one should simply indicate things.

Whenever I write dialogue I speak it first as an actress I speak the lines, listen to it and try it, change it and once I am satisfied I write it down. So there is no question of involving others in writing. But in some cases the actors and actresses also provide the lines. The scene of Bikhni and Sanichari, in which Sanichari tries on a pair of earrings, some of the dialogues of this scene came to us as we were

rehearsing. Similarly the last scene was not written during the script writing workshop> The scene was developed during the rehearsals

On the Ending

Samar Chatterjee: I told Ushadi that the play reminds one of *Mother Courage*. I wanted to get out of that. I thought that the play needed a final jerk. Last time when I saw the play I felt that the ending still needs work. The audience couldn't make sense of it. My last suggestion was to let Sanichari scratch earth and from that let her discover the coin. Earth symbolizes life, but money has become part of it. It could have made the last scene



. significant. This was something which I thought I should suggest so I did.

The script writing workshop for Rudali yielded several different resolutions of the narrative, resulting suggested endings for the play. We reproduce here two Bengali versions, and the final Hindi version of the ending, each expressing a different reading of the text and of the central character, Sanichari. Translations by Anjum Katyal.

From Samar Chatterjee's script

DULAN You didn't go to the burning ghat? *Sanichari shakes her head.*

DULAN Why? What's happened? *Sanichari does not reply.*

DULAN Today your mourning seemed so genuine, the cries seemed to be tearing you apart. What's the matter? Was Gambhir Singh your...?

Sanichari stops him with an angry glare. Dulan keeps quiet.

DULAN Well, then, I guess I'll be off to the burning ghat ...

Sanichari gestures annoyedly for him to leave. He goes. She looks around the empty stage as if she is looking for someone. She picks up crumbs of batasha and khoi from the ground sifts them through her fingers, lets them fall. She picks up the bundle of clothing, and slowly begins to walk out. Music is heard-the tune Bikhni used to sing. She stops and turns. Curtain.

From the script by Partha Banerjee and Subir Mukherjee

DULAN What's this, aren't you going to the burning ghat? SANICHARI No.

DULAN Why? What's the matter?

SANICHARI Dulan, I'll never go to the burning ghat again. It's taken away my Bikhni. (*Dulan stares at her.*) You go. Ask the *gornatha* to hand over my money and whatever else is due to me.

Dulan leaves. Sanichari is left standing alone. After some time she begins to walk wearily away, as if dragging her tired body off stage.

From the final Hindi script by Usha Ganguli

Sanichari stays behind alone as everyone follows the corpse out. Dulan enters with the bundle of clothing. He places it beside her.

DULAN Here, take your things. Come quickly. I'm off. To the burning ghat. You'll get the money later.

Dulan leaves. Sanichari picks up the bundle and slowly begins to walk off. She stops to straighten an overturned incense holder. Then she picks up a coin lying on the ground. She looks at it. Smiles sadly. Knots it into the edge of her chunni. Walks slowly away.

Usha Ganguli: For one and a half months I was very disturbed about the ending of the play. Mahaswetadi's story ends in idealism the prostitutes become rudalis. I knew I had to keep that scene in the play, but I felt that this was not real, this was not how things happen in life. It was also suggested to me that the scene in which Sanichari receives the news of Bikhni's death should be the last sequence, but that didn't appeal to me. I tried to visualize the last sequence differently, with Sanichari standing alone, but still it was lacking something, it was not coming out well. The question was, 'Why didn't she go off with the group? Why is she standing there alone? What is she waiting for?' Then this present ending came to me.

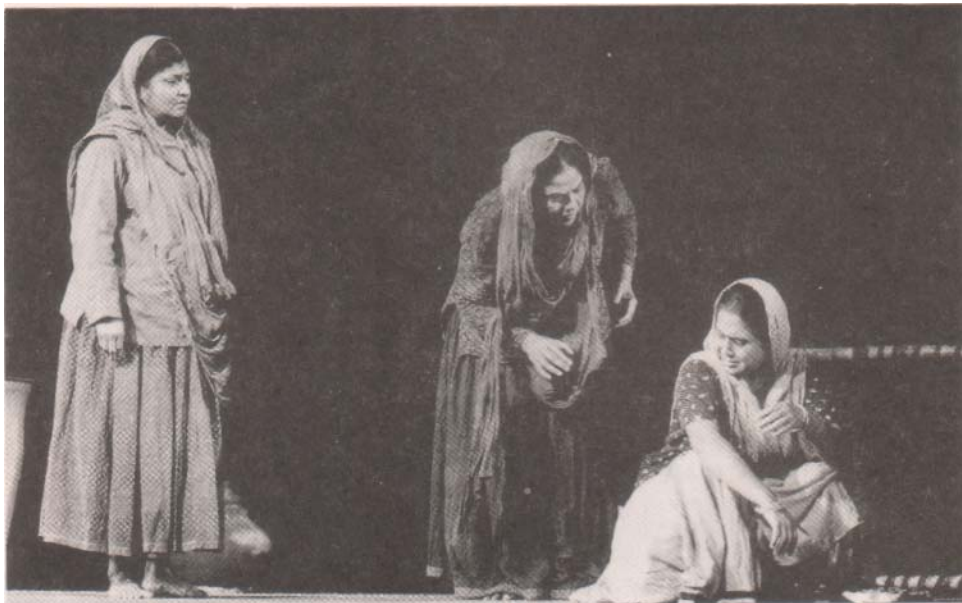
I didn't want to treat this story in a sentimental way and make it a mere melodrama. Initially I thought that the last scene should be rustic and not stylized, but this was not coming to me it was not looking right. Eventually I realized that by stylizing the last sequence I could actually heighten the impact. Yet I managed to refrain from letting it get emotional. I like treating plays in an intelligent way, without letting them become emotional.

Background Research

Usha Ganguli: If you want to bring real-life sketches into your theatre it is very important to observe. Even in my life whenever I talk to somebody or meet somebody I observe. This observation is not forced, this is something which I didn't learn after reading Stanislavsky. I love watching people. Even when I am talking to you I am watching you. I can show your expressions, imitate you. Have you seen in *Rudaii* the small boy lying under the cot? It was something taken from life.

Mallika Jalan(actress, *played the 'Thakurain'*): I did accompany Ushadi to Sonagachhi to do some sort of research on the way the prostitutes lived. But this was not detailed at all and therefore did not make any impact on me.

Usha Ganguli: I have seen the performances of real rudalis, but my actresses are different and their representation is also different. Of course, some common things are there too. But the inside complications and the complexities of the characters and their development are different. All these women are different. I went to Sonagachhi about a month before the production with Mallika, who was doing 'Thakurain'. It was really an experience and I was very disturbed that day. Because if you see them-I talked to them, watched them-you will find it very disturbing. I was very upset for the whole day. It was very disturbing for me because I have never had this kind of experience before. Talking to them, knowing their stories, leaves a nauseating feeling whether one says it or not. I went there before the production of *Rudali* because I wanted to see what they generally do at 12 noon-what they do and how they are dressed at that time. In the production the different hair styles-one of them has covered her head with a *gamchha*-I took all this from what I saw at Sonagachhi. I noticed that even in the day time they wear lipstick and serve their customers. In Sonagachhi the interiors are very dark. There is something which was not there in the play when I started-something I saw there ... lots of children. That's why I put in a boy and a young girl playing hopscotch. All these entered the play after my visit to that locality



Between 3.30 to 8 pm you will find a lot of hawkers near Prabhat cinema. Mallika and myself went one day and bought all those printed 'nylon glass' saris. You won't find these saris anywhere else. We used them in the play.

I went to Chandigarh to meet professional rudalis, to see their style of mourning; and later decided to train the actresses in physical movements to bring in some rhythm in the last sequence. [For further details on her interaction with real rudalis see box on page 30.]

The Rehearsal Process

Usha Ganguli: I believe while acting one must use one's body, one must bring out rhythm to create different theatrical move-rhythm to create different theatrical movements. My workshops in body movements and rhythm differ from the Third Theatre techniques. When I direct I always see the characters in a certain way and then I tell and guide the actors. For example the character of Bikhni ... Yama was acting after a long time, and so we had to do a lot of throat exercises. Apart from throat exercises the whole group did a lot of physical exercises without music, exercises of movements to the counts and beats, for one and a half months.

Yama Shroff (*actress, played Bikhni*): I have never worked with this kind of dedication before. I am basically a director's actress. Initially I may react to the play or to the content or the process in a particular manner. But after some time, you know that the director wants this, this, and this. After that I just let myself go. Because I believe that you have to work under one person as far as group activity like theatre is concerned. You cannot have an individuality of your own. In *Rudali* I felt that Ushadi was so keen on getting what she wanted, and this was very clear in her mind. And in order to achieve that, the kind of work, the kind of effort you had to make, that made my work interesting. The study or the homework, the rehearsals, getting into the character, understanding the character-and the discipline of time, of method. There was this 'no compromise' attitude-that is what I liked.

I attended a few sessions and she described the character to me. In fact she had sketched out the character keeping me in mind. First we had a reading session. So for a few days we read the play. I all along have acted with my voice at a very basic level, very

soft ... and one thing I learnt while working in *Rudali* was how to raise my voice. That is something Ushadi did with me, constantly. And through this voice training I learnt to raise my voice which I have never done before. We also went through some body exercises-but not many. We learnt how to control our bodies.

[Ushadi] had everything in her mind, all planned out. During the initial stage, after a few days' gap I discovered that two scenes were already blocked and that made me a little nervous. I thought, 'My god, I have to learn my lines fast. Because she never warned me



that she was going to be so fast about it. That very evening I sat with my script and started learning my lines. While the blocking was going on I learnt it all. Once the blocking is done then comes the acting part of it-going into the fine details of acting. It all happened in the course of reading, in the course of blocking, in the course of ... you see ... how do you explain a character? How do you sketch out a character? By the way the person walks, by the way the person talks, by the way the person thinks. At whatever level you are-say when you are at the reading level-she would tell us about how Bikhni would talk. If we were at the emotive level she would tell me about her emotions, what is going on in her mind ...

There was no question of improvising on our own. Most directors, I believe, are pretty adamant about what they want. One *can* suggest. She respects me, I respect her. So if I had a suggestion I would make it.

I haven't worked with a such a big cast before, but I had no problems with it. I found Ushadi's way of working very, very organized. The play was so well rehearsed, we were ready, say, two weeks before the show. We had our costumes on for more than a month. That really helps, you know. You feel more comfortable: You don't come on to the stage thinking of what to do with your *chunni*, and where to put your *ghagra*. You know exactly how to walk. You can work out, improvise, as you want.

Even the smallest of characters -even that little girl playing hop-scotch in the prostitute quarters-each and every character got attention. [Ushadi] has such minute observation power, which is so interesting and so intriguing. Sometimes you feel, oh, I had not thought that this could be done in this way.

Om Pareek (*senior Rangakarmee member, played Dulan*)- Often [Ushadi] discovers minute details which as an actor I have never thought of. For example take the last scene of *Rudaii*, where she picks up the coin, looks at it and stands up. The way she does it-this is creation. There could have been dialogue in this scene. But the whole scene has been worked out in such detail that one does not miss the dialogue. *Rudali* is full of such examples. About Dulan, the character I played, I can say that I am not fully satisfied till today. I am discovering more and more. But she has discussed the character with me in such detail. Who is he? From where has he come? His caste, his dress, age, his nature, what he was thinking when he was talking about that black stone ... She believes in knowing the character first. She always tells us, 'Try to understand the character. First understand the character and then act. Use your intellect, observe, never play



a role by emotion alone. Acting is a mixture of intellect, emotion and stage norms.'

Ushadi's process is like this: first she asks us, 'What is your conception regarding this play, regarding your character?' Then, if she finds our conception is okay, one can try it. But if she has any doubt about the actor's understanding then she initiates a detailed discussion and helps the actor to understand it. She always asks the actor, 'Do you agree?' Then finally both of them come to an agreement about the character. But she never imposes. Ushadi, myself and the group believe in team work, not in individual actors. She always stresses team work. If one or two characters stick out and the rest of the group fails to perform well she will not allow it. Every artist, even if the performance is for only a minute or for one appearance only, should be as good as the others. She believes in team work. Because of this, in our productions even the minor characters act well. This is Rangakarmee's speciality.

Mallika Jalan: Ushadi does usually tell people how she wants her characters, she is quite particular about that. I would say that 90% is hers, and she gives 10% flexibility. There should be no argument as to how a role should be, so the feeling of being able to discuss a problem is not there.

Dipika Ganguly (actress): We started with physical exercises, then making different types of sounds and then we started doing the pieces with dialogues. If Ushadi thinks a delivery or action is good she will tell you to put it in. First she says, do it yourself. Then if there are

mistakes or if she doesn't like something she will show it or tell you shows us something we take it as the correct thing and don't really want to change it. Now, after so many shows, we are changing a little bit, but not much.

Mallika Jalan: Each character was given equal attention, no matter how big or small the role, each one did receive individual attention. We started with training which was perfect, but eventually the vocal/physical exercises that we did, we were asked to do them at home. I don't think too many people actually bothered to do them at home on their own. I think we could have taken ten minutes every day before our rehearsals to do these. Training is unfortunately not there in terms of analysing your character, and most people did not go through that process of actually thinking of the character they were portraying, so the question of interpreting it in your own way did not arise.

Backstage Work

Yama Shroff: So far as group activity is concerned, in Rangakarmee there is a lot of involvement of the stage hands, the actors, the backstage people-there is perfect co-ordination. In ninety-nine per cent of the cases if you have a property to pick up from this particular wing you know that it is there. You don't have to worry about it. They are very efficient. I think Ushadi leaves this to the production-in-charge. There is also a property-in-charge. And there are other people working with them. Ushadi is a hard taskmaster. You can't come on without your property. She will send you back and you will be asked to do it thirty times. She will just not compromise in these things. She really screams. You simply can't make mistakes. Any serious director is definitely going to create a certain amount of tension while working, because if you are not under tension you can't perform.

Om Pareek: In Rangakarmee we have learnt that acting is not all-there are other things in theatre: light, sets, music, props these are also part of theatre. If we are only interested in acting who will take care of other things? All this amounts to the same question, 'What is

your approach to theatre? Why am I doing it? For whom?' Whatever you do is part of theatre. This is part of our education



Debabrata Shome (*Property-in-charge*): When we started rehearsing *Rudali* we rehearsed with props. Fifty per cent of the training in managing props came from there. I learnt how to set the props and when, the timing, dividing the props into personal and stage props etc., but I also try to do it my own way. It needs a lot of concentration. Nobody double checks my work. Once I have arranged the props I check it scenewise. I enjoy this. The newcomers are encouraged to take~interest in the backstage work. So you get a chance to learn about it along with acting. This way if you are interested in 'total theatre' you have the scope to learn it. I believe that backstage experience is a must for every actor. It makes one confident, helps one to concentrate more while acting. If the show is at 6.30 pm I come at 3.30 and it takes about an hour and a half to arrange everything. This is the first Rangakarmee production in which so many props are used. We have two huge trunks full of props!

The Figure of Rudali

The rudali was an unknown figure till recently, when the play, and more importantly, the film, brought her to the attention of the Indian audience, which learned that rudalis were professional women mourners who were paid to lament and sing praises of the dead, a custom still practised in Rajasthan, Bihar and Punjab, amongst other states. In the Mahasweta Devi story and the Usha Ganguli play, which are set in Bihar, it is the prostitutes and lowcaste women who perform this function. Kalpana Lajmi's film, set in Rajasthan, retains this detail. But elsewhere, rudalis come from a different social class, and the practice of mourning serves a different social function. Usha Ganguli, in the course of her research before the play, met rudalis in Punjab. Reproduced below is an extract of an interview in which she describes this experience.

STQ: Did you meet rudalis? Did they perform for you?

UG: Yes. In Chandigarh. Swadesh Deepak's [author of Court Martial] uncle is the local panchayat head. He first said that it was simply impossible. Then we requested him again and again. Next day two rudalis came to see us, but they were not serious. Then I said, 'Please help me.' I wanted to know if they were invited to mourn. They said that they had a group and when someone died they just went there together even if they were not invited.

STQ: Who are they? Are they housewives? Do they have families?

UG: Yes. Most of them are housewives. From Chandigarh we went to Patiala. Rajesh [Sharma] and Om [Pareek] went to a different village and found an old lady. But her relatives wouldn't allow her to travel and meet us. But surprisingly she came on her own and we met. She spent the evening with us. We went into a room, closed the door and recorded her performance. She was reluctant but we convinced her. I discovered that they use lots of songs. From Patiala I went to Chandigarh, where my friend Rabindra Kaur is the principal of Ropad College. I met Dr Atamjeet, a theatre person, who gave me a book titled Syapa [funeral wailing] written in Gurmukhi. From them I gathered that the women were lonely, they were not allowed outside their houses. These women used to go out in big groups to mourn, it was a kind of social occasion for them. They used to travel from one village to another. But they used to wear white and not black as in the play.

I requested Rabindra to help me-I wanted to meet a few more rudalis. We hired a car and went to Ropad village and I met a lot of women. I requested them to help me, I explained that I had come all the way from Calcutta and I wanted to know about their work for our production. Then they started their performance. We noticed that there are five steps. First they enter, then they sit near the dead body, they weep, they cry, then they stand up ...

STQ: Do they weep real tears?

UG: Oh, yes. Once they were interested we couldn't stop them. Interestingly, after the performance was over they were so relaxed. I always feel that when they cry they have some kind of loneliness inside them which comes out. After seeing their performance I realized that all women, whether they are married, have children, or not, have some kind of loneliness within them. And after crying they are so relaxed : . . this is the experience I have. I think that in our Indian society woman is somehow not getting what she should get. Somewhere she is not liberated, somewhere she is not independent, she is not free. So she has some kind of loneliness inside.

STQ: These rudalis you met in Punjab, are they just ordinary domestic women?Are they social outcastes?

UG: No, no, they are mostly housewives. Even in Punjab they are saying that people are forgetting this old custom. With modernity it is changing. Nowadays only the family members mourn. But in some places in Punjab and Rajasthan this custom is still there.

STQ: Are widows also allowed to perform?

UG: Yes. It is very interesting. I am from a very conservative family. I have seen many times, specially in weddings and social ceremonies, that widows are not allowed to come out and take part -'Go inside, you will pollute.' I have seen my *bhabhi* being insulted in wedding ceremonies. But when you are a rudali you can take part in the rite.

So the custom of rudalis was a sociological means of escape, of catharsis, of interacting, for a community of women otherwise isolated, locked behind doors and walls. Ironically, mourning was also celebrating-their own momentary freedom.

In Tribute

The Theatre Poems of Utpal Dutt

One afternoon, a month after his death, Sova Sen let me have my first look at Utpal Dutt's prison notebook from his first spell in prison in 1965-6, with fragments of self-analysis, recapitulations of tensions and clashes within the group-and a bunch of poems in English. Two of them are reproduced here. They are personal and private poems, but it is not difficult to read a continuity between them and the three theatre poems, originally written in Bengali, and translated here for the first time.

Dutt loved a good life-good food, good drink, good music, good books, theatre posters on the walls of his house, films on the video, and good stage performances wherever he had a chance of seeing one. Success and popularity came easily to him. He had enough easier choices before him, but he chose the hardest of all-taking it upon himself to improvise and

define a political theatre for himself and his audience. He could have made his job simpler by thinking along the lines of those who often pretended to be his political mentors, and driven a neat wedge between politics and the arts. (In fact, a Communist leader and former minister, speaking at a seminar dedicated to Dutt's memory, did pontificate on how ultimately irreconcilable the two are-in the spirit of the new liberalism that too often perpetuates orthodoxy.)

Dutt's political theatre changed directions too many times, experimented with too many possibilities, drawing him to activist-extremist, positions and imprisonment at times, taking him to mass rallies and street corner gatherings with his 'poster plays', to the mass consumption popular *jatra*, and the creation of a repertoire of plays that offered a highly personal Marxist reading of India's history from the time the Indian State defined itself during the reign of the Guptas, through the colonization of India, the national movement, the communal virus and its depredations, independence, and the collapse of democracy in India; and plays that defined simultaneously a matrix of revolutionary history on more global terms, covering the French and Russian Revolutions and the crisis of revolutionary praxis in the nineties.

But there runs through his life and works one single passion-the desire to be really free-and the awareness that an individual's freedom has to be part of a larger freedom, the freedom of his own people. There is something naive and absolutely honest about this endless quest that Dutt pursued all his life. It had to be selfish and unselfish simultaneously and naturally. Both the testament-like works he left behind have the quest themes planted at their core-his book he called *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre*; his video film he called *In Search of Theatre*.

Samik Bandyopadhyay

Waiting for Liberty

[Utpal Dutt was detained under the DIR in Calcutta in September 1965, along with prominent communists, for his political activities . He was released in March 1966]

We wait for liberty,

counting corpses,
measuring air,
tracing on slips of thrown-away paper
loving portraits of one another.

We play cricket
with a tattered thrown-away tennis ball
and lose sleep over it,
descending to duels over a challenged decision,
sweating in the night in dread
of the moment I'll go out to bat.

We write poems to eternity on empty cigarette packets
finding hazy inspiration in the stale smoke of crushed cigarettes
seeing faces in it, smiles and eyes,
and the essay beckoning possibilities,
and I know of two of us
who wrestled and rolled on the floor
in murderous jealousy
because one had written better than the other.

We stage plays in dark corners of prison,
in the light of smuggled candles
pretending a mass of atmosphere,
ignoring the idiot of a convict
(probably the murderer of his mother)

who snooped through the window
blasting the black song of our theatre
with an explosion of sunshine.
And later we've held caucuses
maligning one another's acting
in insane fits of hatred.

We have had them all of us,
those who've duelled and wrestled
those who've maligned and bickered
all together, sat all together in a circle
holding in tin mugs a brown brew
they tactfully call tea,
and looked at one another through the smoke,
pinching one another's fags
and being forgiven when caught,
We've looked at one another and felt
we are one, for better, for worse,
in sickness and in health,
until death do us part.
because, in this prison,
we are waiting for liberty,
and life is much bigger than these walls.

14th July February 1966 , Presidency Jail

Tired

Prison, today I surrender to you.

You know I have fought you,

Tooth and nail,

No holds barred,

These five months.

I've snapped my fingers in your fave

and sung lusty melodies

in the gloom of my cell.

I've held loud colloquies with the walls

Filling the loneliness with bragging defiance.

You know what you've done to me

these past lonely months?

You've denied me food and drink;

you've bulldozed my mind

and laid waste my dreams,

till the warscape of my thought

looks like Guernica,

bombed and blasted by fascists.

You've taken my wife and child from me

and amputated without chloroform
the wherewithal of love and affection.
you've destroyed my habits'
taken me from my books,dammit,
and my work,
feeding me constantly on self-defeating perversion,
like rotten apples tossed out from hotels
at dawn.

You've poisoned me, you're good at it.
But today I'm tired and beaten.
You'll admit it's been an unequal light,
the dice have been loaded from the start ;
the entire state machine,
men, rifles, uniforms and spies
against one man.

I give up prison,
if that's the way you wish to win
I throw in my tattered towel
and holler 'enough'.

But don't get me wrong,
you've not made me sorry for myself,
for I hate self-pity

as a virgin hates her chastity.
You won't see me cry or whine
Or beg for mercy on my knees.
I won't unsay a word I've said,
Won't lick the spittle I've once thrown up.
You haven't made me want to live
a whit differently if I were to live again.
I'm just a bit tired, prison, pardon me,
just a bit weakened by hunger and loneliness,
and often I am so tired
that I watch my cigar burn between my fingers
and just cannot puff at it.
I wish to sleep now, prison,
sleep till my tensed flesh melts,
memories unknot, lungs emit
the foulness and stench you've fed them on.
I don't care if you keep me down,
spreadeagled under the weight of stones,
crucified by your barbed wire
for fifty years more.
I know I won't live that long.
I can see a strange person,
rather sad-looking, fleshless, white-boned

at the foot of my bed
night after night,
smiling liplessly, calling me to the beyond.
I can't sleep at night, prison,
for this bore of a visitor won't let me.
figs to you prison, for I'll be off with him
long before decided
to kill me.

February 15, 1966 – Night.

Let Me Tell You a Story *

Priyanath Ghosh of Memari,
One of the numberless
crossing the threshold of old age, a small bald patch on the crown,
rubbed to bitterness by life,
he remained till the other day
devoted to the Honourable Government.

He came
to see our plays regularly.
He never liked
the coolies and workers stepping so presumptuously
on the boards of the Minerva Theatre,

once blessed by Ramakrishna.

He would often charge us:

What have you ever created for Eternity?

Where is that touch of immortality about your mines in *Angaar*?

Where is that tenderness of poetry

in the crowds of fishermen on the banks of the Titas?

Priyanath-babu burst into wild rage

on seeing *Kallol*.

He barged into the green room,

screaming, his voice trembling, is this a play, or sedition?

He left us with these words

to go and donate blood for the soldiers at the front.

And then the other day

at Memari Station, next to the railway track

there lay Somendranath, eldest son of Priyanath,

his face buried in the soil of the land he loved so fervently,

with a piece of lead from a military rifle

and a hoard of rebellion in his heart.

Priyanath came to the Mincerva Theatre

with a bowl of *sandesh* on the first day of the Bengali year.

He said, this is a small present from a poor father

For Shardul and his company.

With a somewhat peeved smile, he said, from Shardul to Nurul Islam,

from Yakub and Gafur to Ananda Hait,

it's the same old play running from act to act.

With these words he left

along the Beadon Street scorched by the sun,

the quiet, patient little man,
a little bomb

bursting to explode.

Father, we swear to you
let there be storms and assaults,
prison and torture,
contempt and denial,
and masks of mockery, the guns of the Khyber will never cease to roar,
Minerva will belong for ever to the coolies and workers,
and to the toiling masses,
Minerva for ever will be Priyanath Ghosh's.

April, 1966

' The Priyanath Ghosh poem was used in the handbill that was circulated by the Little Theatre Group, inviting the people of Calcutta to the 'victory celebrations' of the production of Kallol on 7 May 1965 at the Maidan, the best known traditional site for political rallies in Calcutta.

A Dream Shattered

Farewell, Kanak*

They turn my dreams into reality,
they put flesh and blood on my thoughts,
and in limitless confidence I assume
they'd go on shedding sweat,
turning a deaf ear to the myriads of lamentations that rise every day,
raising the dreams to the stage for ever
with steadfast dedication,
even when I'm no longer there.

Then they leave,
unburdening themselves of the load of dreams,

for a free country with no rehearsals,
no performances, no making up
no obligation to explain a two minute delay,
and then the dreams alone lie around, all broken open,
Like a mockery.

9 March, 1989 (This poem was written almost immediately after the death of this loyal and dedicated member of Dutt's company on 9 March 1989).

The Street Play

A mass of twelve thousand, in a field in Amta,
all sunk in impenetrable darkness.
Comrade, the way you've set the lights,
they dazzle and blind our eyes.
We can't read in the faces of the mass
the map of rage, humour, and rebellion.
Cast the light on the people, Comrade,
let the tiger eyes burn all over the field.
Otherwise, we'd lose our way in the darkness.
Can the heroes of the street play sit away beyond the circle of light?
16 May, 1982

'To set Time stirring... I had to exaggerate and distort'

Khaled Cbowdhury

Book cover for Mahasweta Devi,
Mother of 1084

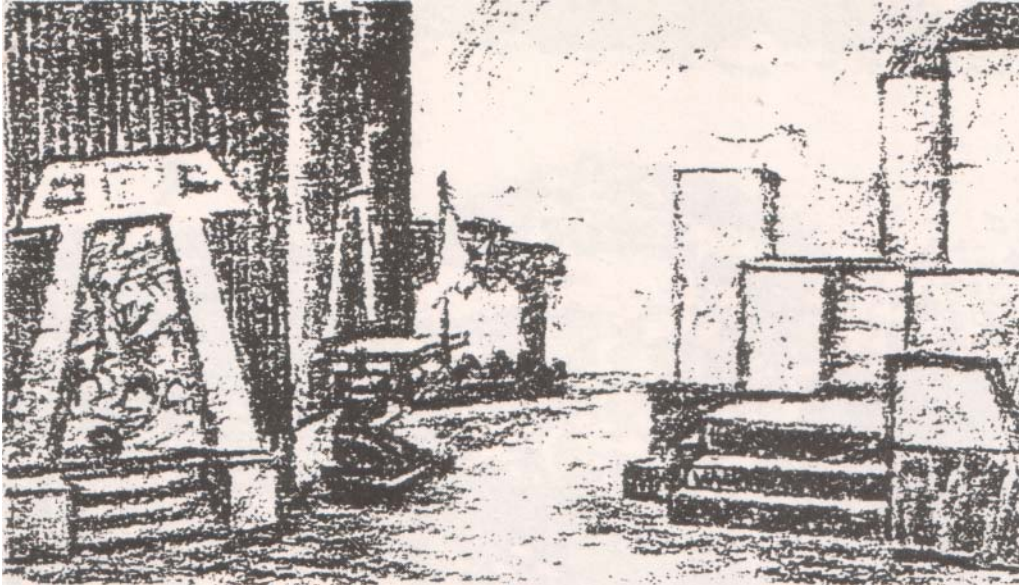


KHALED CHOWDHURY (b. 20 December 1919), stage designer, book illustrator and cover designer, folklorist and musicologist, received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, one of the country's highest awards in the performing arts, for stage design in 1986. He has designed for directors like Sombhu Mitra, Bijan Bhattacharya, Tripti Mitra, Sabitrabrata Dutta, Tarun Roy, Manoj Mitra, Bibhas Chakrabarty, Soumitra Chatterjee, and Shyamanand Jalan. His major works include *Raktakarabi*, *PutuJKhela*, and *Pagla Ghoda* for Sombhu Mitra, *Shuturmurg*, *Pagla Ghoda*, *Evam Indrajit* and *Adhe Adhurey* for Shyamanand Jalan, *Kaler Jatra* for Sabitabrata Dutta, *Dakghar*, *Raktakarabi*, *Gudia Ghar*, *Durasha*, *Saanjh Dhale* for Tripti Mitra,, *Visarjan* for Bibhas Chakrabarty, and *Shobhajatra* for Manoj Mitra.

The piece reproduced here is a translation of excerpts from a long interview published in September 1993 in a special issue of *Proma*, a Bengali literary quarterly edited by Surojit Ghose. The interviewer, some of whose questions and annotations appear in italics within square brackets, was SAMIK BANDYOPADHYAY, who has selected the excerpts, strung them together and translated them.

Looking for a means of living in Calcutta in 1945, I don't know how I came to be convinced that a book cover can be the world's greatest art. Perhaps I had discovered an affinity between what I had been doing earlier-drawing posters-and the new profession I was choosing. When I drew posters, I had to convey through the design the gist of a whole story, within the limited space of the poster. How long does a person spend looking at a poster? Either from within a car, or while walking along the street, a person looks at a poster, and seeks to draw in in the shortest possible time a

message, maybe the date of release of a film or a stage show. All that needs to be immediately registered is the name of the film or the play, along with the name of the theatre, and the date and show timings. If the person would like to gather more information about the show, he would have to come and stand before the poster to read it. But a poster is not something that you would stand and read. For that you have to go for a book or a booklet. It is the conception of a



Working sketches for Raktakarbi



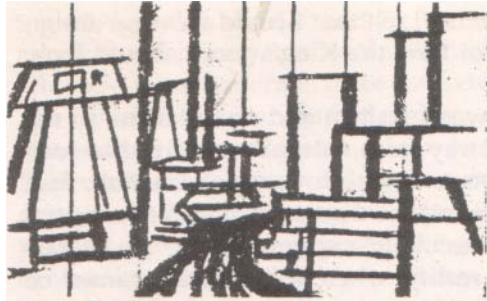
. Book cover for Jyotvindra Nundy, Meera's Afternoon

poster that goes to provide the conception of a book cover. In other words, a book cover is a poster in miniature.

When I began to design book covers, and the technique was still not in my control, all I knew was that I had to tell the whole story within that little space allotted to me. The first book cover I designed was for Chinmohan Sehanavis's translation of Dyson Carter's *Soviet Science*. When the book came out I got ten rupees. I thought it was great. I thought I had conquered the world. I had painted a star, something like a shooting star, rising upwards, at tremendous speed, like a rocket; symbolizing the rise of the Soviet Union and Soviet science in terms of a star. I had to explain the idea to my publisher, Anil Sinha. From my first experience of designing a book cover, how to improve my skill in the field and how to train myself better remained an obsession with me from 1945 to 1955. I was not earning enough from these assignments. At times, when I was groping for a cover idea that remained elusive, I would start walking in the street through the night. I would often offer eight to ten layouts for a single cover, and all of them would be turned down by the publisher.

At this stage Quamrul [Quamrul Hassan (1921-89) eminent Bangladeshi painter] got me an assignment at Orient Airways, to paint posters for them. What I earned from this assignment gave me a little sense of security. But this was also the time when I came into confrontation with the IPTA leadership. The IPTA was under a ban at the time, along with the Communist Party, and functioned as an underground outfit. There was this episode, when a few people from Kakdwip came along, and asked for a performance. They said, 'We'll arrange to take a group of four or five of you to the place in secret, you put up a play there, sing a few songs, and then we'll bring you back safe. Naturally we can't take too big a group.' Salil Chaudhury wrote a play, took his group to the village, performed it, and also sang songs for the occasion. The IPTA executive was furious when the news got to them. Especially all those in the theatre squad, who questioned the right of the music squad to do a play on their own without proper clearance from the theatre squad. There was a great fight over this issue. I was most irritated by the way things were moving. I said: 'What are you doing? Isn't it our purpose to perform plays for the IPTA? And isn't that just what's been done?' They insisted that there had been a gross violation of procedural rules, which laid down that any organization looking for a play to be staged should approach the theatre squad of the IPTA, and it was for them to decide whether to put up a show or not. We asked: What comes first,

the cause of the IPTA, or the rules? Was the IPTA set up to ensure that the rules were obeyed, or were the rules laid down to ensure that the IPTA functioned smoothly? If the rules were meant to support the IPTA, then the group that



had gone out had only worked for the IPTA. Rules are made to fit the demands of a situation. The situation demanded different rules, and before they could be made, the old rules had to be violated. That is how it had happened. With that, I left in a rage. For all practical

purposes, that was my resignation. That was in 1949. I cut off my connections with the IPTA from that day.

One of the ideas that circulated within the IPTA was that the Party men in the organization should educate the people-culturally. But I considered myself uneducated, and when I walked out of the IPTA, I decided that it was time that I learned something systematically. I chose to take a conventional, systematic course in playing the violin. I began practising on the violin for eight hours a day.

Sombhu-da [Sombhu Mitra] lived close to my place at the time, and would visit me from time to time, often asking me to do a poster for a Bohurupee play or show. He would sometimes drop in and listen to me playing. I recollect the occasion when I did a poster for a Bohurupee festival at the New Empire Theatre that featured *Chaar Adhyay* [Four Chapters] and *Chhenda Taar* [Broken Strings].

One day Sombhuda came and asked me, 'Have you read *Raktakarabi* [Red Oleanders]?' I said, 'Yes, I have. In fact, we did a production recently: It was a production done by Georgeda [Debabrata Biswas (1911-80), eminent singer specializing in the songs of Rabindranath Tagore and IPTA songs], on which I too had done some work. Surya Roy and I had designed and made the sets Book cover for *Mahasweta Devt*, for them. Sombhuda said, 'How should it come out? Why don't you read it up once again?' I read it up, and found it full of possibility. But all the possibility I could see was only in the parameters defined for us by the IPTA. For that is the only initiation we had. I found the play quite revolutionary. That is the only aspect that appealed to us at the time. The other aspects I read and discovered only much later. Sombhuda asked me, 'How did you like it?' I said, 'Very good.' He asked me, 'Then it's worth doing?' I said, 'Go ahead: All the time I was thinking, well, if he wanted to do it, he could very well get going, but what had that to do with me! Then there was a reading, some time early in 1954, and he asked me to join him, and I don't know exactly how it happened, but I got involved with the making of *Raktakarabi*.

When the first cardboard model for the *Raktakarabi* space was made and placed before the company, I didn't have a clue as to what stage space was all about, or even the differences between the proscenium and the nonproscenium stage. When an invitation card or something

like that had been cut into pieces, bent and joined to make a cut-out model that provided for a first room, the King's room, the neighbourhood of the sardars, the *makara* mouth, and so on, it didn't mean a thing to me. But once the model had been set up, and I had studied it for some time I felt that I could weave a design around and for it. I started thinking of how the



Chotty Munda and His Arrow

Book cover for Mahasweta Devi

King's room should look, and what the *makara* mouth stood for.

I was still in a whirl somewhere between realism and non-realism. In my cover designs I had already broken away from naturalism, moved to realism, and then left realism behind to start moving towards abstraction. And that is the view I adopted now to relate all the diverse elements to a central design. Realistic sets would be inadmissible in a scheme where the characters are placed on different levels of reality, where the situation cannot be historically localized and where the landscape changes with different moods. I had to emphasize the hierarchical character of a society split between two classes—the *karshanjeebi* and the *akarshanjeebi*-- and the sheer solidity of this social system. I could suggest the former in the levels made of black stones and white stones, on the right, and the latter in the monumental lines of the network door on the left, the Atlas-like figure on the left suggesting weight. Mass and volume predominate in this stage scheme, for the play was concerned with the dehumanization of the individual in an industrialcapitalist society.

The *makara* mouth originally had the look of fangs, but then I made it more squarish to fit with the pillars, seeking a kind of architectural logic. For the first show, for the door of the

king's room, I remember having done an exact copy of Gaganendranath Tagore's cover design for the first publication of Tagore's play-the spider net suggesting Yakshapuri [literally the abode of the protectors of wealth]. In the second show of the production, I changed it, and introduced items drawn from the dialogues between the King and Nandini, as they revealed the essence of the play. The new images that now entered the painting on the door included the frog, a chemist making experiments, even symbols associated with nuclear power-drawn from the dialogues. In the play itself, the King defines his power in terms of the panic and terror that he had planted deep in the earth, and how he snatches and rakes up from under the earth the cry that rises from fragmented souls. I sought for images that came up from these outbursts of the King behind that door. I could introduce and arrange these images on the Yakshapuri door from my experience of working on book covers.

All those years that I had spent on book covers, I had not been particularly inspired or affected by painting when it came to designing covers. The approach that went into the making of book covers stayed with me when I came to design sets, and had to begin with a search for the essence of the play. But a feeling of the stage space came to me only after I had done my work on *Raktakarabi*.

When I look back now on *Raktakarabi*, I get the feeling that it was all a matter of chance or accident. I do not claim that I did what I did consciously. I have a clearer sense of the logic of it when I now make a stage design. But even behind what I had improvised for *Raktakarabi*, there must have been a logic at work in my subconscious, a subconscious that drew on my background of exposure and access to a rich store of folk artefacts, music, dance, performance, ritual etc. The subconscious operates logically in the arts only with a background in the arts.

With virtually no background in the theatre I found *Raktakarabi* too strange an affair. A character like the King in *Raktakarabi* was too remote a conception for me. I had never known a character like him, nor like Nandini. Yet when Nandini speaks, she seems to be someone I should know. Yet actually I didn't know her, hadn't ever seen her. She could not be one of the many people I personally knew, but I could sense her presence. From that sense alone I knew that she was definitely located somewhere. In other words, she was part of a phenomenon that revolved around me, beyond my immediate awareness, and affected

me nonetheless; like the whole experience of industrial civilization that influenced me without my knowledge and remained physically invisible. That is a phenomenon that became visible in *Raktakarabi*. If I design *Raktakarabi* afresh now, with total knowledge of its politics, and the better understanding of stage space I have acquired over the years, you will find it totally different from my earlier scheme—more elaborate, more concrete, more telling.

The *Raktakarabi* design, as I've told you, was more accidental than deliberate. But after all these years, I can look back on it and place it in the 'expressionist' category. It has been often described as cubist. But, no, it's not, not at all. A lot of passion went into the making of this design; it was the passion, spread everywhere through the work, that had torn down the conventional modes, lines, everything. I could tear all that edifice down only because I had no experience in the field, and was not held back by any constraint. When Gangada [Gangapada Bose (1910-71), eminent stage and screen actor associated with Bohurupee] once told me that there were many who were praising my *Raktakarabi* design, I told him, 'Gangada, I'm illiterate in the language of theatre. How can you say that I've done worthwhile work?' Gangada said, 'That's why. You could violate the code only because you were not held back by any tradition. You could afford to be irresponsible. Inhibited by tradition, I don't dare break or violate it'

That's what stood in my way once I had learnt music the hard way. I can't afford to be as bold and daring as I was in the past. But in the matter of designing sets I draw upon my ignorance. I don't have a guru to date. I have carried on for so long without a guru that now I've become my own guru; with the advantage that I can be my own disciple and my own master simultaneously. As a faithful disciple, after I have done something, I have to ask the guru in me to 'explain' it to me. I have to remain innocent in my creative work, and yet be able to justify it, by identifying and explaining every single element I have introduced into a design. And the ultimate goal will always be to raise it to the level of poetry, the level of art, and I have to pursue that goal as a disciple. Then where is the guru? There's none. I am my only guru, teaching myself over the years.

It was in *Putul Khela* [Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, in the Bohurupee adaptation and production, directed by Sombhu Mitra, 1958] that lines came to dominate the picture for the first time. Whatever I had achieved in *Raktakarabi*, I had achieved spontaneously; in *Putul Khela*, I was conscious. In *Raktakarabi*, it was someone prodding me all the time—'Can't you create a different kind of sound here, not the conventional kind, but very different?' I created new instruments to

produce new sounds. It was the continuous prodding that got things done, and something totally new came into being. There was a man pursuing an idea, and looking for an image for it, and he accomplished his end through me. It touched the level of art.

There was nothing accidental or instrumental about my *Putul Khela* design. By then I had become aware of space, and expression, and the techniques of drawing and painting. I had learnt the potentials of the line, and studied closely the forms actors make when they bend in different directions, at different points, and from different provocations--in pain, in joy, in rage. As I could identify these lines as signs, I started putting them to use. I asked myself, 'Now, what is the main line of the play?' The main line ultimately led to tragedy. A little reading revealed how the old Greek tragedies were designed in terms of a pattern of rounded arches, or rounded lines. When a man is hurt, he breaks down. I created a subdued pattern of breaking down, which might not be immediately obvious to the audience, but a more conscious spectator would recognize it.

At the end of *A Doll's House*, Nora walks out it's a kind of victory for her, when she ultimately leaves. Her exit represents a total break-up, and Sombhuda [Sombhu Mitra, playing Torvald] breaks down at this point. The entire pattern I created was to underscore Nora's exit. Nora follows that pattern out. She takes three beatings in the course of the action, before she hits out: the first time, it's Krogstadt who strikes at her; then it's her husband, near the bed; and finally, it's the totality that strikes at her, when she realizes that she has to stand all alone, especially after the Doctor has exposed his real feelings to her, and Nora asks, 'Why did you have to say it?'

Working sketch for Putul Khela



These are the elements highlighted at moments that I sought to visualize as pictures, in terms of lines, colours and levels. But it was a linear quality, the significance of line, that came to dominate my stage design for *Putul Khela*. My primary task was to provide the necessary middle-class household details: I chose to economize by dispensing with the walls, and making imaginative use of colour and architectural design. The conventions of architectural design were deliberately violated to construct an arch on the top of only one of the two doors on the stage.

In the first scene, an excess of yellow on the doors, windows, seats and bed dazzles the eye. The black backdrop highlights the autumn sky outside and the dazzling yellow within, so that the outlines of Bulu (Nora) are swamped in the too-brightly-decorated surroundings. Tapan (Torvald) enters from the room on the side (a room almost dark), dressed in white, a red diary in his hand. On the stage, from the left there appear a lamp-shade on a small bookrack, the top of the easy chair on a higher level, the top of the chair higher still, a clothes' screen, a flower vase, a bundle on the top of the almirah, the arch on the door, a figure of Ganesha on the arch, in an ascending pattern of bow-like curves. The ascending scheme starts moving downwards with the hat-rack, the lamp-shade on the book-rack and the pillow on the bed. The curves complete a full cycle when they reach the round stool at the end of the bed. The whole pattern suggests a figure crushed down in deep despair, looking yearningly out of the door. These curves are the primary rhythm

lines in the composition of the stage design of *Putul Khela*. The lighting at times emphasizes only the straight lines, and at other times only the bow curves.

In the second act a colour scheme of dark blue and red on ash replaces the yellow. The audience feels the impact of the change of colour almost unconsciously as the whole atmosphere becomes grim and ominous. At the end of the third act all the lines seem to draw our attention towards the door; and as the defeated Tapan bends down on the handle of the chair, his shape is in tune with the pattern of the curves.

For the centenary of Tagore's birth in 1961, I was asked to design his *Kaler Jatra* [*The March of Time*, produced by Rupakar, directed by Sabitabrata Dutta, 1961]. It tells the story of the sacred chariot that cannot be moved by anyone until the Shudras pull at the ropes. And thus is restored the disrupted balance of a society where the connexions that bind man to man have been denied. In the structural-symbolic pattern of the play, the anonymous character-types are identifiable with definite social sectors, retaining a universal social validity. I used structurally symbolized forms—a skeletal temple, with the Adi Brahma symbol at its top, suggesting the mysteries of genesis. The rope of the chariot was easily identifiable, as it lay over a thorn (with its obvious suggestion).

But the thrust of the text could come through only with a visual evocation of Time, the use of an enormous clock maybe. I drew my inspiration from the Romantic Delacroix, who valorized the French Revolution, the Revolution that stood for the liberation of mankind and inspired both Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and some of Schiller's greatest poetry. For in *Kaler Jatra* it was the same Romantic idea at work, with the suggestion that time has come to a stop, and needs the tug at the ropes that only the Shudras are capable of, to set time stirring again. I had to exaggerate and distort—to achieve that dimension of Time. Hence I designed a magnified three-dimensional plumbline balancing a structural hour-glass—the perspective of continuous time measured by the standards of civilization—spread out against the entire horizon—and allowed the Shudras to enter and exit through the design *itself*—

Jatra



showing how Time gives the Shudras their direction and power alike. The inspiration in this case came from painting-and from the European Romantic ideal that lay behind Beethoven's Third and Ninth Symphonies, and the images of Napoleon. The distortion came from that inspiration. Deliberate distortion of this kind is one of the pre-conditions of art, not just painting, but practically all kinds of art, including sculpture, which I used as a point of departure in Bohurupee's production of Badal Sircar's *Pagla Ghoda* [*The Wild Horse*, produced by Bohurupee, and directed by Sombhu Mitra,1971).

I didn't quite agree with the director's reading of the thrust of the play, a different production of which I had already designed. The director insisted on morbidity and carnal desire for the Bohurupee production, going to the point of suggesting that I could even make it obscene! I was working on the assignment with some inner resistance, but the possibility of using sculpture as a component of the design drew me to the job. I felt that I could bring in an uncanny feeling, a three-dimensional and more fleshly representation of carnal desire--and yet keep it all within bounds so that the performance could still work with all its power--only if I laid out sculptured forms in the Henry Moore manner on the stage, subdued to the point where they could look like cactii. I asked Tapas [Tapas Sen] to allow the least quantum of light from outside, and not let any light catch them frontally and directly. I had an almost obscene copulating figure in the group, which was of course not as blatant as in a painting, say, like Picasso's 'Rape'.

I came back to *A Doll's House* later, when Tripti Mitra did a Hindi version *Gudia Ghar*-for Rangakarmee, and the new design was radically different from my earlier one for Bohurupee. [What I found most striking from the point of view of the philosophy of the play, was the way you made the rear wall of the room transparent, with that corridor opening but to the street, and the so-prominently displayed letter box, immediately suggesting the presence of a space outside, a space for liberation, a space with a distinct physicality, adding another dimension to Nora. S.B.] What I had in mind was a bird in a cage, and the way a caged bird would look at people outside, from within the cage, with the fear that anyone could attack it, harm it, it can't see who's a friend, who's an enemy - it's drawn to the world outside, that's what the transparency conveys, and then there's the confinement-that's what I sought to capture. When I came to *Gudia Ghar* my own maturity helped me attain a different level, a different sphere.

[In this case you come back to the same text after a number of years, and there is a genuine development in your thinking and imagination that go to enrich the production. S. B.

A lot enriched. But there was a little disappointment at the end. When I conceived the new design, I told Tripti Mitra: I'm giving you a different set altogether. You should also think in different terms. You should search for something entirely different, then you'll come up with something new. You'll strike out in a different direction. When I gave her the new design, I explained the whole thing to her. I told her, forget the earlier production, and do something totally new. But unfortunately she couldn't do it, she still had the old frame at the back of her mind. She admitted she had not been able to achieve it. Maybe it didn't amount to real damage as such, but the utilization of the new set remained unrealized.

And there I remained frustrated, unrealized. I do something from my everincreasing theatre sense, not just a sense of the space, but the entire dramatic experience, the music, the totality of it, and I'm introducing it into my set design, and helping the playwright achieve his objective, and then in the production I find it left unutilized. And there I'm helpless, for ultimately it is the director who decides.

[In a different interview you said that as a stage designer you consider your role to be that of a second fiddler, who has to wait for the conductor of the orchestra to indicate to him the point where he should come in, and then it is for him to play his bit. But in modern proscenium theatre, the moment the picture-frame of the proscenium spells out a space that demands a

picture--a picture for the picture frame--the design to appear within the frame becomes absolutely imperative. A frame without a picture in it is an absurdity. The moment you create a stage space] it is my job to fill every dot, every inch of it. [Then won't you say that your role, the role of the stage director, in the modern theatre, maybe not in the old actor's theatre or the actor-manager's theatre, is no longer a second fiddler's role?]

You are assuming the the role has changed. But it hasn't. For, after all, I am not the ultimate arbiter, the way it was with Gordon Craig or Appia, again and again. Moreover, in our theatre there has never been the awareness that it is an orchestra, a collective. . The director here

Set design for Gudia Ghar



has never given to the role of the stage designer the recognition that an orchestra conductor in a Western orchestra gives to the vital role of the second fiddler. So I have to play my piece all by myself, never in counterpoint.

[Would you then say that the more you understand the possibilities of the stage, the more your dissatisfaction grows almost in proportion to that, with the conditions and attitudes with which you have to work? In other words, when the director lags behind as you progress, as a creative person you cannot accept your position as a second fiddler.]

They just don't understand. I've told you about the production where when they had to shift the production from a larger space to a smaller one, they just sawed off the top of a sculptured form that I had created. When I told the director, 'How could you do it? Didn't you see that the set was

complete only with the top? If you had given me your proportions for the smaller stage, I'd have designed it differently in terms of the proportions of the two different stages, so that it could serve for both. But how could you just eliminate the top like that?' all that he had to say was that he hadn't thought of that! If a top rated director can say something like that, you can imagine the state of my mind. Then one naturally feels, to hell with it all! And then another director tells me, I see carnal desire in the play, so why don't you introduce it visually in your design, going for obscenity if you'd like to! Can one go for obscenity just like that? I don't know. When you deliberately go for the obscene, it amounts to pornography, and pornography is not a public performance, but a clandestine selling operation. Art and pornography stand too close together. Think of Goya's two Majas ! There's a subtle measure that distinguishes art and pornography. When the director gave me that brief to create obscenity, I told myself, well, I'm only the second fiddler after all, why should I bother about all that? The director doesn't care for my sensitivity. He doesn't have any use for it anyway. That's the reason why, in spite of all my pleading, the directors and groups for whom I have designed have almost never had my set photographed. They have any number of stills shot, but never one that shows the set properly. When Nemichandra Jain once asked me to write a piece on how I approached the problem of designing two different productions of the same text, I came to think of it and found that I have designed four plays twice *over-Raktakarabi, Visarjan, Putui Khela, Pagla Ghoda* -but I had to decline the offer, for there were not enough stills available.

Theatrescapes

Inaugurating the Calcutta Book Fair on Republic Day, 1994, U. R. Anantha Murthy envisaged a cultural revolution with the rapid spread of literacy that is taking place in the

country which is bound to equip for the first time ever the people 'in the backwoods' with a voice and a language that would make them visibly potent in the country's politics and culture as a whole. As I listened to his excellently worded and articulated presentation, I could read yet another possibility beyond, that of the regional cultures with their performative forms asserting and defining themselves in their own terms and not within the comfortable parameters/matrices predetermined by the metropolitan culture machine, hopefully leading eventually to the collapse of the phony valorization of inventions and constructs of folk traditions which have dominated the national cultural policy since the sixties-a policy that has tended to identify the typical folk or tribal performance with a mindless, thoughtless celebration rooted in a naive uncritical faith or as a source for exotic ingredients that can be picked up at will and 'used' in/for the metropolitan performance.

The regional cultural particularity that has been systematically denied and curbed under a supposedly integrationist 'national' project has tended again and again, particularly in the last couple of decades, to erupt into violent confrontations with the centralized state authority, assuming strong political overtones and often being subsumed under more elaborate power games that transform a genuine sense of cultural deprivation/humiliation into counter-revolutionary terror. Religion in its several articulations and in its universalizations has served to distort the cultural thrust soon after its first appearance in several cases. The centralized, organized projections of a universalized 'national' culture, stemming in most cases from Delhi, the political capital, and with official support (and more often than not financial support, as a form of 'buying') from a national government that has over the years lost its political and ethical credibility and standing on a cultural plane, hinge on religion and supposedly liberal/humane religious philosophies or moralities that have had popular appeal for sections of the people marginalized by caste/class power. Religion in some woolly, non-denominational, non-sectarian form, very often a re-construct from vestiges of some historical process, has been assumed to be the only possible idiom for a dialogue with the amorphous, notional 'people', aimed at keeping them at peace as a 'people' prepared to be tolerant and good-neighbourly with the 'others'-a measure of the isolation of the metropolitan planners, strategists and motivators engaged in designing a secular, integrationist package for the people. Grassroots activism in different forms, from different political/ ideological motivations, often operative through performative articulation, has

again and again realized the sheer irrelevance of religious 'expressions' at the level where the marginalization of the human element is nothing short of barbaric and abysmally degrading. At the level, for example, where Mahasweta Devi relates to and works with the Lodhas and Khedia-Shabars, tribes marked as 'criminals' under the colonial regime, 'decertified' for legal purposes in the recent past, but struggling for education and rights and political presence. (And even as the first sense of achievement builds to euphoria, the first woman from the community ever to graduate, a postgraduate anthropology student, is driven to commit suicide by circumstances unmistakably of class and caste, and the media and the establishment rush to construct a case of marital incompatibility between an 'educated' young woman and the less educated husband, with a barely veiled cautionary strain, suggesting the undesirability of the tribal woman getting 'educated', something that spells the end of innocence and inevitable broken marriages and unhappiness!) This is the level of experience from which emerges the basic text of Rudali that shows the people 'in the backwoods', in this case village women torn apart from the security of the family, subverting religious practice/ceremony (all the religion that comes their way, and makes cruel demands on them), and discovering security and asserting their independence in the process. On the level at which the Jana Sanskriti group 'works, in a cluster of villages near where the Sundarban forests begin and continue to the seacoast in lower West Bengal, with an all-women theatre unit of twelve, all of them agricultural labourers, active through the entire harvesting process, some of them taking a two hour trip by train to the metropolis every morning to work as domestic menials in urban households, returning to the villages in the evening; and finding in theatre for the first time their own voice, which steers clear of any kind of mediation, and enters into dialogue and interaction with the community as audience, inviting and challenging the latter to intervene in the performance with contradictory or alternative propositions in the manner of what is now called 'forum theatre' (the methodology learnt/derived from Augusto Boal, with whom the Jana Sanskriti core group has trained and now looks forward to interacting with, when he comes down to Badu later this month to conduct a workshop and attend a mela). The performance that I saw in Patharpratima-a three-hour drive from Calcutta - centred on dowry, the paraphernalia of a conventional marriage, and the tensions over division of domestic chores between working husband and working wife; the interventions erupting into violence in both act and word.

The more I gather from the activists in such situations, the more doubts I have about the metropolitan proposition that offers religion as the only idiom that needs to be mastered and used for communication *to* (maybe not *with!*) the people. In a setting which has outgrown religion, and does not offer the luxury of religion (especially when hunger and exploitation remain overwhelmingly vicious), a programme that seeks to restore religion--a parallel alternative to the Hindu revival package-is bound to be counterproductive, its universalist politics imposing an authoritarian, compulsive control on the voices of people seeking redress in articulation.

Both Mahasweta Devi and Jana Sanskriti are engaged in an extended literacy project, the kind of project that one could see shaping within the Total Literacy Campaign being conducted throughout the country by the National Literacy Mission, as fieldworker-activists reported on trends and developments in the universal literacy project at a three-day workshop held in Calcutta (7-9 December 1993), under the auspices of the Bengal Social Service League, the State Resource Centre for the Total Literacy Campaign. There were reports of neo-literate women in Medinipur picking up scraps of printed paper, actually packets made out of newspaper in which groceries are bought and sold, that they would take home, spread out and read, for there was no other material available to let them continue with their reading practice; of villagers in Purulia taking a mobilized stand, after a literacy course, against the persecution and killing of supposed witches; in Purulia, again, of mothers coming to the adult literacy centres to get literate in order to help their children with their lessons, since the fathers were too busy in the evenings or too unconcerned to have anything to do with the education of the children; in both Bardhaman and Purulia, of neo-literate parents discovering for themselves and challenging the inadequacies, imperfections and deceptions inherent in the education that is being offered their children in the half-hearted and indifferent pedagogy of the free primary schools set up by the government; and, of the militancy of neo-literate women in both Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal against alcoholism and the clandestine and poisonous trade in indigenous liquor. (Incidentally, Jana Sanskriti's 'social' achievements in and around Patharpratima include a similar buildup through a series of performances in the *haafs* or weekly markets in the villages, leading to a violent showdown with the people breaking the vats in the indigenous distilleries, and putting an end to the trade in illicit liquor, in defiance of a local administration and police that had gone on tolerating and sheltering it.) There was also a reference made to K. Shivarama Karanth, who at the age of 92, two years ago, chose to write his *Oduva Ata* (Reading Is Fun), a primer for

children and the neo-literate, have it illustrated by Hebbar, prepare notes for the use of the primer, conduct classes for the instructors who would use the primer, and use the Yakshagana, the traditional form that he has rejuvenated, 'to drive home how best to spread literacy through any and every medium born out of the environment.' There was a sense of frustration at the end of the Calcutta workshop on the use of the media in the Total Literacy Campaign, with Calcutta's theatre workers staying out of it altogether, the independent video and short filmmakers asking for a fund and a 'contract' that would enable them to launch a media barrage on the model of one of those irresistible consumerist campaigns for a new product (with not the least concern for or awareness of the specific, 'cultural' requirements of a literacy campaign, at its different phases or levels, initially motivational, then disseminatory with supplementary content inputs replacing the individual field instructor, and later still, contributing to continuing literacy), and the odd foreign-funded NCO gloating over his success with putting 'topical' content into the traditional *Chhau* (or *Chho*, as the local purist would prefer), and making *new Chhau* productions (which, from what I could gather, have been naturally rejected by the people; and the funded /supported company has by now dropped them from their repertoire, leaving the NCO with a set of video cassettes of the 'socially relevant' *Chhau* for the consumption of metropolitan enthusiasts).

What has been most disturbing is theatre's obsession with itself, with purity and sacredness and spirituality, with formal-aesthetic achievement, in total indifference to the larger issue of those 'in the backwoods' and their voice; a voice that has been stifled and silenced by a whole host of authoritarian powers colonialism, a religion that legitimizes discriminations of class and caste, and a state that legitimizes economic exploitation in all possible forms. As a project, theatre for art's sake, in a situation of underdevelopment, amounts to a denial of human rights and a betrayal of cultural responsibility.

At yet another two day seminar in Calcutta (28-29 January 1994), held under the auspices of the Max Mueller Bhavan, Calcutta, on the Future of Communism, an economist, a university lecturer and scholar in European and English literature, and a critic in cultural studies could come to a consensus on the need for a pursuit of micro discourses to build history and change from below. Gramsci, with his valuable distinction of 'dominance' from 'hegemony', of the violent mobilized seizure of political power from the creativity of that power only when it is 'culturally' absorbed and planted, proved to be a point of reference for the departures away from the earlier mind-set of the 'socialist' project that had sought to 'programme' itself from the top down, more as

political decision and administrative commission than as revolutionary movement or dialectical praxis. As the Socialist system fell apart in eastern Europe, it immediately gave way to a vicious onslaught of ethnicity, drawing on religious fundamentalism, exposing in the process how the socialist power structure had failed to 'culturalize' its ideology and its achievements alike, how it had allowed divisive violence to grow 'below', while the 'top' remained cushioned in complacency.

There is no short cut to 'hegemony' through culture, as Gramsci envisaged it. The process has to start at the level of micro discourses, with micro cultures allowed their space, where political activists committed to change should and can take the initiative to interact; and theatre can be an area of interaction rather than the message-bearing readymade manufactured too often, too pompously, and with too much complacency and arrogance by the metropolitan leftwing theatre. In fact one of the more interesting sidelights of the Panhala meeting of Maharashtrian theatre workers (reported elsewhere in this issue) was the Dalit playwright-critic protesting against the term *nukkad natak* (which has been for quite some time now the official Delhi term for the non-proscenium protest play, against the Bengali variants used for it in West Bengal, where it is quantitatively most in evidence in several forms and with different brands of politics-viz. 'poster plays' and *patha natikn*, literally 'road play') and proposing instead *sadak natya* (literally 'highway play') claiming for his and his colleagues' own work in the field the openness/ open mindedness of dialogues/encounters in/along the road, the powerful metaphor that Badal Sircar put at the core of his play *Michhil* (1974, translated as *Juloos* in Hindi and *Procession* in English), which for all practical purposes triggered off the non-proscenium activist theatre movement in India (although historically the IPTA in the forties and Utpal Dutt in the fifties deserve credit for initiating the more directly militant and propagandist street play, serving the immediate requirements of trade union politics, political agitation /campaign on specific issues, and leftwing parties contesting 'democratic' elections'.

If theatre in India takes itself more seriously and places itself in a 'cultural' movement, interacting and evolving with specific cultures, regionally located, linguistically defined and socio-economically determined /constituted by history, it has to determinedly break loose from global or national models as they are being articulated, formulated, privileged and institutionalized by the National School of Drama that denies the cultures of India their voices in their languages-languages that speak in words, acts and performances alike, with their intense particularities.

The Nehruvian 'cultural' package, with its facile 'national-integrationist' 'unity-in-diversity' thrust persists in India, as a piece of ridiculous anachronism, institutionalized in the Akademis and the National School of Drama, which have long degenerated into unreal showpieces, operating all together as a tool to drive a wedge into and tear down the cultures that constitute India, with their voices reduced to moaning and whispers. It is ironic that a 'cultural' package that had once been conceived, clearly on the Soviet model, for a 'socialist' experiment has needed little recasting or re-modelling to fit the needs of a system that has now started moving towards a free-for-all, competitive market economy. Eastern Europe has paid the price for its 'nationalizing' and India, from its power centre in Delhi, follows blindly in the same direction.

Fortunately the voices endure, cultivating, nurturing and 'expressing' their cultural spaces. When the articulation is driven underground, the voices tend to express themselves better in telling gestures which are often essentially the same in different spaces, e.g. when the actor steps out of his role as master performer and dominating presence, and 'serves' the community-his/her company and/or select audience- as when Ugamraj, the great Khyal master and Sangeet Natak Akademi awardee, cooked for his company and us before the performance and served us *dal* and rice when we turned up for his nightlong performance at the annual cattle fair at Parvatsar, a six hours' drive from Jodhpur, in 1991, in the company of Komal Kothari; or when the Jana Sanskriti actress who is also a political activist cooked chicken for us, 'killed' by her fellow political activists (who live in a commune, and keep poultry for their sustenance), and served us dinner when we had landed up at their den, after a 45 minute brisk walk along the narrow, raised bank of the river, returning from the village where we had seen the all-woman Patharpratima company perform. There was no special thought behind that gesture directed at the 'community'--cooking for the company and serving-but it was a gesture that would never let the actor-manager rule over it. There was a reaching out, a sharing, an 'entering'.

If the gesture was the same for voices located geographically so far apart, there were significant differences between Bengal and Maharashtra, when, as the only non-Marathi-speaker at the Panhala seminar, I heard certain words being repeated more often than others in the presentations by different speakers, and asked my friends, G. P. Deshpande and Satish Alekar, who were kindly interpreting for me, to translate them for me; and as I juxtaposed them with their parallels in Bengali, there was a whole area of difference that opened up. 'Ideology', I found, was *vichar qranali* or *vichar sarani* in Marathi, literally 'method of judgement' or 'way

of judgement', whereas it is *matadarsha* in Bengali, translating literally as 'opinion or point of view as/and ideal; revealing at once the strength of commitment, of holding to a point of view as an ideal for life, or something to lie by/for-underscoring a Bengali-Marathi distinction. Similarly, *chikitsa* in Marathi stood for 'critical analysis'-and as Deshpande added, 'pejoratively: hair-splitting', which would give the word shades of the 'medical' meaning that it had in other languages; whereas *samaloचना*, the Bengali parallel, would translate more literally as 'adequate viewing' or 'discussion', more open-ended naturally. One wondered if *Samhita*, the Marathi word for 'text', with its Vedic association, had something to do with the reverence for the playwright or the text that comes naturally to the Marathi-speaker, something that Shanta Gokhale notes in her review of the deliberations at Panhala; while the Bengali in theatre begins with a basic unconcern for the text, feeling free to tamper with it and change it if the director so desires. The voices, whenever they surface-and they will-carry such cultural signs, and there is no way theatre can deny them. A search for these signs can give a different meaning and relevance to theatre.

Samik Bandyopadhyay

Kamalabai Revisited

Kamalabai is a 45-minute film by Reena Mohan, a professional film editor and aspiring documentary filmmaker. Kamalabai, in her nineties at the time the film was made, was a major professional stage actress of the Marathi theatre, and also a pioneer film actress.

It has been argued that there are differences in the way research is organized, carried out and written up, depending on the gender of the researcher, and that a woman to woman/women interview is invariably more productive for both sides. Reena Mohan's film on Kamalabai could well be a good case in support of such an argument. To the issue of gender may be added the equally significant one of difference in cultural histories, usually subsumed under the more general rubric of 'national sociologies'. The film does not try to elide this second difference, as is emphasized through its use of three Indian languages in the film: English (for the titles) and Hindi and Marathi for the conversations and monologues. (More on this point later.)

However, as we shall argue in this essay, Mohan's efforts to problematize the two sets of difference/ distance we have mentioned above, ultimately leaves Kamalabai largely unvisited. The strategy of fractured narration is overdeployed, so that the crucial *difference* of the performer-who is more than a part of, but has enabled the making of theatre and film history-and one who seeks to document this history through the person of the performer, becomes a *distance* that is never actually traversed.

The film is 'silent' excepting for the actual conversations between director/interlocutor and the monologues by Kamalabai herself. The information accompanying the visuals appears in English on the screen, instead of in a commentary. The dir/int is rarely seen and her voice, when heard asking questions (in Hindi), is usually muted in contrast to that of Kamalabai's sharp replies and otherwise clipped and controlled utterances.

Clearly, the careful excising of all other voices is intended both to foreground and resolve some of the problems of representation or even presentation of the subject of the film. Kamalabai, the first actress of the Marathi stage and film, in her early nineties (at the time of the film) is not to be made into a passive object; the dir/int casts her as an active performer in this film about her.

The actantial role given to the subject of the film extends to the actual movements of this ninety-two year old woman, so that the film is not cast in the conventional form of a question-answer session between a formally seated interviewer with a semi-reclined interviewee, interspersed with a few long shots of the subject walking away towards the 'horizon' or frequent unwarranted close-ups. Shot at very close quarters and inside her home, the narrative moves through varying paced activities ranging from the 'mundane' ritual of dressing and undressing to the more explicitly 'arranged' performances of Kamalabai reciting lines from old plays. The activities of this amazing woman are framed by the introductory sequence where she begins with a terse account of her physical condition: blind in one eye, lame in one leg etc. and adds, 'but my faith is strong . . . I am Kamalabai Gokhale'. The crutch-the visual and physical extension of the aged body-then continues to appear sometimes effectively and sometimes for mere effect as a reminder of Kamalabai now, possibly with a view to bring back the audience from nostalgia land.

The ethical problems inherent in the role of the interviewer and in the 'reality' of performance inherent in the medium itself are sought to be resolved by focusing at different points in the film on the intrusive presence of the camera and its crew. Thus, there are instances of Kamalabai actually addressing the camera (the person/s behind it), communicating her thought or simply expressing her annoyance; of the dir/int informing Kamalabai (and the audience) that whatever she is saying or doing at that particular point is being recorded. One is reminded of Dzigha Vertov's *Man with a Moving Camera* in which film, in accordance with the precepts of formalism, the narrative reveals its own making. In the present case, however, this process of defamiliarization almost completely overwhelms the context of the subject. By this I mean that Kamalabai, as the earliest of the Marathi actresses on the stage and on the screen, is surely as much the subject of the film as is Kamalabai now and in her old age. The vitality and honesty of Kamalabai in her old age has indeed to be communicated to a latter-day audience (the future as well as the present audience, most of whom will not have seen or known her as a stage or film actress). But zest, acerbic wit and honesty are qualities which would make any person, particularly a ninety-two-year- old living in India, remarkable. Kamalabai is special because she has been a pioneering actress in industries (theatre and film) which were unequivocally male dominated and patriarchal, where she was con-

stantly being 'made' as the performer who is desired by the audience. This past is hinted at but never emerges as a living story, which constitutes history.

The film presents Kamalabai's past her professional life-in a variety of self-conscious strategies: excerpts from other interviews (on TV) with her; Kamalabai is shown watching what is presumably a videotape of this interview; there is also a host of black and white photographs and shots from various films which convey to the audience some idea of her original performative contexts; a brief sequence of Kamalabai saying the same lines from an old play over and over again until she feels she gets just the right tone, conveys the right meaning. Then there are 'straight' sequences of an informal interview, where Kamalabai both reminisces as well as responds to specific queries by the dir/int. This is indeed a persuasive attempt to recover the past through mixed methods of narration, commentary, vignettes and freezes, always foregrounding Kamalabai now. It has the advantage of avoiding monotony, of cutting through the pretence of the past as a teleological telescoped vision, and of acknowledging the continuum of Kamalabai's own life. If memory is history (to invert Dilthey), then the film discards conventional documenting for filming memory at work (which is also, of course, memory performing, withholding or censoring). In this venture, the dir/int's greatest strength is the active, enquiring mind of her 'subject'.

However, the self-reflexivity of the film, while it enables the dir/int to avoid many of the usual paradigms of power relations between interviewer and interviewee, is paradoxically its greatest weakness. *Man with a Moving Camera* is a film about the mechanics, ethics (and vagaries) of filming as much as it is a celebration of the mechanics (and diversity) of human labour and human relations, of the interaction between men and women and machines. Mohan's film is about a person and a persona-we *may* therefore have expectations that it will also *document* social contexts-past and present, so that we may align memory with the history it seeks to tell. The interactive triangle between the person (Kamalabai), the dir/int (Mohan) and the camera (with the also invisible cameraman) ultimately usurps the actual field, if not the subject (performing actress Kamalabai in Marathi theatre and film) of the documentary.

The viewer is treated to tantalizing glimpses of this field which do not (even in the viewer's mind) contribute to the making of any coherent text. The strategies that we have mentioned above unfortunately make Kamalabai's past (and certainly more significant performances) almost a kind of decorative icing to be juxtaposed against the immediate performance entailed in making this documentary.

From what little we do have in the film, a standard story of origins or beginnings emerge: the young girl from a poor household, a womanizing and spendthrift father, a mother who struggles through her acting to keep the family going. Acting as a profession was simply a matter of survival. 'People will talk', is Kamalabai's laconic response to questions about social reaction, but survival was simply more important.

Kamalabai says with a candour that characterizes her speech throughout the film, that her father used to beat her mother, that 'he ran after whores' (in Hindi). We learn that her mother performed in 'prose plays,' in adaptations of Shakespeare as well as puranic plays like *Keechak vadh*. (We are curious about dates, particularly since performances of *Keechak vadh* had taken on the aura of a phenomenon in Maharashtra in the early decades of this century.) Kamalabai speaks of a period when the men played women's parts. We learn later that her husband, who was with the famous Kirloskar Company, did female roles too. After his death, Kamalabai took over many of his roles as well.

About her own induction to the stage in the role of Aswathama's child, Kamalabai insists that she had a 'squeaky voice'. 'I am a non-matric of 1915' is another unapologetic announcement, which is still more formal education than most of the professional actresses of the Calcutta stage of the same period. Kamalabai starred in her first musical, *Sharda*, when she was 14 years old. The company toured extensively-from Kashi to Dharwar, Hubli etc. in Karnataka. When the company travelled, everything except their houses travelled with them. The entourage comprised painters, scene shifters, *dhobis*, goldsmiths and so on. (What sort of an extended family or mobile household this motley crew must have made! Did they observe caste rules in their peripatetic life?) They travelled all over the country in 86 bullock carts. Tickets were two annas each. There were four shows daily, starting around six in the evening, lasting for two hours each). How was all this 'funded'? asks the dir/int, echoing our own concern with sponsors, funds and the production process. 'By the fuckers who came to see them' (the performances) is the prompt reply. There is less disrespect intended to the actual audience in this apparently flippant reply than there is indignation at the question itself. Who else but the audience would /should pay for the production!

We have a glimpse of the remarkable relationship with 'Dada' (Dadasaheb Phalke) who is both mentor, father figure and much more. Dada persuades her to wear a choli which the little girl finds too 'prickly' and uncomfortable. Kamalabai's narration of this

incident is so vivid, it recreates in a few sentences the complexity of the entire relationship between the girl artist and the director, the human relationships that sustain or break against the dictates of art. It is uncannily like many such memories recorded by Binodini Dasi, the star of nineteenth-century public theatre in Calcutta, in her autobiographical writings about her acting life. At a later point in the film, Kamalabai weeps (the only time in the film) as she remembers Phalke. She tries to express what he meant to her: 'like Vivekanand' . . . 'like someone in a Ravi Verma painting'. The three men compared present an irresistible set of larger-than-life figures. Phalke's admiration for Ravi Verma may have invited the comparison with one of the latter's painted figures, but Vivekananda leaves us a little puzzled. (Unless, of course, we look back or rather at that famous turbaned, full-face photograph, arms tightly crossed.)

An invaluable anecdote is the instance of cross-dressing where Kamalabai's part as a man in a play called *Man-apman* is so successful that a woman in the audience falls in love with her and even pursues her to Dharwar, where the company was touring. Kamalabai recounts this incident without ridiculing the unfortunate (or importunate) woman, but with enough humour so that we realize the actress's own predicament. A further twist to this drama in real life came from the fact that the woman-in-love had dressed up as a man to follow her to Dharwar. It was only when Kamalabai stripped down in the dressing room before her admirer that the matter could be 'resolved' (brutally for the woman). In that celebrated explication by Barthes (S/Z) of a similar situation in Balzac's *Sarrasine*, a very different configuration of appearance and reality is explored and ultimately textualized, so that human relationships may be frozen into signs and codes for better reading. Kamalabai's narration of the incident is refreshingly human: the incident is as much an acknowledgement of her acting prowess as it is of the 'sex appeal' of the 'hero'; it suggests also the breakdown of 'limits' in the ways in which desire might actually be pursued by a woman spectator of the times.

The incident also carries reverberations of the construction and deconstruction of 'star appeal' and of sexuality in other times and other places. One of Sarah Bernhardt's biographers has this story to tell about the 56-year old Bernhardt who was playing the 20-year Duc de Reichstadt in Rostand's *L'Aiglon* which became the hit of the London season:

One worshipping girl fell in love with Bernhardt, or rather with the Duc de Reichstadt. She attended every matinee, sent a daily bouquet along with a poem of her own composition to the theatre and systematically turned down each suitor; and she had several, for she was a very attractive young woman. Her parents in deep concern wrote to the actress, who immediately sent for the girl. She received them in her dressing room, wearing an old and somewhat spotted wrapper and minus a trace of make-up. Take a good look, ma chere; she said. 'This is really me. There is no such person as L'Aiglon except on the stage: The girl fled in disillusionment. A month later she married and a year after, Madame Sarah was godmother to their first child.³

What emerges from this incident of the woman in love and other splintered narratives is Kamalabai's tremendous commitment to her profession throughout her long acting life. She maintains that she was 'quite ordinary' (*mamuli*), in keeping with her earlier admission of a squeaky voice, but suggests that it was probably her love for and absolute commitment to acting-performing that gives her, her self-worth. Her account of the physical training that she was made to undergo is only one aspect of her commitment. She had to learn various martial arts-*lathi khel*, the use of the *talwar*, everything. There were times when, after a fight scene, she would bleed profusely on stage, but she could not stop her performance; it was part of the 'work', she says in a matter of fact tone. We have access to another side of the 'training' when she speaks of how she had to learn Kannada to do a Kannada play. The director, Shankar Rao, gave her five rupees for every correct sentence she spoke. The play was such a hit that for one performance an overfull gallery came crashing down (there were 5000 people in the audience), but the show went on.

Perhaps the most enigmatic statement that we had from Kamalabai was vis-a-vis her comments about religion. 'I used to observe fasts and all that; she says at one point, 'but now I have lost all faith. They are useless.' We are left wondering what might be the process where one performed (credibly) puranic roles, where one was (conceivably) regarded as a social outcast (one does not know from the film what the social conditions in Maharashtra were during the time Kamalabai acted) and then arrived at such a position towards the end of one's life. Kamalabai does not say this with defiance but with conviction: it is a statement worth exploring in detail.

Concluding observations and questions: How much of the lacunae in the film is to be attributed to the dir/int's own distance from the history of Marathi theatre or film? A theatre person would perhaps have made a different film; a Marathi theatre person doing a film in Marathi for a more con-textualized (and perhaps less 'national' audience) would have also, as a matter of course, addressed many of these lacks. But an imagined target audience is not reason enough for quarrelling with the .film in hand. Our problem lies in the nature and extent of problematization in this film. We assume that the dir/int must have engaged in sufficient research into theatre and film history before/during and after making the film; but there is not enough of it either surfacing in the film or even implicitly sustaining its structure, so that Kamalabai's relationship to her metier, her mentor(s), her own performing self does not emerge in other than tantalizing glimpses. It is more than likely that what we finally have in the film is only a part of the actual material researched, or actual footage shot during the years of making the film. It seems a pity, though, that involvement with and sensitivity to the 'subject' and the desire to underline this in the film itself, should be partly responsible for the loss of a substantial sense of theatre/film history as *embodied* in that person's career. I take issue with a film that alters ways of seeing only to be overwhelmed by its own narrative.

Amongst the questions that remain: who wrote the lines? Were they scripted entirely by the dir/int or improvised? If we agree that there can be no such thing as a 'real life' or 'natural' documentation, it is the 'second coming' of the subject in a documentation that becomes a terrain for conscious interrogation. To what extent is the performing subject responding (consciously, unconsciously or both) to the dir/int's queries: i.e. if 'boldness' of an easily identifiable kind (use of swear words, speaking in/to the camera) is seen as a marker of feminist consciousness, is it constructed through a directed performance? To what extent is there a real danger of the documentation excessively emphasizing the privileged position of the dir/int, thereby implicitly claiming a position of greater intimacy and authority than the spectator?

The liberal project of the film gives rise to yet another set of concerns. For example, the gesture of enabling Kamalabai to act out her selves in the context of her home is not one that may be followed unproblematically in similar projects aimed at 'letting' or 'directing' the living archive [to]speak. It is this relative comfort of a fairly acceptable, domestic environment (hearth, home and grandchildren, even if she does live by herself) that makes documentation feasible,

even possible. Poverty and squalor would have made even the desired equality of the relationship difficult. The sequel to the lives of most actresses of that era (of male theatre people too) has rarely been one of economic sufficiency.

One has to thank the filmmaker for raising these and other very crucial questions about the ethics and techniques of documentation in an age and time when documentation has been made so much easier, when the 'subjects' of such documents have become so much more vulnerable. And one can only fuel whatever dissatisfactions or frustrations we may have about the film into possible ways of maintaining that necessary yet difficult balance between addressing the individual in her present context and the social text she constitutes, between an individual now and her career as part of the cultural history of a specific region. The search for that happy balance will inevitably be worked out differently by each dir/int/researcher/writer engaged in a similar project: each work will have to construct its own rules as also deviations from those roles. *Kamalabai* might serve (apart from its own value as an attempt at an interactive record) to sensitize us about the contesting claims involved in documenting and historicizing, without dividing the world into observing interrogating subject and the alien or too-familiar material object.

Rimli Bhattacharya

Notes

I am grateful to G.P. Deshpande and Meenakshi Mukherjee for their comments on this article.

1 See for example, Janet Finch, "'It's great to have someone to talk to": the ethics and politics of interviewing women' in *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice*, Colin Bell and Helen Roberts eds. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). Although Finch's essay is based on surveys of 'ordinary' /non-famous women, many of her basic arguments hold true of the relationship structuring *Kamalabai*.

2 *Amar Katha* (My Story, 1912) and *Amar Abhinetri Jeebon* (My [Life. as](#) an Actress, 1925) reprinted in Soumitra Chattopadhyay and Nirmalya Acharya, eds. *Amai Katha o Anyanya Rachana: Binodini Dasi* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1987)

Cornelia Ottis Skinner, *Madame Sarah* (1966) (New York: Paragon Publisher, 1988), p.270.

A Manipuri

Trojan Women

Julia Hollander is an opera director/producer based in England, who is associated with English National Opera in London. She is particularly interested in challenging and confronting the deep-seated traditions and conventions of the form, with 'trying to take the form into new realms of style and interpretation: She has directed operas-in-the-round, in churches and public houses, in school halls and gymnasiums and in the open air, as well as in the more usual proscenium theatre. She was recently in India and visited Manipur to work with Lokendra Arambam's Forum for Laboratory Theatres in Imphal. On her return to London, she set down her experiences as a theatre professional interacting with a new and different theatre culture.

It was during my stay in Bombay in 1991 that I resolved to visit Manipur. I had no firsthand experience of the performance forms of the region, but understood that here on the border with Burma lived a people whose lives were constantly celebrated and informed by an ancient tradition of music theatre. In Bombay I learned of Ras Lila and Sankirtana, the leaping pung players and the lyrical martial artists; and my friend Veenapani [Chawla, theatre director] tried to describe to me the haunting effect of Manipur's 'death songs'. It took me two years to find time and resources to make the trip, and by then tribal warfare in the area had escalated and access to foreigners was severely limited. The sole means of entering the country was through an official institution and by specific, government-sanctioned invitation. In August I wrote to the head of the Forum for Laboratory Theatres in Imphal, Lokendra Arambam, whose celebrated knowledge of indigenous performance forms might prove an ideal introduction. He promised to help me, and so it was that I became a 'visiting opera artist', officially invited to Manipur by his theatre group. I assumed that the title and the official invitation were mere formalities in the process of introducing me to Manipuri culture. At the same time, I was well aware of the legacy of British theatre directors from Edward Gordon Craig to Peter Brook whereby my countrymen have visited Indian theatre companies and simply raided them for images and ideas which they can exploit back home. This new face of colonialism importing the exotic paraphernalia of Indian theatre to my country was something of which I wanted no part. Perhaps, linked to a genuinely experimental and

enquiring group of artists, I could give them something in return . . .

During the two weeks I spent in Delhi arranging the government papers for my visit, it became clearer to me that I was expected to demonstrate my skill and experience as a director to Lokendra's group. He told me of a previous visitor from London who had taught the group stage performance skills based on the Chinese martial art of Tai Chi. I myself practise Tai Chi for my own pleasure and have used its methods of centring and breath control for performance training. However, I am far from being an expert martial artist and knew that my knowledge would soon prove insubstantial, especially for the trained Manipuri martial artists in the group. My technical expertise in all aspects of professional theatre staging should be interesting and useful, I conjectured, considering that the director's central co-ordinating position in putting on a production had given me a little knowledge in all areas from operatic vocal techniques to stage design, lighting and stage management, to choreography and conducting. These skills are acquired by specialists over years of experience in the industry, but I was eager to pass on any knowledge I had to Lokendra's artists. Other than this, I felt that I could only watch the performers at work and respond as I would to my own performers in London-my directorial role often begins in observing performers and then working with them to achieve the greatest possible coherence and clarity of interpretation in the story.

At last the Inner Line Permit for my official visit to Manipur was granted-one week only. We set to work in the newly prepared hall at the back of Imphal museum. The bright and lively group of more than twenty artists responded attentively to my introductory talk on opera and music theatre in Europe. Some of them clearly had problems understanding my English, which only served to strengthen my resolve to observe and respond to their ways, somehow trying to communicate through other performance aspects than language. Tiken, the music director of the group, had a fine collection of percussion instruments and a harmonium on which I could demonstrate operatic melodies. Kishore, a director trained at the National School of Drama, who rapidly took on the position of translator and assistant, told me of a copy of Seneca's *Trojan Women* which he possessed and wished to stage one day. I leapt at this opportunity: a Roman interpretation of an Ancient Greek tragedy which I knew well. In this seminal tale of love and war, individual pain and social responsibility, I could find a focus for our work.

Greek tragedy, the root of all European theatre, vital precursor of the far more recent realistic conventions of English theatre and nevertheless by nature 'operatic' (using as it does the

conventions of chorus and soloist, having a grand and monumental scale, originally performed with a high proportion of musical accompaniment and intoned vocal delivery. Wagner, the great pioneer of European opera in the last century referred constantly to Greek tragedy as the ancient basis of theatre ritual to which modern opera might aspire.) It seemed right that we should be exploring Seneca's interpretation of the original-there was nothing 'pure' about the text, being merely one culture's version of Euripides. With Greek tragedy in mind I decided to give the myths and stories of Classical European culture to the group for improvisation exercises.

It was fascinating to see the stories I knew so well transformed through the perspective of Manipuri culture. The issues at the root of a family feud became totally transformed, the dynamic of an argument between individual and the state radically altered. Things which for my own secular society are difficult to depict without resorting to inadequate metaphor could be clearly and effectively presented. There is a simplicity and profundity about the Oresteia story or the experiences of Oedipus and Orpheus which ensure their continuing relevance for audiences in my country, but this new culture which I was beginning to enter had its own priorities, its own images. The improvisations were in many ways the closest I came to entering a way of life in Manipur so different from my own.

On the first evening I took Seneca's text home with me and set about selecting themes and narrative events which I thought should appeal to the group. I had read enough about Manipur's history and present troubles, and had already quizzed my hosts about their lives, the perpetual state of warfare in Imphal. Clearly there were themes in the play which dealt very closely with the present. As an outsider, I was in no position to present serious political or social allegory, yet I wanted to create a piece which came directly from the experience and skill of my performers. And so it was that we devised a thirty-minute piece based on the first two acts of Seneca's *Trojan Women* using the musical and acting traditions of Manipur.

In many ways it was the best production I had ever directed: there on the far northeastern border of India I was free of the confines of my own cultural identity, free of the inhibitions which I generally share with my performers, and which, however much we strive to liberate ourselves, inevitably restrict our imaginative response to a piece. I was free from the silly pressure of the British press which I cannot help but allow to preoccupy me in a competitive and recession-bound professional environment. However iconoclastic the ambitions of English

National Opera and the other companies I work for, including my own burgeoning music theatre group, my work for them is never free of the pressures of professional peers and press opinion. Another form of freedom given me by the *Trojan Women* project was the very basis on which I had come to Manipur. Having begun with a simple interest in Manipur's traditional performance forms, I found myself in the midst of a group of traditional performers whose common aim was to advance their forms, to move on from the constrictions of a limited repertoire of myths and to use their skills in newly imaginative ways. As a foreigner working in their midst, my greatest achievement will have been to take them on a little way in this process. They asked me to challenge their habits and conventions, and through doing this I myself was challenged to fathom new parts of my imagination and knowledge. I hope that the discoveries I made in Imphal continue to inform the way I work in my own country for a long time to come.

Julia Hollander (London, 4 January 1994)

STQ hopes to feature a regular column of firsthand reports by theatre professionals and workers describing particular theatre experiences they have recently participated in, such as collaborations, workshops, productions or any other form of learning and doing linked with theatre in this country. We invite contributions in this area.

Theatre Log

Modern Marathi Theatre: Taking Stock

The recent seminar on Marathi theatre held in Panhala (a review of which appears below) was unique in one particular respect. Unlike the globalizing or universalizing trend in most such seminars, which attempt to see macro patterns and draw conclusions on a general or national level, this seminar focused on regional theatre, specifically Marathi theatre. It attempted to hold its own modern theatre history up to scrutiny and analysis, and to examine some of the trends and problems facing Marathi theatre today. This regional specificity is in refreshing contrast to the more general tendency to think in terms of overarching categories or pan-Indian formulations, often determined by the wholly conceptual construct of an 'Indian' or 'national' culture or theatre. To this extent such a seminar could promote a healthy trend, of regional theatres looking at themselves as valid and independent entities, and studying their own problems and concerns in a culture-specific context.

The review reproduced below is refreshing in another respect. It provides an incisive critique of the proceedings, healthy criticism from a concerned insider (Shanta Gokhale is herself a theatre person, a playwright and translator) whose perspective includes a familiarity with the theatre under scrutiny. She identifies some of the organizational drawbacks and weak areas of such seminars, which have a causal effect on the quality of the papers prepared, before presenting balanced summaries and criticisms of the papers themselves. The committed (as against the more usual non-committal) stance of the reviewer turns this critique into a useful lesson for concerned theatre workers to keep in mind while planning future seminars.

A three-day seminar on contemporary Marathi theatre was held from 29-30 August, 1993, under the joint auspices of the Theatre Academy, Pune, and Pratyay, Kolhapur as part of Theatre Academy's on-going Regional Theatre Group Development Programme. The venue was the picturesque hill-station, Panhala, near Kolhapur, a fit setting in which to take stock of the journey Marathi theatre had made between the sixties, generally held to be the beginning of the new theatre in Maharashtra, and the present, equally generally held to be a period of directionlessness and creative fatigue.

Seminars are held for a variety of reasons, to use up allotted funds, for instance. This seminar was different. It was held in answer to a need theatre people had been feeling for some years now, to look at themselves and their activities in the larger context of what serious theatre should be even if it isn't wildly experimental. From the brief note that the organizers circulated with the invitations to prospective participants, it appeared that this seminar was meant to guide our attention in two directions at once-into ourselves in the context of our history and the present socio-political situation, and outwards to other theatres within and outside the country.

When a seminar has not been organized as a mere gesture, but with the avowed purpose of attempting to arrive at an understanding of problems within a given framework, postal correspondence, it would seem, proves quite inadequate to the task of communication. Ideally, a meeting of participants called before papers were prepared would have served to eradicate the line that kept appearing between them and the organizers, obliterating the common purpose. Practical considerations probably make such a measure unfeasible and so one was witness to intermittent bouts of shadow-boxing that marred some otherwise interesting presentations.

The second problem was the wide scope of the topics given to participants to write papers on. Vijay Tapas, college lecturer and theatre scholar, for instance, was asked to examine the last 25 years of Marathi plays and theatre. With just about 13 years of consciously critical viewing behind him, he had no alternative but to reduce the scope of his subject to those 13 years, from 1980 to 1993. Samik Bandyopadhyay was asked to write a paper on contemporary 'Indian theatre', a very tall order. He decided to confine himself to the theatres he knew best, the Bengali and the Manipuri. Pushpa Bhawe, college lecturer, political activist, theatre scholar and critic, was invited to present a paper on 'Politics and the Drama of Ideas in Marathi'. Her contention was that only two plays in the entire corpus of contemporary Marathi drama could be described as political. She therefore devoted a large part of her paper to defining the term 'political drama' in order to say we didn't have any to speak of. Uday Narkar, college lecturer from Kolhapur, was asked to read a paper on Peter Brook's theatre, which he had never seen, while I had to speak about trends in western theatre in the last 20 years, though I had been abroad only once during that period, and seen just two significant plays. Casting a series of such impossibly wide nets, it was not surprising that some all important issues which are central to theatre never got discussed-the problem of the actor, for example, about which Satish Alekar has been talking from every public

platform during the last few years. As a matter of fact, the entire proceedings were heavily skewed towards drama rather than theatre.

Within these limitations, however, a variety of viewpoints were expressed and the air cleared of some misunderstandings. By and large, the seniors were more vocal than the younger people, which is not the way it should have been. Had the reverse happened, the seminar would have come closer to achieving its purpose, because, in the narrowest sense, it was the new generation which was being asked to locate itself in the history and traditions of modern Marathi theatre, to articulate its present position and attempt to discover the directions in which their theatre seemed to be moving. An important factor which prevented this from happening was the new generation's assumption, not unfounded, of the dismal view the seniors had taken of their theatre. This drove them alternately to defensiveness or a defiant rejection of the past in its totality.

The keynote address was delivered by Chandrashekhar Jahagirdar, professor of English at the Raja Shivaji University, Kolhapur. He began by making a few general statements about Marathi theatre over the last 30 years. He asserted that Marathi theatre had never suffered for want of an audience, that dramatic art had always been vital, giving scope for experiments which brought about corresponding changes in the understanding and attitudes of the audience. He spoke also of the vital link between drama and theatre, the changes in one being reflected in corresponding experiments in stagecraft and performance. The most important development of the period under study, he said, was the decentralization of theatre after the 1960s when Bombay and Pune stopped being the centres of drama culture and a 'healthy trend' was set up of 'the periphery strengthening the centre rather than being regulated by it. He suggested that the right note for the seminar to strike lay between self-congratulation and self-denigration. Characterizing the early modernist experiments of Elkunchwar and Alekar as loud, rhetorical, and self-conscious in their use of 'absurdist techniques', he applauded the two directions in which drama had moved in the last decade with the return to naturalism of Mahesh Elkunchwar through *Wada Chirebandi* and the comedies of Shyam Manohar which, while taking an outrageously absurd view of middle-class aspirations and mores, still managed to bring a rare understanding and compassion to bear on them. These two playwrights, according to Jahagirdar, had shown the way out of both the 'frozen tradition of modernism' and the decorative use of folk elements that

followed upon the success of *Ghashiram Kotwal* in the seventies. He considered Shyam Manohar's plays *Yak?** and *Hriday to* be the 'turning point in the history of contemporary Marathi drama'.

Many of Jahagirdar's statements called for debate; but according to seminar rules, the keynote address could not be discussed.

So we passed on to the first speaker of the first session, Vijay Tapas, who spoke on the Marathi theatre of the period beginning 1980, in order to bring it within his field of firsthand experience. As spokesman of the younger generation, he was expected to provide new insights into the attitudes and resources of his generation. As a critic, he was expected to take a long view of the theatre of his generation, noting its contribution to the history and tradition of drama in Marathi. However, he chose to take a somewhat defensive position vis-avis the theatre of the sixties and seventies, describing playwrights and their works singly, without making connections. An equally serious problem was his focus on the dramatic text, turning directors, set, lights and costume designers and music composers into also-rans. He made no attempt to respond to the request made by the organizers in their note to relate their analyses to today's sociopolitical situation. Thus, the works he spoke of hung in limbo, uncontextualized. Again, his categorizing of plays as being about relationships between individuals, between individual and society, between individual and group, between one class and another etc. did not become a methodology for more precise analysis, as expected, but ended up being simply a descriptive device, a piece of sterile academic affectation. Some other labels he used to describe plays were not immediately accessible to listeners. One was described as a 'mad, mad play'; a few others as 'clownish'. Production styles were described as 'stylized' without indicating the exact 'style'.

His main claim for the new generation of playwrights (of which he considers Rajiv Naik, writer of seven and translator of three plays, to be a central figure), was that their work was free of all 'isms', whether political or aesthetic. Naik, he said, was not concerned with the here-and-now, but with universal man and the human condition. The supposed shortcomings of his plays-absence of story, strong characterization, dialogue as dialogue and dramatic events-were the natural fallout of his deepest concerns.

Other playwrights whose work he described and commented upon, applying to each different measures of assessment (thus suggesting that he did not have any position or viewpoint

on theatre), were Shafaat Khan, Shyam Manohar, Chetan Datar, Premanad Gajvi, Makarand Sathe and Prashant Dalvi. Summing up, he said that if the creation of one or more 'great' plays was to be the measure of a 'golden age' in theatre, then his generation had produced nothing comparable with *Begum Barve*, *Mahanirvan* or *Ghashiram Kotwal*; but if range and variety of work was a criterion of any value, then he would like to submit that this was by no means a 'dark age' of theatre either. There were enough good things happening to keep theatre alive and kicking for a while to come.

Sanjay Pawar, a young illustrator and playwright from Pune who is most known for his one-act play *Ithhe Dukan Mandu Naye (Don't Set Up Shop Here)*, was the first speaker of the afternoon session, speaking on 'The Position of Contemporary Marathi Theatre'. What followed was polemics, witty sparring with the much pummelled organizers' note, suave sallies against certain political attitudes of and aesthetic choices made by the earlier generations of theatre people and *intensely* committed statements, unsubstantiated, however, by concrete evidence of their translation into theatre practice. Halfway through the paper it became obvious that he was skillfully shifting ground in order to attack the older generation of playwrights on two flanks at once. Clearly categorizing them as upper-caste and urban, he noted that the open skies and social freedom of the sixties and seventies, to which the organizers' note referred as factors contributing to the exuberant experimentation of Tendulkar, Elkunchwar, Alekar and Matkari, had been only for the upper caste playwrights who then waved the flag of freedom and proceeded to run amok in theatre, doing exactly what they liked without feeling bound by any social or ideological commitment. While this was happening in Bombay, he said, the traditional *tamasha* artistes whose narratives had always satirized current political events and the *kala pathaks* of the pre- and post-independence era who had done so much to give their mass audiences in small towns a lively, committed theatre, were disappearing gradually. The social climate and skies of the eighties, characterized as closed and suffocating by the note, had always been so for the repressed and under-privileged of society. Shifting ground now, from this flank, he asserted that if contemporary theatre was lack-lustre and moribund, it was because the younger generation had lost its creative energy. Again, the older generation rather than the socio-political climate were responsible. It was they who had ravaged theatre and left for their heirs a barren and desolate space in which the blurring of the line between commercial and 'experimental' theatre was being applauded. Rather than elaborating upon or clarifying these

observations, he took recourse to metaphor. The theatre his generation had inherited, he said, was like an island after a tempest.

What one gathered directly from Pawar's paper was that: (a) the theatre outside the ambit of Tapas's paper, which had dealt only with Bombay middle-class 'experimental' theatre, was abundant and rich; (b) Pawar's criterion for significant theatre was a theatre committed to the problems of the under-privileged and (c) for whatever reason, the younger generation of urban playwrights were suffering from loss of creative vitality. More indirectly, one gathered that the younger generation of theatre people from outside Bombay-Pune feel bitterly resentful towards theatre practitioners in the two cities for excluding from their influential purview all outsiders, who must, willy nilly, still record their presence there to receive recognition and the media *attention* from which important benefits flowed.

Jabbar Patel, noted theatre director of plays like *Ghashiram Kotwal* and *Teen Paishacha Tamasha*, who is now almost exclusively involved with making films, was scheduled to read a paper on the electronic media explosion and its effects on theatre. In a remarkably vague and rambling off-the cuff presentation, aided by a few jottings, Patel delineated, by jumps and starts, the progress of Marathi theatre from about the forties onwards. The thing to do, he said, was to concentrate on giving our audiences what the small screen couldn't-a genuinely theatrical experience by eschewing naturalism. After all, he said, television-serials were naturalistic, and should not be duplicated on stage.

The second day's proceedings began with a paper by the playwright G. P. Deshpande. Speaking about the social context of contemporary theatre, his most important contention was that the very beginnings of modern Marathi drama were to be found in the political situation obtaining around 1843, the year in which Vishnudas Bhave wrote the first 'modern' play in the southern Maharashtra princely state of Sangli. The time was significant in being just a quarter of a century or so away from the fall of the Peshwa regime. It was thus a time when the Brahmins had lost political power and were looking for a new face' in various directions. The drama that was born at this juncture must be seen, he contended, as the drama of a defeated class, which knew itself to be so, judging by the writings of Vishnudas himself and the then young playwright, Khadilkar. Though these are facts of history, Marathi theatre belongs to a society that does not know its own history; and this constitutes the first social context of Marathi theatre. We need to remind ourselves of our history in order to discuss our social context.

Another inescapable social context of modern drama was that even in urban centres it continued to be by and for Brahmins. The next wave of energy in Marathi theatre also came at a time of defeat; but there was a curious split by this time between the subjective understanding of the Brahmins of their position vis-a-vis the objective reality. Whereas the objective reality was of defeat-the Brahmins were politically marginalized-their subjective understanding of their position was of victory. They saw themselves as leaders in the sciences, in music and theatre and in the administrative services. It is the complacency born of this false self-image that has cut the middle-class Brahmin off from his history. In his plays, the Brahmin has reduced the political class to a series of caricatures and nobody has felt the need to point out that if this class were indeed so asinine, it could not have wielded political power over the Brahmin for over 40 years.

Adrift in their own air and space, theatre people no longer feel the need to debate social and political issues the way they did 15 years ago, said Deshpande. They are working under the mistaken notion that a vital theatre movement is possible without involvement with political or social movements. Theatre has thus become a matter of critical criteria like 'good light design', fine performances, and good-looking productions.

Professor of Marathi and theatre critic Pushpa Bhawe's paper on 'Politics and the Drama of Ideas in Marathi' followed. She enumerated different definitions of ideology and then discussed what could be termed a political play. Once that was decided, she could state, without reservations, that there were only two plays in the whole history of modern Marathi drama that could be called political. One was G.P.Deshpande's *Udhvasta Dharmashala* and the other was Datta Bhagat's *Wata Palwata*. What could be discussed with greater relevance and more profit was the politics of theatre, which resulted in plays like Mahatma Phule's *Tritiya Ratna* not rating even a simple mention in any history of Marathi theatre. The politics of theatre was clearly the politics of the dominant class, which showed its subtle face even in a play like *Zu(va*, generally considered to be a play of protest. Even the Dalit play has adopted dominant forms without modifying them to serve their own revolutionary needs. On the other hand, she warned, it was not only 'revolutionary' theatre that was political. Unacknowledged in discussions but dangerously present, there was in Marathi theatre a reactionary political theatre, informed by fundamentalist Hindu or dominant class politics.

However, the main point of her paper was the regretful absence of political plays, even in street theatre and certainly in the proscenium theatre. Marathi theatre, she felt, was too committed to telling a story to acquire for itself the space to create a real drama of ideas. The whys and wherefores of this

situation, she said, needed to be discussed by younger theatre people and members of the Dalit theatre movement.

Shyam Manohar, the maverick playwright from Pune, who hadn't read or seen a single play when he wrote his first, asked a series of questions in place of reading a paper. As a somewhat surprised observer of mainstream and parallel theatre, he wanted to know why amateur theatre groups seemed to want to do on a minor scale what commercial theatre was doing? Why did they have to squander their meagre resources on productions complete with lights, costumes, sets etc .when they could give themselves the freedom to experiment with whatever they could afford, exploring the possibilities of a kind of poor theatre? Next he wanted to know why actors and actresses seemed to have only one style at their command which they used whatever play they were acting in? Shouldn't they have more than one style in their repertoire? His third question was why critics wrote formulaic reviews which ticked off the different components of theatre one by one like a check-list? Finally, since theatre called upon viewers to use their imagination in any case, why could women not play male roles if they thought they could and would like to? There were surely actresses who would love to play King Lear. These questions led to one of the liveliest discussions of the seminar.

'Marathi Drama and the Problems Facing Theatre Today' was the subject of the paper presented by Rajiv Naik, the young playwright from Bombay. He divided the subject into two parts - the practical and creative aspects of theatre formed the first, while the second was devoted to a polemical position on the so-called golden age of Marathi theatre.

The issues he addressed in the first part were those raised by 30 theatre people whom he had asked to speak of the problems facing Marathi theatre, in a mini-survey of sorts which he had conducted in Bombay. Adding his own thoughts to theirs, he enumerated these problems-firstly, the lack of a well-equipped auditorium for parallel theatre. The demand for a performance space was not dependent, he said, on the quality or quantity of work done; it was the right of people who wanted to continue to stand against the commercialization of life to have a place of their own and one that the state should be forced to concede. Finance was the second important problem. Calculating the costs of maintaining an active theatre group which aimed at doing even one play a year, he said about Rs 20,000 per year was the minimum needed. Groups were prepared to struggle, but it would help to have concessional rates for theatres and advertisements, the latter being the biggest drain on funds. The third problem was the lack of audiences. Admitting that the audience for all experimental work was bound to be small, he posed the question of how small an

audience could still be considered good enough? Lack of worthwhile criticism was another problem. Naik's contention was that newspaper critics took a literary view of theatre, contenting themselves with a discussion of dramatic text alone, with only passing references to the other 'departments' of theatre like sets, music and lighting. The next problem was internal to theatre groups themselves. There was a total lack of interest amongst members in reading and thinking about theatre in a serious way. This resulted in another lack-the lack of commitment to self-development in actors who cared neither to train their bodies nor their voices, the very tools of their trade, relying entirely on raw native talent. This resulted, naturally, in mannerisms being substituted for genuine performance. Narrowness was another danger, Naik said. A group could become its own enemy if it did not allow fresh ideas to enter by inviting actors and directors from other groups to participate in some of its productions. The door should also be opened to theatre from other cultures and languages. Finally, he wondered why directors had not been as adventurous as writers in creating new forms and styles of presentation. He felt that directors did not enter sufficiently into the very being of the text to discover its subtext in the unwritten spaces between lines.

In the second part of his paper, Naik attacked the pressure the earlier generation seemed to be putting on the present generation of-theatre practitioners to prove their social commitment through their work. Drawing on examples from recent plays like Shafaat Khan's *Mumbaiche Kawle* and *Bhumiticha Farce* he showed that political comment did have a strong presence in their work. On the other hand, drawing on examples from the recent work of Bhalchandra Nemade, the novelist who became the cult figure for young people in the early sixties, he asked whether the 'unprocessed' political commitment of his later works was the kind of thing playwrights were expected to come up with. Would that constitute good theatre he asked, quoting Herbert Marcuse (*The Aesthetic Dimension*) to support his rejection of overt ideological commitment in plays: 'There may be more subversive potential in the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud than in the didactic plays of Brecht.'

Finally, he launched an attack on the concept of a 'golden age' proposed in the organizers' controversial note. The whole idea of golden ages should, according to him, be thrown out of the study of the arts.

The next person to present a paper was Samik Bandyopadhyay, theatre and film scholar from Calcutta. He was slated to speak on contemporary Indian theatre but reduced that vast and

complex canvas to something more tractable and within his capacity to do justice to. Like Deshpande earlier and unlike anyone else who had spoken thus far in the seminar, he took a long historical view of Bengali theatre, making it possible for other regional theatre people to link up their experiences with the Bengali experience. Again, unlike anybody else, he set theatre in its political context within a clear ideological framework, where the basic argument was that theatre was a tool of protest; that it must neither allow itself to be coopted by the state, nor fall into the repertory trap of catering to a market of varied demands.

State intervention in the arts began with the setting up of the central Akademis in the fifties and the giving away of Akademi awards which implied judgmental criteria. For a decade or so thereafter theatre entered into a two-fold questioning of authority. On the one hand it questioned the role of the state and on the other the parochial actor-manager system of Calcutta theatre, created to project the actor, 'the great glorious male'. The three major new directors of this period, were Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt and Ajitesh Bannerjee. On the surface they belonged to the new, questioning theatre, engaged in defining itself against the old. They chose plays from the west in the absence of local playwrights. But, he pointed out, with a telling illustration from Sombhu Mitra's production of *A Doll's House*, the new ideology was being subverted from within by the older ideological values. Sombhu Mitra's Torvald was ultimately projected as a wronged man, drawing audience sympathy to himself with the help of the set design and lighting in the final scene.

Bengali theatre groups held to a democratic structure till the early seventies, when it finally gave way to the old system of stars and star billing. 'The new theatre was soon swallowed up by the old theatre.' This was the context from which Badal Sircar emerged as one of the very few directors whose theatre was based on ideology. Gradually he evolved what he called his free theatre. The most important feature of Badal Sircar's plays was their historicization of issues. Utpal Dutt's 'poster plays', on the other hand, focused on events of the day through which virtually the entire history of modern India was retold.

Turning to Manipur, Samik Bandyopadhyay traced the beginnings of modern Manipuri theatre to the early seventies, precisely the time, as he pointed out, when Badal Sircar's first non-proscenium play was staged and Utpal Dutt was thrown out of his group which had been doing spectacles.

The pioneers of Manipuri theatre, Ratan Thiyam and Kanhailal, had both enrolled at the National School of Drama. Coming from very different backgrounds, their negotiation of this expe-

rience also differed radically. While the former stayed the full course and returned to produce plays that have proved immensely interesting, a weaving together of Manipur's various performance traditions which he had inherited from his parents, the latter quit the course within a year and returned to his old village where he had never been, and emerged to do a more 'abstract' and less 'saleable' theatre than Thiyam's.

At the end of his presentation, Samik Bandyopadhyay urged more loyalty to our region specific theatres. His was a cohesive and well argued presentation, but what surprised the audience was the total lack of information about younger groups, though he did mention that about 12 groups were doing Badal Sircar's theatre. Again, no mention was made of playwrights. Weren't there any at all? Some reference to the professional theatre and its relationship to the ideology-based theatre would also have cast light on the total contemporary context.

I had been asked to present a paper on the trends in western theatre in the last 20 years. Handicapped by a severe paucity of firsthand experience, and facing an audience most of whom had even less, I not only felt I was not qualified to comment on western theatre, I also thought it would be irrelevant to do so, since some of the most vital theoretical issues being discussed in the west-post-modernism and multi or interculturalism-had no bearing upon the development of theatre aesthetics in this country. Instead, I thought it would be useful to place before the audience, without too much intervention, quotations and extracts from the writings by and on some of the more interesting theatre people in the west. I chose Heiner Mueller, Ariane Mnouchkine, Eugenio Barba, Dario Fo and Robert Wilson. Through my readings, I sought to establish their different approaches to the text, the relationship of director and actor to the text, the relationship between these theatre practitioners and the history of theatre, the role of the actor in theatre, his training, the relationship between the director and the writer and between theatre and the people. I also described in detail what had fascinated me about a Robert Wilson production I had had the opportunity to see in Berlin and, finally, called upon actress-singer-writer-teacher of French, Madhuri Purandare from Pune, to describe the Ariane Mnouchkine productions and films she had seen.

Uday Narkar's paper on Peter Brook's theatre followed. Tracing Brook's theatre to the theatre of Artaud on the one hand and Brecht on the other, he stated that the purpose of his exposition was to examine 'the nature of the synthesis in Brook of these contradictory elements-the celebration of the irrationality of life in Artaud and the firm rooting in rational thought of Brecht.' Giving an account of Brook's experiments in language and form, in multiculturalism, in creating a holy theatre 'on the

ground rather than in the sky', he concluded that, despite radical experimentation, Brook's ideology was ultimately conservative.

The discussions that followed every paper served, in their lively questioning or endorsing of the speaker's observations and analyses, to clarify the positions of various groups present. For instance, by and large, the seniors who had come to theatre in the sixties and early seventies, tended to be disturbed by what they saw as a total absence, in young theatre practitioners, of a firmly held position on theatre. It became amply clear in the course of discussions that, as far as the younger generation was concerned, the lack of a consistent position was, in fact, their position on theatre, and a perfectly valid one as far as they were concerned. Tushar Bhadre, the playwright director from Satara and author of the much discussed play *Karan*, articulated this position in response to the general criticism aimed at Sanjay Pawar's paper. He said, 'We neither condemn nor oppose the previous generation. All we want to do is to break down the categories of theatre they created such as commercial, experimental, parallel and Dalit (exactly like the *chaturvarna* categories), and create a theatre that we can call our own. So, in Bombay, Chandrakant Kulkarni directs both *Yelkot* (parallel) and *Dhyani Mani* (commercial) with equal commitment.

Like the generational gap, the caste gap also showed its bitter face. A reference made by Pushpa Bhave to the wholesale take-over by Dalit theatre of both the forms and platforms of middleclass urban theatre, without in any way subverting them, was countered by the Dalit playwright Premanand Gajvi, with a telling analogy which, he said, would show up the upper-caste intelligentsia's lack of understanding of the Dalit psyche. Gandhiji's politics, he said, led him to dress in a scrappy loincloth; but Dr Ambedkar's call to his people to throw away every badge of humiliation and repression that had been their lot for centuries including their art and their music, could not have been symbolized by a loincloth. It had to be a suit, tie and boots. These were the symbols of respectability and freedom which the Dalits aspired to. Bhave responded with her own comparison, which was, partly at least, fallacious. The comparison was with Black Theatre in America which had found its own voice, space and language. Why the comparison didn't hold, perhaps, was because the Blacks had once had a homeland and a culture. Their self-esteem, their ethnic pride could be centred on this. In theory at least, they had once had an existence outside slavery, to which they could return in spirit. The Dalits had no homeland except for the strip of space outside villages where they must live by divine decree. They

had never had any identity except that of outcasts. From what centre of pride could a strong and defiantly different voice spring?

In the course of this discussion, the theatre politics of the dominant classes was discussed, leading on to a mention of the street theatre Tushar Bhadre and his group had been doing in Satara. There was a request for him to give an account of it. He described how he and his associates had been taking their street plays to villages around Satara for the last 12 years. Unlike other street plays theirs were not mere vehicles of propaganda or sloganeering, but worked as theatre. 'We go in procession to a village; he said. 'We make up and dress outside it, entering to the accompaniment of music. We perform in whatever space is available, without mikes and with the audience sitting wherever it pleases. We persuade the audience, through our plays, to examine for themselves issues like superstition, communalism, the caste system, etc. There are no slogans and no exhortations. At the end of the play, we invite the audience to ask questions and debate the issue freely:

Datta Bhagat, in his summing up, expressed a general feeling of satisfaction at the way the seminar had gone. His only reservation was the over load of papers crammed into three days. Sharad Navare, writer of the 'infamous' organizers' note which had created so much resentment, felt that too much had been made of the tag 'golden age' with the result that no attention had been paid to the larger and more vital questions raised in the second half of the note, viz., how did theatre today relate to its society, to the socio-political conditions created by growing fundamentalism and consumerism, and in what directions did it think it would or should move to explore its own possibilities to face and counter these conditions?

The general consensus regarding the usefulness of the seminar, despite the grave reservations made by every group about some aspect or the other, was that the very coining together of so many theatre people at this juncture, willing to voice their doubts and convictions freely, was a good, healthy sign, serving to map the ground on which Marathi theatre stood today.

Shanta Gokhale

Koothu-p-pattaral and Rang Vtdushak's Works'hop

Koothu-p-pattarai, led by Muthuswamy, and Rang Vidushak, led by Bansi Kaul, are experimental theatre groups which are part of a 'theatre laboratory scheme'. Under this

scheme interactions have taken place between experimental theatre groups from different geographical /cultural regions of the country. The recent workshop at Madras proved, yet again, that these workshops can be a significant means through which directors and actors learn about each others' different performance styles, actor training methods, and aesthetics.

Bansi Kaul's group is situated in Bhopal, the lakeside capital of Madhya Pradesh. In the 'Hindi belt', unlike Southern India or Manipur, theatre is notoriously difficult to do. Kaul and his choreographer, the dancer Bharat Sharma, run a theatre laboratory, devoted to bringing contemporary artists and traditional clowns or *vidushaks* together, in order to create a new clown actor, and develop the many facets of humour, such as its function of providing a socio-political commentary on modern life. For Kaul, theatre must be connected with life, so 'it has been a consistent effort of Rang Vidushak to relate its effort to various branches of social activity', such as sports. The daily training routine consists of voice and music classes with Anjaria Puri, dance and movement classes with Bharat Sharma, and repertory work. The style of performance draws on diverse *vidushak* traditions, and focuses on developing the physical and verbal skills of the actor, and doing ensemble work, choreography, and choral singing.

Muthuswamy is a playwright/ director whose group Koothu-p-pattarai works in Madras. He believes in a 'total theatre' that is inspired by a diverse range of the elements from Therukuttu, a popular folk form of Tamil Nadu, to modern western dance a la Martha Graham. K-p-p's style of performance is highly physical and stylized, and involves the complete consciousness of the actor, where s/he must be aware of inner rhythm, outer action, *tala*, representation of *bhavas*, energy, space, music and poetry. Training on a daily basis involves learning yoga, Tai Chi, Kalari Payyat and other martial arts, various forms of *koothu*, *parai* dance, improvisation, and reading /performing poetry. Muthuswamy's plays are like extended poems, without scene divisions or conventional narratives. They incorporate performative devices from Therukuttu, and comment on current sociopolitical realities and gender roles.

The workshop provided an opportunity to witness demonstrations from major productions of both groups. K-p-p's demonstrations included a diverse range of scenes: the comic opening scene of Moliere's *Don Juan* refreshingly interpreted by Pravin Kumar; the

'doctor scene' from Frisch's *Andorra*; the 'funeral procession and sanitation sequence' from the street play *Tai se Naliam*; a moving non-verbal enactment of Bharathi's poem *Agni Kunchu*, which exemplifies Muthuswamy's vision of theatre as modern dance; Act I of Anmol Vellani's version of *England*, one of Muthuswamy's most complex and modern plays, which has become a K-p-p classic; energetic improvisations from the Wanakam Workshop conducted by Vellani, which show the group at its spontaneous best; and demonstrations of how the martial art *silambam* is analysed, transformed, and incorporated in K-p-p's performance troupe, led by the renowned Kannappa Thambiran of Purisai village, where they ultimately hope to set up a Koothu Centre to train modern and folk actors. Therefore it was appropriate that a Therukuttu performance was scheduled during the workshop.

Rang Vidushak's demonstrations included hilarious scenes from *Kisse*, *Gadhon ka Mela* and *Sidi dar Sidi Urf Tukke par Tukka* brilliantly directed by Bansi Kaul; and *Nain Nachaiya*, a Sanskrit *prasang* adapted by playwright Satish Dave, who participated in the workshop. The actors worked together as an ensemble, creating striking visual patterns, singing as a chorus, and exhibiting the physical agility, verbal skills, and ease with comic situations, characterizations, and timing required of the comic actor. The play texts were remarkable for their humour and social comment, and the complex way in which these *kissas* were strung together.

Apart from scene demonstrations, Rang Vidushak also performed all four plays for K-p-p and Madras theatre audiences. During the rehearsal process, Kalai Rani was included in each of these plays as a clown-narrator figure, who briefly summarized the scene in Tamil, commented on the characters, and provided a bridge by which the local audience could appreciate the play. The inclusion of this device coupled with Kalai's comic skills, and ability to improvise/ respond to a situation in spite of not understanding its language, made the plays come alive. In many scenes, other talented K-p-p actors, Pashupathi, Jayakumara, and Joshua, also joined in. The 'curd sequence' in *Kisse* was particularly comic. A clever man outwits the foolish inhabitants of a place by asking them to agree that the ocean consists of milk and not water. Once they agree, he further dupes them by saying that he has mixed curd in the 'milk', so now it will 'set' and become an ocean of curd. They are thrilled at first, and fantasize about all the things they will do with this 'curd' while they wait for it to 'set'. When the man returns

and begins to bathe in the water, they realize he has fooled them, and proceed to beat him up. In this sequence, K-p-p actors joined in and made references in Tamil to Marina Beach, the fight over natural resources between neighbouring states, the stupidity of Rang Vidushak and K-p-p actors, and so on. The bilingual aspect of the performances and improvisations developed naturally out of the interaction of the two groups, and made them accessible as well as comic. However, the highly theatrical, non-naturalistic, physical acting style of both groups made it possible to enjoy the performances without necessarily knowing the language of the performance-text.

Bansi Kaul told the actors stories about Tennalli Rama, a legendary comic figure who continually outwits the king who conspires to put him in his place. He asked Muthuswamy to write a short play on him that actors from both groups could perform together. Improvisations on Tennalli Rama continued throughout the workshop till they were eventually structured into a joint performance. On the first day, the actors spontaneously used a thirty-foot bamboo pole in an improvisation involving the whole group. They carried the pole horizontally in the entire theatre space, walked on it like a tight-rope, and then began to climb it one by one. The king was played by nine actors, representing *nava rasas*, Kalai became the *kattiyakaran vidushak* who introduced the story and led the action. The *theaarattam* master improvised with his drumming to highlight the dramatic moments. The nine kings climbed the pole, proclaimed who they were, and conspired to trick Tennali Rama. The improvisation had the quality of an acrobatic performance by folk performers. The energy was so high and infectious that everyone in the theatre space was lured into climbing the pole.

Bharat Sharma conducted a movement and dance class during the workshop. He also performed some of his solo dance pieces. In Sidi *dar* Sidi he played the comic protagonist, Tukku Mian, proving that he is a competent actor as well. His class began with breathing/stretching/relaxing exercises, voice projection, moving isolated parts of the body, making facial expressions expressing different emotions, using the face as a mask, and then adding the arms, chest, whole body, sounds, and movements. This led to non-verbal improvisations in pairs and groups. I missed his later classes, but presumably his exercises moved into contemporary dance, acrobatics, and so on. Anjana Puri from Rang Vidushak conducted classes on voice training and singing during the workshop. She composed the music for *Nain Nachaiya*, in which she also made her debut as an actress. Two young local acrobats taught the

actors somersaults, cartwheels, flips, splits, and variations of these exercises. So apart from the performances and demonstrations which were scheduled for each evening, the actors spent the entire day participating in voice and music classes, acrobatics, movement and dance classes, and improvisations. The workshop culminated in a well-deserved trip to Mahabalipuram.

I asked Muthuswamy what would emerge from a workshop of this nature. He replied that it highlighted the differences between his method of working and Kaul's and also pointed to the necessity of both kinds of training. Kaul had told him the previous day that he did not want to be very rigid with his actors, instead he wanted them to play, learn about theatre, and work collectively. According to Muthuswamy, K-p-p actors are used to working individually and drawing on their personal creative resources, and it is difficult for them to form a composition or work collectively like Rang Vidushak's actors. Hopefully, a workshop like this would teach them to work collectively. He believes that no interaction is entirely useless, and 'even a wasted workshop teaches the actors something'. Also, the comic element which dominates Rang Vidushak's work exists in everyone's psychology, and flows here naturally from K-p-p actors, even though they are known for their more 'serious' work. I recalled scenes from the street play *Tai se Nallam* and *Don Juan*, and improvisations from the Hello Workshop, where K-p-p actors showed their natural aptitude for comedy. In the 'bilingual scenes' of the workshop, I could see how much they enjoyed clowning around instinctively, and ad-libbing for the audience. They were natural *vidushaks*.

Muthuswamy observes things with a remarkable concentration, and is rarely bored or mechanical in whatever he does. One of Bharat Sharma's dance classes had ended with non-verbal improvisations in pairs, that is, Bharat and Pashupati, Gyan and Jayakumara. I asked Muthuswamy what he observed about these actors during these improvisations. All four actors are extremely talented and experienced, so the improvisations were even more challenging. He said Pashupati's movements are naturally angular, but he is intelligent enough to use his body, and 'create something beautiful' with it. On the other hand, Bharat has been trained in modern western dance and this makes his body very supple, and his movements very rounded. Pashupati also needs more of this kind of training. Muthuswamy does not judge, he merely notices differences. He constantly searches for new ways to train his actors. He noticed these differences, and plans to use them to train his actors in the future. He remarked that K-p-p actors had already learnt some of the exercises, and would be inspired to use them to train their bodies.

He felt that in the improvisation with Jayakumara and Gyan, the main difference between both the actors was that Jayakumara was relying on his 'brain', while Gyan was using his 'intuitive power', so he was tapping deeper resources than Jayakumara, which gave him an edge over the latter. Muthuswamy would like to evolve a training process that draws on the subconscious, unconscious, and collective unconscious, not just on conscious experience, learning, and the intellect; the actor must tap these larger reserves in his creative process.

It was moving to see the respect and kindness of the actors towards each other during the workshop. They had no common language of communication, but shared a common commitment to acting. Rang Vidushak actors picked up Tamil phrases, and enjoyed the nutritious *saapad* cooked by Prema, even though they came from a predominantly chapati-eating culture. Unlike the more boisterous and playful K-p-p actors, they addressed everyone as *didi* and *bhaiya*. The sensitive young actors in Rang Vidushak told me they were very inspired by Kalai, and had sat up the previous night talking about her work. K-p-p actors expressed a desire to do a comic play after seeing Rang Vidushak's work. Both were full of praise for each other. Their acting skills complemented each other perfectly: K-p-p's serious, stylized, individual work and many years of experience, with Rang Vidushak's comic, fluid, collective work, and relatively less experience. On many occasions, actors from both groups stayed up till the early hours of the morning, fixing lights and putting up sets in Sitrarangam theatre for the next day's performance. Each day I saw K-p-p actors fetching water, serving food, and sweeping the floor. A strong sense of community pervaded every sphere of activity; whether the actors were performing, participating in a class, fixing lights and sets, or eating, napping, and chatting. I am sure that the human and cultural aspect of such an exchange can leave no one untouched.

Despite obvious differences in objectives and aesthetics, there are many common points of reference in the work Muthuswamy and Kaul are doing. Both are seriously attempting to evolve an actor training methodology for a theatre that gives primacy to the performer, and both are exploring traditional forms to suit their respective aesthetics and training processes. In their vision of theatre there is a nexus of the modern and the traditional; hence Muthuswamy believes that his plays are 'totally modern' at the same time as they are 'totally rooted in this culture'. Their theatrical interactions go back a long way. Interactions between theatre groups and directors are a delicate business, and perhaps the personal chemistry between them was an important factor in determining the success of the Madras workshop.

Vidhu Singh

Twentyfive Years of Alternative Theatre

Shatabdi, Badal Sircar's theatre group, completed twenty five years of existence in 1993. At least fifteen of those years have been spent with the dual purpose of doing 'third theatre' or 'free theatre' and transforming into a movement the initial impulse toward a portable theatre synthesizing rural and urban elements and catering to the widest possible cross-section of rural and urban audiences. From 27 December 1993 to 14 January 1994 Shatak, the core forum composed of the various groups in this theatre movement, held an Angan Mancha Utsav in a community hall in central Calcutta.

The concept of the *angan* [courtyard] *mancha*, as opposed to the proscenium or the open *jatra* space, began in 1971, with Badal Sircar's determination to evolve a theatre of direct interaction with the audience-physical, direct, accessible, critical, addressing social and political issues which were of immediate concern to the people participating in the performance, both as audience and performers. The term 'third theatre' designated a theatre different in aim, function and style from the 'first' or 'second' theatres--from both the elite commercial urban professional or semi-professional theatre and the mass folk or *jatra* performances. With time Badal Sircar grew to prefer 'free theatre' as a categorizing or descriptive term for the kind of theatre activity he spearheaded. This theatre was free in several ways-it worked as a free flow between viewer and performer; it was free to watch (no ticket or entrance fee is required, only a voluntary donation after the performance); and it was free of commercial or state patronage.

Out of the plays presented thrice a week during the recent Angan Manch Utsav, three were Shatabdi productions. The rest were presented by groups which have been working together with Shatabdi as well as independently in their own areas around the metropolis and in the suburbs, sharing the same theatre philosophy and collaborating with each other on occasions like this festival.

Apart from this, a continuous fixture of such theatre activity are the plays performed at Surendranath Park (formerly and even now commonly referred to as Curzon Park) every Saturday afternoon, just when the office goer saunters out of his or her workplace and walks

through this area which is in the office *para* or neighbourhood, and which is also a major terminus for public transport. In addition to these regular public performances, each of the groups that functions out of the smaller towns around Calcutta or from the suburbs hosts a circuit of festivals in its own area, and groups from outside travel there to present their work. Further to this, the groups collaborate on what they call a *parikrama* or travelling-company tour of villages, in order to take their theatre to the villagers. This is a theatre that seeks out its audience, costs whatever the audience can afford to pay, and talks directly to them on the same level, whether in a room (the *angan mancha*) or in the open (the *mukta mancha*). Calcutta is encircled by a ring of groups which are part of this movement, such as Pathasena from Kanchrapara, Angan Theatre Group from Barisha, I-Ialishahar Sanskritik Sanstha, Tirandaj (Krishnanagar), Aaina, Samidh, Sambodhi etc.

The movement has spread further through workshops held by Badal Sircar and other associates of the movement in other states including Assam and Tamil Nadu. In each of these areas, groups have grown out of the workshops and fanned out with their own agendas of theatre and social action. As Badal Sircar points out, the availability of a circuit in which productions can be presented, coupled with the extreme flexibility and mobility of the productions themselves (he often talks of a 'theatre mounted on our shoulders') have encouraged more groups to join this wave. And since the audience finds the theatre at its doorstep, the response is positive. Audience and theatre groups have both grown due to this increased accessibility on both sides.

Ipsita Chanda

Notebook

Natakayogam, a Kerala-based travelling theatre group under the leadership of playwright-director K. Raghu, has done pioneering work in improvised playmaking in open space, and

succeeded in taking its experimental, wordless and non-formal theatre to villages all over Kerala. A theatre festival organized by Natakayogam in October 1993 travelled to eight different locations including an opening five day session at Thiruvananthapuram where the group is located, and the success has renewed the theatre workers' faith in their art. Natakayogam had invited two other groups, Roots from Trissur and Alternative Living Theatre of West Bengal, to participate in the festival. Despite bad weather, the attraction of popular television programmes and the language barrier (in the case of the ALT productions) the audience responded very positively to each group's work, with enthusiastic discussions following almost every performance.

Alternative Living Theatre West Bengal: Through a long and laborious process of interacting with and learning different folk and martial art forms like Tai Chi, Therukuttu, Kalari Payyatt, Kabui-Naga, Thang-ta and traditional dance forms like Kathakali and Bharatanatyam, Alternative Living Theatre has come *up* with its new production *Andhakarer Dheu*, a strong critique of the politics of religion. According to Prabir Guha, director of ALT, ' . . . the process of learning was supplemented by a reworking of the disciplines learnt and imbibed, a breaking down of these forms to create innovative dramatic modes and gestures. All these were learnt and practised through rigorous physical training ... Earlier plays now revived are undeniably enriched through interpenetration of newly acquired arts. This phase during which we were chiefly concerned with evolving new forms has reached a culmination in a spate of workshops in the city of Calcutta and different parts of the country.' *Andhakarer Dheu*, the group believes, successfully exemplifies the result of this interactive process. Natarang: The whole of the Jammu region has no theatre tradition as such and regular theatre activity is almost nonexistent. Natarang, a Jammu based group, is engaged in a search for new theatre idioms through the traditional performative forms of the region like Karkan and Bhakhan (narrative music) and Geetru, a combined song-dance form. The group has chosen Bhakhan and Karkan as source material for voice exercises and Kud and Geetru for body movements. In September 1993 the group invited Prabir Guha to conduct a workshop for them. An adaptation of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, thematically very close to a local folk tale called *Rangroot*, demonstrated the results of these different interactions and inputs. Balwant Thakur, director of Natarang, says, "The objective is to find a training method rooted in our culture and suitable to the present needs of our theatre.'

Rang Vidushak: In June 1993 the actors of the Bhopal-based group Rang Vidushak re-shaped and re-structured the rehearsal space at Kala Parisad. Bansi Kaul, the director of the group, made the master plan and the actors worked together with skilled workers to give the space a new look. To make the reconstruction a low-cost affair the group used local and waste material and also re-used some of the existing material. The group feels that 'the space has emerged as a cosy homely kind of environment and will reduce stress during long rehearsals.' This restructured rehearsal space has understandably affected the daily rehearsal/training schedule.

Natarang Pratisthan: Established in 1989 by a group of theatre activists and theatre lovers including Habib Tanvir, Bansi Kaul, Ashok Vajpayee and N. Singh, Natarang Pratisthan of New Delhi is trying its best to preserve Nemichandra Jain's personal collection of rare theatre photographs, brochures, magazines, unpublished playscripts and audio/video tapes. This collection covers four decades of Indian theatre since the fifties, but regrettably students of theatre are not taking advantage of this invaluable treasure house of archival materials. The centre is planning to create a theatre environment for the theatre practitioners/researchers/students by organizing seminars, play readings, discussions and performances on a regular basis.

Medea: 'The ancient Greek classic re-written by German playwright Heiner Mueller and presented by Alaknanda Samarth against a backdrop of paintings by Nalini Malini must rank among the most unusual theatre productions ever presented in Bombay; wrote Meher Pestonji in *Hindu* (12 December 1993): unusual because Alaknanda's production of Mueller's *Medea* challenged the Indian theatregoer's perception in every possible way. The Mueller text itself is an interpretation not an adaptation-of the classic and in Alaknanda's production the text was reinterpreted yet again. For her the production was something more than a 'play' or 'performance': The space, with help of the paintings by Nalini Malini, was transformed into an inner landscape where the 'play' unfolded. For some who managed to see it, 'the rest was poetry'. Unfortunately, Medea didn't travel to other cities in India and there were only five shows in December at the Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay.

Antaryatra: There are some plays which are mere productions and some plays which are true journeys into oneself, into meaning and definition of theatre, of space-an unending restlessness with what one is doing,' wrote Anamika Haksar in her introductory note to the play *Antaryatra*. Anamika's

new 'experimental' *play Antaryatra* surprised, if not bewildered and confused, the Delhi audience when it was first shown in November 1993. The play took place in the open under a huge dome and the panoramic space behind the dome gave a unique depth to the depiction of the mythic narrative of the play. In the play the concept of the journey was a 'running metaphor' and in that context the use of space was undoubtedly very innovative. Anamika has drawn freely from different traditions of dance and martial arts, from Bhakti poetry and Buddhism.

STQ invites theatre groups and workers to send in factual reports on their activities which we will endeavour to include in this section. The objective is to keep theatre aficionados and practitioners aware of theatre activity all over the country