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*We regret that in issue no. 12, Anuradha Kapur was spelt Kapoor. Moreover, an acknowledgement that her article 'On Acting' had been presented earlier at a seminar was inadvertently omitted. The oversight is regretted.*

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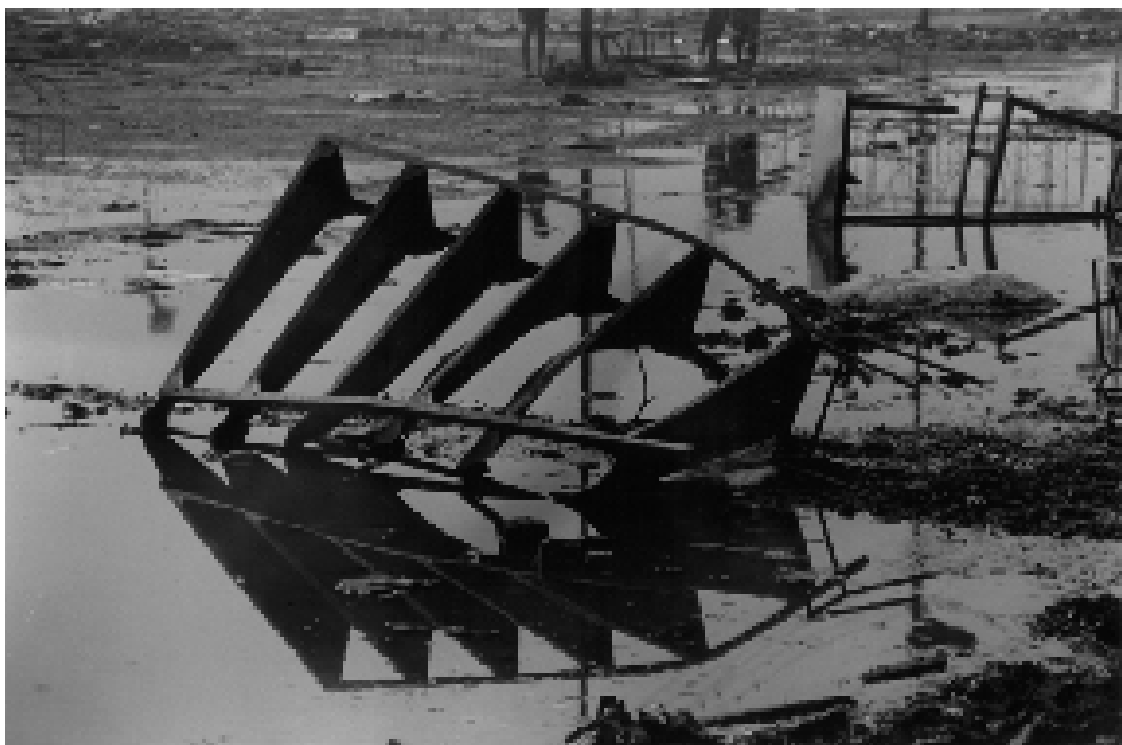
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NOTEBOOK



*These images of the morning after were taken on 4 February, the day after the Calcutta Bookfair burned to the ground in a fire that started by accident and spread through negligence and the lack of adequate precautions.*

Strange mourning.  
Not for death, but for loss.  
Waste.

At the violence done to books, those fragile, ineffably complex handfuls of print and paper which are so much more than they appear to be: thought; belief; sharing; growth; change; affect. So helplessly vulnerable against the violence of sheer callousness. The kind of complacent non-caring which is, ultimately, a lack of respect.



## Editorial

As STQ enters its fourth year, we find ourselves searching for different ways of writing about, documenting, discussing, theatre and performance: other modes of expression and communication. What could these be? What can convey the complex of risk, exploration, uncertainty, discovery, conviction, passion, excitement, partnership, teamwork, connectedness and introspection, that makes up a life in and of theatre?

STQ already stresses the oral (interview / discussion / interaction) over the more formally structured 'article' due to the inescapable reality that in this country, theatre persons function more verbally than through the written word. This privileging of 'voice' over the 'written word', with the different thought structures that it entails, is characteristic of this journal. As is process documentation, which we attempt to make as multi-faceted as possible, to convey the dynamic, shifting nature of a work in progress.

But we need more varied modes of text. So what could these be?

The visual, for one. Communication through the visual as a vital component, complementing words. Or even confronting them. Or refuting them. At the moment, the visual image is still a marginalized aspect of most theatre documentation or analysis: even when there is access to photography, for example, this medium is utilized in the most utilitarian of ways. We are making a conscious effort to 'think visually' when we document process or performance.

STQ welcomes imaginative visual material related to theatre and performance. We are also interested in working sketches and notes, poems, letters, diary entries, photographs, ruminations, reactions and responses, and interactions between theatre practitioners. In other words, texts other than the formal article or essay, which grow out of work in theatre, and which reflect its variety and dynamism.

And finally, we welcome more ideas—other than those indicated here—on varied modes of text.

Anjum Katyal, Editor





*'And Diaoyu will give birth to a new Guernica.'*

*The play ends on this note with four actors in masks putting the picture of a horse together while Man plays the saxophone.*

# From Hongkong to India: Mediating Between Cultures

A Process-to-Performance Account of the Creation of a Play

Paramita Banerjee

## The Script

Probir Guha has been a friend for some twenty years now—since those early days when Living Theatre consisted of a group of dedicated theatre workers who put up plays every Saturday evening in a half-finished school building in suburban Khardah, fighting to get people away from the emerging lure of movies on television. Probir has come a long way since then and is now a not-so-unknown director in the alternative theatre scene of India. His theatre group, now known as the Alternative Living Theatre (henceforth ALT), has new, young faces and its performances are no longer confined to the unplastered walls of the Surendranath Memorial School of Khardah.

Recently Probir contacted me with a draft script to translate into English. Mok Chiu Yu, his friend from Hongkong and the producer of *Yours Most Obediently*, the latest play directed by Probir, was to arrive in Calcutta in December 1996. A joint production was being planned by ALT and the Hongkong based Asian People's Theatre Festival Society (henceforth APTFS) with two actors from ALT and three from Hongkong. On Mok's arrival, an intense session of work began. Probir wrote during the day and I translated from Bengali into English by night. An English translation was necessary for Mok to be able to translate into Cantonese immediately, so that the actors from Hongkong could work on the script before they arrived here in mid-January 1997.

The focus was to be on Indian migrants in Hongkong in the context of Hongkong's change of hands from Britain to China in June 1997. Probir's impressions of Hongkong from his trip there in September 1996, piles of history books brought by Mok, and video tapes of the improvisations a team of Hongkong actors had done around the theme, comprised the materials we were working on. What emerged was a text that did more than simply deal with Indian migrants in Hongkong. Probir's own analysis of the phenomenon of migration, its links with capitalist development, the complexities of identity, and dreams for a new Guernica were all interwoven in what emerged as the base script.

What I found of interest in this whole process was the way Probir's impressions and visions were constantly tempered by Mok's insistence that more 'actual' history be brought into the script. To cite an example, in Probir's original script the sequence dealing with the British use of Indian soldiers to crush the uprising against the New Territories Treaty of 1898 was as follows:

*Chorus changes positions and each one becomes a soldier.*

1. 1899. Just a year after the lease treaty for the New Territories had been signed.
2. The British started to mobilize Indian soldiers to suppress the resistance against the New Territory.

*Chorus enacts the scene.*

3. But it wasn't that easy. The fire of resistance was burning. Tai Po, Yuen Long, Kam-tin—ablaze with the primal will to protest. Thousands of people were transformed into corpses.

As I was translating these lines, I could visualize the use of red, orange and amber cloth by the actors in true Probir style, ultimately freezing in some form of a choreographed mound of dead bodies. How would Probir signify the thousands with just five actors, I wondered. But Mok intervened to point out from a book in his hand

that there weren't thousands of deaths after all, but a few hundreds, maybe. Also, it wasn't the first time that the British were mobilizing Indian soldiers to suppress the Hongkong people. So changes had to be made for the sake of historical accuracy. The whole process of scripting was similarly fraught with Mok's attempts to contain Probir's flights of fancy within the limits of historical reality, and my attempts to get an insight into what Probir was trying to say about Indians in Hongkong.

I could sense that Probir, as an Indian in Hongkong, had felt a lot of anger and frustration and I was curious to find out more. So, on 2 January, in the interview which was part of this documentation process, I asked him about his impressions of Hongkong from his two week stay there in September 1996. Relevant extracts from that interview can explain quite a bit of what's gone into the script:

**PG:** I couldn't stand the country culturally. A country where people don't sing . . . I just couldn't accept it. I kept feeling uncomfortable somewhere.

**PB:** Why couldn't you accept Hongkong culturally? What did you find problematic?

**PG:** One thing is that, I had only conjectured about the heights capitalism can reach, about the saturation point of capitalism. But I'd never actually experienced it. Though I've been to America and spent a long period of nearly five months there, strangely enough I didn't have this problem there. Just as I had experienced a very 'mod', negative culture there—I'd also perceived a very strong, positive culture. I saw some excellent theatre there. Just as plays were happening in big halls, simultaneously there were also people enacting plays in parks. I'd seen this contrast. Just as there were big jazz shows in huge auditoriums, there was music and dance on street corners and in railway stations also. So I never felt any problem in the States. But this country [Hongkong]—it's so small that I have problems thinking about it as a country in the first place—has been the first country in my experience where people don't have any time to talk to you. They'll talk to you only if you have an appointment, and it has to be within a specified



*'British soldiers marching' —Man gives the order while Prince and Indy march with the national flag of Hongkong.*

time. If you have an appointment for five minutes, it's just those five minutes that you can talk to her/him—not a quarter of a minute more as s/he will have something else to do. I didn't see a single person singing, or discussing literature or anything like that. They have no idea about India and Indians. I asked them about cities like Calcutta, Madras, Bombay—whether they'd heard the names—but no, they hadn't. I asked them if they knew about Mrs Indira Gandhi—no. I just asked about her since her name is an internationally known one. I asked them about Satyajit Ray, Rabindranath Tagore—they didn't know. None of them. Only an elderly gentleman told me that he remembered an old Indian with a stick in his hand, bare bodied and wearing short clothes, though he couldn't remember the name. I asked him if he was referring to Gandhi, and he said, 'That's right! *Gandi*. I've seen Richard Attenborough's film and I know about this guy.' That's the level of their awareness about India.

**PB:** Let me interrupt you for a moment. Suppose someone asks you about Hongkong, like who's the governor there, who are the important public persons in the country today and things like that. Would you be able to answer? Do you know, or do I, for that matter?

**PG:** Well, I've asked myself this question. The first thing is that Hongkong hasn't so far contributed anything important enough for people to know about. The second thing is that if one asks things like where is Hongkong, what kind of a country is it—any student here will be able to say at least three sentences. But the people of Hongkong don't even know that a country called India exists. That's what I found so strange.

**PB:** Well, I'm sure they do, since there are Indian migrants in Hongkong and they have definite feelings and views about those migrants. Maybe what you mean is that they don't know about the cultures of India.

**PG:** And Indians invariably evoke a kind of loathing in them. You could say that in the script I've changed these negative feelings into a very positive one. While



*Ruma and Bapan's Jana Gana Mana changes into the British national anthem as the Hongkong national flag covers them. Britishers using Indian soldiers against the Chinese.*

still in Hongkong, I'd already started wondering about why one section of the population there was so antagonistic to another. I'd complained to my Chinese friends there that they were racists, but I felt rather surprised, for racism, I thought, is not part of the Chinese tradition. That's how I started looking into the roots of the problem—why is it like this? The answers I finally found to this question have all been worked into the script.

One look at the script will confirm how strongly this anti-Indian feeling had affected Probir. A line that keeps recurring like a refrain is: 'Indians are poor, Indians are bad, Indians smell bad.' Chinese soldiers say it, the chorus says it, and it's spoken several times in different contexts. But it goes to Probir's credit that he didn't stop at the surface level of this hatred; he did actually try to find out the reasons thereof, actively helped by Mok with ready historical references, and that's how several memories got built into the text. For example:

3. An Indian army and an Indian police force.
4. They were the ones entrusted with guns. The right to kill people.
5. (*Repeats above sentence in Cantonese.*)
1. Some Chinese were also recruited as cops. They got swords.
2. The very sight of the strong, bearded young men from Punjab drives people inside in terror.
3. That terror exists till date. Bearded Indians are terrible men. Stay away from them. Stay away!
4. I hate Indians.

A lot of incidents were incorporated to explain that this deepseated distrust of Indians grew because the Britishers used them to torture and kill the poor Chinese, including rebels. However, in my opinion Probir could not quite get over his nationalist, patriotic feelings, for he built up sequences that explored how the Indians felt about being used in this way. Perhaps these are attempts at portraying human values, since Probir feels that the people of Hongkong need to be reminded of them. As a case in point, let's take a look at one of the several military camp sequences:

*A British officer orders an Indian soldier*

- BO. Hey Indian, kill him.  
IS. But why? Why do I have to kill him for no reason?  
BO. Because your job is to obey me. That's why you're paid.  
IS. But he also has a family. Dependent parents. And family responsibilities.  
BO. Soldiers aren't supposed to think. Just to obey orders. That's the only reason you've been brought all the way from India.  
IS. But thoughts come to mind even if you don't want to think.

Another military camp sequence builds in a lot of romanticism about the plight of poor Indian soldiers who were compelled to kill their Chinese brethren under British orders. Whether such thoughts ever did cross the mind of any Indian soldier in British-ruled Hongkong is beside the point; this sequence succeeded in adding a very human dimension to the play. The same purpose is served by the introduction of the two characters of Renny Brigenza and Ilmus Khan, Indian migrants to Hongkong who bring out beautifully the factors that cause migration, and the reasons why migrants stick on in Hongkong despite certain obvious problems. The other important point that's highlighted through the character of Renny is how class exploitation of Indians by Indians does not change even when both are migrants to the same country.

On the question of nationalism/patriotism, I must mention something else. I've never been comfortable with that very melodramatic part in the script where Ruma buries the national flag, puts on a fancy bonnet and says 'Bye bye India' in a typical, affected manner. The lines that come before this are:

3. Which do you want—which passport?



4. If a British passport is not available, I prefer a Chinese one.
1. But why not an Indian one?
4. That is my last preference.
2. What if India refuses to take you back, then?
4. Oh no, they'll take me back. After all, it's just India. Some tears, and they will be ready to take me back. Didn't you notice what happened vis-a-vis Iraq?
3. But listen, won't you feel ashamed? At least in this case? Indians have fought to gain freedom from the British.
1. But you people are still behaving like slaves of the British. Doesn't that prick your conscience?
4. Money and conscience can never travel on the same boat. We buried our conscience in the Indian soil before we sailed the Chinese seas.

Such simplistic equations between so-called patriotism and 'sticking to your own soil' appear somewhat superficial and sentimental to me, but then Probir is against 'those who migrate to other countries simply for pleasure, for a better life.' The problem with theorizing on the basis of such personal opinion is that the complexities involved in the phenomenon of migration in a world plagued by tremendous imbalance in the distribution of resources get lost. Why do people choose to migrate to another country only to live as second class citizens and be victims of discrimination? Is it just in search of pleasure? Do the stories of Renny Brigenza or Ilmus Khan, both characters supposedly based on people Probir had actually met, support such a theory? And supposing people do go in search of a better life, is that a crime? Does a 'better life' necessarily mean some kind of cheap pleasure hunting? Is the quality of life an irrelevant issue altogether? Ignoring these questions leads to a mushy portrayal of so-called unconscientious migration.

There are other simplistic analyses that Probir accepts, like his theory of capitalist culture versus traditional culture, his elaborations on which are excerpted here. For Probir, capitalism seeks to break down traditions in order to extend its market. Hence, traditions have to be safeguarded against this capitalistic onslaught. To my mind, the so-called 'traditional' is itself a construct, and too many debatable values and systems get maintained and reinforced in the name of upholding tradition.

The two characters that emerge as strong protagonists in the script are Foo and Mok Chai, both based on people whom Probir had met in Hongkong. Not that the characters in the play are real-life portrayals, but Probir himself admitted that both had left a strong impression on him and that had found its way into the script. Mr Foo and Club 64, the bar where he works, occupy a crucial space in the script, as do the conversations between Foo and Mok Chai on a mobile phone. Let's have a look at the first Foo-Mok Chai sequence:

1. Hope you remember Foo! The one who thinks about another Guernica while he serves beer.
2. His eyes sparkle with worry. What if another Guernica doesn't happen? Why does no one draw it?
3. Mobile telephone. Capitalism's new zone. Ring, ring, ring. Foo's girl friend Mok Chai is imprisoned.

*The following conversation between Mok Chai and Foo is in Cantonese. Two persons from the chorus, in a relay, keep interpreting it in Bengali/Hindi.*

MC. Hello—Mok Chai speaking.

FOO. Hello, Mok Chai! This is Foo speaking from the wall of Club 64. Can you tell me what the typhoon warning is now? Has the ferry been caught in any doubts and typhoons on its way to Chhang Chhau island?

MC. Hello, Foo. There's no typhoon warning today. The sky is fairly



*Part of the wall of Club 64 recreated on a piece of cloth for the play.*

blue now, and the sea is as quiet as socialism.

FOO. Oh well! That's why no one drew Guernica on the walls of Club 64. No one has yet drawn it. No one.

MC. So what? You could have drawn it yourself!

FOO. I've tried, you know, but I can't. Whenever I attempt it, it becomes something else.

MC. But that's only to be expected. How can that Guernica happen all over again? The one you draw will be your own Guernica. Picasso is Picasso. Foo is Foo. How can their Guernicas be the same?

FOO. I see! That means the sun belongs to you and to me. The breeze belongs to you and to me. Diaoyu belongs to you, and to me, and to everybody. And it belongs to the fishes, the waves, and to all the free marine animals.

1. Passport, visa, dollar—all these mundane things are for democracy.

2. Waves, fishes, turtles, the wind—none of them has a passport, or a visa, or dollars.

3. Hongkong, are you listening to me?

Now, this entire sequence was conceived because Probir thought that Mok Chai was coming to act in this production. He had in mind two couples—one Indian and the other from Hongkong. But later we came to know that Mok Chai wouldn't be participating. In fact, there was to be no Hongkong actress, only three men. There was no question of doing away with the Foo-Mok Chai sequences as that would make the play lose its essence. How to deal with it, then?

#### **The Workshop**

On this note, I'll turn to the fifteen-day workshop-cum-rehearsal that shaped the play as it is performed today. Initially the plan was to have a multilingual production with English, Bengali and Cantonese, and smatterings of Hindi as well. I was curious to find out how that would work. Mok had no doubts, for he had already produced *Big Wind* and other collaborative performances as multilingual plays and knew that it worked. But

Probir and I spent hours trying to work out where we could effectively combine which languages. His worry was that the performance standards of Bapan (Shib Shankar Saha) and Ruma (Ruma Guha), the ALT members acting in this production, would suffer if they had to speak in English constantly. So we tried to locate strategies to work around this challenge and had a rough work plan ready by the time we left for Durgapur for the two week workshop and rehearsal programme.

However, having read the script of *Big Wind* as well as the scripts of the plays APTFS has done in collaboration with groups in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, I must say that the level of the use of different languages in all these plays is very different from what we were trying to do with the script of *Yours Most Obediently*. All the other scripts are basically in English with some dialogues here and there in some other language like Thai or Urdu or Nepali or Bengali. But we were trying multilingualism much more extensively, as the plan was to have most of the play in two different languages simultaneously. English was to remain the major language, but Cantonese, Bengali and Hindi were all to be used with it. As it is performed today, English is not the major language, but most of the script is still done simultaneously in Bengali and Cantonese. This language issue has a lot to do with the performance techniques used. Some excerpts from my exchanges with the actors on this issue could be of interest in this connection. My conversation with Bapan on this factor ran as follows:

**PB:** This is a multilingual script, with Bengali and Cantonese as the two major languages and there're parts with English and Hindi thrown in as well. Now, Bengali and Hindi, and even English, are understandable to you. But Cantonese is a completely unknown language—you can't even understand it. Do you think that the use of this completely new language is any way affecting your work methods, the speed with which you normally work, your spontaneity?

**B:** Whatever is being said in Cantonese is being said in Bengali or English also, so that there's no problem of the audience here not comprehending those lines . . . In fact, this jump from one language to another, then back again to the first language, or to a third one—I find it very interesting. For me, this is a new aspect of theatre.

**PB:** You mean, this is a new dimension for you? Right, you've answered part of my question, so let me ask you again. As an observer, I can see that sometimes Ruma or you are taking up your lines a few seconds late as you can't make out when the Cantonese dialogue finishes—the cue isn't clear to you. Even these few seconds can't be allowed as that'll hamper the pace and motion of the play. How do you plan to tackle this challenge? What do you feel about it?

**B:** Well, it's a challenge for sure, but not one that I think we can't face. What we must do is to take within our grip the last few words of each Cantonese bit, so that the cue becomes clear to us. That'll mean a lot of extra work for us, but we are ready to do it.

However, despite their best efforts Ruma and Bapan did not entirely overcome this problem. The Hongkong actors faced the same problem with Bengali. It's not easy to pick up cues from a language even the sound of which is unfamiliar to one's ears. Missing the cue wasn't the only problem. Sometimes, one of them would forget that s/he had to wait for the Cantonese/Bengali dialogue and jump from Bengali to Bengali or Cantonese to Cantonese. But the techniques that the actors evolved to tackle each other's lapses in this area were superb. They even managed to fool their exacting director at times! I particularly remember one incident. It was a final rehearsal of the first bit that the team was supposed to perform for outsiders that afternoon. Bapan started his Bengali dialogue immediately after Ruma, completely forgetting that Man was to say Ruma's line in Cantonese before him. Man in that scene uses a joker nose that can also be used for honking, and he immediately used that here to alert Bapan. Since he was using that sound in that sequence any way, nobody save me was any the wiser about this particular signal! A similar trick had to be used at the premiere in

Calcutta as well, with no ill effect on the audience.

So, multilingualism brought in not just a whole new set of performative techniques from the director, but also caused the actors to devise their own ways of tackling problems that arose specifically because of it.

Probir's impressions of Hongkong, I feel, had a direct influence on the way things happened in Durgapur. To go back into the interview:

**PB:** The other thing you said is that they never sing. Could you please elaborate on that?

**PG:** I think that's the result of a couple of factors. Firstly, they've lost their tradition. What capitalist culture does is . . . this is my own opinion . . . it seeks to destroy people's own culture, their own tradition. That's how they make market economy infiltrate in from all sides. If you want a theoretical explanation, I'm ready to offer that in order to substantiate my view. Say for instance, in our country the Keralite culture is a very tight one—at least that's what I think. A Keralite, however rich he might be, he'll only go to office in a *mundu*—that's a half folded *dhoti*—and a shirt. However rich he is, his food will consist of idli, dosa, sambar, vada. He'll go to the temple in the evening with a white sandalpaste mark on his forehead. They prefer to keep their tradition intact. Now, unless this culture is broken down, who'll wear Levi's or 'Rough and Tough' jeans? Nike shoes? How can they be made to eat Kellogg's cornflakes or Kentucky Fried Chicken? So, it's essential to break down the cultural traditions that act as a barrier against capitalist market forces. And the capitalists have managed to do this very successfully in Hongkong, just as they have in Bengal. Here we've nearly lost our own culture. Similarly, in Hongkong I've seen that whatever their own culture was, has been completely wiped out. And that is why, if you ask them to sing a song, they'll think for a while and then say, 'Oh, songs! That's in a *karaoke*.' For them, songs mean *karaoke*; people don't sing! *Karaoke* is a Japanese music system where you can match your voice to prerecorded songs . . .

All human values have been completely ruined. There's no human connection among the people there any more. Suppose we're travelling on a train; we very often start a conversation on where we're going, how far and that sort of thing. This is more common when one's away from the cities, or on long journeys. There the scope for very long journeys doesn't exist, of course, but suppose you're on an hour long journey—no one is going to speak to you. And it's not because I'm an Indian. I've observed very carefully that even two Chinese never talk to each other. I mean, I've really seen the ultimate heights of capitalism and I felt a kind of terror, you know. What if the same thing happens to India? And I am terrified that it very likely will. I feel that as a socially responsible person I must do something about it. These are the factors that tempted me to do this play, I think.

Since the lack of singing had affected Probir this strongly, it was predictable that he would start the workshop with songs on the morning of 16 January. The Ecumenical Social and Industrial Institute (ESII) was our venue for these fifteen days—Yusuf Mandal, a long time theatre activist from rural Bardhaman and a friend of ALT, works there. We started with a beautiful Baul song from him, followed by a chorus by all of us. Then Ashok, a friend from the Bangalore based Madhyam, who is acting as tour manager for this production, sang a philosophical Kannada number. Then it was the turn of the Hongkong men and Probir definitely wasn't ready to let them off. One of them, Paul Lee Chi Man—Man to all of us—is an extremely resourceful musician who plays several instruments and is quick to pick up almost any instrument. His suggestion was that he play something, but no—Probir wanted a song. After quite a bit of memory hunting, finally our Hongkong friends came up with an English song that used to be a favourite at middle school level and we teased them about not finding a Cantonese song. Anyway, after songs came the introductions. Probir, the only one who knew everybody, introduced us to each other with short profiles of each of us. Then the five actors were asked to interact among themselves. Ruma wanted this to be a closed door session with only the five of them. So I don't know what happened, except that outside

on the fields we could occasionally hear the saxophone (presumably played by Man) and drums (either Man or Bapan might have played them) and tabla (presumably played by Bapan). But after lunch break, we all assembled for a script reading session.

That's when the fun began. The actors themselves distributed the lines amongst themselves, each one becoming one particular voice. Probir knew that he would have to work with five actors, so the script had been worked out with five voices in mind. But each actor was struggling with English—both those from India and Hongkong—and my task for the coming few days got fixed then and there: helping the actors with pronunciation, meanings and constant on-the-spot editing and substitution to make the language as simple as possible. There was an added problem for the Hongkong actors—there's no 'r' in Cantonese and they fumbled pathetically whenever there was a word with an 'r' in it. This struggle continued for two days and then Probir decided to quit English and stick to Cantonese and Bengali only.

Probir strictly believes that language should not prove a barrier in the acceptability of a production; but I saw certain problems in his decision to abandon English. When it's a play about an Indian context or a national issue that is familiar to an Indian audience, maybe body language and other performance techniques can overcome the language barrier. But this was a play with a very different focus and there were too many references to issues and incidents not immediately identifiable by an Indian audience. That's why I thought that verbal communication would have to play a significant role here. I argued my point and Probir agreed.

We were back to working with the script again. Finally, we managed to identify certain key areas which would be said in English also, so as to supply clues to the audience about the issues in focus. The script as it is performed today is mostly in Bengali and simultaneous Cantonese translation, with only some bits in English. There's one small chunk in Hindi and Cantonese and some bits and pieces in only English or in English and Cantonese.

The performance techniques used in the play changed a lot because of this decision about the languages and almost none of the directorial narrations in the original base script are in use. The way the Diaoyu sequence is performed today can be cited in this context. Probir uses the Brechtian 'break the performance technique' here to introduce the Diaoyu issue (which is totally unfamiliar to Indians). As soon as the first reference to Diaoyu occurs, Ruma breaks out of character to ask, 'Diaoyu? What's Diaoyu?' And then it goes as follows:

MAN (*in English*). Oh, you don't know what Diaoyu is? Okay, okay, I'll explain. Hey Indy, come here, hold this—you become the island.

PRINCE, come on, come on—you hold this. (*Man holds a board that reads 'Japan' and Prince holds one that reads 'Taiwan' on one side and 'China' on the other.*) Okay, this is Diaoyu—a small island near Hongkong.

RUMA (*in Bengali to Bapan*). Oh, Diaoyu is a small island near Hongkong.

PRINCE (*in English*). It is between Japan (*Man points to the board in his hand*) and Taiwan (*Prince points to the board in his hand which is now showing 'Taiwan'*).

BAPAN (*in Bengali to Ruma*). Oh, it's between Hongkong and Taiwan.

MAN (*in English*). Japan and China (*the board in Prince's hand now shows 'China'*)—both want to occupy this island. So, they fight.

*Movements by Man and Prince to signify Sino-Japanese clash, but they miss each other.*

RUMA (*in English to Man*). But why do they fight over such a small island?

MAN (*in English*). Because of oil—oil.

RUMA (*in Bengali to Bapan*). Oh, there's oil on this island.

PRINCE (*in English*). And money—money.

BAPAN (*in Bengali to Ruma*). And money also.

MAN (*in English*). And dignity, dignity of the country.

RUMA AND BAPAN (*in Bengali*). Right—honour of the country.

MAN AND PRINCE (*in English*). So, they fight.

*The same movements to signify Sino-Japanese clash, but this time they meet and continue fighting over Indy's shoulders till he straightens up to break them apart with a long scream.*

INDY (*in English*). Leave me alone. I belong to nobody. Let me remain as I am.

*Bapan and Ruma come forward to join the other three.*

BAPAN AND RUMA (*in Bengali*). Even though our newspapers don't cover it, Diaoyu is a burning problem of south east Asia today.

*The actors get back into position.*

4. Whom will Diaoyu belong to?

CHORUS. Japan! No, never! China—Diaoyu belongs to China.

The Renny Brigenza sequence is also illustrative of how the multilingual aspect modified the play. Probir had originally planned to use Ruma and the Hongkong actress for this role, only to subsequently discover that there would be no Hongkong actress. The plan then became to distribute the Cantonese version of Ruma's lines between all three Hongkong actors, but it didn't work. The impact of Renny's monologue was being totally lost. Finally, Probir decided that the gist of Renny's monologue would be spoken in third person by Man in Cantonese—so the technique changed to Man listening to Ruma as if he understood what she was saying and then translating it for the benefit of the others. I was called in to work out the lines in English, so that Man could then translate them into Cantonese. In the original script, this sequence was as follows:

*One actress steps out to enact the following character. The monologue will have simultaneous Hindi and Cantonese interpretations.*

RENNY. My name is Renny Brigenza. Though I lived in Goa, a place for wealthy tourists to come and go, I always suffered from the lack of money. Dad's an asthma patient. My mother died when I was only three. In a family of one brother and four sisters, I am the youngest. With the help of a Bombay—now Mumbai—based agency, I now possess a domestic helper's visa in Hongkong. I have to sign government papers stating that I earn four thousand two hundred and fifty Hongkong dollars every month. But in reality all I get is just five hundred Hongkong dollars. According to the contract, I'm supposed to work only eight hours a day, and my employer is supposed to be in charge of my board, lodging and clothes. But of course, I actually have to work twenty-four hours instead of eight. My food is only left overs. I sleep in the dining space. My mistress donates me my clothes. Dresses she can no longer wear are what I have to make do with. When she goes visiting to her motherland, I have to be the master's bed partner. Sometimes I have to do his friend's work and be his bed partner as well. All this just to keep them pleased with me. So what if it's only five hundred dollars? In my country that means two thousand five hundred rupees! Had I worked as a domestic help back home, I could have earned five hundred rupees a month, at best. Now I earn five hundred dollars. Which means two thousand five hundred Indian rupees. It may not be enough to bring wide smiles to the faces of my siblings and others, but it's not too bad either . . . Every year I think, this time I'll go back to my own country. I won't renew my domestic helper's contract. But each year I sign afresh on that contract. Because the members of my family, their neighbours—they all know that Renny works in Hongkong—big job—a flat, a car—lots of maids and servants. No



*China and Japan fighting over the occupation of Diaoyu island.*

one knows that Renny is a maid herself. And the most tragic point is that in Hongkong Indians like me are exploited by other Indians.

In the final performance script, this sequence has a painting of a Goa beach with a couple of expensive whisky bottles and a green coconut shell set on one side of the stage with Prince (Wong Sai Kwan) and Indy (Lee Chun Leung) frozen in a particular pose, as if they're part of the painting. Man sits on a chair listening to Ruma and translating once she finishes. Every time he speaks, Prince and Indy change position and freeze again. The long monologue is now broken up and the script reads as follows, with Renny's lines coming in Bengali and Man's in Cantonese:

RENNY. My name is Renny Brigenza.

MAN. Her name is Renny Brigenza.

RENNY. Though I lived in Goa, a place for wealthy tourists to come and go, I always suffered from the lack of money.

MAN. From Goa in India. Poor.

RENNY. Dad's an asthma patient. My mother died when I was only three. In a family of one brother and four sisters, I am the youngest.

MAN. Sick father. Mother dead.

RENNY. With the help of a Bombay—now Mumbai—based agency, I now possess a domestic helper's visa in Hongkong. I have to sign government papers stating that I earn four thousand two hundred and fifty Hongkong dollars every month. But in reality all I get is just five hundred Hongkong dollars.

MAN. She signs for 4250 Hongkong dollars. But gets only 500 HK



*Ruma as Renny Brigenza, complete with the setting for the sequence.*

dollars.

RENNY. According to the contract, I'm supposed to work only eight hours a day, and my employer is supposed to be in charge of my board, lodging and clothes.

MAN. Her contract is to work 8 hours a day. Also to get food, lodging and clothes.

RENNY. But of course, actually I have to work all twenty-four hours



instead of eight. As food I get only leftovers. I sleep in the dining space. My mistress donates me my clothes. Dresses she can no longer wear are what I have to make do with.

MAN. But she works all day. Doesn't get proper food or sleeping space or clothes.

RENNY. When she goes visiting to her motherland, I have to be the master's bed partner. Sometimes I have to do his friend's work and be his bed partner as well. All this just to keep them pleased with me.

MAN. Has to be master's bed partner! And his friend's too.

RENNY. So what if it's only five hundred dollars? In my country that means two thousand five hundred rupees! Had I worked as a domestic help back home, I would have earned five hundred rupees a month at best. Now I earn five hundred dollars. Which means two thousand five hundred Indian rupees. It may not be enough to bring wide smiles to the faces of my siblings and others—but it's not too bad.

MAN. But she stays for the money. Five hundred HK dollars mean 2500 Indian rupees.

RENNY. Every year I think, this time I'll go back to my own country. I won't renew my domestic helper's contract. But each year I sign afresh on that contract. Because the members of my family, their neighbours—they all know that Renny works in Hongkong—big job—a flat, a car—lots of maids and servants. No one knows that



*Man in freeze while Renny's monologue goes on.*

Renny is a maid herself.

MAN. Her family thinks she's rich. Doesn't know she is a maid.

BAPAN. And the most tragic point is that, in Hongkong Indians like Renny are exploited by other Indians.

MAN. Indians like her are exploited by other Indians in Hongkong.

CHORUS. Renny, what will you do now?

*Exit Renny with movements signifying pain. Humming from Probir to accompany her*

*movements.*

Probir made it clear to all the participants that he did not want these two weeks to be just a rehearsal period; in other words, he did not want to direct till the actors had worked out the entire script in some form or other. 'Unless you force me to think, I'll not think for you and offer you directions that you simply have to enact'—these were his words to the actors after the script reading session.

On that note we broke up for the day to visit the Baul *mela* that happens in nearby Joydev-Kenduli every year on the last day of the first winter month of Bengal. Probir wanted the Hongkong men to absorb as much live music as possible! After dinner that night we had quite a question-answer session with the Hongkong men firing questions at me about Joydev, the bauls, the ideology and practice of *melas* and what not!

On 17 January, the morning session started with warm up exercises and I observed a very interesting pattern emerge from these entirely free improvisations. The Hongkong men started their own movements and the Indians joined them with their exercises. It was rather interesting to watch how the movements of the two groups, disparate at first, were gradually synthesized. At one point, Indy, one of the Hongkong actors, was left out of the group movements and he assumed a role which forced the other four to gradually draw him in again. At one point Man left the performance area to play the saxophone and sometimes the flute, and the other four continued to improvise to that music. Once there was a sudden change from the music to vocalized animal sounds. Then there were a series of movements that signified fun, temptation, love making, ecstasy, battle, with the team divided into the hunter and the hunted, to fatigue and then back to quiet bliss again. The animal sounds stopped as suddenly as they had begun and the flute was back. Then the movements again changed to grouping together against attack, the music stopped and Man came back into the performance area.

For me, one aspect of all these improvisations was rather intriguing. With just one woman in the group, the compositions/choreography could sometimes be interpreted to signify isolation, domination and abuse. But the expressions of the actors uniformly ranged from immense agony (but in Ruma's case, *not* as after some form of physical/sexual abuse) to ecstasy, with frequent alterations. As Probir kept watching what they were doing, he kept making notes on possible compositions—some of which are now in use in the performance as it stands today. The notes he made on my note pad went like this: 'A ship's siren—Man on the sax. Movements by the three HK actors, attracting with coloured cloth pieces. Bapan and Ruma—right corner, both attracted by the colours, longing to mingle with them. Move away rejected—try again. Robust, irresistible movements, tiring everybody out—sudden freeze. Animal sounds with voice. On each other's backs in two pairs—to be used.'

Script reading continued in the post lunch session, and Probir had already begun making changes. Mainly due to the actors' problem with English, he began cutting out what he called 'extra flesh'. Basically, he was making the lines as simple as he could. For example, the beginning originally was:

1. Night descends all over south Asia on the cobra's dark hood. This time, at the whole of Asia we shan't look, only Hongkong we shall note.

2. But why not Afghanistan? An unruly fountain of blood reigns there now. The false particles of sand are soaked in dried blood.

3. Rabbani, Masood, Dostam, Taliban.

4. And at times, Pakistan.

5. Or Sri Lanka.

1. Human bombs, suicide squads, the ocean and jungles.

2. Explosions, shots, gun powder and smoke.

3. The LTTE or government soldiers.

4. Sri Lankan cricket—world champions.

5. Jayasuriya's sixers versus the explosion of human bombs. Which of the two has stronger sound effects?

CHORUS. J-a-y-a-s-u-r-i-y-a.

In the afternoon script reading session, this was trimmed to:

1. Night descends all over south Asia on the cobra's dark hood. Not the whole of Asia, only Hongkong we shall note.
  2. Why not Afghanistan? Unruly fountain of blood. Sand soaked in blood.
  3. Rabbani, Masood, Dostam, Taliban.
  4. And at times, Pakistan.
  5. Or Sri Lanka.
1. Human bombs, suicide squads.
  5. Jayasuriya's sixers.

CHORUS. J-a-y-a-s-u-r-i-y-a.

After tea break, the actors decided to go on with improvisations rather than with the script reading. I found it rather strange that they chose not to go through the whole script once before they started compositions and movements. They were taking chunks of the script and improvising on them. Ruma was leading this particular session, suggesting movements and compositions. But sometime later, the Hongkong team also wanted to try out their ideas, and two sets of choreographers were prepared on the first bit of the script. When Probir was watching these later in the evening, he took the decision to reject English.

Throughout the next two days, script reading and improvisations continued alternately. They were continuing to take up chunks of the script and work on them. As observer-cum-facilitator I kept feeling that the choreography, movements and lines were lacking in strength and conviction because the actors were not getting into the mood of the whole script, which wasn't surprising at all, since none of them had read nor absorbed it in its entirety. The team was coming up with disjointed, sometimes interesting, sometimes uninspiring, bits and pieces of acting and composition.

For a person who claims to have felt so disgusted with the heights of capitalist consumerism in Hongkong, Probir did prefer to rely a bit too much on some of those 'capitalistic' devices, at the cost of valuable time, which was a crucial element, as getting the whole thing ready in just fifteen days was by no means easy. To cite an instance, Probir preferred to stay away for the major part of the first week, watching the experiments on video (Grad, who'd come with the actors as Mok Chiu Yu's deputy was handling the video camera). His presence, I feel, was particularly necessary on two counts: because of the language barrier between the two sets of actors, and also to emphasize the need to take in the whole script, particularly since a lot of things in the script came out of his own experience and analysis. The Hongkong actors, in fact, asked me several times about the reasons for his absence and also frequently came up with a variety of questions about different elements in the script. I answered as best I could, but if it's a script with which you don't agree in parts, then there's always the chance of wrong interpretation. The Indian team also was beginning to sulk at times because, I feel, they were not always sure about how to proceed. The general cause of tension was over the fact that the Hongkong actors preferred to get 'underneath' the script, so to speak. They wanted to explore and understand the script in its entirety, before beginning to improvise. But the Indians wanted to carry on with movements and improvisations. They were worried, because the director had decreed that by the evening of 22 January, the acting team was to present their rendering of the entire play.

On the morning of 20 January, the warm up exercises started with the Indian duo demonstrating some Yoga exercises to their Hongkong partners; and then the latter introduced a game they call cat and mouse (very different from the way kids play it here) which was funny and stimulating. For the first time, the director started intervening directly, suggesting alterations in the movements and compositions as well as in the rendering of the lines. My role changed to that of the prompter.

It was raining by the time the post-lunch session started, so we went indoors for a long script reading session. The actors finally came to read the entire script. This session also brought out some of the tensions that were already smouldering between the two



*Above. The Hongkong actors begin the first movements.  
Below. The Indians, attracted but unsure.*

groups of actors.

One either needs mature actors, experienced in multilingual and multicultural activities to successfully avoid such tensions, or a director who can by his personality and intervention diffuse them. Probir certainly wasn't doing this; in fact I don't think he was even aware of the tensions that were constantly being created—maybe he didn't sense them as sharply as I did since he was hardly there. This was a team of young actors, after all, all of whom, except Man, are in their early twenties and working on this kind of a collaboration for the first time. Small things got blown out of proportion. Since most of the script was now in Bengali alternated with Cantonese, and since neither of the two teams of actors had a clue about the other's language, it was essential that any change one made in one's dialogue—even in the breaks, if lines were being spoken alternately—be immediately communicated to the others. But this did not happen, and I must say that the Indians slipped up badly in this respect. They were changing the breaks in their lines without intimating their Hongkong friends, and the latter suddenly found themselves with one extra line or a line less after a chunk. No one was doing anything deliberately, but things like this continued to happen. These are big 'little things' that need attention in multicultural, multilingual collaborative productions, if they are to be truly participatory. Otherwise the process remains a pseudo-partnership where skills and bodies come together without enriching minds and broadening horizons. Something each of the Hongkong actors told me comes to my mind in this context: they felt that knowing each other and understanding the script together was more important than going on with movements and compositions as the acting team could only convey the feelings in the script convincingly to the audience after they themselves had come to a consensus about it. This kind of understanding does affect performance, especially when none of the major languages used are accessible to the audience it's meant for. Moreover, without this kind of mutual understanding, there's really no collaborative production—just a joint display of skills.

Anyway, once the actors presented their rendering of the whole script to us on the 22nd evening, Probir's work of blocking, editing, crystallizing and synthesizing began in earnest. On the 23rd morning we started with the actors demonstrating 15 different compositions. These were just free compositions that they came up with, but some of them were then used in the production. This was a hectic week, with constant changes in the script (cutting out chunks of it, groping for linking sentences), the gradual introduction of props, the finalizing of the music, and frayed nerves and fatigued bodies.

Two interesting changes were introduced at this stage. The lack of an actress from Hongkong had necessitated that one of the men play the Cantonese version of Mok Chai. Somehow Prince had come to play that role. Feeling that something was necessary to signify that he was playing a woman in these sequences, I suggested a mask for him. Probir agreed. But as he was polishing up the Foo-Mok Chai sequences, we both felt that if both Mok Chais wore masks, it would go very well with the way the characters of Foo and Mok Chai had been conceived. In the script, Mok Chai and Foo are like alter egos who complement each other—Foo the romantic and Mok Chai the hard-core realist. It somehow added a different dimension to have both Mok Chais in masks and both Foes without them. Probir added new lines to underline the complementary nature of the characters of Foo and Mok Chai.

The other last-moment change that I found stimulating was the use of puppets in one of the military camp sequences. Originally, this sequence between two Indian soldiers was being played by Bapan and Indy, with the former speaking in Bengali and the latter in English. But Probir finally decided that the poignancy of the scene was being lost in this crosslingual conversation. Also, he was keen that his audience in Hongkong get all the lines at this point. So he got Ruma and Bapan to do the two guards and had Indy and Prince do the lines in Cantonese, using masks and clothpieces together to create the image of hand puppets. It may sound simple, but the actors had to get used to a whole new set of strategies to make this sequence work.

As we were heading back to Calcutta on the morning of 30 January for the premiere



*Above. 'What'll happen if I take this uniform off?'*  
*Below. '... Even to draw another Guernica, you*  
*need dollars today'—Mok Chai warns Foo*

the next day, I still felt that we were in need of more rehearsals, although we had had two trial shows, so to speak. One was in a nearby village where we were invited for an afternoon of discussion on alternative theatre—the first half-hour of the play was presented there. The other was on the 29th evening for the staff of ESII and their families.

To round up, let me go back to my interview with Probir:

**PB:** When the culture of Hongkong repelled you so strongly, how come you felt inspired enough to do a collaborative production with people from that country?

**PG:** That really is an interesting point. First of all, I believe that our basic task is to change the negative into something positive. It's because the situation in Hongkong is so bad that we need to make attempts at improving it. We wouldn't have to bother if the situation there was already good. I just felt that we should contribute something towards changing the situation in Hongkong today. That's been one source of inspiration for me. The other source comprises the people I'm working with. They're a special lot. I mean, they are like aliens in their own country. They are very, very different from the general people of Hongkong. They think differently, they perceive things very differently, their values are very different. For instance, every member in this group is very concerned about India, about Indian people, about Indian culture—which has inspired me very much. Or their friends whom I met at Club 64—they are also different. They don't like the way things are going in Hongkong; they dream about a very different Hongkong. The other thing that prompted me to take up this project was that, I have a personal crisis about my roots. I was born in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, but my growing up and active life has been here in India. Even here I haven't stayed for more than ten years in any one place. So I also feel like a migrant. That's why I felt tempted to address the question of migration.

**PB:** In what way do you think this play is relevant for today's India?

**PG:** Well, I wanted to make people sensitive to all the insults they invite when they migrate. The other thing is that, there're migrants here also. People from Bangladesh, for instance. Or inter-state migration. We don't always treat such migrants kindly or with respect. I hope that this play can make people think twice about that also.

*Photographs of the production by Naveen Kishore*

## The Actors

### **Paramita Banerjee talks to the five actors during the workshop.**

**Lee Chun Leung (Indy):** Twenty-five year old Indy is a fresh graduate from the Hongkong Academy of Performing Arts (henceforth HAPA), the only educational institution in the country for studying performative arts. He has studied 'directing' as a major in the drama school of HAPA. His formal name means 'the handsome moon', but he prefers to call himself Indy—a name he had chosen for himself after seeing the movie Indiana Jones. 'Before I joined HAPA, I had no idea about theatre,' he says, 'because the high school where I studied had a drama club, but their performances were no good. They just went blah-blah-blah . . . and I found it so boring!' But just out of curiosity he joined a mime workshop after finishing secondary school and discovered that theatre 'was a very good experience—a lot of imagination. And also, I learnt a lot about myself—my body, my mind, my feelings . . . how to express them and communicate to others.' The trainer in this workshop that changed Indy into a theatre person was Philip Fok, a popular Hongkong mime artist who has since migrated to Australia. Today Indy believes in the kind of theatre that has a message, but is still artistically fulfilling and he took up directing as a major as he felt that it gave him better scope to create the kind of theatre that he likes. Serious, thoughtful, Indy prefers to survive as a freelancing actor for the moment, since joining any of the professional theatre companies would mean leading a life 'that's just like school—rehearsals, performance, rehearsals, performance . . .' Life as a freelance actor is not easy, but it's not too difficult either as there aren't too many trained actors there as yet.

Indy joined this project as it gives him a chance to travel in different south Asian countries and interact with the people there. He had seen earlier performances organized by the APTFS and had also participated in the workshops organized by the APTFS when he was still a student at HAPA. Since Indy believes in a kind of theatre that seeks to address relevant socio-political issues, he's keen to find out what he can about the so-called people's theatre movement. That's why he's in this project. Problems of identity and the ambivalence that surrounds June 1997 are issues that he finds knotty and wants to explore. He felt that this collaborative effort would give him a chance to do that.

To my question about how he was feeling about the project after a week of working with Probir and his actors, his response was: 'To communicate with people from other countries is hard work. Because the cultural backgrounds are so different, you need a lot more effort both to be able to listen and to talk. It's so interesting that sometimes we say the same thing, but we mean different things because our cultures are so different. Sometimes it's difficult to come up with improvisations without the director intervening, because it's not just Ruma and Bapan who are new—Prince, Man and Indy are also working together for the first time. So it's five different minds, really, and it's difficult to understand the script, to get the feeling of the script or its orientation. Maybe we can come up with improvisations, but we cannot always get what's there in the script between the lines . . . the subtext, so to speak. . . It's interesting to come up with our own visualizations, but to have common visuals, we need to understand the script together first. I feel that the director . . . could help us first in reaching such a shared comprehension . . . There are many, many different things combined in the script, many different contexts, many different images, many different stories and pictures. I like the form of the script, but I feel even now that we haven't understood the entire script—we do not have a common understanding. I personally have just started to digest the script; the emotions are just coming. Our approaches to the rehearsal process have also been very different. We haven't had enough time to solve all these problems. Maybe when Probir comes in, we'll have more stimulation.' When I probed deeper and asked him directly whether it had so far been an experience that he would like to repeat or one that he would take care to avoid, his response was: 'I'd like to repeat my experience with multicultural ventures, but certainly with much more preparation on my part so that I know how to deal better with the new culture I'll be facing.'

**Paul Lee Chi Man** describes himself as a labourer who does anything he can when he has no money, but prefers to survive as a freelance actor. He does a lot of educative theatre work, community theatre work, theatre with disabled persons, scriptwriting etc. A graduate from HAPA with a major in acting, Man had been working as a salesman after high school and hated it. One moon-drenched night of soul searching convinced him that his personality was suitable for performance. So he quit his job the next day and found a theatre company to work with. He had been involved with community theatre, experimental theatre and mime for four or five years before he joined the Academy for his formal training.

After ten years of a performer's life, he has no regrets; rather, he feels that he has gained many



things. Most of all, he feels that he can be himself in theatre and only in theatre. Man likes all kinds of theatre, whether it's classical drama, commercial theatre with pure entertainment in view, community or educative theatre with definite purposes and messages to deliver, or experimental theatre seeking to discover new dimensions of this art form. 'I like theatre because it's direct communication and different kinds of theatre give me different things. It totally depends on my mood, when I like what kind of theatre. . . I can learn a lot from all these different styles. I enjoy the process of theatre more than the end result. . . I don't want to isolate myself from any form of theatre. . . the kind of theatre is not my concern, my concern is quality.'

Since he himself introduced the concept of 'people's theatre' in his elaborations of why each variety of theatre was equally important to him, I asked him what he meant by 'people's theatre'. His response was: 'I define people's theatre as the kind of theatre that is concerned with people's concerns like social welfare or even social behaviour and values . . . How to make people more conscious, more aware of things happening around them, how to make them more sensitive to human problems—that is the main concern of people's theatre.' Asked if he is involved in the people's theatre movement in Hongkong, Man responded with—'Yes, Mok Chiu Yu'—in his characteristic tone of buffoonery. But when prodded, he explained that he really was connected with this movement both because he thinks that there are issues that need to be brought into focus and because he himself wants to learn more through this process.

Throughout the two weeks that we were in Durgapur, Man established himself as the clown of the group who refused to take anything seriously. It had to be Man who walked straight into a ditch on our way back from the village performance just because he didn't want to see where he was going. Did that teach him a lesson? Certainly not! He was overjoyed to come back in a brand new lungi and a pair of new socks, trailing his filth-drenched shoes and clothes behind him. But then, Man also established himself as the most versatile of the lot—an expert juggler, someone who can play almost any musical instrument and can do so many little things with his own bits of characterization—that one had to notice him. No wonder then that his response to my question about how he came into this particular project was a jocular 'I've clean forgotten, actually.' But I was persuasive enough to revive his memory. Man had actually been involved in Mok's *Big Wind* project also, and Mok asked him if he wanted to participate in this one. Man's trip to India to perform *Big Wind* made him want to come back here. He had also liked what he had seen of ALT's work then. And of course, 'I was in the right mood. So . . .'. But this forever joking character vanishes and a different Man appears every time he takes up his saxophone or his jee yu (a double stringed Chinese instrument played with a bow). Then he becomes a study in absolute absorption.

I tried to get Man to talk about his experience with *Big Wind*. But he wouldn't say anything beyond 'very complicated'. A lot of probing brought out the response that he had found it both very difficult and enjoyable. He loved working with so many actors from different countries, but he didn't like either the use of English in the script or the very American style of the script. He felt that the director's attitude was that of an outsider's and that he wasn't ready to change. Compared to that, he found this present collaboration much simpler as it involved only two countries. Also, he thought that Probir as a director was more open and Man liked the fact that Probir had gone beyond the problem of Indian migrants in Hongkong to raise more basic questions in the script. Man thought it was very good that English had been rejected as the major language of performance. But he felt that the actors not knowing enough about each other's work was a handicap which could not be eliminated, because of the time restraint. He felt that they all needed to be less rushed to learn more from this collaborative effort. The creative potential of all the actors could not be explored fully within such a short time. Also, because the time was so limited, he felt that the director needed to be with them from the very beginning, not to do the actors' thinking for them, but to help synthesize their very different energy levels, skills and understanding.

**Wong Sai Kwan (Prince):** This quiet, unassuming and yet mischievous actor is also a fresh graduate from the drama school of HAPA. He had studied ballet and modern dance for six to seven years before joining the Academy. As a teenager he saw the classical *Swan Lake* and was so bowled over that he gave himself the name Prince and went on to join a dance school. But in secondary school, he joined the school drama club and found theatre to be even more inspiring than dance. He feels that theatre offers one the constant scope to know more about life, about oneself, and about other people. But he loves bringing dance techniques into his theatrical performances. He knows mime too, and combines elements from that as well. He feels that the body is very important in theatre, for effective communication. What to communicate can vary, but it has to be about life and love. As a believing Christian, he feels that these are the two most

important messages that need to be spread. However, he feels that it's not the time for him to start communicating his own ideas about life and love as they are not very clear yet. He wants to continue doing theatre to gather more experience and crystallize his own ideas in the process. Prince feels that he's in theatre because money is not very important to him, but agrees that it's possible to survive as a freelance actor in Hongkong.

Mok Chiu Yu emerged as the catalyst in bringing these actors together—Prince also got into this project through him. Prince had seen *Big Wind* and *Cry for Asia* and thought that such multicultural productions offered interesting challenges. The other reason for his liking these productions was that this was meaningful theatre seeking to communicate a definite point of view. So, when Mok asked him to join this project, he was only too willing. How did he feel about this script, then? Did he think it was meaningful? Prince responded with: 'I like the way the script addresses many problems and not just the problem of Indians in Hongkong . . . And I think that the script is romantic. The idea of the picture—Guernica—I like that. I wish many things could be solved like that, through similar dreams. Not that the script offers any solutions, the problems are still there. But the dream, the hope—that's what I like.'

Was his involvement in the project matching up with the expectations he had? Prince responded with: 'Not bad, but not very good.' He hadn't enjoyed the rehearsal procedure. For him, multicultural collaboration should mean exchange of ideas among the participants, which should involve serious debates and arguments. That's the only way to clinch issues and resolve cultural and ideational differences to reach a consensus. Then only can a production be truly participatory. But these two weeks to him hadn't been stimulating in that sense as the emphasis seemed to be much more on going on with reading the script and doing compositions—no interest in sharing the feelings that the script evoked, no debates over possible interpretations. But he emphasized that he enjoyed interacting with all the Indians around him beyond rehearsal times. He felt an exchange of minds was possible there, but it was unfortunate that the same didn't happen among the five actors who formed the core team for this project. The other point that Prince had found very interesting is the way the concentration level of all the actors changed when Probir started handling the rehearsals himself. 'Maybe he should have been with us from the very beginning'

**Ruma Guha:** Probir's actress daughter has been working with him in theatre formally since 1988. She features in all ALT plays, but hadn't worked with any outsiders before. Being chosen for this production had her simultaneously excited and tense. The tension was because of English. 'How would I communicate with my co-actors from Hongkong with my kind of "I eat", "You go" English? Worse still was the fact that most of the script would be in English. With my pronunciation and everything, I was pretty sure that I'd end up being spanked by Baba for not remembering my lines and a bad performance.' Ruma's relief when English was cast aside was evident and I can vouchsafe that all the others shared her feelings about this. However, it's amusing that she also got most of the English lines that were retained, as hers proved to be the most clear and comprehensible pronunciation. How did she feel about the collaborative work? 'I'm very excited, as this is the first time that I'm working with people from a different country with very different backgrounds. I've also discovered that their English is just like mine, so that there's no problem. Initially, I think, they were finding it difficult to work with no director around them, but now we've reached a perfect balance and I'm sure that the three of them have enjoyed this last week of working together as much as Bapan and I have.' Just one rejoinder. Apart from working separately with Probir on her Renny Brigenza bit, young Ruma spent more than an hour talking to me about Renny—wanting to know how I understood Renny's situation, her thoughts, her feelings . . . and the next day I could see there and then how her curiosity had got translated into a superb portrayal of this very poignant character.

**Shib Shankar Saha (Bapan):** He got attracted to ALT after seeing their work, and later joined the group and became a full time theatre person. He has been with ALT since 1992 and features in all their plays. Like Ruma, he also was excited about his first ever collaborative work with outsiders. To him the challenge was to put up a performance that people would remember, 'but then, that's how I feel about all ALT productions.' He did not feel that Ruma and his acquaintance with Probir's work gave them any extra advantage over the Hongkong actors, 'because Probirda changes his thoughts and work methods with every new play. Every time it's something new. We like that challenge; we also try to think ahead every time. So, we are in the same boat as our friends from Hongkong—all five of us have to get adjusted to Probirda as the director of this play since they haven't worked with him before and we haven't worked with him in any joint venture before either.'

## 'I'm ready to perform for just one person'

Mok Chiu Yu, a People's Theatre activist from Hongkong and producer of *Yours Most Obediently*, in conversation with Paramita Banerjee in Calcutta on 3 January, 1997



Left. Mok on the *Big Wind* set and (Right) in a scene from a playlet performed in memory of the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989.

**PB:** Tell us about your involvement with theatre—how it began, the level of your involvement now, etc.

**MCY:** Okay, let's put it this way. When I was a university student, I was more of a political activist. I was a student at the University of Adelaide in Australia. It was the time of the Vietnam war, and initially I would just watch demonstrations, listen to campus talks, you know, but then gradually I got more involved. There wasn't much theatre in the university then. I still recall one occasion when a theatre group performed in our campus hall, which was a big one with 500 seats, and somehow I got a free ticket. And you know (*smiles*)—there were just seven of us who had gone there without paying—and there were so many people on stage . . . I don't remember what they performed, but they were performing for just the seven of us. Eventually this has had something to do with my theatre practice also, you know. I'm ready to perform for just one person . . . if there's even one person to watch a performance, I'm happy.

Somehow at the back of mind I've also conceived the possibility of performing in a prison or a bedroom, particularly when society becomes repressed, which may happen with the change of sovereignty . . . The kind of theatre I've been involved with since the early 1980s, I might need to be more discreet, doing theatre in my bedroom or ending up in jail (*laughs*). Anyway . . . so I graduated from the university and I came back to Hongkong in the late 60s and throughout the 70s I was more a political activist. In the early 70s I started a youth paper, something that you may call an alternative paper, something you find all over the world—young people trying to have their own voices articulated through their own publications. So I began to publish this radical youth paper and through it we organized demonstrations and rallies on a whole set of issues including, for example, the campaign for making Chinese an official language. Various campaigns—improving the social and living conditions in Hongkong and so on and so forth. One of these campaigns was the 'Protect Diaoyu' movement—we were very much the initiators of this movement in 1971. Diaoyu is an island off the coast of Taiwan that

Taiwan and China and Japan all claim sovereignty over. It was being returned to Japan by America, who had occupied this chain of islands during the Second World War. We considered that an imperialist conspiracy, turning a piece of Chinese land into a Japanese one. So we were shouting in the streets—we were doing it from an anti-imperialist angle and we saw it as part of the overall global opposition to American imperialism and all that, though I must say that there was a very nationalist faction within this movement. Then the issue kind of died down until recently again a second Diaoyu movement erupted—when Probir was in Hongkong in September 96, the movement was at its high point. There were some ten thousand people shouting in the streets against Japanese occupation of Chinese territory. But I myself and Foo and some of the old guard had a different opinion about the whole thing.

**PB:** In retrospect, how would you describe your political ideals back then?

**MCY:** We were influenced by the American neo-Left . . . or the neo-Left in general. We were reading Herbert Marcuse, Paul Goodman . . . all these underground newspapers from England, from Europe, from America.

**PB:** So, would you say that you were more a Euro-Communist than a Maoist one?

**MCY:** Yes. We have been against the Chinese bureaucracy for a long time. Because of our proximity to China, we always knew that China was propagating lies. So we were never Maoists, although there were Maoists in Hongkong. At the beginning, we were a very amorphous group; we would read and have debates, and we were influenced by some ex-Red Guards who came to Hongkong from overseas, including one who had connections with the Weather Man. But gradually our group split because of ideological differences. The split was basically between the Trotskyites and the more libertarian socialists, otherwise known also as anarchists. I belonged to that more anarchist faction. But the Protect Diaoyu movement is something that a pure anarchist would never join (*laughs*). Our ideas were progressing and changing. . . Anyway, as I was telling you, we were getting all these papers from the West, like the *Berkeley Blurb*, the *Los Angeles Free Press* and so on. Now, some of these newspapers reported a very interesting group called the Living Theatre of Julian Beck and Judith Malina, you know. They seemed to be a very interesting group—the way they used theatre as action . . .

I wasn't actually involved in any theatre throughout the 70s when I was a political activist. I must tell you, though, that from 1974 onwards I was a high school teacher—a full-time teacher of economics and political science, at the same time trying to be involved in publishing, in writing, in getting various activities organized. In the 70s we'd been involved in movements that expressed support and solidarity with the dissidents in China—people who fought for more democracy in China. We were using rallies, meetings, leaflets . . . but no theatre at all. In 1979, I had the opportunity of going to Europe and there, in Milan, I met the Living Theatre group who were still performing there—a play called *Seven Meditations on Political Sadomasochism*. I was very impressed, although they were doing it in Italian, which I hardly knew. But Julian and Judith and another guy—Ilian—they were good enough to interpret before and afterwards. So I was impressed and felt this itchiness about why we couldn't do something like this in Hongkong.

**PB:** While you were a political activist, was there any kind of political or activist theatre in Hongkong? You may not have been involved, but did it exist?

**MCY:** I'd say that there was very little theatre in Hongkong. I'm not talking about the traditional Cantonese opera, which is popular among the masses and has a wide audience, although every now and then we say that young people are not interested in it, you know. But it's always been there in a big way. I'm talking about the other kind of theatre, the so-called modern theatre—there was very little of that.

In fact, if you look at the whole Hongkong situation, we've had International Arts Festivals for more than twenty years, but in the beginning, in the 60s and the 70s, all these festivals were filled with imported performances. It was some 10 . . . or maybe more, can't remember exactly . . . about 15 years ago that the Hongkong government

decided to support the first repertory theatre. Meanwhile there were a few so-called amateur theatre groups. And there were some groups set up by students involved in the Protect Diaoyu movement, which put up plays that had some kind of a social commentary. But by and large, they would have one or two performances a year. So there wasn't really much political theatre of the kind we're talking about . . . So, in 1979 when I saw Julian Beck and his Living Theatre, I thought well, that's great!

Meanwhile I went to England to do a counselling course. During the weekends I'd go to London and see plays, and I'd also see plays around my school campus. Also in my course, you know, we had psycho drama or psycho theatrics and that kind of thing became very interesting.

The first thing I did when I got back to Hongkong after this one year in Europe was to get involved in theatre, initially with one of the student groups, though the people involved were no longer students. The group was called . . . let me see . . . well I've even forgotten the name (*laughs*). We were doing a play called *Fanshen*. This Chinese phrase—*fanshen*—means turning your body so that you're no longer a slave, no longer poor and exploited, you're liberated. It's a book written by William Hilton, a great supporter of Mao. But then a playwright in England called David Hare developed a play from this book and we were doing this play—we translated it into Cantonese and I was invited to join as an actor. Basically, you know, my hair had gone totally white during this one year in Europe and the director of this group saw my hair and said, 'You're the right man for my play' without telling me why. I came to know that it was because of my hair because I got it dyed (*laughs*) as my wife said that I looked very old and all that . . . and the disappointment of the director! Anyway, I did that role all the same.

Almost at the same time, my political friends and myself were experimenting with a performance—with theatre and also teaming up with a rock-and-roll band called the Black Bird. So these two groups developed—the Black Bird who would bring out CDs (originally it was audio tapes) and at the same time we formed this Hongkong People's Theatre Group. The first play we did was a discourse about 1997—about this take over. Already in the early 80s we were talking about what would happen. In fact, that play is called *1984-1997* . . . Somehow we saw then that there was going to be a similarity between the Big Brother state that George Orwell wrote about and what'll happen to Hongkong in 1997. Of course, since the communist takeover of China, there's been all those things that Orwell wrote about—the Big Brother was there, watching all along. Which is not to say that in the capitalist world there are no such features, but they appear there in a different way.

**PB:** Did someone write this script, or was it more like a group activity?

**MCY:** It was more like a group activity. We evolved the script together. Sometimes someone would be directing, someone else would do it at some other time—it was like that. It's been a kind of practice that we adopted, and we were doing mostly original plays.

**PB:** Was this the first play performed under the banner of the Hongkong People's Theatre Group?

**MCY:** Yes.

**PB:** Do you remember which year it was?

**MCY:** The first version, I think, was in 1981, but there was a subsequent version of the same play. Let me try and remember some of the other plays that we did . . . Well, the others I can remember are not original plays (*laughs*). We adapted a couple of plays by Safdar Hashmi—*Halla Bol* and *Machine*—under the direction of Mamunar Rashid from Bangladesh. We did *Halla Bol* in 1992.

**PB:** Was this a collaborative project with Bangladesh?

**MCY:** No, he had come over for this festival and we got him to direct these two plays for us. His group is called Aranyak. This was one of our first attempts at adapting plays from neighbouring Asian countries. The other play we did which was not original was

the *Story of the Tiger* by Dario Fo. But we did it with Czech puppets. From the very beginning we were using masks and puppets. In our first play also we used masks, and we'd adopted what the Living Theatre was doing—we wore red T-shirts and black jeans. We were doing it as non-proscenium.

Actually, the kind of philosophy we'd adopted from the very beginning was similar to that of Badal Sircar—that the proscenium was bourgeois. Of course, I've seen Badal Sircar's work only very recently; our influence had come from the Living Theatre and the West . . . So we developed this kind of theatre to express our political message. Sometimes student groups invited us and sometimes women's groups too, and we performed for them and we sometimes involved them in the performance.

**PB:** What's the structure of this group?

**MCY:** Changing all the time, because we don't have a membership system. But a core group has always been there—about 7/8 people, I'd say. But we can always rely on other people—sympathizers—and the Black Bird group whenever we call them. Our biggest productions involve maybe just 20, not more.

**PB:** Do you have women in your group?

**MCY:** Yes, there are women also. In Hongkong there isn't that kind of stigma against women performing, although it was there in the Chinese tradition. But looking back at the political movement that I was involved with, there were definitely more men than women—it's always been so, I think . . .

Now, we were very eclectic in our approach. We were using masks, we were using rock and roll music, puppets . . . sometimes it would just be a puppet show, but at other times it would be more like a puppet theatre with huge puppets. We were using large puppets in the 80s. We made huge puppets of Deng Xiao Ping and at the end of the show the audience would shout, 'Burn him, burn him'—which we did, of course.

**PB:** Since you could do this sort of thing, let me ask about the economics of these performances. What was that like? How could you afford to burn puppets at every performance, for example?

**MCY:** Everything we were doing was very, very cheap. We charged no money, but sometimes the organizers paid us. And because everybody involved in it was engaged in some kind of employment, we were able to contribute the money required. We were basically doing theatre out of our own pockets. There wasn't anything like government funding till a few years back. And then again, we used to say that theatre should be free, affordable by the proletarians—that kind of approach.

**PB:** Does this group still exist? Are you still involved? Are you working on any new play?

**MCY:** Yes to both. We've been doing one play, actually, which is based on a Taiwanese script—the story of a playwright after the Kuomintang takeover of Taiwan during the Second World War, when China recovered Taiwan, so to speak, from the Japanese. We adapted this play, but we've changed it in so many different ways that the playwright won't recognize it. We've put in a lot of material that corresponds to the situation in Hongkong right now. It's called *The Crumbling Ivory Tower*. We've actually done a few shows—once in Macao, several times on campuses, once for women's groups when they held a meeting about 1997 and the future of women in Hongkong after 1997. And we want to do more shows of this, because we think it's relevant at the present time. But ours is not a very well organized group and the people involved are also doing things on their own. For example, the women in the group are very active doing workshops with other women's groups and also putting up shows in festivals.

One of the important things about the development of the Hongkong People's Theatre Group, or of the people's theatre movement in Hongkong, is that we came to know about the existence of groups like the Black Tent Theatre in Japan, and the Philippino Education Theatre Association in the Philippines. They have developed a methodology of encouraging people to do theatre themselves, which is very important to

us and also personally to me, given my political ideology. So we go to places and do theatre and try to inspire people to take up similar ideas and to do theatre themselves, to use theatre to organize and say the things they want to say. But things like that weren't exactly happening in the places where we were going to perform. However, I think Black Tent has actually adopted this methodology from the Philippino Education Theatre Association (PETA), who have developed this workshop process that they call the Basic Integrated Theatre Arts Workshop. For five days people—ordinary people—students, peasants, workers—just come together and take part in all these various activities, facilitated by members of the PETA. People could then command the means of producing theatre . . . not just theatre—a whole range of things—how to write songs, how to create your own movements, how to use visual materials . . . basically how to express yourself through all these media. When we discovered this method, we felt that we were on a second stage.

**PB:** Has there been any significant change in the theatre scene in Hongkong since the time you got actively involved in theatre?

**MCY:** Well, as I've told you, Hongkong was just buying cultural products from abroad. And then there was this feeling that we should have our own thing and so 15 years ago the government formed the first repertory theatre, which is still the only one. It also began to subsidize all these dance companies—both ballet and modern dance. So, government support for the arts grew and it became possible also for groups to apply for funding. Then 10 years ago, the government decided to build the Hongkong Performing Arts Academy with the drama school, dance school, music school and technical arts school which churn out graduates. All this has contributed to a significant growth of theatre activities in Hongkong, and also of experimentation.

In the midst of all this, there was us. We were known as a group who'd shied away from the proscenium; we were described as a phantom by some people (*laughs*)—no one ever knows when we'll perform, unlike regular theatre groups. But we were also known as a group—perhaps the only group—doing political theatre. Then when the Tiananmen Square massacre happened in 1989, every theatre group became politicized in the sense that they were all doing plays that had some kind of a commentary on the Tiananmen incident. They were also doing plays on the streets, which very few groups would do before. All of a sudden, because of the immediacy of the event, when you couldn't wait to hire a hall—because it needs about six months in Hongkong to get a hall—so when all these theatre groups wanted to say something about this massacre, wanted to reach the masses immediately, they had to go to the streets, the parks, the rallies. They all became street players. But that didn't really last.

**PB:** How often does your group perform?

**MCY:** At times more vigorously than at others. To give you an example, the Tiananmen massacre happened in June 1989. A year before that we were doing a performance together with the Black Bird group. We were hoping to do something as a kind of demonstration on April the 5th. April the 5th was another occasion when way back in 1976, people in China had gathered in the Tiananmen Square and had been severely repressed. In those days, the Maoists were still alive. So on April the 5th of 1976, people were converging on Tiananmen Square shouting anti-Mao slogans and songs and there were mass arrests and killings, but the Chinese authorities then were much more able to control the media. So in 1988, we were trying to mobilize people to join in this big demonstration in memory of April the 5th of 1976. Then we were performing maybe once every week. In 1989, after the massacre, we again went to the streets once every week. These were our most active times. But before then or after then . . . maybe two shows a year and each show maybe 8 to 10 times. So about 20 performances a year.

Anyway, as I was telling you, we were just coming to know about workshops, and some of us had been to Japan and participated in workshops . . . but we hadn't participated in any workshop with any group till 1992. In 1990 I quit my teaching job, after the massacre. What's the massacre got to do with my quitting the teaching job, right? Well, I was earning a very good pay as a teacher and I was only doing theatre part

time, though I felt that theatre was the most important and interesting thing I had. I've always had this question about why I was doing that only part time. And the resolution of the young men at Tienanmen, their courage, had a very strong effect on me. I felt very strongly that I couldn't just carry on being a part-time theatre activist to earn a good pay. So I quit. Apart from diligently translating the publication we put together—*Voices from Tienanmen*—and sending news all over the place, I also became more seriously committed to theatre.

Meanwhile I'd been allotted a grant by the Asian Cultural Council, which is an organization under the Rockefeller Foundation that gives grants to Asian people to go to America. I was awarded this grant and I went for half a year to America and Europe. The money was enough to allow me to live in America and tour Europe. This was in 1990. I was able to observe many theatres, but three groups impressed me very much. Of course, it was great to meet up with the Living Theatre again, who had by then gone back to New York. Julian had, of course, passed away by then, but Judith—his wife—was working vigorously in a small theatre in New York. I spent almost a month with the Bread and Puppet Theatre and then I also spent some time in San Francisco getting to know the San Francisco Puppet Troupe. These were the three most prominent radical people's theatre groups in America in the 60s. I'd read about them, but it was different to get involved with them, particularly with the Bread and Puppet. In the summer, they all go to this farm owned by the Schumers, the founders, and work there. I went with them. In the mornings, over coffee, very democratically they would decide what needed to be done and who would do what. It was very collective. And in the afternoons we would be rehearsing under Peter Schumers who took complete control of all the artistic happenings, so that the rehearsals were completely different from the mornings, when the cast was decided very democratically. In the afternoons, other than rehearsing we'd also be making puppets and things and maybe in the evenings we'd get ready for our slide shows. Because what happened was that in the summer, Bread and Puppet Theatre would organize its own festival for two days and people would come from all over. They have been doing it for many years. Ten thousand people would come for a day . . . very impressive. It was rather unusual, you know, people organizing their own festival.

Anyway, I must also tell you that before I went to the States, the same year, I had gone to Japan with three other colleagues of mine from theatre and we were doing shows in Osaka, Tokyo and Hiroshima. It was a small piece about the massacre at Tienanmen. It was just one part of the ceremonies, where there were speeches and other things. After Japan, I went to South Korea, before I went to the States, to participate in a three week trainers' training workshop organized by the ACPC—the Asian Council for People's Culture. This organization is based in the Philippines and was run by Al Santos of the PETA—one of their foremost actors and directors. But then he decided that he would go more international in two senses. One, he would get together people from different countries in trainers' training workshops where they could learn from each other how to facilitate workshops. Two, he would bring together artists from different parts of Asia—people's theatre activists—to perform. One such production was the *Cry of Asia I* with which he came to Hongkong. In late 1989 I got to know him and then I was organizing his shows. The *Cry of Asia* was actually a cultural caravan, so to speak—it went to Europe before it came to Hongkong. Apart from the performance, they also had workshops, exhibitions and videos. Very impressive. They came to Hongkong with this intra-Asian collaboration. I've subsequently read about how this whole show was put together, what it was supposed to do and all that. It was supposed to address the common problems of all the participating countries. They're supposed to have gone through a workshop process when they learnt from each other. The performers were all people from different countries in south Asia, including people from the subcontinent. They would teach each other the skills they knew. Like this Pansori master from South Korea—he would do this form of the traditional Korean one-person opera and the others would learn, and that's how the whole thing evolved. What you see on stage in *Cry of Asia* is a conglomeration of different art forms. There's a Thai woman and Thai dance. . . I was very impressed. I liked him a lot. So when he told me about this workshop in 1990, I went there. The workshop was, of course, just a three week thing—somewhere in the middle of South Korea. We were learning from each other, telling each other how we worked and



interacted with people . . . it was quite well developed, profitable. There was a separate session on networking. Because there were participants from quite a few places, like Japan, Korea, Philippines, Bangladesh—a kind of personal network also developed. This laid the basis of another network that subsequently became the Asian People's Theatre Festival Society (APTFS).

I just took advantage of these connections I developed in Korea to set up a small festival in Hongkong with solo performances. It had to be one-person performances because we didn't have much money, so I just invited people to come over with one-person plays. Al Santos himself came to the first festival and he directed a show. This was 1992. This festival also went to Taiwan. Before this festival, I'd gone to the United States again for a second time. Because after this South Korean meeting, I learnt about workshops. And then I went to a Theatre for the Oppressed workshop in New York facilitated by the students of Augusto Boal. I was informed that Boal himself was due to workshop in New York for two weeks. So I decided that I'd go, and I did. For 12 days I became a workshop participant and I learnt image theatre, various theatre games that Boal uses—like the actors' games and the non-actors' games, and forum theatre, and also the more therapeutic Rainbow of Desire. I learnt some of his techniques, subsequently I read his books also and when I returned to Hongkong, all through 1992-93, I started taking workshops using some of these techniques.

Others from my company—the People's Theatre group—were also participating in these workshops with me. That way more people learnt these techniques and now quite a few of us have become confident of doing workshops and that's also become part of our activities. To perfect our skills further, we constantly keep inviting people to come over to Hongkong. Like last year—1996—we managed to get some money from the Municipal Council and we invited quite a few people to come and do workshops—two people from PETA, Mamunar Rashid from Bangladesh, Subodh Patnaik from Natya Chetana, Bhubaneshwar and Probir Guha of Alternative Living Theatre, Calcutta. As a result of this we've been able to multiply, so that it's not just us doing people's theatre any more; there are many younger people today who're doing people's theatre.

**PB:** Being involved with what you call 'people's theatre' doesn't make it difficult to get Municipal or any other governmental funding?

**MCY:** See, there's a distinction between the APTFS and the Hongkong People's Theatre group. And then the first two grants we got were actually in my name—for the production of Safdar Hashmi's *Halla Bol* and Dario Fo's *Story of the Tiger*. See, I'd come back from the US as a grantee of the Asian Cultural Council and I'd put together and published a couple of books from that funding. So I submitted an application for this grant and on the strength of what I'd done, they gave it to me, and we used it to pull off these two productions, including the invitation of Mamunar Rashid from Bangladesh. Subsequently, when we used the APTFS to obtain government funding, like for *Big Wind* in 1994, it wasn't exactly easy but we got some money from them. And also, on the strength of the success of *Big Wind* I was able to get funding through the APTFS for this project with Probir Guha. The series of workshops we did last year was a separate thing, but we got some funding on the basis of what we'd done—like *Big Wind* and the two people's theatre festivals. You see, the APTFS exists as a society to promote people's theatre activities and cultural exchange among people's theatre workshops. When people came over with their performances, solo or otherwise, radical though they were—they were acceptable in Hongkong. But all this funding can only come to registered bodies and the Hongkong People's Theatre group is not a registered body. We'd never get any funding if we use that name. But then, for the kind of shows we put up, we don't need much money.

**PB:** How did this collaborative project with Probir come about?

**MCY:** You know, there wasn't any Indian taking part in the South Korean trainers' training workshop. I'd met some Indian people's theatre workers through *Cry of Asia I*, but I didn't have any follow up contacts with them. I'd also met some theatre workers from India in 1993 at the international Popular Theatre Festival in Sydney, Australia. A lot of people had gone from the Asian Pacific region. Subodh Patnaik happened to be my

room mate and so he came to my workshop and I went to his workshop. And I also met another guy called Felix based in Madras—I can't remember his surname though, it was rather a long one. Anyway, Subodh is a very good organizer and the international festival where we met was a networking exercise, basically. So, back in Bhubaneswar, Subodh began to organize something that would consolidate networking among the people's theatre workers of the Asian Pacific region. He organized something in Bhubaneswar in 1994. I participated and got to know more people. I saw the work of Subodh's group and also the work of other groups, but I hadn't met Probir Guha yet. Meanwhile, I had a letter from the San Francisco Mime Troupe, telling me that they'd raised some money to work with Hongkong theatre workers. So I did some calculations and worked out that it would cost us almost as much to have a multinational collaboration as an American-Hongkong collaboration—the first one would cost more, of course. But anyway, with whatever money the San Francisco Mime troupe had raised, I managed to raise some money in Hongkong by applying to the local funding agencies, by getting to Oxfam and I also managed to get some funds from Germany for Bangladeshi participants and so we decided to go ahead with the multinational production. Subsequently, we made some losses and we had to chip in personal money to make up for that.

**PB:** May I ask you how you managed to incur these losses?

**MCY:** Well, it's quite amazing, you know. Several different things. We were rehearsing in Nepal, and Dan Chumley, the American director and Joan Holden, his wife—both from the San Francisco Mime Troupe—they saw Anju, a Nepalese dancer who's very good and they wanted to have her. I said yes, but it meant extra money. Then there were some things that we hadn't budgeted for. Like it took us several hundred US dollars to shift all our luggage, including our props, from Kathmandu to Thailand, for example. So all these kinds of things that we hadn't calculated. This was our first experience in touring this part of the world and there were things that we hadn't anticipated.

**PB:** Since *Big Wind* was a multinational collaboration, could you please give me the names of the different nationalities involved?

**MCY:** Yes, there was a Taiwanese girl, Americans, Australians, Bangladeshis, an Indian. His name was Sagar Mahato, a chhau dancer recommended by CCCA. He was to come to Kathmandu to workshop with us, teaching us some chhau movements and we were to decide if we could integrate some of that into our production. The whole thing was planned as a kind of multinational, multicultural product. So Sagar was just coming as a dancer. But when he touched the drums, he made the band I'd assembled come alive. There were originally just three guys—one Hongkong Chinese, one Australian and one Nepalese. They were trying to work things out. But when this guy came and joined the band, playing plastic buckets and what not, the band just came alive. So they said they wanted him in the band also. So we took him on. To me it seemed like developing a good piece of art and so I just went along, knowing that even if we made some losses we'd be able to cover them up through working hard and squeezing ourselves a bit.

**PB:** What was the language for this production?

**MCY:** Language is always a very interesting issue in multinational collaborations. The *Cry of Asia I*, and *Big Wind*, and the *Cry of Asia II* that happened in 1995 and toured Asia, also brought together by Al Santos—all these three productions had the same approach to language, I guess. English was taken as the medium of communication, which creates its own problems. Language is an issue that's always coming up in such efforts, because when you have to rely on English as the common language—there are people who speak it fluently, there are those who're not so good at it, people speak with different accents, so there's a problem in understanding one another. What happens is that command over English becomes a source of confidence, so what happens very often is that less the command over English, the less the contribution. Then, the people who speak fluent English tend to dominate. In collaborative efforts so far, we haven't had enough resources for translations. When you perform, of course you can use movements and body language and all that, but in the three productions I've mentioned, we'd used

words. For *Big Wind* the playwrights had come together in Hongkong well before the rehearsals were to begin: seven of them (Joan Holden—USA, Mennan Heera—Bangladesh, Ashesh Malla—Nepal, Afzal Mohammed—Pakistan, Ot Plesgrumme—Thailand, and Cheung Tat Ming and Louis Yu—Hongkong). They talked about their work, exchanged their experiences and identified common problems. Then they came up with the sketch of a storyline and each wrote one or two scenes or more, and then we had a Hongkong playwright and a San Francisco Mime Troupe playwright come together to shape up the whole thing. The playwriting process also was one of coming together, sharing, barter. By and large I think we achieved those aims. But the play also is written in English, so that Joan Holden ended up playing a very significant role.

But when the first version of the script was finished, it was sent to different countries and it has a Nepali version and a Thai version and so on, so that actors could read it in their own language. The actors' performances tend to be affected if they have to speak in English. So in *Cry of Asia* it was decided from the very beginning that the actors would speak in their national mother tongues. But *Big Wind* was a kind of evolving process where we began with an English script, but then decided to move away from English more and more so that with the different regions where it was performed, the language also was different. Like the Thai girl would be using English for her part in India or Bangladesh or Nepal, but she would be using more Thai or all Thai in Thailand.

But *Big Wind* had this added element—it wasn't just Asian. There was an Australian guy and he's not aboriginal, a white Australian. And we had Americans. But *Big Wind* was to serve another purpose—we wanted to see whether the San Francisco Mime Troupe style, meaning the use of very big, exaggerated movements, but doing it in the open in front of a mass audience—whether it could be integrated with various traditional Asian performance forms, whether it could work in Asia. There's been this serious debate between Badal Sircar's third theatre or intimate theatre and Utpal Dutt using jatra for a massive audience, and I think the San Francisco Mime Troupe style is more jatra oriented, very interestingly. In the process of evolving and performing *Big Wind*, we achieved a lot more, in fact. We saw each other's work, had workshops. Actually we wanted more than just to stage one performance. Apart from the *Big Wind*, we had the Thai girl doing a solo performance and we had three other performances in mind as well. Collaborative ones—the Hongkong-Bangladeshi one, the Hongkong-Pakistani one and the Hongkong-Nepali one. But because we consumed all of our time for *Big Wind*, these plays weren't really ready until the final stage of the tour and the plays that are there in *Black Sky*—the Hongkong-Bangladeshi one and the Hongkong-Nepali one—were not performed till we were back in Hongkong.

**PB:** Did all these three collaborative productions happen in the course of *Big Wind*?

**MCY:** Yes and no. Before we'd taken on *Big Wind*, I'd asked Mennan Heera of Bangladesh and Ashesh Malla of Nepal to do the scripts—on the democracy movements in Dhaka and Beijing and the Gorkhas, respectively. We had very little money for this. So we had the scripts, but we had no time to rehearse these plays as we became busy with *Big Wind*. Then we had problems with getting visas for India. By the time we were ready with *Big Wind* there was this huge media burst about the outbreak of plague in India and people were writing to me from all over the place, 'Hey, let's not go to India.' Joan Holden had reservations about coming to India also. 'I don't want to leave behind orphans' she said. So by the time we got to Kathmandu, none of us had a visa to India and we wasted a lot of time trying to get the visa. And the other funny thing that happened to us—you must remember that none of us had any experience of travelling in India—so a Hongkong guy had designed a huge set for us, it could all be dismantled and folded and put into boxes that could be fitted into one another. So we went to a furniture shop in Kathmandu and asked them to do it for us. They made it, but they made it with the heaviest wood available, and not only that—when we tried to bring it to India, we discovered that it was forbidden for this variety of wood to be exported, or to cross borders (*bursts out laughing*)—and the problems we had with clearance! Most of us were not used to handling such heavy sets or props, we were much more accustomed to working with minimum props in Badal Sircar's third theatre or poor theatre style. But to continue with

the story, when we did manage to get permission from the Nepalese authorities to export that set to India against a lot of money as taxes, we never did get clearance from the Customs authorities in Calcutta. So we couldn't use that set in India at all. We had to build new sets in Bhubaneswar. We only performed in two places in India—Bhubaneswar and Calcutta. Subodh organized it in Bhubaneswar and Sanjeev Sarkar of CCCA organized two shows for us in Calcutta—one indoor and one outdoor. We didn't have huge audiences—maybe 100/150. We were happy, but subsequently we came to know that many people didn't know at all. But it was covered on TV and all that.

In one of the performances in Calcutta, the open air one at Bishop's College, I think, we had a special stage set up for us. We were performing and Sanjeev Sarkar had invited two other groups as well. The Alternative Living Theatre and another group who did mime . . . they did very good mime, but I can't remember the name of the group, I never got to talk to them. But Probir Guha invited us to visit his place at Madhyamgram and the Hongkong participants went there and we had the opportunity of getting to know each other more. To some extent, Probir's group and another group—Patha Sena—and a group from Madras who'd come to Bhubaneswar, and Natya Chetana—all of them had some similarities. They don't use too many props and they derive elements from traditional folk forms. Of all these groups, Probir's group impressed us most—the violence and the martial arts. We saw *Andhakarer Dheu* (Waves of Darkness). When I met him again and went to Madhyamgram, we had a chance to know each other better and we got talking about how he got involved with theatre after his disillusionment with political activism, and I saw a kind of similarity between him and me. Not that I ever got disillusioned with political activism or politics as such, but then he was involved in a different kind of politics, a lot more militant, which demanded much more in terms of organizing in villages etc. But we didn't talk about any collaboration. Then I met him again in Bhubaneswar last year in March when I came over for the Theatre of Consciousness workshop, and by then we'd started thinking about collaboration with India. So we got talking about that in the conference and there were several people who expressed interest. Anyway, before we went home to Hongkong, we went back to Probir's place once more and by then he had set up his training centre—Akhra—and we saw his group rehearsing different plays. By this time I was almost sure that I could put together some money for this collaboration with India, though we didn't know for sure till much later. Anyway, when we got talking about a possible collaboration, it just clicked and though we didn't have any money at that point, I decided to go ahead. So we invited Probir to Hongkong in September 1996 to finalize the collaboration and for him to do some workshops. We actually used some of the money raised for the workshop project for Probir's visit.

**PB:** Now that you more or less have a working script, how do you feel about it?

**MCY:** I am feeling great, actually. I'm looking forward to this production, though I myself will not be able to participate as much as I'd like to because of my job. I told you that we incurred some losses in the *Big Wind* project. I had to take a job to pay that off. I am the executive director of an organization called Arts with the Disabled Association, which tries to do performative things with disabled people. Because of this job, I won't be able to participate in the rehearsal process, but I'll come whenever I can and I'm really feeling very excited.

## Waiting for the Bald Soprano Some Reflections on the Recent Kannada Theatre

Dr B. K. Banker

*The curtain rises slowly revealing a Narrator on a dimly-lit stage. The Narrator turns and moves downstage. He is in his early fifties and has the look of a teacher. He speaks fast in an affected tone:*

NARRATOR. Well, here we are.

These people that you behold are about to act out for you the essence of the Absurd movement in Kannada theatre.

That middle-aged man sitting there surrounded by those three is in a confused, confounded stage. He is being bombarded by them with questions about his identity.

Those two men, one tall and the other short there at the right corner just stand there arguing about their destination. They don't know where to go.

Down there, the other two seem to be busy with their own activities: one digs the earth while the other pretends to climb a non-existent ladder and falls on to the ground.

Oh, yes, there at the centre, those two with their umbrellas, one with a folded one and the other with an open one, saunter on the stage aimlessly.

These are all nameless characters, without any predication. After all their learned authors know that predication is also prediction.

Nomon/Omen . . .

*Lights brighten.*

Look, once again, into their eyes: those blank eyes that tell you the story of a movement that percolated from the West after its demise there in the early sixties. These are haunted by the spectre of Vladimir and Estragon and the Bald Soprano. These are all the shallow emblems of borrowed cultural coordinates . . . and as you all know, there was a time and it was long, long ago, 'Argos, Thebes and Troy were, just like Jerusalem, the laboratory of divine justice'.<sup>1</sup> Today, it is Paris which is the arena of the Absurd. Then, in the tragic universe, the dead used to return seeking justice. Now our life is haunted by a series of existential moments, antinomies and the monstrous shadows of Sisyphus.

*Lights are dimmed again while the curtain comes down slowly.*

Well, in fact, we have just witnessed the stage actions in the opening scenes of a few Kannada Absurd plays,<sup>2</sup> the dramatis personae parading through the dimly-lit stage for a while. The Absurd movement in Karnataka did not last long: It was a short-lived affair, lasting only a couple of years in the early seventies. By the late sixties, the Kannada theatre had begun to discover European playwrights such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Anton Chekhov, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. For a while, with the 'invasion' of the last two playwrights, the Absurd movement in the Kannada theatre began. In fact, it was Sumatheendra Nadig's Kannada translation of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) as *Bockataleya Nartaki* (1966) that heralded here the advent of the Theatre of the Absurd. It would indeed be interesting to note that when Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* appeared on the French scene in 1950—it was produced at the Noctambules by Nicolas Bataille—it was, to quote Claude Bonnefoy, 'So disconcerting and broke so

completely with everything the public was used to that it stirred up violent reactions—some enthusiastic, some plain contemptuous.<sup>3</sup> But the reception accorded to *Bockataleya Nartaki* was different: the elite theatre-goers received it with great delight and admiration. Immediately after that there sprang up a few Absurd plays (Asangata Nataka)—This time in no actual translation, but in blatant imitation of Ionesco and Beckett—written mostly by university teachers and staged by directors of amateur theatre groups in Karnataka.

The history of the Kannada theatre, as many scholars would testify, is very old. It also has a great tradition, both classical and folk in mode and expression. The folk theatres in Karnataka are still alive in different forms: puppet-shows, light plays, musicals and also semi-classical plays like Yakshagana. It has always been an important element of our culture. And it should be noted that the modern Kannada theatre was greatly influenced by the West as well as the theatres in Bengal and Maharashtra. There were many playwrights like, T. P. Kailasam, K. V. Puttappa, D. R. Bendre, Adya Rangacharya and Shivarama Karanth who contributed greatly to the Kannada Theatre. Kailasam was a pioneer in many respects. It was he who established drama as literature and, as Prof. K. D. Kurtkoti, a noted critic of drama, says, the realistic drama attained dignity mainly due to Kailasam's efforts. Since he rejected the professional theatre, the amateur theatre came into existence for the performance of his plays.<sup>4</sup> Both Kailasam and Adya Rangacharya brought on to the stage a heavy dose of realism: They portrayed the social problems that were plaguing the society of their day. They used satire and humour to set things right. They altered the traditional structure of the play: music was given up, so also was the high literary 'bookish' language. Instead, they used the language of the ordinary man and woman on the street. The credit of bridging the gulf between the classical and modern Indian theatre should, however, go to Adya Rangacharya. As he confesses:

It is my personal belief that modern Indian dramatists have as much to learn from Indian classical Drama as they have to shake off the influence of Western Drama . . . Classical Indian drama was very rarely preoccupied with presenting a picture of life. The long philosophic tradition conveyed to the common man through the epics and the puranas has given an average Indian almost a hereditary understanding about life and death. We think they are like the links making human existence one continuous chain . . . There is no intention here to resent, decry or discourage Western influence on Modern Indian Drama . . . I myself am one and almost one of the earliest ones at that, to have been influenced by Western Drama.<sup>5</sup>

Besides writing social and domestic plays, Adya Rangacharya also wrote serious plays, such as *Kelu Janamejaya* (*Listen O, Janamejaya*), and *Kattale Belaku* (*Darkness and Light*, 1960). *Kelu Janamejaya* presents a study of the social structure by reducing society to its basic primitive level, and his *Kattale Belaku* deals with the fundamental aesthetic questions about drama/theatre, like Pirandello's *Six characters in Search of an Author* (1921): form, content, characterization and the very function of theatre itself. These playwrights were followed by younger writers like Parvatavani, N. Kasturi and G. B. Joshi. Later came Girish Karnad and Chandrashekhara Kambar. Karnad had just then returned to India after his three years' stay at Oxford: He was fresh with new ideas and disappointments as well. He then had the feeling that the West had nothing to offer him and that made him turn in desperation to the natak companies of his childhood. He felt that the key to his theatre lay through the folk theatre forms. He says:

That energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, or making them literally stand on their head . . . The various conventions—the chorus, the music, the seemingly unrelated comic interludes, the mixing of human and non-human worlds—permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative analyses of the central problem.

They allow for, to borrow a phrase from Bertolt Brecht, 'complex seeing'.<sup>6</sup>

His return to his roots for theatre sources was a reaction to the 'banality and social irrelevance'<sup>7</sup> of the Western naturalistic drama indulged in by the Kannada theatre of his day. While both Karnad and Kambar were digging deep into the myths and folklore of our culture, a small group of teachers—comprising N. Rathna, P. Lankesh, Chandrashekhar Patil and Chaduranga—was busily engaged in a search for modern metaphors to express the human predicament on stage. In this article, I should like to speak about its efforts and the Absurd movement it created in Kannada theatre during the late sixties and early seventies.

At first, it would be of immense interest and significance to highlight the influence of the Western Theatre of the Absurd on our playwrights. As we know, the Theatre of the Absurd was, without any doubt, the most successful avant-garde movement which characterized the European cultural crisis in the Twentieth Century. Behind it, is the atheistic existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus—the founding fathers of the Absurd—which itself is a reflection of the inexorable consequences—epistemological, cultural, moral, and religious—of the movement of modern philosophy. It emphasizes the failure of rationalist philosophy and science to provide a viable account of freedom, of human life and existence. As a cultural phenomenon, existentialism is a protest against a coercive mass society and a universe devoid of all intrinsic values.

Atheistic existentialism, following Nietzsche, proclaimed the death of God. Once you accept God's death, the Universe becomes contingent, not governed by any system of necessary laws. Of course, in such a universe anything is possible. And the following are then their off-shoots:

- a. Time becomes unreal.
- b. Past can have no influence on the present and the present can have no influence on the future, either.
- c. No course of events can be predicted: anything can happen.
- d. Memory is impossible.
- e. The identity of the Self or the stability of the personality is not possible.
- f. No intrinsic relationship between cause and effect.
- g. Life becomes meaningless and purposeless.
- h. No achievement in life is possible.
- i. Everything that occurs is due to chance; and the Universe becomes a chance universe.
- j. The language that reflects it becomes quite incoherent. Since the reality of the world has to be reflected in language, the structure of the language has to be disintegrated, dislocated and disjointed.

These, in fact, were the central concerns/themes of the playwrights in the fifties like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, Edward Albee and Harold Pinter. All these playwrights shared a certain common attitude towards the modern man's tragic plight and portrayed it in their works. They defined man in terms of his agony, and they saw the universe as being fundamentally in a state of conflict. In fact, the theatre of the Absurd was a kind of 'intellectual shorthand for a complex pattern of similarities in approach, method, and convention, of shared philosophical and artistic premises, whether conscious or subconscious, and of influences from a common store of tradition.'<sup>8</sup> They did not use rational devices to portray the basic conditions of human existence like Sartre and Camus. We know that the existentialist playwrights Sartre and Camus argued out their cases vehemently in their plays to show the absurdity of existence. But the playwrights of the Absurd felt that the loss of meaning in human life in the absence of any rational motivation could best be expressed through the form of concrete poetic images. In their search for a valid image of modern man, these playwrights rejected the conventional techniques and language of the traditional theatre as unsuited to their form and made bold innovations with new techniques and new

forms to voice forth their feelings of absurdity. It was a theatre of exploration. Each writer, instead of telling a story in more or less dramatic form, tried to express the human condition metaphorically. They did not follow the traditional structure of a drama. As Martin Esslin, a perceptive critic of the movement, says:

If a good play must have a clearly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babbling.<sup>9</sup>

Here both tragedy and comedy which make sense in the traditional theatre are equally senseless, since human acts exist in all their naked absurdity. The Absurd movement lasted for a decade or so in the West and, by the sixties, it died a natural death, but it was a genuine contribution to the permanent vocabulary of dramatic expression. The devices, techniques and style became integrated into the mainstream of drama. Most of the playwrights associated with the movement turned to other kinds of dramatic expression.

Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco are the most important playwrights of the Absurd, the cult figures of the Absurd school. In his novels, short stories and plays, Beckett deals with human characters in extreme situations because, according to him, only they can reveal the essential aspects of human experience. The normal social relations between human beings, their desires, ambitions, ranks and positions are, for him, mere superficial trappings of existence that hide the most important problems and the basic anguish of the human condition. The language that we use, feels Beckett, fails to tell us who and what we are. In fact, he vehemently feels that words fail miserably to penetrate the riddle of human existence. And these views are shared by Eugene Ionesco. He raises many basic questions about the absurdity of existence, the pointlessness of culture, the shallowness of language as a means of communication. His plays mirror our anxiety and vacuity of existence, its failure, transience, despair and death. For both Beckett and Ionesco, Space and Time are unreal. They do not subscribe to the view of the continuity of time, neither do they believe in the concept of personal identity. Theirs is a morphological universe. In fact the experience and the concept of the Absurd would, as Ionesco says, dictate the style, the syntax and the images in language and portray the contingencies of modern reality. It was their 'World Vision'<sup>10</sup> as Lucien Goldman says:

It is, in fact, the conceptual extrapolation in the most coherent possible manner of the real, emotional, intellectual and even motory tendencies of the members of a group. It is a coherent pattern of problems and replies which is expressed on the literary plane, by the creation through words of a concrete universe of beings and things.

After its demise in the West—by 1962, the movement seemed to have spent its force—the Theatre of the Absurd was resuscitated on the Kannada stage during the late sixties. While Kambar and Karnad were writing their plays in the folk tradition, Professors N. Rathna, P. Lankesh, Chandrashekhar Patil, Chandrakant Kusnur and Dr Chaduranga were busy experimenting with the then new trend of dramatic writing—the Absurd theatre—on the Kannada stage. It was at this time that Modernism was making inroads into Kannada poetry and fiction: Professor Gopal Krishna Adiga was writing his Navya poetry and Professor U. R. Anantha Moorthy had just then published his novel, *Sanskar*. So theatre could not have just remained in the wings waiting not to be influenced by the Navya movement! It all began with the staging of Sumatheendra Nadig's *Bockataleya Nartaki* in Bangalore in 1966, a Kannada translation of Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950), as referred to earlier. By then the elites of the cities were familiar with the plays of Ionesco and Beckett. Plays like *Amédée*, *The Chairs*, *The Lesson*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, had already been staged in English in university and college



auditoriums. They were also staged by directors of experimental/ amateur theatre groups in Bangalore, Mysore and Dharwar—the university towns. In fact it would also be interesting to note that some of these plays were the prescribed texts for the post-graduate English course included either in the Twentieth Century or Comparative Literature paper in their syllabus. So when *Bockataleya Nartaki* was staged, neither its theme nor its technique was a great surprise to the theatre-goers at all. Thus there was a readily available literate audience in towns which would welcome plays of this kind with great jubilation. Our playwrights knew that and it goaded them into writing plays for the stage. And there were other reasons too:

1. A great desire to experiment with the new trend. These teachers of drama were not happy with the existing theatre which was indulging in social and domestic plays. Adya Rangacharya and G. B. Joshi—the elder dramatists—were churning out plays in the style of Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Brecht and Pirandello, while Kambar and Karnad, as I mentioned above, were following the folk forms seriously. As Professor Patil said, 'The Kannada theatre then was almost obsessed with myths and conventions and techniques of folk drama' and he felt that 'both myths and folk drama were not relevant to the problems of modern times'. And in order to drive his point home, he wrote his *Gokarnada Goudashani (The Duchess of Gokarna)*, published in 1974) as a kind of parody of the then modern Kannada drama. Just as Ionesco did his *Bald Soprano*, 'his anti-play, in parody of a comedy of comedy, of the theatre-trend then'.<sup>12</sup>
2. Social dramas of the day had almost paralysed the creative spirit of the playwrights: They had almost lost the capacity to find new themes. And therefore these new playwrights felt that they had to liberate the existing theatre from its cramped existence. And not only that, they also wanted to emancipate the actor from the bond of naive realism practised then by others.
3. The simplicity of the stage-craft of the Absurd theatre: the fewer number of characters, sparse theatre props and its techniques must have lured these playwrights into the new theatre.
4. The immense freedom offered to the writer: its very amorphous structure, the loose frame work—neither plot nor complication, climax nor denouement, quite circular in design etc.
5. Perhaps the general frustration and huge sense of disillusionment of the educated class at the sight of their dreams being shattered: their rising unemployment, the corruption in various walks of life, economic inflation etc. All these socio-political and economic factors must have also contributed their might to the general malaise of the times.
6. And, perhaps, the infatuation with the philosophy of the Absurd: its intellectual/cerebral thought-content must have been a thrilling experience to our Absurd playwrights.
7. Even the recurring themes of the Theatre of the Absurd in the West were intellectually very seductive and stimulating and our writers succumbed to this seduction.

The period from 1967 to 1973—half a dozen years or so—was a fertile one for the harvest of Absurd plays in Kannada. The first Absurd play to hit the stage in Karnataka was Dr N. Rathna's *Ellige (Where to . . . ?)* 1968). And it was an instant success. He wrote two more plays in the same vein, *Gode Beke Gode (Wall on Sale)*, 1968) and *Bonthe (Effigy)*. Then came Chandrashekar Patil's *Kodegalu (Umbrellas)*, *Appa (Father)*, 1969), *Gurutinavaru (Acquaintances)*, 1970), *Tingar Buddana* (1971) and *Kattal Ratri (Dark Night)*, 1973). And while Professor Lankesh wrote *Teregalu (Waves or Curtains)*, 1972) and *Siddhate (Preparation)*, 1973), Dr Chaduranga had only one play to his credit, *Elibonu (Mouse Trap)*,

1972). Then there were a few other playwrights like Chandrakant Kusnur, Sagar, M. S. K. Prabhu who also enriched the Kannada stage by their contribution. None of these plays have been translated into English or any other Indian languages. And the staging of these plays was also confined to Karnataka alone.

Before I begin a discussion of some of the plays mentioned above, I should like to list here the recurring themes that were embedded in the Kannada Absurd plays *in general*. It should be noted that most of our playwrights borrowed their themes heavily from the Theatre of the Absurd in the West.

- a. the inexplicable and irrational nature of man's existence and his predicament.
- b. the failure of language and communication.
- c. the failure to discover one's identity and destiny.
- d. the nightmarish experiences of the modern man.
- e. the deep pessimism of the modern alienated man.
- f. a free handling of time in an irrational/subjective way.

And to drive home these points they used almost the same techniques as had been used by their counterparts in the West.

- a. creating characters de-mythologized, lacking any history, hardly recognizable, many a time complementary ones.
- b. repetitive dialogue—words often degenerating into meaningless babble, misunderstandings, monologues, clichés, telegraphic style of language, often disintegrated and dislocated.
- c. repetitive actions—circus buffoonery, miming and clowning, indulging in meaningless gestures.
- d. brilliant melange of puns, incongruous analogies and various perversions of rational discourse.
- e. plays often starting at an arbitrary point and ending in an arbitrary fashion.
- f. even the stage techniques mirror those of the Western plays—empty stage, bereft of any theatre props, usually a road, a tree or wall, or a dilapidated structure of a house/building.
- g. the timing—usually evening, twilight.
- h. often 'borrowing' themes from the philosophy of existentialism and absurdity.

I should now like to spell out my criteria for the selection of a few plays for discussion here. I have usually selected the playwrights' well-known works, quite often staged and popular even among the general readers. In fact, such plays happen to be their best representative works as well. Therefore, I have chosen here for my discussion Rathna's *Ellige*, Lankesh's *Teregalu*, Patil's *Kodegalu* and Chaduranga's *Elibonu*. These plays speak volumes for the playwrights' craft, philosophy and other artistic qualities that make them good pieces of Absurd theatre.

Dr Rathna's *Ellige*<sup>13</sup> was an instant success. It had all the ingredients of an Absurd play: nameless characters, simply called Chickavanu (The Little One) and Doddavanu (The Big One), Yuvathi (A Young Woman) and Yuvaka (A Young Man). The Little One and the Big One meet at a place surrounded by a wall. There is some facial resemblance between the two. While the Big One is slim, the Little One is fat. One has a bright costume, the other doesn't. Even in their speech, the Big One speaks in a more mature way than the other does. Thus they appear to be complementary characters. They are trying to go to their grandfather's house. They have a map of the area and the address. But they can't decipher the map or read the address. Hence they don't know which path to take to their destination.

THE LITTLE ONE. Tut, how far have we to go?

THE BIG ONE. I feel we are close to our destination.

THE LITTLE ONE. What do you mean by that, 'you feel'?

THE BIG ONE. What do I know? I feel we are not far off.

THE LITTLE ONE. You have been saying the same thing for a long time.

Are we going there to that house . . . ?  
 THE BIG ONE. Which house?  
 THE LITTLE ONE. (*Pointing towards a distant thing*) There, by the tamarind tree.  
 THE BIG ONE. Yes, what if?  
 THE LITTLE ONE. Are we going there?  
 THE BIG ONE. I don't know.  
 THE LITTLE ONE. Is it not there?  
 THE BIG ONE. I don't know that either . . . <sup>14</sup>

At that juncture, they meet a group of tourists who have been in search of their missing friend. They don't know where exactly to go. And their search simply continues. The Big and the Little Ones do remind us of Gogo and Didi in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. They are also complementary characters. Perhaps the difference is in the theme of the play. In Beckett's play, they wait for Godot who never appears on the stage; but in Rathna's they don't know how to go to their destined place. Until the curtain comes down, they just keep on going about in circles on the stage. There is only a futile movement and no real progress towards their destination. But they are there on a journey. Right from the beginning, the characters are assailed with the big question 'Where to . . . ?'

THE LITTLE ONE. What is to be done now?  
 THE BIG ONE. To remain here itself.

*Just then, the others from the group come back. They have been running on the stage in a circular way . . .*

THE YOUNG MAN. Wait! Don't you see me?  
 THE SECOND MAN. Why do you run so fast? Where to . . . <sup>15</sup>

*Ellige*—Where to . . . ? This question becomes so monstrous that it metamorphoses into a metaphor for the journey of a man's life.

In the other two plays, too, *Gode Beke Gode (Wall on Sale)* and *Bonthe (Effigy)* Dr Rathna has created an absurd situation and follows its illogic logically till the end. The Absurd efforts of two persons, the One and the Other (nameless again) to sell a glass wall in the market, their gestures and their pointless dialogue remind us of the earlier play *Ellige*. Even his *Bonthe* is no different. Dr Rathna has modelled all his plays on Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The dramatic devices, the characterization, the dialogue all make us aware that what we watch is a 'desi' imitation. Gogo and Didi, Lucky and Posso appear and reappear in their Kannada dress/garb and help the audience to pass the time tirelessly.

If Rathna's play speaks about the failure of finding one's destination/destiny, Professor Lankesh seems to be dramatizing yet another type of failure in life: the failure of finding one's own identity—the real 'I'—in the nightmarish flux of time. One might go on stripping off one's layers or masks, without ever knowing what or who one really is. Lankesh has made a sizeable contribution to the Kannada stage. He has written more than a dozen plays and is considered an important playwright in contemporary theatre. As Professor Kurtkoti says, 'Lankesh's chief contribution to dramatic writing is his style which is individualistic and which is neither sentimental nor affected.' He attempted to create a new dramatic idiom to convey the new sensibility. He did not follow his peers, but began new experiments with the form of drama: most of his plays are in the form of a long debate and are predominantly 'intellectual' in content. His first play, *T. Prasanna Grihastrashram (T. Prasanna's Married Life, 1963)* created a new wave altogether. It is about the disenchantment that follows a marriage: The expectations of a middle-class wife and her husband's efforts to fulfil them. In order to overcome the boredom of his marriage, the husband begins to indulge in theatrical gimmicks at home. The play was a great success. Then Lankesh wrote his *Teregalu*. *Teregalu*<sup>16</sup> is a short play depicting the conflict—inner as well as outer—in the individual. It portrays the elusive and futile ways of defining and stripping off the masks of personality. Like the curtains, the layers are taken off and the individual is eventually left with his ambiguous nakedness. The

play reads like a nightmare. The protagonist Vyakti (Individual) is suddenly attacked by three strangers called Kanti, Kitta and Vitty. These three belong to different classes: One to the working class, one to the business class and the third to the priestly class. They try to remind the protagonist of his evil past, his earlier deeds and his guilty conscience. They talk to him like his students at first, then like spies and later they don the garb of judges and try him for the murder of his wife. These three strangers perhaps stand for three different dimensions of Vyakti himself. He is assailed by them.

VYAKTI. Who are you?

KANTI. You said we are sophomores.

VYAKTI. No, that just can't be!

VITTY. We have suffered a great deal, sir.

KANTI. I have seen dogs barking in the class—

VITTY. That is why I have made friends . . .

VYAKTI. Then—

KANTI. Why have you come here . . . ?

VYAKTI. Why don't you speak straight?

KANTI. Why, are you, ah . . . or what?<sup>17</sup>

Lankesh has very ingeniously used a lot of puns, rhythms, equivocations, misunderstanding and distortions in the conversation between Kanti, Kitta, Vitty and the protagonist (Vyakti), to create an absurd situation—a la Eugene Ionesco. These are rather difficult to translate into English.

The futile search for one's identity is also the main preoccupation of another playwright, Professor Chandrashekhar Patil. Professor Patil began his literary career writing poetry. He edits a Kannada literary journal called *Sankramana*. He was associated with the Bandaya (Protest) movement in Kannada literary circles. And of the gamut of his plays, there are five Absurd plays which are very familiar to the Kannada audience even in villages. His *Kodegalu*<sup>18</sup> and *Appa*<sup>19</sup> must have been staged throughout Karnataka more than a hundred times or so. Indeed, it would be interesting to note that while many Absurd plays failed miserably to take off in villages—in towns and cities they were always a great success, as I said earlier—Patil's plays have always attracted a large audience of illiterate people even when staged in remote hamlets. His dramatic technique, his lyrical use of the Kannada language—Professor Patil is more a poet than a dramatist at that!—were important factors that lured a vast audience. He uses the resources of the spoken language, a spicy Kannada of his region (Dharwar, North Karnataka). It often defies translation as it exhibits 'the beauty and the fragrance of the local colour and atmosphere'.<sup>20</sup> His poetic sensibility is mirrored in the content, situation and dialogues. His use of symbols, too, is poetic. Instead of using the nightmarish experiences of the modern alienated man, simple everyday themes are made use of. He portrays the absurdity of everyday life and its situations in a comic way in his plays.

The fact that language fails to communicate is quite lyrically dramatized by Patil in his *Kodegalu (Umbrellas)*. This play has two characters, X and Y, who have no identities of their own. X always carries his umbrella, which he has inherited from his great-grandfather, folded, while Y always has his umbrella open. X and Y are in some ways complementary characters. The conversation between them stands testimony to their failure to understand each other. They themselves feel its impotence:

Men open their lips . . . but they don't speak. They say one thing, we mean another. And the reality lies elsewhere.<sup>21</sup>

Their meaningless talk, the incongruous behaviour, heightens the absurdity of the situation. Their exchange of umbrellas and names are some of their attempts to bestow meaning on their actions, on their lives. Their umbrellas have become part of their personalities. In fact, X and Y know that they are like the characters in an Absurd drama.

Y. True, our main job is talking.

X. Come on, let us speak . . . Then, do you know what an Absurd drama is?

γ. What? You seem to have begun it now . . .

x. Yes, that is what I say. Let it be. But before that, I have a question, a great question at that. I feel rather giddy when I have to speak to people about that . . .<sup>22</sup>

It is really interesting to note that Patil has alluded twice to Absurd drama/theatre in his *Kodegalu*. Perhaps, he was conscious of the fact that he was modelling his new play on the Western Absurd drama. *Kodegalu* lacks development of plot. It is based on a situation. There is not much action to speak of. The characters just saunter aimlessly about the stage. They do not have any sense of time at all. In the very beginning of the play, when Y asks X about the time, Y says:

Ah, time! Wait, I shall tell you. (*He consults his watch but does not speak. He looks at the sky and then says*) it might be 9 or 9.30, 10 or 10.30.<sup>23</sup>

and again at the end of the play it is X who tells Y about the time:

Time? Wait, I shall tell you. (*He looks at the sky and then says*). 11.30, 12.30, 13 or 14.<sup>24</sup>

(*Both X and Y laugh loudly, like children, like mad people, and they sing and dance until the curtain comes down*).

*Kodegalu* was the first Absurd play to bring Patil fame on the stage. Poetic diction and effective dialogues are its main features. Perhaps these elements are responsible for turning the absurd situation into a comic experience for the audience. Patil does not portray ghastly and cruel scenes in his theatre.

Even in his short play *Appa (Father)*, the protagonist Basavaraja gets disappointed in his search for the roots of his being. He is the son of a prostitute and he wants to find out who his father was. As a child, whenever he asked his mother the identity of his father, she would tell him stories of a princess and flowers and satisfy his curiosity.

AVVA. If it has . . .

BASAVA. If it has . . .

The princess in the garden  
Floating like the air  
Black petal  
White petal  
Rosy petal  
All petals crying, mother, mother . . .  
What is my colour?  
Whose colour do I have  
Whose colour . . .?<sup>25</sup>

But now he is an adult and no longer believes in those lyrical stories. He feels quite different from his class mates and friends, who all have fathers. He feels that the knowledge of his father's identity would give a meaning to his life. But at the end he understands that the clouds of the air, the trees of the earth and the flowers in the garden do not suffer from this conflict at all. And eventually he reconciles himself to the situation: 'I am my father'<sup>26</sup> says Basavaraj at the end. He understands that his search would be a meaningless one.

Speaking about the dramatic works of Patil and Lankesh, Professor Kurtkoti remarks:

The trouble with the drama of both Lankesh and Chandrashekhar Patil is its size. The plays are very short and the dramatic action is quickly fulfilled, as it were, by magic. The brevity of drama, of course, has certain advantages like economy of means and the concentration of details. But due to its smallness the drama is not developed adequately and can seldom deal with diversity of themes.<sup>27</sup>

After publishing his *Uyyale (The Swing)*, Dr Chaduranga did not write anything for about twenty years or so. Then he wrote his first Absurd play, *Elibonu (Mouse Trap)* in 1972. He himself called it an Absurd play (*Asangata Nataka*). It should, however, be noted here that he is the only playwright who subtitles his play that way. And in the

preface, he recounts his mood and the experience that made the play possible:

I had no idea of writing this play. It was during the *navarathri* days: one evening it was raining heavily and I felt like a mouse that was caught in a trap. That feeling must have been the main inspiration behind its creation. Or perhaps, there might be other things as well, like the little squabble I had with somebody at home. That worry coupled with boredom could also have been there at the back of it. Moreover, it was at this time that all the values I had cherished were becoming meaningless and topsy-turvied, and I was then in search of some new directions. That also could not be denied.<sup>29</sup>

The locale and the characterization of *Elibonu* reminds the reader of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. There are many similarities between them: a broken framework, a mound and the ambiguous way of referring to time. Of the two characters in the play—they have no names—one is a digger and the other, a climber. Both pretend to be busy with their respective jobs on the stage. The nonexistent ladder and the pickaxe and the action indulged in by the characters—that itself is an absurd situation.

THE CLIMBER (*regretfully*). Trying to climb the ladder. But everytime I do, I get defeated. Yes, defeated . . . defeated.

THE DIGGER (*with certainty*). Admitting defeat is as good as dying.

THE CLIMBER (*with a little fear in his voice*). I am not prepared to die so soon.

THE DIGGER (*consoling him*). You must have got hurt when you fell down.<sup>30</sup>

The different characters of the two friends manifest themselves: The climber seems to be interested in 'intellectual' matters. But the digger takes a great pleasure in mundane matters. They always talk at cross purposes. They suddenly think that rats must have infested their dilapidated dwelling. And to catch them they bring a mouse trap.

In the second act, a lady enters. She has lost her husband and she thinks that the digger must be her lost husband and goes towards him. But he rejects her and when she tries with the climber, he too does the same. Later she begins to share their travails and troubles. Although they want to get rid of her, it is just not possible. Gradually she begins to take control of the situation and both the digger and the climber give up their pretended jobs. They now become subservient to her and do whatever she orders them to. She asks them to get wood to cook their food.

THE DIGGER. I must dig, dig and find out the roots.

THE CLIMBER. I must climb up and up. And I must do that, climbing higher and higher . . . I know how to climb a ladder. Never brought any wood . . .

THE DIGGER. The same with me. I know only digging pits.

THE WOMAN. No. It can't be. You are men, you should know all types of work. (*They see each other's face*) Why do you simply stand there blinking your eyes? Come on, get up. Go now.

*Both men seem to be frightened, they try to get up, but fall on to the ground again . . . The woman goes on staring at them, and after they leave the place, she goes to the oven. There is a lot of smoke and the woman's eyes are full of tears. She tries to wipe them off and makes efforts to sit on the mound as the curtain comes down swiftly.*<sup>30</sup>

There are many symbols in the play: the digger and the climber are the two sides of the same coin. The rats and the young lady are the real distractions that take them away from their duty. To get rid of them, to run away from all these and their final failure, all speak of the inevitable tragedy and absurdity of their lot.

In his dedication to the book, Dr Chaduranga says it is dedicated 'to the life that sometimes metamorphoses into a mouse trap.'<sup>32</sup> The playwright seems to be saying that life is indeed a mouse trap and we are like the rats that have been caught in it. We don't know our destiny. All our actions are absurd, meaningless. We sometimes feel that we are engaged in some great work which, in reality, we are not.

By 1973, the Absurd movement in Karnataka had withered away. Although these writers continue to write plays, they seem to have compromised somewhat. It became rather difficult for them to sustain a whole evening with the same kind of intensity and theme again and again, as in their earlier Absurd plays. In fact, we know the same thing happened in the West too. For example, Ionesco's later full-length plays became more and more allegorical, Beckett's shorter and shorter. Adamov abandoned the Absurd altogether in favour of the Brechtian Epic Theatre and Pinter moved towards a fusion of the Absurd with high comedy. And our playwrights were no exception. Although the Absurd movement was a spent force, it had a liberating influence on conventional theatre, and its effects still continue to be felt today. While Lankesh adapted in his later plays many of the elements of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, Patil began to exploit the techniques of the Epic Theatre. Chaduranga has not written any play after his *Elibonu*. He has now gone back to fiction writing. And Dr Rathna takes more interest in staging plays than writing any new ones. This is the case with other Absurd playwrights too: Kusnur, Prabhu and Sagar have gone back to the conventional theatre. Of course, even in their new works, some elements of the Absurd theatre are there for the critics to discover.

When we study these Absurd plays or see them staged, we are bound to feel the presence of a monstrous shadow of Beckett or of Ionesco looming large in the background. The Absurd movement in Kannada theatre would not be what it was, if Beckett and Ionesco had never written. They are to them all—to Rathna, Lankesh, Patil, Chaduranga and others mentioned above—whether or not they know and acknowledge it, what St Thomas Aquinas was to Dante: the interpreters of a world and of an experience which they portrayed imitating the Beckettian/Ionesque theme and structure: a pale copy many times removed.

As we know, all art and literature are cultural symbols. They are the products of a certain vision of reality, a view of the nature of things in the world in which man lives, moves and has his being. There is a very close relation between the philosophic thought and the literature of a particular epoch of human history.

As J. L. Styan says:

The social history which lies behind the play as a public event can offer unpredictable insights into the source of the vitality. Drama is an expression of community, feeling the pulse of an age or of a moment in time like no other art. A play is a social event or it is nothing.<sup>33</sup>

As such, the theatre of the Absurd in the West was a concrete chart of the crisis in their civilization. There the theatre rose like the phoenix out of the anguished ashes of the post-war experience: the theatre as an institution and as a performing art stood for and portrayed the epistemological and socio-historical realities. Menacing emblems like the tramps waiting for a mysterious Godot, the hall of mirrors, the ever-growing corpse were the manifestations of a Europe that was bewildered by the horrors and terrors of World War II. However, the Absurd movement in Karnataka (or for that matter, in India) has a different tale to tell: No doubt, there were certain socio-political and economic exigencies prevalent then. But there was no philosophical background—a nihilistic philosophic perspective—for an Absurd drama to take shape. In fact, nihilism has never been part of our culture at all.

As we know, in India, we have a rich unbroken tradition consisting of thousands of years of inherited values. Even today, the Indian cultural reality stands rooted in the traditional philosophical and religious notions. Among the thinking sections of the Hindus, the notions of *Paramatma* (God/Divinity), *Atma* (soul) and the doctrine of the four-fold *Purusharthas* with the *Parama Purushartha* (*moksha*) at the apex are the ethico-spiritual practices. They are oriented towards the realization of the *Parama Purushartha*: the soul being transported into a resplendent transcendental world. These notions still have a positive hold. Among the remaining sections of the Hindu society the traditional religious practices continue to hold sway. Of course, here and there, there are non-conformist movements by eminent persons, but considering their impact on the bulk of the Hindu population, one can only say that they all appear as fringe movements. Even among the other Indian religions, by and large, the overwhelming majority are

conformist in religious outlook and practice.

Nor, historically speaking, can original Buddhism, which has been described as *shunyavada* be looked upon as a philosophy of the Absurd, since Buddha insisted on the eight-fold path as the proper way of life in order to realize *Nirvana*. Even the school of Charvakas cannot be said to be nihilistic. They no doubt rebelled against positing another world as the primary locus of realized values and they flatly rejected the notion of a transcendental world being the true niche for the ultimate values. Philosophically, being materialists, they could not possibly accept the concept of yet another world transcending the spatio-temporal world. Whatever the values, they have to be realized here and now in this world alone. The Charvakas may be termed this-worldly philosophers through and through. Therefore, even if their philosophical frame-work is accepted, there is no place in the scheme for the notion of absurdity as being the central characteristic of human existence nor for the notion of vacuous existence, i.e. existence devoid of any meaning or meaningfulness.

When our Absurd playwrights tried to indigenize the Western experience on the stage—it was merely the modes of expression without any indigenous philosophical perspective or mood—they did not seem to be authentic. It was simply a pretentious imitation of certain formal aspects of the Absurd theatre without any sustained philosophical background. And as such, they did not reflect the ethos and the needs of the community and our culture: the very selection of images and juxtaposition of details in the play revealed a ‘dislocation’ in the authors’ supposed philosophical notions. Perhaps these are the limitations we see when we adopt/adapt foreign models to our stage. They did not venture beyond an indiscriminate alteration of details and characterization. The whole movement looked as if it were exotic, not really sprung from the native soil, but simply hoisted on the Indian stage as a sort of imitative, at best innovative, literary attempt. It did not reflect the true culture of our land at all.

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## Murder in the Cathedral: Browne to Bansi A Look at Two Productions

Uma Narain



*The Chorus and the Three Priests, Bhay ka Safar, directed by Bansi Kaul.*

Recently I watched two different productions of T. S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*: a Romanian troupe performed this play at Almeida Theatre, London, in the Romanian language; the second one was Bansi Kaul's production in Hindi at Lucknow under its original title *Bhay Ka Safar* (Fear on the Way). These two productions made a very positive statement about theatre—that whenever a play is revived in a foreign country, something new is added to its meaning, because drama takes its colouring from the country where it is produced.

Martin E. Browne had already created theatre history when he produced this play in 1935 at the Canterbury Church—it was a production that Eliot approved of. It is one thing to build a play around a specific historical event and perform it in a church on the occasion of the Canterbury Festival; quite another to revive it later for a regular theatre audience. Eliot had great faith in Martin Browne's direction; in fact, he agreed to write the play only if Browne was prepared to direct the production. The task was both easy and challenging: easy because at a festival the audience comes prepared to watch a play about a saint and his faith in God, specially if

the performance takes place in the church, fifty yards from the site of actual murder; and challenging because it is a play of heavy intellectual weight, and because the physicalizing of abstract concepts of religion might be too much to bear in theatre. I was curious to see how a director would deal with Becket's saintly character, which did not manifest variations of emotions because he had already attained the 'spiritual grace' of an Archbishop. Throughout the play his positive character needs to be reconciled with a passive personality that does not easily get agitated, the core of his philosophy being:

that action is suffering  
And suffering is action. Neither does the  
agent suffer  
Nor the patient act.<sup>1</sup>

As a result the Tempter Scene that externalizes Becket's internal conflict became a much-talked-about experiment in Martin Browne's production. Another feature of Eliot's play was the Chorus—a tradition that he had revived in theatre after centuries, and not without reason. Therefore, when I went to watch the Indian and the Romanian versions of the play, I was alert to the great potential for experiments in these areas.

Art-Inter-Oden, the Romanian group, was blacklisted in Romania during Ceausescu's regime, for provocative and anti-establishment performances. Their director, Mihai Maniutiu, sought the support of the British theatre community for doing *Murder in the Cathedral* and bringing it to London. Joyce Nettles, the one-time Head of Casting at Royal Shakespeare Company, offered to raise the £17,000 needed to mount the production and thus she, along with Alan Bates, Tom Stoppard, Tom Cruise and a few others became the patron of the Romanian group. Generous contributions came from Valerie Eliot, widow of T. S. Eliot. She was supportive and well aware of the hardships faced by people in Romania even six years after the execution of Ceausescu and his power-sharing wife. In a country where repression was still rife, Becket's refusal to bow to secular power and his murder by the King's Knights had obvious resonance. Romanians become the real-life chorus of Eliot's play, 'living and partly living' in fear and shortage of food and fuel. The chorus of the 'Women of Canterbury' appeared on the stage—almost like the charwomen—wearing filthy rags and blue netting, enacting their felt experience of life. Their choral speeches were not delivered from one fixed position as was customary—this chorus was all over the performing area, physicalizing vignettes of violation, murder and deprivation. They shrieked and shouted, they tossed in anguish and everything they spoke came visually alive even when the language was not understood. The natural rhythm of the Romanian language communicated the 'strange discouraged hopelessness' of the women of Canterbury with a dramatic impact.

To achieve intensity in the performance, Martin Browne had his chorus trained by Elsie Fogerty, the famous teacher of speech at Central School of Speech and Drama, London. Her training was magnificent but arduous. She helped the chorus achieve a harmony and yet retain their individuality. Browne wanted a chorus that was 'more than a sum of its individuals . . . a group chosen to speak for the community . . . in harmony of persons thinking together.'<sup>2</sup> The result was that Browne's chorus was static and far too articulate. The Romanian group, on the other hand was spontaneous and emotionally charged right from the word 'go'. They were impatient to express their anguish of twenty-four years of paranoid dictatorship under Ceausescu. Like Eliot's chorus, they did not need to evolve from 'passivity to

participation.' They were involved with the action of the play right from the beginning. When Becket is murdered they do not sit immobile—they go ahead and perform the burial service and cover the knights in sand (the action is reminiscent of Antigone performing the burial of her brother against the order of King Creon). Similarly, the long-suffering citizens are emboldened by the discovery that they are not alone—that no tyrant can kill an entire nation. In 1989, it was happening all over Eastern Europe: in Poland, in East Germany and in Hungary.

The star attraction of this production was Marcel Iures as Becket—crop haired, brooding, hawkish and rangy, an extraordinarily charismatic actor who suffered from state censorship for playing Richard III. Doing Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* was a personal catharsis for him: 'We are all Beckett from time to time.' For him the play is 'about a man saying "No" to the state . . . (to have the) courage to stand up against authority. Ceausescu was a demolition man. He destroyed half our churches.'<sup>3</sup>

Iures and his group discovered their own analogy in the Becket story. The Romanian revolution of 1989 was also sparked off by the arrest of a clergyman who had opposed the Government openly in the western city of Timisoara. In the performance also, Iures as Beckett is less concerned about the theological concerns raised by martyrdom. The characteristic 'spiritual grace' of Robert Speaight who played Beckett for Martin Browne is replaced by a more humanized look on Iures' face. He rages and raves, looks helpless and even cries. The innovative Temptation Scene is played with identical figures carrying a black scarf. The First Tempter, a crony of Beckett's gay youth, playfully offers the scarf to him, reminding him of his fun-loving youth. The same scarf becomes a threat when it is suggestively wound round Beckett's neck by the Second Tempter, who is a fellow politician persuading him to return to Chancellery. The Third Tempter is a baron, fanning himself with a beret and urging Becket to join hands with the baronage against the king. The Fourth Tempter has none of the nuances that were given to it by Martin Browne, who played the role himself and thematically linked him with the Fourth Knight. Since the temptations are an externalization of Becket's 'strife with the shadows' and therefore aspects of his personality, Browne had given the mask of the

face of the actor who played Becket to all the four Tempters. His first Tempter wore striped trousers and a fancy top hat within a coronet, the second Tempter wore medals on his breast, the third Tempter carried a stick like a golf club and the fourth wore a habit like Becket's with the palms and crowns of the martyrdom.

The Romanian production showed a menacing figure in black who prowled around the stage and put chains around Becket's neck. He could be a figure representing the State, because after the murder he looked remorseful, almost apologetic. This was a visual twist that became significant because in Eliot's text Becket's antagonist Henry II is absent physically. The Knights were clad in leather and moved in the choreographic steps of the Persian dancer and looked more like underworld figures. All the characters made their entry from an inner room lit with red light, with sliding doors. The performance space was a flat area, partially lit, with no props. The entire force of the production lay in the visceral and visually hypnotic central performance.

### *Bhay ka Safar*

The topicality of religion in politics is not lost on us in India, particularly in the wake of the Constitution (80th amendment) Bill 1993, delinking religion from politics to amend the Representation of People Act (RPA). Bansi Kaul explored these ramifications of *Murder in the Cathedral* in his production *Bhay Ka Safar*. To begin with, the play was done as a musical with seven or eight songs, and the rhythm of drum beats all through the performance helped in balancing the intellectual weight of the play. Kaul is adept at using folk tunes to the best advantage. The play opened with the choral speech set to the tune of a Vedic chant, reminiscent of the music in *Discovery of India* by Shyam Benegal. The circular movements of the chorus correlated their lot with characters drawn from *Lower Depth*. When they sing the passage about the 'bird image', the onomatopoeic effect of chirping birds and bleating sheep maintains the tempo of the play. Later, when Becket is murdered, the chorus recites the immortal lines from *Bhagavadgita*: 'Weapons do not cut it; fire does not burn it, so also does water not moisten it; the wind does not dry it up' [Chapter II (23)] i.e. the *atma* is uncleavable, uncombustible, not to be moistened and not to be dried up—it is permanent, all pervading, stable, immovable and eternal. The concept of the immortality of

the soul and the theme of martyrdom could not find a better expression than in the wisdom of the *Bhagavadgita*. This one verse encompasses the entire 'Christmas-sermon' by Becket, explaining martyrdom as a design of God, which Bansi Kaul cut out completely.

The chorus then sings in the mourning tunes of Punjab, *syapa*. This imparts an emotional and spiritual mood to the play, saving it from becoming tragic. It is also a powerful statement of Indian dramaturgy, of stylizing the death scene and producing *rasa* leading to *anand* (joy). Finally, all the characters join the chorus in the last choral speech celebrating Beckett's martyrdom as a divine comedy, in a sufi tune from Kabir. The chorus was clad in olive green, as was Martin Browne's chorus, except that Browne's chorus had strong patterns in deep red and blue, creating the effect of figures in a stained glass church window. Bansi Kaul gave the priests pure white costumes but indicated through makeup that one was a Sikh, the second a Hindu and the third a Muslim. The connection to the Golden Temple, 'Operation Blue Star' and the Ram Janmabhoomi–Babri mosque, without any verbal change, was a stroke of genius. *Murder in the Cathedral* immediately acquired an Indian context. The straight movements of the priests brought out their fundamentalist approach. Their choreography in the 'bar the door' sequence made the otherwise unnoticed priests strikingly noticeable.

Becket and his four selves (the tempters), were given bright yellow costumes and parallel movements. The Temptation Scene was composed as a game of hide and seek. One by one the Tempters confront Becket while others hide behind the chorus—a composition that brought out Becket's play with his conscience effectively. Unfortunately, the externalization of Becket's internal conflict was not mirrored on the actor's face. He failed to convey the spiritual grace of Martin Browne's Becket, who reconciled in his acting the passivity and positive goodness of Becket, or even the humanized portrayal of Marcel Iures in the Romanian production. This could partly be due to the long beard that hid most of his face.

Whereas Martin Browne's Knights wore the heraldic colours of the four actual murderers, Kaul gave the Knights 'Rajasthani warrior' costumes in mustard yellow, and red turbans. Their movements were triangular—brisk and purposeful, with the gracefulness of the

warrior. They were not unsteady or tipsy as in Browne's production. Their movements had the bounce of the Chhau dancer as they moved daringly over the split level space: they performed the murder as an act of chivalry.

The performance made its mark largely due to the music, which was put to purposive hard labour, and the composition and picturization of scenes that bore the touch of a painter's brush. Kaul succeeded in uniting the energy of Eliot's theme of martyrdom with Indian dramaturgy, based on stylization, where death is celebrated and not mourned—a concept that proved most appropriate for *Murder in the Cathedral*.

When we look at these productions in terms of 'time' and 'space', an evolutionary process emerges. The age-old dilemma of the tension between state and religion is resilient in the 1990s, but with the tables turned. In the twelfth century the 'Catholic Umbrella' might have been more powerful, but history tells us that it gradually evolved into Nationalism, as a result of the Renaissance spirit of enquiry which taught an individual to question everything—even the church. Today we find the 'State' becoming a greater power block. Between the 'Catholic' and the 'State' power structures, the common denominator is the common man, i.e. the Chorus of Eliot's play. By making the common man mobile and active in the Romanian and the Indian productions, the directors have given an indication of another kind—that if a society aspires for a balance between the 'State' and 'Religion', the common man has to play an active role. He can no longer be a passive and immobile force. Both the directors have drawn attention to this aspect of Eliot's play. The Romanian Chorus takes upon itself the strident way of strife and struggle leading to revolution, whereas the Indian production is rooted in the philosophy of the Gita and 'detached action'. The Indian Chorus has movement but they do not take events in their hands as the Romanians do. The circular movements symbolize the sufi concept of love and harmony—a belief that echoes in the Vedic and sufi tunes.

These directors are no longer merely interpreters of the text but co-creators of the play, because they impart their own creative energy to the work and expand its thematic nuances to contemporary relevance.

#### Reference

1. T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (OUP India,

1974), p. 32.

2. Martin E Browne, *Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), p. 86

3. As quoted by James Rampton in 'Nothing Lost in translation', *Independent*, Section Two, Wednesday 24th July 1996.

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#### In Memoriam

*Burrakatha is a folk theatre form of Andhra Pradesh which involves singing, narrating and the enacting of some heroic story. Traditionally performed by three artists, this form has a principal artist and two assistants. The principal artist plays the tambura while the two assistants play the percussion instruments that they carry on their shoulders. One assistant explains difficult things while the other narrates and enacts some humorous episodes. This way, the chief artist gets some rest and the audience some comic relief. B. Ramalu, a scholar of Telugu folk arts, is of the opinion that the burrakatha form of musical narration dates back to days prior to the Ramayana.*

*S. Nazar was a committed and reputed burrakatha artist who passed away on February 22, 1997. Born in 1920, Nazar could not pursue his education beyond the high school level because of poverty. He learnt vocal and instrumental music while doing odd jobs for survival. Then he began teaching music and finally was associated with Praja Natya Mandali, a theatre group of Andhra Pradesh. While working with them he learnt burrakatha and gradually emerged as a master in this form. The heroic tales of Palnadu and Bobbili were his famous performances in this folk art form. He also performed the burrakatha for some Telugu films and trained many artists, some of whom are famous performers today. Always a strong supporter of those who fought for the poor and downtrodden, Nazar had to face police harassment for performing burrakatha for Naxalite organizations. Winner of many awards and the Padmasree, he had completed a book on the folk arts of Andhra Pradesh a few months before his death.*

# Darpana for Development: Performance and Change

## The Darpana Outreach Programme: Performance, Education and Change

Dr Ralph Yarrow

*This article considers three outreach schemes using performance as a method of developing awareness and inciting activity: two in sixth grade (age 9-11) schoolchildren in Ahmedabad, Gujarat; the third in 30 selected villages in North Gujarat. The projects have been initiated and are operated by Darpana Academy of Performing Arts with the cooperation of the Ahmedabad Municipal School Board, the Centre for Environment Research, the MacArthur Foundation and the Manav Kalyan Trust.*

### Background

Darpana Academy for Performing Arts, Usmanpara, Ahmedabad, was founded in 1948 by Mrinalini Sarabhai. The Artistic Directors are Mrinalini and Mallika Sarabhai. This centre has a strong history of relating performance to social and environmental issues. This originates in work based on classical dance using traditional themes (for example, Mrinalini Sarabhai's 'environmentalist' *Meghadoota*), moves into multi-generic forms like Mallika's *Sita's Daughters* (dance, music, narrative, acting, reappraisal of values), and is evident throughout in the academy's focus on not merely preserving traditional dance, theatre and puppet forms but also relocating them within the current situation (such as the celebrated Bhavai performer and teacher Kailash Pandya's work on regeneration of Bhavai, the collection—not as museum pieces but as practice—of folk dances from all over India), seeking to reawaken interest in traditional forms which can then serve as a channel for individual and community expression. Mrinalini and Mallika conceived 'Darpana for Development' in 1981-2 as a way of presenting challenging ideas on social issues (family planning, environmental protection, communal harmony, women's issues) through performance.

The projects listed above date from 1994 (*Awakening Awareness, Jagruti*) and 1995 (*Parivartan*). This article offers a report to date and an assessment, both of the projects as strategies for development, and of the use of performance-related activity as educational and social empowerment. The article is based on documentation of the projects, interviews with project leaders, team members, teachers, recipients etc., and on direct observation of performances and subsequent sessions in schools and in the rural sites.

### Brief Description of the Projects

#### *Project 1: Awakening Awareness*

Mallika Sarabhai analyses violence in India as of three kinds: against women or involving women; between groups in the same religion (e.g. families, tribes, castes); and between religions (all these also feature in Mallika's performance-piece *V for*, performed by her with Darpana/Pan Project from 1995).

This project aims to 'motivate the children to think about existing problems and biases . . . through the medium of story-telling', and the focus is on three major areas, i.e. gender differences, communal disharmony and colour complex. Members of the Darpana performance troupe form the project team. The stages in the project are as follows:

- i. Performance tells the story; question and answer recap essentials and internalize the issues for children.
- ii. Children are asked to reconstruct the story and then perform it themselves (in groups where appropriate). Project members offer appropriate performance guidance, such as mime, vocal projection, positioning.
- iii. Children are asked to bring newspaper cuttings of similar events.

iv. Selection of stories from these cuttings; the class divides into groups to work on the preparation of one or two: some are performers, some provide musical accompaniment or sing (songs were initially composed by the project team but could subsequently involve children), others create visual displays from cuttings and illustrations. Team members provide guidance regarding methods and assist with clear structure where necessary.

v. Performance to others in year-group or school as a whole.

Each stage involves some small-group work including games, discussion, work on performance skills, encouragement and support for the process of creating something together.

#### *Project 2: Jagruti*

Here the issues are apparently somewhat more 'external' (though clearly Project 1 also addresses this perception): environmental and health issues such as water, garbage disposal and air/energy. The programme starts with the presentation of a performance around the topic—often using characters and motifs from the Gujarati folk form Bhavai—and then moves to check comprehension and analysis through question-and-answer before giving out questionnaires about home practices to be brought back later. Subsequent classroom activities (some continued in the wider school environment and at home) include segregation of different kinds of garbage, making compost pits, initiating community action, making things from discarded items, collecting press cuttings, drawing diagrams and pictures, writing and performing poems, songs, and plays on the issues. Important concerns include stimulating children to realize they can do something direct about these issues and creating a domino effect by involving parents and others.

#### *Project 3: Parivartan*

The proposal aims to 'bring about a change in the conditions that face the Bhils (pre-Aryan indigenous people of western India), especially the Bhil women in Banaskantha' (an economically and educationally backward area of Gujarat, bordering Rajasthan) through 'an extended and intensive programme of education aimed at attitude changes' in the areas of social, cultural, gender and health issues. Thirty to thirty-five villages were selected to participate. The project has funding for three years from the MacArthur Foundation and support from the Manav Kalyan Trust, a social work organization active amongst the Bhils.

After training at Darpana, the project team (comprising the creative director, a local teacher-activist, plus ten performers from the Bhil community) perform in the villages. Performance is followed by discussion, both publicly and more informally with host villagers. Resultant action is monitored on subsequent visits.

A fourth project (not assessed here) carried out by Darpana has involved the use of puppetry to educate villagers about the benefits of cattle immunization.

### **A Report**

#### *Project 1: Awakening Awareness*

I visited Vidhyanagar HS, Usmanpura and Amrut School, Shahibaug: the former a local authority Gujarati-medium school, the latter a private English-medium school. In both cases the level of alertness and participation by the children was impressive, perhaps more clearly so in the 'public' school: in spite of a class size of around 60, fairly dingy surroundings and the fact that the class took place as the last period of a very long day, the children were eager, bright and imaginative. (In many classes in Indian schools small-group and participatory work is very much the exception, partly for economic and plant-related reasons, partly because of ingrained traditionalist attitudes.)

The performances the children created were enjoyed hugely by everyone, and the materials they brought and put together were impressive. The Darpana performers had clearly established an excellent rapport with the children; the teachers were cooperative and interested in the process. The project was not overtly about teaching performance-skills, except in the sense of making it clear that learning by doing is highly effective, but the children, nevertheless, were able to express themselves with gusto and no little success.

Moreover, the project clearly succeeded in alerting them to the issues involved and getting them to think for themselves.

As a pilot scheme this looks most promising, and the intention, as with *Jagruti*, is to draw in teachers and family-members and to enable the process to mushroom. It has, moreover, very significant implications for educational practice, and shows that even with less-than-ideal conditions this kind of approach is educationally justified. As I have argued elsewhere (Yarrow: 1990), it is a way of empowering learners and enabling them to begin to take responsibility for themselves: this is clearly one of the key aims of the projects and it is vital in the Indian context if any kind of shift of attitude and practice is to occur.

The basic stories used were adaptations of traditional or well-known tales; performance forms suggested to the children included mime and movement, rhythm and music, masks and facial expression. Throughout all sessions the aim was to stimulate questions, not to inculcate ready-made answers. Observation by team members, teachers and myself suggests that one of the major educational gains was the cultivation of a questioning attitude.

#### *Project 2: Jagruti*

I initially visited two schools, both in the public sector. Returning 18 months later I visited a further 3 municipal schools, one of which had joined the scheme at its own request. Activities were again clearly popular, attention and participation excellent, support from teachers and heads enthusiastic and results impressive in terms of things the children had made and composed. Even though in both projects there was not always complete consistency of the project team and there were a number of interruptions for holidays and exams, the rapport continued to be good and it was apparent that the children readily picked up the thread again. Teachers were supportive in spite of the heavily exam-syllabus-oriented operation of schools in the Indian system. (In the long term this is a problem which needs addressing at all levels up to MA: possibilities for real learning are all too frequently suffocated by force-feeding of material for regurgitation).

The initial outline indicates that the focus of the project is essentially on the ability and responsibility of the *individual*. The initial group of schools comprised four from the public and four from the private sector, focusing, as with *Awakening Awareness*, on sixth-grade children. The project takes eight-week blocks per issue: it receives funding from ETC, New Delhi, for a period of three years from April 1994. It emphasizes the intention to open out environmental education beyond the confines of an exam-oriented set of statistics.

Teachers are regularly consulted and involved, particularly at the beginning and end of each block; I also noticed that they participated keenly in the class sessions taken by *Jagruti* members: the teachers did not use this as an excuse to slip away and do some marking! At the outset of the project, a planning meeting was held involving both Darpana and the Centre for Environment Education (CEE), followed by a joint workshop and later by an orientation workshop for teachers. Expert advice was available from CEE and other appropriate organizations. The planning and organization of the project is particularly thorough and impressive. This no doubt assisted the delivery of the project. The first report details some of the initial problems arising, as from unexpected holidays, unfamiliarity with the educational level of the students, etc. The basis of contact established by the initial meetings helped to ensure that modifications could be worked out appropriately. During the first two years 16 teachers and 400 children were involved.

The Annual Report 1995-96 records further planning meetings and workshops at the start of the second year, building on the experiences of the first. Three topics (water, garbage, energy) were covered in year one, and two (air and sound pollution, tree) developed for year two. Again, performances presented the issues and subsequent class sessions were structured around activities. In both years a closing function for all schools at Darpana allowed children to present the results of their work in their own performances; and the AMC School Board organized a further function for its participating schools in 1996. Approaches were also made by Doordarshan (TV), who filmed versions of the original performances for later release on its children's programme; and an invitation to an international workshop, Children in Charge for Change, resulted in a presentation, contact with other NGOs, and inclusion in a write-up of NGOs' experiences in environmental education and participatory schemes (*Reviving Links*, IUCN, Netherlands).



A case study of the project to date includes results of the questionnaire/interviews with participating children in order to determine outcomes. The questionnaire aimed to assess the suitability of the communication approach adopted by *Jagruti*: the knowledge and awareness gained by the students; resultant action by participants.

Results indicate that the initial performance (compared to subsequent demonstrations, survey forms, etc.) was far and away the most effective communicative method, remembered by virtually all students who were interviewed with reference to each of the first three topics covered (100%, 90%, 100% respectively). Practical activities (making toys from waste materials, making a compost pit) also produced high retention in the case of topic 2 (50-75%). Questions about specific details indicated greater diversity, but in nearly all cases students had grasped the essential issue and retained a significant proportion of detailed awareness about, for example, specific causes of wasting energy and water or types of garbage and appropriate and inappropriate disposal methods. Subsequent action (talking to others, changing habits) was taken by a similar, and quite impressive, proportion of students, very frequently in excess of 50%.

The case study concludes that the communication approach was popular and effective; performing arts is a powerful educational tool and its use should be extended to other areas; knowledge–awareness–skill (KAS) gain of students shows a positive trend; more emphasis should be placed on the subsequent action phase in future. It further adds some general comments on environment education, including the following: ‘to foster comprehension of complex wholes . . . the effective environment must be extended . . . to include the entire life-space of the student’; ‘in addition the attitudinal climate needs to be one that frees the student emotionally to struggle with problems for which there are no easy and specific solutions’; ‘the approach should be . . . to develop educational environments for facilitating a re-examination of basic premises, values, attitudes and perception’.

After two years most of the children who have participated in these two projects have moved to different (secondary) schools. However, they take with them in many cases an awareness of and enthusiasm for the methods and issues involved; and a positive climate has been created in the schools. Further work may need to take different forms (discussions are underway about the formation of ECO-clubs).

### *Project 3: Parivartan*

The selected performers, some with experience in community work and all with some artistic ability in indigenous music and dance, though not thought of as performance, underwent a two-month training (one month of workshops on basic performance skills, awareness of issues, project methods; followed by initial visits to villages and subsequent planning of performance schedules). Trainers included the *Jagruti* team (on environmental issues), a representative from the Behavioural Science Centre (BSC), women’s organizations (Jyoti Sangh, Ahmedabad and Sahiyar Group, Baroda), the Aga Khan Rural Support Group, and Darpana staff. During the programme the performers were not only sensitized to the issues but also socialized to the methodology by being invited to contribute their knowledge and skills, share in planning and develop discussion skills.

The original intention was to deal with a single topic each year (year 1: rural development; year 2: status of women; year 3: reproductive health), and to cover three aspects of each topic through performance and follow-up. This schedule has been interpreted fairly liberally, in that the first rounds of performance have been concerned with alcohol abuse, blood feuds, and witchcraft.

Performances on the first two topics were held in over thirty villages, with between 100 and 500 people attending each. Some discussion took place after the performance and some between performers and hosts; the following day the performance team visited families in the village for follow-up discussion. Following the sessions, around 50 people pledged to give up alcohol and 4 villages agreed to resolve family feuds by negotiation. Villagers requested that the performances be shown in other communities also, but this was not possible within the schedule. A video recording of the two programmes was completed.

I attended a performance on the topic of witchcraft in Khedbrahma district, along with some 200 to 300 villagers and the video team. The latter meant that this was a more ‘formal’ event than some previous performances. It was also interrupted by one of India’s frequent

power-cuts, but nobody minded very much. The style was presentational, street-theatre, using traditional song, dance and narrative techniques derived from Bhavai and framed by a short contextualization and commentary by the project leader. Clearly the audience (from small children to village elders) enjoyed the performance. The (male) elders, questioned afterwards, were emphatic that it had enlightened them and given them new perspectives, both on categorizing women as witches and on giving credence to witchdoctors. They claimed that they would amend their behaviour in future, and pointed out that they had stopped abusing alcohol after a previous performance. Younger men confirmed this and said that attitudes and behaviour had changed and that they very much favoured this. The men said they were proud that members of their families were performing with the team. The performers themselves claimed that their lives had changed significantly, that they were pleased and proud to be with the team (the leader and co-workers confirmed that the performers, particularly the women, had gained immensely in confidence and self-respect over the first year). Questioned by a fellow visitor, an American female theatre-worker, the women were adamant that they wished to go on with performance and work of this kind even after the end of the current project.

Clearly these initial results are encouraging, particularly from the point of view of the reception of the performances and the sustained change in the performers themselves. Social attitudes in adults are unlikely to change overnight, but there is evidence both of significant shifts and of a willingness to consider hitherto unacknowledged possibilities. Some doubts, of course remain, to do with the inevitably somewhat agit-prop format and 'missionary' zeal of performers and 'converts'. It is clear that these relatively unsophisticated people could be swayed by other messages from apparently authoritative sources. Against this, however, it should be pointed out that the performers, performance-form and project leader all have roots in the community and are therefore neither accorded undue reverence nor given particularly 'exotic' credibility.

### **Assessment**

The reports above make it clear that all three projects have had success in many respects. They each set out to promote a growth of knowledge and awareness, to instigate changes in attitude, to stimulate subsequent responsible action, and to do all this by essentially performative and interactive methods which themselves articulate a model of learning, growth and change.

### *Methods*

The methods used in the projects are tried and tested in many parts of the world, though somewhat less familiar in India. TIE (Theatre in Education) is well-known in Britain as an educational methodology and as a way of raising awareness of issues, mainly in primary schools (up to age 11); similar methods have been widely used, for example, in AIDS education in Africa. TIE usually starts with a performance and is followed up by interaction and discussion between the performance team and the target group; it also not infrequently involves subsequent project work, normally organized within the school by teachers. Thus performance leads into ongoing group and individual work. In addition to the focus on specific (e.g. environmental) issues, the methodology itself is perceived as transferable: learning through multi-media input and through doing is recognized as highly effective in many subjects.

Performative and interactive work with adults has major avenues of application in the socio-political and therapeutic spheres. The work of Augusto Boal (see his *Theatre of the Oppressed*) uses a variety of forms of interactive and participatory performative situations (e.g. apparently 'impromptu' dramatized events or debates; Brechtian scenarios in which audience members are invited to take over characters' roles and indicate what they would do in the situation). Boal's principles include the development of listening skills, internalizing theatre language, writing scenarios and incorporating alternative perspectives. There have been a number of applications of comparable methods in India, notably in Calcutta (Badal Sircar, Arun Mukherjee [Jana Sanskriti]), Kerala (KSSP), Karnataka (Ninasam), Tamil Nadu (ARP) and Delhi (Janam): these and other examples in Asia are documented in Eugene van Erven, *The Playful Revolution* (Indiana University Press, 1992).

Drama therapy, much of it deriving from J. L. Moreno's Theatre of Psychodrama, invites clients to dramatize problematic or traumatic events from their own lives in order to enable them to perceive the causative dynamics. Here also, therefore, performance both articulates new insights in a more thorough way and also invites participation and involvement in the cognitive process.

#### *Implementation*

The projects have been thoroughly prepared and have functioned within a strong support network, including not only Darpana personnel but also workers in social and environmental organizations, with back-up support from educational leaders and financial support from both Indian and international sources. Project teams were thoroughly briefed and trained, and have frequently reconvened for further training and discussion. Not only the teams themselves but also the recipients have been consulted and involved in subsequent planning, ensuring ownership of the projects by as wide a spectrum as possible. The ethos of working together cooperatively which is found in performance contexts is particularly strong here, and has communicated itself to all involved. Both creative enjoyment and a strong sense of commitment are evident throughout the project teams.

#### *Outcomes*

Knowledge and awareness gain is evident, both in the questionnaires administered as part of *Jagruti*, but also from direct responses of participants after performances and during follow-up sessions. Since the acceptance and internalization of new information is the initial stage in any reorganization of a living system, this platform is crucial to subsequent phases.

Change in attitude has clearly followed, in the cases, for instance, of children becoming alert to the need to conserve water and of villagers becoming aware that specific behavioural patterns were damaging to the community and could be changed. What occurs in this phase is the conscious realization that alternative possibilities exist. This realization can then lead to the assumption of individual or collective responsibility for action and change, i.e. an element of conscious intention enters the scene: internalization becomes desire and leads to activation. All these phases have been evident in the projects described. Whether action for change is maintained over a span of time depends on a large number of factors, many of which lie outside the scope of the projects (e.g. the influence of parents, social environment, other aspects of education, economics, etc.). It does, however, appear that in the relatively short term a good deal of such positive action has been initiated and maintained.

#### *Difficulties and strategies for resolution*

Difficulties experienced fall mainly into three areas: logistical (time available, access to target group), resourcing (relatively small size of project teams, doubts about ongoing funding) and some aspects of methodology (how best to transform positive perceptions into sustainable action).

The first two require continued planning and consultation, for example, with educational authorities and funding bodies. Clearly, in the case both of schools and rural schemes, the optimum future scenario is for the projects to be extended to a wider constituency, and for this to occur as a result of action from within the target community: in other words, in the case of schools, for school principals, teachers, children and perhaps also parents to receive training from the initial project teams and then to take over the major responsibility for future provision, with the project team remaining available for back-up. In the case of rural communities, the same process, with the personnel being drawn from the villagers, would be appropriate. Here there is already a back-up organization in the shape of the Manav Kalyan Trust, which operates many awareness-raising and social programmes.

In this context the interdependence of issues and methods needs to be emphasized. Any group which takes these projects forward needs to be provided, not merely with the relevant arguments and information, but also with the confidence and ability to communicate this through interactive and performative means. The whole thrust of the programmes is empowerment: it is vital for their effective continuance that the participatory mode does not become diluted to a passive form of reception.

The third issue raised above suggests the need for adding a stage to the process, or strengthening it where it is already in use. Currently the projects are strong on producing knowledge and awareness gain and relatively strong on instigating individual and communal shifts in attitude. To strengthen further the link between the undertaking of individual responsibility and the cementing of this in ongoing action (as well as to offer more learning-by-doing experience) more attention needs to be given to devising ways for participants to work together in *small* groups. This further internalizes understanding, spreads the burden of responsible action and lessens any anxiety which may be experienced in trying to influence a large group, particularly where as in the villages it may contain authority figures.

The relatively low cost of the projects (they involve personnel rather than plant and can largely be coordinated within limited areas) and the opportunity to divide funding responsibility between several agencies—local, national and international—favours their extension and continuation. Additionally, many of the issues targeted are likely, in the long term, to deliver social and environmental improvements which will be cost-effective. The projects fulfil their intention to deliver both values and value.

### *Conclusion*

The fundamental proposal of the projects is that performance (understood in a wide sense) is a highly effective means of 'environmental' (again in a wide sense) education. It directly stimulates and instigates educative activity in individuals and offers them methods and opportunities for learning to work together. Such learning and doing creates changes in attitude and perception of the individual's environment which issue into extended forms of interpersonal and social reorganization. Participants begin to reconfigure their world.

For all of us, that world depends largely on our relationships with our 'environment', whether we understand that in terms of the 'others' we live with (other sex, other race, other interracial groups, other religions, other species) or the natural phenomena surrounding us, and from which we are likewise not necessarily as separate as we have tended to assume.

The work then is outreach in many senses: involving our sense of who and what we are and of how we perform our relationship to the world of which we are a part.

All violence constructs an *other*: it distances 'self' from 'other'. It is based in the non-availability, the covering-up, of the sense of non-differentiation: that is, in the illusion that there is only the 'skin-encapsulated ego'. It is fed by fear: the fear of invasion of 'my' space, 'my' body, 'my' language, by what has been demarcated as 'other'. This demarcation is a form of categorizing, partitioning, sectioning; always involving hierarchy, role-assumptions, symbolic orders of some kind.

In performance, people touch. They touch themselves: they have to get in touch with their bodies, their emotions, rather than deny them. They experience directly, without the curtains of abstract terminology, what it is to feel. They empathize (with characters they are watching); they sympathize (with other human beings who can feel similarly); as audience they join together in feeling, they share pain or anger, they experience together the joy of a new insight or an unexpected resolution. So here they begin to touch one another, to sense that other is not always different from self, that 'me' and 'my environment' may be co-existent. The hierarchies and the barriers become more permeable. If they then learn to perform more consciously together, they extend that touching, that direct awareness and in-tune-ness. They begin directly to participate in themselves, in each other, in their environment: to commune and to communicate.

Clearly these initiatives are of more than local significance. Their importance in the national context is underlined by events like Ayodhya, plague, governmental corruption, by much in the history of post-independence India; and by similar events throughout the world. Education has to start by activating the capacities of individuals to take appropriate measures, to develop in and for themselves the ability to judge and respond, to learn that they can become responsible for their own attitudes.

This is not the only viable form of art, nor the only way to develop responsibility: but it is a practical, testable and direct addition to the aesthetic and educational repertoire, which deserves widespread dissemination, not least because it challenges everyone to rediscover in themselves their own ability to care and to express that in practice.

## Keeping Chili Powder out of Their Eyes

Betty Bernhard

*This account describes one performance under the Parivartan project in more detail, capturing the sights, sounds and smells in a report which locates the author within the space of the performance. Quite apart from what they contain, these two contrasting approaches to documentation make an interesting comment on sociological methodology.*

Khedbrahma is a tribal area located about a three hour bus ride north of Ahmedabad in Gujarat, a state in west central India. It is late August, 1996, mid-monsoon season, when the welcome cloud cover, which gives some respite from the oppressive heat, will suddenly burst into rain. The usually dry area is green and lush now from an especially heavy monsoon season. Nearly 200 local people died in monsoon-related incidents this season. Birdlife is active and mosquitoes are plentiful. Scarlet flowers bloom like fever blisters on the top branches of the gulmohr trees; and on the overflowing river banks, one finds delicate lavender mallows and pink tipped spiky plants growing. Goats, cows, boar, camels and an occasional dog move through the reddish mud. Herds of water buffalo submerge themselves up to their necks in the cool waters of swollen creeks. Roads are washed out, making travel of any sort difficult.

The Parivartan Project is a three year pilot project now completing its first year. During this past year, the Darpana Team chose ten individuals (five men and five women, including one couple) from different local villages to form an acting company to prepare and perform four plays on different subjects in thirty targeted villages. They return to each village with a new play every three months. The age of the performers ranges from thirty to the early forties. Prior to this project none of the actors had any performance experience. There is no tradition of women performing in tribal theatre due to social taboos. To overcome strong traditional and societal pressures the actresses had to surmount many barriers. All the actors agreed to leave their families in order to stay in the project centre. In this residential compound they live and work together to prepare performances on important issues for developmental change in the Khedbrahma area. The troupe usually stays overnight in a village in order to visit individual houses the next morning for follow-up discussions on the issues of the previous night's performance. The actors are able to establish personal relationships at each location. The topics of this first year's performances are Alcoholism, Witch Burning, Revenge Fights (Family Feuds) and the Evil of the Middle Man Who Profits from All Sides. Next year's projected issues are Illiteracy, the Girl Child, Women's Health, and Empowering Women in Family and Community Decision Making. Education, awareness and empowerment are the key words in the mandate of the Parivartan Project.

In order to experience the work of the Parivartan Project first hand, I jump onto the colourful Darpana Academy van which the MacArthur Foundation grant especially provided to facilitate the Tribal Project transportation requirements. Staff are going to attend a regularly scheduled visit to Khedbrahma. It is nearly four o'clock; overhead clouds are low and dark, causing some uncertainty as to whether the outdoor performance planned in the village of Champa can take place. However, a two man crew scheduled to do a special video documentation of tonight's performance, is already on board; so we decide to risk the weather.

When we arrive at Khedbrahma, Dr Patel and the performers warmly greet us. The actors must quickly leave in the van for Champa village to set up for the evening show some forty minutes travel away. The vitality and energy of the performers are evident. I enjoy the welcoming drink of spiced tea while the coordinators give a clear orientation to the project and to the evening's performance. We sit around a large well-used work table, surrounded by a few floor fans whirring in the background. The humidity is close to 100%. One can easily sense the personal commitment and sincerity of the project leaders as they enthusiastically describe their working procedures, goals and challenges.

Preparation for the performances takes place in the following manner. First, the Project Team introduces the subject of the performance to the actors. The entire group discusses the

issue. The actors relate their own experiences in relation to the subject. Next, they improvise small scenes based on their personal stories. This process validates the importance of the actors' personal knowledge, encourages dialogue from all members, and facilitates team work. Then, Kailash Pandya (the Project Coordinator) and Bhagawan Patel (the Field Coordinator) identify traditional songs and stories which touch on the central issues. The two-act performances last about fifty minutes. Act I consists of a folk story which touches on the main theme of the current play cycle. In Act Two the same theme is recontextualized in a contemporary situation.

According to the Director, there are no 'acting exercises' for their own sake, because this common mode of Western style training makes the actors self-conscious. These tribal actors, like many amateurs, increase their skills and self-confidence by doing concrete activities related to a specific production. The main performance reminders they need are to speak loudly and to position themselves in order to be seen by the maximum number of people. The women faced the biggest barrier of overcoming the social constraints against tribal women speaking openly in public. The troupe is now fully competent to accommodate any performance configuration with assurance.

The actors make their own costumes and the few necessary stage properties. They choose and design all the materials and fabric. In this show, the props consist of a large sword, a portable Goddess image, and a saree-length piece of shiny orange fabric. All the performance preparation activities are shared. As is common in Indian performance traditions, every performer sings, dances, and plays a musical instrument of some sort. This production uses hand cymbals, finger bells, drums and horns. Although two special halogen lamps on stands are rigged tonight to accommodate the video documentation, lighting is usually only one bulb light or a scoop light hung over the acting area by a rope. Other ambient light comes from dim bulbs and small fires inside the adjoining huts. Occasionally the small red blurs of bidis being smoked in the audience punctuates the darkness. The metallic decoration on the bold designs and shiny fabric also help to catch the light and focus audience attention on the actors.

As per their regular routine, the actors travelled earlier in the day to Champa village to walk from house to house informing people of tonight's show. Since these visits are repeated every three months, they all get to know one another, which helps to connect audience and actor, a key aesthetic component in Indian drama. As they build their audience, they help to build a stronger sense of community at large.

The troupe enters singing and dancing, playing drums and cymbals to announce the beginning of the performance. The audience quickly gathers with eager children crowding together on the ground to form a somewhat free-form circle. People watch from steps, slopes, low slung beds, tree branches and mothers' laps. The atmosphere is festive. They tolerate the distraction of a foreigner in the audience along with the clouds of flying insects the halogen lamps have attracted.

Witch burning is the theme of the current cycle of performances because of a recent resurgence of this atrocity in the area. Women are accused of being witches and pulled out of their houses into the open where they have chili powder rubbed into their eyes. In pain and unable to see their attackers, the victims are bound up, beaten, and hung upside down from a branch over a fire where they are burned to death. Looking at the friendly and peaceful demeanor of the audience tonight, it is difficult to imagine these villagers committing such barbarities.

The name of tonight's show is *Toral and Jesal*, a well known story based on an eleventh century legend about Queen Toral, a saint, and a thief named Jesal. The action takes place in Kutch, an arid region adjoining Gujarat to the north. The performance structure has several features of the folk theatre format including an opening song to invoke the gods, a friendly monologue by the Sutradhar (a stock character Stage Manager), the self introduction by each character to the audience, a presentational style, a non-linear use of space and time, use of small held curtains as props, an episodic plot structure, a happy end, and a closing benediction.

In this part of the paper I will describe tonight's performance in detail. The group enters singing a song to invoke the blessings of the Goddess Bhavani on this occasion and to notify the village that the show is beginning. By the time the song ends, the audience has settled in

place and the actors arrange themselves on a ground cover. The actors sing a second prayer, dedicating the performance to the Goddess. A song briefly introduces the main point of the story so that the audience knows the gist of what will follow. The character of Jesal stands up and introduces himself in song and speech to the audience as 'a big time robber who can do anything and no one can stop me.' He sings about his skills at thievery in lively traditional tunes. A Brahmin, readily recognizable to the audience by his clothing and speech, stands up and introduces himself. Stock characterizations help in the immediate identification of characters and give a legend-like quality to the play. In the opening scene, we discover that Jesal plans to rob the Brahmin of all his valuables. However, the Brahmin laughs and says, 'There is no point in robbing me since I have nothing, but if you really are as terrific a thief as you say you are, go and bring back a *toral* for me.' At this point the audience breaks into laughter, because *toral* is both the name of the Kutch Queen and the word for a mare. Jesal takes up the challenge and goes off to get a *toral*.

A brief song segues us into scene two where Queen Toral introduces herself to the audience. The Brahmin addresses her, saying he will honour her as a Saint if she can change Jesal the thief into a law abiding gentleman. Their lively verbal exchange has the flavour of call and response. Toral takes up his challenge.

In scene three, performed only in song, we learn that Jesal arrives in Kutch intending to capture a mare, but a careful night watchman hears the horse whinny and wakes up. The *toral* is frightened and rears up, pulling her stake out of the ground. The watchman comes running, so Jesal tries to hide. In the dark, the watchman, intending to replace the sharp stake, instead pierces the hand of Jesal, painfully pinning him to the ground. Jesal is extremely brave and never cries out. In the morning light, the King of Kutch arrives at the stable to fetch his mare but discovers instead the wounded and bleeding Jesal. The King is so impressed with Jesal's bravery that he offers him whatever his heart desires. Naturally, Jesal says he wants *toral*. So the King gives him both *toral*, his wife and mare. The audience responds with enjoyment at this amusing turn of events.

Scene four uses song and some dialogue to convey that although Jesal has two *torals* and has matched the Brahmin's challenge, he is still unsatisfied. His inner nature remains that of a thief so he cannot resist the temptation to steal. On his way back home, Jesal sees a beautiful herd of cows and declares he must steal them. Queen Toral argues against this theft, but he refuses to listen and goes to take them. While he is gone, Toral performs a sacrificial ritual to the gods to stop him. She sits on the ground with a large prop knife and mimes cutting off pieces of flesh from her leg and putting them into a sacred fire. Her sacrifice works, and the cows suddenly look deformed and useless to him. Returning emptyhanded, he sees her undertaking this ritual and decides that she did black magic on the herd. He shouts that she is not a saint doing good works but a witch doing evil. He tries to kill her with a large sword, but just as he brings it down on her neck, it falls from his hand as if stopped by an invisible force. However, instead of renouncing his thievery in the face of her power, he becomes even more determined to get rid of her and the 'black magic'.

In the closing scene the chorus sing what is happening, as Saint Toral and Jesal mime the actions. To save herself, Toral runs into the sea. Because she is a true saint, Toral is able to walk on the water, but Jesal cannot. He begs Saint Toral to save him from drowning. She tells him to confess all his sins of greed and violence towards women in order to purify himself. She says that if he renounces his sins, he will make himself light enough to keep from sinking into the water. Naturally, Jesal does as she commands. Convinced of his sincerity, she holds up an orange cloth representing a boat in front of them as they circle the performance area on their way to heaven. He openly repents that he accused her of being a witch and vows to revere her as his Goddess. Lively music sees them on their way to heaven as they exit the performance space.

At this point, the traditional folk section of the performance is finished. Having established the anti-witch-burning theme in a traditional story, the play now turns to a contemporary version of the same story so that parallels will be made to today's problems. In general, the contemporary sections contain more dialogue and less singing than the traditional opening act. The characters are quite identifiably contemporary in speech, dress and movement. For example, Jesal is now wearing a trendy safari shirt instead of his former dhoti.

Act Two begins with the self introduction of the modern Jesal. He complains that his ox is dead, his horse is lame, his water pump is not working and his wife is sick. He whines and laments that since none of this is his fault, he must be the target of an evil spell put on him by some witch. The Sutradhar interrupts Jesal's chronicle of woes with the following advice: 'Jesal,' he says, 'these things happen. There is no evil spell on you, so give up this idea. All these things can be fixed by the proper people. Spend some money on expert help.' Jesal ignores the advice and announces he is going to spend his money on consulting a male witchdoctor.

In the next scene, a dialogue occurs between Jesal and the Witchdoctor, who demands many items including wine, a goat, money, and other ritual materials, in exchange for breaking the evil spell. We also discover that the Witchdoctor is the evil henchman of the corrupt Village Chief. At this point, there is a complete and unannounced electrical blackout for miles around Khedbrahma due to a phenomenon called 'load shedding,' which often occurs during monsoon season. Several hundred people stay in place, laughing and talking, while some persons go to fetch flashlights. Some matches are lighted and a few long pieces of straw burn. Someone starts the van's engine. It seems possible that the remainder of the performance might be illuminated by the van headlights. A few minutes of confusion later, the electricity comes on, and the action resumes where it left off as if nothing has happened.

In the ensuing scene, we meet the modern Toral, a female social worker well known for doing good works for the village. She tries to expose the corruption in the leadership of the village governmental system. Witchdoctor and Village Chief decide this is an opportune time to get rid of this troublesome woman. They identify her as the witch who is the cause of Jesal's problems. This is where the play gets deadly serious. Some villagers start to throw chili powder into her eyes to begin the ritual violence that must end with burning her alive. However, just in time, a group of village women come to put a stop to this mob action. The women convince the crowd of all the good activities the social worker is doing and insist that the real evil in the village lies not with her but in the corrupt Village Chief and his exploitative Witchdoctor henchman. Loudly encouraged by the audience, the women actors beat up the two bad men. The women admonish Jesal and tell him to stop blaming innocent women for his problems, wasting his money on fake witchdoctors' remedies, and to keep away from corrupt officials.

The play ends with the entire acting company dancing. One actress carries a large image of the Goddess Bhavani on her head. As she parades around the acting area, the other actors sing praises glorifying women: 'Women are our mothers, our sisters, our wives and our daughters and must never be identified as witches.' They also sing and chant a summary of the play's lessons which include these commands: do not steal, do not drink, do not go to witchdoctors, do not support corruption in officials, do not call women *dakin* (the local word for witch), and do no violence to any woman. Give honour and respect to women in this community.

The audience applauds in the usual brief Indian fashion, but one can see from their faces and the crowd noise that they enjoyed themselves this evening. The actors sit back down on their ground cloth, and Dr Patel addresses the audience. He reiterates the main anti-witch-burning theme. Then, the actors go directly into the milling crowd to talk and get feedback on the ideas in the play, a method which encourages small group discussions in which everyone who wants to speak may do so. Often, the women will be shy about stating an opinion in a public forum.

I sit with the actresses in order to try to talk with them. Luckily, someone in the Darpana team translates for us. After I am introduced to them, they want to know what I think of their work. I tell them how much I enjoyed the performance, its importance, and applaud their skill and commitment. I marvel at how they were able to work with this company outside of their family responsibilities for three entire years. They respond that their families feel that the work they are doing to better the social conditions in their villages is worthwhile. The joint family system in Indian villages can accommodate the duties of child care and other family responsibilities. Also, they are paid for their training and ten performances per month, which economically helps their families. Furthermore, they do have short breaks when they can go home. With genuine family and village support behind them, the women are free to do this project. They believe that this work empowers them and



other oppressed men, women and children in the area where they live. They say that when they are at their home villages, they continue to have discussions about the issues in the plays. Several women agreed that this project has changed their lives in a positive manner.

I enquire what the women plan to do in two years when the project is completed. They respond that they will most definitely continue either together or individually to start new groups in different villages because of the skills, experience and self-confidence they now have. I believe they will do it. The ripple effect will no doubt encompass a far greater area than the original targeted one. One has to admire and applaud the courage, stamina and dedication of the entire Parivartan Project Team. There is no appropriate quantitative way to measure the success of this project, but the qualitative change in village life and attitudes will manifest itself in the everyday life of these villagers. The lives of the performers are certainly enriched. This project is a carefully organized and administered collaboration between the villagers and genuinely concerned, qualified experts in the field of theatre and social development; and as such stands as a model for other such worthy efforts.

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#### Special STQ issue

### Theatre in Manipur

Not much is known about theatre in Manipur outside the state. *STQ*, in close collaboration with Manipuri theatre experts, scholars, writers and theatre practitioners, has been planning and working towards a special issue on this subject for over a year. Several trips, hours of interviews, and special photographic documentation have resulted in a rich collection of original and archival material which is bound to be of interest to anyone interested in performance and theatre, as well as those whose areas of interest are cultural anthropology, cultural history or gender studies, since a major focus has been the role and contribution of women to the various aspects of Manipuri theatre and performance.

**The special issue will be published in May 1997. It will contain approximately 120 pages and will be priced at Rs 50 per copy inclusive of mailing. Regular *STQ* subscribers can book their copy at a subscribers discounted price of Rs 35 per copy inclusive of mailing. This pre-publication offer is open to current subscribers till 30 April 1997.**

## A Brief Look at Theatre in Kenya

Swapna Guha

### Before the Beginning

Theatre in Kenya today seems totally westernized, not only in form and style, but also in content. Why? One would naturally like to probe. The British director of one of the most commercially successful theatre groups in Nairobi, in his account of Kenyan theatre, quite understandably claims that there was no drama in Kenya in its pre-colonization days. Since the first proscenium Theatre, Kenya National Theatre, was built by the British government in 1952 and Shakespearean drama started being taught at Alliance High School in those days, it is natural to trace in those events the initiation of drama or of 'what you and I would call drama' as the aforementioned director says.

Mr Wasambo Were, the director of the Creative Arts department of Kenyatta University, on the other hand, holds a different view. He says, 'Not only in Kenya, but in most parts of Africa, all major social ceremonies used to be performed with the enactment of some relevant drama. Now, mainstream 'drama' this may not be, but a certain storyline evolving through dialogue exchanges between different characters, play-acted (performed?) by a group around a loosely knit theme and others joining in impromptu, was a regular mode of ritual-cum-entertainment in all their social ceremonies around child-birth, child-naming, circumcision, marriage and death. Moreover, in market places and village squares some rural forms of drama, based on folklore and traditional myth, used to be a popular form of entertainment. Since there are numerous ethnic tribes here in Kenya, these dramatic forms have different names for different occasions, such as 'Teroburu' in Luo language, which is performed in a funeral ceremony, where a group of men and women, with physical and verbal expressions, attempt to drive away the evil spirits and to help the deceased's soul reach its abode of peace. Even storytelling involved dramatic expressions. The storyteller used to involve actors to enact portions of his story. In these indigenous forms of drama in Africa, Mr Were emphasizes, action was more important than words. More often than not, the unwritten text of the play evolved through the extempore interactions of different characters whose emotions and messages were borne more explicitly by their spontaneous action than by their impromptu speeches. The drum as a musical instrument played an important role, functioning as a rhythmic hub of the primarily non-verbal action. To express disapproval of an action of the government, an authoritarian figure or even of an individual in the community, people used to perform symbolic/metaphoric plays, either on the basis of popular folklore by dramatizing it, or with the essence of the actual incident/happening, transforming it into a dramatized dance with little dialogue and expressive dances conveying the message. 'Ogra', a traditional concept of a monstrous human, has been repeatedly used for critiquing the government. Drama, as a form of expression, therefore, can be traced in Kenyan life even before Kenya was accepted as a 'civilized nation by the rest of the world'.

The above information received from Professor Wasambo Were of Kenyatta University, Ms Alice Ayara, manager of Kenya Culture Centre and Mr Teiye, drama and language teacher in Premier Academy school, certainly enlightens one about the theatre scenario in pre-colonial Kenya, but unfortunately throws no light upon the foundation of today's Kenyan theatre. British colonization, as believed by most Kenyan theatre people today, has totally obliterated the nation's 'traditional roots' and imposed (along with many other socio-cultural/religious norms) the western performing modes. The indigenous forms of celebration, along with other local rituals, have also been replaced by western alternatives. During this transition, British and other European drama enthusiasts started their own dramatic ventures in the country. Whatever evolved thereafter in the field of drama in Kenya, happens to be the outcome of the endeavours of these foreigners as well as of Kenyans raised in Western education and imbricated in the Western discourse. Eminent African playwrights too write plays in English, that being the medium of their education and urban intellectual communication. Only a few of them have started writing in the Kenyan national language, Kiswahili. Plays written in English are also being translated into Kiswahili and performed now. Traditional dramatic forms or content, 'of

the soil', are sometimes imbibed by certain 'politically aware' Kenyan drama-enthusiasts and brought into the field of Kenyan theatre, which has already matured within a rubric of 'British culture' through the English language. For example, Professor Were gives an account of the emphasis that the department of Creative Arts in Kenyatta University is laying on 'traditionalization' of theatre in Kenya. But Mr Teiye, an accomplished theatre personality, while talking about his attempt to employ Kenyan folk techniques in modern drama, calls it a 'second hand training' since his own education was totally Western and he needs to go to the villages to research and learn Kenyan traditions and techniques of dramatic expression. This trend of 'revivalism' is therefore not devoid of the fractures of post-colonial identities searching for 'ideal' pre-colonial tropes.

### **The Making of the Present**

The starting point of 'modern' drama in Kenya can be located in the foundation of Kenya National Theatre in Nairobi in the year 1952 and the simultaneous establishment of Garrison Hall in Kisumu, Little Theatre in Mombasa, Nakuru Players' Theatre in Nakuru and Uasingisu Theatre in Eldorato. In the year 1957 school-drama festivals began in Kenya. Since then, drama as a part of education involved school-going Kenyans from a young age. Students carried on their endeavours at the college level as well. The Kenyatta University on the outskirts of Nairobi, introduced the department of Performing and Creative Arts in 1977 under the directorship of David Mulwa, a noted playwright of Kenya, with a view to providing the university community with a cultural life, by running cultural festivals within the university. Another objective of the department has been to train young artists in the fields of drama, dance, music and other performing arts. This department has a separate unit called comparative theatre, where theatre arts as a subject is dealt with in connection to Greek, Asian (mainly Japanese), European (with emphasis on English) and African (including Egypt, the 'centre' of African 'culture') theatre. The department holds a week-long annual festival in which other universities and independent theatre groups from Nairobi participate. The Nairobi University also conducts their cultural week once every year. Theatre enthusiasm is thus spreading at a core level through educational institutions. Outside these institutions also people (maybe earlier initiated in schools) form theatre groups and perform in the halls of Nairobi and other cities of Kenya.

### **The Scene around the City**

The well-known theatre groups in Nairobi are Phoenix Players, Nairobi City Players, Lavington Players, Saracasi Group, Mabala Mwezi, Chelepe, Friends Theatre, Vision Theatre. Among these groups only three or four are initiated and directed by foreigners, long settled in Kenya. The rest are directed by Kenyans. Whoever the director, on the stage one witnesses an interesting conglomeration of Kenyans, Asians and Whites. Actors and actresses are mostly Kenyan local people, but the foreigners (British, European or Asian) also join the troupes very often. With so many groups in one city involved in the production of plays and with nationwide arrangements like drama festivals and contexts for the encouragement of theatre activities, one might expect the Kenyan audience to be really theatre minded. But, interviewing several theatre personalities, I encountered the unanimous observation that Kenyan people are very lethargic about going to the theatre though, the reason has been located differently by each of them. Professor Were believes that Kenyans had always been used to being entertained by dramatic performances free of cost. Today, to watch such performances in a closed space they are not prepared to pay such high prices as a hundred (or more) shillings per person. Ms Ayara of Kenya National Theatre says, 'They pay three hundred shillings to watch football! It proves that they are just not interested in the other mode of performance, doesn't it?' Later on Ms Ayara adds that she believes that the reason is the degree of imperfection prevailing in the local productions. She tries to support her logic by citing that theatre groups from abroad enjoy a better response from the same audience. Indeed, one cannot buy this argument at its face value since the possibility of a 'craze for all things foreign' cannot be ruled out in this particular context. On the other hand, when Mr Teiye, the drama teacher of a secondary school, also confirms that there is a positive inadequacy of enthusiasm for theatre among the Kenyan audience in comparison to those in Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, etc. the reason given by Professor Were also gets negated, since all these African countries bear the same tradition of dramatic performances being presented free of

charge.

Whatever the debate, this characteristic of the Kenyan audience certainly comes in the way of the dramatic endeavours of all these theatre groups in Kenya. Nevertheless, there is an abundance of enthusiasm in the theatre performers here. There are festivals of free shows and contexts inspiring different educational institutions and other group theatres. There are groups like the 'Free Travelling Theatre' which travels by bus to different cities of Kenya to give performances at no charge. The recent gala celebration of Mabala Mwezi theatre group's Theatre Awards Night at Safari Park Hotel on the 8th of December 1995, succeeded in bringing out the flavour of the thriving theatre activity in the country through a series of short plays produced by different theatre groups of Nairobi.

### A Close-up View

Ms Alice Ayara, a qualified civil servant, is currently posted at the Kenya National Theatre as the manager. Kenya Cultural Centre, which lets out its auditorium at Kenya National Theatre for performances or cultural activities in the city, also makes its own cultural contributions. On your way to the Manager's room on the first floor, you pass by a room resounding with lively drums and get a glimpse of dancers practising. Ms Ayara confirms, 'Yes, that's our residential music group.' For drama, however, they don't have any such residential group. She says that the KNT mission is to aid all the talent in the city. Maintaining their own drama troupe would mean less opportunity for the rest. Thus, for each KNT production, artists are chosen on the basis of auditions. To direct the play, one among the three eminent directors in the panel — John Nyongesa, Jacob Orieno and Wasambo Were— is delegated. For the last few years KNT has been arranging a 'Winner's Concert'—a grand show by the winning team after each annual drama festival for Kenyan schools. According to Ms Ayara, this works as a very good incentive for an improvement in the quality of the production, since children are found to be all eagerness to grab this privilege.

The KNT, as a government organization, produces plays and TV skits on educative themes for their audience. The subtle artistic approach to precautions against AIDS in their last production, she says, was highly appreciated all over the country. Being asked in what way she involves herself in the production of the KNT plays, Ms Ayara says she basically organizes the entire production and moreover, sometimes she acts, or designs the costumes etc.

Professor Wasambo Were of Kenyatta University, department of Performing and Creative Arts, is not only a knowledgeable and capable drama-director, but also an intense researcher and visionary. The productions of Kenyatta University, which stand out among the productions in the university drama festivals, speak for the dedication and hard work put into them by Professor Were and his talented associates at the department.

James Falkland, the manager-director of Phoenix theatre group, along with Jimmy Ward and others, deserves the credit for a remarkable contribution to the development of modern theatre in Kenya. This British theatre addict has spent more than twenty-five years in this country, most of which have been spent in working on the production of plays, encouraging histrionic talent and planning innovative settings to combat the remarkable space crisis on their tiny stage in the basement of the Professional Centre. It certainly takes talent to bring out, in the manner in which they always do, the effect of a sprawling living room or the ambience of an open roadside for *The Odd Couple* or for *Comedy of Errors* on that strip of a platform masquerading as the 'stage'. After the completion of twelve years of regular productions, with an achieved target of minimum eighteen plays in a year, the confident pilot today turns down the suggestion of moving to a more spacious stage-space. The competent productions of Phoenix Players, the improved seating arrangements and, above all, the convincing setting of stage props, makes the audience also inclined to agree with Mr Falkland. The history of the company, which sounds like any other story of bleak prospects, exhausted funds and numerous hindrances in front of an enthusiastic band of theatre lovers, rich only in zeal and optimism, is staggering for one who is familiar with the now 'renowned theatre group' placed securely at the summit of success. Their latest production, *Too Good to be True*, is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The adaptation has been done by James Falkland and George Mungai. In the words of the dramatic-critic of a noted Kenyan daily, this musical has been able to 'blend the modern with the ancient without breaking the narrative thread of the musical.' According to her, the typically Kenyan English and some remarks in Kenyan languages, as used in parts of the play, along with the

subtle references to community problems in today's modern world, keep the contemporaneity alive while the poetry in Proteus' and Valentine's love-lines takes us back to the Shakespearean context. Going by their record of texts performed, it appears that this brand of mild experimentation with the text is by and large the parameter within which Phoenix theatre operates.

Mr Teiye, an unassuming, pleasant person, teaching in an Asian secondary school, has been making his own modest contribution to Kenyan theatre for more than a decade now. He is a playwright in his own right. He was attached to the Kenyatta University at one time. The Free



*Above left. Muntu by Joe de Graft. Above Right. The Concubine by Ammadi. Below left. Syokimau by Muliwa Kyendo. A KNT production. Below Right. Tom Says He is Dead by Ben Ateku.*

Travelling Theatre which was started by Mr John Ruganda in the late seventies with financial support from the Kenyatta University, was eventually taken over by Mr Teiye. He continued with this group for several years. Their shows used to be free of charge. The travelling and other expenses used to be borne largely by the Kenyatta University. Other sources like the British Council, and Swedish East Developing Agency also funded them generously. For about a couple of years now this Free Travelling Theatre has been inactive since Mr Teiye has involved himself in school-teaching, writing and producing plays locally. Talking about the Kenyan audience's lack of enthusiasm as theatre spectators, he says, 'If you shut yourself within theatre halls and distribute posters, Kenyans are not likely to reach out to you; on the contrary, if you reach out to them or suit their convenience, they come to watch you.' In this context he cites the example of one Mr Were, an eminent businessman of Kenya. Mr Were, he says, is a dynamic and farsighted person, in association with whom Mr Teiye has directed several plays. Mr Were hires some space in a market place or at a carnival and puts up plays there, for which he hires directors and artists. According to Mr Teiye, this aggressive theatre lover, himself a non-performer, is making a remarkable contribution to the development of a theatre-going attitude among the Kenyans, going by the proverbial principle of bringing the well to the thirsty.

### **Waves of a Wider Ocean**

The world-famous Grips Theatre of Berlin had been well received in Nairobi in the late seventies, when more than a few theatre groups, with the support of the Goethe Institute of Kenya, staged a few of Grips' plays. In 1985 Mr Volker Ludwig, the playwright-director of Grips theatre, visited Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Mauritius. The then-involved theatre groups arranged a week-long workshop at the Goethe Institute in Nairobi. A participant of that workshop, Mr Paul Olungae now happens to be the sole director of Grips plays in Nairobi, since the original groups have dispersed over the years. Paul Olungae, with his theatre group Ed-Hok, has staged several Grips plays since 1985. Their production of *Trummi Kaputt* in November 1995 was a great success in terms of production and acting quality; but the small auditorium of the Goethe Institute was hardly filled in any of those eight shows, to which entry was free. Mr Olungae emphatically stated the 'difference' in his productions from those of Grips', as his actors are all children as opposed to adult actors playing children in the original Grips productions. He also claimed that the response to their plays has been more in terms of 'simple enjoyment' than any qualitative difference in the experiential world of adult-child relationships. The primary focus of the Grips plays seems to be quite 'different' when performed by his troupe.

The London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, popularly known as LAMDA, has been introduced here by the local organization called Drama Development. The proprietor, Mrs Maureen Havelock, is a teacher, an amateur actress and a LAMDA teachers' diploma holder. This institute has started running courses in most of the well-known schools here. Since LAMDA has introduced an international syllabus for examinations on acting, along with public-speaking and so on, the programme of drama courses in schools appears to have gained remarkable popularity. Doubtless, the Kenyan audience is looking forward to seeing LAMDA productions in abundance on the Kenyan stage in future.

### **The Silver Lining**

Drama-viewers of Kenya, however, have mostly shown indifference and passivity in comparison to the enthusiasm with which the performers have been moving forward over the decades. The strength of the theatre performers therefore lies, not in the majority of the mass audience but on the minority consisting of genuine theatre-lovers. Most of the theatre groups enjoy the backing of some sincere patrons. The Phoenix Players identifies such a group of enthusiasts as 'Phriends of Phoenix'. These people have consolidated themselves in a group and, since the inception of this theatre group, have been providing all kinds of support from different sorts of people. Theatre-loving businessmen like Mr Were, for example, use their business acumen in formulating strategies of enhancing the financial viability of theatre productions. It is thus that theatre-enthusiasts have been able to achieve a commendable standard of production and that there are impressive performances visible in huge auditoriums like Kenya International Conference Centre of Kenya National Theatre and also in modest sized spaces like those of Nairobi University, Kenyatta University, Brabourn School Hall etc., in spite of the lukewarm response from the viewers in general in the country.

*The author is a theatre enthusiast who has taught literature for several years in Kenya.*

## Theatre Log

### *Ou vas-tu Jeremy?* by Magic Lantern

Recently I saw a theatre event at the auditorium of Alliance Francaise de Madras. I call it a theatre event because the same play was enacted for two weeks consecutively. It reminded me of the Kutiyattam or Kathakali performances in temple courtyards in Kerala. Besides the play, there were other events taking place at Alliance—painting exhibitions, music and dance performances—enhancing the feeling of an event rather than a single performance.

The play, chosen as the main event around which the other performances were arranged, was French dramatist Philippe Minyana's *Where Are You going, Jeremy?* Minyana's theatre represents the Theatre of Proximity which emerged after the 70s, after the earlier Theatre of Metteur en scene (where the director was all-important, and technology and big budgets played an important part), faded away owing to the economic, social and cultural crisis France and other European countries faced. From his own introduction to the play we know that it was written in 1988 when he was living with three other writers in an ancient abbey converted into a centre for dramatists and playwrights. It was war time—Iran-Iraq war, Lebanon war. In his own words, 'In a certain way, cut off from the world, we were watching the news emissions on the television and then we used to go to the Avignon museum to contemplate on the Miniatures. And so, steeped in all this, we told ourselves, we must reinterrogate the epic, the moral tale. And four of us wrote plays which were called *The Temptation of Antony*, *Desert*, *Desert*, *Promised Land* and *Where Are You Going Jeremy?*'

Eric Auzoux, director of Alliance Francaise de Madras, who played an important part in the choice of the play, explained the circumstances leading to it. 'At a Symposium on Contemporary European Drama at Santiniketan in December 1994, I was asked to speak on French Contemporary Theatre. To me, among many trends, what seemed necessary to emphasize, was the return to the social in theatre. So, I spoke of Minyana and others who belonged to this genre. As this theatre believed in the need to communicate to a wider audience, I felt it was the most relevant to India. Arup Rudra, a Bengali theatre director present, brought up the idea of staging a play by Minyana. Then it occurred to me that in order to make it appealing to the Indian audiences, it should be presented in as many Indian languages as possible. Also, I wanted it to be a combined programme of the various

Alliance Francaises (12) in India. So, I suggested doing it in three Indian languages—Tamil, Malayalam and Bengali. Translators were found and the plays were staged in three different centres—Madras, Calcutta and Trichur—at the same time. Minyana was supposed to have come and watched all the performances, but, unfortunately, he couldn't.'

The translation into Tamil was done by Padmini Rajagopal and the production script by one of the actors, Kumaravel. The translation captured the flavour of the French original and the actors felt comfortable with it. However, the names of people and places sounded awkward in Tamil. Though there are many universal elements in the play, which can be recaptured in any language and transferred to the ethos and milieu of any country, to a great extent it is specific to the European situation and therefore, the actors had to internalize a situation which was alien to them and project the specifics of that situation with conviction. They did succeed to a great extent, but were unable to recapture it fully. Pravin, the director, says, 'We did not want to portray it as a tragedy, but as a tragi-comedy.' Nevertheless, the underlying emotions are loneliness, loss, separation, death, destitution, violence, greed and bleakness. Even the occasional humour is cynical and black. So, there should have been an attempt to project the tragedy of the situation more poignantly.

The most interesting aspect of the play—that of a journey—was conveyed interestingly in the confined space of a proscenium stage. The set was designed by Hans Kaushik, another actor. It was created out of empty boxes—different types of boxes—cardboard boxes, metal trunks, wooden cage-like structures. These could be shifted easily while the play was going on. The actors themselves shifted the boxes to the accompaniment of musical interludes, as though it was part of the play, two dock-hands shifting boxes in a warehouse, pasting labels on them. Thus alternate spaces were created, and the characters moving in and out of the intervening spaces created the illusion of a journey, the leit motif of the play. Pravin and Hans told me that it was the words in the play which implied or indicated appearances and disappearances of characters or everything 'in transit' which gave them the inspiration to devise such a stage. In their words, they created 'spaces to facilitate popping in and out of characters.' They did an admirable job. I distinctly felt that as the play progressed the stage moved forward and the dividing line between the

actors and the spectators grew thinner. All the actors rose to the occasion and used the sets to enhance the dramatic quality of the play and retain the ambience of a journey. They popped out of boxes, pushed around boxes, rolled from the top of the boxes, creating hidden alleys, ships, rostrums, wharfs and graveyards. The general metaphor of a confined and dark world was also conveyed effectively.

The next outstanding theatre device used in this play was the music. Music used was from different sources—a good example of how music 'bits' from different scores can be effectively used in a play, not only to enhance the moods and dramatic suspense, but as notations, pauses and comments by the director. There were pieces from Egypt, Senegalese numbers, flute pieces from the Middle East, the Arabian pop group's 'Behind the Camel'. I asked Pravin and Hans whether the choice of music from the countries to which Jeremy's journey took him was conscious. They said it was.

Four of the actors—Kumaravel, Jayakumar, George and Kalairani—belong to the well known Tamil repertory group Koothu-P-Pattarai. Hans is a freelancer who has distinguished himself in the Madras Tamil and English theatre circles. The newcomers—K. V. Suresh (as Jeremy), Samantha Dandapani and Lawrence, played the different roles given to them with admirable ease and suavity. Some of the roles came out better than the others, like Jayakumar's fisherwoman, Kalairani's mother, Kumaravel's flaming prostitute and Hans's President. But, overall, the impression remained that their concern for finding local equivalents to a situation overwhelmed their ability to transcend from the local to the universal. Not enough research had been done to translate the trauma of a lost generation in Europe.

The lighting done by Bala Sarvanam was imaginative. It enhanced the dark, sombre quality of the play. It was good to be reminded at times that light is just the other side of darkness and there is no light without shadow.

Finally, I asked Pravin why he chose this play. He said that he had been thinking about this play for nearly two years. He also sees the choice as an outcome of the previous plays he has directed—*Caligula* (Camus) and *Fables* (La Fontaine). He chose it mainly because of the social concerns mirrored in the play, and the structure which is very difficult to translate into stage terms. But the overriding reason that inspired him was, 'It does not depend on heroes, but brings out the heroism of ordinary people. In that respect it is a very positive play. It reminds you of the comic strips which treat ordinary people as heroes. Heroes are created out of circumstances—be it Superman or Batman—circumstances which occur in everyone's

life. It forces the audience to look at everyone in a kindly light, because all of them are potential heroes.'

Eric Auzoux hopes that there can be an interface with the three directors and translators which would throw light on how each translator and director had chosen to treat the same theme.

Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan

### **Search: A Seminar on the Future of Alternative Theatre**

The Jangalmahal area of the Kanksa block of Bardhaman district is now operative in what's come to be known as the Alternative Theatre movement, which is gradually spreading to the neighbouring district of Birbhum also. Many students, youths and agricultural and other labourers of the area are active participants in this movement. They are involved in a variety of activities that seek to locate ways and means of developing this form of theatre as the medium of expressing their protest and resistance. The participants feel that this form of theatre is becoming increasingly popular among the masses, causing narrow-minded proscenium supporters to feel threatened. Be that as it may, those involved in this process are undoubtedly serious about their work. Feeling the need to clinch certain issues that divide theatre activists of the region, the Rural Living Theatre group based in the village Kankra organized a day-long seminar entitled *Khonj* (Search) on 27 January, 1997 to debate and discuss the future of alternative theatre. Representatives from 18 different theatre groups from Bardhaman and Birbhum districts, most of them rural based, participated. This seminar caused serious debates to surface indifferent aspects of alternative theatre.

What was not discussed was—what is alternative theatre. There were debates around whether the proscenium is to be used, whether the narrative style should be maintained, whether to depend more on verbal communication or on body movements, if it is alright to use classical music and so on. The concept of alternative theatre seemed to have been taken as pre-determined, though the controversies sometimes seemed basic enough to make that consensus questionable.

What the term alternative theatre has come to mean in common parlance today is what Badal Sircar had once termed third theatre. His oft-quoted explanation was that jatra and other forms of folk theatre prevalent in the country since before the advent of the British is first theatre; the proscenium theatre that developed under British influence is second theatre; hence the variety of theatre that developed as a point of departure from both these should be called third theatre. With time, this third or alternative theatre as it's come to



be called now, became identified as non-proscenium theatre depending more on the body than on props and language, and with a message of change towards a more egalitarian society.

However, maybe this working definition of alternative theatre needs to be questioned, as one of the most serious controversies in that seminar was on the issue of using the proscenium. Representatives of 16 of the 18 participating theatre groups argued that alternative theatre is meant for the rural poor as opposed to city-centred proscenium theatre and should not, therefore, rely on the proscenium. To them, rejecting the proscenium seemed to automatically imply the rejection of dependence on props and verbal communication in favour of what is known as physical acting. But Prashanta Bhattacharya, the representative of the local Indian People's Theatre Association, argued in favour of the stage, props, words, fixed characterizations. He said that the proscenium and the narrative style are what the rural people are accustomed to, which is why any theatre with an important message must come to them through that mode. Stages could be make-shift ones and local resources could be used as props. Dependence on so-called physical acting only made matters more complicated, he argued. The representative of the local Ganatantrik Lekhak, Shilpi, Kalakushali Sangha (Association of Democratic Writers, Artists and Performers) supported Bhattacharya.

The other question on which there was considerable debate was, how simple or complicated the theme and the representation techniques should be. Probir Guha of Alternative Living Theatre summed up this debate with the argument that there could be no hard and fast rules on this issue. The theme and the representation techniques should be designed with the target audience in mind and would vary accordingly. A play developed with the backward sections of the rural poor in mind would differ from a play evolved for the urban middle class, for example.

Similar conclusions were drawn about the use of classical music in alternative theatre as well. It was argued that there could be no taboo against its use, as long as it was presented in a demystified form to the audience so as not to make them feel uninitiated.

Bansi Bhattacharya of Reviving Theatre based in Trilokchandrapur acted as the moderator for this seminar. There were two performances as well. Rural Living Theatre, the organizers, presented their new play *Bisrangsan* (The Flow of Time). Written by Bansi Bhattacharya and directed jointly by the playwright and Yusuf Mandal of RLT, this is a collage of various people's struggles that have surfaced from time to time since the era of

independence. The other presentation was an excerpt from Probir Guha's *Yours Most Obediently*, which has been discussed at length elsewhere in this issue.

It could be relevant in this context to briefly look into the backgrounds of the theatre groups participating in this seminar. Some of these groups are members of a joint forum called Reviving Theatre based in the village of Trilokchandrapur. Five theatre groups are directly connected with this forum and there are four to five more that are in indirect contact. One member from each of these groups is a member of Reviving Theatre, through which they put up joint productions while each individual group continues to function on its own. Many of these theatre groups were mentioned by Probir Guha in his 'Invisible Theatre' (STQ # 12) as he happens to be one of those outsiders who is closely involved with them. Together with other theatre groups of the area, member groups of Reviving Theatre have set up the Panagarh Forum as a broader platform for joint action in the field of theatre. The activists involved insist that this combination of individual and joint functioning simultaneously at two different levels is part of their experimentations to spread the alternative theatre movement around and to advance it further. Bansi Bhattacharya has evolved as the most popular playwright of the area as most member groups of the Reviving Theatre are doing his plays, but each director directs the play his group is doing without interference from the playwright. Yusuf and Bansi singly or jointly direct the productions put up by the common platform of the Reviving Theatre, which is at the moment busy with a play called *Adhiya* (One with Half a Share), written and directed by Bansi, based on the Tebhaga peasants' struggle that had rocked Bengal in 1946-47. It is interesting to note that the Reviving Theatre has also experimented with producing Tagore's *Rakta Karabi* (The Red Oleander) and *Bisarjan* (The Immersion) in the non-proscenium form.

Reviving Theatre has been working since 1985 with the singular aim of creating theatre for, and spreading it among, the rural masses of West Bengal. They seek to do productions based on themes dealing with issues that concern such people, using a form that depends solely on what is easily available in their work area. This platform for joint theatre action has been functioning for all these years without any kind of governmental or non-governmental grants. They have no rehearsal space other than open fields and no funds other than what the people of the villages they work in collect for them in cash or kind. Bicycles or the crowded buses that irregularly ply these areas constitute the only modes of transport for these





theatre activists, who insist that it would be wrong to identify their theatre activities with any particular form as they are constantly experimenting with new things and even they do not know what the form of their next production would take.

**Bansi Bhattacharya, Paramita Banerjee**

### **Notebook**

#### *Festivals, Celebrations and Workshops*

ON DECEMBER 27, 1996 Baitalik organized a cultural evening at Rabindra Bhavan, Bankura, on the occasion of its twelfth anniversary. After the formal opening of the evening with a song, Arindam Bandyopadhyay, the President of Baitalik presented a brief resume of the organization's activities over the last 12 years, underlining how the active cooperation of members has made it possible for Baitalik to function as a significant socio-cultural activity centre in this small township of Bankura without any grants from governmental or other sources. Baitalik presented its new production *Sadar Darja* (The Main Gate), a play by Prabhakar Chakraborty, directed by Arindam Bandyopadhyay. This was followed by a song and dance programme by Baitalik students. The evening ended with the distribution of prizes.

THE ANANDAM CULTURAL CENTRE located in Coochbehar, West Bengal organized a district theatre festival from 27 to 29 December, 1996 in collaboration with the William Carrey Study and Resource Centre. Plays, a workshop, an exhibition, a seminar, felicitation and distribution of annual prizes, were the various items covered. Bangalore-based Madhyam sponsored the festival.

ON ITS TWELFTH ANNIVERSARY, Chennai Kalai Kuzhu (CKK) organized a People's Theatre Festival from 11 to 15 February. This group was formed in 1984 by the Chennai district unit of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers' Association with a view to developing theatre as a distinctive medium of the people's cultural movement. Though this group had started with a proscenium production, they later shifted to street theatre to expand their base and reach non-theatre-goers. Apart from putting up performances, CKK is also a sought-after resource group for inputs on theatrical workshops, training and research materials. This festival was organized to have 'a closer look at how contemporary Indian theatre has coped with the challenges and what leading groups in different languages are engaged in.' Open air street theatre in the evenings was followed by proscenium plays later. Over twenty theatre groups from different parts of the country participated, including Habib Tanvir's Naya Theatre from Bhopal, Jana Natya Manch from Delhi, Samudaya from Karnataka,

Sangha Chetana and Kerala Shastriya Sahitya Parishad from Kerala, Prati Kriti from West Bengal, Natya Chetana from Orissa and Andhra Praja Natya Mandali from Andhra Pradesh. Koothu-Pattarai, Mounakkural, Sabdham, Vidyal, Karuvakkattu Kalai Kuzhu and Deekshayana were the participants from Tamilnadu itself.

KULAVAI 97 was a workshop of Tamilnadu Women Stage Artistes on 21 and 22 February, 1997, in Chennai. The Voicing Silence women's theatre group of the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, the International Institute of Tamil Studies, the Tamil Nadu Iyal Isai Nataka Mandram and the Tamil Nadu Kattai Koothu Valarchi Munnera Sangam were the joint organizers of this workshop that sought to provide a forum to stage actresses for sharing experiences, ideas and opinions. In the workshop brochure, the organizers stressed that, 'The appearance of women on stage has always been a historical event . . . in the light of patriarchy which has seen women either as a property of men or as an instrument of pleasure.' To substantiate this point, the brochure cites how traditional women's forms are not regarded as performing arts, how women are not allowed to participate in certain folk forms while in others they are allowed only as accompanists to men. Even in theatre, women appear almost only as actresses as opposed to playwrights and directors. But, in the southern districts of Tamilnadu, there have been women who performed Special Dramas or Isai Natakam as parts of what were known as Boys Companies. There have even been some all-women groups. In northern Tamilnadu, a form called Novels developed by the beginning of this century, as a hybrid of Terukkoothu and Isai Natakam with women as the lead players. Women from all these different fields of performing arts were brought together in the Kulavai 97 workshop. The workshop was formally inaugurated with an all-women Therukoothu presentation by the Katthaikoothu Valarchi Sangham of Kanchipuram. 'In an amazing display of power histrionics, the women proved that they are in no way less than the males who are the traditional performers of the Koothu'—reported V. R. Devika in *The Hindu* about this presentation. Another interesting presentation was the solo piece of part dance and part theatre on Nandanar developed by Kalairani of Koothu-Pattarai. In her report, Devika also foregrounded the quiet dignity, openness and vibrance with which veteran actresses of traditional forms participated in this workshop.

SAPTAK OF NAGPUR held Rangotsava, a national theatre festival, from 22 to 27 February. It was a big event for Nagpur. Held in the Dr Vasant Rao Deshpande Hall, the festival was formally

inaugurated by Ms Vijaya Mehta, followed by the presentation of Ratan Thiyam's *Uttarpriyadarshi*. The other plays presented in the festival were *Tumhari Amrita* with Shabana Azmi and Farooque Sheikh, directed by Firoz Khan, *Yerma* by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhary, *Wah Jo Aksar Zapad Khati Hai* by Bansi Kaul, B. Jayashree's *Lakshapathi Rajana Kathe* and Veenapani Chawla's *Impressions of Bheema*.

AND THEN THERE IS ENGLISH THEATRE, a festival of play readings, was organized by Prithvi Theatre in collaboration with the British Council in Mumbai, from 7 to 9 March. A total of 8 original English plays written by Indian playwrights were read—4 of them one-acts and 4 of them full-length. By original is implied that these plays are neither translations nor adaptations and though they were read, not performed, they are meant for stage performance. In fact, one of the criteria for selecting the plays was that it should have had at least 25 performances. The one-acters were *Snafu* by Iqbal Khwaja, *White Spaces* by R. Raj Rao, *Naushil Mehta Commits Suicide* by Naushil Mehta and *Rathod The Cockroach Killer*, a monologue written by Zubin Driver. Anahaita Uberoi, Rahul DaCunha, Rooky Dadachanji and Soli Marker were the directors for the full-length play readings while Iqbal Khwaja, Prashant Shah, Vikram Kapadia and Denzil Smith played that role for the one-act play readings. The purpose of this festival was to gather Indian English theatre people under one roof so as to establish that a body of Indian English theatre exists, which—in turn—is expected to create a future audience for such theatre and to inspire existing and aspiring playwrights of this genre to write more. The response to this event has been encouraging enough for Prithvi Theatre to initiate a regular play reading programme on the first Monday of every month from April 1997. Original plays written in any Indian language, including English, are invited from aspiring playwrights.

THEATRE ON THE STREET, from March 11-14, was organized at Lonavla by the Mumbai-based Media Matters, a centre for development support communication. With Prabir Bose as the resource person, this workshop aimed at understanding the form and content of activist theatre; exploring the scope and potential of theatre as a medium for organizational campaign; and providing skills and resources needed to use theatre as a media tool. Apart from exercises, games and improvisations, there were film screenings, guest lectures and a presentation of the Hindi play *Chhi* by the Media Matters theatre group.

THE MARCH-APRIL CALENDAR of the Max Mueller Bhavan, Mumbai, focused on Brecht in India with

a seminar, exhibition and plays. The seminar from 13 to 15 March proposed to look at the Indian experience of Brecht vis-a-vis theory, play productions, translations and adaptations—exploring issues of social relevance. A comparative study of various Brecht productions in India in different languages and by various theatre groups formed an important part of the proceedings. The exhibition was from 3 to 20 March and presented photographs with a difference. Entitled 'Portraits of the artist as a young man', this was an unknown and forgotten collection of photographs of the young Brecht taken by Konrad Ressler. The two theatre productions were *Baal* and *The Job*, both presented at the NCPA Experimental Theatre. Directed by Rajat Kapoor and presented by the group Chingari, *Baal* is a Hindi adaptation of Brecht's first play and had its premiere production in India in Hindi on 12 and 13 March. *The Job* developed as a collaboration between visual artist Nalini Malani, theatre director Anuradha Kapur and actress Ritu Talwar. Atul Tiwari adapted and scripted it in Hindi on the basis of a short story by Brecht written in 1933. Presented on 15 March, it was followed by an open interaction with the artists.

JANA SANSKRITI, India Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed, is planning to celebrate 12 years of its existence in the last week of March this year. 'Jana Sanskriti is not just a theatre group—it is the name of a movement today' is how they describe themselves, and to substantiate that, they now have 25 teams working in different rural areas of Bengal with each team performing at least twice a month. Jana Sanskriti has also been successful in completing the Mukta Mancha at the Digambarpur village of the Pathar Pratima block, South 24 Parganas. This is a rural cultural centre that Jana Sanskriti has built up over the years completely through the support and solidarity of local villages, without any kind of funding from governmental or non-governmental sources. The Mukta Mancha is actually a hexagonal platform covering an area of about 1000 square feet, with pillars on the circumference supporting a thatched roof. There are plans to have two rooms on two sides also. They want to use this space for performance by local theatre teams once a month and for rehearsals and performances by Jana Sanskriti the rest of the time. The two rooms are to be used as adult education centres as well as storage space for props, costumes and musical instruments. Jana Sanskriti has arranged to get this Mukta Mancha formally inaugurated by Sri Sudhi Pradhan, noted cultural historian, on 27 March, 1997.

THE VETERAN ACTOR, director and theatre scholar Utpal Dutt is no more, but the work he began is

still carrying on under the guidance of his widow Sova Sen, herself a reputed actress of rare calibre. To celebrate Dutt's 68th birth anniversary on 29 March, the People's Little Theatre, better known as PLT, and the Utpal Dutt Foundation for International Theatre Studies arranged to present three of his plays: *Dilli Chalo*, *Kallol* and *Barricade* on 28, 29 and 30 March. On the last evening, the first volume of the collection of Utpal Dutt's articles and *Epic Theatre* will also be formally released, followed by a discussion by eminent theatre scholar Samik Bandyopadhyay.

#### *Performances*

THE LITTLE THESPIAN, a Calcutta-based amateur theatre group, staged its new production *Sulagte Chinari* directed by Azhar Alam on December 31.

DARPAN'S LATEST PRODUCTION *Karamdas Ki Katha* was presented in Lucknow by Jajabar Rangmandal on March 1. From a story by Vijaydan Detha, it was adapted to the Nautanki form by Siddheshwar Awasthi and Satish Anand, who also directed it.

THE GUWAHATI-BASED Theatre Foundation and Calcutta-based Assam Socio Literary Club presented *Desire*, an English version of Satya Prasad Barua's National Academy Award Winner *Mrinal Mahi*. Translated by Geeta Lahakar into English, it was presented on March 9, at Kalamandir, Calcutta.

AN EXPERIMENT IN CONTEMPORARY DANCE, *Solil'oquy—talking to oneself or without addressing any person*, was presented in the Museum Theatre, Madras with the support of the Alliance Francaise. The concept and choreography was by Padmini Chettur and Krishna Devanandan. Prasanna composed the music and Akhila Belle, Krishna Devanandan, Padmini Chettur, Sirisha Naidu and Sumangali Krishnan were the five dancers.

*THE COMEDY OF ERRORS* by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) directed by Tim Supple is being presented by the British Council in collaboration with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. This is the RSC's first visit to India. The British Council has also organized workshops. The first workshop will be a participatory one for actors, and students of drama, focusing on verse speaking, rhythm and play, Commedia Dell'Arte and comedy, physical tension, status and comedy, use of space etc. The second workshop will primarily be a question-answer session where company actors will answer questions about performance. There will also be an insight session devoted to questions and answers about the practical business of creating and touring a Shakespearean production. Technicians will explain and demonstrate their role within the company. Selected members of the audience will have the

chance of working with the assistant director and the technicians to evolve a short piece of theatre using what they have learnt. The third workshop will be a work in progress session where the company's rehearsal process will be demonstrated and opened up for questions and suggestions.

#### *Organizations*

KANPUR-BASED DARPAN, founded in 1961, is devoted to Nautanki, a folk art form of Uttar Pradesh. Darpan has formed units at Bhopal, Gorakhpur, Lucknow, New Delhi, Sitapur and Varanasi. They presented *Dahliz Ke Par Urf Teen Betiyan* on February 13, 1997 in memory of Gulab Bai, founder of The Great Gulab Theatrical Company, that's been functioning since pre-independence days; she was also the first woman to appear on stage in 1930 in a Nautanki performance. Asharani and Madhu Agarwal, her able daughters, are carrying on the work, and this play was produced under their direction. This was a collaborative piece developed jointly with the New Delhi-based Alarippu, one of whose many activities is the development of theatre as an educative and consciousness-raising medium. This production was developed in the Kanpuri style of Nautanki, which is different from the Hathrasi Nautanki tradition. The exploitation of women in a patriarchal society was the theme of the play written by Tripurari Sharma. Siddheshwar Awasthi adapted it to the Nautanki form with the assistance of Bhanwar Gopal. The Kanpur-based Sakhi Kendra and Mahila Manch also provided special assistance.

**This Notebook consists entirely of information sent to us by theatre workers. STQ invites theatre individuals and groups to send in reports and announcements of productions, workshops, seminars and any other significant news items they wish to share with the theatre community through this forum.**