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Editor

Anjum Katyal

Editorial Consultant

Samik Bandyopadhyay

Project Co-ordinator

Paramita Banerjee

Design

Naveen Kishore

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A DIRECTORY OF THEATRE GROUPS IN MANIPUR STATE



Editorial

APRIL 1996; IMPHAL. Everywhere, on the roads of this town, rickshaws are being driven by young men with hidden faces, cloths wound and firmly knotted over the head, with just a slit for the eyes. This insistent image disturbs. Why the masks? There is the ubiquitous military presence on the streets—are these youths protecting themselves from being pulled in for random ‘questioning’? But if so, wouldn’t the dramatic masking invite the wrong kind of attention? Almost, it seems a statement. Defiance, then? ‘Come, get me if you dare?’

The answer lies elsewhere. The parameters here are pride and shame. A pride that cannot bear the shame of being recognized—young college students, forced by poverty to earn their living as rickshaw pullers, protect their honour by hiding their faces. In solidarity, others join them. Simultaneously a cry of anguish and a gesture of protest, the hooded faces remain with me as the confusion and pain of this deeply troubled, deeply riven, society.

I

Manipur today is struggling. With itself, and with the Indian polity. Within the state there is friction between the mainstream Meitei community and the tribes, between different tribes, rival insurgent factions, civilians, state military forces and the insurgents. Drugs and AIDS spread tentacles of dread through the society. A culture whose strength lay in its traditional structures finds itself being shaken by the roots.

The relationship with the dominant state, India, is wounded, suspicious. Rejection and a desire for rightful recognition war with each other, resulting in internal confusion and conflict. Soyam Lokendrajit, a contributor to this issue, says, the ‘Machiavellian machinations’ that resulted in ‘annexing’ this state to the Indian union, dismissing the popular government elected through adult franchise, soured the relations between Manipur and India (‘An Artist’s Response to Contemporary Reality’); now, as Lokendra Arambam says, ‘Culturally there is a vital difference between mainstream demands and ground realities, because the alienation between Manipur and the mainland has become near-total. This is the situation—how should a conscious, self-critical, thinking theatre person react to it?’ (‘Experimental Theatre in Manipur’).

II

This question runs like a swollen vein through all theatre activity in Manipur today.

And Manipur is intensely theatre active. The performance arts traditions of this state are rich and varied. The Sankeertana and Lai Haraoba, for example, though religious ceremonials, contain dramatic and performative elements. Several spheres of theatre, each a complete system in itself, overlap and coexist: the older traditional performance forms, particularly the Sumang Leela or ‘courtyard’ theatre; the established proscenium theatre; and the ‘modern’ experimental, alternative theatre. It was impossible to cover the entire spectrum in this special issue; inevitably, certain personalities, aspects and features await their due attention.

The central focus of this issue is the experimental theatre that, in the early 70s,

emerged as a strong presence, emphasizing the exploration of traditional forms, reshaping techniques, themes and training methodologies, often incorporating thang-ta (the martial arts form of Manipur), and folk and classical dance. This theatre also engaged directly with the urgent social issues and problems the young directors saw around them. This movement of the 70s found its expression mainly in the work of four directors: Ratan Thiyam, Heisnam Kanhailal, Haorokcham 'Sanakhya' Ebotombi and Lokendra Arambam. They became, although highly diverse in style and signature, the pivot of a new phase in the experimental, alternative theatre, posited equally against the established mainstream proscenium theatre, and the still popular Sumang Leela.

Now there is a new generation of directors, anxious to establish their difference from, even as they acknowledge their debts to, this older generation, striving to discover their own identity and their role in a vastly changed, violence-ridden and chaotic socio-political situation. With them is a band of highly talented, highly trained, actors, of both sexes. Their keen commitment to theatre is evident, as are the anxieties: about how, as creative persons, they can intervene in the current socio-political situation; how they can generate an audience for their kind of theatre; how they can reconcile their nationalist pride and beliefs with the cultural demands of a larger India; how they are to negotiate funding without compromising their creativity.

The first section of this issue attempts to enter their world: moving from commentaries written by those close to the process, to the voices of the more established directors, to interviews with the subsequent generation of directors, to an exciting exchange between peers in which they confront their situation with moving honesty, to the actresses who talk of what it means, as women, to be part of this theatre world.

III

A separate note on the actresses is important here.

As is common in our tradition-bound societies, the status of women is a complex of diversely nuanced truths. There is a strong tradition of activist women's interventions in Manipuri history, especially in the struggle for independence; women run the markets, and there are several all-women Sumang Leela, opera, and touring performance troupes (unfortunately, we were unable to see any of these perform). But women are equally bound by the rules of domesticity that a traditional social environment enforces. They are expected to lead circumscribed lives within given parameters, and are censured if they transgress the accepted social norms. It is important to balance the contradictions and overlaps between the militant activist tradition and the constriction and disapproval the women still face in their personal and social identities. A too easy valorizing of the former can lead us far from the ground reality of their day-to-day lives; and yet, respect for and recognition of a heroic history of protest is important to fuel any movement towards change.

Theatre, even now, lies outside the pale. So the generations of actresses who talked to us emphasized the stigma and struggle they faced—less now than previously—in entering the world of theatre. It was interesting to see the thread of continuity emerge, linking the generations. The elderly actresses of the proscenium stage, now retired, talked of the resistance and opprobrium they faced in their choice of profession (what remained largely unvoiced was the pressure on their private lives). Sabitri, standing between their world—she started her career as a performer with a travelling troupe—and that of



Courtesy Huiyen Lanpao. Photo: N. Basantakumar

experimental theatre, echoed this in her own history; and the young women who are members of the theatre groups today emphasized these same social pressures even as they acknowledged their debt to the generations of brave women who, by opening up paths and attitudes, had made things much, much easier for them. This consciousness of a connectedness, of a history, was palpable.

Our meeting with the retired prima donnas was a high point of our trip to Manipur. Once we had expressed our desire to record the presence and contribution of women to theatre in Manipur, Arambam Somorendra, scholar and revolutionary, went to a great deal of trouble to arrange a meeting with these actresses of the 30s and 40s. It was not easy. Most of them lived in total or near-total retirement; many were elderly and infirm, and moving about was difficult; they were scattered over different parts of Imphal. With remarkable dedication and affectionate respect, Somorendra went about organizing a meeting. He arranged to have them all gather at one place, except Tondon Devi, who was semi-paralysed, and whom we visited instead.

The encounter was heartwarming. A gathering of one-time grande dames, each carefully dressed for the occasion, impeccably groomed and made-up, excited at meeting each other (they had all been rivals and peers) and at the prospect of the outing and the interview. Apart from Manipuri (carefully interpreted on the spot by Somorendra), several of them spoke fairly fluent Hindi and some Bengali—a reflection of an era when a more cosmopolitan culture prevailed. They reminisced about the inter-war years, when foreign soldiers thronged the theatres, the time when they sang and danced their way into the hearts and memories of a loyal audience, often becoming synonymous with folk and mythological heroines in the popular mind. They had been courted and shunned, adored and censured, won accolades and awards, before slipping into retirement; and as they recalled their triumphs, traded memories, sang snatches of songs and rendered bits of dialogue remembered from the past, the atmosphere warmed and came alive. As the session drew to a close, one of them said to me gently, 'Come and spend a few days with me, then we can talk freely. My biodata alone is 40 pages long—how much can I tell you in half an hour?'

Sabitri, one of this country's most sensitive and powerful actresses, speaks only Manipuri, though, once she is performing, she needs no language other than her talent. Married to H. Kanhailal and an integral part of his theatre, she has been a gifted medium for his theories and methods, demonstrating in practice what he wishes to communicate, and at the same time infusing it with her own genius. Straddling in a lifetime the transition from the world of the professional travelling theatre to that of the experimental, alternative theatre, she foregrounds many of the tensions and pressures that actresses in the amateur theatre face. Hers is a voice rarely heard—fluent only in Manipuri, she usually lets her husband speak on her behalf at interviews. It was, therefore, a real privilege to find her relaxed and forthcoming; and with the interpretive help of journalist Salam Rajesh, an important voice has been heard for perhaps the first time.

Just as Sabitri is central to Kanhailal's productions, the young actresses play an important role in the groups of which they are a part. Most of the productions we saw, performed by various experimental theatre groups, revolved around



Courtesy *The Freedom*



Courtesy *The Freedom*



Courtesy *The Freedom*

the central figure of a woman: mythic, heroic, symbolic. In fact, I felt a sad recognition of a similar projection of concepts of nation and motherland onto the bodies—in this case, literally—of the women as had occurred in another period of intense nationalism and identity-formation, the struggle for Indian nationhood. In play after play, Woman became land, country, heritage, history.

The actresses did more than justice to the dramatic expectations focused on them. They were impressive: sensitive, expressive, poised, graceful, competent. Yet, in the presence of their—mostly male—co-actors and all-male directors, they were silent. It was only in separate sessions of just the actresses (requested by them) that they opened up and discussed poignantly what it felt like to be women in the world of experimental theatre.

We discussed the subject of how women were represented in the plays they had performed for us. They showed an awareness of the irony that though most of the plays could be described as woman-centric by virtue of privileging a female figure in the narrative, in fact they were simultaneously and curiously blind to the real-life, three-dimensional woman. Woman as mother, as sister, woman as suffering body-politic, abounded. Yet they felt that the theatre wasn't really *seeing* the woman in a more nuanced way. Shades of another history, as I said earlier.

This session was ably and sensitively interpreted on the spot by Khilton Nongmaithem.

IV

An interesting counterpoint to the experimental theatre is the vastly different Sumang Leela or 'courtyard' theatre. This traditional non-proscenium form, said to have begun early this century, is hugely popular even today, drawing large audiences—very much, in fact, a community theatre. Sumang Leela troupes are hired for an evening's performance, to mark a social or ceremonial occasion. Performances take place in the host's courtyard, and the neighbourhood watches free of charge. Social and family dramas predominate, usually highly moralistic in tone, with liberal doses of melodrama.

The second section of this issue focuses on the Sumang Leela today, progressing from an introduction to the form, to interviews with a director, playwright and actors. A remarkable feature of the Sumang Leela is that all roles are played by men. The female impersonator is a venerable tradition here, fertile ground for studying social and psychological gender construction. One of the most telling moments was when actors spoke about their 'transformation' into women—the point at which they began to feel that they were women: the final finishing touch of the lipstick, for example.

As is clear from the various interviews, those who are part of the Sumang Leela are very aware of the pressing necessity to change with the times. Although there is a mutual dismissiveness between the worlds of experimental theatre and the Sumang Leela—the former scoffing at the form and content of the latter, the latter emphasizing the lack of audience for the former—there is no doubt that the Sumang Leela still attracts the people, while the experimental theatre is largely performing for its own small, elite circle of enthusiasts, mostly students and the intelligentsia. It seems, therefore, that each has something to learn from the other.

V

The third section of this issue turns to the proscenium theatre of Manipur, which established its presence and popularity in the 30s. The main older theatres in Imphal have been Manipur Dramatic Union or MDU (estd. 1931), Aryan (estd. 1935), Society (estd. 1937), Rupmahal (estd. 1943), and Paradise (estd. 1944). Rural Manipur has its own theatres, such as Kha-Manipur Dramatic Union, Kakching Dramatic Union, Khoriphaba Artistes Association, Leimayol Arts

Centre and Langmeidong Dramatic Union.

In the early years this theatre focused largely on popular legends, myths and folklore, peppered with music, songs and dances. The influence of the Bengali stage of the 30s on this theatre is an established fact, as comes through clearly in the pieces included in this section. Arambam Somorendra's overview of Manipuri playwrights begins the section. G. C. Tongbra, one of the proscenium theatre's most prolific and popular playwrights, who passed away last year, is represented here; as are the actresses who fuelled that theatre with memorable performances, and who recall the golden era of proscenium theatre in their interviews.

VI

The voices in this issue are aware; conscious; articulate. They speak from the experience of living within a situation of uncertainty and frustration. Theirs is a world being continuously ruptured by all kinds of conflict. Violence and anguish are omnipresent; they erupt everywhere: on stage, in their speech, in their personal lives, on the streets. Unsurprisingly, what emerges from their combined voices in this issue is the sense of a theatre at the crossroads: a sense of searching; of no clear answers. I find myself unable, in the face of this genuine self-questioning, to sit in judgement and dismiss it all, like Samik Bandyopadhyay does, as 'a decline of the emancipatory passion and its subsidence into a more mundane struggle for survival and visibility' ('The New Karnas of Manipur'). He continues on a warning note: 'The new politics, holding out the promise of support in and from a national—and consequently global—resource bank, imposes on the Manipuri sensibility the obligation of legitimation, the persistent demand that it explain and justify its choices/positions to a supposedly universalist mainstream, to ensure a steady supply of support.' The quoted comments come from a concerned and sympathetic observer. It is ironic, however, that this attitude seems to impose a similar 'obligation of legitimation' on the Manipuri 'sensibility', for a 'supply of support' which is the paternalistic approval and acceptance of the critical establishment, rather than grants or funds. Thinking theatre persons in Manipur are highly conscious of the contradictions and complexities of their situation; as is clear from their own statements, they are under no illusions about either the powerplay or the more insidious effects of outside funding, whatever be the source, governmental or otherwise. I would prefer to believe that compulsions and motivations are not always as simple as they may sometimes appear to be; and to trust to the honesty of the genuine creative impulse in negotiating its own contract with ground realities.

There is tremendous talent, tremendous potential, in Manipuri theatre today; its restless energy is bound to forge its own path, to come to terms with itself, to find its own balance, even if this means accepting and living with inner contradictions.

Anjum Katyal



The central focus of this issue is the intense world of contemporary experimental theatre, which is vitally alive and active today in this troubled state. It was in the early 70s that a generation of theatre innovators broke from the established, dominant proscenium theatre practice to explore new forms of theatre, expressing an urgent concern with immediate reality and social issues. We begin this section with commentaries on the situation in contemporary theatre today, before moving on to the voices of the practitioners.



Experimental Theatre in Manipur: At a Critical Juncture

Lokendra Arambam

This article has been constructed from an interview with Biren Das Sharma for *STQ*, subsequently revised and updated by Lokendra Arambam in August 1997.

There is a need for some soul searching on the character, identity and purpose of contemporary theatre in Manipur. During the last 20 years or so, since the 70s, there have been substantial changes in the development of Manipuri theatre.

Some of the important aspects of that change were in the realm of how individual directors, authors, followed by their own groups, experimented with new themes and forms. There was definitely a process of breaking free from the traditional, conservative, semi-urban, middle-class theatre that was prevalent at that period. The 70s was the period when there was an overall desire for change, an accent on youth and the power of youth to change the world.

At the same time we witnessed a big movement for redefining the identity of the Manipuri people as a whole. The reason behind this social and intellectual change was that in 1947—after 80 years of colonial rule—Manipur became free and at almost the same time, in 1949, it was politically integrated into the big Indian state that was emerging in the postwar period. The rapid urbanization, the onrush of economic and political development, were supposed to have influenced the minds of the decision makers. There was a certain shift, in the sense that most of the people in Manipur were gradually realizing their own historical position, their own problems, realizing that development as it had been imagined by the policy planners was going haywire, society was becoming more and more corrupt, the leadership in politics and in economic development was not concerned with the desires and aspirations of the people as a whole. There was an increasing realization of the marginalization of the Manipuri people. Their decisions, their aspirations and their desires did not matter in the so-called process of development.

So in the late 60s there was a growth of youth power, youth influence, along with an increasing awareness by the people of their own identity, in the entire northeastern region. They were becoming aware of their roots, their own identity. There was a genuine search for certain aspects of life which the people could hold on to as representative of their own character and civilization. So there was a vast change taking place.

During this period youth groups and non-government organizations working for the development of Manipuris as a distinct ethnic community, were also becoming aware of Manipuris settled in regions other than the state, becoming aware of the people of Cachar, Manipuris in Bangladesh, Manipuris in Tripura and even in Burma (now Myanmar).

This process of self-assertion had actually started in the early 20s with the social and political movements of that period. There was a search for identity which had been started by people like the late Hjam Irabot and Naoria Phullo, who were very important in the movement for identity in the early 20th century. Irabot was the first modern revolutionary of Manipur. He came to Calcutta in the 40s and took part in a conference held under the Fourth Comintern as a communist revolutionary. Communist revolutionaries like Than Tun from Burma, all came to Calcutta, where P. C. Joshi's line and Ranadive's line were fought over. Ranadive said that there must be a struggle, the bourgeois government of Nehru should be removed, and the industrial workers should take the lead in the revolutionary struggle with peasant support. That was how the 1948-49 struggle began. Dange was arrested in Mumbai.

Irabot came back to Manipur and assessed the situation, which was distinct from the social situation in the rest of India. He felt that the indigenous environment was different, so the social and political movement in Manipur would have to be different. Though he supported the revolution, he was not taking part in it. He was waiting for

certain things to develop. The Communist Party in Silchar, part of the Communist Party of India, asked him to undergo self-criticism. He was taken to task for not building up a Marxist base in Manipur, for dillydallying on issues, and he was charged. He did his self-criticism like Tito did, and took up the revolutionary line in December 1949. There was a great struggle, like there was in Telengana. It was a peasant struggle for change, a struggle to form a new society. The movement was suppressed.

But in the 60s, the movement registered a shift and the youth took up arms against the Government of India in order to fight for their independence and a separate identity. We also witnessed the struggle of the Nagas in 1956 under the leadership of Phizo and Laldenga in Mizoram in the 60s. Underground insurgent movements were developing in the late 60s, which became predominant in the 70s and still remain a major problem for the Indian polity. In Manipur, alienation from the Indian mainstream had become near-total. In every club, every college, there were debates on the legality of the 1949 merger of Manipur with the Indian Union. The legality of it, the constitutionality of it and the kind of political intrigues that went into it—all these things were debated. The debates continue till today. Some of the insurgent groups ask people to observe one month's protest against the merger. This is the kind of situation in which a conscious theatre person finds himself now.

Earlier, in the 60s, theatre people followed the general trend of identity politics. Young theatre workers were coming out of the universities, serving as teachers in colleges, working in the students' movement, working in the students' theatre—during this time our generation came into the limelight in Manipuri theatre and grew concerned with issues of exploitation and oppression, with the general feeling of discontent in the minds of the younger generation in Manipur at that time. H. Kanhailal, Ratan Thiyam and a few others including myself were deeply concerned with finding idioms and expressions to reflect this mood of discontent, disillusionment and marginalization. The theme of protest came through subtle symbolic expressions which were not very overtly political compared to other parts of the country, where the protest was more dynamic and open. But the Manipuris worked with different idioms, with subtleties of expression, with nuances—through the use of myths, through the use of other experiences—and the focus was on aspects of ethnicity. There were thematic experiments revolving around the struggle for assertion of people's concerns. But these were overladen with ethnic symbols, cultural idioms taken from folktales, and intricate aspects of life in Manipur.

There was a romantic dramatic tradition in the proscenium theatre of Manipur which emphasized folklore and the native vernacular, narrating the experiences of the semi-urban agricultural communities. But after the 60s, there was a general change in format, and the search for identity became a kind of conscious exercise. Kanhailal, Ratan, Ebotombi, myself and a few other directors of the late 60s and early 70s were concerned with these issues.

After the 70s, over the last 20 years, it was felt that ethnicity alone, self-consciousness alone, was not adequate, because life had become much more complex. Social tensions, disturbances, unrest, violence, have actually become objective realities of life in Imphal and Manipur as a whole. The entire rural region was activated and disturbed by insurgence and encounters with security forces. There were widespread disturbances everywhere, and as a result, tremendous tension became a feature of everyday life. At the same time the awareness of ethnic identification affected not only the majority communities but also marginal communities. Small tribes like the Kharam, Purum, and Tarao were also affected and there was tremendous debate on issues like their identity and roots.

At the same time the tensions of life, the conflicts in resource sharing, the increasing burden on land, expansion of population and demographic tension, resulted in inter-ethnic strife. The polity of Manipur as a whole was thus critically affected during the last decade. At such a critical period, issues of ethnicity and searching for roots cannot be enough. One has to be completely aware of the dynamics of social tensions, of the issues now affecting the lives of the people as a whole.

But the contemporary theatre of Manipur has another problem. What Kanhailal, Ratan and people like me started in the 70s was a theatre reflecting on some of our

internal tensions and issues of exploitation etc. But the situation has become more demanding. A young group of theatre workers has come up in the 80s, who want to express what they are feeling and experiencing. Unfortunately, they have been affected by the anxiety of a polity in tension. At the same time they want their theatre to be recognized, to be known and accepted both by their people and by the general theatre community at large. They want to be seen outside Imphal, they want to be featured in national festivals. Here issues of patronage, access to the channels of communication etc. become important. At present, a host of young people—some 13 to 15 groups—are constantly in the circuit. Most of these directors' works are seen at the Akademi festivals, in the multilingual drama festivals organized in Allahabad, Cuttack, etc. The themes that they have tried to confront are all concerned with struggle and discontent. It still needs to be seen how far they are able to politically and socially analyse the issues of today.

Most of these directors work in isolation in their peer groups. Their theatre is shown in certain community pavilions—they work within a community of extended households, a traditional feature of urban Imphal. In Imphal, traditional communities gather into households which have a ritual unity in the sense that in terms of death, marriage or any other traditional community activity or rite they come together and work together. They have a face-to-face interaction with one another as individuals and as a community. One can see that a certain traditional culture has developed from these pockets of humanity. Each community has some kind of distinctive culture of its own and a distinctive place in traditional Manipuri life.

Most of the young theatre directors work within their own communities and have their own small clientele. These theatre groups very rarely come out, except at secular festivals like that of the State Kala Akademi. So there is a kind of isolation, and they continue to work in this isolation. They have their own methods of training, their own methods of developing idioms. Though they share the same Manipuri experience, they have their own ways of reacting to the environment, reacting to the cultural and political scenario. In this way, a few young theatre directors are coming up in different pockets. They participate in the festivals organized annually by the State Kala Akademi, with some support from the Department of Culture. Recently, 15 theatre groups were invited to show their plays at the 20th State Kala Akademi Festival. Most of the plays were about discontent, struggle, violence and bloodshed. Universal experiences of conflict, of tension and struggles, were also brought into, reworked into, local life, into our own social milieu.

The younger generation of theatre directors are trying to relate to their contemporary existence, to the social tensions and political inequilibrium faced by the young people as a whole. There has not been much of an aesthetic departure from the theatre of the 70s. Younger directors work with the same idioms, with ethnic designs and costumes; and at times this intrusion of colour and spectacle undermines the very sense of tension they want to create in their plays. One often notices that problems of ethnicity, roots, and the demand for a stronger statement have been diluted by their own desire for patronage and recognition.

Contemporary theatre workers are facing a very important critical period. They are uncertain as to how to react to the contemporary situation, and then there are these matters of patronage, festival circuits, recognition. Mainstream channels of theatre patronage do not necessarily desire the reflection of contemporary realities. There are two streams of contemporary Manipuri theatre. One is a theatre of aesthetics, of great design, representing the culture of Manipur, but not necessarily the tensions and dynamics of a marginal people trying to assert themselves. The other is a theatre concerned with unrest, but at the same time unable to rise, to be recognized, not able to assert itself by its own efforts.

Contemporary theatre thus stands at a very critical historical juncture, when the whole tension of the resurgence of Manipur, the alienation of the people from mainstream India, is affecting the arts, lives and activities of the young generation. It is not a question of 'pro' or 'anti' this or that theatre. There is a kind of human tension, a great sense of alienation, which the younger theatre people want to reflect. But they are not able to actually confront these issues. For example, Brecht has not been done at all in

Manipur, though there were some experiments with Brecht earlier. But even then, the aesthetics of Brecht were emphasized over the issues. So, in our theatre we have a problem of over-exuding culture, suppressing the realities of life, of culture becoming an impediment to the understanding of the realities of life. This is a crucial problem of contemporary Manipuri theatre today.

We have three or four playwrights who have been writing for quite some time, not very well understood, increasingly isolated from what is actually happening. Their plays are taken up by a few directors. One could name the late Brajachand, Kshetri Sanajaoba, Somorendra, the late P. Shamu, and the late G. C. Tongbra, who has written more than 70 plays. They contributed to the expansion of critical activities and gave a playwright's response to the situation of that period. G. C. Tongbra himself was a pioneer of the modern theatre movement in Manipur, though he was influenced by Bernard Shaw. He worked in the Absurdist idiom in the 70s; he experimented with Beckett, with some of the Absurdist playwrights of that period and wrote a few Absurdist plays in the 70s. His plays looked at critical issues of today—they are socialistic and idealistic in the sense that he believes that theatre should change the world. He responded to violence, corruption, political instability, ministerial fumbblings—all these were satirized by him. He was the doyen of Manipuri playwriting.

Somorendra depicts the gradual alienation of the young people, a sense of disturbance in the individual trying to cope with daily life. He has also written certain plays in the conservative genre. He hasn't written any experimental plays. He focuses a lot on the problems of women, on the ruptures of middle-class life. These things were part of the experience of playwriting in the 60s and early 70s.

Some of the young playwrights like Brajachand and Sanajaoba reflect a more internalized kind of writing. The late P. Shamu's work was taken up by Ratan [Thiyam] in his early days. Shamu's plays were absolutely what he called a 'theatre of inner truth' in which he expressed things in a very internalized manner. He has an important place in Manipuri theatre and recently there have been a lot of seminars and discussions on how he should be placed, because he has been almost forgotten by the contemporary theatre workers. We need to recognize our playwrights as contributors to modern Manipuri theatre. Unfortunately, many of these plays are not in print. Manipur has no theatre journal. A lot of poets have come up and their poems are being read, translated, presented in conferences. Storywriters and essayists' works are being published. Certain magazines of literature including those patronized by institutions, the government, the academies—they all emphasize poetry, the novel, the short story; but hardly any plays appear in their pages.

Theatre people work very much in isolation. There has been no input from painting, architecture, poetry—this lack of interaction with other performance arts people is really unfortunate. The young playwrights also are not open, they find it extremely difficult to interact even with people in theatre who are experimenting with forms. They give their texts to theatre people, but speaking about their experiences, attending study circles and presenting what they have in mind—these things are never done. The playwrights are very isolated. A few of them have been exposed to outside literature, but critical exposure, critical interaction and critical association have been lacking.

Nor has the alternative theatre been able to secure a strong audience willing to pay to see it. Much of their work and experimentation is done without any returns commensurate with the effort they put into it. So a lot of them depend on subsidies, grants, small sums doled out by the Sangeet Natak Akademis. The state government also sometimes encourages a few theatre groups to travel outside the state. The Eastern and North Eastern Zonal Cultural Centres have certain schemes, under which they subsidize mainly dance and music, and very little theatre activity. The Human Resource Ministry also has certain policies by which it encourages scholars to undertake individual research projects. They have senior and junior research fellowships, and salary grants are also given to some groups by the Ministry. The issues of funding and subsidies have their own problems—there is a lot of rivalry and competition to secure the funds available.

Now a situation has arisen where money has become an important requirement for many groups. They have started writing, requesting and doing all sorts of things for grants and subsidies. This creates a certain atmosphere of dependency, an ambience

where you feel that money is coming in and you don't need to work. So there is very little challenge to these groups to secure their own audiences. They are not expanding their audiences. The grants are being routinized. They rely on money from benevolent institutions and from the government. The money that is coming in will be used for productions, no doubt. But they are satisfied with that. On the other hand, professional Sumang Leela groups may not worry much about aesthetics, but they fight for their livelihood, they take up bold subjects. However, they are not committed to social change. They are more committed to entertainment. This is a contradiction in professional groups, which are flourishing. The alternative theatre wants to promote change, but the workers themselves have become dependent on institutional patronage. As a result their works are becoming more and more routinized. There is no attempt to expand, draw more audiences, get more people to support their cause. This is also a contradiction. It is all because we have entered a period when dependency and underdevelopment are becoming more and more manifest. Critical dependency has affected the arts, affected the quest for new things. It has become a syndrome and it has a dulling effect on the actors and actresses working in the alternative theatre.

As the leader of a group interested in research in the dynamics of change, I have been thinking of how the personal development of the actors has become more important than the search for form or things like that. The Ford Foundation has given us funds to organize some activities in the realm of research. But this has its own difficulties. A few groups are negatively affected by the intrusion of funds and it creates unnecessary tensions in the society of theatre, among the young theatre workers and a lot of other people who do not get funds. So the whole issue of subsidies, the whole issue of theatre and subsidies, theatre and audience, of paying people—these dynamics have to be reworked, reassessed and restructured for Manipuri theatre to evolve to a better, more organized stage of development.

How far are our contemporary theatre workers alienated from their audience? How far are they captivated and trapped by the system of subsidies in which they are working? These are very important questions which we should answer. In spite of doing good work, these young workers are absolutely dependent on subsidies or grants. It is a sociological syndrome. It is an absolutely critical dependency, in which for any action, for any decision, for any option, you become dependent on something bigger and larger, on whose pleasure, on whose love and sympathy, you depend. It completely limits your choices, limits your options, to look out, react, respond to issues. Many work with texts and subjects which are historically important for an alienated people. They work on such themes, yet, at the same time, they depend on subsidies. It is a contradiction which they haven't resolved. That's why they are not able to get an audience. They are not confronting our audience with the new things they have. They are not putting their plays amidst them. At the same time they are becoming a kind of willing pawn, a pliant commodity in the big 'circuit'. Because they believe that those who participate in the circuit increase their chances of funding. But facing the audience, opening their plays to them, is something which is not done, and this is a mistake.

These are the contradictions in contemporary Manipuri theatre. But except for a few, the younger directors are not aware of these contradictions. As a result there is a general dependency on forms handed down to them by their elders. They work on the same forms, same patterns, same designs. For them, myths are important. They depend on the mother figure as a symbol, for example. If they were really modern, if they were dynamic enough, they would be able to expand and explore further. But this is something which is not taking place. This is the tragedy of contemporary Manipuri theatre because we—myself, Kanhai and Ratan—have not set a good example. We have become products of the mainstream, we have become willing partners in what is happening elsewhere in the world. We are not reacting to situations in our own environment. This is the contradiction.

So the situation of the 90s is a new phase of alienation between contemporary theatre people and our own audience. The internalized experience gathered from the struggle is being expressed, but its expression remains to some extent alienated, isolated from our own people. We have to scrutinize the images we are creating, the subtexts we are creating; we need to find out if we should be a little more direct and confrontational to

inspire a new vitality. We are yet to seek out the means by which we can have a dynamic theatre related to our audience, and have it accepted by people who want to sympathize with our struggles. Or we may become pawns in the great circuit of the mainstream, we may be subsumed by it, consumed by it.

Manipuri theatre at the fag end of the 20th century can never be the same as that of the 70s and 80s. The rapidly changing dynamics of life, progressively impinging on aspects of human dignity and freedom, increasing the threats against individual security and territorial integrity; the wanton destruction of life, property and community; the crisis of the self as against professed identities; the contradictions between appearance and reality in contemporary times, set forth new paradigms for looking at life and art. But a dependent culture, dependent worldview and the underdeveloped individual—noncritical, complacent, and happily associated with the general trends and slogans of growth and development—produce another stream of art totally related to ground realities, yet with an identity, a form, subversive of bitter truths, yet assuming an existence with a structure of its own, driven by the logic of the establishment. The subversion of the naked self, as demanded by the external logic of recognition and patronage, denies the Manipuri theatre worker a critical struggle against himself in his own history. The inability of the contemporary actor to feel the strands of a polity in crisis, the complexities of his troubled psyche in his own self-expression, represent a very unusual dilemma of an essential inadequacy within an aggressive facade and a pleasing veneer, proclaiming the identity and beauty of culture, but without the communication of vital realities.

Theatre director Lokendra Arambam is now the Director of The Forum for Laboratory Theatres of Manipur, a network of directors dedicated to experimental, alternative theatre.

A Critic's Eye View

Senior critic and cultural commentator E. NILAKANTA SINGH in conversation with the STQ team (Naveen Kishore, Anjum Katyal, Biren Das Sharma), on 14 April 1996, Imphal.

You have observed the emergence of modern Manipuri theatre since the 70s. How do you evaluate the 70s from the perspective of the 90s?

I think it was a very exciting time, the 70s. Before that period there was a dullness in theatre, and when that East-West seminar was organized in . . . I think it was 1966—that international event in Delhi—at that time we were complaining about the level of our theatre. But after that I think something developed, maybe on account of our political situation, maybe on account of some of the new forces coming up. In 1972 we invited Badal Sircar and his group Satabdi, and they did a play. Kanhailal was very inspired by Badal Sircar's work, but then he went another way. So I think it was a good beginning. The 70s were very good, full of questions.

Directors who started working in the 70s, like Ebotombi, had come back from the NSD. Did that make a difference?

Ebotombi was not so much of a force. In the 70s I would say it was Kanhailal. And then Ratan Thiyam also came up at that time, more or less. Yes, they were fresh from the National School of Drama, no doubt. Kanhailal was there only for some time. He could not adjust there, he had to leave. So they started doing new forms of theatre, experimentation began.

But their work is very different—Kanhailal's and Ratan's. So how do you connect them?

Well, they are different of course, but they were both doing new kinds of theatre, experimentation. There was some sort of a change. Kanhailal started his group Kalakshetra, doing intimate theatre, Badal Sircar style. Then he went on probing deeper and deeper, and later he changed his style of direction. Ratan was more spectacular. He introduced a ritualistic sort of thing.

What about Lokendra?

Lokendra also did something, but a little later, I would say. Because he belonged to another theatre group—Aryan Theatre, which is an established theatre group. There are three wellknown established proscenium theatre groups—the others are Manipur Dramatic Union (MDU) and Rupmahal Theatre. MDU was the first theatre group; it started in the early 30s. Rupmahal Theatre came up during wartime, around 1943, and Aryan Theatre came up sometime in between, 1935 or 1937.

Lokendra, and his elder brother Somorendra, who is a wellknown playwright, were attached to Aryan Theatre. They did some experimentation also, but Lokendra's impact is not very much. Not as much as that of Ratan or Kanhailal, because somehow they were introduced properly and they are recognized at the national level, and they have toured and all that. Lokendra is more a college teacher of history, and he does not have all that time to devote to theatre. Now, of course, he is taking up a lot of new projects, because he is giving more time to theatre. But the people who really devoted themselves wholeheartedly to theatre were Ratan Thiyam and Kanhailal.

Ratan gets his inspiration from our ritualistic theatre—there is drumming, and storytelling, *kathakata*, and Ratan takes elements from all these. Of course, our traditional artists are not very happy with Ratan, for they feel that he has somehow destroyed the

spirit of the traditional forms. That is also true, you see, for in his works these elements are decontextualized. But what he says is that—I am not trying to destroy them, I'm only taking their essence. The Sankeertana I do is not traditional, it is my kind of Sankeertana. That is how he explains it. He has been questioned a lot, about his distortions, and what he calls improvement and all that.

In the case of Kanhailal, he went a little deeper into psycho-physical experimentation. He also questions himself, and his search is, I think, more intense in a sense. Ratan's is more eclectic, intercultural. But with Kanhailal, I think he's trying to go to the roots. Of course, going to the roots is a very controversial thing—what roots and all that—but the way Ratan takes from our roots is very different from Kanhailal, who is interested in the almost mystic side of our tradition. For example, we have this trance-like phenomenon which is called *maibi*, when a woman gets into a trance, the kind of language she uses and so on. So Kanhailal goes into that—and he is very well assisted by his wife Sabitri, who is a very great actress. Very serious type of work. And even now he's trying to probe into the human body through different exercises. So he was a student of Badal Sircar in the beginning; then he spread his wings further and further.

All the others, I think that their works are also manifestations of the creative spirit and as a critic I welcome them. But sometimes I feel that Kanhailal's work is a little more intense. And he's been appreciated by people outside—they appreciate his search very much.

Could you tell us something about the younger directors?

The younger directors are also good. But sometimes they become superficial. You 'go to the roots', take something from here and there and put up something—that kind of work is very superficial. That's why Kanhailal challenges this sort of approach. Some music, some dance, some movements, some rituals—but ritual is something so deeprooted, an expression of our mythology. If you are not rooted in the tradition, you don't see all these things. I think this sort of looking deeper is necessary. But our young directors and playwrights somehow go for a Marxist sort of a label. Class hatred, class distinction and exploitation and that sort of thing. That is all right, but when you go to the myths, you go to the collective unconscious of our own people. Sometimes I feel that they should go deeper, as Kanhailal has been doing recently. That's how I see it. But, of course, there are some good directors. Ebotombi is trying to create some meaning out of traditional things, like the *Mahabharata*, for example.

So you like Ebotombi's work not for his experimentation, but because he is trying to reinterpret tradition? Like Ratan?

Ebotombi does not really do experiments. He tries to connect himself to the *Natyashastra* tradition, to Kalidasa's work, to Mohan Rakesh's work—as a matter of fact he could produce a lot of plays by Tendulkar. He is a bit of a traditionalist, I would say—but trying to create new things from that. *Waiting for Godot*—the Manipuri version, done his own way—he does that sort of thing. But Ratan is a little different. Ebotombi is more conservative. Ratan goes in for expressionism, and very spectacular performances. Good music, and his actors are well trained—wrestling, fighting—everything. And he tries to include everything. Ebotombi does not work that way. Of course, he does some workshops with the NSD students, but he does it in a very careful manner—not much of experimentation. And he is trying to discover roots too, in a way. For example, he sees a lot of drama in Sankeertana, and he questions why we should lose all that. These are rituals all right, but he wants to create drama out of rituals, which we are supposed to be doing but are not—that is his line of thinking, as I understand it.

Kanhailal is into another sort of roots. Like, recently he is trying to look at the *Mahabharata*. Before that he was into some sort of political theatre, dealing with problems of rootlessness and all that. And he has slowly evolved—he has changed gradually. He is

going in the opposite direction to his guru, Badal Sircar. Sircar is more into class awareness, mixing with the people and all that. But Kanhailal is searching.

Ratan is a very good organizer also, which he learned from his guru, Alkazi. Ratan is trying to do what Alkazi did for the National School of Drama. I think he is successful, very modern, and at the same time receptive to all sorts of culture flowing all around. Kanhailal is a little different. He started with political protest and now he's trying to go a little deeper into our roots—which are of a universal nature. Now he talks about universal themes, not much about our Manipuri ones. That's how I look at these three personalities.

How did the 70s generation influence theatre criticism in Manipur?

We don't have a very regular theatre criticism, in fact. Even I am not a professional critic—I write only occasionally. Of course, earlier I used to write a lot more. Our newspapers are not very encouraging to this kind of theatre. Modern theatre is not given much importance. Our jatras are given much more importance. Even then, there's not much criticism. We have our State Kala Akademi doing an annual theatre festival, but that's not enough. Our young directors and writers are not given enough importance. Playwrights more so—because, somehow, the trend towards direction and ways of presentation minimizes the importance of playwrights.

Tell us something about the audience. What kind of audience does contemporary Manipuri theatre attract?

Experimental theatre does not have a very good audience here. Our middle class is more attracted to entertainment—music and dance and the kind of theatre offered by Aryan Theatre, Rupmahal. But the audience has started increasing. Whenever Ratan has a performance, there is always a rush for tickets, though he charges a pretty high rate—Rs 50 per ticket or something like that. But then he spends a lot of money on his productions, and he says that he can't charge Rs 5 or 10 for tickets. So . . . the audience for serious experimental theatre is also growing. But these young directors don't get a chance to show their work to the audience. Most of the auditoriums are always booked by the commercial theatres—Aryan Theatre, Rupmahal. They only do popular theatre, not very serious work. Only Lokendra's brother Somorendra does some serious work in popular theatre. He does plays on why and how women suffer and that sort of thing, though he does it in a very traditional style—nothing formally experimental. But through his plays, Marxist thoughts are coming into commercial theatre also. I feel that if our young directors are given a chance to present their work to the audience, they can become popular too.

So, do you think that the existing halls should be made available to them, or do you think a special space should be created for them?

See, it's a question of money also. They are trying, but they have financial constraints, and the problem of appreciation also. It will take some time. Because . . . you see, their work will not attract the audience, who will not understand it at all. I myself find it difficult and obscure at times. But I think it is a must. Contemporary theatre can only grow this way—through experiments. Just going back to folk forms or traditional jatra is not enough. The jatra people are doing what our traditional performers did before the Second World War—melodramatic plays dealing with the joys and sorrows of life. Of course, this jatra reflects the concerns of the common people—our common people's sorrows and sufferings are reflected in these plays. Our young directors of experimental theatre also deal with common people's interests, but in their own way—at a much higher level. And they are all very well trained also.

Well, if you look at it this way—your society is still very traditional, but a section of theatre practice has become very modern. Would you say that this is a contradiction?

Of course, the sensibility of the audience is still very accustomed to ritualistic performances. So it will take some time. Even in Calcutta, Badal Sircar—he's so modern—but how many people care for his kind of theatre? The avant-garde is a must, because experimentation is at the root of the growth of our theatre. Coming to grips with the real situation is also very important—be it symbolic or mythical. So . . . I want the young people to turn to the myths, which they haven't been able to do. It's a matter of sensibility, and they are not very culturally conscious. They feel that they are very isolated from the mainstream and that's affecting the young minds, including Lokendra. The thing is that being identified as Indian is a little repugnant to them . . . There's a history behind that also, how we were marginalized and how all these present political troubles developed. But it's not so in my case—I think I'm more Indian than many Indians; but then I've searched for my roots also, and I've looked into some great civilizations, like the Chinese civilization, for example, because our language is called a Tibeto-Burmese language. So the Tibetan and Chinese cultures have had some impact on our sensibility also. I'm a student of philosophy; so I'm attracted to all this.

We have a very rich theatrical tradition—theatrical in a general sense, not just proscenium. Our proscenium theatre is only 90 years old. It was initiated here by a Bengali group, I think, soon after 1900. Initially they were doing translations; then we started doing original plays. Our people went to Calcutta and came back inspired. Just after the War, there was a kind of awakening and many theatre groups came up. But then, because it's a very poor country, they started going out, and there was no government patronage. It was all a people's movement. In 1954 the MDU group went to Delhi to participate in the first National Drama Festival and they got an award. It was a very beautiful presentation of a folk theme in modern style. I hope our young directors get involved in this search for the roots.

One of the handicaps is the fundamentalist feeling that comes out occasionally. They feel alienated from the main culture. There's an agitation about whether to accept things from mainland India; they feel more free when they look at the west. But this feeling of east versus west should also go away slowly. Because if you keep thinking that the east is east and the west is west, then there's no link, no free flow of information or technique or philosophy. We have a very glorious past, no doubt, but still I think we should look more to the future and come to grips with the present reality, read more books to know what's happening everywhere. I have faith in our young directors, provided they keep an open mind, are not fundamentalists . . . roots is quite a dangerous word nowadays (*chuckles*); all these political parties trying to search for roots—what they find sometimes is quite terrible (*chuckles*).

E. Nilakanta Singh has written extensively on performance and culture for several major newspapers, and is a respected authority on the Manipuri performance arts.

An Artist's Response to Contemporary Reality: A Case of Two Directors

Soyam Lokendrajit

Understanding contemporary fears, hopes and social practices of Manipuri people is one way to understand the social content of Manipuri theatre. Let us dwell on the fear first.

Manipuri fear is rooted in her unique geopolitical destiny. Geopolitically, the land and the people are a part of Southeast Asia. Culturally, Manipur is the convergence point of India and Southeast Asia. Her culture is a synthesis of Hindu and pan-Mongoloid culture. A historian with a pan-Hindu outlook may regard her as the last outpost of Hindu culture and civilization, whereas a historian with a Mongoloid bias may look at the Hindu aspect as a facade or veneer only, a mere form. The truth lies in between. The culture of the land and the people is a fusion of Southeast Asian and Hindu culture in a synthetic unity, which, for lack of a better term, we may call Manipuri culture. A culture, a civilization, a way of life, flourished in a green valley girded by ranges of hills, under a feudal monarchy. Manipur was an independent kingdom whose fortunes fluctuated with the changing political tide in Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. She had her wars with Burma, whom she defeated twice. From 1819 to 1826, the Burmese overran Manipur—a period known in her history as the Seven Years' Devastation. A proud people, under the leadership of the king Gambhir Singh, they liberated their motherland with the help of the British East India Company. The logic of power directing the relation of nations gradually transformed the Anglo-Manipuri alliance into colonial dependence, culminating in the Manipuri War of Independence, 1891, in which Manipur lost her suzerainty to the British. The Britishers did not formally annex Manipur, allowing the monarchy to continue, and leaving the internal administration with the Raja, although it was closely monitored to safeguard British interests. A sense of national independence remained with the people, although in reality they were under colonial domination.

It was, therefore, quite natural that when the Britishers left the Indian subcontinent, the people felt free to choose their own destiny. But the newly emerging Republic of India, under the euphoria of transfer of power after one of history's most remarkable decolonization movements, decided that she was the rightful heir to all the immovable assets of the British Raj, including Manipur. Had the Republic allowed the democratization and modernization process already initiated in Manipur after 15 August, 1947 to take its own course, the history of the land and the people would have been entirely different.¹ The cultural unity with the Indian subcontinent would have been assured. The subsequent, Machiavellian machinations leading to Manipur's annexation to India on 15 October, 1949 and the dismissal of the popular government elected through adult franchise under the Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947, was due to the Indian leaders following in the colonial shoes of the Britishers.²

The consigning of a nation to a Part C State, a Chief Commissioner's Province, left a deep scar on the psyche of a fragile but proud people. Integration into a democratic process where the majority carries the vote and manoeuvres all decision-making left the people of Manipur, hardly constituting one per cent of India's total population, marginalized; in fear and trembling (to use a Kierkegaardian expression) of strange institutions and the Other coming in wave after wave. This fear of being marginalized and deprived of a say in one's own development is at the root of Manipur's demand for the right to self-determination, which, understandably, the Government of India calls insurgency. The historical process of the marginal man desperately trying to carve out his own destiny but unable to come to terms with the geopolitical reality, and landing himself in a blind alley, is, as we shall see, the social theme of contemporary Manipuri theatre.

Insurgency and counter-insurgency has released a dynamics of violence, terrorism and corruption. The armed forces of the state and the Union, under the guise of terrorizing the insurgents, are terrorizing people, using the dreaded Armed Forces Special Power Act. The

insurgents, in striking at the security forces, are also letting loose a reign of terror. They are demanding huge sums from business and salaried middle-class citizens as donations to their cause. This anarchic milieu of violence, terror and lawlessness is used by criminals of all hues to make a fortune. Highway robbery, road taxes, extortion, intimidation, mysterious killings, kidnapping, ethnic clashes, are the order of the day. The high-velocity inflation of corruption makes the situation even more bizarre. Not a single idea remains that has not been perverted, nor any single organization that has not been corrupted, nor any walk of life where corruption has not spread its tentacles. Even traditional rituals centring around man and nature's life cycle are emptied of their spiritual meaning and filled with corruption. The past—a burden; the future—not on the horizon; the present—dead. Freedom from fear is a distant dream; hope we have none. And this, for a people for whom silence is always golden! A valley placid and tranquil—but with undercurrents of intrigue, violence, corruption, treachery, mindless killing; not sparing even children and women.

How does a theatre worker respond to this kind of a social situation with his art?

Theatre as entertainment, adrift in the current of market forces, is one possible response. Make the theatre audience forget themselves and their social conditions. They will be all too willing to pay for moments of oblivion. Established theatre groups like Rupmahal and MDU are doing just that.

The second alternative is to plunge into the exotic classic, to try and fish out some esoteric but allegedly contemporary meaning, wrap it in the gorgeous attire of performance motifs torn out of context from an already rich performance tradition—a form perhaps aesthetically too heavy for the soullessness of its inner content. Some of our theatre directors are nationally and internationally famous for such export quality products and they truly deserve the praise showered on them by the government and the NGOs.

A third alternative is to keep oneself busy with techniques of theatre, actor training, workshops and what not—from Stanislavsky via Grotowski to Manipuri performing and martial arts. Many of our young directors are assiduously doing this. But adepts at powerful techniques are not finding occasions for their use, as they have nothing in particular to communicate to the audience.

Apart from the above, some rare directors have chosen to make their art grow from their fascination with the destiny of the Manipuri people—art as 'presence' of the soul in the form. I now take up two such representative directors, Lokendra Arambam and Heisnam Kanhailal.

Among the living directors, Lokendra Arambam is one who works with a historical consciousness of the social forces that go into shaping the destiny of a marginalized people. He firmly believes that alternative theatre has to grow out of artistic tension, to grapple with the contemporary social reality of his people. In a manifesto to the theatre world presented through Doordarshan, he declared:

There is economic exploitation, corruption, political violence in Manipur. To work for change in theatrical expression and to work for change in society is the alternative theatre for the dynamics of social change. Our people are misrepresented. Our people are being marginalized. But we would like it to be remembered that although a marginal people, they have a soul of their own, they have a life of their own, and they have a right to a full life of their own.³

Understandably, the manifesto is the culmination of Arambam's quest for self-identity, discovered in the identity of his people, through an understanding of the historical forces that go into its making. In the 60s it was just the quest of a middle-class intellectual anti-hero, who is beginning to be disturbed by the strangeness of his human condition, portrayed in Shri Biren's *Khongchat* (The Journey, 1970) directed by Shyam Sharma and *Hallakpa* (The Return, 1971), directed by Lokendra Arambam. The historicity of the human condition demanded a deepening as well as a widening of historical consciousness through a historical ontology of one's own people. This Arambam does in *1891*, a play he directed in 1975, on the Anglo-Manipuri War (also called Manipur's War of Independence), referred to as part of Asia's awakening against

European domination by Mao Zhe Dong himself.

Not individuals, but the people, are the protagonists in the play. Historical forces are the living subject matter of historical ontology, and perhaps for the first time in the history of Manipuri theatre, alternative theatre is aiming not at entertainment, but awareness. This was followed by *Irabot* (1976), a play on the life of the great leader who led a political movement of decolonization in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Not the individual, but Irabot as the representative of historical forces, destined to be crystallized in the subsequent decades, is the subject matter of historical ontology. The treatment is deft, involving painstaking research. The exploration continues in *Yotpak Yotlei Amma* (A Spadeful of Earth, 1979), a play on how even ordinary individuals sans political consciousness make strange existential choices in a revolutionary situation.

From the 80s onwards, Arambam's exploration started looking for new possibilities in ritual performances, in primitive tribal practices—in the world outlook of the Meiteis where elemental energies, beings in Nature, beings in society, are placed in a cobweb of relationships—either of strife or of harmony. There is an increasing concern with the phenomenology of the body as the centre of cosmic energies and its correlation to performance dynamics. How can this cosmic ontology be correlated to the historical ontology which is Arambam's perennial preoccupation? A correlation must be found, otherwise the consistency and the viability of the whole methodology will be in doubt. To my mind, a deep but invisible correlation lies in the powerful influence the collective unconscious exerts on a people's response to social and political forces. Art as awareness of the collective unconscious, and disclosure of how the collective unconscious shapes people's response to challenges, may well begin with an exploration of ritual performance and the metaphysical support system welded to a form of life. In *Khuman Chakha Moireng Ngamba* (1982) and *Numit Kappa* (Shooting the Sun, 1984), this exploration is confined to the suggestive and allegorical level, conjuring up medieval violence, political intrigues, rebellion, treachery etc. by using agricultural rites, martial arts and violent primitive rituals like head hunting. In *Phou-oibi Langol* (Rebirth of the Goddess of Bounty, 1985) the language of primitive myth is explored. But a sensitive use of tribal rituals and performances to explore man's inner world is attempted in *Ningthou* (1987), an interpretation of Tagore's classic play, *Raja*.

A fuller flowering of the methodology is seen in Arambam's latest interpretation of Shakespeare's classic, *Macbeth*, called *Stage of Blood*. We admire Shakespeare because he allows the elemental forces that go into the making of human nature and Nature to disclose themselves on the stage for all of us to feel, without the slightest intervention on his part. Arambam, in his deconstruction and transcreation of the Shakespearean text, uses the background of Meitei cosmogony of which the elements earth, air, fire, water and sky create an eerie, elemental, rarified atmosphere. Man and nature, protagonists and antagonists, are shrouded in mists. Strange beings, ghosts and witches (interpreted as the seven shaman sisters) fill the stage, striking hidden chords deep in our psyche. But it is stranger still to follow where the logic of violence, ambition, treachery and nemesis leads. This is what Arambam's art does, against the backdrop of contemporary violence, political ambition, treachery, rebellion and casual killings in Manipur. Perhaps the happy discovery is, not one of us can afford not to be human, not even Macbeth. Awareness of the collective unconscious fused with historical ontology in Arambam's art has a long way to go.

Heisnam Kanhailal is yet another representative theatre director whose art is rightly celebrated for a sensitive reflection of Manipuri fears, hopes and travails—that, too, with a universal message.

In one of his earliest plays, *Tamnalai* (Haunting Spirits, 1972), Kanhailal explores dark social forces, shaping the destiny of individuals in spite of themselves, with the inevitability of classical Greek tragedy. Chandrakangnan, a promising young man with high hopes, is made into a murderer when he reacts to the provocation of local toughs acting like a fury on him at the instigation of Keirakpi and her daughter, the seductress Nganbiton, who has lascivious evil designs on him. In the play, even wellwishers, like Chandrakangnan's teachers, are reduced to helpless sympathizers who can only pass wellmeaning comments on the transformation of the

hero into a murderer. Reflecting on the play years after its first production, I wonder at the new meanings the play has acquired. We are now living in a society where social forces are turning our innocent youths into murderers and extortionists, and the older generation is reduced to a silent spectator, knowing not where it stands. They are not sympathetic or well meaning either.

The dread of the midnight knock, *Kabui Keiwoiba* (1973), named after the monstrous half-beast half-man, knocking at your door and asking you to go with him, God knows where and the Devil knows to what fate, is the theme of Kanhailal's play, pregnant with ethnic as well as human meaning. (This monster, prominent in Manipuri lore, is human by day, but transforms into a beast at night, preying on isolated and unorganized individuals.) Today, when people simply disappear into thin air or are left lying, shot dead, with no one knowing who has done it, citizens wondering, as they see morning newspaper headlines, whose turn it will be today, Kanhailal's play acquires a new, bizarre, social meaning. Must Thabaton—the Manipuri ideal of Beauty—be sacrificed to the monster in order that individuals may unite in collective action to free themselves from the spell of terror that confines them indoors, awaiting the knock in the dead of night? This is the question engendered by our bizarre social reality.

The struggle of an oppressed people for growth and development, culminating in the joyful freedom from the Big Cat (hypocrisy and tyranny epitomized), overcoming oppression, internecine feuds and brainwashing propaganda, is the theme of *Pebet* (1975).⁴ The symbolic meaning of *Pebet* is one who is frail, but uses guile, flexibility of tactics and tenacity of will to get his way. The play is a classic, the way Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* is in cinema. What makes it so is the synthetic unity of the keen ethnic texture and the universal human message. At first the play projects the contradiction between the Manipuri people and the Other, but this is soon transcended through a powerful unfolding of the inner dynamics, to the universal concern for human freedom. Unfortunately for us, but fortunately for the director, mankind is yet to be free.

The themes of Manipuri life, colonialism, violence and casteist introjection are sensitively portrayed in *Laigi Machasinga* (1978), *Leibak Ama Khunnai Ama* (1976), *Khomdon Meiroubi* (1974), *Imphal* 1973 (1974), *Nupilal* (1978), *Memoirs of Africa* (1985), *Gita* (1996) and *Karna* (1997). Of late, Kanhailal has taken a turn towards an in-depth exploration of theatre as the ritual of suffering, which is, in essence, a joyful celebration.⁵

We have many talented young directors experimenting with many forms of expression in theatre. They are interesting in themselves, and as part of the movement in performing arts going on in Manipur. If I have not dwelt at length on each of them in detail, it is not because their creative work is unimportant. As my primary aim is to disclose the social dynamics reflected in theatre as an art form, I have limited myself to two representative directors in whom this reflection is most pronounced. To conclude, I may only say that an artist is hemmed in by the unique human condition he is in. His art is determined to a great extent by the very social dynamics he tries to reflect. But even so, in creative freedom the artist can distance himself from the social forces and look at them from a vantage point. An artist's existential condition is the fabric of his art, but this alone does not set the limit to his art. Art, in essence, is chasing the horizon. That is why, although conditioned by modes of social existence, the artist can transcend them and visualize possible modes of social existence and forms of life much ahead of the social scientists. But this power of visualization is given only to artists who can consciously participate in the movement of Nature, Society and Life around them. Firmly rooted in their own soil, our artists must nevertheless transcend it and cry out to the wide world.

Notes

1. Resolution No. 5 of the Council meeting of Manipur Krishak Sabha, dated 4 October, 1947.
2. Ministry of State, New Delhi, 15 October, 1949, Order No. 219—P. Also see, Government of Manipur, Orders by the Chief Commissioner, Notification No. 0001/C.C. of 15 October, 1949 (Noon).
3. Theatre directors at work, Lokendra Arambam, produced for DD 3 by Audio Visual Arts, Calcutta, 1996.
4. For an analysis of the performance text of *Pebet*, see Rustom Bharucha, *The Theatre of Kanhailal* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1992).
5. Heisnam Kanhailal, *Theatre for the Ritual of Suffering* (Imphal: Heisnam Publications, 1997).

Dr Soyam Lokendrajit is the Head of the Department of Philosophy, Manipur University, and is closely connected with theatre in Manipur.



Working for Change

Lokendra Arambam

Noted director Lokendra Arambam, one of Manipur's best known theatre persons, talks to Biren Das Sharma of *STQ* about his memories of a life lived in the midst of theatre in Manipur.

I belong to a theatre family. My father was part of the generation which came to adolescence in the early 20s, while Manipur was still under the British. They were the early pioneers of modern poetry, short stories, journalism, a new theatre movement and the overall cultural changes that were coming in, along with the process of modernization. Their inheritance consisted of the local cultural traditions, local performing arts, local rituals, which were very strong. They created the proscenium theatre of the 30s.

My father, one of the leaders of this cultural resurgence, was a poet and Sanskrit scholar. He wrote plays, after reading Shakespeare, and plays from Bengal, which influenced him greatly. He named his own theatre Aryan Theatre. The very name is an interesting symbol of Manipur's integration with India. This was a generation of people who were influenced by Indian culture and wanted to be part of the Indian mainstream. They freed themselves from their traditional, feudal, semi-agricultural environment and became the new middle class who were dealing with issues of life and new forms of literary knowledge, new forms of expression. These were the great movements of the 30s.

In the early 30s they started the proscenium theatre, working with Manipuri people who had been exposed to it in Bengal—Manipuris working in Cachar, interacting with Bengali teachers there. My brother Somorendra Arambam is also a pioneer of the modern Manipuri theatre; he was the first Manipuri insurgent to start the anti-India revolutionary movement. He has now retired, but still, a few days ago he was picked up by the army, taken away and questioned by the intelligence unit about his role in the insurgency movement. He told them that he was retired, that he had got married in 1977 and was now a writer.

Aryan Theatre was burned down recently. The architecture was of 1945: a small proscenium, a small apron and an auditorium made of wood and bamboo for 300 people. Our theatre was different from the other two established proscenium theatres—Manipur Dramatic Union and Rupmahal, which were manned by people believing in traditional values. But our elders in Aryan, when we went as young people in the 60s, immediately felt that they should change. They agreed to give us the opportunity to change.

So the interaction with educated young people from the universities brought about a change. At the same time, that theatre was also a bastion of traditional cultural modes, looking at and finding new things in our traditional culture. So while everybody else was happy with Vaishnavite Hindu modes and conservative Sanskrit influences, the Aryan Theatre looked to our traditional culture, the original non-tribal Meitei culture. We worked on these issues, and therefore our theatre remained different from the others. We had a mix of traditional people and young workers desiring to express themselves, working for change.

In this complex milieu Aryan Theatre became a very vital centre for change. There were my elder colleagues, my brother, Shyam Sharma—who had studied at Santiniketan and was a pioneer of the modern movement and is now a highly regarded filmmaker—and others like Rabindra Sharma, who together created an atmosphere in which we worked as an institution fulfilling the need for change. We first started a kind of collaboration with young theatre workers. Aryan was the only theatre to invite Kanhailal



A 1979 production, *Yotpak Yotlei Ama* (top) and *Khuman Chakh Moireng Ngamba*, 1982, New Delhi (bottom). Courtesy: L. Arambam.

and Ratan Thiyam and give them a chance to present their works, developing an audience for them. They benefited from their interaction with Aryan Theatre and got a platform, a place to work. These are the areas where we played a major role in motivating change. I had experience in students' theatre, I had experimented with Shakespeare—*Othello*, *Julius Caesar*—we did plays for the students' festivals.

This was in the late 60s—we felt that something was happening. We had a contemporary generation of workers—Kanhailal had just left NSD. In this period we interacted with a young poet of our college, Sri Biren. He was interested in working in a different idiom which expressed his rootlessness, his tensions, his loss of identity; and being influenced by the Absurdist poets and dramatists, he created some images which we put on stage in 1970. The play was directed by Shyam Sharma, and I was the protagonist, I recited modern poetry for the first time on stage.

Then a cultural institution came forward to support this cause. Sensing the urge, sensing the need that Aryan was expressing, Kanhailal's Kalakshetra, G. C. Tongbra's Society Theatre, the late P. Shamu's Theatre Mirror Dramatic Society and a few young groups started working together, and this was recognized by other cultural groups working at that time. One literary establishment felt that they should work with us, and a short play festival was organized by the Cultural Forum in 1971. The Theatre Centre had been in existence since 1955, but they had been doing old stuff. This kind of a new thing which emerged was amorphous in form. This was the period when we started working with Sri Biren's material. Already my brother Somorendra's plays had been recognized, and G. C. Tongbra's plays had been acknowledged as innovative, their work had influenced the change that was coming in. But now serious poetry was coming into theatre, creating something new in the traditional environment of Manipur. 1970-72 were the two critical years when change was evident, and a host of young theatre groups were energized.

In 1973 we had the good fortune of having Badal Sircar come to Manipur with his *Ebong Indrajit*. The state Akademi organized a festival and *Ebong Indrajit* was staged. He came back to do a workshop with us and *Spartacus* was produced. I participated in the workshop, as did Kanhailal; and the freedom and confidence Badal-da gave us to break out of the proscenium, to do something different, to create new imageries for ourselves, was tremendous. The earlier movement for change in theatre was an indigenous urge, in which form was not that important. But the complete departure from old traditional forms was something that Badal-da gave us, he gave us internal strength and a conscious ideology. That was Badal-da's influence on our work. Kanhailal was more interested in physical theatre. He went to Calcutta and worked with Badal-da, interacted with him closely. Then Kanhailal began to create independently and started flourishing in his own indigenous idiom.

While this was going on, I started working on the political aspect of our lives. I was deeply concerned with the political sensibility the young people were developing. I was experimenting with plays which dealt with revolution, with rebellion. One of my first productions was Sartre's *Men without Shadows*—I did an adaptation of that. The hero, a Manipuri insurgent, ran away to Bangladesh—this was 1972—I kept the hero in Bangladesh, his group was captured by the army, the army started questioning them, oppressing them, and the interaction between the army oppressors and the rebels, and their own internal degradation, led to tragedy. This is what I did way back in 1972. Nowadays it seems that every insurgent is in Bangladesh. Not that I knew what would happen, but I was just trying to explore the sensibilities which were developing, the trend, why the youth were being alienated, the tensions. So I did *Men without Shadows*, which was a very interesting experiment. Badal-da saw it and offered me a lot of constructive criticism about the theatrical interpretation of that work. It was a very interesting experience for us.

In the later period, while Kanhailal worked on women and oppression, Ratan worked

on varied forms and I grew more and more concerned with issues of rebellion. In 1979 I did a short play based on the American Civil War, a story of a young woman farmer in the south. She and her husband were oppressed by the northern army because a young rebel was hiding in her family. The struggle with the oppressive army personnel, their attempt to take advantage of the circumstances—the woman has no part in the war, she has nothing to do with the fight between the north and south, she is concerned only with her cabbages and potatoes, but the kind of oppression which she experienced led her to develop an immediate resistance. She shot the sergeant who wanted to molest her. I put that into the Manipuri context. I completely localized it: a young rebel hides in a small village, and the army tries to force this young woman, how she suffers all sorts of humiliation and degradation and how she rises and fights back. It was a realistic production, slightly melodramatic, but the play kept the audience spellbound. It was quite an experience for me. The play is called *The Spade*, which became a symbol of resistance in the play.

Before this play, I did some research on the social revolutionary, the late H. Irabot. Irabot was the first modern revolutionary of Manipur. I went to all the villages where he had affected the peasant struggle. For two years I did research on him; in 1976 I did a docu-drama on him. This was completely a new kind of political drama. Irabot's own world was presented to the Manipuri public for the first time and it had a big impact. The play had all the revolutionary songs he sang—interestingly, all these songs have now become songs of the Communist Party. At every function they sing the songs which I put into the play. I found the old, forgotten Communist cadres of the early days, I requested them to come and sing for us. I requested my young actors to learn the tunes and words and sing like him. But they were not that committed to change. Theatre people are casual, they are artistes and they enjoy themselves, they are not very concerned with change. So they did not get the actual feel of the person who was singing in a committed manner. It became popularized later on, and now it has become a fashion. So these are now fashionable songs for the Communist Party.

I was not able to give a true historical picture of that life, but his concerns, his revolution and the tragedy of his death became very important. I toured the countryside, in one year I had about 22 shows. This was in 1976-77. But touring the countryside with about 42 people became a heavy burden on me and my group almost broke down, it had become unmanageable.

So my development as a theatre worker was in the realm of political and social situations, I tried to capture the nuances and tensions of a period, the desire for change. This became a kind of recurring obsession with me. Most of my works were absolutely political. Though I started with family dramas in the early 60s, my own plays—which I wrote—were purely on political issues. So in 1976 there was *Irabot*, in 1979 *A Spadeful of Earth* and in 1982 the work I did was on inter-tribal relationships, a story of revenge and oppression which I was able to take to Delhi, courtesy Shri Ram Centre and my friend Bansi Kaul. For the first time I was getting a place in the national circuit. Ratan got national recognition in 1977 and Kanhailal in 1978-79. I entered the national scene three years later in 1982 with *Khuman Chakh Moireng Ngamba*.

Then came the period of the insurgency movement in Manipur, drawing the attention of the Indian Government; and the tension that was generated in the political and social climate became part of our theatre workers. We were no longer as free as we were in the 70s. In the 80s things were more critical, there were a lot of tensions, CRPF firing on innocent people, women being raped, armed insurgents in open confrontation with the army—violence became a feature of the 80s. We were not sure what effect the plays we produced in this period had on the audience. It became a little more difficult for us to be open, to put up plays in the true political theatre tradition. In any case, our political theatre has its own character. There are no strong Marxists in our state doing political theatre. The Communists do not know the meaning of theatre, they don't even know the



A scene from *Phou-oibi Langon*, 1985 (top) and Lokendra in rehearsal for *Macbeth—Stage of Blood*, 1997 (bottom). Courtesy: L. Arambam.

art of propaganda. Theatre in actual political terms, like Utpal-da [Utpal Dutt] and others did it, is nonexistent in Manipur. It was a curious amalgam of culture and mixed things which hide what you want to state, statements which are never direct. So, by the 80s we had to change our strategies.

It was in this period that we became internalized—myself, Kanhailal—all of us were no longer direct in our expression of political tensions, feelings etc. Our theatre became more and more difficult to understand, and this trend was supported by the establishment of subsidies, which came in at this time. We changed our genre of expression. We completely forsook what we were doing before. Our plays incorporated folklore, nuances which were gradually integrated through a kind of internalized research into aspects of culture. That was the result of my Ford Foundation work. With *Phou-oibi Langon* (the cycle of the rice-spirit mother) in 1985, I completely changed the texture of my plays. I was not political any more.

Subsidies may have had something to do with it, but it was also that . . . theatre in confrontation with the establishment was no longer possible. The nature of suppression was very brutal. It was an era of uncertainty, of insecurity. You were no longer free. You could get killed at any time, some explosion may take place tomorrow. It was a situation in which the theatre people were no longer happy with the themes and genres they had experimented with. We probed inside ourselves, looked into the nature of our own anguish, which we tried to reflect in an amalgam of forms and movement.

It was at this period that the Ford Foundation gave us the opportunity to experiment. I gave up the earlier work dealing with political sensibilities, issues of young people rebelling, being suppressed and feeling alienated—these issues, which I wanted to communicate to my people, subtly changed to something internal, which, however, I was not able to continue with, because of my new duties of theatre administration, of management of a theatre movement where younger people were allowed to experiment. I am now at a critical stage when I am not able to produce plays of my own and I have not been dealing much in personal expression or experimentation in theatre.

In 1987 I did a work based on Tagore's *Raja*—I did the play in the tribal idiom, expressing Tagore's emotion, the Raja's quest, alienation and God's existence. It was badly received by the purists of Santiniketan. They were angry with me. They were absolutely right. There was not a single Tagore song in it, I hadn't put anything of Tagore in it, except the vital theme which affected us. Anyway, seven years later, I wanted to do *Macbeth*. I did not want to do it alone. I was thinking in terms of how Shakespeare has been created everywhere; everywhere, people have wanted to do Shakespeare in their own way. I wanted to do Shakespeare because I have dealt with issues of violence, ritual murder and tragedy. So I wanted to interpret Shakespeare from my own tribal tradition. How a murder is committed not because it becomes an obsession, but because one has to; one has to continue murdering one person after another; and it ends up in one being murdered. The tremendous political crisis in our state at present, where murder, violence and state terrorism are so widespread, finds an echo in my production. It is actually a continuation of my urge to do politically sensitive plays in which I reflect on our situation.

The theatre work we were doing also had another consideration—an outside audience. Our communication with our own people does not require the level of abstraction with which we have been working. This kind of abstraction is much better received by an outside audience, which has a different intellectual and academic experience and expectation. So we find that our plays are not suitable for our own audience. We are struggling to communicate with our own audience. As artistes we started working, thinking, imagining things—but we are not facing our audience. At the same time we are becoming a commodity on the festival circuit. So the challenge of the 90s is to overcome this alienation of contemporary theatre people from their own audience. The internalized experience which came out of the struggle helped us to create

this form, and at the same time this form is alienated, isolated from our own people. We have to find out if the images we are creating, the subtext we desire, can communicate to our audience or whether we need to be more open, a little more direct and confrontational, or if the same vitality could emerge from other forms as well.

This contradiction is easily resolved by Ratan, who belongs to the mainstream, to the new theatre of roots—which has, of course, come in for a lot of criticism. My problem is more critical. I have my roots in my soil, and at the same time I am alienated from my own soil and from the mainstream as well. My plays are not for the mainstream—though the Ford Foundation support was for experimentation, I never thought that the plays would be part of the general circuit. At the same time, I find that I am not able to reach my own people, I have become alienated from my own people. That gives rise to a lot of questions. What are you doing? What audience are you seeking? Culturally there is a vital difference between mainstream demands and ground realities, because the alienation between Manipur and the mainland has become near-total. This is the situation—how should a conscious, self-critical, thinking theatre person react to it?

This contradiction also makes me unable to do theatre. It imposes all sorts of brakes on me. It is a kind of anguish that I have. It's not that one has broken with one's roots or from the contemporary Indian theatre scene, which is liberal, not oppressive like the establishment and the military. Theatre is normally a liberal culture. But the context has totally changed. Where do you go from here? How? A lot of questions are coming up. If you have to do theatre, meaningful theatre, these issues must definitely be grappled with. I don't think any theatre worker in Manipur can escape from this trauma. Most of the young people know that the audience is alienated from the Indian mainstream, and they are doing a theatre of alienation. But they have not been able to articulate the anxieties of life and their own alienation in the way it should have been done, nor turn their alienation into their art. Many of them are still captivated by the lure of patronage. That is the critical juncture at which contemporary Manipuri theatre stands now.



A scene from *Macbeth—Stage of Blood*, 1997. Courtesy: L. Arambam.

Macbeth—Stage of Blood: A Viewer's Response

Sarah Addezio

As a member of the team involved in transporting Lokendra Arambam's and Ajaykumar's production of *Macbeth—Stage of Blood* to the Waterman's Arts Centre in London, I was looking forward to seeing the production in the original environment for which it was conceived and which we could aim to recreate and adapt on the River Thames.

The staging of a largescale dramatic performance on a floating stage proved to be as much of an innovative form of presentation for the company and audience in Manipur as it is in London. Although there is a tradition of non-proscenium performance in Manipur, and there have been dance and musical presentations on boats on the Ningthem Pukhri reservoir, this was the first time a full-length drama was presented on water—and an audience of 2000-strong was there to witness it.

The footage I had seen of the early stages of development of the play captured the visual elegance of the piece but was no substitute for the experience firsthand. I knew the production had evolved since then into an almost entirely new work. The impact both in visual and dramatic terms was not a disappointment. A combination of the scenic beauty of the environment, the atmospheric lighting, dramatic tensions, costumes and expressive movement of the cast successfully captured the imagination of the audience and graphically emphasized the supernatural forces driving much of the action within the play.

Without explanation, much of the symbolism employed in the adaptation is lost on someone unfamiliar with the Meitei tribal beliefs and rituals. However, once educated, I found a resonance in the performance which many other productions would not have been able to achieve. The staging of the play on water also became more significant when I was able to understand the spiritual meaning that water has within tribal culture, symbolizing the universe along with fire, earth, wind and sky, driving the dynamics of life and the cosmos. Water represents the source of life and nourishment of the spirit. The effect of reflections on the lake served to powerfully express the duality and fluidity of Macbeth as an individual as well as the fragility of a superficial surface reality. Disturbing the equilibrium of the elements leads to chaos: one ripple and the perfect image is shattered.

The theme of duality was further explored with an exclusively male cast blurring the boundaries of sexuality, and one male actor who played both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Presenting Lady Macbeth as Macbeth's alter ego in this way is an interesting idea, translating an interpretation of the text into corporeal expression. For the most part, despite being unable to understand the dialogue, which was in classical Manipuri, this device worked well, skilfully communicating the notion that these two central characters are almost indivisible in their thoughts and actions. However, as it depended so much on the male actor successfully conveying the nuances of gender through movement as well as dialogue, occasionally when his masculinity overwhelmed the character, or the shifts were not distinctive enough, I became confused.

My ability to follow and engage with the play, despite not knowing the language, was one of its strengths. The clarity of the production transcended the text and the masterful translation by Somorendra Arambam, a crucial factor for a non-Manipuri audience. This becomes even more relevant when considering the structure of this production. By inverting the sequential plot construction so that the end becomes both beginning and end, the cyclical nature of causality and time, a long-held belief in tribal culture, was symbolically illustrated. The never-ending circle and figure of eight, which have no point that can be called beginning or end, permeate all Manipuri dance, movement and martial arts techniques. The Oriental theatrical tradition, where the rejection of a linear structure focusing on plot is replaced by a more lyrical presentation, changed only after western forms began to influence this style of theatre in the 19th century.



A scene from *Macbeth–Stage of Blood*. Courtesy: L. Arambam.

Lokendra Arambam has returned to the traditions of nonlinear storytelling in much the same way as many of the rituals and costumes in the production are also a return to the traditional forms of Meitei tribal culture. This is as much an expression of tribal values and identity as it is a theatrical tool, as these are themes which not only pervade the story of *Macbeth* but the lives of all contemporary Manipuris.

As a viewer unable to rely on the text alone to convey the story, the importance of the rhythm of the text, which at every moment was accompanied by the rhythms of the music and the movements of the actors, is all the more emphasized. Tiken Singh's haunting musical composition enhanced the atmosphere with insidious subtlety, shifting moods and lifting the company at crucial moments. The actors seemed so tuned in to these shifts that their response was always complementary rather than forced. This was testament to the intimacy which I observed during rehearsals between all members of the company, which meant that their interaction was almost instinctive both on and off stage. The practice of channelling the energy harnessed by the martial arts, *thang-ta*, into a powerful performance energy was fully unleashed during the performance, a technique perfected by the Assistant Director, R. K. Tombisana. Though there are difficulties in sustaining that level of intensity throughout the performance, there were moments when I could not fail to be captivated.

The audience seemed to respond to the performance at every level, expressing their support or not, as they felt it. The whole experience reminded me that the original intention of Shakespeare's plays was not that they were to be enjoyed by an exclusively middle-class, theatrically-minded audience, but as mass entertainment, full of intrigue, sex, murder, mystery and suspense. The presence of 2000 members of the local community, young and old, was my most authentic experience yet of Shakespeare as it was intended, beautifully performed and appreciated by all.

(Presented at Ningthem Pukhri Reservoir, Imphal, on 25 June, 1997, and on 20-24 August at Waterman's Arts Centre, Brentford, England.)

'Theatre is only a link between heritage and community'

H. Kanhailal

In this interview held in Calcutta in January 1996, HEISNAM KANHAILAL talks to Biren Das Sharma and Naveen Kishore of STQ.

You have come back to theatre after some years. Why did you stop directing plays? What happened during this long period of silence?

Let me put the record straight about my so-called long silence, my isolation and why I did not do any production. For me the 70s was the most creative period in my life. Whatever I did in the 70s, I did instinctively and intuitively. I could not analyse what I did. I could not even formulate a methodology of my own. I felt the necessity of analysing, but academically and intellectually, I was not equipped to do it systematically. So I gave up almost all production work and decided to look afresh at my tradition, to study again all the performing and martial arts forms. It was a real challenge and it literally took years. Fortunately, I got a small grant from the Ford Foundation for an individual research project. I began to reformulate academically the science of theatre—the physiology, psychology, anthropology. I had to re-examine everything. But during the three-year project period I could not complete my research. I could not properly and systematically consolidate all the things I had learnt. I needed further support.

But the Ford Foundation had changed its focus, and was not interested in individual projects any more. I submitted a proposal to the Nehru Memorial Fund, and fortunately it was selected for 1992-93. This two-year fellowship helped me to consolidate my work, my actors' training methodology. Now I feel confident. Now I am back to training and production. But during this research period I kept quiet and did not do much in terms of production. I did only one production, titled *Meegi Sharang*, meaning Human Cage. It was successful and ICCR sponsored a tour for it to Cairo to take part in an international festival of experimental theatre, and the play was honoured as one of the best productions of the festival and Sabitri was honoured as the best actress, by the critics. This was the only production I did after *Memoirs of Africa*. During my project I went to Karnataka, worked with Rangayana actors and did *Rashomon* in Kannada. I wanted to test my methods not with Manipuri actors but with actors from other states, from different cultural backgrounds. Rangayana gave me an opportunity to try this out and I was very happy to work with them. The emphasis was on the production and not on the methodology.

How did it help you in your search?

Whenever I work with actors coming from different cultural backgrounds, I find that they have been exposed to different directors—both Indian and foreign—and their different methodologies. Ultimately, an actor gets confused because of such unplanned exposure. In the absence of a leader or guide, actors who are exposed to so many methodologies, so many techniques, cannot create one single process for themselves—a conscious process suitable for their own journey. Too many exposures can be very counterproductive, and may create confusion. For example, a group exposed to tai-chi, yoga, thang-ta, kalari, acrobatics, may learn all these things as physical skills, whereas each one of them needs to be related to his or her own expression. Otherwise it will be meaningless. Sometimes actors tend to use these skills as gimmicks instead of taking them as material resources for their own authentic, original and genuine expression. This is one of the reasons.

Also, I want to work in an intercultural situation in India itself. Because in India one can experience the real intercultural situation where many diversities are linked together, though we tend to be very ethnocentric. In the 70s I was so ethnocentric that I could not



come out of my own enclosure, or leave it. In the 80s I wanted to be an observer and an

outsider at the same time. These two kinds of experiences I found very essential for my work. I found that actors are very prejudiced in this regard, which affects the entire process.

What kind of prejudices?

For example, all regional actors have their own prejudices, pride and priorities. All these work in the subconscious. In an intercultural workshop situation they become competitive. A competitive attitude is nothing but a prejudice. Actors, though they come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, should be able to work together. The question is, how shall I work and interact with others from different cultural, social and political backgrounds? Culturally, such an interaction needs more time to produce meaningful results. When actors from different cultures meet, talk, work freely, you can feel the different creative temperaments with all their diversities. In an intercultural situation an individual actor tends to defend himself and stick to his own work in the beginning. Such defensiveness is culturally counterproductive for an actor. He needs to open up, otherwise he cannot absorb any new experience and thus cannot create anything new.

If you extend this defence analogy, if somebody is hitting you, it is worth the risk of lowering your guard and feeling the blow in the hope that something beyond the blow is also absorbed, with the pain. I think it is important. If the actors open themselves up, perhaps they could also imbibe. And you feel that this process of interaction should be longer and more continuous. Since within the country there are no passports, no barriers, theatre could well be an admixture, an amalgam or a synthesis rather than one particular localized kind of theatre. You are saying that a form could emerge which borrows freely with great abandon.

Yes. I'll give you an example. My artists, specially Sabitri and the other boys, have learnt koothu steps. When this is absorbed into Sabitri's body and mind, she enacts them and it is no longer the same. It has become a different kind of expression with the Manipuri temperament. This has happened to the others also. But in her case it came out excellently because of her experience. We need to know many other forms. It does not harm us, or interfere with our Manipuri styles. On the contrary, we can enrich them and create a new kind of dimension in the theatrical and cultural expression.

But in such an open, interactive process there is always a fear of loss of one's identity, a fear of being alienated from one's roots. How do you come to terms with such a contradiction? How can one retain one's self-image, one's own identity, and at the same time work at an intercultural level? Particularly when the state in question is Manipur?

It is not really a problem. We are very much affected by the historical processes of the world. It is probably because of the 'invention' of anthropology that we are so aware of the problems of ethnicity. Let it be. We will remain Manipuris. When I learn a form from any region and express it, it will come out as Manipuri. In the larger context it will not demean Manipuri culture.

So you think that there is no necessary contradiction between the regional and the national.

No. Though the fear is there, I think we should be able to defend that kind of homogenization. We are afraid of being culturally imposed upon. Smaller groups like the Manipuris do feel that way. We are very, very concerned about this. There was a period when we were really threatened by this fear. But now I know how to defend myself. I know where and how I am both culturally and politically located. So though there are contradictions, I think we can avoid them.

Sometimes we tend to romanticize, sometimes we are very blind when we try to look back and study. In the 70s, ideologically I was very blind. There are so many things to learn from each other. Culture cannot be confined to a particular geographical area. It can migrate like folklore, folktales, travelling from one place to another. We need to

understand theatre as a culture. If we want to create a new kind of theatre with a national perspective we need to understand theatre and its psychic and cultural characteristics. We need to understand the inner principles that help us to express. We are still unable to understand psychological characteristics underlying Manipuri expression. Why are we so soft, delicate, subdued and economic in our expression?

But at the same time one finds a very strong portrayal of violence in contemporary Manipuri theatre.

That is because, historically, Manipur is a very violent country. In order to suppress it, Vaishnavism was brought in to integrate our society. But there are many clans here and they still fight each other. Our menfolk remained warriors all the time. Therefore the women had to look after domestic work, even take care of economic problems. Men are free from all these problems of everyday life. When we react to the violence and suppression, a kind of anger comes out. Violence is always expressed in a very virile manner. The society is violent, and I use a lot of violence.

Theatre people are generally trying to learn the external principles of culture. This is what I have been experiencing. We can enter into the inner truth, learn the internal principles. To give you a very simple example, we learnt tai-chi but not from Chinese teachers. Young theatre people learnt tai-chi in India from the Britishers who went to China, learnt tai-chi, then studied it in their own 'laboratories' and came to spread these things. From them we learnt what tai-chi is. I have worked with the actors who have learnt tai-chi. As I worked with them I realized that they have only learnt the physical part of tai-chi. The inner part of tai-chi, what it demands, they could not grasp. How can one learn tai-chi without the conviction, without understanding the inner flow of energy which it demands? Tai-chi demands total concentration of the mind and a complete coordination between the smallest parts of the body—muscles, limbs, nerves, everything. Then I began to realize why our ways and our characteristics—like many other countries of Southeast Asia—are the way they are. For example, people of the Southeast Asian countries will explain that in a hand movement in tai-chi, the hands do not extend themselves, it is the mind that extends them. Mind is very important in this philosophy. This relates tai-chi to theatrical expression. In many eastern forms, the whole body becomes an expression of this extension of the mind. Noh theatre of Japan is another example of this. It is not a mechanical process. But when you do not understand its philosophy, you just learn it mechanically. The NSD students learn it mechanically. Tai-chi works only when the mind works. The balance of mind and body is very, very important.

One of the major challenges of contemporary theatre arises from its growing interest in nonperformative forms like martial arts. Somewhere in the process of learning a form its philosophy is lost. Is this what you wanted to say?

Right. I would like to supplement it. Whatever you conceive in theatre now—in designing, in actors' training, in make-up—everything tends to be very materialistic, and thus very external. For example, our Festival of India projects a certain kind of external image of Indian culture for sale outside. It is the demand of the time. But we have to be truly sensitive to the tensions of the time. The existence and survival of our tradition and its continuity also becomes important in this context.

There is a process of standardizing the so-called 'national' theatrical expression, to create a homogenized kind of national theatre . . .

Globalization, modernization, standardization.

How can one subvert this process and remain 'national'?

It depends on us, on the kind of conviction we have. We have to continue our work without bothering about whether it will be recognized or not. The present time, in

Manipur, for example, demands that we be true to ourselves. Our young directors are not true to themselves. In the beginning they were honest in their attempts, they wanted to explore their originality. But now they have come out of that search because they are worried, because they are not recognized even though many of them have worked for many years. They want recognition from the state, from the government, and in order to get recognized they want to appease the demand for standardization. One is tempted to respond to the call of standardization. This is happening. We cannot stop this. The only way of doing anything meaningful is to work with the younger people, shape their attitudes first and let them work independently.

In Manipur so many young talents have been funded and given every opportunity, but it affected them negatively, and as a result many of them have stopped working. This is the condition, not only in Manipur but all over India. How did it happen? These are the things that kept me quite isolated. I felt the need for working silently and tried to do something new. But this needs a new scheme, a new project. How can we work together and contribute to each other's work? Let us forget for the time being terms like 'intercultural' or such stereotyped words. How can we work together? How can we enrich our own form of expression? How do we share our ethos and values, forms of expression, aesthetic sensibilities? I have developed new and interesting possibilities of working together with different cultural groups.

What kind of methodology have you developed for the new search? What is new in it?

You have asked this question at the right moment. My theatre was known as physical theatre. But when we studied the science of the body properly it came out . . . What we need to know is why these actors learn gymnastics, tai-chi and all kinds of physical skills. Why? The first answer that all the trainers and instructors give is that it strengthens, gives flexibility and endurance to the body. Like in the field of sports. But in the creative field, specially in theatre, why do actors need all these things? Through learning koothu movements or kalari or Manipuri thang-ta we can understand a region's psychological and cultural characteristics. Through proper scientific methods we can understand the function of impulse. Grotowski and Barba have already done a good deal of work in this regard. From them I have learnt the science of how to look at the body scientifically. We have to understand these things. How does impulse work in the natural process of bodily expressions? Theoretically, nature as such is not art. When we manipulate and transform it, we create art. So in our case, whatever we have inherited in our blood, in our muscles, in our limbs, our senses, we should master this natural process first. Only after that will we be able to manipulate nature and create our own language, our own form of expression. Only then will we be able to respond to the minute details of this new theatrical language. So I find that when a traditional actor learns a skill, he is not aware of its inner principles, though he has inherited it. But when a modern actor learns these things from a traditional actor, he should first have a knowledge of the science. In the absence of that, an actor may learn only the skill, he cannot discover the natural process, and thus his expression becomes only an imitation. The science of the natural process is similar everywhere. The expressions differ according to geography and other conditions, like food habits etc.

Badal-da [Badal Sircar] helped me very much. I give him the respect of a guru. When I worked with him I could not fully grasp his concepts. But as a human being we learn from our experiences, don't we? I learnt through all these experiences; the meaning came later. Africans, when they resonate their songs, do it through the chest. In India, yakshagana and koothu people, when they sing out, resonate from the top of the head. Manipuris normally do not speak loudly in daily life. But when we are in performance we use this kind of sound. After ten years of working and learning the science of vocal resonance I discovered how it happened. The child, I looked at a newborn child crying. I noticed that the whole body of the child cries. But actors only use a certain resonator. Actors do this because we are socially and culturally conditioned. We never go through a process of

de-conditioning. The whole body of the child resonates when it cries and it comes out very powerfully. So what we need is the creation of a new body culture which is nothing but attaining the innate power and beauty of the body. Our traditions have that kind of body culture. Look at bharatanatyam or kathakali, and you see the power and beauty of the body, the magic of the body. As theatre people we are trying to create a new language by working in these areas and responding to the tensions of the time, trying to give expression to things which could not be expressed in other forms.

How does this knowledge help the creation of the new language you are talking about? How do you propose to bring this knowledge into the interpretation of a text? How does it become a production?

Production is a kind of expression; the actor gives his body to the art of expression. An actor keeps his body, his senses, his emotions, his intellect, functioning. The question is, how can an actor be alert all the time, retain his energy, be prepared to respond? Secondly, if he is unable to master all these things, how is he going to perform?

My question is slightly different. Take Pebet. It was just a play, just a text. It was a matter of selection, it had a particular ideology, a particular theme and a particular understanding of the text and time and situation, your own culture—all these went into the selection of the text and its ultimate production. My question is, how do you prepare the actor intellectually and enable him to respond to the narrative creatively?

These are the other aspects of actor training. Apart from the body culture, we also need to understand the whole situation, the historical, social and political context. An actor should not remain at the level of traditional koothu or thang-ta practitioners. For a modern actor these things need to be internalized because he belongs to a particular social and political milieu. He should be able to react to his own milieu. This is what I call actors' sensibility. An actor should also prepare himself intellectually. I believe that actors' training should be balanced. If there is an imbalance between intellectual awareness and physical awareness, how can you create meaningful modern theatre? For this you have to be ideologically conscious. In India I have worked with highly urbanized actors who are intellectually mature but lacking in body culture. When I work with not-so-urbanized actors, I notice that they have more body culture but are lacking intellectually. There should be a balance.

Since you have come back to production after a few years' gap, to what extent does your present work differ from your previous work? What changes have taken place?

I have become more sophisticated (*laughs*). More calculation, more details.

Is it a turning point in your career? Or a progression?

A progression. I won't claim that it is a turning point. I am not rejecting what I had done earlier. It is a continuation, a progression.

How do you place yourself now in the context of contemporary Manipuri theatre in particular and Indian theatre in general?

By temperament I am more calm, and I feel that I am journeying towards inwardness. This is my personal opinion. I was a very vibrant trailblazer in Manipur in the 70s when I started



working. H. Kanhailal in a workshop with his actors.

Now I am the old guard. Now I feel that whatever I have learnt through experience, I must give very systematically to future theatre workers. I am no longer interested in producing plays. My interest lies in whatever I can share with them, whatever I can give them.

How do you want to pass on your knowledge?

Through productions, through workshops. There was a time when I wanted to do the best possible productions. But now I do not have that attitude. My primary concern is to work

with young actors and shape their attitudes, help them to explore. I do not want to impose my ideas or my ideology, but to give them guidance so that they can go further and explore and create. I am very concerned with this. But I am an artiste, so sometimes I also want to do a production. I don't deny that; it is only normal. But I automatically prefer to work with young actors. This is what I am doing.

In the 70s when I worked with actors, I had to provide the language of expression for whatever I conceived. I had to design everything for the actors to execute. The actors could do it because they had full confidence in me. Because of that, it came out so powerfully.

Now my methodology has changed. Now I give ideas, I never fix anything, never design anything—now the actors design and execute in their own language. This is the difference. In the 70s I did not have the opportunity to work with different groups, with actors from different cultures. I worked only with Manipuri actors. In the early 80s I started travelling to different places. Even then it was not easy. But now, in the 90s, I have found that the actors have started to show interest in body culture. When I worked with Rangayana in Karnataka, with Koothu-P-Pattarai in Madras, in Calcutta, in Bihar, in Delhi, I found that they have consciously or unconsciously accepted the need for a new body culture. Nowadays, when I work with actors, I can relax and sit quietly, watch the actors work, ask them questions, and step inside the rehearsal space only when it is necessary.

What makes me happy is the fact that I am confident that actors can create their own language. In realistic theatre, the director starts working with actors who are already trained. If you work with Uttara Baokar or Surekha Sikri, who are very sensitive actors, the director does not need to teach everything, the actors are responsible for their own language. There was a time when the director had to do everything. He had to play an autocratic role. Now the actors are capable of creating their own language. They can give the director what he wants, argue with the director if they are not happy with the direction. 'If I do it like this, what do you feel?' That kind of thing also came out during the work. Though the process is not complete, though there are mistakes and uncertainties, I think we are growing positively, we have definitely made some progress.

This discussion was renewed in Imphal, on 15 April, 1996, when Kanhailal talked to Biren Das Sharma.

In the last 25 years we have been shaping a new Manipuri contemporary theatre. In the 70s we were confined to Manipur itself, we produced plays for our own people, they were our audience. In the 80s we started looking towards outsiders, to the non-Manipuris, as our audience. Why did it happen? Without being conscious of it, we changed our focus to the outsider, and started to use objects and materials of our own identity and culture in order to create an exotic kind of spectacle, without being conscious of the real meaning of our theatre. It happened to me also. I also wanted to create theatre for an audience abroad. This happened to others as well.

In the 70s I had a strong urge to communicate; so my nonverbal, physical theatre was very, very meaningful. But in the 80s it became stagnant, without a strategy. Nonverbal theatre was mainly directed to audiences outside Manipur, who did not know Manipuri. In order to cater to them we created a theatre that did not need spoken words at all.

But you also had a very strong urge to communicate. I think you devised a new language of theatre which did not need spoken language. Why did the priorities change in the 80s?

In the 80s, because of urbanization, corruption and deterioration of the social and political order, the human condition changed totally. We were very depressed. It was like a manmade catastrophe. Theatre depicted whatever happened in our society. We followed the violence in society. In this changed time we had to be self-critical, to look back at our own life, our work, and analyse it. We came to realize that we needed a new kind of theatre, an alternative theatre which could educate people. I am talking from an ideological point of view. I am not talking about political theatre or propaganda. I am not talking

about the conventional means of teaching through theatre—I am saying that theatre should be educative, that it should be an educative experience.

What exactly do you mean by educative?

It should create a new consciousness, some kind of a deeper experience of life. But how do we do it? Is it possible to do with whatever we have accumulated in our experience? No, it has its own limitations. My main theme in this new theatre is suffering—personal, social, political—of all kinds.

Why suffering?

Because we are suffering. We suffer because of social and political forces working within us, even religious forces working amongst us. In order to overcome this, to counter this suffering, we need to realize that suffering is at the core of everything. That suffering should give us real pain. What is pain? I am suffering but I do not know my pain. Sometimes I am angry, but it is not really anguish that makes me angry. There may be a very sentimental outburst because of this anger. There are many kinds of suffering. There is political suffering. We are free citizens of a free country. But here in Manipur the army and police have us at gunpoint, we have lost our sense of dignity. Any policeman can hold you at gunpoint. At the same time, we have become shameless. There is a high degree of corruption. We subscribe to it. We cannot resist it, we submit, we surrender. There is also economic suffering, we are just surviving marginally. In all respects, degradation—political, economic, social and moral—is affecting us. We don't have a sense of moral values. We used to be in awe of persons with a demonic, evil eye. We were cowards. But we suck our own blood, though we are cowards. This is the reality of the 90s. Our middle-class intellectuals are leaders in all respects. But they are spiritually lost. Nobody really works for society. Religious fundamentalism exists, revivalism exists. All this leads to what I call total suffering.

Then there is also revolt. I don't know whether it is actually revolt in its true sense or not. It has not created the necessary consciousness. It only deals with violence. But before violence, we have to create consciousness and a will to sacrifice. This is not only in Manipur—I am taking the case of Manipur because I live here—it is universal. As human beings we want to defend our democratic life and shape humanity. As long as there is humanity the arts are also present. So in this way an artist's point of view, how an artist looks at society and life, is important. Otherwise our theatre will be alienated from our lives.

Theatre people are proud that they deal with violence. But what purpose does it serve? In the 70s we had a good audience who could appreciate our theatre, who came to see our work and even paid for it. In the 90s we do not have that kind of an audience. We have to invite people to come and see our work. Since our theatre is not located within the society itself, since we are alienated, I feel that we have lost what is 'true' in the art of theatre. We are in search of that truth in theatre. What is the truth in theatre, in the context of the reality?

I feel that we can only rediscover it through suffering, which is the truth of this time. In our search, theatre should work as an educative agency. A new consciousness may be created through theatre. There is a tendency to romanticize, sentimentalize, everything, even suffering. We want to confront the situation, the reality. People talk of the rich cultural material in Manipuri theatre. Now, we need to know—what is Manipuri thang-ta? It is a very ritually charged form. What are its inner principles? Its inner truth? Its natural process? Its scientific aspects? How do all these work on our bodies? These are the things we need to re-evaluate.

You told me that your understanding of reality has changed since the 70s, your understanding of your traditional forms has also changed . . .

In the absence of a philosophy, our search for identity cannot be complete. How do we look at our lives, our own reality? How can we relate it to our theatre? We needed a philosophy at the individual and at the collective levels. I realized that we tend to look at our tradition from the outsider's point of view. Because we learnt theatre the western way. We looked through the proscenium at our own tradition. Now this should be negated. We are in the tradition, we are here and we are not outsiders. So we look from our own tradition out to universality, to science, to history. In this way tradition, science and history—these three things should be fused, should interact democratically and only then a new physico-psychic endowment can be evolved.

Now, when we analyse, we are able to formulate a system which becomes 'sensuous memory'. How does it work? According to the western tradition, when you portray a character it is a psychological interpretation. But now we take a person or a character, and through that character the actor creates the performance text. So in the western method it is the actor-text-characterization, but in our case it is like actor-character-text. Character is no longer treated as a 'human' character, it is transformed into images. We look at the character and discover his tensions. We get a series of tensions which are transformed into a series of poetic images. So the actor presents these poetic images while he identifies with the character. But it is not conventional characterization. Here tensions are transformed into poetic and lyrical images. This representation has a circular, flowerlike structure, whereas in the western concept the dramatic structure is conceived as having many mountainous ups and downs. Ours has no beginning, no end, it is not a linear structure, but a circular one.

Temperamentally, we Manipuri people cannot go into the deeper experience of interpreting a character. We are not used to being deeply psychological. Our actors are not highly educated, or urbanized. We happen to be a very closed society. Only after the Second World War did we open up to the outside world. We still live with mythological truths.

In the so-called realistic theatre, the actor lives in the psychological frame. In our case the actor lives beyond the psychological frame. The realistic theatre gives us a logical process by which to understand reality; for this theatre we need to depend on the scientific temperament, to know the actor's physio-psychological reactions. Even Stanislavsky worked on that. Nowadays, when we borrow from Stanislavsky we tend to neglect these inner principles. Even Grotowski learnt this through Stanislavsky. We have learnt these scientific, logical methods. Now we look at our classical theatre, we know our system of aesthetics and its psychic meaning. We also look at folk and tribal forms and try to understand them—they are no longer arts, they are resources, and we need to develop and make them arts. What they give us is flexibility, openness, directness, direct communication and an innocent response to life. In an urbanized situation an actor cannot give an innocent response, because he lives within the complexities of life.

We want to develop a sensuous theatre, because we want to awaken the senses of the audience and then come to the intellect, to help them come to their own reason after experiencing the theatre. Theatre is not just a spectacle, it should be an experience. So it should be located in the true principles of a heritage and not in the form as such. Sometimes this confuses us. For me, a form is a standardization. Theatre is only a link between heritage and community. Our audience is not a mere proscenium-theatre audience—it is a community, a living community. And we have to locate our theatre in the midst of that community and then the community can reshape our theatre. There is a need to locate theatre in the context of our own community, as a link with our own heritage.

Coming back to the concept of 'sensuous memory'—we aim at the senses of the audience, to alert their intellect, create a vision. For this form of communication our actors cannot blindly follow the development process of body-voice-mind. We should go into the inner meaning of the process. Because, from my experience I notice that our actors learn so many things, they accumulate so many objective materials, but they fail when they try to

relate these to their own art. Technically, 'sensuous memory' is rooted in our culture, in our life-style. The problem is, how to transform all this into a technique which will be useful for our actors? This is the real issue. I have experimented a lot and I am confident that I can give an authentic system to the actor.

What will your theatre look like?

It will be a smiling theatre. It should be pleasant, joyful both for the actors and for the audience. But in the midst of this joyfulness we have to recognize the reality. I have used violence, I know how to use violence. But I realize that the impact of violence does not last long in the minds of the audience. I would like to give the audience a holier kind of experience. By holier I do not mean purity or spirituality. Our own suffering and pain and anguish need to be expressed in such a way that it strengthens our will. I call this 'holier'.

Am I right in saying that the Manipuri society seems to be on the verge of collapse because of pressures from outside forces, the violence that has been inflicted on the society? It seems to me that you want to create a theatre which will reinstate and celebrate the humanity of the community.

Right. My theatre will be a celebration of all the emotions. And through such a celebration one can come back to the humanity which is under threat. So when I talk about ritual, I am not talking about it in its general sense. I am talking about a cultural practice which holds the community together, which is also a celebration of all our emotions. This quality should be brought into theatre, which can really help us to interact with our audience in a celebratory manner. Theatre cannot be just a showpiece. Through this process one can take theatre back to the community.

This is precisely the power of a form like Sumang Leela.

You are right. It is very original theatre. Sumang Leela still exists and is still very popular because of its celebratory qualities. Even when Sumang Leela depicts corrupt policemen, corrupt ministers and bureaucrats, the police, the bureaucrats, the ministers themselves enjoy the play. The play talks against them, even then they enjoy it. Why? They celebrate themselves. This is the strength of Sumang Leela. I want to bring in this quality in a new approach, a new process of creativity.

What would be the role of the actor-performer?

The actor's role is not to interpret the character psychologically but to create a celebration of emotions. And an actor should have that quality, that capacity to celebrate. His body is the medium which communicates to the body of the whole community.

Heisnam Kanhailal is one of Manipur's most celebrated directors, whose work has been seen all over India.



Photo: Amit Bararia

'My acting is almost entirely my life'

Sabitri Devi

This interview with Sabitri Devi, senior actress with H. Kanhailal's group, and a partner in his experimentation process, was held in Imphal in April 1996, with Anjum Katyal of STQ. Salam Rajesh acted as interpreter.

We used to do a lot of community singing, singing in the temples, when I was young, but these days no one seems to do it anymore. When I was very young, as young as 5/6 years, before I had even taken part in any plays or stage productions—we used to sing and play and act. My aunt, my father's sister Gauramani (she's no more now), when she saw my interest, said, 'Let her join the theatre. What's the point in taking other people's children and moulding them until they can find their own eyes and feet, and then leaving them and forgetting all about them? I'll mould my niece instead.' Saying this, she brought me into acting.

But my aunt wanted to see whether I was fit for it, and she tested me a lot. Whether I could act, whether I could sing, whether I should be sent for dance training—she made me try out various things. Seeing that I adapted myself to acting the most, she brought me into this field. The very first production group I was involved in was called Joy Ji Drama (Joy's drama)—it was my uncle, Irangbam Joy's production group. My aunt was also in it. She had written to my mother saying, 'Let her come and join us.' This was when she was in a place called Wazai—there used to be a lot of touring in faraway places. So she sent a person to take me to join Joy Ji Drama. The very first part I had was that of a young girl searching for flowers for a particular marriage ceremony. Seeing me act that part, they said that it looked like I might do quite well. And that's how I got into it. After that there were many more roles in different types of plays—in those days we had Opera, then Sumang Leela, which we performed after putting up a screen during Kaang and other festivals.

After that first play, when I was a young girl searching for flowers, my aunt thought that I could be moulded to act well, and she did so. After that she brought me into theatre, first in *Nimai Shenaz*, where I was Prabhu. It was Opera-theatre. I played the part of Prabhu. I became very famous after *Nimai Shenaz*. It seemed like I was actually Prabhu when I was acting as Prabhu. The play ran very well, never less than 5 times a day. I don't know what it was in that play, whether God's *shakti* (strength) was in me then—it's only now that I can look back and see it. Of course, I was wholehearted in my commitment and dedication, my whole heart was involved in it because I liked it, the play and my part. The old *sadhus* who had dedicated their lives to God—when they saw me acting as Prabhu—maybe they saw the same *bhakti* (devotion) in me as in them—they even touched my feet. I cried loudly. That was when I was 6/7 years old.

After that I grew up a little and toured a lot. I took part in many Opera plays staged during festivals. Then there were plays like *Sri Batsa Chinta Maharani* (Rule of the King and the Queen), where I played a part. In those days the plays were mostly about gods and goddesses and that's all I played. After that play I gained a lot of acclaim. That was when I was older. And then, when I was a young adolescent girl, around 14/15 years of age, I became a 'heroine' (*laughs*). I was given a lot of heroine parts to play—those days we used to sing ourselves, but these days hardly anyone does so. The plays I took part in, maybe they can be called melodramas. The plays have changed now.

Were there any actresses you learnt from?

Of course; it's only now that I act as I feel is right, act on my own. Those days it was mostly a matter of imitation. I learnt from nearly all of the actresses like Ichê (sister) Ibeyaima, Aiga Robindro's sister, and Radhe, and also from my aunt. Radhe is around 20

years older than me and I used to play her daughter. I was not yet a heroine then, and I used to follow their advice and imitate their gestures and acting. At that time there were plays like *Laibak Chaobi* (Unfortunate Woman) and *Thadkopa* (Renunciation), written by Ramacharan, that were produced by Joy Ji Drama. But as for training, I was trained mainly by my aunt. And no, I didn't take or learn anything from other actresses of my age, only from those older. The actresses of my age, none of them are active or popular any more (*laughs*).

It was my aunt Gauramani who trained me. How to sing a song, how to act, how to depict sadness, what to say where—all this my aunt showed me and told me what to do. At the same time, I also tried on my own. We would sit together and she'd tell me 'Act like this' or 'Do this', before any new play. She would ask me to act out a new part in front of her, teaching all the while, suggesting, telling me what I should do, how far I should walk, how to depict sadness at the thought of losing my child, how to cry, how to laugh. As for now, the acting is more my own, searching within myself for the right way to act.

I didn't go in for voice training. I just tried to speak the way the others did. There was no rigid or rigorous training as such, I would speak and if it didn't sound right, she'd say that it's not coming out right. She didn't teach me how to use my breath or anything like that, I simply copied and tried my best until it came out right.

What did you like best about your parts, which role did you like most?

I liked the part of Mahaprabhu the most. Maybe because I was a child, I entered into the part with a lot of enthusiasm and interest. As for when I matured into a young lady, all the roles were more or less the same. There was no particular preference.

Did you like dressing up, the costumes, make-up, etc?

I wasn't particularly interested, or even particularly pleased at the idea of dressing up. Before each play I would be told to wear particular clothes for particular parts or scenes, and that's what I did. When I grew older I would think on my own that for this particular scene I should dress like this or like that, but for the most part the elders would tell me what to wear. Of course, that was mainly when I was a child, and when I grew older, when I became beautiful (*laughs*) I started to decide on my own. At the same time I still took the advice of my elders.

It's funny when I think about the make-up that I used to put on. We would apply it ourselves. This was long ago, when I was very young and callow—even when I grew up, though I became more mature and refined in a way . . . maybe it was because we were all so poor, we had to grow up the hard way, so maybe we couldn't get good make-up, or maybe we didn't know any better. Most of Joy's dramas were very popular and ran for a long time in the rural areas. We used to make a paste with lantern soot and water and use matchsticks to paint the eyebrows, and we would put some oil in the *sindur* and use that as lipstick. As for rouge, we had to make do with zinc powder mixed with water (*laughs*).

Did the director give precise instructions or could you act a part on your own?

The director was in total control of the play, we all followed his instructions precisely, even down to how many steps to take while walking—2 steps meant 2, not 3. Nowadays it's different, we all try to play the role as we think best and improvise a lot. I also had to remember that I could never turn my back to the audience but that I must always face them when on stage.

I got married at the young age of 16/17, when I was very popular and sought after by everybody as an actress. It had become so, that if I could not commit myself or find time for a play, that play would be delayed. But once I got married, I stopped acting for a

while because my in-laws were against it. I never stopped longing for the theatre, the desire was always there. But since my in-laws were against it, I entered domestic life fully. I would bathe and put sandalwood on my forehead before eating, whereas before marriage, it was upto me whether I bathed or not. I would sleep late, too, as the plays were staged late at night around 11 p. m.; so when I slept late into the morning my folks would let me, seeing that I'd worked so late into the night and needed my sleep. I was so free, then. But from the day I got married I had to adopt the ways of a married Meitei woman. I couldn't help but wake up early, I couldn't help but bathe before eating, I had to apply sandalwood etc. I had to bear up with all those rituals even though they were a burden. And then, after my eldest son was born, I was asked to take part in a play written by Oja (teacher; referring to her husband) for Aryan Theatre. I was very interested and badly wanted to play the part, so I asked my mother-in-law whether I could, and to intercede with my father-in-law on my behalf. Even Oja was to play a part in the play. My father-in-law gave me his permission, and so, with my son placed in my mother-in-law's arms, I went along and did the play. After that my in-laws became more agreeable to the idea of my acting. At that time I was around 19/20 years old.

The name of Joy's company was National Drama Touring Company.

Did you have to take permission from your husband?

Oh no, he was all for my joining. He and I, we thought of ways and means through which I could take up acting again, even though the elders were against it. Most elders are against any kind of drama or theatre. They thoroughly disapproved of a daughter-in-law who painted her eyebrows and wore lipstick. My in-laws' other daughter-in-law was not at all like that. I was the total opposite, a person who had toured and led a free life, and my in-laws were against me. They were worried about how such diverse people, both their daughters-in-law, would get along or even interact. My husband's brother put his head in his hands in horrified despair at the very idea, as did my in-laws.

Was it a marriage of your choice? Where did you meet him?

I met Oja when he was taking training in agriculture, he was a student. At that time everyone could go out for some training or studies. On one of his trips back, he and his friends decided to put up a play. Oja was the director, he wrote it, too, his very first play. So he and his friends, when they came home for the summer holidays, they staged it. Oja taught the others their parts. It was for this play that I was taken on to play the part of the heroine. We rehearsed in R. K. Ronen's house, Janmasthan, on the verandah, in fact. Sagolsen Indra Kumar, R. K. Ronen, Jatrasana—they were all involved, though R. K. Ronen didn't act. We all rehearsed on the verandah. Oja was a student then, it was a student effort, the play. That's how I met Oja, and that's how we came to know each other. The name of the play was *Laiyeng Ahauba* (The First Treatment).

When you look back at your touring life, what were the things that you really liked or didn't like about it?

It was mostly in the remote rural and hilly areas that I toured. As such, the market was nearly always far away, vegetables weren't easily available. Cooking was done for everybody at one time and we would all eat together. We were mostly women, but sometimes a few men would join and help us in the cooking. In the morning we would ourselves collect a particular kind of vegetable that grows wild and prepare it for cooking in the evenings. After that we'd rest for a while before the play. I was happy, as I was well known then. I loved that life, it was the kind of life I led even as a child, as I'd grown up in the villages. Hence my touring life filled me with a sense of love.

As for dislikes, I can't say that there were any outstanding ones. Of course, it was a hard life. But it was a good life and I enjoyed myself and I was very happy. Now I've been abroad, I've been to many places within the country too. I can't deny that this is a

much more comfortable life, but somehow the memories of collecting wild vegetables, cooking something haphazardly, then acting—it's something that I loved. I didn't dislike anything as such. Wherever I went, I loved the place and I loved the people, the audience, whoever they were. Now, sometimes when I encounter any kind of hardship, I think back to the places I went to when I was young and I am filled with affection and longing for them.

There was nothing to fear then. There was nothing so difficult that I couldn't cope with it, nothing that disgusted me or put me off. The people were like my mother, brothers, sisters, friends—I shared a feeling of kinship with them.

How did you feel when you returned to the theatre after marriage, was it different?

Yes, it was very different. The plays I took part in before I got married were different from the ones I took part in afterwards. The roles I did then, after marriage, the plays I took part in, I think, convinced my in-laws and other people in the locality that the acting they so disapproved of was not bad, after all. So when I showed an interest in resuming my acting life, and because my husband was supportive, my in-laws allowed me to take up acting again, saying that since my husband was with me, let me act if I so wished. It was harder after my son was born. My mother-in-law couldn't come with us to look after him wherever I went. That was when we started Kalakshetra, and I acted in a play called *Wahang Ama* (A Question). As for being a heroine, I am still one. I still play heroine roles—different kinds of heroines. In *Wahang Ama* I played 4 parts and was so pressed for time that I wore 3/4 costumes together. Chaogtham Joy Kumar would wait for me offstage with different clothes for the different parts, and in this way I played 4 parts. My interest and involvement in acting grew even stronger, especially after my mother-in-law approved. Then there were a lot of plays, and they were more and more different until they've reached the present stage.

Till *Wahang Ama*, my roles were quite similar. That play marked a difference in the kind of roles I played and in my style of acting. But I played a totally different kind of role in *Tamnalai*, a Kalakshetra play. The marked change was also due to Oja's direction. He told me that he wanted to stage this play in a particular way. *Tamnalai* is an old folktale, but he didn't want me to depict the play in the same old way. It's the story of Lukhrabi's only son, Chandrahamna. I was Lukhrabi. Her son was an excellent student all through college and university, and his mother, who had no one else, had a lot of expectations of him. He was her very life, but he turned into a murderer. Oja wanted to express how his mother would feel at this terrible turn of events; he wanted me to express that in my own style. The earlier plays all depended on dialogue, but from this play onwards there was more emphasis on the physical aspect. Oja was a different kind of director. Unlike the older directors, he wouldn't give precise directions, but rather he'd tell me the character I was to play and he would leave it to me to interpret the role the way I wanted. His direction was very different from other directors I'd known.

Have you kept any of the things that you learnt in the earlier years and do you still use them now?

No I haven't, though, of course, I remember what I did then. Actually, the roles are so different now, especially after *Tamnalai* and *Kabui Kei Oiba*—these 2 plays were very similar, I don't even remember which of them I acted in first. My memory's not so good anymore.

After *Tamnalai* was *Pebet*, which saw another big change—it was very physical. Also, *Memoirs of Africa*.



Moments from *Pebet* (top) and *Memoirs of Africa* (bottom). Photos: Amit Bararia

I still haven't finished searching for all the potential within me. But I've tried my best to express myself in such a way that the audience would appreciate my role. As for training, it started at the time Oja and Arambam Loken took up a project under the Ford Foundation for 3 years. We were inspired by thang-ta—how and when to breathe, how to move the body. All these helped a great deal in physical control, so that by the time I did *Pebet* and *Africa* I could express myself very well.

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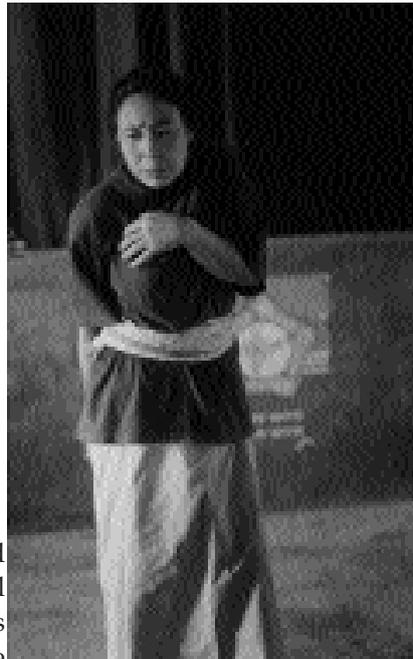
and learnt them as I even from folk how my

and how and where to use it. It all started thang-ta—the physical exercises and control movements—then from the old folk singers and old tellers of folktales, how to use the we took all these and adapted them, used them to benefit us in our interpretation of roles. The elders did not really know how to pass on their techniques of, say, singing. So we would sit with them and urge them to sing again and again, asking them to stop at particular points, trying to figure out how exactly they breathed out the different syllables. That's how we learned. We also learnt from the different forces of nature around us, even from the way dogs barked, and we built upon whatever we had learnt and used it in to great

How to breathe in, where to take the breath—the elders did not know much about seeing that they were not educated. All the

when I across who did, Oja Kanglen other teachers gurus, I from as much could. I learnt the old singers, to control breathing with of body

voice— applied it, our plays effect



Sabitri in a workshop with Kalakshetra actors.

(demonstrates use of body and voice).

There's still so much to be learnt from the elders. There's still so much that I need to learn. But the elders are dwindling in number. I did not search them out as I should have, and this is my sorrow. There's a lot left to be done, in fact it wouldn't be wrong to say that I still don't know anything.

From the plays that you were in as a child till now, is there a continuity?

So much has changed. Things that we did, that we learnt long ago, say, during *Pebet*, don't satisfy us any more, mainly because everything has changed, the times have changed. Even the clothes and the way we wear them has changed. It's not so much whether the people, the audience, would find something that I do acceptable, but, rather, whether I find it acceptable. The plays that I'm doing and have done—I feel that I've done them with sincerity and with dedication, but somehow it doesn't satisfy me, I cannot wholeheartedly accept the way I act. It's not that I'm worried about people's approval or criticism, but rather there's a feeling of something lacking within me. So I think, what else can I do now; I'm searching for new ways to express myself. That's the difference.

Of course, there's a certain continuity and pattern in it all. The plays are no longer written the way they were written earlier. But the way our old folk singers and tellers of folktales would construct a story out of simple, everyday events, even from poetry, that's the way that we are slowly approaching again. Even from sitting down and observing things around us, we construct a story, we build upon what we see. There is no longer a rigid structure to the plays now. We are constantly experimenting. We are still searching. We don't think that the present way of things is the best, we are always trying to find a better way.

People ask me now, what is Kalakshetra doing? Why is it silent, what new things is it producing? The truth is, we don't want to bring out a new play yet. In our thoughts we want to try out new things; *that* hasn't stopped, in Oja or me. If the two of us, who are older, cannot keep still, how can the newer ones, those who have just entered, sit still? The older members have all taken leave and gone. So Oja and I, and Tomba, who is one of the older members of Kalakshetra, we often discuss what we can do. We are no longer satisfied by the kind of plays we did in the past. Like movies being endlessly repeated—what's the point in doing the same kind of play? That's what we are discussing now, what new things we can try out. Our thoughts, our arguments, our discussions—they are coming to an end, and we will now bring out a new play.

To be an actor or an actress one must be trained. Though we on our own part were not trained, we entered theatre without any real idea of how to go about being actors or actresses, we now know how to train those who enter theatre, and those who will be in the new play, though we haven't started teaching them properly as yet. I feel that even if we don't dog their footsteps with constant instructions about how to do this or that, if they concentrate their minds hard enough, they will come to know what is required of them and how to do this thing called acting.

What is it like being a woman in Manipuri theatre—the strengths, difficulties, the reactions of society?

Well, being a woman taking part in theatre has brought me a lot of disapproving looks. These days, since the people are more educated, they do not feel anything is wrong, but in the earlier years, they would look down upon an actress as someone disgusting. They would pass sarcastic remarks, even insult me outright; the people had a very negative idea of what an actress was. Even my aunt, who was responsible for introducing me to theatre, she could not but be affected by other people's attitudes, their rude behaviour towards actresses. And so, when as a child I would sit with some boys in all innocence, enjoying pure conversation, she would call me aside and tell me that I was not to mix with boys, not to get friendly with them or allow them any kind of familiarity. She was

very unhappy about the way people spoke of actresses and since she herself had to bear with so much disgust and distaste, she would tell me that I must never give people a chance to talk badly about me. And that if anyone tried to even put down actresses or the profession itself, I should reply harshly and never let them browbeat me. Her words influenced me a lot; and since I loved acting, I, too, was extremely unhappy about other people's attitudes. I had to bear a lot, too, and in me grew an anger and a determination that I would show up all those people who laughed and sniggered about us. I still feel the same. Now people are educated. In the neighbourhood we have women doctors, engineers etc. They don't respect us, as we are so different, but then we don't respect them either. All these attitudes have only made me stronger and more determined in my acting, and I feel that with my acting I will show up these very people and make them swallow their words.

We have always taken men-women relationships in our stride as something simple, we do not think anything about it. It's natural, being friends, but in other people's eyes we are doing something wrong. An affection, an affair, can spring up between any couple, but when it happens to actors and actresses, people talk badly about it, saying what else can one expect of people who have loose morals, simply because they are into acting. To someone who has a low opinion of actors and actresses, just the sight of us sitting together and talking idly is enough to make them think and say the worst. It's only now that people have become more educated and cultured that these things have nearly stopped; in the olden days this was the general attitude.

It's a strange thing that I have always turned to acting, even in the midst of personal grief. When my first son died at the age of 18, I was devastated, but I couldn't cry much. My feelings, my grief, my pain, all that I took with me into my acting, and my acting spoke for me. I cannot speak out, but my words, my feelings, are manifested in my acting. My acting is almost entirely my life. I have started thinking of the plays and my acting *as* my life; there is very little difference between my personal life and my professional life.

At times I'm filled with anger at myself. I think that my life is not the theatre nor the theatre my life, what am I doing, and I become depressed and sometimes tell myself that I'll end my life. My life is a play, and I sometimes feel like ending the play. I don't think that I'll live long if I ever give up acting.

Do you feel that being in theatre has helped in your life as a daughter, mother, wife etc?

It has given me strength. In my neighbourhood, when some trouble arises, I'm there—though I don't go during joyful occasions—doing all that I can. Even when the *meira-paibis* (torch bearers, the women of Manipur who are a powerful group and engage in a lot of social activities) ask me to join in their activities, I do so and in fact play a leading part. I am not an actual member of the *meira-paibis*, but whenever they engage in any work for the neighbourhood or the state, I'm there. I involve myself in other social work even when there are hardly any women, and against the wishes of my family.

I'm a very simple person, and also very emotional. When people regard me in a positive light and treat me warmly and simply, it affects me to the point of tears. But if people see me in a negative light, it hurts me so much that I can't sleep at night, I can't eat, and I'm filled with the urge and the anger to get my own back at them and make them change their attitude. It's something like a cancer within me (*laughs*), and something very bad in me.

Transcribed and translated from the original Manipuri by Elizabeth Vesant.

H. Sabitri, wife of H. Kanhailal, is an extremely powerful and sensitive actress, who has been an integral part of his theatre for decades.



'The audience is inside me'

Ratan Thiyam

This interview with the STQ team consisting of Anjum Katyal, Biren Das Sharma and Naveen Kishore was held in Imphal on 14 April, 1996

If you could start with your assessment of the situation of Manipuri theatre at the current time ...

The pace of the development of Manipuri theatre has really been hampered over the last 10 years or so because of the political situation here and the economic crisis that's come with it. This has happened because, I think, theatre cannot be only a kind of 'art for art's sake' programme but is always linked with the socio-political situation, which is reflected in the performance and also in the growth of theatre as a whole. That's why I've been very disheartened in the last 10 years. In the 70s we saw that we could really give a lot to theatre, many experiments were carried out here—all of this has been affected by this crisis. The economic crisis is really important, as Manipur does have a lot of young talent both in terms of actors and directors who are good and keen, but are unable to carry on, simply due to lack of funds. As a theatre actor or director, of course, one can't expect a lot of money and fame, but surely one must earn one's bread and butter!

The other aspect where we have failed is that there's a lack of exposure to different kinds of theatre and theatre people. Manipur has not seen the theatre happening in other parts of India or in foreign countries—this theatre has never been to Manipur, and we do not have the money to travel to see them. That's why, even with a lot of talent and potential, the communication problem has become a very important drawback in contemporary Manipuri theatre.

The same problem can also be seen with the designs created, as no theatre group can spend much on set design, lighting or any such aspect of theatre. Now things are computerized everywhere, very high-tech, and we cannot do that in Manipuri theatre.

In the case of playwrights, also, we have no interaction. A playwright here should encounter other playwrights of other languages, which doesn't happen, as we cannot bring them over to Manipur. You know, I feel that not only production, but theatre as a whole suffers if our actors or our directors, our set designers, our playwrights, cannot go outside because of the economic problem here. What I'm trying to do is to bring them over, but for that also we need money, and our repertory is a company which runs on a daily wage basis. We work daily and we try to survive with whatever we get out of our performances. But it's very insecure, as we don't really know how much money we'll be getting in a year; even the maintenance here, the production cost here, everything is becoming very high. That's why I think that Manipuri theatre is facing a lot of problems. It was not like this till the 70s and 80s. But after the 80s, it's a very serious problem we're facing. The theatre workers here are very active, they really do something or the other just to satisfy themselves, experimental work and so on. I think it's a very good sign.

Apart from this problem with communication and exposure, I think Manipuri theatre is like Polish theatre. During that period in Poland when everything was under curfew, there was political turmoil and Walesa was coming up—during that period, Polish theatre was very active; nothing could stop them. That is what I appreciate about Manipuri theatre also. Nothing has stopped theatre activity here, whatever the crisis—it has never stopped Manipuri theatre. And you know, the government here, the art and culture department, the State Kala Akademi here—they've nothing to do with the development of theatre. But in spite of all these things, I think that professionalism in Manipuri theatre is growing very fast. By professionalism I don't mean commercialization, but a really professional approach to theatre. See, people are always

talking about having no money for theatre despite working very hard, and so on. I'm not talking about that. Of course, money is always required, but I'd rather tell you that the kind of theatre competitions or theatre festivals that we carry out here in Manipur have proved to be very healthy. Earlier it was not like that. But after the 80s it's really become competitive, everybody is trying very hard, all the directors, and we can see quite a lot of interesting work. These productions, all done without high production costs, can go to any national festival. You can say that some of them may not be up to the mark, but on an average, the work is very interesting.

You say that isolation, lack of communication, a kind of atmosphere of alienation is very predominant in Manipur and that this kind of situation has become a very important factor. My question is, why theatre and why not the other arts? What is so special about theatre, in the local context?

If we at all consider theatre as a composite art, then Manipur is a place where elements of theatre are more available than in many other states, because here you will see a lot of traditional art forms, narrative forms, which can be utilized in theatre as a source of inspiration, as direct elements and non-direct elements, many things. Theatre is surviving here only because of that. All these elements of a composite art are available here. At the same time, you'll see that in most of the plays, maybe it is taken out of the *Mahabharata*, or a short story or whatever, but in all these productions the thematic content is a kind of attack against the system. And theatre also demands that, theatre has to be like that, I believe in that kind of theatre. This kind of thematic content is very much in existence and that's why the expression becomes very important. The expression in theatre—we have a lot of writers here, a lot of poets, very interesting, good poets, short story writers, novelists, also painters—but the theatre people here are trying much harder than the rest of the people to express themselves.

Would you say that art is basically just self-expression or . . . ?

Self-expression according to the situation and the system that we have here. Manipur is not a place like Calcutta or Delhi or Bombay. Inside, it is bleeding. Outside you may see that everything is okay, everybody is going to office, but inside it's bleeding. And theatre is a kind of document where all these things, all the inner ideas, all the inner layers of life, should be and *are* normally expressed. I think that is why we do theatre, at least the kind of theatre we do.

Is this kind of theatre actually trying to react to that kind of violence?

Reacting, yes, but not necessarily saying this is right or this is wrong. It is not necessary also—not yet—as we still do not have a single formula to prove things. But the feeling inside is very important and that's definitely being reflected in theatre here.

From whatever we've seen, one thing that comes out very strongly is that Manipuri theatre has predominantly moved away from the realistic mode. Can you tell us why there's so much stress on symbols? Also, you commented on the classical narrative and the traditional elements from which theatre can draw. The movement away from realism and this drawing from other traditions of communication which are already in existence, seems to be quite strong. It seems to me that people have been used to watching performances of different kinds, as also to this tradition of making a social commentary through performance. So could you talk about how contemporary theatre connects up with this tradition?

I don't think that Manipuri theatre has really moved away from the realistic mode, because if you go to Rupmahal Theatre or Aryan Theatre—they are doing a kind of proscenium theatre that's very realistic. I don't know about realistic-realism, Indian realism is very different. I think that the Manipuri Dramatic Union is also mostly doing realistic theatre. Some of the young directors have been trying stylization, or the

utilization of other performing art forms, because they can communicate a bit more than a dialogue-based play. And that's why, in my case also, if I write plays like *Imphal Imphal*, or *Imphal Karusi* (Let's Go to Imphal), it becomes difficult for people to follow them and they become limited to the audience of Manipur. But when you see these young people who are experimenting—I've seen them in Bangalore, I've seen them in Calcutta—at least some of the things that they want to express get to the audience. But if it is too word-oriented a production, it cannot communicate. And that's why—for every one realistic play, they do more that are not. Like we do in our repertory for their academic knowledge or for the requirement of the team—like my *Hiroshima*, which has a semi-realistic kind of approach, different from the original text written by Badal babu [Badal Sircar], because I wanted it to be more semi-realistic. If you're doing a play like *Sajano Bagan* [a Bengali play by Manoj Mitra], it's again different. If you do a play by Mohan Rakesh it is different again, though it is also a realistic play. In that way many people are doing realistic plays, but the experimentation aspect in terms of using traditional theatre, most of our young directors are doing that. I don't think it's bad, it's a very good sign—knowing your own culture and experimenting with your own tradition and coming out with something that helps you to express best what you want to say. I actually expect more and more directors to come up with many more different kinds of experimentation. I don't know what the future of Manipuri theatre will be, but so far, though the young directors are experimenting with stylization, it is not that they are not doing realistic plays, though it's true that they're trying to evolve different modes of expression. Even the young playwrights are very keen to write experimental plays, because they know the rituals, the traditions, and it becomes easier for them to express themselves in that medium. But we are also very interested in the playwrights who're writing realistic plays, like Brojen, who's written a number of plays for the Rupmahal Theatre—all very interesting plays.

In the course of your own journey, do you see any movement to a new mode of expression that hadn't been there in your earlier work?

It's been a long journey, a very long journey, and it's about . . . I think 4/5 phases that I've been through in the last 20 years. I've had to move from one point to another point, but it takes quite a long time, because I'm doing it knowingly. The most difficult thing with me is that once the first performance is over, my work is also over; I never go to the rehearsals. Even if I go, I just sit down, I don't direct, don't talk to the actors or musicians. I'm bored seeing myself again and again. And also, I'm never satisfied with any of the productions, and so my influence at this second stage could be dangerous also. When the production's on it's okay; at the last moment, also, if you want to change this and that—everybody is still very enthusiastic. But the moment the first performance is over, I don't feel like seeing the same thing again, but you can't keep changing—your actors and musicians will not like that. So I have to be very careful before I put up a production for the first time, because that is the last time I'll think about it. Then I want to think about another production.

Now, talking about my work from those days, as I've told you, it takes me about 4/5 years at least to do one thing well. I keep waiting for the moment when I know it's going to work. That moment comes only after working for 4/5 years. If I am utilizing traditional art forms today, then it's taken me quite a number of years—one has to dissect them, learn again and again, go to the gurus and ask about their practice, their relationship with the actors, analyse the relationship of traditional space and modern theatre space and the kind of energy flow—any aspect. One has to concentrate and that takes a long time. Not only that, the kind of theatre that I'm trying to do . . . say, I started from utilizing the traditional art forms, but that was 30 years back. Now I'm working on a project on the language of expression in theatre. I'd started with the *Blind Age* and now I've done this production *Uttarapriyadarshi* which is a very, very complicated kind of a

play. I don't think in the last 35 years anybody has done this play in this country. It was a great challenge—working with the language of expression. The word does not necessarily mean what it is, the lines don't necessarily give the same meaning and the images can be clashing. How are the images going to be worked out? How are the meanings to be interpreted and re-interpreted, and how are the actors going to utilize those devices? Why new devices? Why not other kinds of devices we have utilized in the last many years? Out of so many sounds, why are some more important than others? In *Uttarapriyadarshi* I've utilized *kharam* (wooden slippers) to create the sound of hell. Communication is not limited to words and their expression—there is a language through which we can also express, a language that can be universal, related with the space, with gestures, postures, tradition, non-traditional performances. What is happening between the audience and the actor, between the director and the audience and the actor? These are the kinds of things I've been trying to look at in the last few productions. Maybe it'll take me another 3/4 years to come up with some ideas.

Could you tell us why you got interested in this sphere of the language of expression?

Because I felt that, even in English or Hindi or Manipuri—any language, basically—the actor is not going to utter the same lines or the same dialogue that are in the written script. He is meant to express it in such a way that the meaning or the aesthetic aspect, the shape and the size, the weight and the balance of the words—all these come out. His postures and gestures, the penetration of the space—all these things come out in his words, because words constitute the basic background of an actor—sometimes. It may not necessarily be always, but most of the time the playwright is writing with a certain significance attached to the words he uses. It is very sad also on the actor's part when he cannot deliver or express it properly. So there should be a language to specify how to express it. Say the playwright has written something which is very authentic, but the actor is getting it only in print; he may never have gone through the experiences that the writer has. I'm not saying that he needs to have that kind of experience, I'm only saying that the actor needs to know how serious the words are—that's the first thing. Then the actor can try to get a kind of language, not just the words of that language, but a language where the actor with his physical force, his external and internal energy, tries to bring out, to tell, to express something which is not merely 'said'. Even in realistic plays, if the language of expression is wrong, then the whole interpretation goes wrong. Even the building up of characters—whatever line it follows—Stanislavsky or Brecht or Grotowski—is dependent on the language of expression. It is the actor's own language of expression which is going to be significant all the way to the end of the performance. He tries to think, he tries to deliver that, and this delivery is not very easy, he has to study a lot. Not only the script, but the aesthetics of performance, the degree of preference . . . because the actor's language of expression is the only tool for communication. The audience is sitting there and I'm performing here, but the audience is not taking that in, they're thinking something else—that happens because of the lack of the language of expression. I know this because there are many actors who work very sincerely, systematically, when I tell them to work. They work, do a lot of physical exercises and movements and so on, but even after that we find that they have no language of expression. They cannot express themselves. So when you see that this actor cannot deliver, why can't he? Because he doesn't know what the language of his expression should be. I think this is a very essential point, knowing how to express. Because without knowing that, one can't grow as an actor.

How can an actor reach the level where he knows his own language of expression?

I'm trying to find out, I don't know, I don't have any pre-set ideas. But my experience tells me that somehow many of the actors cannot even change their own language of expression, because they don't know other languages of expression. I don't know exactly,

I'm only trying to get started in this production. In the production of *Uttarapriyadarshi* you can see the areas where the actor is trying to work out the relationship between the spoken word and non-spoken word, between the verbal and the non-verbal. I'm even bringing in abstraction where the spoken words don't necessarily relate to the expression. Maybe if we have a broad idea with many minute details, out of which you underline only one, it may reflect the whole idea—so maybe the actor needs to express only one single idea, one single expression, which will bring out the whole spectrum.

There's a lot of cooperation and hard work in terms of interpretation, it seems to me, that you demand from an actor. This business of communicating the subtext, so that in some cases it creates an image that either directly clashes with or contradicts the text, but still has an effect on me as a receiver, as a spectator—How do you as Ratan Thiyam, who is also into experiments, who knows what he wants to get, but may not at this point know exactly how, deal with the actors? As some kind of human plasticine, trying to shape them? Trying to find out how they relate their life to this language of expression? How does this process happen, say, on a daily basis when you take up your plays, work on the scenes? You, in your role of director, are looking at all these people, you know them, you know your written material also. What would be interesting to know is, how do they come together—the written and the human materials, and what are the surprises that emerge when the magic clicks? How does this language of expression link up their own experience with the way you want them to deliver? Give us some idea of the actual battle that you face when you're dealing with this.

Normally, you see, an actor is trained in many aspects of theatre, he knows Stanislavsky and Brecht, he has also studied characterization. Now, each and every production for me, and this relates to the actor, requires a different kind of training, because the kind of training that an actor has may not necessarily work for every kind of production. So what happens normally is that the production starts basically with the same kind of thing, same kind of acting, same kind of expressions, just different words. So you just look at it and you see that the repetition is happening, you know why it is happening and you want to change it. But how to change it? I must adopt a method to change it. Either I should act and tell the actor, 'do this, this, this and this', but that's not possible, always, and I should not do it, also, because then it will be an imitation of Ratan Thiyam. Also, as a human being I don't think I'm able to express 100% of what I feel; so whatever—50% or 60%—whatever I can express, I have to sit down with him and express it and tell him to do it in such a way that he finds himself doing it differently. Then, gradually, once the norm is set, the style of performance is set for that production. So the language of the production, the language of expression, comes up only when he realizes what the demand really is, but it is an exercise that one should carry out at an individual level for each and every production; otherwise he won't be able to do it. Even if Ratan Thiyam does not repeat himself—he may have a very good new idea every time—but if the actor is not performing and is doing the same kind of thing, then that newness won't be there. So this is the basic work that needs to be done for every production. Even utilizing the devices that have been there always, like sound—why *this* sound? Or the images. Images that we think inside can come out very different through expressions. We cannot express the imagery inside; why does that happen? An actor is talking about the moon, and the audience is thinking about a different kind of moon, different kind of water, different kind of sound—how to bring them together? Nowadays, most of the performances are highly computerized. Now, what do the actors do? Because everything is set, everything except the actors, and the actors have to follow the computer—because, even for their cues, they have to depend on a computer.

You seem to be set for manual cueing here, though maybe it's not the fashion of the day. But I see what you mean, because this dependence on computers means that an actor is expected to repeat exactly, contrary to what you were talking about—that once it is set—a particular play, you may

need to move away from the origin to see it again, whereas with computers he or she has to keep on repeating exactly, has to be in exactly the same place, as the computer is going to put out the light at a certain time, at a certain place, and he or she has to deliver the line within those limits. It's possible that the human beings involved might deliver it differently, depending on how the rhythm has gone for that particular scene on that particular day.

But all that will disappear very soon and computerization and other levels of mechanization will come in, because of the commercialization, because of the economics of it. See, I'm utilizing 7/8 musicians for my production, but it is much cheaper to have a tape recorder. So it will come to us, and very quickly. So something should be done. I'm just working on it, I've just started working. It will take time, I have to work a little harder. Theatre, after all, has to establish a very close communication between the audience and the actors. If we, as actors or as artists, cannot communicate with each other, that creates a big problem. And in India, particularly, organization is a very big thing. If one cannot become a good organizer, or if a group is not well organized, then that theatre group falls out automatically. You can bring in one of the great designers, one of the great music composers and 4/5 wellknown actors and do a production. But how far that production can really help the development of theatre, is a big question indeed. Because theatre is not like films. In film, you do the same thing, you engage the people—the artistes and the designers—they work for a month or two and then they work for another film and so on. But here in theatre . . . we have a compulsory course of apprentice fellowship for one year and it is very necessary. It is not that we only give technical knowledge to these artistes. Of course we teach acting, we teach other technical things, but one of the most important aspects is that whoever tries to enter this repertory must know the history of the repertory. How it was established, when it was established, how many people were there, who are the people who've sacrificed for theatre, and how rich is the theatre, who are the senior people, why are they here, why, when at this time money is so important, we are working here even though we don't get much money? All these things are very important for me—to teach or to make them realize, to talk about the repertory constantly. How to involve them in the production? How is the production done normally? What is a mature kind of production? What is the professional kind of attitude, how would you develop it? How do you talk in the rehearsals, how do you handle the costumes in the rehearsals, and how long do you keep yourself silent as an actor and prepare yourself to go on stage, how the bell affects you, what is your duty to the bell—all these need to be drilled in even to make him/her able to become a stage manager afterwards. I myself have to cook for them sometimes, I have to wash my own dish, as nobody is a servant here, it is a self-service kind of thing. All these aspects of behaviour and attitudes in theatre . . . it's not that the performance is not important, but before the performance one needs a lot of earlier preparation, even before going to the rehearsals. And also, how to talk in terms of the play we're rehearsing, how to talk during the rehearsals, knowing what we're talking about. And the technical language is another important thing, for all the companies, all the theatre groups, I think, have their own way of speaking, their technical language. All these things are very important, for me, at least. Also, to make an actor aware of the design. Suppose a designer makes his props and they are given to the actor, the actor has no relationship with the props at all. If the actor, along with the designer, designs a mask, designs his own props—of course, the actors may not know how to make them, but the designer is there and if they make it with the help of the designer—they are not only learning how to make the props, but I also say that those props won't betray the actors. Props created by someone else may betray you, because you don't know their weaknesses, but if you start involving yourself in those kind of things, when it comes out as a final product you know the whole process, you start loving it, caring for it, and naturally you'll tell everybody, this is mine.

So that kind of close relationship has to be established and I'm talking about this and

other such small things. When an actor can involve himself as a human being as well as an actor . . . for example, we grow these vegetables here. I told you that we have to be here for at least 3/4 months a year, or even 6 months in two chunks if we are working on two bigger productions. So how do we get vegetables to eat? They're costly. So we planted them, all the actors planted vegetables. We do the gardening, look at the flowers as they bloom, you look at them and feel that they're beautiful and they're yours and that sort of thing. You have to be involved in organizing things in theatre. Otherwise it becomes like a government office where you go and start your work at 10, then go home at 5—there's no involvement any more. So I think the growth of the organization also depends upon the kind of understanding we have, apart from only giving performances. If I say, you have to paint this portion, he will go and do it because it is his own work. You'll find that some people are even doing construction work, they're learning. I bring in masons at times to teach them; then next week you'll find they are making it themselves.

Everything is a part of survival, theatre, and particularly survival in theatre. Because it's a big question as to how you survive in theatre. I think it can be done only with a strong organizing power and good communication between each other. Just money won't do. Of course money is very essential—very, *very* essential—but I don't think that only money is enough. If you do it only for money, then it is like a government organization, which is a very different situation, where you find the actors coming, speaking their dialogues and then going back and doing nothing, and you can't expect them to develop also. Apart from the money question, I think this aspect of human understanding and human relationships, getting happier day by day, is very important, though I admit that money is essential. It's like this, you see—I know that I planted this tree 5 years back or 10 years back; now it has grown. I look at myself, I've also grown. We have suffered for the last 20 years, struggled a lot, but now the younger generation coming up will not suffer for 20 years because they have a different situation now. That is the kind of gift we wanted to give them. They need not suffer because we've suffered for them, gone through different kinds of experience. They can now work better for 30 years, gaining a different kind of experience. Working like this, they can go many steps ahead from where we'd started.

What're the challenges you face today?

Working in theatre, and that, too, supporting the families of all the actors without much money and trying to do a kind of theatre which may or may not draw a large audience, working in a place like this where the population is not much—if you do one production, there will hardly be an audience of 2000 who'll see your performance, that's all—and you can understand how big a challenge that is. Bringing quality improvement to your work is another challenge in a place like this, when we have only 3 lakhs of rupees as an annual grant, while our cost nowadays is not less than about 10 or 12 lakhs. Just the maintenance of such a big place requires quite a lot. You have to have your STD, ISD and lots of other things. Even if we are based here, we are working in the international network also. You get one performance sponsored by somebody at an international festival, and you bring Rs 2 lakhs for two shows, come back and put it in to take care of your salaries for some time—that's how it goes—there is no security.

How have you reacted to the violence in this region over the last decade or so? Have you found it difficult to work because of it, has it determined the kind of theatre you do in any way?

Violence is everywhere and it has disturbed me for the last many years. See, it's like this . . . *Hiroshima*, for example, is about violence. Doing *Hiroshima*, I learnt a lot. I did a lot of research about Hiroshima. I went to Hiroshima for this production. I chose the music for *Hiroshima*, I brought it from Japan, because the Japanese music after the Second World War was very western. So I had to find the exact music for the exact feeling and then

gradually thought out the instruments that we were going to use. Hiroshima the place itself, the museum of Hiroshima—how all that had changed. And then the Japanese nuances. Like the aroma of their food, how the actors should walk, how they should bow—that sort of thing. And speaking the dialogues in a very different kind of way, not very loud, that, too, gives a flavour. That's how the director learns a lot about how to produce such a play. And that's why I think if the director is satisfied, then people will come. But a more important thing is, why am I doing it? It's because of the violence that's everywhere, in this state, all over the country, all over the world, in fact. Take *Imphal Karusi*—what is happening, after all, in Imphal? How are we living? What is the crisis? How can the problems be solved? Why do we think this way and not in a different way? Why isn't there a single statue of a martyr? I try to bring out all these things—whatever I've been thinking and what I *should* think also, as a modern man. Because this production is, after all, the product of a modern man, whatever I'm doing is a contemporary thing.

Even for *Uttarapriyadarshi*—I don't know what hell is because I've never experienced it, but I have to create a hell. So I think of two levels of hell: one which was told to me by my grandparents—a big frying pan in which the sinners are being fried. But there is another level. After all, I'm working for a contemporary audience. I'm a man living in this modern world and what is hell after all, psychologically? For me, hell is wherever people are tortured. There are gas chambers, electric chairs, guillotines, hangings—all these things I bring out along with the other earlier concept of the hell. I put them together and then there is a change. This hell is like a five star hotel and there's someone who is frying mutton, chicken, and other things, who is also eating and enjoying them. Working for the modern audience, I try to feel it inside first: why I'm not happy, why I'm not satisfied with this system, where I should attack. Of course, I can attack only in a very small area, because I do theatre, which is a very small area. I make the issue much broader so that it can be visible, people can listen to it. I think all these people living in this world—I mean whoever's living in this society—also experience the same thing. So if you have just one take-off point, the audience elaborates it in its own imagination.

That's why I think we do theatre, not always for an audience. The audience is inside me. If I'm happy, I'm satisfied, then I think the audience will also be satisfied. But the first thing is whether I am satisfied with the expression, whether it's done right, whether it's original, how I put my signature on it as Ratan Thiyam, how I am different even though I'm a part of the same society—all these questions come up and that's why I write plays. I write plays not for the sake of writing plays—it is the thrust, it is the history, the cycle that grips me, attacks me, disturbs me, and then I start writing. One day I tell everybody, 'I'm very disturbed. So come on, let's sit down and start writing.' I do it in 15/20 days—very quickly . . .

What are the other problems you've confronted in your plays?

Like—human relations are deteriorating, why is it happening? Can they be saved? Why wasn't it like this 30/40 years ago? A couple, children, family, real friends—many things—all these are very much needed to be able to work in peace. I don't think it is only one problem which is inside me, there are many problems. Like I think that this repertory company should be able to provide a good platform for many of the artistes to come up, but I can only train as a teacher. But that's not enough, there are many other problems. How will I train them? That requires a lot of money. How and where will I train them and for how many years? If I want to concentrate on human relationships, there are many plays written on that theme. But they may not be applicable to this part of the country, and that's why you'll see that translated plays in Manipur are few, it is usually original writing. Because it's a very different kind of situation, a different kind of tradition, different kind of people, different kind of language, different kind of environment, different kind of family structure. So except for the big classical plays (and

that also in a very limited way), lots of plays are just not applicable here. You know, I tried to adapt many of them, but many of the plays don't go with the nature of the soil here.

Do you think that in Manipur the audience for experimental theatre is growing steadily?

There is an audience for experimental plays—the intellectual types. Then there are people who like very light things. The audience is very divided.

Take, for instance, this genre of plays that deal mostly with the violence all around; do you think that people like to see that kind of theatre?

Yes, naturally. You see, with *Imphal Imphal* or *Imphal Karusi* I've experienced a lot of things—they were performed for just 5 or 10 rupee tickets, but after the show, people from the audience came backstage to donate 50 rupees. Of course, it depends on what kind of a play it is. After all, these are very direct plays—*Imphal Imphal* and *Imphal Karusi* are very direct. There's no stylized utilization of devices, everything is happening very fast. In *Imphal Karusi*, there is a plane, an announcement by an air hostess and—it's a wooden plane—the minister is coming from the Centre and all that and within a short while everything vanishes, and the men change parties; the MLA changes his party and starts manipulating. Then, the next moment you see the earlier intellectuals of Manipur coming and talking—their ghosts, actually. . . when it becomes direct, people enjoy it more. They want to see what is happening. And for the symbolic or highly stylized plays—people accept them also, but they are for a more intellectual audience. Like when we do *Imphal Imphal* in Gandhi Memorial Hall or the Municipality Hall—there are lines written, dialogues written, cursing that hall, the municipality—it starts with that. My achievement with *Imphal Imphal* is nothing but this—the Shahid Minar (martyrs' monument) that you see here, was literally a toilet. It was a very notorious place. I portrayed it in my play, and after about 3/4 months, they started developing it. Now it's very beautiful, they've planted trees . . . I'm happy that the way I expressed it made people do something, at least. A lot of plays have this kind of an impact. I've done that with the Gandhi Memorial Hall also. It is in the heart of the town and the worst auditorium, filthy, dirty—so we start with that—this is how we live, this is how the Government maintains things, our system is this.

What kind of impact do experimental or symbolic plays have upon the audience or society?

If I do a very serious kind of thing, a very, very serious kind of thing, it takes time for the audience to understand, because I want them to see things from a different angle and they are not accustomed to seeing it that way. Any kind of work with a deep aesthetic, educational or moral quality is bound to take time in being understood. The aesthetic fact and the moral fact are very different. Aesthetic facts can attain a kind of abstraction but social, moral and educational facts have to be very logical, very rational. In our performances we try to put them together, sometimes. Sometimes we put it like this, sometimes we show it like that, and sometimes we attach the aesthetics onto some other things, with logic and this and that. All these things put together, if it is a very serious kind of a work, I don't expect people to grasp it after witnessing just one performance. This kind of work is developed over a span of one or two years, maybe, so how can one expect the audience to understand it from one performance of a few hours? Maybe they will take time. Also, we have many pre-set ideas as human beings. For instance, in a performance of *Uttarapriyadarshi*, one gentleman came up—he was a critic—and he asked me why I hadn't done this play in a traditional way, which was expected because of the historical background of Ashoka. So I asked him, why should I expect an audience in an air-conditioned auditorium in the first place, for a historical play? And then, did he really think that one had to wear those traditional costumes to go back to the period of Ashoka? See, I'm not doing this for the audience of Ashoka's period, I'm doing it for the

contemporary audience. It is a modern play. It is certainly placed in the age of Ashoka, but it has nothing to do with Ashoka, just as the era of *Mahabharata* had nothing to do with *Chakravyuha*. I just took the storyline from the *Mahabharata* and that's all. Whatever I wanted to say, speak, express—that was for the younger generation, an IAS officer, a bureaucrat or an IPS officer and so on.

How do you solve this problem of the audience understanding the play? As you say, it's not right to expect them to grasp it through just one performance—is there any way through which they can continue with the process of understanding it in a more longterm fashion?

Yes, there has to be. There should be a lot of literature, and also one should speak about the work one is doing, the different kinds of work one is doing, maybe. But one thing is very clear—maybe the audience cannot grasp 100% of the work. But if it is really a great work, quality work, then the audience will definitely appreciate it, even if they do not know the language, they still will—maybe after some time. Of course, I don't think very complicated attitudes and outlooks should be there in theatre, but what I mean is that the more serious the work is, the audience becomes correspondingly serious. People love to see serious work and they are actually much happier when they can.

Founder and Director of Chorus Repertory Theatre, Ratan Thiyam has established himself as one of the most stylish and aesthetically developed directors working out of India, and is now a well-known presence at national and international theatre festivals.

The New Karnas of Manipur

Samik Bandyopadhyay

In Manipur, where, fifty years after independence, more than 40 per cent of the population live below the poverty line, where all protest and resistance is glibly labelled insurgency, where state violence rules supreme, state power is synonymous with corruption, and democratic institutions languish, myths in theatre serve several functions—as safe shelters, facile celebration, romantic nostalgia, and occasionally as masks or even barricades from behind which one can snipe at the enemy. Some of the younger directors, interviewed for this issue of *STQ*, cherish the safety that myth and tradition offer, and would rather humour the enemy, allowing the targets they choose to criticize the pleasure and luxury of laughing the gibes away. What seems to lie between the beginnings of modern Manipuri theatre in the early 70s (the points of departure marked along the route from Badal Sircar's Satabdi performing *Ballabhpurer Rupkatha*, *Ebong Indrajit*—incidentally, premiered in Sircar's own production at Imphal—and *Shesh Nei* in 1972 to Kanhailal's *Kabui Keioiba* in 1974, through Sircar's *Spartacus* workshop in Imphal in 1973, with Sircar himself stepping beyond the straight narrative and the verbal to a more complex, 'expressionist' form), and the post-Kanhailal–Ratan Thiyam period is a decline of the emancipatory passion and its subsidence into a more mundane struggle for survival and visibility. Social scientists have started raising warning voices against the dangers inherent in the politics of institutional funding from outside and NGOs in a culture like Manipur's,¹ where there had been (as all over northeast India), a distinct culture of the community itself throwing up and nurturing its own institutions/organizations aimed at clearing/addressing social hurdles (particularly under the leadership of the women, whose militancy and initiative drew sustenance from their participation in and experience of the women's wars beginning with the First Women's War of 1904). The new politics, holding out the promise of support in and from a national—and consequently global—resource bank, imposes on the Manipuri sensibility the obligation of legitimation, the persistent demand that it explain and justify its choices/positions to a supposedly universalist mainstream, to ensure a steady supply of support.

Kanhailal in the late 70s, and Ratan Thiyam in the late 80s could have made a killing of it, if they had surrendered and succumbed to this demand of and from the mainstream. The temptations were all too glaring. But the long periods of silence into which both the older Kanhailal and the younger Ratan have withdrawn have had a common motivation—the desire to return to the immediate reality of a Manipur groaning under the assault of violence. In their handling of the myths, whether sacral-scriptural or folkloristic, they give violence a more subversive, critiquing and dialectical dimension by underpinning it with radical interventions, as in the folkloristic brothers in *Kabui Keioiba* changing the lamentatory tune of the song to an ironic reversal as a rude, aggressive challenge flung at the cynical 'auditor', or in the black humour of hell as the underside of the kitchen of a five star hotel, in Ratan's latest work, *Uttarapriyadarshi!* Even in their journey to the myths, they were pursuing motivations which in themselves were ironic. As Ratan explained at a 'Meet the Director' session at the Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta, on 12 September, 1992, it was a 'desire for expansion' that led him away 'from the folktales to the more complex characters of the *Mahabharata*.' He could draw, as he explained, from the freedom that his religious practice allowed him: 'We do not know what religion we belong to. Every Meitei house has a small Meitei shrine at one corner. Coming in, one offers salutation at the *sanamahi*, and then offers a prayer at the *tulsi* in the *angan*.' It is this middle state between religious traditions that allows both Kanhailal and Ratan the criticality and density that mark their reading of the myths.

Beginning with *Urubhangam* in 1981 ('I chose Bhasa', said Ratan, 'because he had challenged the *Natyashastra*'), Ratan completed his *Mahabharata* trilogy with *Chakravyuha* in 1984, and *Karnabharam* in 1991. In all the three works, he was reading Manipur—and reading himself: 'When I take up Duryodhana, who always questions and protests, and is always aggressively materialist, I try to assess myself as a modern man . . . I like Duryodhana, for he swears by an ideology, remains committed to it, and performs the right duties, within a system.' But even as he used the *Mahabharata* myths as a transparency rather than a holy, scriptural text, there was a persistent effort on the part of a band of critics to 'present' his works as exercises in style and celebrations of tradition. There was obviously a politics involved in turning the Manipuri 'voices' into spectacles. The choice of the *Mahabharata* was even read as an overture to the Indian mainstream culture from which Manipur has tried to keep its distance and maintain its distinctiveness. In both *Chakravyuha* and *Karnabharam*, Ratan was addressing contemporary issues, from a Manipuri perspective. In *Chakravyuha*, for example, the Abhimanyu story offers him an opportunity to attack the cult of heroism which is only too often held up to the Manipuri youth by political forces playing for sectarian stakes, to drive them to senseless acts of virtual suicide. For him, 'Abhimanyu trusting so foolhardily his technique is one of the younger generation in Manipur.' While mainland viewers of *Chakravyuha* admire the grandeur of the martial arts skills in evidence in the production, Ratan is actively engaged in exposing the barrenness and facile exhibitionism of the tradition, which is fast degenerating into a commodity available for export in neat packages to acting schools in the west for a mere pittance.

As Ratan told the gathering at the Natya Shodh Sansthan in 1992, 'I found Karna in Bhasa's *Karnabharam* very close to Ratan Thiyam. Centring on that one *shloka* articulating Karna's identity crisis—Born of Kunti . . . known as Radheya (lit. son of Radha)—it presented the tragedy of modern man'—and maybe more particularly that of a modern Manipuri located between two cultures in a situation of confrontation.

Behind the confrontation of the two cultures in Manipur—the mainland, predominantly Hindu culture, and the Meitei culture that sustains its theatre—there lie several other tensions between the valley people and the tribes, and between tribe and tribe. But for both Ratan in his *Karnabharam* and Kanhailal in his new work *Karna* (premiered on 8 February, 1997 at the Nityainand Mandap at Imphal), there is an assertion of a Manipuri identity set against an aggressive mainland campaign to negate and appropriate it—a campaign institutionalized in the long occupation by the Assam Rifles of the holy grounds where, in Meitei mythology, the universe is supposed to have come into being, and close by, the other grounds where Manipur's national heroes had executed the treacherous British Representative, Quinton, and four other officers, and had then been hanged for their 'crime' in 1891: grounds to which Manipuris are denied access, except on special days or unless specially permitted. In both the Karna plays, it is this denial/appropriation that is brought into question. In Ratan's *Karnabharam*, the 'transfer' / casting away of Karna—by Kunti, to a void that assumes the form of a real Radha—is played out with delicate irony in cultural terms/forms; with Kunti sartorially and sound-environmentally located in the Hindu-Vaishnava Natasankeertana,² and Radha the tribal woman in the woods, with wood against wood for her music. The transfer/transmission is accomplished through a single flowing movement across the length of the stage—the child dropped into the water, carried away by the current, and then picked up at the other end—from what Ratan calls the 'royal-aristocratic' to what he calls the 'earthy—the culture of the so-called scheduled castes and tribes'.

In his *Karna*, Kanhailal opens with a first movement, devoted to Radha, played by the wonderful Heisnam Sabitri, one of the country's greatest actresses, bringing up Karna, played by her son, Heisnam Tomba. It is the act of a child being taught to stand up, use his limbs, and come to know himself. In the traditional *mandapa*,³ originally conceived as an extension of sacred space, the community has spread its more secular territory and claimed it for its own. The *mandapa* today is no longer necessarily an annexe to the *mandir* (temple); nor is it necessarily a site for the Rasleela or Natasankeertana. It is this *mandapa* that Kanhailal chooses for his new theatre space—for his *Karna*. In the *mandapa*, redefined by Kanhailal, the bringing-up of Karna,

son of Kunti and the Sun, by Radha the shudrani, is an act of humanization of divinity: step by step, move by move, the child is absorbed / reappropriated into a shudra life; re-enacting in a way the secularization / communalization of the *mandapa* too. The shudra life, even as it 'shudra-izes' Karna, occupies / appropriates the *mandapa*, which, after a single battle scene, leaving Karna dead on the battlefield, becomes the intensely charged site of a community lamentation of the shudras, to be disrupted by the rude, violent entry of Kunti and the Pandavas, who claim and carry away the dead Karna as their property. The lamentation moves on to a different plane as Adhiratha shuts the doors to turn the *mandapa* of the shudras into a conspiratorial private space, where Adhiratha marks Karna as a traitor who sold out to the power and security of the Pandavas, and therefore, he declares, one who need not be a subject for their lamentation. But it is left to the foster mother Radha to call on the spirit of Karna to plead his case. The Karna spirit gives a totally unexpected twist to the narrative, in perhaps the first ever dramatic questioning of the myth in its making itself, when he charges his brahman author, Vyasa, with denying him the freedom to make his choice and belong to the shudras, within whose 'will' he was set, but as 'unavoidably an offspring of my Aryan author. Alas! Any historical way of identifying my suffering with my people was not to be.' That remains Karna's explanation, but Kanhailal's text keeps an area of doubt still open—in a dialectic of texts. The performance becomes what Kanhailal calls a 'ritual of suffering', suffering as a process of experiencing history or living a myth through, as the shudras do in their 'adoration' of Karna.

In *Uttarapriyadarshi*, Ratan turns the story of Ashoka's conversion after the Kalinga War inside out, going far beyond the Ajneya text which was his take-off point. The sounds and rhythms that Ratan draws from Southeast Asia, and the greater emphasis on collective movements than on individual 'demonstrations' and on the use of fabric and masks to create designs, bring a monumental weightiness to the performance, to be subverted by the intervention of the ceremonial of black humour, deflating / approximating the myth of history.

When Ratan told me in May 1995, when he had just begun rehearsing *Uttarapriyadarshi*, how he needed 'a different kind of programming' for his actors for 'a release from their own habits', and how the chanting he improvised for his new play—in Pali, the whole concentration is different, the whole breathing pattern is different—provided the fresh programming, I could see how Ratan was cutting himself free from the rigidity of a cultural identity and exploring the possibility of global spaces between such identities, but with a feeling for, awareness of, and concern for distinctive identities, and with their presence firmly located.

The conversations that follow record a sharing of thoughts with Kanhailal and Ratan on my first viewings of their new works, at Imphal and Nagpur, respectively.

This brief talk between H. Kanhailal and Samik Bandyopadhyay was held on 9 February, 1997 in Imphal.

What you were describing to me yesterday is how you have moved away from your earlier theatre and entered a new phase: with the use of the mandapa, trying to go to the audience directly, and also trying to give theatre a more directly educative, socially responsive, more immediately, actively involved function. Could you elaborate a little on these two points? The mandapa, why you chose it, what you would like to achieve through it, and the different role you have ascribed to theatre?

Yes. Let me start with the search for a new identity of theatre—its role and responsibility. In this time in Manipur, in the Manipuri society, we need to make theatre more active. And, theatre has its own educative value and function. So we need to use this educative function of theatre because of our own socio-economic condition. We need to educate the people about why we suffer collectively, socially—not individual suffering. What is this politics—politics not in the sense of political parties—the role of politics and other social forces which influence the human condition. We need to teach people these things. Because enough has been done . . . say Irabot has been taken as a hero.⁴ But nobody tries to discover how he

became a hero. I mean, he isn't just individually a hero, he is part of our awakening and all that sort of thing. How he reacted to the British, how he reacted to feudalism—all these things are related to the social forces which influenced us. These are very bitter social and historical experiences. In Manipur, we never try—the people as such—to understand things historically, because we are not very aware of historical necessity, of historical experience. So, Irabot is projected as a hero isolated from history. Our culture is very rich in myths. When I created *Tannalai* you yourself commented that it is allegorical. True, I realize now. So, the reason for our existence in society as human beings and everything becomes very allegorical because the role of myth is greater than history. The fusion of myth and history is very, very essential in our society, as in Japan. A democratic fusion, a balanced fusion. What myths give to us is potential—how to work with our imaginative faculty, *great* imaginative faculty—myth has a great role in this.

So, you redefine reality, cast reality in the myth . . . there is a reality, but you transform it into a myth. So you could even work out the relationship of how reality turns into myth. So you see the contradictions between history and myth. It's not always just plain and simple fusion. Fusion is much more complex—working through the contradictions to the fusion.

So, the myth—the epic experiences I worked out in *Karna*. For all these things, we need to create a new social awareness of our lives. Within that context, theatre cannot remain isolated from society. In Manipur, theatre is active to some extent, but consciousness is only gradually heightening among the theatre workers themselves. Our consciousness is not shared by the audience; we have lost our audience—this modern, contemporary theatre. So we need to create our own audience, moving directly to the people; not to do the residential kind of theatre, inviting people to our theatre. Instead, for the time being, we need to spread to all corners. In that context, we can't continue to do the kind of theatre we have been doing. So, as you said, I'm looking for a new kind of popular theatre which does not compromise with the silly points of the so-called popular theatre but also tries to . . . I have a vision of a very simple, but very powerful theatre that can create an impact on both emotion and intellect. The interplay of emotion and intellect is very essential now. So, these will be very emotional plays. How can we reach the emotion of the people and then their intellectual level? Their hearts and their heads. The whole community is our target. If we want to create a new audience for our theatre, then theatre has to be educative in this sense. But in the mean time, this theatre, this kind of performance, has to be rooted in our own culture, our own community. Unless we find a theatre rooted in our own society, how can it educate? They have tried the street theatre here, you know; the so-called Indian street theatre is not at all popular here. So, because of the very strong *mandapa* tradition here, I chose this *mandapa* theatre. The *mandapa* is a cultural and social expression. These social and cultural elements are always associated with the *mandapa*. So the *mandapa* is the theatre, the kind of performance, that is a community experience. We need this community experience. The reason why I would like to depart from the proscenium is not its colonial association; I am not concerned with that. But proscenium cannot create a community experience and it cannot ritualize both the audience and the performance in the same space. Illusion is always there; you cannot break the illusion—number one. Number two, you cannot break the class connotations. First-class seats, back seats and all these things—we can't wish them away. I would like to free theatre from all these bondages—these are bondages. So we moved to the *mandapa*.

Would you say that Karna is really your first independent work towards this goal?

Yes, *Karna* is the first performance which I have very consciously created with this goal in mind.

Would you try to give me some impression of how the educative function—locating it in the mandapa, using the entire space of the mandapa—how these have been used in Karna?

Educative function is not the only function of theatre. It is one of the major functions. The most important function, the primary function, is to entertain, to bring people alive. All performances do not need all these functions. But we can't miss out on the entertainment function, though we may miss the educative function. I'm trying to work with, to educate through, the emotional experience. Educate in the sense that you transcend the turbulence of emotions and express that turbulence as a kind of experience that does not lose the intellectual aspect. So, there must not be any overlapping between emotion and intellect, they should be balanced. Because whatever we perceive, we perceive through the senses, and filter through our intellect, and at last we discover our own vision. That kind of channelization and communication model is what I'm looking for. Then again, there is our body. Why are we so aware of our own bodies, the role of the body? Because that communication is intimate and direct. The body of the audience is also very important. Their senses—we are trying to reach the root of their senses. Through their senses we are entering their bodies, reaching their intellect and then their vision. It is the same process—in our learning process we have seen these things and in our performance also we channelize the same process of communication. In that kind of performance, we need a different methodical approach. Very investigative, sportive, meditative. Investigative in the sense that it tries to make us aware of the scientific approach, to ascertain our scientific approach. In the absence of this, we may not be able to understand what the social forces are. Things, then, will remain as they are. We would only depend on our instincts. Instincts have a great role to play, no doubt. But if we are able to analyse, then we will be able to bring in our conscious process. That's my idea. So, this investigative approach, this scientific temper. Then sportive. Our tradition, our performance is a very sportive kind of performance. We really enjoy our play—the entire play. It's liberating for the body—that kind of sportiveness. It is incorporated in our tradition. Then meditative. What is the aesthetic value? Very subtle, very slow, very refined—the kind of values, characteristics, that are the result of meditative experience. These three are combined into one in the investigative spirit—the educative, sportive and meditative character.

And how did I discover these things? Because I didn't know and I started with my own experience. But now I am able to analyse and look back at my earlier work—I've come to know. So in this way we worked it out. This is how my work has changed and I have come to think of the *mandapa*. It's a performance approach; the *mandapa* becomes a part of a process—the space of the *mandapa* becomes the whole space of the ground; the airy space of the *mandapa*. Through all these spaces we're trying to express our creative energy. By that I mean our movements, our body . . . What happens on stage is that the audience views our movements from one side, one dimension only; but here all the spectators watch the movements from all the angles, so I can't conceal, I can't keep hidden. Everything becomes open. The *mandapa* is open, the body also becomes open, the narrative structure also becomes open. Flexibility becomes very important. There are differences—from *mandapa* to *mandapa*, from community to community, and we have to adjust to all these differences. So flexibility is quite essential. Then this kind of directness. Directness is in the folk nature, tribal and folk nature. After looking at all these principles, these characteristics, I created *Karna*. The acting level, the acting dimension, is also different from my earlier work. Because, now real confrontation comes up—confrontation with the audience. The psychological meaning of confrontation. In proscenium theatre, we don't find much public confrontation. Here, when we

become open, then what happens to us? What is the strategy to deal with this? We have to create this strategy very consciously. How to create this strategy? Because of the demands of the different levels of acting, where confrontation is happening through acting, even the level of the vocal expression that we use when we speak out in the proscenium cannot work here. Everything must be struck from the memory . . . art is a very important and interesting thing provided it can create a spontaneous reaction to its similarity with our own lives. That's when we experience the pleasure of seeing a piece of art. That similarity—that magic of similarity—is at work. Now, how to capture this? Suppose it's pure psychological acting. The audience sees that we are creating something like life. How is it so similar to my life—that's the kind of reaction, and the impact is greater. It is a kind of epic impact. For this impact, this kind of acting is essential. Not directly involved. In the proscenium, you've seen all of my plays. There, they just sit with their roles. Here, how they change! They come in as actors, but they change. Then they go back and they leave their roles just before they exit. This is also very much there in our tradition—it is very interesting. Like in Sankeertana—the audience comes and joins in, bangs the *dhol*, and by then the singer is out of his role; he responds to the emotional situation. Then, with the change in audience reaction, he again gets back into his role and continues with it. You don't find any break. This kind of acting becomes larger than life, yet related to life. Not the kind of larger-than-life which is separated from life . . . it strikes the senses and the audience also can receive it through their senses. Yesterday, I asked some small children, 'How do you find this *Karna*?' 'We're enjoying it!' (*Laughs*) Very interesting. This performance grips the audience. It is like a ritual. I am very aware of the ritual character of acting. I deliberately use the word 'ritual', because ritual is very gripping. In religious traditions, particularly the mystic tradition—how they explore, how they share. So these characteristics of performance I call ritualistic. And in another dimension, visually, it is a kind of celebration of emotions—joy, terror, pain, grief—all the experiences, through the body. These are not just expressions—this is a celebration of the emotions via the body. And through repeated operation of the performance, it is communicated. When the repeated operations of the performance are neatly executed, the ritual characteristics come out meaningfully.

Would you say, Kanhailal, that even in shaping the text of your Karna . . . you begin with the mourning . . . the growth, the mother bringing up the child—that's your first sequence and the second sequence is the war and the third sequence is the mourning. And then everything takes off from the mourning. The mourning is for all practical purposes the central point, the take-off point. Things lead to the mourning and then develop from the mourning backwards, and even forwards in the end. And the mourning is, again, a ritual. And with the mourning for Karna by the shudras—by Radha, Adhiratha and their community—you immediately take Karna from the mythical distance, the mythical ceremony, into the real community, this immediate community. So he remains epic and yet becomes part of this immediate community. So even in the text I think you're using ritual and recasting the whole narrative, making the epic remain epic and yet relate to reality.

Yes. Unless all these things are incorporated in the performance text, how can they come out in the performance? How can it fulfil this kind of visual function? The ritual characteristics . . . the ritual of Karna, the birth of the boy and his growth, morning to noon—that becomes ritualized, told in the vein of mythical experience. And then, in the war, when he's killed, in the first vacuum . . . some friends who had



Scenes from H. Kanhailal's recent production, *Karna*. Courtesy: H. Kanhailal.

seen rehearsals, they asked me, 'Why does Karna remain lying there throughout the flashback? We'd like to see him come alive.' But I said, no, it is the stronger point, it's breaking the stereotype. And not only breaking the stereotype, the idea is—Karna is dead, he's a shudra, and they can't speak just like that. They were

always held back through *shap* (curse), *gurudakshina* (the system of voluntarily paying the guru with whatever he chose). So there's this whole politics of exploitation. If I make Karna come alive during the flashback in the narrative, then he remains epic—but he loses touch with reality. That's what I feel.

What I've noticed about the nature of the text, is that, in your earlier texts—text and performance together—it was so strongly, powerfully focused, so bare, so simple, in a sense, that it had an overwhelming impact as a totality, as a whole, but it did not give the viewer much of a chance to think about it part by part; it was just that one impact that we could take almost with reverence—it was so strong, so powerful. But this time it was a very complex text, several levels, raising a lot of questions of politics, of ethics, of state, of the politics of relationships—everything together. So, are you very consciously making this kind of a text this time?

Yes, I'm making it very consciously. Because my earlier works, texts—you're right—they are so powerful that they grip the audience, but as soon as the performance is over—you are free from that. That is, the emotional impact on the audience was strong, but there was no mechanism to make one carry on the process, because it rarely reached the necessary intellectual level—the conflict of the text, the conflict of the tensions. So, it needed to be radically defined. This is a new consciousness that I lacked in my past. I'm retaining whatever is still relevant, necessary, significant, from my earlier works. I'm trying very consciously to create new texts that can carry on the process. Then only would the purpose of the creative tension of performance texts be meaningful and significant. Otherwise, my earlier works were more self-expressions—there was no communication in the true sense of the term. There was no intervening activity, in the sense that there was no interaction. That's why I used to criticize the ritualistic characteristics of the performance, so that the interactive mode of theatre between the performance text and the audience would not be completely, fully, fulfilled. For then, what's the use of rituals? The community experience of theatre also needs to be fulfilled. In that way, I'm consciously working towards creating new texts to fulfil the communicative function as well as the ritual aspect of performance and the sportive aspect of performance through entertainment. So these are the new things . . . there is an interview with Schechner in *STQ* [issue 4] which I find very, very interesting. Schechner very rightly analysed the essence of our performance art as sportive—he uses the exact word 'sport'. Our performance art *is* very sportive—Rasleela and other rituals are sportive, but at the same time meditative. The rhythm or the sense of time—that is meditation. The whole performance environment is meditative. The audience is not allowed to enter until the meditative aspect is shared. So meditation is always with our performers. Through this meditative aspect, our aesthetic value of slowness—also part of the philosophy—is a very conscious practice that tries to realize itself through feeling it inside, in the muscles, the mind. That type of controlled and regulated state of existence is always at the root of creative energy. The involvement is not only at the external level, but the inner level; the inner being becomes the performer. That's why we can have such highly agonized performances. Actors perform in Calcutta, in Delhi, in Bombay—in the Indian context—where their inner being is not involved. But here, you know, there's an inner involvement of the actors because of our mystic tradition; it's part of our life. This kind of thing I find very interesting. So, the text is always, you know, related to the cultural context, and this cultural context and the sense of community—these two areas are very active. That's why we need a new kind of narrative, a new kind of text that can reveal the reality and that can carry on the process of our thinking, realizing, recognizing our roots—both the cultural context and the sense of community. Only then can we aspire to revolt with a free mind against the old influences that keep chaining our spirit. I need to

create this consciousness, this impact, in addition to the emotional impact which I've always accomplished, to make theatre a complete process of revelation.

This demands a different approach to acting from your earlier acting training exercises.

Yes. So, what I do—this training process is a ritual, a very conceptualized ritual. Because if I stay very mechanical this time . . . if I ask my actors to exercise as in sports, they get flexibility, endurance . . . but these are not the only things. If the same exercises are conceptualized as rituals, then we restore a sense of the self in the body once again, afresh—how I envision my own body. If I understand how I draw energy from my body to react to the society, not only with stimulus, but with reason, mind . . . my body should give me a new vision, a philosophy. We need an ideology—which elements of my society I accept and which I reject, to make myself better. But ideology alone cannot make our inner life. Only when ideology is internalized and connected with our emotional experiences do we live the ideology. This is the philosophy I'm following in the actor training. The actors must create ideological tensions—which means that they have to personalize the various social experiences. At the same time they must have their sense of self, their sense of keeping the body always alert so that at any time they are able to react without any preparation. All the actors—if they need time for preparation, then they actually misuse concentration. Concentrate, concentrate—what on? How can they concentrate blindly without any purpose? So, fusing these aspects of experience—the intellectual, the emotional, the sportive—and at the same time communicating, carrying on the process of thinking . . . these are the new angles in actor training. I know people say that my actor training is becoming very complex and losing its simplicity—but simplicity is not a quality for the sake of itself, simplicity is just an element of the complex. People who don't have any sense of art have no aesthetic sensibility—art, for them, is complex. Now, should we say that all kinds of art should be made simple for them? . . . Art comes to life only when we're conscious of the process—natural, social—this consciousness makes art meaningful. So we need to know the natural process—the science of the body. At another level, the social process helps me to identify my individual role in society. We talk about democracy, about progress—but we need to look at another level—at my relationship with the community—how much do I share? How much do I communicate? What are my duties and obligations? Even in our theatre culture, in our group management and group life, these two things—duties and obligations—should be in focus now. It is not enough to say that this is our duty to our tradition, our obligation to ritual—how do they help me in identifying myself, in realizing my sense of self—all these things have to be looked into afresh, rethought. So, after these 25-30 years of hard work, again we have to face life from the beginning—start from scratch (*laughs*). But this process is a very interesting thing. Because if I only keep making statements with continuity and no change, then there will be boredom—that's my experience.

One last question. About Karna, the epic experience—this is the first time that you've worked with an element from the epic, which is yet, in a way, relevant to the present—how has the audience in Manipur taken to this new attitude, this new mode of theatre?

Because I wanted to do it as a kind of popular theatre—not targeting a select audience, but for the community as a whole—my idea was to find out: what is the secret of so-called popular art? What makes a performance a community experience and not an individual experience? One thing is that boredom should not be there, if you want to refresh the mind of a community as a whole. But popular things—*Mahabharata* is very popular and Karna is a very sympathetic hero, to all kinds of audience.

He's a hero and a victim.

Yes, he's a hero and a victim. That's why he can arouse sympathy. That kind of popular image is valuable, and that image I wanted to fill up with new ideas of our ground realities. That image remains our epic experience. From this epic experience we need to transcend to the world of reality. Now, how shall we see the experience of Karna in the historical perspective? We can't just sustain epic experience as it is; according to our times, we need to transform it into our own historical experience. Then only will the relevance of the epic be good; otherwise it will be bad. So, in that context I wanted to take a popular hero and build up the sensibilities of our times through him. So, these are the things. In theatre, rich people want to simplify; but I'm against that kind of arithmetical simplification. Reality is so complex that complexity is essential. We cannot just make it simple; but all the aspects of complexity can be displayed, so that the audience recognizes that though it appears simple, it is actually a complex process. In this context I wanted to take up the popular image of Karna and try to give it a contemporary meaning, our own social and political contemporary meaning, presented in the traditional cultural style of Manipur. The use of the *mandapa*, the mode of acting, the mode of expression, are still very traditional, aren't they? The gestures, the movements, are not necessarily as abstract as modern dance or modern art. If the continuity of tradition changes flavour, then it's new, there's change. And continuity is necessary to capture the popular mind. And art is continuous—that's why I chose the *mandapa*, that kind of acting. I wanted that continuity. But very consciously I'm bringing all these changes into the text—even in the reading of the epic. At the level of interpretation—it can be interpreting the psychology, or interpreting the events. Interpretation is an important tool to change the meaning of a classic text. Through the interpretation of a character, you can bring in the contemporary historical reality. Here in our case, this is not a psychological interpretation, it is an interpretation of historical experiences. Even the psychological interpretation of a character can bring in elements that are relevant today, but I went for the historical interpretation. Because here in India, we still do not care very much about the individual; the community is more important. Because of this, through the mystic experience, I wanted the community to relate to the individual. I had a distinct feeling at one time that individuality and realism as experienced by an individual are not suitable for popular theatre here as they cannot create a community experience . . . If you think of Adhiratha's speech, that as a shudra, as a father, as a mother, they actually bring up Karna, take care of a child's growing up—but that does not mean that Karna as a person becomes a part of their caste, becomes their property, that Karna himself becomes a shudra. He has every right to live his individual life as a kshatriya, with his own individual valour and intelligence. There was no question of derecognizing these. Because, Adhiratha says, 'We have no right to take away his individual powers and rights. Of course, we are very proud of him as our son; but we do not want him to take our identity.' That is Adhiratha's speech. And what does the mother Radha say? 'His soul, his spirit, is still with us, because we gave all our love to him. But his duty as a kshatriya was with his body and he died as a kshatriya on a battlefield.' All his valour, all his manly qualities, his weapons, were taken away by the gods through the politics of *dan* (charity), *gurudakshina* and *shaap*. But still he remained what he was, very much against godliness. He didn't like being blessed by gods, he didn't like to live his life in the realm of gods, with the blessing of gods, with the inspiration of gods. He really faced life like a human being—he was a real man.

This is the important thing about Karna. He believes in his *purushartha*. That's why he doesn't care about being blessed by the gods. He doesn't want to play big brother to Arjuna, who is really his enemy; he only wants to kill this enemy. So

that's what he aims at. But he is really remarkable and I think he is a martyr in the true sense of the term. Anybody who is killed in an encounter is not a martyr. Only those who die because of a sacrifice are martyrs—that is my concept of a martyr. So Karna was a martyr who died the way a martyr dies. When he did not have a single weapon in his hand, Arjuna killed him. And even then he was speaking a dialogue consciously. Arjuna's arrows only touched his body. His spirit still remained. I prefer this concept of spirit to the materialist concept of a body. Spirit, not in the sense of *atma*, but the process, the consciousness that allows the sacrifice of a martyr. The five elements of earth, fire, air, water and ether make up our body. But what is our inner source of strength? These five elements are just tools to express our inner strength—a self-existing, self-subsisting spirituality. This is what makes us survive as human beings, more than the *pancha bhutas* (five elements). It is with this self-subsisting spirituality that Karna says his last dialogue: 'I'm not free; oh Mother, I've had to tread through my destiny. Alas! I was born in real life at a historical moment, had to perform my historical role. I had to obey, to please my so-called parents, my gurus, my elders—not the people who were oppressed.' That is my interpretation of Karna—that he got everything from the shudras, but he obeyed kshatriya norms and sacrificed his life.

This conversation between Ratan Thiyam and Samik Bandyopadhyay took place at Nagpur on 24 February, 1997.

So, earlier you'd say that first it was the concept of a play, and then you start exploring the play as a play and build upon it—play to play to play. Not so much of a total or larger theatre business, as in Chakravyuha.

No, that was till *Chakravyuha*. Even *Chakravyuha*, is a change from that. Since *Chakravyuha* I've realized that certain tricks which, as the director, I'd put in it wouldn't be able to hold the strength of the theatre expressions any more. It is the firmness, the firm idea behind the play, apart from the political ideas, social values and other things. Another thing is that these ideas—socio-economic and political problems—can be provided by a playwright to a director. But for a director groping to find out a way for a particular production, it is not a very longterm approach, and it cannot be strong also. Because an idea or expression becomes stronger only when you take them up one by one and in your long journey you try to realize yourself, you try to attack yourself, to make an assessment of yourself—you know where you are wrong and where you're right. But taking up what is right is not always possible. It's the same for an actor. Suddenly he may find that he's very good, sometimes he knows that he isn't so good, or that he's bad . . . But the long journey, talking about myself as a director, particularly, helps in bringing out or solving many problems—not as a readymade theatre director, but as a director who is working in a process. It has more to do with that. Of course, there are many questions that arise in between and some of them I can't answer even in one year—they take two years, three years. So, from *Chakravyuha* onwards, I've been asking myself many questions and some of the questions are very interesting. Why traditional elements in theatre? Why folk traditions? Why should a talented actor fail if he is not trained in my mode, from my perspective? He may be very talented, but he cannot cope with my kind of expression. I need a kind of understanding from the actors. So, how long will it take?

I have two questions at this point. I know that there are some very personal factors, or let's say some personalized experiences, that affected you very strongly during the process of working on Chakravyuha and before it finally took shape—very personal tragedies. This is

just at one level—nothing so mechanical like ‘this happened and therefore that happened’. But your dealing with that, your coping with that, gave Chakravyuha a kind of maturity, a kind of density, specially in the mother-child relationship and the whole situation, that was very special. Was there any personal factor also in this fresh questioning, fresh opening up for Uttarapriyadarshi? I have a feeling that your theatre work is so closely involved with your life that it is not always abstract theorization—never that with you.

As you know also, I got involved with peace also because it’s a part of my life, an expression of my life. And in these two years I’ve done two productions—*Hiroshima* and *Uttarapriyadarshi*—with the theme of peace. You can say that this is the result of the disturbances within me, which have compelled me to do many things focusing on peace. Of course you know about the political situation in Manipur and how many people are dying every day. And at the same time, in the global context, also, you see the same thing, witness the same thing—anywhere. So, all this disturbed me a lot . . . I’ve done a series of lecture demonstrations in international functions on world peace, where I’ve shown them excerpts from my plays and I’ve shown them that the reason I’m doing this is because it hurts me—it hurts me terribly to see young people die all around me. This can’t continue, there must be a solution somewhere. I appeal for peace, but I’m not a *neta* or a political leader or anything of that sort; I can only do it through my expression in theatre—that’s all. And you’ll find this also in my group theatre—I’ve done plays on peace. And as you’ve very rightly pointed out, I don’t do any production, heavy production, unless there’s some pressure from history which compels me to, compels me to write. Taking any play just for the sake of doing a production, I don’t think I’d be able to put any weight on it unless I have that pressure.

The other thing, Ratan, does this development from Chakravyuha to Uttarapriyadarshi also have something to do with the building up of a kind of lifestyle, a kind of practice around your complex? Because this also has really happened between Chakravyuha in 1984 and this. This place growing up, coming to have a way of life, style of living, sharing. Has it affected your theatre thinking or even this work?

I couldn’t catch your point.

The way you’re now rehearsing, using the space, how the space has developed its own spirit, atmosphere, environment, place of work facilities, the time you spend away from your house, totally cut off because of the distance . . . this is a different kind of a theatre environment, a different kind of a theatre spirit that you’ve developed in this period. But Chakravyuha was not made under these conditions, its development took place under different conditions. So, this is just not a theatre space—of course, the space is very important—but you’ve developed a very different theatre environment. The experience of this environment, that has actually changed a lot of things—there’s a whole life around it—your relationship with your group . . . everything has been recast.

It is because, there is always a similarity between the lifestyle that you lead, or your



Scenes from Ratan Thiyam's *Chakravyuha*. Photos: Amit Bararia

likings, and your theatre, surroundings and even people. And your belief. Like, for me theatre has always been a composite art and I formulate theatre as a composite art where dancing, music, literature . . . many things are put together. That's why I



Scenes from Ratan Thiyam's recent production *Uttarapriyadarshi*. Courtesy: Ratan Thiyam.

also feel it's important for Chorus Repertory Theatre—we need a space, maybe for the actors, dancers, musicians, scholars; a space where they can just live and relax. Because my idea is that the way I live gets reflected in my work and the ambience that I create. So, now people are coming—painters and narrators will come, dancers will come and dance . . . many people will come. I like all these arts and naturally, when you have so many different artists doing different things around you, you widen your vision and there's a close interaction, a close encounter that's been

taking place in the last few years. And then, it becomes more professional, where one wrong step may ruin the entire team. Earlier, though it was a repertory, though there was a salary—it was not like that. We always felt that we'd be able to survive some way. But after experimenting for 10 years, we came to know that we cannot survive . . . we just cannot survive in theatre. We have to draw inspiration from many things and professionalize ourselves more. More and more we have to get into experimentation of a theatre which is more intellectual, yet acceptable to the common audience. So, these two levels have to be worked out. That's why it's very, very tough at times . . . I don't know how we'll manage—but it's a challenge—a very big challenge—how to survive in theatre.

The other thing that you've mentioned quite often is that your audience in Manipur is slowly increasing, which is important when you talk of survival. Because I know of a phase when there was virtually no response in Manipur—very little. Whatever little response was there would be dominated by the critics, who almost dictated how people should respond to your plays. But now people are independently coming to your shows also, which I think is a very important thing.

Yes, it's a very healthy thing, and not only that—people are now also giving me a lot of respect.

But I remember there was a phase when in Imphal I thought you were almost treated as an outsider.

Yes, because I was the first person to come up with a new approach to theatre and so I needed time to establish myself in Manipur itself. I had to face a lot of attacks, initially.

Now, in Manipur, what I've noticed is that there's a very strong code of orthodoxy in terms of culture, religion, certain values also—these are correct, proper . . . and if you deviate, it's not acceptable. A play like Uttarapriyadarshi, I think, on so many levels, so many layers you might say, departs from all these supposed Manipuri norms more strongly than your other plays . . . has it created problems at those levels, or is Manipuri orthodoxy beginning to wane, would you say?

I don't think it's weakening or anything, but I feel that there is more general awareness now. When they hear that Ratan Thiyam is doing a production, they don't expect it to be a normal production. So my idea of life and death or whatever it is . . . according to the prevalent norm, say, the soul of Abhimanyu, his *atman*, cannot wear black—this is the concept—because he is full of truth, full of youth, everything. But I dress him in black. There's an argument. Even very erudite scholars have asked me, 'Ratan, why have you given black clothes to this divine soul? He should be wearing white.' So, I told them that death is black for me. Whether his soul is divine, or his body is divine—it does not mean anything for me—it is death and it is black! Because it horrifies me, makes me confront a horror. Horror means—you know he's not coming back to realize who's been right and who's been wrong. He may even become a ghost. But he'll not come back to make these judgements. That's why death is black for me. Of course, I told them that I appreciated their idea, but what I'm doing is nothing conventional. My work is not to be measured by convention. I'm not providing you a tape to measure convention with. Yes, there's a white religion always, but the white religion itself becomes a black religion sometimes. If there's a Vaishnavite, there's a Shakta [shakti worshipper] in the same Bengali household. So if there are Christian monks in a monastery in Spain, and they come out at night and start burning houses and killing women and children just because they won't convert to Christianity—then all these monks become men of a black religion. In fact, they were known as the 'night

trampplers' in Spain. So the same Christianity carries a black robe.

For all practical purposes, they were just assassins—meant to kill.

Yes. So, to speak about rituals, to speak about conventions—it's good to know them, even to practise them to a certain extent. But mine is an art. Art doesn't allow one to stay confined to a particular community, a particular convention. Because art is something that has to be created anew every time. And, it can only be created with the best of inspiration. So the question of tradition, I think, applies at two levels. If you talk about Manipuri dance, naturally it's about Radha-Krishna, and you have to adopt the *bhakti marg* for that—I mean, know about the *bhakti marg* at least, know about the entire concept of the *rasa*, Hinduism, *Natyashastra*, and many other canons that are derived from the *munis* (erudite sages). But if you talk about Manipuri solo dance, then it's a kind of creation, a creative activity that may not be connected with that *bhakti marg*, it may carry something experiential, so to say, but it is also equally strong.

Would you also say that, specially whenever people talk about your work, it is immediately related psychologically, almost compulsively, to the fact that Manipur is a very traditional place, a very traditional society, with lots of rituals, cultural forms etc. So, your work is immediately read as a kind of extension of the tradition, or as how far it has used the traditions and rituals. What I've always felt is that you've had the best of exposure to your tradition and your tradition is more internalized; you've absorbed it, and then you're reacting, responding to the world, your life, your experience—creating art out of that, rather than drawing on tradition, or even feeling obliged in any way to relate to tradition or draw upon tradition.

In fact, the same thing comes back again and again, which is—how can tradition be pitted in any kind of art, that I don't understand. Number two is, I don't understand . . . see, all the movements, all the expressions that I'm trying to utilize are very typical, though they are not available among the Indians or the Manipuris. These are not available—anywhere. But they want to identify me with Manipur. I'm very happy that Manipur has an exotic cultural background . . . I'm very happy, because it is, after all, my state. But when the Manipuri people are looking at my productions, then what happens? Maybe they think that I've brought out something unconscious or subconscious and I'm focusing that on them. But no! Why? Because, it's not Indian, or Manipuri, or anything—it's just a work of art. It's manufactured—that's a bad word, but anyway—in such a way that the raw materials are drawn from everywhere in this world, to express myself. You know, it is like you're a rice-eater, but you have to eat vegetables too. Or maybe, because of the political situation, you have to eat hard bread and hard mushrooms—you don't like them, but to survive you have to eat them. Similarly, I've been trying to do that play for my survival. Just as I have to eat for my survival, I also have to find out many other things in this world. Sometimes, it may be a folk tune I find very haunting. Or maybe you go near the Sun Temple and you find something there, and you may have something to say about the Acropolis also. Many things together—it is not one thing. The civilization is not just Maya and Inca, both have something to do with Ratan Thiyam also. They have something to do with me because the anthropological piece that I've done concerns many, many things which are very similar. Because I enjoyed that. You may hear only one stanza of a song, or maybe just a line—not the entire tune; but it's such a mindboggling thing for you that you remember it after twenty years. Maybe a line here, a tune there . . . these are natural things. What is the harm in utilizing your source of inspiration, in giving expression, in creating an expression that's better? That way, you're also helping in the making of the human society. It's not just that I'm making a production, but I'm also helping in holding

together human society, and to do that you have to choose the *healthiest* thing. Healthy things, beautiful things, help in making society—ugly things are not assets in this world.

Actually, yesterday we were talking about this at one point, if you remember, when we thought that words with their own meanings have been snatched away from us and turned into clichés by overuse, by abuse. So the need, not from any gimmicky or any theatrical intention, but . . . absolutely the point that you were just making . . . that you're trying to do almost a celebratory act, and so at that level you have to break away from associations which are related to images and sounds. So, it's not being non-verbal because you want to do non-verbal theatre as such—it's much more meaningful than that. And you were giving me an instance of this song about a flower. Would you repeat it for the record?

Well, I was talking about the importance of word and the non-importance of word, both. Word—when its image is utilized again and again, then somehow it loses its own charm and even its own meaning. Losing its charm is okay, but when it starts losing its meaning . . . it's very funny sometimes . . . say a word like 'love'—'love' is so delicate as a word, so intense, so meaningful, till a certain age. But then it's heard again and again, everywhere, and particularly in Hindi films, and in many of the sequences it doesn't carry its meaning. But again, verbal or non-verbal [communication] is determined by the followup of an expression that very often carries a tune for itself and the tune may also dictate the words. Like in one of our folk traditions, we have a song that means a flower that blooms in the height of the mountains; and though the Manipuri women are very fond of it—you know that in Manipuri tradition, women put flowers in their ears—they can't get it, and so they're jealous of that. Now, if I utter these words like delivering a sentence, they carry no meaning. But the tune, even without the words, if you sing it to some Manipuris and ask them if they know the words, they will immediately tell you that it's such and such. Why? Because, here the tune dictates the words, but if spoken without the tune, it has no meaning, no charm—it loses everything. So now, when it comes to the question of expression, the language of expression—we have to find out, in theatre, a language which will be able to dictate the words. Not the words dictated by meanings, but the layers of expressions which will be able to dictate the words plus the ideas behind them.

So there's also a possibility that words can be recharged with meanings, words can be reborn.

Yes, a lot of possibilities. You see, on the eleventh, on Saturday, I'd written a small sentence here for actors: The word is important, but the correct expression gives the right image and brings out the ideas behind the words. I admit that the word is important, but the right expression is more important. Right expression means a kind of language that you adopt to express the word. Different kinds of meanings, gestures, postures, or even silence—a long pause or something like that. In yesterday's performance, you might have noticed some very silent sequences—very silent, and I've done that intentionally to . . . not even to create the atmosphere, but to interpret the atmosphere. Creating an atmosphere is something different from interpreting the atmosphere.

Notes

1. Cf. Sanjay Ghose, 'Civil Society in North-East', *Mainstream*, 7 June, 1997, pp. 33-5.
2. 'In the long history of inter-clan feuds and wars the need for integration is felt at a historical time when the suffering common to all clans grows into a political awareness of the need for a positive attitude towards living together. Thus a larger national identity is envisaged and envisioned. The consolidation takes place in the integrating process for a national identity for the Meitei. The larger identity is genuinely founded on the martial wisdom and understanding of all racially and linguistically related clans of an indigenous people of Mongoloid stock of the Himalayan heritage. However, it was not allowed for long enough to develop in its own way'—H. Kanhailal, *Theatre for the Ritual of Suffering*

(Imphal: Heisnam Publications, 1997).

What Kanhailal suggests is that state and church, engineered and manipulated from the mainland, intervened at this stage to check the growth and consolidation of the Meitei character/identity as a convergence/unity of the warring groups/communities: 'The martial potency begins to be disrupted as the State-sponsored world-views of the Hindus—the hypothetical responses to the Brahmanic texts—are imposed on the nation. At the first instance, the Ramandi dharma stormed violently throughout the state projecting the then King as the leading patron . . . of the cult. The native people suffered with utmost pain and anguish. Their resistance expressed through the then leading trustees of the native belief failed helplessly . . . The State power prevailed over the will of the people. It did not last long. However, the martial society could not be revived because another powerful response to the Brahmanic texts in the form of the cult of Gaudiya Vaishnavism took over. This time there is no expression of resistance. From conditioning the people become tamed wild horses. The martial potency is lost in its transformation into a submissive, surrendered and withdrawn mind seeking the metaphysical security of a lonely man. The collective man with a martial character is gradually suppressed under strict vigilance . . . Administrative skill is used for the feudal management of subcultural differences and tolerance of contradictions and inconsistencies to allow the sponsored and dominating culture to subvert and absorb the other.'

Kanhailal describes this process as a 'concealed process of homogenization,' and describes the Maharaja who initiated it as a 'very shrewd and intelligent craftsman' 'in both state and art management with the necessary imagination and skill to project himself as a god-gifted figure by mythopoetic strategy. His mythopoetic charisma transforms the people's collective martial suffering into the unselfconscious suffering of a withdrawn mind at a historical time when his people are in a state of confusion under the conditioning pressure. It is at this juncture of time that the Rasleela and the Sankeertana are created out of the submissive and surrendered mind of a martially suppressed body' (Kanhailal, op. cit.).

3. 'The mandapa tradition is only about two centuries old and not a very old one. With the introduction of Vaishnavism in the late eighteenth century the culture of the mandapa is brought in, when King Bhagyachandra, the exponent of Rasleela, installs the image of Lord Krishna and Radha at the palace temple. The temple as such consists of two main structures. The first one is known as the mandir, where the images of the gods reside. The second structure is the mandapa built in front of the mandir, to facilitate the performance of all kinds of rituals and other necessary Vaishnava traditions . . . It is the birthplace of the Rasleela, the Sankeertan, the Gouraleela and all other performances too. The mandapa is therefore in the contemporary context, from the angle of performance and operational strategy alike, so conveniently integrated socially and culturally as to reach the people by its own nature of dynamism' (Kanhailal, op. cit.).

4. Hijam Irabot Singh was the sole inspirer and central figure of the Manipur Kishan Party (Krisht Sabha) revolutionary movement, launched in 1948 in the northeastern part of Manipur with the aim of establishing an 'Independent Peasant Republic' with its headquarters at Nongda. Irabot was an ex-panchayat member of the state. The movement grew violent and succeeded in establishing some free pockets from where they continued harassing the police in rural areas down to 1951. By that time, most of the ringleaders had been arrested and prosecuted. Irabot managed to escape but none knew of his whereabouts. This movement of the Manipur Kishan Party may be viewed against the background of the International Communist Movement, which had then been militantly active in different parts of India, Burma and Southeast Asia.

Theatre scholar and critic Samik Bandyopadhyay has been a closely involved observer of Manipuri theatre and performance arts for several decades, and has nurtured interactive relationships with the major directors.

Theatre Education in Manipur

Harokcham 'Sanakhya' Ebotombi



Theatre was present in my life from my childhood. I still remember, when I was very young, the blanket that I used to cover myself with was actually torn from a painted scenic backdrop! We used to play with ancient make-up material we'd discovered in an old make-up box. I used to play 'theatre' with my brothers. My grandfather was a theatre person. My father and uncle were wellknown actors. My uncle Biramongal is still active, and is a popular actor. My father was also a very good actor. But he had to leave theatre when my mother died.

At that time we were very young. With five children—all boys—my father had a big problem bringing us up. He had to leave theatre to give us more time. But till he was forty he was recognized as a very profound actor. He did historical plays like *Shah Jahan*, and many famous directors were his students. We had some theatre books in our house—translations of plays written by the Bengali playwright Dwijendralal Roy and others. I read all these when I was in class five. So I sort of grew up with theatre.

Later, when I went to college, I joined Aryan Theatre, where my uncle was. I began going to the theatre regularly, seeing plays and enjoying them. Soon I started playing minor roles. Later, after completing my college education, I formally joined Aryan Theatre in 1962 and was there till 1971–72. In 1970 I was given a chance to direct a play for Aryan Theatre. I directed two or three plays for them. I was the youngest director there. I wanted to go in for further study in theatre, and I dreamt about going to RADA. I collected information and material on their theatre programme, but I could not go. Then I decided to join the National School of Drama. I applied two or three times, was selected and became a student of the institute between 1973–76.

While I was at the drama school I formed a group called Avant-Garde with some friends in Imphal. I worked with them whenever I was here. After finishing my course I formed a repertory and started performing plays. In 1978–79 I realized that I was not able to communicate with the local actors. There was a gap. I gradually realized how

essential it was to give basic theatre education to my local actors. I felt strongly that only after a systematic training in theatre would they be able to follow me. Otherwise, I would not be able to work the way I wanted to. A good production can materialize only after such training.

So, in 1980 I started a school, National Theatre School, sponsored by Avant-Garde itself. In the school I used to teach all the basic subjects. I also invited personalities from other media, from painting, dance, music etc. to come and teach. Even martial arts gurus were invited to teach. We worked together. We taught Indian and contemporary world theatre, various techniques and related subjects. When I came back from the drama school a group of friends started working under my guidance. The same group became the first students of the new school. Soon I started getting new students every year. This was the first attempt to provide systematic theatre training in Manipur, without any support from the government or other institutions. It took time to make people realize that theatre needs a certain skill, discipline and education. Instinctive or unschooled theatre work is bound to be different from schooled theatre work. This is only natural. It took time to convince theatre workers that only systematic education can help one understand theatre from a proper perspective.

In Manipur one finds the creative impulse in almost everyone. We have a long tradition of different art forms. Forms like Lai Haraoba, Sankeertana and other performing arts, are part of people's lives. It is, therefore, very easy for our people to copy things. As you know, our elders, who created a proscenium theatre in Manipur, actually copied it from Bengal. They went to Calcutta, saw performances in Star Theatre and brought that theatre here. Mind you, they did not go to any teacher to learn theatre formally. Just seeing performances was enough for them to start a professional theatre here in Manipur. They had that ability. When we produce a play we usually follow one of the several models we have.

When I worked under my elders at Aryan Theatre, I realized that they had their own ways of working. After my theatre training I found a big gap between their work and my own understanding of theatre. So, I started my own group because I did not want to impose my ideas on Aryan Theatre.

When I started theatre training in Manipur, the biggest challenge was that there was no good theatre teacher in Manipur. We still have good performers in every field of art, but no teachers. A teacher should know the subject academically and also as a science—the techniques and specific histories of each field. For example, one cannot create a new lighting system out of nothing. The lighting system in proscenium theatre has its own history of practice. We need to know about this process first and only then can we do something meaningful. Since there was no teacher available I had to teach alone, study alone and do everything on my own. Make-up, lighting, stagecraft—all these fields need good teachers and practical helpers.

I think that my work has had some influence on contemporary Manipuri theatre. It is a fact that many theatre workers have accepted my work and directly or indirectly infused that experience into their work, in their own way. Many wellknown young theatre directors are direct students of my institute. They came here, learnt, worked with me. I believe that systematic theatre education has initiated a lot of changes in the Manipuri theatre scene. But to understand change, one must know what it was like before. One has to be careful when evaluating.

One problem in Manipur is that nowadays some of the younger directors are doing a kind of theatre which is not liked by the audience. The directors say that the audience do not know how to appreciate these modern plays, that it is very difficult to understand the audience. The audience says that the old theatre forms are much more enjoyable than the modern theatre done by youngsters. I also feel that this is true. Also, 'a little learning is a dangerous thing'—some of them just get a little training and then start producing plays. This kind of work is not liked by the audience.



S. Ebotombi's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. Courtesy: S. Ebotombi.



Chopped-off Hats, a play by G. C. Tongbra (top); and a Paithei group production, *Zuan Sial Ching* (bottom), both directed by S. Ebotombi. Courtesy: S. Ebotombi.

One can say that because of work by people like us, younger theatre directors were encouraged to experiment, to express themselves in different ways, and take the risk of facing the audience. The youngsters may have important things to communicate. So far it has rarely been proved to the audience that what they want to communicate is something profound, important. Theatre is also indirect education; and it should be done so that the consciousness of the audience grows in a healthy way. Theatre is for social education. The audience should grow out of a production, as I grew out of my traditional performances. What is needed is a certain depth, a philosophy. Modern theatre in Manipur should be able to contribute something new to the modern theatre movement in the state, the nation and even the world. This can only be realized through a proper knowledge of theatre history, different theatre movements. One should be aware of all these. If we try to do something honestly, keeping this perspective in mind, then it is good. If we experiment without any understanding and knowledge, how can it work? Who will accept it? Every school should have a philosophy, a discipline, a history. There should be some connection with what has been done before. One cannot completely disconnect oneself from the past.

I also believe that our teaching methodology should evolve and incorporate new things. Because as we work, we improve. It is a progression. This development is organic. There will be change and new ideas will come up. Theatre education should respond to this change. For example, we can study traditional Vaishnavite culture and if we get something new from it and if it is applicable philosophically and technically, if it is worthy of adding something new—a new idea or a philosophy which is more excellent than what we have at present—we have to add it. Our problem is that we have very few thinkers. We have many good directors, actors. But we do not have good thinkers, I mean dramaturgs.

In my productions, in all of my work, I try to create what I call 'a theatre of essence'. We want to create a profound theatrical experience which will be useful to all human beings. The whole philosophy of theatre is that it is universal. Recently I coordinated with the National School of Drama. Students from Delhi came here to familiarize themselves with Manipuri culture. They were introduced to our culture, to our traditional performing arts, and also got some basic training in Manipuri dance, Manipuri movements. All this training was for educational purposes. One may use some of this in a production. One can also experiment, which is a part of learning.

There is a notion of dividing theatre into regional and national divisions. One must realize that such divisions are impossible in our situation. Any work of theatre is bound to have some elements of local music, local taste, etc. There are different traditions of music in Europe and I enjoy them. I also enjoy tribal music. But that does not change a thing. I listen to and enjoy both. So the question of 'regional' and 'national' in theatre is not really important. We need to understand our society, our culture. Manipuri culture is very much Indian culture, Bengali culture is very much Indian culture. In every society youngsters are modernizing themselves. They are more inclined to western culture because the west is now prominent, Japan is prominent. Once India was prominent and Japan and China followed us. Even in our language, foreign languages are stepping in. It is natural. But for us who are working in the field of art and culture, we need to know our own culture very, very well. We have to build a theatre on our own foundation, and create a new theatre which will be worthy.

Ebotombi began his career as one of the finest young actors on the Manipuri stage. Later he became a committed theatre teacher and the producer of the best realistic plays in the state after a stint at the National School of Drama. He has more than 20 notable productions to his credit. A scholar of Sanskritic sources, he has written a book on theatre and drama in Manipur. Ebotombi regularly conducts workshops for students both in Imphal and in the NSD.

Following Thiyam, Kanhailal, Arambam and Ebotombi, a fresh wave of directors entered the sphere of experimental theatre. Today, in a rapidly changing and highly pressured socio-political climate, cultural concerns are being re-examined and reviewed. In the following pieces this more recent generation of directors voice their opinions about the current situation and its impact on their theatre.

In the 70s Manipuri theatre was very active and vibrant. People responded to this theatre and theatre also responded to them, gave some relevance to the lives of the people. But in the 80s theatre gradually removed itself from the lives and realities of the people. In the 80s people like Lokendra Ratan Thiyam, Kanhailal dealt more with form and thereby did not foreground the realities of the time. In the 80s, for the first time, people experienced problems like drug addiction. Then came insurgency. We were completely drawn into the insurgency movement and violence became a living reality. But contemporary theatre was not dealing with these realities of Manipuri society directly. In the late 80s many people felt a need to re-orient this theatre in order to deal with the realities.

A general tendency of Manipuri theatre is to use myths to comment on contemporary problems. I, too, used myth in my first play. But in the later plays I did not use folk elements or myths at all. That does not mean that I do not like them. A director may claim that by using myth we can talk about and explain the present realities in concrete terms. But in most cases they remain very limited in their exploration of the contemporary realities of our time. A director may claim that he has used this or that myth to explore some contemporary issue. But such attempts soon became a fashion. Directors would pick up materials from myths and use them. But I think, as a director, that the most important thing is to feel free. If I think this myth or that folk motif can give meaningful help to the production, I will use it. But it should not be a compulsion.

There are audiences who prefer palatable storytelling and simple narrative in theatre. If we go on producing that kind of play, how can the audience grow? Now the society is almost taken over by Hindi films, Hollywood films, which work directly on the emotions, on the feelings. But we need to nurture the intellectual faculties, the thinking faculties, of the audience. We may not be able to get a ready audience for this kind of theatre immediately. But it is a matter of time. We need to continuously nurture it so that the audience who are accustomed to seeing Hindi films, melodrama, see something different. We try to bring in change and show that art is of some help in understanding our own life and times.

I started working in theatre in 1986-87 with the play *Ima Keithel* (Market Run by Mothers, 1987) which dealt with a women's strike. This was something that actually happened here at that time. More than 4000 women vendors revolted against the government plan of constructing a plaza complex in the old market area. They launched a very long strike, they called a bandh, they almost turned the marketplace into a home of their own. We visited the marketplace and met and talked to the women vendors. They too came to our theatre and helped us in producing the play. We collected a lot of data on the lore behind the *keithel* or the marketplace, about Keithel Lairembi, the goddess and protector of the *keithel*, on the belief system of the women vendors, stories connected with their personal lives etc. We brought in a journalist with his camera, writing pad and pen, to create a dramatic dimension in terms of the narrative and representational quality. The play was gradually created in this process. We did not have a written script in the beginning. *Ima Keithel* was a result of our interaction with these women. The play was selected for the Zonal Festival and was shown in Delhi, Patna and many places in Karnataka.

Sak-Jangkhidraha Lanmi (The Unknown Soldier, 1990), my next play, was based on a radio play written by Arambam Somorendra. It dealt with the internal feud among the insurgency groups and the problem of leadership. The play unfolds its action in the historical setting of 18th century Manipur when it was ruled by the Burmese for 7

Targeting the Mind, Not the Emotions

Nongthombam Premchand

years. A subtheme was that of the love-relationship between the protagonist Thoiba and Chingkheilembi. In order to meet the demands of our theatre we took liberties with the text. First, we attempted to establish an organic relationship between the subtheme and the main theme. Second, the play was overwhelmingly carried by the love-relationship and a narrative highly characteristic of radio drama. So, we had to restructure the play to curtail the emotion and bring out the deep-lying structures of the social and political

realities of the contemporary life of the people. Thus, the tension of the society came to be structurally related with the psychic tension of Chingkheilembi. The entire play came out as a rewinding of her memories, an unfolding of her dreams and fantasies, in the course of which the tensions prevalent in society were acted out.

Chingnung-gi Thawai (Spirit of the Mountain, 1991), also written by Arambam Somorendra, had a historical theme. In the 30s, Jadunang, a rebel leader, launched a rebellion against the British. It took place in a very remote area, some 100 kms. from Imphal. We came to know that the movement had been misunderstood, especially by the Meiteis. In fact, the significance and intention of this ethnic movement had been systematically distorted over the years by peoples and groups with a vested interest. So, we were confronted with the challenge of putting the movement into perspective. We did not present the incident in a linear form; we shaped it in such a way that we could find



Antigone by Aryan Theatre, directed by Nongthombam Premchand.

the interpretation that we had in mind.

Nong Tarak-le (The Rain Has Come) is about the so-called guardians of Manipur, the security forces, the police, the CRP and others—they are the guardians of law and order here. But quite often they turn out to be the destroyers of the law, violating the human rights of citizens. The play deals with this problem. The months of November and December are the busiest time in the life of the peasant, because they have to harvest before the rain comes. The play opens with Khumbong and Tamubi, husband and wife,

who are very busy. Tamubi is preparing supper and Khumbong is waiting for it. After supper he will go to the field to collect paddy. In the mean time, policemen come because they have received information that while they were harvesting the other day some boys came and helped them. Now the police want to take Khumbong to the police station. But these two innocent farmers do not know anything about law and order, what they care for is only the paddy, the work they have in front of them. They protest but are forcibly taken to the police station. The police officer starts interrogating them, suspecting that they are hiding insurgents. Those two boys just came and helped them and after work they had a meal with them and left. This was the simple incident. They did not know who the boys were, or where they were from. After the interrogation they are separated.



A scene from *Antigone*.

The police officer says to Tamubi that Khumbong will be retained for the night in police custody. The wife is sent off. The play ends here.

In the play the representation of the police is somewhere in between a doctor and the military, in terms of costume and treatment. Usually, on the stage, we see the policeman in khaki or olive green uniform—this is very common. But I thought that if we tried to defamiliarize the figure by using a surgeon's overalls, then this differentiation would hint at the interpretation and make the viewer think—why is the play presented in this way? They would use their rationality to understand the play, the point it wants to make, discover the ideology behind the representation. I think this kind of interpretation should reach the audience. If the play is presented in the familiar, expected fashion it will be a linear, one-dimensional play. Since the military takes its job as a mission in the same manner as doctors do, I used the metaphor of surgery and the doctor's clinical interest in curing a 'problem' which turns the operation into dehumanized, emotionless work. As a doctor one is not emotionally involved, one is just doing a job. That kind of cold distance from the human subject comes out very strongly in the play.

The doctors in the play are in need of dead bodies, because they are actually students learning the trade. The play mentions that dead bodies are available in Kashmir and Punjab. But since the illness is different from that of Kashmir or Punjab, those dead

bodies are of no use here, they will not help the doctors of Manipur carry on their activities. They need local dead bodies. So a person—he happens to be a student—is arrested on his way home. He is arrested because he coughed, and was suspected of suffering from the dreadful illness.

I have not done this with black humour in mind. I wanted to create a very serious impact on the minds of the audience. I do not want to work through emotions or sentiments. I wanted to convey what was deep in my heart through bare metaphor, using the disease as a metaphor. It is not AIDS. It is an ideology that is dangerous, contagious. The authority finds it difficult to manage, to control, and tries to find a way to solve it.

In this play I have also used wheels in many ways. All the props are movable. Then, we have wheelchairs and carts. This adds dynamism within the given space and at the same time, it symbolizes the security people's attachment to wheels, vehicles, armed cars, as they are constantly on the move. The presentation gives the viewer a clue to understanding the underlying idea. Between two scenes you see a man come on stage playing a saxophone. Music is used to create harmony between two scenes as well as to provide a pause and create a space for the audience to reflect on the scene they have just seen. I think that is demanded in this play. The kind of music, the instrument—a saxophone—represents youth.

I read Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* in 1984 and it created a very deep impression because of the power of the dialogue and the historical situation under which Anouilh wrote it. The play was written in the early 40s when France was under German occupation. When I first read it I found some resemblance, some similarity, some kind of parallel between what is happening here and what happened in Europe at that time. The relation between Manipur and Delhi, in particular, is antagonistic. Independence was achieved in 1947 and a long time has passed; but Delhi still has a colonial attitude towards Manipur. People in power in Delhi should try to find out why we feel that the situation is colonial—it may help them to understand us. I took up Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*. I wanted to give the audience a taste of a foreign text. At the same time, I wanted to experiment with a text which I thought could be very helpful in explaining our life. Sometimes, it is very difficult to understand the life that we are experiencing, the situation around us. We find it very difficult to make sense of the present situation since it has become a part of our daily life. An outsider coming from a different cultural and political background may reach some kind of understanding of our reality. Similarly, using an alien text, that too *Antigone*, as interpreted by Anouilh in accordance with the historical and social situation of France in the early 40s, I felt would be very useful for us to examine our reality. This was the idea that led me to the text.

Creon simply represents the leader of the government in Manipur. In *Antigone*, too, I tried to defamiliarize the mode of representation, which enabled me to incorporate the comments I wanted to make. Creon is stylized with a headgear that uses the Indian national flag. The ending of the play has been completely remodelled in order to suit the situation here. In my production, Antigone is shot at by Creon. She is blindfolded, and Creon changes his costume and outward appearance, and kills Antigone. Here in Manipur, also, this kind of fake encounter takes place regularly. There have been many instances where young boys and girls have been killed in fake encounters by the supposed guardians of the law. This I have tried to portray in the play.

There was censorship in the early 60s. But now the government is not interfering with theatrical productions at all. They are not censoring or banning my plays because, I think, we do not strike them at the emotional level, at the obvious level. If the policeman in *Nong Tarak-le* or Creon in *Antigone* were made obvious, it could have been banned. It could have aroused anger. Instead of arousing their emotions, I think my recent plays arouse the mental faculty of the audience. The plays do not want to make the viewers angry, but to make them think. Theatre director Balwant Thakur told me that it is very

theatre in order to arouse anger? The idea can be communicated without making anyone angry.' That is what I am trying to do.

I am aiming at a different sense of performance. A hardcore, elitist kind of presentation can only be understood by a few, which is very dangerous. On the other hand, going in for the conventional narrative performance is also redundant now, it cannot have any fresh impact on the minds of the audience. I am trying to find a path somewhere in between these two, so that I can give a different taste, a new idea to the audience. If stylization is done for the sake of stylization then it becomes simplistic. What is the need for stylization? For example, if I want to show a lotus, there are many ways of representing it. An artist can make a beautiful lotus, the light designer can create an audiovisual impression, the same lotus can be created on the stage using hand movements from our traditional Natasankeertana. Presentation-wise there is a difference. But where is the semantic difference? What is the aim of this stylized difference? That is the question. Why don't we start with questioning such representation in order to come to a new level of representation? An iconic representation of Durga has ten hands, but otherwise she has all the attributes of a woman. What does this kind of representation mean? It tells us about power, *shakti*. The ideology behind an icon shapes its form. It works because of the defamiliarization of a known form. If Durga looked the same as any woman, where would the power of the representation lie? Similarly, instead of showing a real lotus, if one uses the *kartal* to suggest a lotus it has no new meaning or interpretation at all. This is mere stylization. Personally, I find this kind of stylization rather narrow. A stylized representation may actually obscure what it wants to represent.

Nongthombam Premchand is an actor and director with Aryan Theatre. He is also the Director of the Ford



A scene from *Antigone*.

Foundation Project on the Development of Ethno-Dramaturgy organized by the Forum for Laboratory Theatres, Manipur.

is very difficult to do political theatre in Kashmir. I told him, 'Why do you want to do



Antigone.





A scene from *Sanagee Keiruk (The Golden Ladder)* by Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union, directed by Loitongbam Dorendra.

'I am only the catalyst'

Loitongbam Dorendra

In this conversation with Biren Das Sharma of STQ, Loitongbam Dorendra traces the development of his career in experimental theatre.

How did you begin your work in theatre?

In the late 50s and early 60s, theatre was generally practised by amateur theatre groups and I began with them. We have a youth club called Cosmopolitan Youth Club and we used to perform plays at festival time, during the Nigojakoba festival. This is a festival when brothers call their sisters and offer them clothes, gifts etc. Sisters also offer food to their brothers. On that particular day Manipur is always full of theatre performances. Initially I started taking part in that kind of theatre. This was around 1966.

Later I took part in one of G. C. Tongbra's plays. At that time our theatre was very dependent on others. For example, we did not know how to use make-up, how to design costumes. The make-up man would come and do the make-up. An outside director was always invited to direct, and we just spoke out the dialogues. The director would show us what to do and how to do it and we would imitate him. There was no creativity involved.

Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union was formed in 1971 and we started producing plays on our own. In 1971 I got an award for best supporting actor. My initiation into theatre came from those actor-directors who were mainly concerned about acting. My first gurus—N. Tombi, Nilamani, Hawibam and Netrajit—generally followed the Parsi theatre style. We imitated them and they praised us when we did it well.

Once I joined the cooperative department as an inspector, I could give more time to theatre because I was stationed at Imphal most of the time. I could rehearse at night and during the weekends.

My real, indepth understanding of theatre started with Ratan Thiyam. But I must say that my first introduction to modern theatre was at a National School of Drama (NSD) workshop. In 1979–80 NSD organized an intensive theatre training camp in Manipur for three months. This helped me understand what theatre really is, its various aspects, techniques. We learnt about movement, music, lighting etc. Several teachers came down from Delhi to teach us. Those three months were very precious, very useful for me. During the workshop we produced plays. At that time Ratan Thiyam had just come back to Manipur after finishing his NSD training and he directed a play for us during the workshop. This gave me a chance to get closer to Ratanji and he later invited me to join his group.

I told my own group—Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union—that I wanted to work under Ratanji to learn more about theatre. I told them, 'My involvement with Cosmopolitan will remain as it is. Whenever I have time I will come and work with you.' Chorus Repertory Theatre, Ratanji's own group, was formed earlier and Ratanji had already directed a few plays. But I could not join his group earlier because at that time I was living in the districts, working as a teacher. I joined Chorus in 1981 and became one of the professional actors of the group.

Ratan Thiyam has been a major presence in experimental theatre in Manipur. How do you assess your experience of working under him?

After joining Ratan Thiyamji's group, my first work was a play called *Laimai Khonukhaba*. Rehearsals were very hectic. Ratanji has a very strongly disciplined way of working. Rehearsals started at six in the morning and the place was about five miles from my

home. On the first day I reached there at 6.15 a. m. I found the door closed. I was not allowed to enter. For half an hour I had to wait outside. Whenever an actor is late for more than five minutes he is not allowed to enter for half an hour. I learnt my first lessons in discipline from Thiyamji, and I agree with him. The kind of theatre we do needs a binding thread of discipline. Discipline should be an important quality in an actor.

I also learnt designing and acting from Ratanji. Ratanji's process of training is not purely academic in nature. But I try to note down every point he makes. In a formal classroom situation one may not get enough from Ratanji, but when there is a rehearsal session, so many things come out of him spontaneously. In fact, a rehearsal session with Thiyamji is actually a class. Acting class. Design class. Whenever a point comes up, say, a question like 'What is acting?' he will say, 'Acting is reacting. Acting is coordination. Without reaction there is no acting.' And he will keep on developing this in a very practical manner. But in a class on acting he may not explain it in this way. He is a better teacher when it comes to actual work. This is surely a more effective way of teaching. I also take classes for Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union, and I have noticed that one can go much deeper into the subject while actual work is in progress. Even when I write a play, I do not write it in a very planned manner. We do a lot of improvisation and some enactments. Certain things come out during rehearsals, and gradually the play takes shape. This is a process we learnt from Ratanji.

Working with Ratanji is always a learning process, because he does something new every time. For him, what he has done today will be old tomorrow. He is constantly changing. In the beginning he was experimenting on an interaction between traditional performing art forms of our region and techniques of modern theatre. As a result he has produced some great plays. I was in most of the major productions done over the last 12 years, from 1981 to 1995. In between came *Chakravyuha*—I think it is his greatest production. If we study *Chakravyuha*, we will find that he has taken certain elements, certain devices, from some of his earlier productions—from *Vikram-Urvashi*, from *Urubhangam*—in fact, from all his major productions, and used them, remodelled them in this production in a unique way. This made *Chakravyuha* a grand production. For example, in *Urubhangam* we find the use of *kartal* to symbolize a flower. *Kartal* is also used as a symbol in *Chakravyuha*—but the designing was unique, different from its previous use. In the *vyuha* sequence Abhimanyu was put in the centre, surrounded by seven *rathis* in red dress. The seven *rathis* were making that *kartal* movement encompassing the young warrior.

Because I have been associated with Ratanji for the last 12 years, we have a creative relationship. I belong to the trend he has set. He takes myths and uses them. I try to project something deeper, explore more complexities. I try to work more on the interpretative area, giving more contemporary relevance to the play. Ratanji usually does not deviate from the original storyline. I tend to deviate from the storyline and try to work more on the edges of the story than on the story itself. Sometimes, there is a need to move out of the hold of the story. If it demands a contemporary interpretation, then one shifts the emphasis accordingly. I love the way Ratanji visualizes a play, the way he gives it contemporary relevance through his aesthetic sensibility. At a certain point, I think, it is important to give more thought to a socio-political understanding of society. I try to do that. Ratanji has helped us to reach a certain level, he has shown us how effectively myths can be used, how one can give them contemporary relevance. In *Chakravyuha* Abhimanyu asks himself, 'Am I a martyr or a scapegoat?' Abhimanyu is a scapegoat. Yudhisthira wants to win the war. The loss of Abhimanyu is nothing to him. In this sense Ratanji shows how a small war vanishes into a larger war. That interpretation was there. I also work on the same premise. All I want to try out is how to take a step more.



A scene from *Golden Ladder*.



A scene from *Golden Ladder*.

I was very involved with this production because *Chakravyuha* was a proper theatre camp. No one was allowed to go home. Everybody stayed for 24 hours. We worked for

18 hours each day. We all benefited by working with Thiyamji on this production. After *Chakravyuha* came *Antigone*. In this play Ratanji used movements from tribal forms. Then came *Andha Yug (Blind Age)*. In that he also used certain forms demanded by the theme. He used Buddhist chanting, which is different from the Indian way of chanting. This chanting was taken from a Buddhist university in Bangkok. We taped that particular way of chanting and listened to it, sang it time and again. With much devotion, with much dedication, and with more working hours per day, the quality of the production was heightened. We learnt this kind of an approach to a production from Thiyamji.

While he was the Director of the National School of Drama, Ratanji left us free to do plays without involving him. He entrusted all the work to the assistant directors and we even performed *Chakravyuha* without his presence. Ratanji always wants to experiment and try out new things. He always moves away from what he has already done. He believes that if the theme demands it, anything can be used, any form can be used. It can even be the electronic media, it can be puppets, mime—anything. For him, theatre has become a bigger canvas, now. It is very evident from his recent productions.

How do you describe your own independent work?

In 1989 Manipur State Kala Academy started a Drama Festival in which I presented a play written by me called *Ekopungi Kaureltasu* or 'The Bull and the Tiger'. I read and watched Moirang Parba, a form of indigenous Manipuri theatre which was very popular at the beginning of this century, when Parsi theatre emerged on the scene. I started thinking of doing a play on the essence of Moirang Parba, using their devices, their singing dialogue, elaborate costumes, their use of properties, use of mime, even make-up. I wanted to do something which was close to Moirang Parba. In the story the spirit of the bull incarnated into the spirit of the tiger. I took up this story and created a theme in which a spirit wanted justice, punishing anyone who caused injustice and exploited people. In the Pena tradition the bull is depicted as a talkative character. Traditional Pena singers have placed a lot of dialogue in the mouth of the bull, as if he is a human being. I used masks for the bull and the tiger. I used the devices of Moirang Parba in which, for example, a stick becomes a horse, a chair becomes a hill. I tried to use these things. The play was also written following the tradition of singing dialogues.

My next play was *Draupadi* written by Sanajaoba Kshetri. I went to his house and requested him to write a play for me. He gave me *Draupadi*. The play had been offered to other directors also but had not been staged so far. There was a line in the script in which Kunti says to Draupadi, 'Today I am passing the burden of the family on to your shoulders.' I was attracted by that one sentence and I imagined the whole play around that epicentre. Kunti and Draupadi belonged to two different generations and yet both of them were exploited. Kunti was neglected by her in-laws and her family. For me, Draupadi was another Kunti. Another exploited woman. I showed a continuation of the exploitation of womanhood. For the production the floor of the home was designed in the shape of a traditional dice board.

To an outsider a play based on myth looks colourful, and detached from contemporary life, but to you, to the audience of Manipur, it may not appear so. In your context, a myth-based play may not appear as distant as we think. Can one say that such a play will work better for the local audience, for the 'insiders'?

I answer in the affirmative for the simple reason that our people are still in touch with myths. Though the 21st century is approaching, Manipur has not been urbanized. If Manipur is at all urbanized, it is only in words, not in reality. We still live a kind of community life. We don't live individualistic lives. Myths are part of our everyday life. When there is the Lai Hairoba festival, the community of that particular area becomes very involved in the festival. Even if there is enmity between families, people will participate in the community festival. It is obligatory; and we fear our gods. When the

procession of the god comes, when the god is carried on the platform, one can't cross its path. Once the spirit of god is taken from the water and put in the mask, personified, one cannot cross its path. The belief is that one will die if one does. Such faith is a form of social binding. It even reduces enmity, because we are all descendants of god and all people are protected by the god of that place. So, as I told you, myth is still with us. One can actually use myth very forcefully.

For me the audience is not a homogeneous group, it is made up of smaller units, families, friends. I want to address them as smaller groups, as individuals.

I don't really believe in the difference between an insider and outsider audience. I take a story, take the simple flow of the story, and give it my interpretation. The outsider will no doubt understand the story. The insider also knows the story and his advantage is that he knows the language and cultural nuances. But for the outsider it is not impossible to follow the storyline. And in certain areas we do the interpretation visually, in terms of song and movement. If it is done correctly, I don't think there will be too much difference between these two audiences.

I also did a short play on Sanatandharma, about a revolutionary who fought against the king. But his revolutionary struggle was not successful, he could only organize battles in the villages. He was very disappointed. He wanted to die in battle as a hero. He met the Senapati (general) of the king and said to him, 'Let us fight a duel. I will give you a chance to kill me.' The duel was fought and ultimately he died. The spirit of that kind of freedom never ends. So I wanted to do a play on this theme. He was a historical character and he did revolt against the king.

I wrote a play about a father and his daughter who live in a lonely village. The king has two sons—the elder one is wicked, the younger one, not. The wicked son wanted to kill his younger brother. He made a coffin for his father when he died and requested his brother to lie in the coffin, to check its size. The younger one knew his intention and said, 'You are as tall as our father. Why don't you lie in the coffin and see whether it fits you or not?' Ultimately the younger brother was thrown into Imphal river. The girl picked up the coffin and found a beautiful young boy in it. She kept him inside the granary. They fell in love. She conceived. When the father came to know about it, he killed the prince. But when he saw the handsome head, he was very remorseful. The daughter gave birth to a son. Now the grandfather was very afraid of his grandson. What would happen when he came to know how his father had been killed by his grandfather? So he decided to kill his grandson. They went to fish and the grandfather pretended that the fishing net was stuck under the water. He asked the grandson to dive into the water and see what was wrong. But the grandson knew about this plot. So he said, 'I don't know how to dive into water. Why don't you do it?' The grandfather couldn't say no. He dived and was killed by the grandson with a nine-point spear. When he saw blood he cried and said, 'I have killed my grandfather. People will call me a murderer.'

What I tried to say in the play is that even revenge is a form of murder. When this play was done, there was so much killing going on. Shooting, killing, revolutionary killings and counter-revolutionary killings. A murdered revolutionary's son kills the son of a counter-revolutionary. The killing continues. Manipur is a killing ground, the killing goes on and on. If someone's father is killed, his son will kill the murderer's son. Such is life in Manipur. In this context, a play like this has some meaning.

I have noticed that any tragic incident in Manipur often ends in a kind of 'double sorrow.' I say this because we have our own problems—problems of poverty, of not getting two square meals a day, of unemployment, of misery. People are out of jobs. These are our own problems. But added to this is the presence of certain negative forces which increase our suffering, at a time when the situation itself is not peaceful at all. They

make people suffer more. Such elements are there in our society. I do not know what they want, what their definite goal is. But they come in and make us suffer more.



A scene from *Golden Ladder*.

A recent production of mine is *Golden Ladder*. Before writing the play I did some

research, reading, and also travelling, to get myself inspired. After *Draupadi* I wanted to do something on women. I collected all the available poems on women and tried to visualize them. There are some women poets in Manipur: Bhanumati, Mensongi Devi, Kunjrani. I know them personally. I went to their houses, and whenever there was a poetry reading session I was there. I attended these sessions to pick up images, words, ideas. It is a continuous process of understanding the socio-economic and political situation of this land called Manipur.

When I was working on my script, Manipur was going through a series of debates, seminars, symposiums, discussions, painting and poetry competitions and what not—all on the theme of Manipur's merger with the Indian Union. The day was 15 October. It is a much talked-about day in the history of Manipur. On that very day, Manipur was merged with the Indian Union by force. The Governor of Assam wrote that the King of Manipur was weeping as he was forced to sign the charter of agreement. Even those who went with the Maharaja later described what happened on that particular day. So I started thinking about all this while working on the *Golden Ladder*.

You can see the gap between Manipur and the rest of India growing wider and wider. In the structure of the play I had two levels. On the lower level I put the people living on earth and on the higher level, Indra, god of the sky. So I tried to bring this difference into the structure of the play: the 'earthy' people of Manipur are depicted in contrast to those who live 'up there' in Delhi. God Soraran and his kingdom in the sky symbolized the people of Delhi who rule us from above. Everything comes from Delhi and everything goes back to Delhi. This is the kind of economic situation we have. The Delhi Government is feeding us, giving us money in terms of five year plans and annual budgets. I tried to explore the condition of the people of Manipur. They have become lethargic, beggars who live on the charity of Delhi. In one sequence of the play the people on earth cry for more help, 'Father Indra, give us food and the things we need for everyday life. We beg to you.' And God throws them food from above. I tried to show that people have become entirely dependent on the mercy of those who rule. So it is the social condition of the people which is reflected in the play. I wanted to show the true nature of this relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Structurally, it has become a vertical relationship. The parallel or horizontal relationship is lost, it does not exist any more. This is how I interpreted it in the play. I tried to explore the internal complexities of the whole problem because I know that even the relationship between the people is not that simple. In the play, the mother comes down to earth and meets her own people. But they are envious of her because she has escaped misery. So when she wants to leave, she is pulled off the ladder by her own people.

I turned to Moirang Parba for another story. I read about a general called Chaoba Nngnogtho the bribe-taker, a very interesting character. I created small episodes around this central character. Chaoba takes bribes from people. We call it 'debt money'—if one takes a bribe and gives someone a job, it is a crime. But Chaoba takes money in such a way that the giver does not feel bad about it. On the contrary, when Chaoba takes money the giver is relieved. In the play, Chaoba is on the side of the exploited and ultimately helps him to become a nobleman in the king's court. In the play there is a reference to *lu*—a kind of net we use to catch fish—and someone says that if Chaoba puts his *lu* up in the sky the fish would automatically enter it. The play talks about a kind of situation where corruption is naturalized.

In the original story of the play Yangoi, the evil character, appears only once. He comes in when Khoiripaba comes down to earth. Yangoi is also one of the gods. Even today, he is worshipped. Evil gods are also worshipped here, so that they are satisfied and do not harm people. According to traditional belief, certain areas are controlled by Yangoi. Khoiripaba happened to descend at a place controlled by Yangoi, who was disturbed and got angry. They fought each other. But Khoiripaba was also the son of a god, and in the original story Yangoi was killed in the battle. That was the only sequence

when this character came into the story. But I made him a much more concrete character in the play. He is shown as an evil power in society, a negative force. He appears and instigates people to do things. He tells people, why do you pray to Soraran? I can bring Nguino back. But when Soraran drops money and goods for the people, he picks up the money. He is just an opportunist.

In the play, certain dialogues help the audience to relate the play to contemporary situations, giving it contemporary meaning. In the story Khoiripaba, the son, came down from heaven in search of his mother. I used certain characters in my play—for example, a mother who has lost her son. The mother was looking for her son and when she heard Khoiripaba's voice she thought that her son was back. Khoiripaba also thought that she was his mother. But the moment they met she realized that he was not her son, and she left. This character represents so many mothers of Manipur whose sons have not returned home. This was not in the original story. Such subtle references were put into the play to make it meaningful to contemporary political life in Manipur. I always try to make statements in a subtle manner.

While writing this play I was very concerned about the words I used. I read translations of old scriptures and even used some of the old words in certain sections. I also talked to the experts. I went to the Loishan, an institution in the palace. I went to the office and met people who can read old Manipuri scriptures. I talked to them, and learnt about the real story. In the original story there is a happy ending. But I changed it, made it a tragedy. I symbolized Khoripaba, the son, as a person who wants to keep the ladder between the two worlds. The ladder is a connection. Only through a proper relationship between the upper and lower levels of society will it be harmonious and prosper. I read poetry and went to kavi sammelans (poetry gatherings) and tried to pick up words and imagery. My actors also contributed words and imagery. For example, hell cannot be expressed in one word in Manipuri. So Nandakumar suggested that I use the word *narak* because it is understandable to our audience. The big metal mask used in the play is a stylization of the traditional Lai Haraoba mask. I also used the *maibis*, through whom the spirit says, 'I am very unhappy. I am not satisfied. Because I could not put the ladder connection in my life time.' A *maibi's* words are god's word. The *maibi* says, 'I am trying to find a person who can place the ladder and connect heaven and earth. But till today I have not found a person who can put the ladder back. I am very unhappy, very dissatisfied.' The play ends with that.

How do you create your plays?

I often pick up small incidents from everyday life, observe, take notes. I cannot write plays in a very formal manner. I may write one sentence. I write down ideas, comments made by people, a few lines of a poem I liked. A collage appears from all these bits and pieces I gather. The structure of the play emerges from this. My actors also help me give it a shape. They help the process. They are actually the makers of my plays. I am only the catalyst.

Loitongbam Dorendra is the founder-director of Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union. Trained by pioneer actor-directors like the late N. Tombi, late Netrajit Singh and H. Nilamani, he was with Ratan Thiyam's Chorus Repertory Theatre for 12 years.



A scene from *Bhishma* by Banian Repertory Theatre, directed by the late Maibam Surshen.

**'Still Searching'—
A Panel Discussion with
the Directors of the Nineties**

This panel discussion with the newer generation of directors, all of whom are part of the experimental theatre sphere, was conducted by the STQ team consisting of Anjum Katyal and Naveen Kishore, at Imphal, on 17 April 1996.

Something that comes up often is the towering presence of the established experimental directors of this state: the Big Four, as it were, or, by some accounts, the Big Three. Does everyone here feel that his work is a continuation of the trends set by the senior predecessors, particularly Ratan Thiyam and Kanhailal?

Loitongbam Dorendra, director and playwright, Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union: Before we joined theatre, it already existed; it was like following the path laid by the elders. It was a process of growing up. This kind of theatre emerged in the late 60s; a kind of theatre different from the conventional proscenium or Parsi theatre. It was a renaissance of Manipuri theatre, exploring our identity through the medium of theatre. I joined Ratan Thiyamji as an actor, and have been associated with him for the past 12 years. I love his theatre, it tries to express our cultural identity through the medium of theatre. So it is natural to follow that kind of thing, and create a breakthrough from that point of view for my own vision. I need to expose myself to the kind of theatre which was prevalent before, and the socio-political situation which ultimately conditions us. Manipuri theatre has identified itself through the new kind of theatre done by Thiyamji, Kanhailalji, Lokendraji, Sanakhya Ebotombi. From that point, we must look deeper into the complexities that we are experiencing. I try to explore the complexities of modern contemporary life and express them. If that can be communicated to the audience, my aim of creating a new language of theatre will reach its goal.

Lourembam Kishworjit, director, Paradise Theatre: I don't see myself as following in the same train. So far I have experienced two extremes in theatre: one is a very grand style, like Ratan Thiyam's, the other a very minimal and suggestive kind of theatre, which Kanhailal is doing. Their styles of theatre are so dominating that elements of both are very obvious—as you must have noticed in the performances you've seen. I feel that I am trying to come out of that kind of milieu, trying to experiment with the audience, and find a new kind of theatre. I am still experimenting—I don't know what it will be like in the future. The situation nowadays is quite different—we're in a very difficult situation. Our society is changing so fast, I am still trying to find something . . .

Lamabam Gojendra, director, Manipur Dramatic Union: I think that Ratan Thiyam's and Kanhailal's style of theatre is still being practised by some of us younger directors because the source is the same, our culture and tradition. The raw materials are the same, so there must be a similarity. Yet some of us are trying to do a new kind of theatre, something different from them. But we're searching, still experimenting. I am doing theatre because I can't escape from society and society is changing. So I want to do something that can become a new kind of theatre, that reacts in a different way with the human psyche. I'm trying to do psychological plays—but, as I said, I'm still searching.

Maibam Surshen, director, Banian Repertory Theatre (died on 31 July, 1996): I know we are facing many problems now. At the same time, I am doing theatre not only for myself, but for human beings. Because theatre is a study of human beings. I'm trying to find a way to communicate what I want to say through my theatre. I'm trying to develop a new kind of theatre which will speak of what I want to say. Theatre must speak to people. Not

only in our state, but also outside. Human problems are the same everywhere. Maybe some people are facing problems in a different way, but we're all the same, all human beings. I'm trying to say through my theatre that we're facing many problems, but our problems must be solved by ourselves.

Yumnam Rajendra, director and playwright, Panthoibi Natya Mandir: We are facing so much tension and turmoil in this society that we have no rest or peace or relaxation in our lives any more. So I've taken up a new idea. Before, I was doing serious theatre—body language and nonverbal theatre. Now I feel that it is the time to develop a new kind of theatre that will make people laugh, release them from anxiety and tension. Otherwise our society will have no creative development, no progress towards newer truths. Some 60 years back there used to be traditional folk forms of theatre, like the Manipuri Thok Leela, which were very popular. Some of them are extinct now. Those actors were from a past era and not many of them are alive now. But luckily I met one of those veteran actors who lived to experience the 80s—this was in 1986—and I asked this Mr Nitai Sharma, 'Guruji, how old are you?' He laughed out loud and said that he was only a child of six. I was totally confused and asked him again about his real age and he told me that he was 96 years old. But he explained the kind of plays he used to do in the past, what they were like and why they were popular then, and said that all that had changed in the last six years, so that he felt like just a child of six. That experience has influenced me very much. I pick up elements from our folk tales, fairy tales, and try to relate them to our contemporary reality, but what remains very important to me is that there must be a lot of laughter. I train actors with this in mind. Our actors are not exactly clowns, but they must have a clear idea about being a clown in contemporary society. However, this laughter is not useless laughter; I want to reflect the wrongs in our contemporary society, the selfishness of some people—that's what I want the audience to laugh at. I don't try to bring in any high intellectual stuff in my plays; I want the common people to reflect on these things as they laugh. I don't know whether the intellectuals will accept my plays. As long as the common people get some laughter from my plays, I'm happy.

Wareppa Naba, artistic director, Theatre Mirror: It is a bit difficult for me to articulate exactly why I'm doing theatre. I believe that theatre is a composite and living art form and we must interpret it in our own ways. Along with my group I have been trying to find an alternative theatre, a new medium that will allow us to express our longings in a free way—a relaxed theatre of free expression. As my friend Y. Rajendra expressed very clearly, I'm also trying to develop an alternative kind of relaxed theatre that can actually act as a kind of therapy, because our society is right now in a state of lunacy. Some psycho-analytical process is needed to deal with that. Now, who's our targeted audience? Shall we present our plays to a few intellectuals, or to the common people, breaking these barriers? I believe that it should be the latter, because in my theatre I'm looking for free expression for all. I'm a part and parcel of society and so is our audience. We as the transmitters, and the viewers as the receivers, are the same—we belong to the same society. Why should we be alienated from all those political activists, farmers, rickshaw pullers, and be elitists only? Society comprises all of them. My work is, therefore, a search for an alternative theatre with a firm philosophy—to locate our identity through representing our collective experiences aesthetically.

P. Khogendra Singh, director, The Deal Repertory Theatre: I've been doing theatre since the 1960s. In those days, performances were put up only on festive occasions. Back then, I used to wonder why I was doing theatre, if I wanted to be just an entertainer for the people. I'm still asking myself that question.

S. K. Mangang, director, Marjinkhol Cultural cum Drama Association: I've been doing theatre since 1972 and worked as an actor in Ratan Thiyam's Chorus Repertory Theatre between 1976-80. Then I started directing plays myself. My plays have similarities with those of Ratan Thiyam; there are similarities in our ideologies also. I believe that politicians have forced our people to forfeit even their basic citizenship



Kanana Haijilibano (Who Says So?) by Theatre Mirror Dramatic Society, directed by Wareppa Naba.

rights. That's what I tried to show in the play [*Khongnet Hee*, meaning 'boat'] you saw yesterday. In the play, the middle-class people have been represented by the boat, and the sailors represented the politicians. I've very seriously tried to depict how politicians have misused the power given to them by the people. As you saw, the boat could not move freely; the sailors took it in their own direction, exploiting the freedom of the boat. Through this, we wanted to say how politicians shouldn't be given the kind of freedom

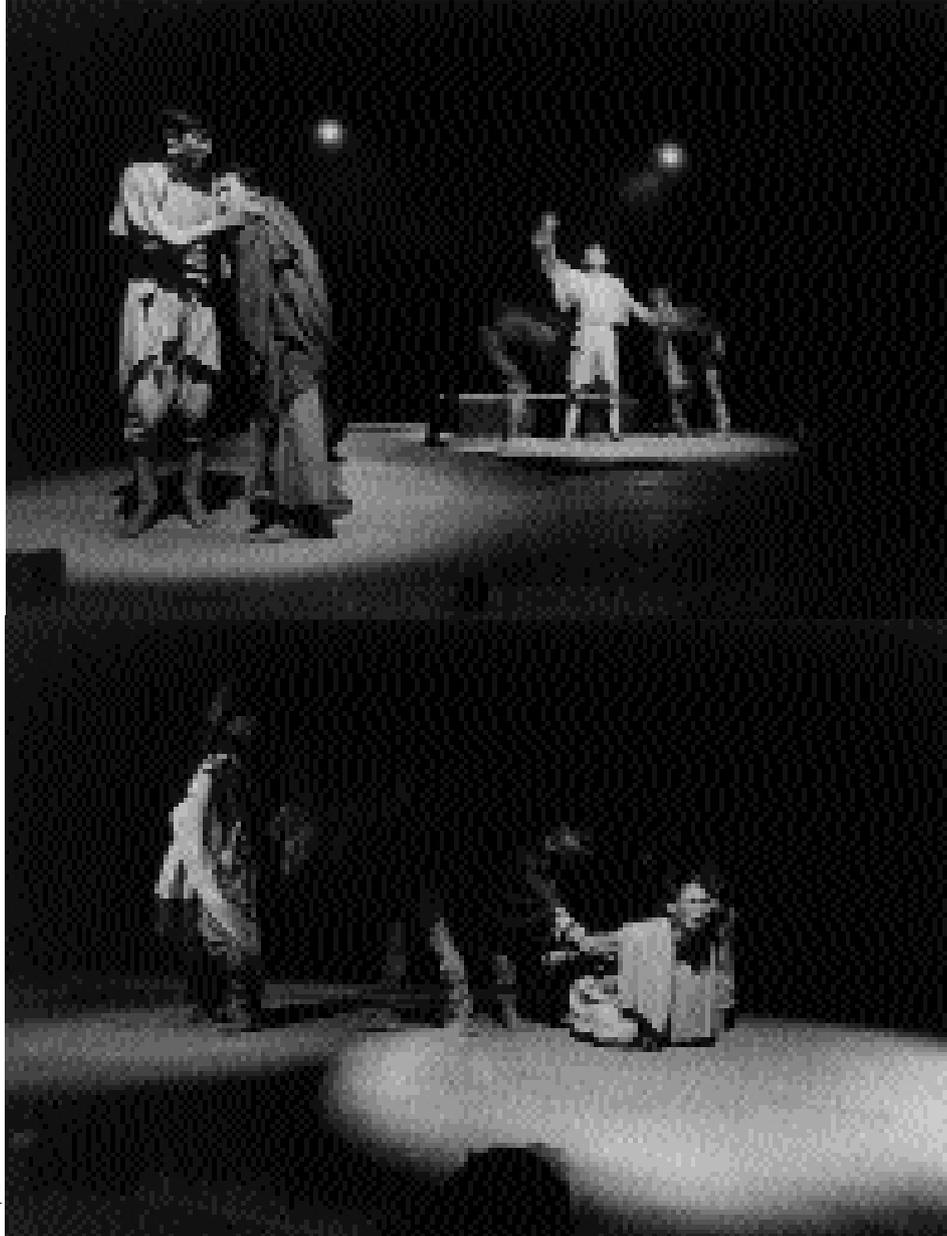
that the Indian Constitution has given them, as it deprives the common people of their freedom.

Nongthombam Premchand, Aryan Theatre: I look at Manipuri theatre against the historical background of the last two decades—the 70s and the 80s. In the 70s, we found a theatre that was very active and was in intimate connection with the common people. But in the 80s, we had a kind of theatre that was very far removed from the realities we were facing. The 90s is a different matter. Ratan Thiyam, Kanhailal and Lokendra were at the height of their creativity in the 70s. Say, for example, Lokendra produced his *Irabot* in 1981, then Kanhailal produced his *Pebet* . . . most of his noteworthy presentations were in the 70s. Ratan Thiyam came in during the late 70s. But in the 80s these people had taken a different course—Kanhailal started repeating his earlier plays and Lokendra did plays that were all kind of conformist—simply representing the text, no attempt to interpret or put in something of his own. In the 80s, so many things developed . . . like the insurgency which started in the 80s and swept our society like a storm. But in none of their plays of that decade will you find any reflection of this change; there isn't a single production that you can name. Thiyam's famous *Chakravyuha*—when I asked him what he was trying to represent, he said that he'd tried to portray the international situation, how the Third World was suffering due to the two big powers, USA and the then USSR. The suffering Abhimanyu of *Chakravyuha* represented the people of the Third World countries.

Listening to him, I tried to think if this suffering was a universal experience, whether people were actually trying to create something out of a vacuum. I believe that universality is a human experience and this should be portrayed in our productions. What we are facing here in Manipur is a human problem that is universal. This is what we should try to communicate to people from other cultural and political backgrounds. I did not find his *Chakravyuha* very meaningful or relevant to the reality that Thiyam himself was facing here in Manipur; he was trying to escape from his immediate reality. But in the process he was unable to conceal the ropes that kept him bound to his reality.

These three directors, then, had ceased to be relevant in the 80s and that's why the younger people felt that they had to portray the problems they were facing and how they felt about these problems. Now, in the 90s, the problems we are facing are very complex and we have still not found the methodology and tools to pierce the surface and identify a solution. What I find of great interest is that we should also be able to theorize what we are doing, have a methodology to deal with the problem as it exists today, and not just produce excellence on the stage. Or we'll soon grow stale.

Th. Bhogen, actor, Panthoibi Natya Mandir: I'm not a director, but I've worked as a consultant for a play that was presented by the Manipuri University Theatre Club in the zonal and national theatre festivals held at Ranchi and Dwarbhanga. That's how I got a sense of what it means to present a play. It's too simple to say—'I'm doing theatre for the people and the society'—there are some considerations that are important here. We've



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Scenes from *Khongnat Hee (The Boat)*, by Marjhinghol Cultural cum Drama Association, directed by S. K. Mangang

theatre in Manipur for the last hundred years, but we have no system of preservation of scripts etc. We have a State Kala Akademi, a university, but if anyone wants to do research on theatre, it's impossible to access the materials needed. So I'm trying to remedy that with the students of Manipur University. We're trying to start a Performing Arts faculty from this year. The reason we're doing this is that most contemporary theatre directors in Manipur are working in circles, in the sense that they are not developing, but repeating themselves. If we want development of theatre in Manipur, I believe that we should be able to do research on the theatre that existed before. As an

actor, I feel that need also.

I want to pick up some of the points that have come up in this discussion, one of which is the question of relevance to the immediate socio-political situation. What I feel is that most of the works that we've seen express a sense of violence, exploitation and suffering, portrayed in a symbolic, allegorical way—mostly through myths and folktales, reinterpreting them to bring out their contemporaneity. That way they are contemporary, but are also timeless in a sense, because at this level they tend to become very general. Violence, exploitation, lack of power in the hands of the weak—these are things that have gone on for centuries. So I was wondering if anybody would like to respond to this question of symbolism as opposed to direct depiction, which could have something to do with what Mr Premchand was referring to as escapism. How do you feel about such a lot of symbolism and allegory? Is there some reason for it? Is it coming naturally? Or is it not true that most of the theatre is like that, maybe it's just an impression that one's got?

SKM: I believe that myths can be used to express what we want to say, but there is need for direct portrayal also. For example, about Ratan Thiyam's work—I, too, believe that *Chakravayuha* does not represent the tensions of the reality he was living in, but he has also done plays that have direct immediacy. In his *Imphal Imphal* he's directly voiced all the things happening around him; so I think he's been doing both kinds of theatre. I believe that both kinds of theatre are acceptable—direct depiction or symbolic, and that both can be used to express contemporary situations.

LD: I personally like to explore traditional forms like the Sumang Leela. I have some thoughts about the Chinese opera also, which is almost dying out now. I like to explore these forms of performance, but at the same time I want to do theatre that deals with the dynamics of our complex society. I believe that in the life span of a director, he may do different kinds of theatre and trying to do that is not a fault, because if my conscience is clear then I'll automatically stick to the form that allows me to express my concerns best.

LK: The question is not whether you do immediate theatre or symbolic theatre; the question is how far you can communicate with the audience. Theatre is not as significant today as it was some decades before, as we are not being able to communicate to the audiences what we feel about today's situation. Theatre has become somewhat static over the last twenty years. Since we haven't actually developed the habit of interacting with the audience, we really do not know how far we're being able to communicate. There's a lot of discussion among the directors, playwrights and actors about our changing society and its problems, but we do not know how far our message is getting across to the audience.

This is a very important question that was raised once earlier when Rajendra was talking, and it's directly related to the question of which audience you're doing theatre for. Could we elaborate on that a bit? Rajendra seems to feel that a lot of the theatre becomes too elitist, whereas he'd like to reach a much wider cross-section of people. Does anybody want to talk about that aspect—any problems you face with the audience and how you think you can overcome them?

NP: The Manipuri audience has traditionally been accustomed to the narrative mode, not to other forms of theatre. Even now they are just trying to adapt themselves. But for myself, when I conceive a movement or a form, it's like designing a code; I must keep in mind how the audience would decode it. I believe in giving a few clues here and there to help the audience decode, because I want them to ponder on what I'm trying to represent. There may not be a ready audience for the kind of theatre we're doing—ready to buy tickets, that is. The question of entertainment is also there, as many like to be entertained in a lighter vein only. Then there are those who like to be provoked into thinking only if it comes to them free. We, too, are moving in different directions, trying to do different kinds of theatre. So sometimes our audiences differ, also. But one thing is true—the meaning of our plays is not always readily available to our audience. We

demand a lot from the audience and sometimes there are problems, because we're too demanding. But we're slowly building up our audience. This process actually started in the 70s, when the physical kind of theatre was introduced to Manipur through Kanhailal, because of his association with Badal Sircar. Since that time, theatre in Manipur has started going in a different direction as far as representation is concerned. Since then, the Manipuri theatre audience has been trying to get accustomed to these new trends. So by now I think we've been able to create a new kind of audience, though they may not be very great in terms of number.

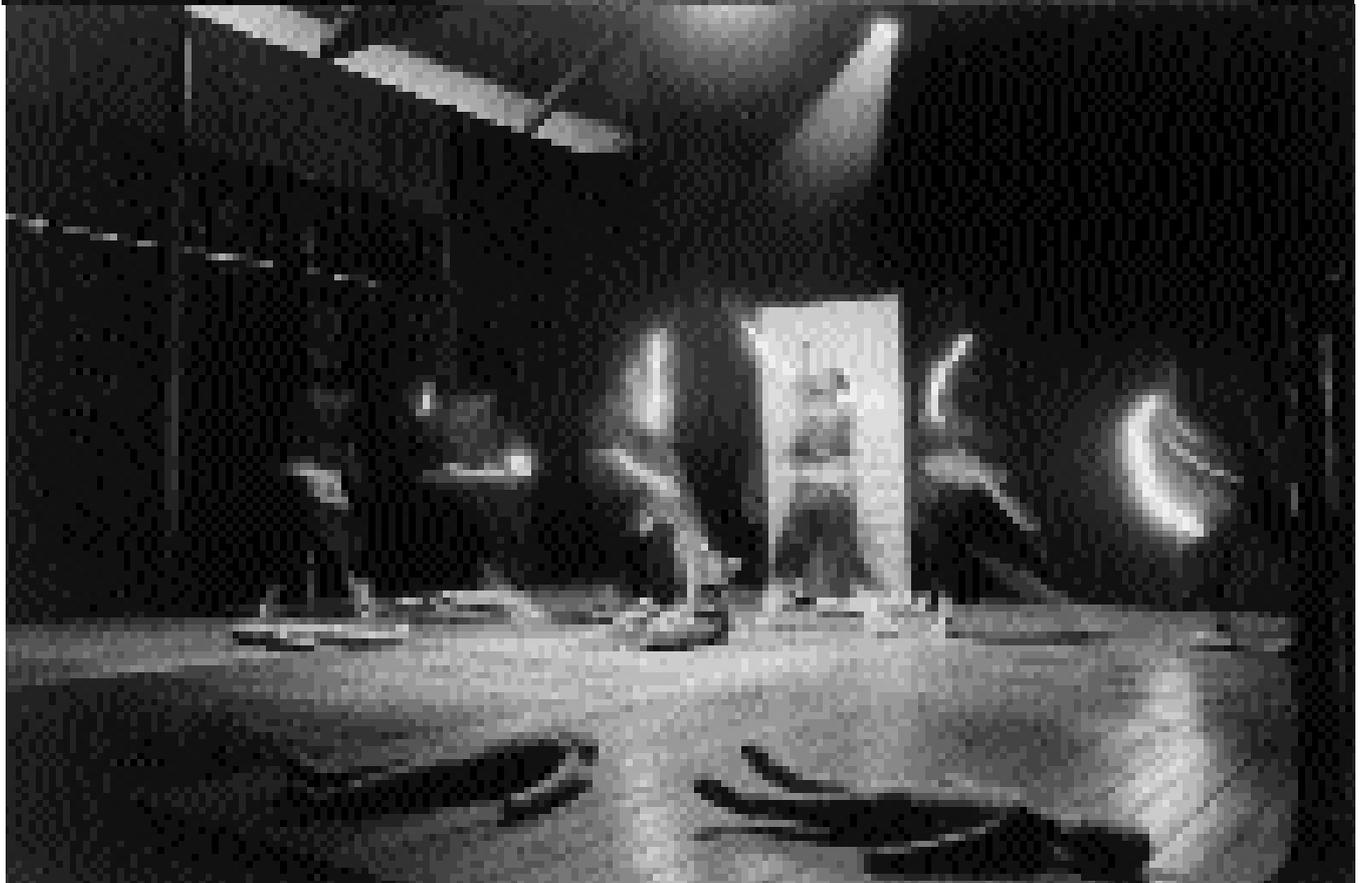
LG: My approach is the same as that of Premchand; I'm also very concerned about the audience. That is why I'm so keen to find out how far our messages are reaching the audience. Nowadays, there is a lot of fear in the minds of the people about being unable to live in peace. I'm doing this kind of mixed theatre to attract the common audience—there are elements from folktales, some symbolism, the simple narrative style. In my opinion, which coincides with that of Premchand, if we do audience research we'll be able to find out how we can communicate best and what kind of theatre they're inclined to come to.

LD: I think that to some extent audience education is also very necessary. See, my wife is only an upper division clerk, but she knows something about new urban theatre. Yet her boss, who's an IAS officer, knows nothing about it. This is because he lacks theatre education. It is true that she's gained her knowledge because she comes to see my work and that of others regularly, while her boss never goes to a theatre hall. So that kind of exposure is also needed. If the art of theatre has to be practised, then putting up shows regularly is essential. I'm worried that some of the eminent directors of Manipur, as well as some of the newcomers, are not presenting their productions often enough. That's why they are not attracting an audience, even though they are engaged in a lot of theoretical work that they call theatre research. Theatre is a performative art form, and it must be practised. There must be productions for the audience to come and watch, we must have something to offer them either through selling tickets or by invitation, whatever.

WN: I presume that the audience is representative of our society, it is a miniature Manipur society. If we are trying to do something good for society, then there must be an audience—whether we have a large or a small audience, it is a miniature society and we should not differentiate between an elite audience and a common audience. That's what I feel. Before presenting a play, we must think, we must check it out ourselves whether the work is fit for presentation—both subjectively and objectively. If my production is good, it will be appreciated; if it is bad it will be rejected. We theatre workers must try to examine our respective ideologies and philosophies from within and without. We've already mentioned three eminent theatre personalities of Manipur—Ratan Thiyam, Kanhailal and Lokendra Arambam, but we are not following them. We're doing our theatre independently, without their philosophies and ideologies. We have our own minds to think with—I don't even like to mention their names, actually.

LK: But I don't think I'd like to rule them out so completely. I, myself, am getting financial support from Lokendra Arambam. Even apart from that, I get theoretical and moral support from him and from Ratan Thiyam and Kanhailal. In my work also, I derive a lot of inspiration from them. So I don't agree with what Mr Wareppa Naba just said.

MS: To get back to the audience question, I have no targeted audience. Every person is my audience. We are doing theatre to express ourselves, and to give some message to our people. Theatre is a medium which combines creativity with messages for the good of society. I do not believe that age has anything to do with audience response. If my work



Scenes from ? by Paradise Theatre, directed by Lourembam Kishworjit.

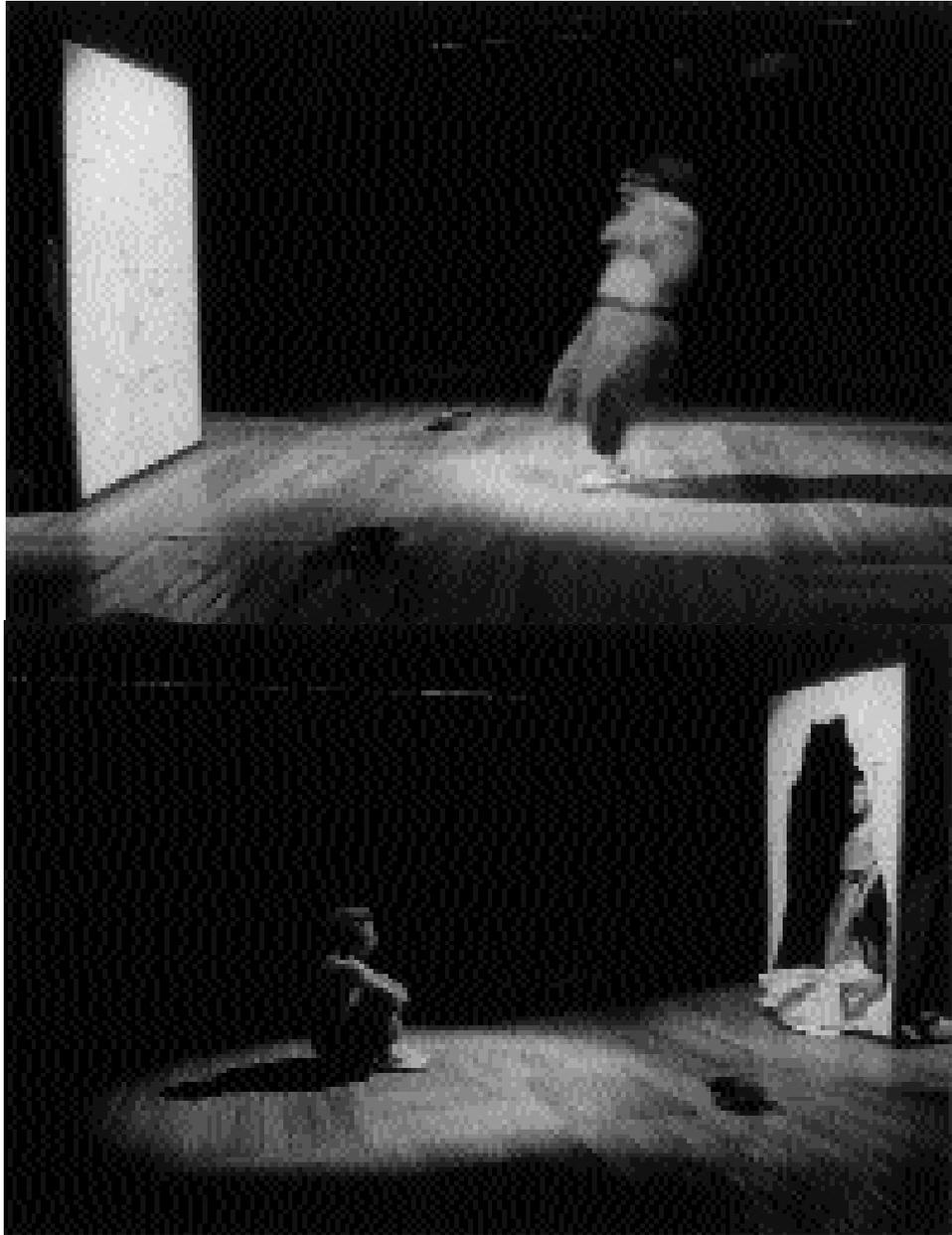


is good, people will accept it and if it's bad they'll reject it—irrespective of whether I'm young or old or middle-aged. I know what we're facing now, because I'm also part of this society. I think Ratanda or Kanhailaji or Lokendraji are all doing something that reflects the situation in our society, just as we are. The problem is that, just as someone who doesn't understand what cancer is cannot explain it to another, similarly people do not understand what the problem today is, and that's why they cannot communicate to other people. If you can communicate what you want to say, if you're clear about that, people will surely accept your work. Why won't they? I've noticed even eighty-year-old people in my audience, and I think that's because I'm clear about what I want to say, and I express it simply and creatively.

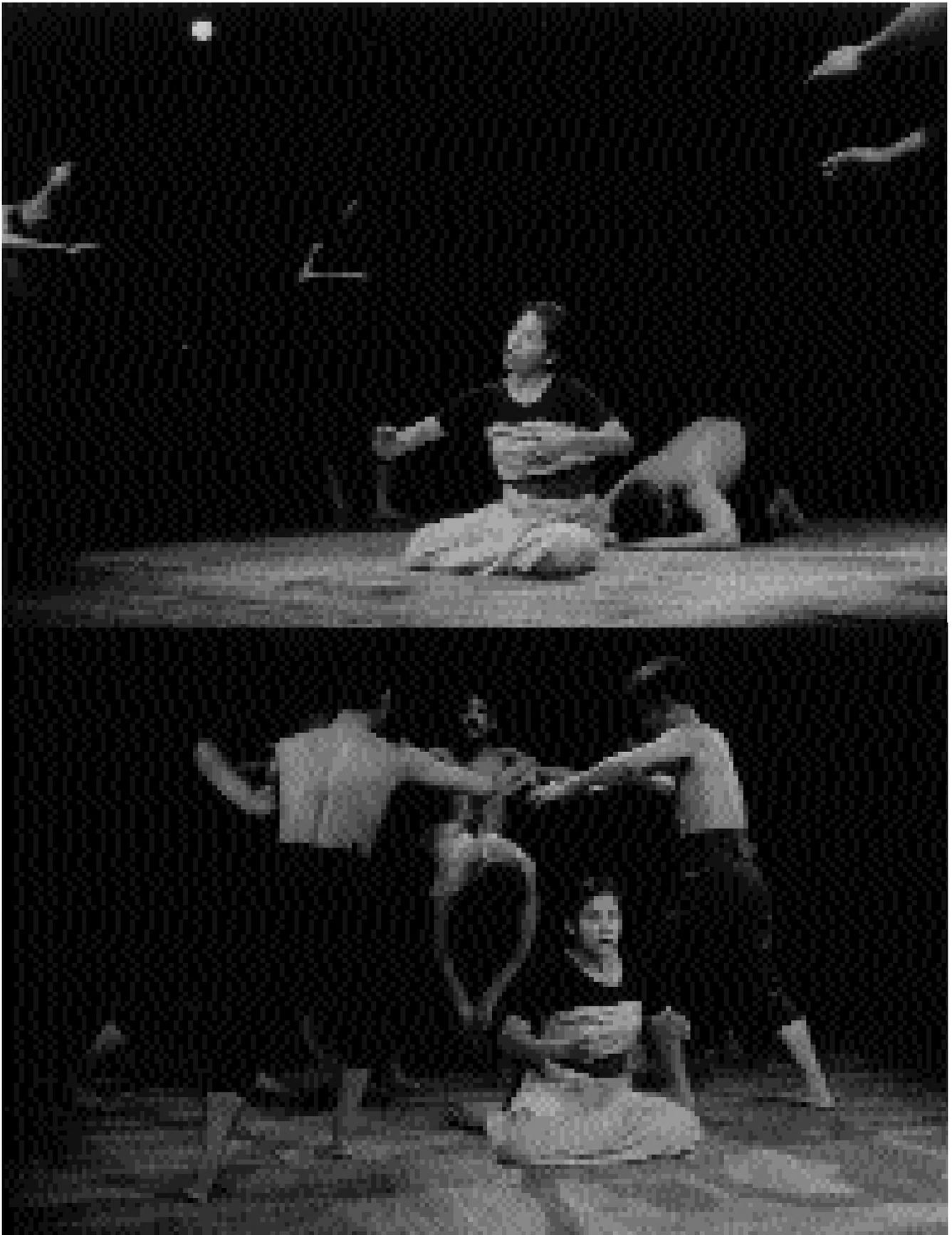
YR: I think it is high time that this second generation of directors got critical attention, as we are all doing our own kinds of theatre very seriously and sincerely. I'm not saying that we need to forget all about first generation directors like Ratan Thiyam, Kanhailal and Lokendra, but there's a definite difference between their theatre and ours, and that needs to be highlighted. In this sense I agree with Mr Wareppa Naba, because whether we're good or bad, the second generation of directors is definitely different from the first.

As far as the audience goes, it is very important to get an audience because, otherwise, our theatre is useless. But to attract the common people to see our theatre we have to study them intimately—how they live, how they are dealing with the society, all the details of their lives and problems in this society. Only if we have a full knowledge—and that's not difficult at all, since one can know these details simply through studying one's actors—can we present something to the audience that will attract them, as they will find that we're reflecting their lives. I don't believe in this differentiation between an elite audience and common audience, as I have some practical experience in this regard. In 1995 I did a door-to-door survey in our area with my actors, to find out what kind of theatre the people like and I can't tell you how many different answers I got—traditional theatre, experimental theatre, physical theatre, symbolic theatre . . . so many differing tastes. But there was a common thread. This survey convinced me that 80% of the people like an emotional kind of theatre, something that makes them feel, cry, laugh. But the other 20% like to think about what's happening in our society, which way we're going. On the basis of this survey, I decided what kind of theatre we should do. My theatre is entertaining, highly entertaining, because I don't want to do theatre for the 20% only. But it is not simple entertainment—there's a message that is communicated through that entertainment. That way I can attract the 20% also!

Let me recount a personal experience. In 1984-85 I was working very seriously in theatre in the colleges and rural areas—mainly colleges. I went to do theatre in Urkul, a tribal-intensive hilly area some 80 km away from Imphal. There I discovered that the young men were not interested in Manipuri at all—they didn't want to speak or read Manipuri, study Manipuri literature etc. This is quite a remote place and travel is not very easy there. This prompted me to choose a play that's a romantic story, where I used half Manipuri and half Thankul, their tribal language. I stayed in Urkul for 3 days, and every night there was an audience of 3000 or more. People from distant villages had



Scenes from ?



Scenes from *Hold! Oh, Fire, Water and Wind* by Forum for Laboratory Theatres, directed by R. K. Tombisana.





Neihatpiraba (The Tortured), by The Deal Repertory Theatre, directed by P. Khogendra Singh.

come—entire families, carrying packed food and all. The people really enjoyed it. On the third night there was a lot of commotion, security people rushing in, and I was told that the tribal militants had come to watch. I requested the security people to please let them come and watch, and promised to talk to them about being peaceful. But when I went to talk to them there was total confusion, as they would not use Manipuri and I couldn't understand what they were saying. Anyway, they stayed on to watch the performance. After the show, there was a lot of jubilation—everybody was very happy that the terrorists had decided to accept Manipuri. They said that if Meitei people from Imphal could use their language and entertain them so well, then there was no harm in accepting Manipuri. The Chief Minister, the Police Superintendent—everybody was very happy.

This was a long time ago, around 1982–83, as I said, and now it is 1996. I started doing



city-based theatre from 1992. These experiences have made me believe that if the people

do not come to the theatre, I should go to the people with my plays. How do I do this? First we just go and present our plays to them, free; on the second day, we try and have some discussions with them; on the third day, maybe, we get full audience participation.

PK: As far as the audience is concerned, what they want from theatre, I really don't know. I do allegorical plays, but to know about the audience, we need to do research.

Please speak about whatever you feel is important, like the situation today, or the difficulties you face—whatever you like.

NP: One of our great difficulties is that since there are many different modes of representation that we use, there is often miscommunication. We have something concrete to say and we say it through composition or movement, and quite often the audience takes it in an altogether different sense. Like in a metonymical play of mine—not metaphorical, but metonymical—the security personnel, the military, that is, wear olive green like the real military, but because I wanted to show that they're doing a kind of surgical operation on society, I also made them put on doctors' overalls, and large sections of the audience took them to be army doctors. So, you see, we still face great difficulties in communicating to the audience.

The other thing is that we theatre people—I'm saying 'we' as I think I'm speaking for all of us—are very conscious of politics. It's something that's very alive in our theatre. You may not see it, but politics is something that we cannot deny. Yet, mostly, the directors fight shy of owning up to the fact that there's any politics involved in their plays. In denying that involvement the person very often becomes a victim of that very politics.

Would you care to explain this connection between politics and the young directors more elaborately?

NP: Let's look at the very term 'young directors'. Where does it come from? I want to state this very concretely—it came from the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1984 when a programme for 'young directors' was evolved. Who are the people who invented this term 'young directors' and why did they do it? Does age ever play any role in the sphere of arts? . . . This term was coined by people who are thought to be seniors in the Sangeet Natak Akademi; and it is being very successfully used everywhere in India, not just in Manipur. I think this division into seniors and juniors is actually a way of deifying a group of directors so that they cannot be criticized or dissected. I believe that everybody, be it Ratan Thiyam or B. V. Karanth—whoever—is eligible for dissection. But we theatre people tend to mystify and glorify some people and take their words as God's words. Ratan Thiyam, Kanhailal, Lokendra—we can subject them to different levels of criticism. Of course, we do agree that we draw a lot of inspiration from them, and, after all, every theatre production is really an example of intertextuality. There are many different levels of influences and inspirations . . . from European drama, even . . . and it's in that sense that I say that theatre is intertextual. But despite that, we should be able to criticize them instead of just glorifying them. If we theatre people fail to find a point of departure from what was happening in the 1980s, how can we be creative directors? I may be mistaken, but I think that we younger directors have many contrasts with the seniors, with the kind of theatre they did in the 80s. In terms of sensibilities, in terms of the way we look at theatre, there's a drastic difference between the seniors and us, the so-called young directors.

That's an interesting point, what you just said about the difference in the way you look at theatre. Could you explain, please?

NP: See, the audience is our first concern. When we think of theatre, the people, their problems—that's what we think about first. The audience is in that sense the primary concern of the young directors. But is it the same for them? That's the question.

LK: I feel that we theatre workers should ask the basic question of why we're doing theatre, but in a different way. Instead of looking at why we're doing theatre, we should be asking: what's the significance of theatre in society?

In terms of the problems we're facing today, I think that they are very similar to the problems elsewhere in India. The first big problem is that we're not finding an audience. The second thing is the economy. Apart from grants from the state government or elsewhere, we're not able to generate our own income. We can't put up regular shows because of this, so our work also becomes very static. Naturally the audience is not ready to accept it. But this may not be due to the money problem alone, it could be that we're not creative enough and we're becoming repetitive.

LD: About the audience problem, I would like to mention the lack of variety. For example, none of us is doing children's theatre. The audience likes variety. We have three established halls here—Aryan, Rupmahal and MDU. But Aryan is not doing regular shows; only Rupmahal and MDU are doing regular weekly shows—weekend shows, in fact. They are getting an audience. I think we should think of variety. For example, if we do children's theatre all the parents will surely come to watch that production. Not only that, they will come for the next production also, if we invite them, even if it's a serious play. The other thing, as I've mentioned before, is that not putting up regular shows keeps us away from the audience.

Have all of you faced this problem of economics stopping you from putting up productions?

All: Yes.

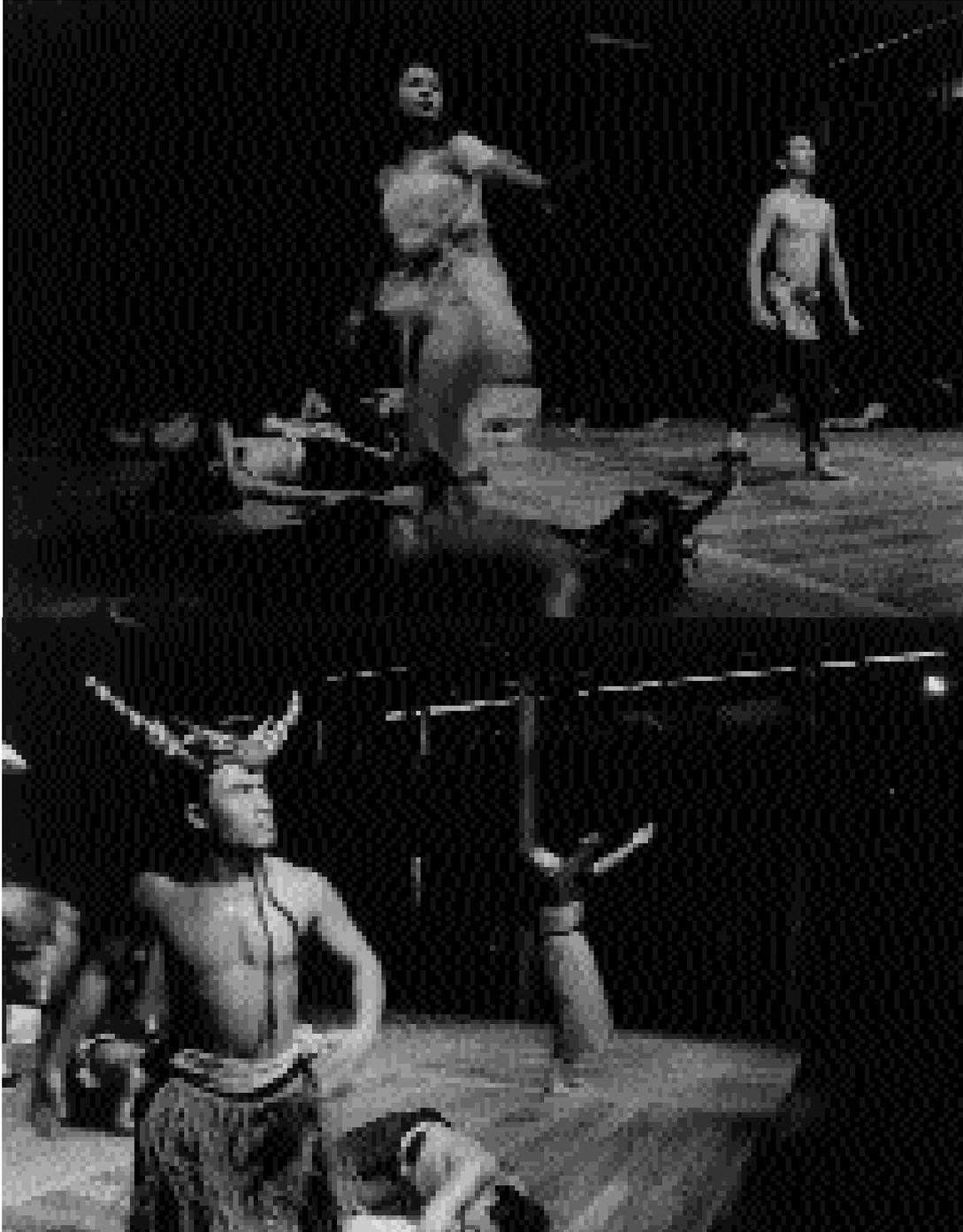
Even when you do different kinds of theatre, some involving a lot of technology and some not?

WN: Let me talk for a while on one very important problem. I think the problem that's bigger than the economic question or that of politics in theatre is the lack of understanding amongst us theatre workers—the egocentric, self-centred tendencies that keep us apart. We must try to get together, talk together, identify and face our problems together. Though we are small in number, egocentrism is very strong among us, maybe because we think that ego is part of our artistic talent. If we can overcome this, if it becomes 'we' from 'I', then I believe a lot of our problems can be dealt with successfully.

Have you tried to experiment with different spaces? Like, you have this tradition of courtyard plays—the Sumang Leela. Maybe you could do an adaptation of your plays for a courtyard presentation so that it remains a proscenium play, but can also be presented in a different space?

LK: See, no change of space or any other change is going to help us, as the audience won't come unless we can present to them free of cost. Like, last evening, there was a big audience because it was completely free. If there were tickets you wouldn't see such a big audience.

YR: The biggest problem all of us are facing is the money problem. We can't put up



Scenes from *Amamba Ahing (Dark Night)* by MUTC, directed by Bhogen.

productions unless we have actors, but if the actors constantly have to struggle for survival and worry about their livelihood, then how can they be creative?

Let me add a few words about space, also. We have this traditional space of the *mandapa* which can be occupied by a huge audience. Initially I used to do only

proscenium plays, but now I like to do theatre in this *mandapa* also. But I've seen that this change of space hasn't really helped, as the people don't come if the show isn't free. One experiment I've done in this regard is selling Rs 2 tickets in our *mandapa*—Rs 2 tickets for all, no different sitting arrangements and all that. With that I've been successful. But Sumang Leela and our theatre is very different. You know, in the last state festival, tickets for Sumang Leela performances were priced high—Rs 10 per ticket—but they were all sold out. Not only that, for one particular highly popular Sumang Leela group, tickets were sold in black for Rs 100 also. During the show, the fences were just broken down and people rushed in in great numbers. But for our theatre, they refuse to buy tickets for Rs 5 also, though they'll come and watch and offer comments if we send them free invitation cards.

About the tensions amongst us that my senior brother Wareppa Naba was talking about, I'd like to say that earlier, in the 70s, when I was a very young theatre worker, there was a much better understanding among theatre workers. Today I think the main reason for this tension amongst us is also lack of money.

NP: In Manipur we find a consumerist sensibility, consuming things without creating for self-sustenance. Before, theatre here had a self-generating mechanism that's actually been thrown away; today we just keep looking for funding sources because we need money. But in looking for funding sources we theatre people, including myself, tend to forget that where money is involved politics is also involved. We sometimes go to the extent of letting money prevail over creativity instead of creativity prevailing over money. I'll give you an example from *Ashad ki Ek Din* by Mohan Rakesh. When Kalidasa is in Ujjain with Mallika and nature around him, he writes beautiful pieces like the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* and *Meghadutam*. But when the king comes to know that there's a very good poet in Ujjain and picks up Kalidasa and takes him to the palace and makes him the governor of Kashmir, Kalidasa finds that he's no longer as creative as he was in the setting of Ujjain—he is decontextualized. So one day he just leaves his palace and comes back to Ujjain. My interpretation of this text is that the king does not patronize Kalidasa to help his creativity but to annihilate it, because there is a politics, a crisis in all his texts between the ruler and the ruled. That's why the king needs to annihilate his creativity. Similarly, I believe that wherever money is involved, politics is also involved. In Manipur, or anywhere, for that matter, theatre people expect the government to give them money. But that's a wrong expectation. Because if the theatre people were capable of voicing what the government wanted voiced, why would there be a government drama department? There are these two radically different poles—on the one hand the kind of theatre that we people are doing, which is very anti-establishment; and on the other hand, government-sponsored theatre carrying messages from the government. These two are completely antithetical. So how can we demand more money from the government? Even if the government gives us lakhs of rupees, it won't be for us to do theatre; it will be like Kalidasa being taken by the king to the palace. We must be aware of the harm associated with looking for funding.

LD: It's very true. If we're asking for money from the government drama department, then we have to compromise our values, our ideology, the mode of representation we have. We become vehicles for their messages. That's only natural, as that source is just a part of the existing structure.

MS: This problem of economics exists not only for theatre workers, but for singers and other performing artistes also. I'm a graduate of the NSD and I've been involved in theatre activities since 1979. I'm doing only theatre, but it's not giving me enough money for basic survival. I don't need much, but I do need some for my survival, for my basic needs. Where do I get that? It's not just a question of doing productions, we need money

to survive as theatre workers. I am a professional theatre worker and I need to be able to survive as that. How can that be arranged—that, I think, is the biggest problem.

WN: The term 'professional' or 'professionalism' is difficult to define, but if we take it in a broad sense then we should accept that one of the biggest professional theatre groups is run by the government itself, in the form of the department of drama unit. It is interesting to recall that Kanhailal was once the assistant producer of this departmental unit. He joined this unit with the sole objective of introducing professionalism into it. He had some prominent actors and actresses and musicians under him—quite a big team. This unit might have enacted many suitable plays—suitable for the politicians, for the common people, for patriotic sensibilities, also. Now, they have a regular source of money and they are very professional. I appreciate Premchand's viewpoint that money should not dominate our creativity, but then we also need money, as Surshen pointed out, both for productions and for survival. So there must be funding sources that can give us money without our creativity being hampered.

YR: I don't think that the departmental actors are professional actors; they might have been at one time, but now they are only actors by occupation. Should we call whoever receives money for doing theatre a professional theatre director?

LK: If we try to define professionalism in terms of the amount of money received, it will be wrong. I think it should be in terms of the amount of time devoted and the quality of work. But the picture is quite different amongst us theatre people, and this money problem is really becoming a big question mark. Like I don't know about my future or about the future of my actors. I can't pay them a single penny unless I get a grant or something, and this affects their creativity, because they face problems with their families due to lack of money. Naturally, they stop thinking about theatre. I agree that money shouldn't prevail over creativity, but it's also a big problem to be creative with no money.

MS: The attitude should definitely be professional, but professionalism should not be defined by how much money one is earning—that's an important point.

NP: Conventionally, when we say 'professional' we mean that one is earning one's livelihood in that field. But in theatre, I think that this needs to be redefined in terms of attitude. If someone is earning his livelihood through theatre but that theatre is not of a professional standard, how can we call him a professional theatre person? On the other hand, if someone is a teacher or a government employee by occupation but produces plays that are professionally superb, why shouldn't we call him a professional theatre worker? This is why I think that the conventional meaning of 'professional' has now lost relevance in theatre—it needs to be redefined in terms of attitude and involvement. Even if someone is earning his livelihood through something else but is involved to a greater degree in theatre, he should be called a professional theatre person.

Coming back to the question of money, it's not just money—it's also the question of fame, of national and international recognition, of going to the Edinburgh or Moscow Festival. National recognition of Manipuri theatre happened in the 1980s when insurgency here was at its height, because the rulers in Delhi realized that, emotionally, Manipur was not a part of India—that's my interpretation. That's why some Manipuri persons came to be recognized by the centre. One of our MPs became a union minister, and Ratan Thiyam became the director of NSD. Also, Manipuri dance came to be given a lot of prominence, as that is harmless enough to be taken to international festivals. But Manipuri theatre is a problem, as it's highly political. The productions that can be taken have to be decontextualized from the Manipuri situation, they have to be as conservative and safe as traditional Manipuri dance. That is how Manipuri theatre came to be disconnected from the reality here.



Antigone

Romola Yenshembam (28), Banian Repertory Theatre: At present the position of actresses in contemporary Manipuri theatre is not an easy one, it is somehow undermined by the males. From the point of view of family, being an actress is always a problem. At the same time, in the eyes of society it is not easy because society watches the actress all the time. There are lots of interested girls who want to join theatre, but because of the social situation, they are not able to come out and express themselves through theatre. Generally speaking, at present there are certain elements in the theatre and in the society in general which make it difficult for an actress to work. But I really do not care whether, in the eyes of society, we are outcasts or not. I know that I have the same right and same capability to work in theatre as a man does.

Lairenmayum Bhumeshwari (25), Aryan Theatre: There are a lot of problems for the actresses in Manipur. For example, it is impossible to go out at night without someone from the family accompanying me. It is very restrictive. Sometimes there may not be a male member of the family available to accompany me. So the woman needs to go out alone. But the society says that a woman should not do such things. There is a lack of understanding in the society. Society keeps an eye on the woman. In fact, we want to be liberated from all this and I am not using the word in a narrow sense. We want full rights for women, just as men enjoy them in society. The position of women in Manipuri society is not what it ideally should be. There are so many unwanted things we experience daily from different quarters. I do not want to mention any particular event. Everything we face in the society or in the family affects our work. Personally, when I come to the theatre, I try to forget these outside experiences and not allow them to show directly in my theatre work. But it always has a partial, indirect effect on my theatre.

Maibam Chhatrabali Devi (28), Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union: As long as we are unmarried we can work in theatre despite these problems. But once an actress is married, her husband will probably not allow her to act. Though she is interested in continuing, she may have to stop altogether. A fear like this should not exist at all. As for myself, there is no family problem. But I am aware of the problems an actress usually faces from her own family. I am very lucky in this regard. I have received all possible help from my parents and they are very happy to see my work and they come and watch my plays. They encourage me a lot. But at the same time, I am very concerned about other actresses and their problems. I also do not know whether I will be able to continue



The Actresses Speak: A Group Discussion

This is an amalgamation of two discussions held in Imphal with young actresses from Manipuri experimental theatre groups. The first was coordinated by Biren Das Sharma. While talking to the groups, he noticed that the women would remain silent in the presence of their directors; sensing their eagerness to communicate, Biren invited them to a session of their own. When they met as a group, they opened up and shared their thoughts and feelings about being women in theatre, an embattled position at the best of times, and even more so in a tradition-bound society like Manipur. By the end of their discussion, they had gained so much from the experience, that they began to discuss forming a network and holding regular meetings. Some months later, there was a second discussion with them, in which some actresses who had been unable to attend the earlier session joined in. This time the coordination was by Anjum Katyal, with the help of Khilton Nongmaithem, who interpreted.

after I get married. As for myself, I have decided not to marry unless I am allowed to continue with acting. I want to continue; and, if necessary, I may not marry at all.

Lairenmayum Bhumeshwari: I have joined theatre of my own free will. It is my decision. I know that I must bear all social and family problems, everything that goes with it. As an actress I have experienced many problems, but I know all the time that I have to continue. The society may think that being in theatre and working as an actress, I am not going in the right direction, not doing the right thing. But I feel that we are doing something good for the society. Most of the time, those who claim that they are working for the betterment of the society are not actually doing so—they often do a lot of bad things. I know that as an actress, I have to overcome all these problems in my acting career.

Minakumari Sagolsem (25), Paradise Theatre: As a Manipuri actress, when I perform on the stage I have some cultural shyness about showing my body, and even the looseness of the costume affects my mind and concentration. I cannot really completely shake off my cultural and traditional inhibitions. And all this affects my performance. Even from friends who are not in this field, one hears stray comments which leave a mark in the artiste's mind. One feels as if being an actress is some kind of an immoral thing, as if things go on behind the scenes.

Romola Yenshembam: As actresses we find it very difficult to open up on the stage because we are being observed all the time. For instance, in a play one is asked to act with an actor who is playing the father. As an actress one transforms oneself and portrays the character of the daughter in a convincing manner. If the actress playing the daughter hugs the male actor playing her father, the audience will think that she is being forward. The society will not accept it, will not think for a moment that she has transformed herself and become the daughter. Experiences such as this definitely will make an actress silent, will not allow her to give her best, will prevent her from coming close to a character she plays, restrict her from exploring the character fully. So even when one portrays a character, one may not do it convincingly. When the group travels, when an actress performs for an audience outside Manipur, they will think that the actress is inhibited, that she cannot express the feelings and emotions of the character, that she can't project the character. This definitely makes one feel really sorry. As an actress I understand such problems, but unfortunately it is difficult for us to talk about them. A



Pukhrambam Ranjeeta Devi in *The Tortured*.

good actress has the ability to act as convincingly as any male actor. But a director may think that an actress should not or cannot do certain difficult and demanding things which he would then assign to the actors. This makes an actress unhappy, because she believes that she is capable of

taking up any challenging role. Something like this will make an actress very frustrated. In most cases one will keep it to oneself and suffer. Frustration is always there in an actress' life. Another point is that our knowledge of theatre is limited to the Manipur theatre scene.

As an actress I want to experience as many branches of theatre practice as possible. I want to know and learn techniques other than those I already know. Personally, I have a very strong urge to do any challenging role, I want to do it as vigorously as an actor does and I definitely want to continue.

Rajkumari Bedarani Devi (25), Manipur Dramatic Union: I really become unaware of the presence of the audience when I perform a role. I usually do what the character demands and completely forget the audience. If the audience is not satisfied there is no point in acting. If the point I want to make does not reach the audience, the whole effort will be meaningless. So I will do whatever a character demands to communicate and convince the audience. I will do it even if the audience does not accept that portrayal fully. In the field of art and creativity, I do not have any fear. I may take the role of a mad

woman, or a serious woman, anything. But after the performance is over, I will once again become the same human being, the same person. I am not afraid of taking up any character. But it is true that sometimes we fear hearsay, 'Oh, she is always going out at night, why does she spend the whole night out?' One fears such unpleasant comments.

I am the eldest child in the family and I have to look after my family. At the same time, I have to find time for theatre. An actress experiences a lot of unpleasant things. For example, when I return from the theatre late at night, there is a feeling within myself, as if I have done something wrong. This is something one should not feel at all. I very strongly feel that many actresses like myself are yearning to do something new. But often the directors are not able to give this yearning an expression. Some actresses are not allowed by their directors to work with other groups.

Pukhrabam Ranjeeta Devi (21), Deal Repertory Theatre: Actors and actresses working on the same platform are equal, there is no difference between them, and there should not be any.

Laimayum Gaitri Devi (19), Manipur Dramatic Union: Sometimes my parents ask me whether I will return home at night or not. When rehearsal is on full swing one naturally

has to give more time and stay out for longer periods. But I would say that, in general, the position of actresses in contemporary Manipuri theatre is much better than earlier. This has been possible because of the social and cultural changes that have taken place in Manipur over the last two or three decades. It has definitely improved now.

Pukhrambam Ranjeeta Devi: I am fortunate that I belong to an artistic family. But still, the question is, how long can I continue? This concern is always there. Since childhood



Laimayum Gaitri Devi in *Sanarembi*, by Manipur Dramatic Union, directed by Lamabam Gojendra.

I've had the chance to see performances and also be involved in various artistic activities. My father, my brother and others in the family have been involved in various kinds of cultural work for so many years, and I have observed them working since my childhood. I got my inspiration from them. I have a very strong desire to continue as an actress. But there is a kind of conflict between my artistic feelings and my social bindings. I am also concerned about my future life, economic stability and my status as an actress in society.

Minakumari Sagolsem: In my case there was no family background of theatre. But since my childhood, whenever I saw a play or listened to one on the radio, I felt like trying it out, felt that I, too, could do it. At school, when I saw someone reciting a poem, I would come back and open a text and read out poetry and try to capture the feeling again. All these little things inspired me to join theatre. After joining theatre I became more concerned about other people's situations and suffering, and how they react to them. Theatre is a means of understanding social life.

Y. Satyavati Chanu (20), Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union: Ever since I was a child I was interested in dancing and in acting. But being young and a woman, I couldn't do much about it. I would sometimes attend workshops on acting without telling my family, telling them only on the day the play was to be staged. My father was against the idea in the beginning. Before joining theatre I was very immature and thought like a child. But I have learnt so much, I have learnt how to talk to different people, how to become much more social, much more understanding.

Romola Yenshembam: In school I was very interested in acting and I took every opportunity to show it. During free periods, I would act for the rest of the class, pretending to be a drunkard, all impromptu. I would relate funny stories to my friends, and make them laugh, or tell sad stories and make them unhappy. Any social service function in the locality saw me taking part. Every year, in our locality, there used to be a play, and I was often asked to play a part. That's how I gradually got involved in theatre.

Personally, through my theatre work, I have experienced a lot of change in terms of my own thinking, my own understanding of theatre. Before joining theatre I had certain preconceived ideas about it, which have changed radically since I started working as an actress. In the beginning, I thought theatre was a good place to work, that working as an actress would be really good. At that time I had no idea that there were so many unwanted, unpleasant things behind the scenes. For example, the portrayal of a particular character depends on the script, on what the script demands. In a play, one may take the role of a bad woman and in that play one then acts out that particular character. What one portrays in a play does not affect one's personal life outside theatre. But an actress will always feel, 'If I do such a role, what will the audience think about me?' Often, after doing such a role, I feel that I should not have portrayed such a character in front of the audience. Such is the social situation. During rehearsals, sometimes, I find it difficult to get into the character, sometimes it takes days to understand the character, and during that span of time I remain really angry and irritated. As an actress I always know what I am doing, whether I am doing it right or wrong.

The actors and actresses come from different places. Once we are assembled to work, it is like a family, no one should be left out. Theatre teaches us how to live together, work together, how to associate with each other. A theatre worker should be a very openminded person, should have a big heart. Theatre can broaden one's understanding of the family and the society. I also want to tell you that I have joined theatre because there was no other way I could enjoy myself, make myself happy.

Lairenmayum Bhumeshwari: There were a lot of things which I could not express earlier, before I joined theatre, and used to hide within myself. Theatre has given me a

chance to express myself. But at the same time, as an actress a lot of new, unspoken experiences remain hidden within myself.

O. Sharmila Chanu (28), Theatre Mirror: Just like sportsmen who win prizes, when I get awards for Best Actress, I feel such joy! Communicating with people is something which I enjoy and which theatre allows me to do. There's a lot of difference between women who are in theatre and those who are not involved in acting; we are much more broad-minded and knowledgeable about the world and about ourselves; we are much more confident.



Rajkumari Bedarani Devi in *Sanarembi*.

Maibam Chhatrabali Devi: When I was young I had no idea what theatre was, what drama was. Theatre helped me to understand how one could communicate, serve society, serve humanity. At the same time, as an actress, I want to compete with others. It helps me to develop myself. After I joined theatre I was able to interact with many people from different disciplines, from dance, from martial arts. I would like to work and develop my

knowledge and understanding of theatre further. I have realized that it would have been very foolish if I had not joined theatre, and stayed at home doing other work, like weaving. So many women of my age do not know anything about society and the world outside. Theatre has opened my eyes and developed my mind a lot. And at the same time, I am enjoying myself.

Lairenmayum Bhumeshwari: Learning about human qualities started with my theatre work. I am able to understand people better. What I find most important is that through my theatre work I have been able to develop my understanding and handling of different characters. When I am assigned a role of a mother I have to prepare myself, get ready for the role. Now, I have my mother at home and I am very involved with my family—so I thought it would not be difficult to portray a mother. But once I started working in theatre, my understanding of family broadened. Because of theatre, family is no longer a single, homogeneous concept to me. I know that there are so many different families, innumerable mothers, fathers in society. Each one is different from the other.

Rajkumari Bedarani Devi: When I started acting, a drunkard used to mock me regularly, 'Why do you go to the theatre? You should enjoy yourself like we do. What is the use of theatre in your life?' I was determined to become an excellent actress and show that guy that theatre can make me powerful and take me up to a superior level. I knew theatre could give me the courage to challenge those kinds of people, to face them. I wanted to show them that theatre can do such things. Maybe he has mocked me in a lighthearted fashion because he knows me as a local girl. But I think it is a kind of betrayal—people should encourage us. At that time, I decided to show society that the kind of positive power and energy one gets from theatre is superior to the kind of negative energy one sees in the behaviour of a drunkard.

As for myself, I feel that society keeps an eye on the actress, on me, it watches whatever I do. Even my relatives scolded me when I first joined theatre and said, 'If you join theatre you will eventually become a fallen woman.' I told my mother that they are scolding me and mocking me and saying such things. My mother encouraged me and said, 'Forget whatever they have said. You yourself decide what you are going to do. If you think it is right, do it.' I was so relaxed and felt so good about myself when she said that. Amongst my relatives there was no one to give me advice and encouragement. But my mother was ready to help me. As long as my parents allow it, I no longer care about what others say about my acting career.

Laimayum Gaitri Devi: Theatre is a different world altogether and I am enjoying acting in theatre. Initially I was very fascinated with dance, Manipuri dance. I had no idea about theatre at all. I used to go to the movies and watch those romantic scenes with songs and dances and I often asked myself, how did they do it? Can I do it? Gradually I became interested in acting. But my first interest came from watching films. Through theatre I learnt about human behaviour, human values and the complexities in human relationships. I think I understand people much better now. After joining theatre, I found a lot of interesting things about theatre acting which I didn't expect at all. I was basically inspired by my elder sister, who was in theatre, and I got full support from my family. I thought acting is not really a very difficult thing to do and it is just a form of entertainment. So I used to imitate my elder sister's gestures. Gradually I learnt about what theatre involves, the role theatre plays in our society. In fact, everything you find in society is in theatre, and one can pick up many things from theatre. I have learnt things from theatre of which I had no idea before—I even learnt things which I could not learn from society or from my family as such—things like social behaviour and the need for social reform.

Minakumari Sagolsem: I feel very alienated in terms of communication with the audience. I sometimes feel that the audience does not understand my artistic work when I perform on stage. The audience should understand and react to what I do on stage. As

an actress I feel alienated. So far I have done different roles and tried to communicate different problems of women to the audience. But somehow theatre does not affect the audience the way it should. It does not bring in any change in their thinking. They do not understand that what we say has some importance, that they should give this a thought. Somehow, what we communicate does not reach the audience. And yet, despite everything, I sense that some kind of change is slowly taking place. The kind of problem I faced in the beginning has definitely lessened. I think if we keep on doing our work we will be able to influence our society in the long run.

Pukhrambam Ranjeeta Devi: For the audience, theatre remains a momentary experience. It ends with the performance. The audience does not take the performance seriously.

Minakumari Sagolsem: I feel the audience cannot really appreciate or understand me as an actress, the roles I'm trying to portray, etc. There's a feeling of alienation from the audience. I have played a variety of roles representing women and their varied problems, but there's no change or awareness in the audience regarding the same. They understand momentarily, but not to the extent that it lasts and changes their attitudes towards these problems. However, I still feel that if we continue working as we are now, we will be able to change society slowly but surely, the way things have changed—though only a little bit—over the years.

Romola Yenshembam: Though contemporary theatre sometimes projects the frustration and anger of Manipuri women, this is often not done in the proper way. Attempts are made to project women's problems through theatre, but so far such efforts have had no impact on society, which makes me think that, probably, such themes have not been handled in the right manner. We need to try and find other ways of projecting them.

In the earlier days there were very few actresses in Manipur. Probably that is the reason why they could not portray the real problems of women through theatre. But as a result of their hard work, more girls were able to come into theatre. At the moment we have a good number of women in theatre as a result of those actresses. But still, a lot has to be done. We have to make society understand us—sometimes they understand but don't accept, and we have to make them accept. We will continue our work even if a section of society betrays us.

Theatre has proved that as a medium it has a lot to give to society. Theatre can pass our message to society. I sense that, slowly, people are becoming aware of these things and because of that people are coming to the theatre. At this moment we should not stop, but continue.

Maibam Chhatrabali Devi: Most of the plays produced by different groups now are about the oppression of women. But it is difficult to assess whether the message is reaching the audience or not. As an actress what I do has been perceived by the director. I do what the director wants me to do. In general, the portrayal of the mother is very real and convincing in many contemporary plays. They show what is happening in society now. For example, in a family, the son may be in an insurgency group and when he does not return home and is wanted by the police . . . In a situation like this the mother suffers a lot. This kind of situation is being focused on very convincingly in contemporary theatre. Also, the portrayal of sisters who have lost their brothers, and of daughters who have lost their fathers, are very significant. The portrayal of female characters in such situations is quite convincing in contemporary Manipuri theatre. But there are also plays in which a woman's desire for freedom from society's suppression has been shown. There are mass killings, communal killings, and amidst such violence the women have a definitive role to play. As an actress one can only express, project this, through theatre.

Our youth have to be very careful now. In Manipur there's not only the insurgency problem, but other problems like drugs. There's a strong tendency for the youth to leave Manipur, too. They think that places like Delhi or Calcutta are far better. As women, whether mothers or sisters, we have to do our best to persuade them to listen to us. In

Sanagee Keiruk (The Golden Ladder, directed by Loitongbam Dorendra) I played the role of a mother who suffers when her son does not return from outside. This is an example of the kind of problems faced by women in Manipur, and I tried to represent it through the play.

Romola Yenshembam: We often say that our work is tiring, that we feel exhausted. But think of the women in theatre 20-30 years back. Compared to them and the work they had to do, we are very comfortably off. Even today, people still don't totally approve of us joining theatre; when we think of those actresses during our mothers' times, we feel quite scared to think of what they must have gone through. It has to be said that whatever acceptance we have today, is because of their work and their efforts. What we do today is going to make it easier for those who will follow us. Sometimes when we see something wrong happening, we are helpless, we can't do anything about it. But through theatre we can make people aware of it. That's what theatre is all about, a source of social expression, a means to highlight the problems of society.

O. Sharmila Chanu: I quite agree with the points she has raised, about society etc. Like when we see some leaders in the government who are doing things wrong, our only means of combating it is to speak through theatre. We cannot do anything else, but through our plays we can expose them and the wrong they are doing. That is our only source of comfort.

Translated and transcribed by Elizabeth Vesant.



Sanarembi



The traditional performance forms of Manipur, alive and flourishing, coexist with the experimental theatre. The Sumang Leela, in particular, attracts a large audience wherever it is performed, and its circuit of troupes, directors, playwrights and actors forms a well-established, professional system. This section deals with the Sumang Leela form in some detail.

Sumang Leela (The Courtyard Play): An Introduction

Arambam Somorendra

Features of the Form

Sumang Leela is one of the most popular forms of Manipuri folk theatre; in fact, the most popular art form for the common people of Manipuri. The term *sumang* means courtyard and *leela*, the Sanskrit term, carried its meaning into Manipuri as play / performance.

Sumang Leela is enacted in an open space without any stage or heavy props. An open space of about 18 feet square is sufficient for a performance. A bamboo pole is placed in the middle to hold the lights and this arrangement is normally taken care of by the host who invites a group to perform.

There are some ten artistes in a troupe. The roles of women are played by men, who speak in a falsetto voice. The actors speak in stylized highpitched tones, which was originally necessary for the actors to be heard by the audience seated all around, and now, after the advent of the microphone, has become a convention. A troupe is a self-sufficient unit with actors and musicians, because all the members perform the assigned roles, and almost all the actors can play the musical instruments, which mostly consist of a *dholak* (drum) and two or three *ramkartals*, which are small cymbals widely used in folk music.

The organizer of a troupe is normally the director, who also happens to be the seniormost artiste. He builds up the stories, dialogues and actions of a play. Sumang Leela groups are travelling troupes that follow an itinerary of performances booked in advance. They travel by their own transport and perform at least three shows a day on the average.

Normally a show begins in the evening, after sundown. A fee of around Rs 4000 only is offered, which is traditionally known as *dakshina*. An actor gets his share of the fee after deducting incidental and transport charges for the party.

The Sumang Leela season usually starts from Yaosang (Holi Festival) and continues throughout the year except for some breaks during the rainy season (June–July–August).

A play starts with an invocation song to God, the King or the Motherland, followed by a song saluting the audience. This is a ritual tradition followed by all the troupes. At present, a patriotic song is usually sung. The patriotism of the Manipuris, their love for and pride in their motherland, and their reverence for their national heroes, are voiced in the song; and the Sumang Leela troupes keep alive the finest chapters of modern Manipuri history in the opening songs of their performances.

At the beginning of a performance, the leader of the troupe shouts, 'O Brethren, let us sing the glory of the motherland' and other members answer, 'Let us sing'. With this, the actors enter into the performance space from the dressing room, which is traditionally located either in the northeastern corner or the southwestern corner of the courtyard. There is a taboo against situating the dressing room on any other side. Usually, the courtyard of the host who invites a troupe is the performance area where the performers and audience congregate for the show. After the invocation song, two or three actors sit on one side of the acting area to sing a song saluting the audience, after which the play begins. The locale of the action is revealed through the dialogues of the actors; two or three chairs and a small, low table represent all the props of the play. These are used to indicate houses, hotels, offices, bedrooms or any other place the play demands. The scenes fade in and fade out with the entry and exit of the actors.

In the olden days, the actors did their make-up with indigenous materials like soot, *chandan* (sandalwood paste), vermilion, mustard oil etc. But now complete make-up with modern materials is the norm. The actors do their own make-up and carry their own costumes. Typically, no actors wear shoes, but socks are a convention. Ordinarily, it is odd to see a man walking about in a suit without shoes on, but it is the appropriate costume for a Sumang Leela actor appearing before an expectant crowd to perform a play on a modern social theme.

Origin and Evolution

Sumang Leela traces its origin to the comic skits of the jesters of Maharaja Sir Chandrakirti Singh (1851–1886). Jestors in the Manipuri tradition were favourite attendants of kings and they were witty, humorous, and gifted masters of improvisation. Very pleased with the simulated actions of his two jestors Abujamba Saiton and Kharibam Laishuba, Sir Chandrakirti Singh ordered the two to give public performances of their comic enactments in the Durga Puja Festival. This came to be known as Fagee Leela (*fagee* means comic). Thus Fagee Leela was born and many talented comedians formed small groups and took to acting as a venture. Gradually, they became professionals. This continued upto the 1930s. The main characteristics of Fagee Leela were verbal repartee, cross talk, the comic appearance of the actors, funny physical contortions and gestures, and straight jokes.

While the Fagee Leela was still quite active, around the 1910s, two new and bigger troupes came up, and they came to be known as Kabul Pala (chorus of Kabul) and Fadibee Pala (chorus of the Tattered Clothes). These also belonged to the Fagee genre, but with a subtle undercurrent of protest and defiance directed at the British masters and their bureaucratic servants. Sumang Leela evolved out of all these performance forms.

The first full-length Sumang Leela play *Harishchandra*, based on a story from the scriptures, came up in 1918, and it was followed by many other plays. Sumang Leela has lived its folk life for about 80 years now, nurtured by the common people who have a taste for its simple but vibrant performance.

In the earlier days it didn't have a written script. The leader of a troupe built up a story and taught the dialogues to the actors orally. It was in the 1950s that written texts started being used for Sumang Leela plays. *Puranma Meithaba* (The Burning of the Puranas) and *B. A. Mapa Lamboiba* (The Renunciation of the World by B. A.'s Father) were the first two plays with written scripts. Ningombam Angonon was the writer-composer of the first play, while Nongmaijing Sharma wrote and directed the second one. The introduction of the written script in Sumang Leela signified the growth of its directors in the real sense of the term, as, before this, the performances always depended a lot on improvisations by the actors themselves. It also heralded the need for a scriptwriter and coincided with G. C. Tongbra's active playwriting period. Tongbra's wit and humour suited the basic traits of the Sumang Leela and his piercing social criticism added a sharp edge, which helped the common audience dissect the society in which they were living, and its values.

The other important landmark in the development of Sumang Leela was the Second World War, the experience of which brought in new ideas of nationalism and a keen sense of native sentiment. Postwar modernization also affected its evolution, as it introduced marked changes in the style of production. Sumang Leela now came to have a professional touch in the form of realistic costumes and make-up *a la* the proscenium, though the style of acting remained very different.

Thus Sumang Leela marched forward, and at present it reflects the real problems of Manipuri society with scripts supplied by a host of young writers. Mention may be made of Chana Lukhoi whose 'Manipuri-ness' in story, plot and a common man's dialogue has established him as a name in scripting for the Sumang Leela. In the annual Sumang Leela festivals organized by the Manipur State Kala Akademi, there are some twenty to thirty troupes competing for the best positions in Production, Acting and Direction etc. There are many women's troupes competing for the same positions in the women's section. The troupes which stand first and second in the competition get bookings throughout the year and the professional actors get a substantial income as a result.

Sumang Leela takes up almost all the present-day issues of our society, from family problems to AIDS and insurgency. A minister or a bureaucrat is the devil, whereas the underdogs are the heroes. These underdogs suffer, they are subjected to exploitation and dehumanization and they die in pain and agony. The audience claps and whistles when they utter meaningful words of truth, sympathy, love and humanism. The audience reaction underscores the throbbing pulse of truth and justice in an otherwise decadent and degenerate-looking Manipuri society, and the intense desire of the scriptwriter for a better life, his profound sense of humanism, is undoubtedly appreciated. The Manipuri Sumang Leela has the courage to challenge the morbid and corrupt system perpetuated by a government led by a group of people who are devoid of principles or morality—and it is thus the most popular art form of the common people who yearn for a better life.

The Actors

The majority of the actors hail from the rural and semi-urban areas. They are the real theatre professionals

in the performing arts of Manipur. Other theatre workers cannot earn a living from theatre, but Sumang Leela actors do. There are some actors who are office workers, but they, too, are involved in the Sumang Leela just like professionals. They are educated properly and by virtue of their education and social intercourse, they take leading roles in the Sumang Leela organizations. Since Sumang Leela has been promoted by the government, these educated actors liaise with various agencies of the government and the connoisseurs of art, and work for the continued existence of the groups they belong to, and share the benefits accrued with their colleagues.

The majority of these actors are physically fit and possess a lot of stamina. They talk in highpitched tones and put all their energy into the action. They usually perform three shows a day, each lasting about two hours. They get very little sleep at night since the last show ends sometime around 1 or 2 a.m. They are adept at facing difficult situations. On many occasions they are subjected to severe manhandling by the security forces as they move about for night shows. Among the older actors, there are some who are known throughout the plains of Manipur for the famous roles played in their acting careers. To cite a few examples, the late Jugeshwar Sharma was known as Cheitei Saba (the one who took the role of Cheitei), H. Bonod is referred to as Jagatsing Daku Saba and Inakkhunba as Devadas Saba.

Sumang Leela actors range from 18 to 60 years of age. Itukhombi Sharma acted till he was seventy-two. He joined Sumang Leela from the time of the play *Savitri Satyaban*, which was produced immediately after *Harishchandra*. Roles of women are normally played by younger men, but there are many older actors who play women's roles. They look feminine, speak softly and behave like women. The Sumang Leela organizers are on the lookout for delicate-looking boys to recruit and train. They are all handsome youths, and when they emerge in full make-up and costume, they are seen as women by the audience. They suit this genre so well that the audience has never asked for a real woman to play a woman's role in a Sumang Leela performance.

However, the women's performance groups are all-women affairs. They play the roles of both men and women. Amongst them, too, certain actresses are identified with certain roles. Muktabali played Nongban in the *Moirangparba* (Chapters on the Moirang People) play, and she is considered next only to the late veteran Laishram Manglem Singh in that role (Nongban being the antagonist in the epic love story of Khamba and Thoibi). Keisham Ibemhal is noted as Thonglen, the fierce warrior, and Gambhini as Chaoba, the artful minister, in the same play.

Sumang Leela and its artistes live by the patronage of the common people, as this art form entertains, informs and reflects their lives, their hopes, aspirations, and despair. On the other hand, as a performing art of the folk genre, it is not bound by many codified rules, save the conventions followed for generations. So far, the government has not done justice to this popular form of art. No doubt Sumang Leela festivals are organized through the Manipur State Kala Akademi, the apex body of art and culture in the state, as a gesture of promotion—but this is considered just a ritual by the Sumang Leela artistes as well as the connoisseurs of art in the state. That it is a mere gesture becomes evident through the simple fact that while the standard charge for a performance is Rs 4000, the festival fees are Rs 500 only. The Sumang Leela groups accept this fee with much disdain and the old artistes have to accept an old-age pension of just Rs 100 per month in this period of economic hardship. Even this negligible pension is not for all the meritorious artistes, only for the few lucky ones who are included in the shortlist made to meet the meagre budget of the Akademi, quashed by the Finance Department because of the financial constraints of the state. Nothing substantial that an artiste can be proud of, or that can help improve material conditions or provide intellectual support, has been done so far. This art form is still looked upon as cheap and inferior, so no attention is paid to understanding the energy and involvement of the artistes who have devoted a lifetime to this common people's art. The creativity and sense of aesthetics which are fundamental factors in the cultural life of Manipuri people also get ignored in the process.

The author is a noted theatre scholar and playwright associated with Aryan Theatre of Manipur, and is currently working on a book on the Sumang Leela.

Thok Leela: Satire, Wit and Comedy

Y. Sadananda Singh

According to Yumnam Birasingh, a theatre enthusiast of the 19th century, Thok Leela is a 'comedy satirizing the social conditions, the courtier and king. The actors with their repartee are talented in producing satiric, comic and rollicking effects'. Literally, the word *thok* means 'at random'. The Manipuri colloquial '*thokka thakka hek touradana*' means 'doing something at random'.

Hence, it can be inferred that Thok Leela is a satirical comedy played at random with neither a fixed plot nor any fixed character. It had neither a written script nor, amazingly, a director. The only guideline was the advice of the elders and the gurus.

The haphazard nature and disorderly sequence is typical of this kind of play. The dialogue is spontaneous. It is the wit and skill of the artistes that weaves the delightful repartee, mocking the follies of politics, kingship, courtiers, ethnic society, British administrators etc. This art form used to be an improvised criticism of the different social and political ills of contemporary Manipuri society. One finds it amazing that such criticism didn't provoke the anger of the king. This can be credited to the wonderful skill of the artistes, who were able to wield their cross talk in a mild and courtly language, which was yet swift enough to strike its target. Though Thok Leela consumed its audience with laughter, it nevertheless left room for them to think. In short, Thok Leela was genuine satirical comedy that incited men to think amidst delightful laughter.

The Thok Leela opens with a prayer to the Almighty. The actors enter the space in a line, singing the prayer. The song is accompanied by the *dholak* and cymbals. This is called the *kattawaj*. The *kattawaj* is followed by the *beitha*: that is, the actors now sit in a corner of the space and sing a song addressing the audience. This tradition is still followed in some Sumang Leela/Yatrawali productions, but in many others it has been removed.

Unfortunately, there is no written record of the evolution of the Thok Leela. The date of its origin, therefore, remains inexact. However, from the stories handed down orally from generation to generation, it is understood that Thok Leela came into being when the first large-scale Durga Puja celebrations started in Manipur. Though Durga Puja was held from early times, accompanying the puja with festivities and idol worship started in the 19th century, during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti. Throughout the ten days of the puja, the Sankeertana was held. Furthermore, the well-known comedians were summoned by the king and asked to perform plays before the deity. In fact, the puja festival was not considered complete without these comedians. This can be considered the beginning of the Thok Leela/Fagee Leela. Coincidentally, it also sowed the seeds of Sumang Leela. In no time, Thok Leela showed itself to be one of the most popular sources of entertainment in the state. People started inviting the comedians for performances at the local maidan/courtyard and offered them *dakshina* (performance fee). Thus, public performances began to be given. This trend was followed till the reign of Sir Churachand Maharaj (1891–1941). But today, unfortunately, this theatre form has dissolved into other forms and ceased to exist.

At present, the Panthoibi Natya Mandir, Yumnam Leikai, Imphal, under the aid of Forum for Laboratory Theatres, Manipur, is producing plays that are very similar to the Thok Leela/Fagee Leela of old times. These plays scoff at social ills, follies of the government and the people. The zestful wit and repartee throws the audience into rollicking convulsions. These plays, though similar to the Thok Leela in many aspects, are different in that they are staged as contemporary plays in a proscenium theatre.

The author is an actor, writer, director of student theatre, and an official functionary of the Panthoibi Natya Mandir. He is doing research on the pre-World War II theatre of Manipur.

'The real power of Sumang Leela lies in its audience'

Birjit Ngangomba

This interview with Birjit Ngangomba, director of Sumang Leela plays, was conducted by Biren Das Sharma of STQ, in Imphal, in April 1996.

Birjit Ngangomba is regarded as one of the most popular Sumang Leela directors. Born in 1937, he learnt martial arts in his childhood and became a martial arts expert. In 1953 Hemango Biswas, the legendary singer of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), invited him to join the Assam IPTA troupe for a cultural tour to Mumbai, where Birjit demonstrated thang-ta, and also took part in other cultural activities. In 1954 he started his theatre career as an actor and worked under different directors like Biramongal Singh and R. K. Surjit Singh of Aryan Theatre; and Sawaijam Dharendra Singh and R. K. Deben Singh of Rupmahal Theatre. In 1955 he joined Manipur Dramatic Union (MDU) as an actor and later became a director. In 1984 he was invited by the NSD to conduct martial arts workshops. He has also been the teacher-in-charge of all the Imphal camps of NSD students since 1986. His interest in the popular Manipuri traditional form, the Sumang Leela, made him start directing plays in this form.

Why are you so fascinated with the Sumang Leela form?

In my opinion, this is one form which communicates directly with the audience and involves them in the play. The Sumang Leela audience is different from the proscenium theatre audience. Going to the theatre has become a fashion in Manipur. The theatre audience will dress up formally for a performance. It is like a social outing. On the other hand, Sumang Leela can be performed anywhere, at any place and at any time. The real power of Sumang Leela lies in its closeness to its audience. This is what I like most. Compared to regular theatre, the Sumang Leela audience is very lively and innocent. Once they come to know of a Sumang Leela performance in their locality, parents will send their children long before the show, to reserve space for them. On that day women will cook much earlier. The moment they hear the introductory music, they will leave all household duties and come to see the play. They will not even bother about their dress or how they look. Mothers sitting in the middle of the audience will watch the play while breastfeeding a baby. They will not pay any attention to anything else. They only concentrate on the play. Whatever play they see—tragic or comic—they react to it directly. This closeness to the audience is one of the most exciting qualities of the Sumang Leela.

The simplicity in a Sumang Leela presentation is really remarkable. Have you studied the unique features of this form?

I have. Take the courtyard itself, for example. In Manipur, all courtyards are surrounded by a number of households forming a small community. Sumang Leela takes place in this central courtyard and the audience comes from the surrounding households. The women usually come in small groups long before the performance, meet the lady of the main house, greet her and take their seat on the verandah and also on the steps. It is a kind of customary socializing. As their number increases, they occupy another side of the courtyard. The entire courtyard, which includes both the performance space and the space for the audience, can be divided diagonally and you will always find the male audience on one side and the female on the other. Interestingly, you will also find the make-up room on the women's side of the courtyard.

How is the audience so relaxed during a performance?

This is the very question I request proscenium theatre people to consider. My answer is that the Sumang Leela is regarded as something belonging to the audience, to the community itself. The main audience comes from the neighbourhood and they know each other. It is always a community gathering. All this makes the audience relaxed. As a form, Sumang Leela enjoys a

certain closeness with the audience. The performance takes place for them and literally amongst them. There is no distance.

Does this audience influence your work in any way?

Yes. I also observe the audience and their behaviour and pick up lots of things which ultimately find a place in my plays. Once, during a performance, I noticed a very beautiful girl in the audience. She was with her mother, who was combing her hair. I noticed that she was looking beyond the performance space. Then I saw a boy sitting on the other side. They were looking at each other. They were in silent communication through little gestures of the hands and slight movements of the head. They were actually talking to each other without using words. I realized that these gestures, this silent language, could be very useful in Sumang Leela. I have used these things with success. Observing people in their own social, community and family situations, and using their behavioural patterns in the plays, ensures perfect communication. When I direct a play, my objective is that it should be understood by the audience in its totality. If it fails to achieve this, then there is something wrong in my directorial work. Communication is most important in Sumang Leela. Certain *rasas* like *shringara* (eroticism), *karuna* (compassion) are addressed to the women in the audience. I have my own approach. When I direct a Sumang Leela play I address it to four specific persons in the audience—an innocent child who is not biased or conditioned, a guru (who is a knowledgeable person and can say, 'Yes, this can be shown this way' or 'you can't show this'), a deaf person who can only see and a blind person who can only hear. The story of the play should reach all of them and each one should understand it very clearly.

When did you become a Sumang Leela director?

In 1982 a Sumang Leela group engaged me for the first time for a month and seven days, to direct a play. At that time I had no idea about how to direct a Sumang Leela play. I was very nervous. The first play I directed was in 1982. It was called *Khamnu* and I did it in a realistic style. I actually do not like melodrama. I find it very artificial. I like real life, real people, and would like to depict it in the realistic mode. So I did the play in a realistic style.

How did the actors react to this shift?

They liked it. The play received a lot of appreciation from the audience. The actors used to believe that Sumang Leela was a substandard form. There is also a tendency to regard Sumang Leela performers as substandard. I helped the Sumang Leela actors to realize how rich the form is. I not only worked on the form itself but also tried to improve the working conditions. For example, after a performance the actors used to sleep in the green room, using their luggage as pillows. In the morning they would wake up, have tea and go to the next destination. All this changed after I came into Sumang Leela.

Does your training in martial arts help you in your present work?

I was invited by NSD in 1984 to conduct a martial arts workshop for three months. It was so successful that on student demand I had to extend my stay by three more months, for further training. During my stay at NSD I also got a chance to conduct classes on acting and movement. During this time, suddenly, I was able to understand myself and my work, specially martial arts, in relation to theatre. I realized that there are many elements in martial arts which can be used in theatre. I could see clearly how martial arts can become an essential part of training in the performing arts—whether it is theatre or jatra or something else. Acting and movements constitute the language through which theatre communicates. All forms of martial arts demand a consciousness of the space. How does a martial artist use a space, any space—small or big—without any problem? How does he manoeuvre perfectly within any given space? Both theatre and Sumang Leela people should be aware of this and be in a position to perform in any space, any place. An actor must have some concept of music, dance and movement. Movements, *tala*, *laya*, rhythm—one can find all these in martial arts. There are various steps which a martial artist uses. These steps can and must be used in Sumang Leela and they will definitely help the actors

to use any performing space more creatively. The sharpness in the movements of the eyes and the neck, which are very important in martial arts, should also be a part of the actors' training. In all forms of martial arts, there are elements which an actor can use. Movements and acting in Sumang Leela are quite different from those of modern theatre, primarily because of the very nature of the performing space. Not only the movements, the choreography is also different. For example, one can divide the performing space of Sumang Leela too, as in theatre. As a form, Sumang Leela has its own style, own evolution.

How does your understanding of martial arts help you to analyse the performing space of Sumang Leela?

Sumang Leela takes place in an open space with the audience sitting all around. There is one passage from the make-up room to the performing space. The entrance can be from any side, according to the shape and size of each specific performance space. I have studied the performing space and its basic characteristics and developed my own method of choreography accordingly. For example, a character entering the performance space should take a semi-circular path to meet another character and talk. His exit should complete the circle. The advantage of using the entire space in this way is that the actor will be seen from all sides and it will bring in more dynamism. Proscenium theatre space is usually divided into nine sections. But I have divided the Sumang Leela space into sixteen sections. There are certain sections which are 'strong' while others are 'weak'. The four corners are the strongest sections of the performance space. The actor, his face, his entire body and his acting can be seen clearly by most of the audience. But if he turns his back to the audience then the same section will be a weak section for him. The four strong corners are not equal. For example, actors standing at the righthand corner say, 'He will come soon.' 'Who? When?' This will create an expectation in the viewer's mind and he will definitely look at the entrance. This will unnecessarily shift the focus. So, for me, this is not as strong as other sections of the performing space. So I have divided it in a different way. Some of the Sumang Leela groups are using this. Compared to these groups, the work of other groups is very weak in terms of composition and movement. Most of them will only use the centre space, stand under the microphone and deliver their dialogues. They do not know how to make their acting more dynamic. Actors' positions and movements are generally guided by microphone placement. A successful use of the space will depend a lot on actors and their coordination.

What is the usual size of the performing area?

I usually make it 18 feet square. But in Manipur this is not really fixed. It may vary from 10 x 12 to 15 x 20 feet. It varies according to the size of each courtyard. Sumang Leela is very flexible in this sense.

Where do you start when you direct a Sumang Leela play? Do you start with the dialogues, with the choreography, or something else?

I start with the choreography, with the positioning of the actors, planning their movements, entries and exits. After that come the dialogues. Mind you, most Sumang Leela actors are not educated and they may not be equally talented. They need more time to memorize their lines. The idea is to get them into some sort of a rhythm and then start working on the lines. One should also learn how to use the microphone. One more point: I do not depend on dialogues all the time. Sometimes I use mime and pantomime to create specific effects and get the audience involved in a certain way. It really helps communication.

So when you direct, you consciously use theatrical techniques to enhance communication. Can you give me an example?

Yes. For example, an actor is playing a thief trying to steal. The owner says, 'Who is there?' and the thief hides behind a spectator as if he is hiding behind a statue. This simple technique momentarily makes the audience part of the play. In a revolutionary play, an actor takes a hand grenade and approaches the performing space only to find the police waiting there. The actor gives the hand grenade to a spectator saying, 'Please hide it' and then enters. After the police

leave, he goes back to that person and says, 'Now that they have gone, give me my hand grenade. I want to use it.' The audience may say, 'This is a fake.' The actor says, 'So is the play,' and everybody laughs. This is like a game, but it really involves the audience, establishes communication. That is the point. It really works and the audience enjoys it very much. To give you another example, in a romantic scene, the boy meets the girl. Now the girl's father is coming and the boy does not know what to do. The girl says, 'Please hide.' The actor asks the audience, 'Where can I hide?' 'Come here' or 'Behind the chair,' they say. 'Yes, yes,' says the actor, and hides. This is direct communication and it involves everybody—the actors as well as the audience. Such techniques cannot be used on the proscenium stage. But in Sumang Leela one can achieve this if the play is done in the realistic mode.

In Ishai Leela, which is performed through songs with very little dialogue, one cannot do these things. I also put a microphone in the green room to amplify offstage dialogues. This is something I have introduced for the first time in the history of Sumang Leela. I also use a lot of mime, as in a recent play, which depicted a conflict between the Naga and Kuki tribes. An entire scene was done in mime. The space was divided into two rooms—drawing room and dressing room. Various activities were taking place in those two rooms and everything was depicted in mime. Mind you, there was no set at all, and no dialogue.

Would you say that one can bring modern theatrical techniques into the Sumang Leela, and if done carefully it will work well?

Yes. If it is done properly it will definitely communicate. People tell me that this is a new style. But in my opinion the older generation of actors and gurus used many of these elements in their own way, and they did it instinctively. The styles were not named, but nevertheless they instinctively used many techniques for better communication. But such usage was very limited. I use it more freely. As I told you, in a recent play I did two complete scenes in mime, without any dialogue. The audience understood them perfectly.

Experimental and modern plays also use mime.

As a director in this state I fear that experimental and modern theatre will not be able to survive in Manipur. I say this because modern and experimental theatre directors in Manipur are only imitating others, imitating the west. You will see the same style being used over and over again. The audience gets bored. Modern and experimental plays have failed to give the audience anything new. That is why modern Manipuri theatre is losing its audience day by day. Sometimes the directors use a lot of folk elements. But they are freely mixing different styles. The audience do not know what they are doing and why. They are confused. So the audience does not come to see these experimental works any more. Their audience is now exclusively an invited audience. Most of the directors do not know folk forms or martial arts properly. Some of these plays are appreciated by people abroad who do not know our culture. But I think that the modern and experimental theatre of Manipur will die a natural death.

Writing for Sumang Leela

Nandakumar Moirangthem

My involvement with theatre began when I met Thokchom Shyam, Actor-Director of Leimayon Arts Centre, Singjamei, Imphal. Under his guidance I became an actor for the first time in my life, in 1985. Thereafter, I also worked under theatre directors like Thoudam Nodiya of LAC, Imphal, the late Khaidem Deben and Ch. Gopal of Rupmahal Theatre, Hijam Shyam of Manipur Dramatic Union etc. Due to my strong desire to do theatre with a professional approach, I joined the Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union as an actor and worked under directors like R. K. Naba and Loitongbam Dorendra. I also once acted in a play directed by Sanakhya Ebotombi. This association with theatre gradually led me to write plays. I also attended a playwrights' workshop organized by the Manipur State Kala Akademi, Imphal.

My first play, *Eenga Nongjugee Thanil* (Full Moon in Rainy June), was published in 1989 with financial assistance from the Manipur State Kala Akademi. Since then I've written many plays, like *Awaiba Shakti*, *Om Shanti*, *Lolluraba Thongna Hangdorakpada* (When the Closed Doors Open), *Khongchat Kairaba Grah* (Planet out of Orbit).

As the financial condition of most theatre units without a hall of their own does not permit the expense of recurrent productions, it often happens in Manipur that the plays written with much effort are shown in public only once or twice. It is a great disappointment to the playwright and director that the points to be discussed and the ideas to be expressed through the play cannot be communicated to the common people, as the plays are seen by only a small 'armchair' audience at the time of a festival or a competition.

It is this factor that got me involved with the Sumang Leela of Manipur, which is associated closely with the public and is the most suitable form of performative art since it is rooted in this soil.

On the suggestion of Kshetri Birjeet, a noted Sumang Leela actor, my play *Awaiba Shakti*, originally written for proscenium production, was performed in the Sumang Leela format by the FAPADA (Film And Performing Arts Development Association) and presented at the All Manipur Sumang Leela Festival, 1990, organized by the Manipur State Kala Akademi. Since then I've written other Sumang Leela scripts and received 'Best Script Writer' awards, 'Best Production' awards, at these festivals. In addition, I've given performances as a Sumang Leela actor as and when required, and even got the 'Best Sumang Leela Actor' award from the Manipur State Kala Akademi! The plays which were declared Best Production or Second Best Production at these festivals have received a good number of invitations from different places in and around Manipur; and the number of performances at different places, both rural and urban (with the former predominating) has been above 100 to 150 shows. This shows how much more effective Sumang Leela performances are in terms of reaching the rural audience than proscenium productions can hope to be.

The Sumang Leela audience consists of people of different age-groups, so such plays are generally written with various *rasas* (tastes) for the entertainment of a varied age-group. This is not so in the case of proscenium plays. Nowadays, when a research-oriented play is produced as a Sumang Leela, it hardly receives any invitations. Briefly speaking, most Sumang Leela performances are commercial productions, as call shows are necessary for the artistes to earn their livelihood. However, this should not imply that Sumang Leela plays never reflect any social criticism. Current standards of living, social elements and other features of our day-to-day life can easily be shown directly to the public through Sumang Leela. As a playwright and actor active in both Sumang Leela and proscenium theatre, I think it is time to consider how this very popular art form (Sumang Leela) can be converted into educative, creative productions aimed at changing attitudes, without losing the high entertainment value it possesses for the common people.

The author is a playwright and Secretary of the Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union of Manipur; many of his plays have been performed in the Sumang Leela format.

Playing Sumang Leela: The Actor Speaks

In this group discussion with Biren Das Sharma, several Sumang Leela actors talk about this form and their relationship to it.

Sorokhaibam Rabindro Singh (35), Naharol Khongthang Artists Association (female role): We have a long tradition of male actors taking female roles in Sumang Leela. This practice definitely has a practical advantage here in Manipur. It is a problem for women to travel regularly to villages and perform at different places and come back late at night. We can perform for the whole night. I do female roles not just as a profession or hobby. I realize that Sumang Leela is a medium of expression. And this medium has a social function also. According to the theme of each play, I try to express a message, educate people about life and its problems.

I did my first female role in 1978. My first play was about a man who had two wives. I played one of them. I enjoyed performing my first role. But it was really a struggle for me to perform it convincingly. It was very difficult the first time. I had to watch women's behaviour very closely, study their mannerisms, the way they walked, talked. I had to practise hard to change my 'male' way of speaking. I had to practise very hard. In the beginning I watched my neighbours, how they dressed up, how they maintained a particular hairstyle and put on make-up—everything. I watched the old, the young, women of different age-groups. Even when I walked on the streets I kept observing.

Shamurailakpam Devadutta Sharma, Manipur Co-Artists Association (female role): The decision to join Sumang Leela to do female roles was my own. It was a conscious decision on my part. In the beginning there was a financial need. Now it has become a profession and a passion. I have been acting in Sumang Leela for the last 22 years. I have acted in 30–40 roles. Though I take whatever role is given to me, I love to do tragic characters. Social plays are most popular in the villages.

Narendra Ningomba (37), actor, director and playwright, Naharol Khongthang Artists Association: An essential part of the Sumang Leela tradition is that male actors play the female characters. Even today you will find, in every group, male actors playing female roles. This is an attempt to keep our tradition alive. At the same time, we know that Sumang Leela is a vehicle to carry messages to society. It is one of the best mediums of communication with the audience. Female characters are very important in Sumang Leela plays. They usually talk about uncertainties, corruption, anxieties and insecurities of life which we face now. Women characters are generally instrumental in communicating messages to the audience. In traditional Manipuri society women cannot criticize social evils, though they may want to do so. Social customs and traditions do not allow women to speak out. But through Sumang Leela, through the female characters, the voices of women can be heard, their comments on social evils can be communicated to the audience. The female characters also help the women spectators to understand their own milieu, the problems of the society and the family.

From my experience I can tell you that actors don't usually join Sumang Leela just to earn a living. I always found the Sumang Leela actors very, very dedicated. They are very concerned about the importance of their work and its role in society. Sumang Leela is still popular and supported by the people, because it fulfils a certain social need and the actors are aware of it. So, for them, it is not just a profession. It is something more than that. The applause they get from the audience is more valuable than anything else. This appreciation is the reward that keeps us going.



The audience is also very concerned about Sumang Leela. They know the kind of effort we put into it. Sumang Leela actors are respected by the audience. When I was young I was very impressed by Sumang Leela actors and decided to be an actor.

As a form Sumang Leela has changed in the last 20 years. There was a time when actors used to sing their own songs. Now we have playback singing. There was a time when we would not use musical instruments like the tabla or the harmonium. But this has also changed. We must change with time. Now we also provide mood music, which was not there earlier. For example, when a character is unhappy and upset, we create the same mood through music and song. The audience also likes it because it creates the right mood for them.

Thiyam Chinglen Singh (39), Naharol Khongthang Artists Association: As an actor I face many problems. But an actor also has certain responsibilities. If there is a performance, I have to be there. There was a very sad moment in my life when my mother was very sick and I knew that she was going to die. On that very day, I told my mother that I had a performance. My mother told me to go. I went to perform and came back to find my mother dead. I really felt bad about it. But that is the life of an artiste. If you ask me whether art is greater than life or not, my answer will be that art is greater than life. I would like to continue acting as long as time permits. At the same time, I would like to guide younger people, make them interested in Sumang Leela. I would like to tell them that what you cannot express directly in life can be expressed through Sumang Leela. I want the younger generation to take up this art form and nurture it.

There are a lot of problems in Manipur. The law and order situation is really bad. We face this problem specially when we travel to the villages. Most of our actors come from different areas, different villages. Some of them come from faraway villages. After a performance we can't spend the night at the place of performance. We have to return. Each time we perform outside Imphal we think about the risk in travelling back home at night. But once we start performing, we forget everything. Sometimes we spend the whole night performing. I am very happy about the fact that the audience is so enthusiastic about Sumang Leela. From the children to the elders, we are known to everybody. We respect them. We cannot portray anything immoral which might offend them.

Leishangthem Dhanabir Singh (37), Naharol Khongthang Artists Association (comedian): Comedy is an essential part of Sumang Leela. Usually half a play is devoted to comedy or laughter. Without some element of comedy, a Sumang Leela performance is not complete. It is not just for entertainment's sake, it has another function. For example, you can't mock a minister openly. You cannot criticize him in public. But in Sumang Leela we can crack a joke and satirize him. We are aware of social problems, the mistakes of the government. Through our plays we talk to the audience about these things. We can communicate better with the audience through comedy and satire and make the audience aware of what is happening in our society.

Ningthoujam Rajen Singh (37), Manipur Co-Artists Association: There has been a lot of change in the last 20 years. With time, the interests of the people have also changed. If we want to continue, we have to adapt to the changing times. What we need most—as Sumang Leela artistes—is the expectation and belief of the audience; and to make our audience interested in our work we have to change. Those who can do this are recognized as good actors.

One of the problems we face nowadays is that of getting a good script. We are very concerned about whether new scripts will be accepted by the audience or not. We have to produce and perform plays keeping in mind what the audience needs. Also, we have a responsibility and we have to show things in a positive way and not in a negative manner, even at the risk of the audience not accepting it fully. A group, after all, is invited to perform—if a play is rejected by the audience we will not get shows at all. So the

conditions demand compromise.

Twenty years ago, when we started working, the situation was different and we were happy as artistes. Fourteen or fifteen years back there was no fear of travelling at night. The logistics of a performance were also favourable. But now we face so many problems. The whole of Manipur is now almost a battlefield, there is a civil war going on in the state. In spite of such a tense situation, we are continuing. When we go out to perform we cannot predict that we will return safely, nobody knows what will happen. For a revolutionary play or a play on the insurgency movement we use fake weapons, which we carry with us. We are often stopped by the paramilitary forces, the Assam Rifles or the CRPF. Once we were detained for the night because we possessed replicas of weapons. We were harassed. They even threatened to kill us. There is no security. But we are dedicated to our art. We want to continue, want to serve humanity, serve the people of Manipur. I would like to request the next generation of Sumang Leela artistes to serve this art, to dedicate themselves totally to the service of the people. Personally speaking, I would like to try and adapt myself to the changing times.

Narendra Ningomba: There is no denying the fact that Sumang Leela is facing a lot of problems. I fear that this art will become extinct in the future. Since modern technology has come into the lives of Manipuris, with media like the television, the size of Sumang Leela audiences is gradually decreasing. Also, we get fewer invitations. I feel that this art is now facing a great challenge from film and television. People are also getting more and more interested in western culture. It is quite a challenge to keep Sumang Leela alive. It needs support from every quarter. Our intellectuals nowadays refuse to come to Sumang Leela at all. They go to the modern theatre but not to Sumang Leela. A fear of the total extinction of this folk theatre form is very prevalent now.

Most of the actors in Sumang Leela are illiterate. I personally believe that because of a low literacy level, the actors are not able to understand the complexity of social and political life and give the right kind of message to the audience. Our actors are not intellectuals and we are not guided by our intellectuals.

There was another form of Sumang Leela in which music was not very prominent, only *dholaks* and *kartals* were used. This form was very stylized in its use of dialogue. It was very loud, and the present-day audience does not like it at all. There were hardly any songs, and music was not used the way we use it, to heighten the drama. This form is almost extinct now. What you see now is a changed, slightly different form of Sumang Leela. Now it is a challenge for us to retain the tradition.

We feared that the form would be completely extinct soon. So, in 1982–83, we decided to seek advice from experienced theatre persons, rather than Sumang Leela directors. We started working with Birjit Ngangomba. He is now working not only with our group but with several other groups, directing plays. He has taught us contemporary theatre techniques, such as how to deliver dialogue realistically, and movements, gestures and choreography. These things were not in Sumang Leela earlier. Now, people like the way we present a play because we take advantage of contemporary theatre techniques. We are, at the same time, concerned about retaining the tradition. We want to retain the kind of communication we have established with our audience.

Sumang Leela started in 1851 under the patronage of the king, and it is much older than theatre. Theatre came to Manipur in 1903. But now this old form is about to get extinct, while theatre is getting all sorts of support and being popularized. I think that due to lack of intellectual advice and support, Sumang Leela is losing its importance very fast. If we are supported by the intellectuals, if we receive their advice and guidance, I believe that Sumang Leela will once again become the most important folk form of Manipur. To revive the old tradition of Sumang Leela, we need people like Birjit who have a better knowledge of contemporary theatre. A person like him, with knowledge and experience of different performing arts, can help us to revive this tradition. It is great that a person like him



In the greenroom: Sumang Leela artistes prepare for the performance.



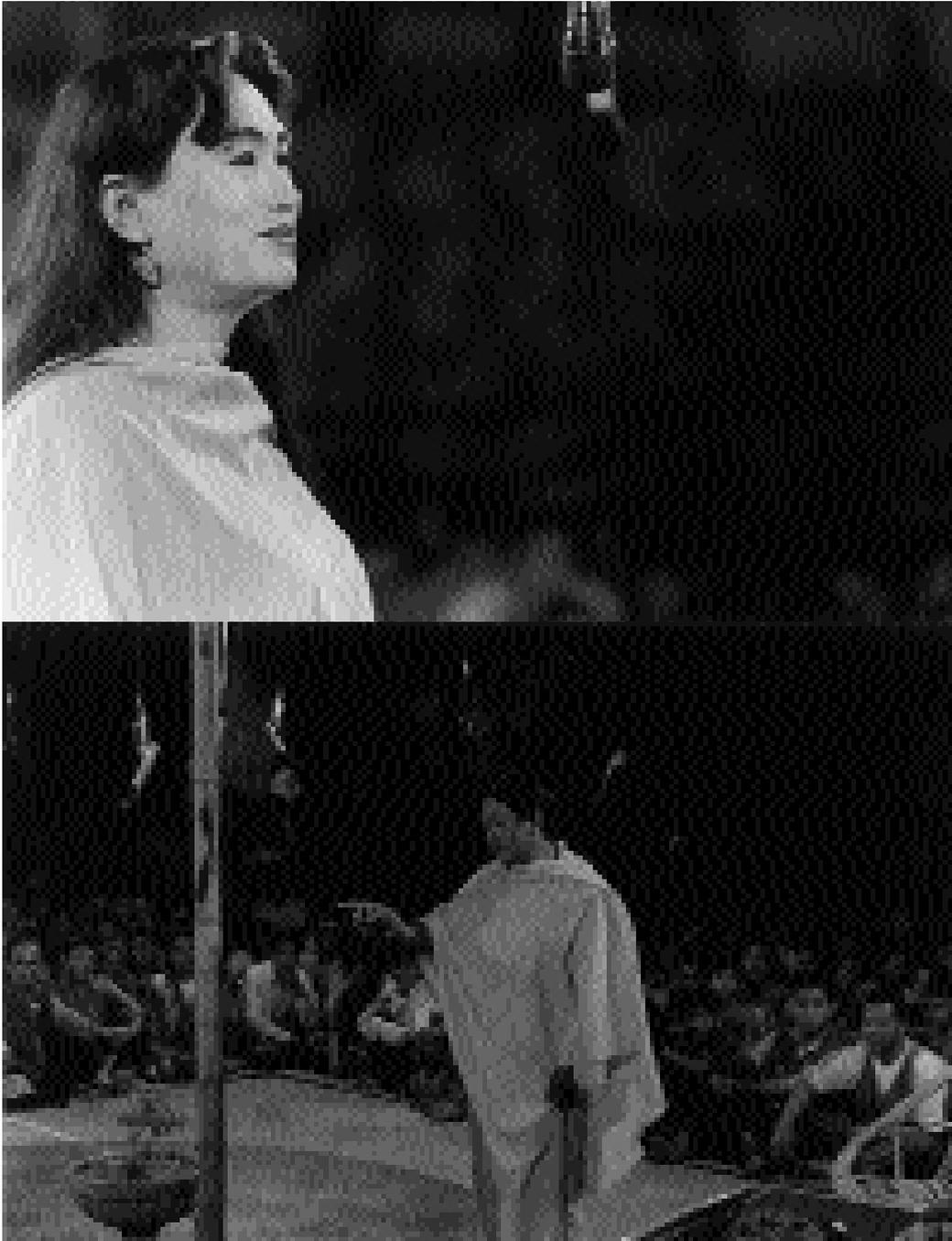
has







taken interest in this art form. At present he is a director of Manipur Dramatic Union. He has developed his own system of choreography, which he uses in Sumang Leela. This is a new input. Sumang Leela groups have benefited a lot from his system of choreography.



In the performance space: A Sumang Leela performance.

Like in proscenium theatre, Birjit has developed a theory of space for Sumang Leela. The space is now divided into strong area, weak area, romantic area etc. This has given us new ideas for using space.

A particular style of Sumang Leela called Ishai Leela uses music and song. In this particular style singers play a major role. Birjit has explained to us how the old Sanskrit plays were performed. They used a lot of songs to express inner feelings which could not be communicated otherwise. Likewise, in Sumang Leela there are moments or feelings which cannot be expressed through dialogue. So here we communicate through music and

song. In a two-hour play there is bound to be about half an hour of music and song.

In



this interview, Meinam Nanda Singh, a 40-year-old actor with North Imphal Jatra Mandal, talks to STQ of his life as a Sumang Leela performer.

When did you first see Sumang Leela? When did you join?

When I was eleven years old I saw Sumang Leela for the first time. As I was watching I thought, I can also act. Some friends also told me to join Sumang Leela. They said, 'You can be an artiste. You have the ability.' A few years later we invited a Sumang Leela party to our village. There was a dispute amongst ourselves over which party to invite. But we managed to invite the party my

friends wanted to. After the performance I got in touch with the older members of the group, and expressed my desire to be an actor. They asked me to come to their place and join. That was how I joined Sumang Leela. I was only 17 or 18 years old at that time.

What fascinated you most when you first saw Sumang Leela?

When I saw the second Sumang Leela performance . . . I don't remember the name of the play . . . I was fascinated by one of the female characters. I thought, I can also do female roles. Incidentally, at that time I had long hair, which was the fashion among the youth.

Why did you find that female character fascinating?

In the beginning of the play she appeared in a light yellow outfit. She looked as if she was really from a rich family. She was very lavishly dressed. Later, when she became poor, her clothes changed. All these details attracted me.

Was she beautiful?

She was very beautiful.

Young?

Very young. When I saw her, saw her body . . . I was attracted by her. I wanted to marry her, save her . . .

Save?

The role which I saw impressed me a lot—something struck me. It was a tragic character. Somehow, I identified with the character. I felt a certain closeness. She was like me. Like me, she had also lost her father when she was young, become poor. She was portrayed as a good person and she remained good and honest till the end of the play.

Do you remember the first play you did? What kind of character was that?

I don't recall the name of the play, but it was held at a village called Chana. It was the character of a wicked girl.

What did you feel when you entered the performing space for the first time, dressed as a woman? What was going on in your mind?

I was very afraid, I was very nervous. I was sweating. I wondered whether my role, my performance, would be accepted by the audience or not. Would I succeed, or not? I had such apprehensions. I was afraid. Gradually it subsided. As I started performing, I was suddenly at ease, I felt as if it was nothing, I became my own normal self. But even now I get nervous. Performing a female role is very difficult, and I am not a well-educated person, you know.

When you started, were you uncomfortable with make-up, with the dress?

In the beginning it was not comfortable at all. When I was dressing up as a woman for the first time, I was in doubt about whether it would suit me or not, whether I was dressing up properly or not. After I did my first performance I learnt how to adapt, how to manage. But during the first performance I feared that the cloth would fall off. So I tied it tightly with a strong thread. I felt that the dress itself was binding me and I was very uneasy with it. I was particularly uncomfortable with the bra. It was very tight and I found it difficult to breathe.

Did you wonder how real women manage their clothes?

Yes. But they are accustomed to their clothes from girlhood. For us it is very uncomfortable.

How do you prepare yourself for a role?

First I clean my face with water. Sometimes I use oil, but oil tends to make the skin look darker, so most of the time I just use clean water. Then I apply what we call 'shining paste' as base make-up. Then I decide on the darker or brighter areas and red areas of the face and apply some red paint or put dark shades if necessary and slowly finish by applying powder, eyebrow pencil and lipstick. When I start putting on my make-up, my mind slowly gets into the female character.

What is the most important element of make-up that transforms you from male to female?

When I finish my make-up I feel a kind of closeness to the female character. I feel the character within myself. Then I comb my hair, put on jewels etc. if necessary. I think about the character and accordingly select my dress, I put on my dress and I completely become the female character. But for me the most important element of make-up is the lipstick. When I apply lipstick I feel that I have transformed completely. When the play starts, when I start saying my lines, I just forget that I am a male.

How do you conceive a character?

The writer's description of the character helps me a lot. I work according to

the playwright's concept and then differentiate between the particular character I am playing and the other characters. I ask myself, 'Is this a sober,

graceful or wicked character?' I try to assume the character within myself. The idea is to try my very best to portray all the intricate ideas the writer has, all the elements that the writer has perceived. The director also gives ideas, he can judge, and if the acting is not satisfactory he can say, 'No, no, this is not right' or 'You should move this way.' If there is any difficulty the director gives ideas and I try to follow his instructions.

When you visualize a character you are going to portray, do you think of a real woman you know?

In characterizing a role it is necessary to observe other people. For example, it is not difficult to portray a poor girl because there are many poor people all around me. But for certain characters you need to observe a lot. For example, I did a play titled *Post-mortem*. I played



the role of a mentally retarded girl. I happen to know someone who is mentally retarded, so I observed that person and tried to represent the character in that way. I actually observe the way women dress, use ornaments or flowers in their hair. For certain kinds of characterization, observation is very useful.

You have played so many female roles, so many characters, and experienced them in different situations. Has your experience of acting female roles affected or changed your understanding of women in any way?

I am very sympathetic to women in general. I think I understand them better. They are exploited in so many ways. I even feel prepared to do something for them.

What kind of female roles attract you? What is your most successful role?

I do not make any distinction. I perform whatever role is given to me. I played the role of a girl called Basanti who was abandoned by her father. She started her life very poor. I liked that character very much, and I performed it very well. It was appreciated by the audience. Since I grew up in a very poor family and suffered a lot, in performing I find that tragic roles

suit me, come to me quite naturally. In most plays tragic characters are given to me because I am much more comfortable with such characters. Somehow, I am also attracted to such characters. They suit me. This must have something to do with the deprivation and suffering I have experienced in my own life.

Have the roles you've played so far affected you in any way?

In plays, there are scenes where romance between a boy and a girl is depicted. I play the girl according to the demands of the script. I do the romantic scenes convincingly. But that does not mean that I am becoming that character. I do not think the specific feminine qualities of any character affect my own personality, I do not feel that way in my everyday life.

What about your family? Your neighbours?

I am appreciated by my family and my community for the roles I play.

Do you have any hidden sorrow regarding your profession?

People say that those who play tragic roles die suffering. This makes me very sad.



Manipuri Playwrights: An Overview

Arambam Somorendra

Himself a wellknown playwright in Manipur, the author is also a scholar and thinker knowledgeable about Manipuri cultural history.

Though Manipur has age-old performance traditions, the contact with western style drama came about only in the early 20th century.

For the young generation of the first two decades of the 20th century, it was a new experience to see plays performed at Bama-Charan Bandhav Natyasala (1903), and to participate in plays organized by the Education Department and Johnstone High School during the annual Saraswati Puja Festivals. These were Bengali plays; in 1914 *Partha-Parajay* was translated by Khaidem Nongyai, a teacher, and staged as a school play. The young students of that period were enthusiastic about this art form. Their preliminary exposure to western style drama was through this kind of Bengali play. When they returned home after completing their higher academic studies at Sylhet, Gauhati and Dacca, they carried on producing plays and organizing drama groups. Translations from D.L. Roy and others were staged by these newly educated youth. The 30s were an active period for such productions. Several theatre houses were born, such as the Meitei Dramatic Union (1931; it became Manipur Dramatic Union after some time) the Aryan Theatre (1935), the Society Theatre (1937), amongst others.

Heavily costumed western drama, with melodramatic acting and stylized speech, was the fashion of the period. Kshetrimayum Munal Singh, an Inspector at the Education Department, who hailed from Cachar, was the main architect of this genre of play. Both he and Khwairakpam Nabakishwar Singh, a teacher and a gifted actor, were responsible for building up proscenium drama in Manipur. These two *ojas* (teachers) and other teachers who hailed from Cachar and Sylhet, got acquainted with Bengali drama during their student years. When they came back to Manipur they took a keen interest in performing such dramas and it became a custom for the Education Department to stage a play annually at the Saraswati Puja festival. As almost all these plays were Bengali, it naturally evoked a desire to see an original Manipuri Drama. On 30 September, 1925, the first Manipuri drama, *Narasingh*, was staged at the Palace compound, during the Durga Puja Festival organized by the Manipuri State Police under the patronage of Maharaja Churachand Singh. It was written by Lairenmayum Ibungohal Singh in 1922, during his stint as a law student in Dacca; thus he became the first writer of an original play in Manipur.

This was a landmark in the history of Manipuri drama, and after *Narasingh*, many literary talents took to writing original plays. Lamabam Komol wrote *Devajani* in 1924, Sorokhaibam Lalit wrote *Satikhongnang* in 1930, Sorokhaibam Lalit's second play *Areppa Marup* was staged in 1931, Arambam Dorendrajit wrote *Moirang Thoibi* in 1935, Ashangbam Minaketan wrote *Sita Banabas*, which was published in 1936, Arambam Dorendajit's second play *Bhagyachandra* was staged by the Aryan Theatre on 19 June, 1939, Hijam Anganghal wrote *Poktabi* and *Ibemma*, which was staged in 1939.

These writers followed the model of western drama they knew from their college days and the Bengali plays of that period. These writers had a world view of their own, developed from their own experience of life. Theirs was a simple society, without the complications of today. Religion played a large part: the playwrights being devout Vaishnavites, the plays held a strong sense of good, evil and piety. It was at this period that G.C. Tongbra wrote his first play, *Laman Khumba* (1940).

The Second World War reached Manipur in the year 1942. The Japanese bomb was dropped at Imphal, and all the inhabitants of Imphal left their homes for the villages.

The war raged on for another three years; the people of Manipur were totally embroiled in its troubles and dangers. It was only in 1945 that the people of Imphal returned to their homes and started a new phase of their lives, after exposure to the hardships of war and to the onslaughts on their orthodox cultural values. The impact of the war brought about a huge change in the economy and outlook of the people. The insular lifestyle of the pre-war orthodox society was shattered. A new educated class began to take an active interest in the political future of the state, with simple lessons drawn from their academic exposure to western education and the reverberating echo of the National Movement led by Gandhiji. With the integration of Manipur to the Indian Union, this new class felt a sense of satisfaction at the sense that they were guiding the people towards people's rule and democracy.

It was during this period that many native writers came up with plays on mythological, historical and social themes. But the social plays didn't reflect the agony of the human situation, affected by the turmoil of war. Most dealt with love, hate, the conflict between good and evil. Some explored the rich treasures of our folk culture and discovered folk legends and stories, out of which they built up beautiful plays. *Yaithingkonu*, *Pidonnu*, *Haoran Leishang Saphabi* etc. were popular plays and gave a fresh impetus to Manipuri drama, adding native colour and taste.

G. C. Tongbra's involvement with theatre began with the establishment of the Society Theatre in 1937. He took to playwriting in 1940, and though he belonged to the post Second World War period, he was an exception to the fold. Belonging to the poorer segment of society, Tongbra drew on his own experience in his plays. His critical mind studied the contradictions in the society and man's life in it, and he brought forth many plays one after another, mostly on social themes. He wrote for Manipuri theatre for five and half decades and didn't stop writing upto the end (he passed away in 1996). There are some 100 plays to his credit and when we talk of contemporary Manipuri playwrights, we are bound to turn to this extraordinary writer.

He is very critical of the system and the condition of men who, though born with a similar body and soul, grow up in a society where the privileged have all the advantages, and the underdogs suffer in their effort to keep body and soul together. He sees the condition of man as tragic, and laments over it. Therefore, in order to redeem mankind, he writes so man can become wiser, understanding himself and the society better. In his later writings he attacks Democracy, which, instead of liberating man, enslaves, exploits and corrupts.

But his forte being wit and humour, he makes the audience laugh. He says that he wants the audience to weep but they laugh instead, and pines over his 'Midas touch'.

There are other writers who are junior to G.C. Tongbra, like Kh. Tolhal Singh (*Thaballei*, *Matamlei*), Mr Ramcharan (*Ningol*, *Laibak*), S. Ibomcha (*Yokchabi*) etc., who wrote many plays, mostly melodramatic in style, whereas Saragthem Bormani concentrates on Meitei folk story themes.

Apart from these, there are quite a few authors who are actively involved in the present day Manipuri theatre. Kanhailal (b. 1942), P. Shamu (1942–1980), Athokpam Tomchou (b. 1944), and myself have contributed plays since the 50s, together building up new standards of playwriting. This group of writers felt the pulse of the changing times, the conflict between man's inner self and social reality, and the problems arising out of socio-political, economic and cultural contradictions. They started questioning the system and values of their times, and broke away from the old tradition of playwriting. The 1960s was a decade of unrest for the people of Manipur. Restlessness and anxiety engulfed the entire socio-political atmosphere. The death of some students, including a girl student, as a sequel to the food scarcity situation in 1965, the intensification of the agitation for statehood, poverty, youth unrest, were the key elements which provoked the people against the corruption, exploitation and indifference of the establishment. This was the social, economic and political backdrop from which this new set of writers

sprang forth.

Kanhailal writes with sympathy for the exploited people on the lower rung of the society. Basing his plots on common Meitei folk stories, he exposes the plight of the underdogs. He uses elements of Greek Drama such as the Chorus and Furies. With simple dialogue and plain statements he has proved his mastery over the craft in some notable works (*Tamnalai*, *Kabui-Keioiba*). Though he has written some 15 plays he is better known as a director.

I write in a realistic mould and try to expose the problems of the present society, specially the middle class, because the middle class is the group from which the intellectuals, who are the brains of the society, are produced. I like to expose the sharp anomalies and inherent characteristic weaknesses of this class, their perpetual tendency to exploit the lower classes. I focus on the problem play, and introduced the one scene box-set design to the Manipuri stage. In my later plays I deal with the life of the underdog, exploited and victimized by the system, and expose the agonies of man in an otherwise apathetic society.

Pukhramba Shamu is a playwright whose sensitive mind searched for a new meaning of life, which he calls the Inner Truth. His play *Ayekpa Lai* (Painted Picture) is a strong contention that man and woman fail in discovering their true inner selves and condemn themselves to incomplete lives; and he endeavours to search for the inner truth in order to redeem mankind from this plight. He uses powerful poetic imagery, sometimes with sentences which seem incongruent with the flow of events and action, ultimately creating the effect of Absurd Drama. In his short span of life he contributed several memorable works to modern Manipuri drama.

Another writer who is in the forefront is Athokpam Tomchou. He is very sensitive to the gradual decadence of values as a result of the gradual advancement in the material conditions of the society which, on the other hand, grills the poor in their struggle for existence. He pines over the helpless situation of those humanists who struggle to save mankind from such a disaster, but find themselves engulfed in the same whirlpool. His *Bus Stop* is a notable work which underlines his vision, in the style of Absurd Drama.

A writer of repute, an iconoclast in his ideas, is Shri Biren (b. 1944), whose surrealist vision of disillusioned and atomized life (*Khongchat*), non-recognition and loss of identity (*Hallakpa*), has shaken up modern playwriting with its poetry. With his third play *Ani* (Two), he has a trilogy on the theme of an individual's search for identity.

Pacha Meitei is another writer to reckon with, who has made his mark with *Langoinei* (The Captive 72). He writes in the absurdist trend on the hopeless condition of man in a world dominated by the progress of civilization, captivated by the so-called progress from which he cannot free himself. Pacha portrays man's desire to go back to the early stages of life where he was free from all the norms and rules. His play reminds us of Adamov's *Professor Tarrane*.

The other writers, who emerged with a spurt of short plays in the 70s, are B. K. Wahengba (b. 1947) W. Kamini (b. 1948) and Kshetri Sanajaoba (b. 1949). Wahengba asks metaphysical questions about man's life. His is a symbolist approach, unconcerned with the usual structures of a play. He puts in as many scenes as required, to emphasize his point. His theme is the changing pattern of values in society, which, instead of leading to a finer life, bring forth an uglier picture of life tantamount to a 'Caricaturic Image'. This is deftly picturized in his play *Fagigi Maikum* (the Comic Mask).

Wairopkam Kamini (b. 1948) is another symbolist writer whose main concern is humanism. He feels that every individual has love and pity for his fellow beings, but individualism makes man cast away these cherished values. Man should sacrifice his selfish interests. *Hingningliba Thawai* (Soul Longing for Life) is a manifestation of this thought.

Two younger writers of note, but of different sentiments, are Nildhwaja Khuman (b. 1950) and Khundrakpam Brajachand (b. 1952). Nildhwaja, probing deeper into the inner

concerns of man, exposes his hidden desire to regain a cherished way of life, but the contradictions in the society being insurmountable obstacles, he withers away along with his nostalgic desire. His *Epom Amadei Ethak* (From a Ripple to a Wave) is a play which testifies to his mastery over the craft, with colourful splashes of pastoral beauty.

On the other hand, Khundrakpam Brajachand brandishes his sharp phrases in a swashbuckling manner, commenting on the hypocrisy of modern man. He satirizes the Meitei mind, rebuking them for their inherent hypocrisy. His *Eigi Yum* (My House) is a testimony to his feelings.

Another serious younger writer is Yumnam Rajendra (b. 1953), who has written many plays, but is inclined more towards directing. The complex situation of the modern man, entangled in a struggle for power, deceit, violence and horror from which he cannot escape though he longs for a fresh lease of life, where the Earth is on the threshold of a holocaust, is the main preoccupation in Rajendra's play *Chekkhairabi Malem* (The Cracking Earth). His concern at the exploitation of innocents by modern devils is explicitly portrayed in his play *Laikhutsangbi* (The Long-handed Ogre). Rajendra likes to use symbolic characters, but his tendency to incorporate too many stage directions disrupts the continuity and flow of the sequences for a reader.

These are some of the contemporary playwrights whose works we are acquainted with either as productions or in book form. There are others whose works couldn't be discussed in this paper due to space constraints.

Performative Situation

Earlier, when a script reached a theatre group it would be studied by an individual or a group of knowledgeable persons who would examine the merit of the text as well as its performance-worthiness. Usually, the leading director was the authority on this matter. He would give the necessary guidelines as to the manner of the production and how to infuse life into the play with physical action. If the play was found perfect it was produced in totality, and, if not, it was amended and even improved to make it stage-worthy. The accepted convention of the period was to keep the script as written by the writer intact. The writer was taken as the authority of a play and a director's duty was to make it move on the stage. The phrase 'Literature that walks' was an accepted concept, appreciated and revered. Sometimes a reshuffling of scenes, combinations as well as division of scenes were carried out; but such cases happened when the scripts were from writers who had not thoroughly mastered the art of playwriting.

But in the contemporary period, with the evolution of the alternate theatre, the performative situation of a written play has changed radically. The trend in the alternative theatre is the metamorphosis of a play into a Director's Work or a Director's Play. In such a situation, the director conceives his own line of play-building, not necessarily following what is written by the playwright. The director tries to retain the basic skeleton, transforms the body as he thinks best and tries to communicate the essence to the audience. The essence of the play is the vital area where the playwright and the director meet. In his attempt to communicate the essence, the director makes his own choice of creative devices and crafts the play to his best satisfaction. Thus, when it is performed on the stage, the play sometimes comes out quite differently from what was originally envisaged by the playwright.

On the other hand, there are other directors who build up a play retaining the whole body intact, though pruning is done in areas where it is necessary. Maintaining the text as set down by the writer as the basis, he applies his own ideas in transforming the written language into action, embellishing it with his own creative ingenuity.

Thus, in the present context we find two aspects to the performative situation of a play. The second aspect is in line with what was in vogue earlier, but with a difference. The notion of the playwright being the authority on the text is questioned in the alternative theatre, and the director's creative ingenuity counted as another prime factor

in the physical transformation of a play.

The point of argument arising in this context is the question of the dominance of the writer—or, rather, literature—in a play. It is assumed that to present a play in totality, as given by a playwright, negates the creativity of a director. The director as a creative artist should not necessarily succumb to the authority of the playwright who, on the other hand, does not have the requisite knowledge of play production. This argument is in favour of the director's contribution in the production of a play.

This argument is tantamount to creating misunderstanding between a playwright and a director. It should be noted that a play is meant for production, which basically demands two elements, a writer and a performer. Therefore it should be understood that a play is the representation of two creative artists—or rather, we can say, more in the analytical mode, from the modern academic point of view: A play is the composite image of all these elements.

The demands of the alternative theatre are not focused only on the director. The expectations fall on a playwright, too. Since the production of the alternative theatre is quite different from the earlier conventional trends, with a break from the normal constraints of the stage and direction, the playwrights, too, have tried to conform to this trend. That is why we find contemporary drama scripts which do not conform to the usual structure of a play as we understand it. But it should not be misunderstood to mean that a playwright does not understand the intricacies of play production. Most of the playwrights are associated with one theatre group or the other. In short, the playwrights are the products of the theatre houses.

This contradiction raises the question of the future, specially for the playwright. It is a difficult question, because nothing can be predicted. What we can deduce, at the most, is that the present turmoil of the society, a result of the present socio-economic and political process, will continue for a long time, since the society is in the phase of an interaction between the thesis and anti-thesis of change. Until the dialectical process reaches the phase of a synthesis, we shall have to be a part and parcel of the process. Therefore, the best thing a playwright can do is to write pieces which can have a very serious 'critical thinking' effect on the people, so that the progress towards a synthesis can be peaceful, and a liberated society may be achieved, the sooner the better. What else can Art do, if not further this objective?

This paper was presented at a seminar organized by Panthoibi Natya Mandir at Imphal in 1997.

G. C. Tongbra: A Tribute

Dr N. Tombi Singh



When G. C. Tongbra (Tongbram Gitchandra Singh, born 6 February, 1913) died on 3 June, 1996, people in Manipur expressed their grief at the loss of a great playwright and humorist. The sense of overwhelming loss was shared by individuals as well as literary and theatrical organizations outside the state who lost no time in sending condolences to the bereaved family. It is not an exaggeration to say that most people in Manipur either knew him or knew about him. He is the most famous playwright and humorist of 20th-century Manipuri literature. In his death, Manipuri literature has lost a life devoted to plays, a multi-faceted personality who was the main architect of a new theatre movement in Manipur. Curtains have been drawn on a wondrous live play called Tongbra's life.

Tongbra's contributions to Manipuri literature and culture are quite significant and valuable. To begin with, he was a prolific playwright. To date, more than a hundred plays by him have been staged and an equal number published. The first complete and mature play by him is *Lupa Sana* (Silver and Gold). The play was first performed by the Society Theatre of Segalambi, Imphal, in 1945, when it was known as the National Theatre. And his last play is *Nungjao Kaona Lanka Meichakpa?* (Clash of Boulders and a Lanka-like Conflagration?), which was staged by the Rupmahal Theatre, Imphal, in December 1995.

Tongbra's plays deal with multifarious themes. The problems and issues he was concerned with cover the spectrum of life and society. He effected a great movement of changes in Manipuri drama with the help of his plays, which reacted against, and were sharply in contrast to, the traditional romantic plays of the past. Undoubtedly, he may be called the Father of Modern Manipuri Drama. The style and technique of his plays, the problems he dealt with, as well as the personal views he put forward, were wholly new in Manipuri dramatic literature. He enriched it especially by bringing in new concepts of realistic social plays, satirical plays and theatre of the Absurd.

Tongbra gave us the first one-act play, as well as the first radio play. The Chitragada Sahitya Mandir published his collection of short plays entitled *Lila Macha Macha* (Short Plays) in 1950, the first ever of its kind in Manipuri literature. There are about forty short plays to his credit at the moment. Noteworthy amongst them are—*Yaoshang Kangou*

(Futility of Holi), *Hingbatai Karigumba Pambei* (Exist by Whatever Means), *Tajmahal*, *Rajkumari Shollibi* (The Weak Princess), and *Leichindei Nongthang* (Lightening from the Cloud).

He made a great contribution as a translator of plays also. Most famous are the translations he made from the works of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Milton, Ibsen, Shaw, Duncan, Pirandello and Marlowe. He was a poet and lyricist. While contemporary Manipuri literature has not yet recognized him as a poet, he wrote and published quite a number of poems. His plays, such as *Chengni Khujai* (Begging Bowl), *Upu Bakshi* (Money Box), *Ngabong Khao* (The Flesh Trap) are veritable storehouses of some of his finest songs. These songs have been penned in a peculiar style—the Tongbra style—and they have a special flavour all their own. To cite an example, the song—‘Thamna khenjongna pengjei/thambalna pommi jumbung (The lotus leaves have pride and the lotus bud blooms)/laining lambi chetna (with stifling ways of tradition and religion)/nungshi panthung pamja (desiring the goal of love) . . .’ from the play *Ngabong Khao* is a very popular song known to everyone.

Tongbra also occupies a notable place in Manipuri prose. His particular style of prose composition can be seen in the autobiographical serialization *Leirami adungei nok-wa shannaba nipa ama* (Once there lived a man of humour)—published in the literary journal *Sahitya*. It may not be an autobiography in the real sense, for he did not write much on his own life—he professedly avoided indulging in that. On the other hand, it was a record of his feelings and opinions about the things around him, that struck him from time to time. He was a very sensitive soul who could easily understand and see through things. He always moved his pen through the thick and thin of current problems and issues, unable to remain silent. These, along with the radio talks he gave and the numerous prefaces to his works bear evidence of the fabric of Tongbra’s prose. His prose does not read easy; there is always an undercurrent of hidden meaning in them.

He never lagged behind his times. Thus, he became a film director too and directed the film *Khuthang Lamjel* (Relay Race), which, of course, was scripted by him. That he became a film director late in life is not something to be wondered at—he recognized film to be a powerful and useful medium of expression which could reach out to all. This film, produced under the banner of A.T. Films (Asha-Tongbra Films), was released in 1978. He had plans for other films too, but they were not realized.

Tongbra was also closely related with the Sumang Leela. His plays *Mani Mamou* (Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-law), *Matric Pass* (Matriculate), *Meitei Chanu* (The Meitei Girl), *Ningol Mawa* (Son-in-Law) were very successful Sumang Leela productions. He became a writer of Sumang Leela plays in his early days and continued till the end.

From its inception in 1937, the Society Theatre of Imphal had Tongbra as its director and motivator. As a director he was not authoritarian. His philosophy of acting may be summed up in the following words—‘Acting is everybody’s art’.

G. C. Tongbra was an actor as well as a theatre writer and director. Though he did not become a famous actor, he acted a few minor characters. Once, when they could not find an actress for the role of a middle-aged mother in the play *Judgena Mashabu Jailda* (The Judge Sends Himself to Jail), Tongbra himself took the role. The audience got a pleasant surprise and roared with laughter when they suddenly discovered that this mother had a Tongbra-like moustache, which was by no means a tiny one. He played the parts of Nabin in *Maheigi Pambei* (Benefit of Education), Kamnikumar in *Mister Damncare*, and a minor role in *Rasgulla Mantri* (Chocolate Minister).

Theatre was Tongbra’s heart and soul. He had no time for other things—his mornings and nights were devoted to writing plays; during the day he would go to college, and his evenings were for play rehearsals. He was not interested in invitations to customary feasts and ceremonies; he did not pay much attention to family chores. Thus Tongbra

was able to become a professional playwright in a place like Manipur.

The period (1945–50) during which he worked as a teacher in the C. C. School in Imphal was the most significant in Tongbra's life. These were the formative years. Manipur had seen the Second World War, and there was a resurgence in theatrical productions. Although Tongbra had produced plays like *Laman Khumba* (Revenge) prior to this, most of his plays started to be shown regularly only after 1945. One good reason for this was the establishment of the National Theatre Hall at Segalambi in Imphal, which was generally known as the Warak (bamboo) Hall because of its location at the edge of a bamboo grove. When the National Theatre stopped functioning after some time, the Modern Theatre took its place. The Society Theatre came up in 1955 in its stead, and started presenting more plays.

In 1945 the National Theatre started producing many of Tongbra's plays. The most popular plays during this period include—*Lupa Sana*, *Judgena Mashabu Jailda*, *Juwardage Kari* (Consequences of Gambling), *Indiada Nambo Thaba* (The Woes of India), *Mani Mamou*, *Eigi Hanna* (Mine First), *Luda Mi Changba* (Man in the Trap), *Mister Damncare*. Tongbra, separating himself from the mythological, historical and traditional plays of the pre-war theatre, could cater to the new tastes of the audience with his realistic plays dealing with social problems. Sometimes he could shock them with his sarcastic remarks against the government and bureaucrats. Even the actors and actresses had anxious moments at times when Tongbra started revealing the stark realities of social evil, injustice and hypocrisy, and admonishing the guilty.

Another theatrical institution, the Rupmahal Theatre, also produced many of Tongbra's plays and helped his thoughts, views, comments and style to reach out to a wide circle of theatre goers. Some of the major plays produced by this theatre are *Mister Damncare* (1954) *Imphal Thoibi* (Modern Women of Imphal), *Chapter 3* (1955) and *Chapter 4* (1955), *Luda Mi Changba* (1955), *Jail Khana* (1956), *Miss Bottle* (1956), *Leibak Houba Andolan* (Agitation of the People, 1960), *Ani Thokna Chingkhair* (Torn into Two, 1960) *Konjeng Kokfai* (Futile Struggle, 1964), *Wakat Che* (Complaint, 1972). Some of the best known directors in Manipur handled Tongbra's plays—the late Meitram Bira, S. Nabakanta, L. Netrajit and Ch. Gopal. The play *Leibak Houba Andolan* was censored by the government for sedition.

By this time, Tongbra had begun to capture the limelight through his contributions to Manipuri theatre and dramatic literature. The Manipuri Sahitya Parishad honoured him by awarding him the Jamini Sundar Guha Gold Medal in 1961. This was the first of a long series of honours. The list includes prizes for best playwright and director on several occasions at the state level; the Sahitya Ratna (1973) from Manipuri Sahitya Parishad; the Padmasree (1975) from the Government of India; Sahitya Akademi Award for Literature (1978); D. Litt. from Manipur University (1992). The last part of his life was thus spent in successful achievement and public recognition.

The life of every great writer or artist is full of struggles. Tongbra did not possess godlike qualities. Tongbra shaped his own life. Whatever he earned—awards, titles, honours—were the fruit of his own sweat.

In his old age, he was deeply affected by the accelerating violence, killing, communal animosity, revolutionary activity of the youth, the deteriorating conditions of administration and the society. A year before his death, on 14 May, 1955, on the occasion of the 'Thoidokpa Sanman' (Special Honour) ceremony of the Diamond Jubilee Celebration of the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, while accepting the honour Tongbra said—'Most of our friends have already left for the other side. At present no one cares to listen to us. What should I tell them on the other side? Would you call Manipur a happy place?'

Tongbra was simple, unprovoking and righteous. He led a simple life. He paid no attention to luxury. A cotton loincloth or pajama, an unironed shirt, a waistcoat, a muffler and a walking stick completed his attire. He was not outspoken and preferred to remain

silent. He did not seek favours from others, including his near and dear ones.

It could be a real problem to start a conversation with him if one was not a good acquaintance. Again, Tongbra was most enjoyable when he lectured or gave a talk. He had a hoarse voice and talked in a husky drawl. Even before he started speaking, people would laugh just looking at him. Once he started speaking, there was no stopping him—he would talk of whatever was on his mind, without hesitation. Jokes, ironic statements, satirical utterances, witticisms, pleasant anecdotes, would have the audience rolling in the aisles. The speeches in his plays are not much different from his manner of speaking in daily life. He also talked in the form of dramatic dialogues, without artifice. He was full of wit. He could quip on anything in a jiffy. He had experienced so much, heard and seen so much.

Tongbra was by nature an easygoing person. His life was full of incidents. Both the east and west had played their parts in making him what he was. The best thing in him was that he could produce out of these influences something which was particularly his own. The real Tongbra was always innovative, full of new and different ideas. He had one astonishing quality as a writer. Once his lines were written, he did not revise.

Tongbra did not believe in literature being a medium of expression for external truth—he believed that it should strive to give expression to inner truth symbolically, using subtlety. 'Art is suggestive' was his firm belief. About beautiful works of art after the manner of the new writing he said—'When things experienced, things heard firsthand, not borrowed from others, form the material of a play, it may be called a *noureng*, new writing.' It is literature's responsibility to show impossible happenings, unbelievable truths, giving vent to the pent up discontent in the inner depths of the human mind. Tongbra found full satisfaction in the theatre of the Absurd during the later part of his literary life. He said—'It is the duty of literature to try to unravel the numberless mysteries of this world. It has to present us with a new world like religion does, but this new world ought to be familiar to us.' During this period, his plays reflected images of the theatre of the Absurd and he made himself thoroughly at home with the absurd plays and writings.

But Tongbra's characteristic as a playwright lies in his protests against the social system, non-conformist attitude and iconoclastic tendencies. Seen from this angle, we find many similarities between Tongbra and G. B. Shaw. He fought vehemently against administrative injustice, corrupt practices, the prevalence of bribery, violent repression, physical torture, exploitation of the weak and the poor, nepotism and other forms of misuse of power. He stood out as an undaunted revolutionary.

Humour plays an important part in Tongbra's literature. The meaning of his jokes and the import of his ideas cover a wide area. Tongbra's jokes fluctuate between crying and laughing. They are not jokes for the sake of mere joking. They are based on truth. All the pretensions, the things he observed in society he changed into truthful jokes so that they could catch people's ears. When one scans the truth underlying his jokes one feels like crying. Tongbra demanded—'Why are you laughing when I shed tears?' It is true, Tongbra spent his life crying. He wept for the plight of human society, for this society filled with violence, for this society from which peace and humanity had fled away. He suffered, he was restless. He could not recover from his malady.

We cannot easily forget this man—the most valuable humorist of twentieth-century Manipuri literature.

Imphal, 7th Feb. '97.

(Translated from Manipuri by B. S. Rajkumar)

The author is a theatre critic and columnist in a local paper, a published author, and Associate Professor in the Manipuri Department, Manipur University.

Treading the Boards: Actresses of the Proscenium Stage

The actresses featured here were all popular heroines of the proscenium stage. This round table discussion was conducted by Arambam Somorendra, who also interpreted simultaneously.

S. Tondon Devi (66): I was born in March 1931. I started taking part in dramas before World War II, as well as in dancing and Manipuri Khubaishai etc. (forms of community singing). My entire family was involved in acting, and I joined them. My sister used to act in Jamuna ki Mandir, a place in Singjamci bazaar, as a heroine. I would accompany her, and whenever there was the part of a child available, I would play it. Then, when World War II started, I would go to the border areas for dance performances. We used to learn Hindi songs from records and sing them and dance at the same time.

In the beginning I was part of a company. Then, when I went to the border areas to perform for the troops, it was with my own company. It was a small company, a family concern, actually, since almost my entire family was involved—sister, brother, mother, uncles, aunts etc. I became famous after the World War on account of my performances, and started acting in Aryan Theatre, Paradise, Rupmahal, etc.

My first director, who's no more now, was an award-winning director: Sarokhaibam Lalit Singh was his name. After that there were many other directors—Oja Shyam Sunder, Ibungoyaima Haobam, Chongtham Ningthemjao Singh in Aryan Theatre; Dada Nilamani, Dada Biro—all of them taught me very well. In Aryan Theatre I played the part of Thoibi, and I became famous and popular with the public as Thoibi. In Rupmahal, I played Moirang Thoibi, in Paradise, Khamba Thoibi. The story of Thoibi is a very long one, and it's usually broken up into small parts and acted out, and I acted in most of them.

In the beginning, when I would go for rehearsals, people on the street would be very insulting and call me names, accuse me of working nights with men. In those days actresses found it very difficult to get married. Even then, I didn't give a damn. To me, it was simple—I loved my art and because of that I would do the plays. At that time, women could not wear shoes for fear of arousing adverse comments from the people, so I would carry my shoes wrapped up in a bundle, and while returning at night I would put them on, as in the dark I couldn't be barefoot. They were difficult times. Now things have changed so much. Now actresses have the respect of people, and this is due to God's grace. Otherwise, earlier on, I had to face so much criticism and slander. Even my family came in for the same. Now the public has become more aware, that this is not bad, and I'm very glad that this has happened. This is all due to God's grace.

When I went for rehearsals, I would return very hungry—there is hardly any money involved in acting. It's a life of sacrifice, and we who have to sacrifice so much often have to go hungry. But yes, I got recognition, though not money or things to eat or a house. I would get a little money after each play. The ticket for the plays would cost Re 1 or 50 p. So, after a month of rehearsals and the actual drama, I would get around Rs 5 or Rs 7—of course, in those days it was quite a lot of money.

I love my art more than my life. My mother had told me not to get into acting or dancing since there was very little money involved, and instead to sit at home and do the household work and learn to weave and cook. She told me that it was becoming difficult to meet the expenses for my food etc. I told her that even if she didn't feed me, I would still go on acting. I would die on the stage.



S. Tondon Devi

I remember an incident at Aryan Theatre. While playing Thoibi, in one scene—she was in a hurry, and her feet got entangled in her *mekhla*, and she fell. This was a mistake, not something that the director had asked me to do. I was upset at having committed such a great mistake, but I continued the scene. During the interval a man from the audience came up to the stage and praised my unusual and beautiful movement, and declared that I would get a gold medal! I got a gold medal for a mistake. Isn't it interesting? How can I leave something which gives me so much pleasure? Even now, though I cannot walk too well, I still take part in radio plays, though there are not too many plays these days. I, too, don't ask for roles, thinking it's time for me to rest.

I love my art more than I love my life. I don't mind dying, but let my art live. In 1954 at the Drama Festival in Delhi, for *Haorang Leisang Saphabi* (A Legendary Tribal Girl), I got the prize for best actress, a gold medal. In 1955 I was hired to sing folk songs by the Guwahati Radio station, and I won first prize for that. I have been a radio artiste since 1955.

Nayani Sija (76): I started from my very childhood. My first plays were *Shahjahan* and *Prithviraj*. I was learning acting from the late Aramabam Dorendrajit, who was an acting exponent of the period. I have been a singer. I acted in *Radhakrishna*. Krishna came from Assam to Manipur after catching elephants (*enacts dialogue*). He came in disguise. I was dressed as this god Krishna and I entered singing (*sings the song*). I started with dance dramas. *Manbhanjan*, *Prabhaskhanda*, *Muraliharan*, these were the famous plays. I liked Narada in *Prabhaskhanda*; when I came on stage as Narada, this was my first song (*sings*). Iché (sister) Thambal, Bimola, Tondon, we were all contemporaries. I turned to acting along with them. I was involved with the Dance Academy. I also went to Guwahati to sing on radio. These days I still like to act, if I'm asked to.

Nongmaithem Bimola Devi (Bimola Achoubi, 67): I started acting before World War II, when I was about 5 or 7 years old. We used to do Sankeertanas, Operas, with songs and dance, dance dramas like *Prabhaskhanda*, *Bansiharan*, etc. In those days we did not act on a stage. We would go to the *angans* of far-flung villages of Manipur and act there. Before the War we even went to places like Assam and Bengal. Almost all of us then were very religious and we would sing a lot of devotional songs and keertans. After the War, we were called by Raja Buddhachandra to sing before him in the palace. We would sing in all languages—Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu. In those days, people from all over the world were living in Manipur. The Canadians even made a documentary on us. In the midst of all these activities I still took part in radio plays and songs on Guwahati Radio. But after I got married I wasn't very interested in doing those things, instead I quietly resumed my studies and passed my matriculation. After that I requested my husband to let me learn dancing and singing from all the top teachers of Manipur. In those days, I would sing my own songs in the plays I did. These days we have so many playback singers like Lata Mangeshkar, but in those days we had to sing our own songs. All of us would get together and interact very well, there was a lot of affection in the group, and that's how we would do a play. After marriage it's difficult for women to work, they become weak due to bearing as many as 10 children. For 3 years after my marriage, I lived quietly and served my in-laws. My husband, Mulia Chand Singh, was the Deputy Director, Sericulture. He would tell me to do something instead of living so quietly. He told me that I used to be so lively and active, acting with Aryan, Rupmahal, Paradise. He said that I had acted in so many theatres, and that one day my time would come again. He encouraged me to take concrete steps again, to look after the house, cook and clean, but at the same time keep practising, to devote some time to my art.

I started in Aryan Theatre, playing Krishna. It was really difficult in those days. There were no lights, make-up, props, dresses, etc. We had to improvise. Nowadays everything has become so easy. So much money is spent on make-up; an old woman can



Randhoni Devi



Nayani Sija

become a young girl and vice versa. We did not even have mikes then. We had to sing

our songs very loudly so that everyone could hear us, even those sitting far away.

I enjoyed acting as Sophia in *Tipu Sultan*, as Sita, Kunjamala—when I acted as a tribal in *Chaibi* (Queen of Charai Rogba, 17th century), and spoke in the tribal dialect, people thought that I was a tribal!

I worked with directors like Ningthemjao Chongtham. When I was acting as Kunjamala, I remember not being able to do the scene where I'm confronted by a tiger. My director shouted at me, and I returned home upset, wondering how to handle the scene. At that moment a cat crossed my path and I stepped on it, and the fright I got resulted in a loud, heart-rending cry (*lets out a loud wail*). That's how I learned how to do that particular scene with the tiger. The next day I went back and said, I can do the role today. How come, you couldn't manage it yesterday? asked the director. But I said, yesterday I killed a cat at home. Now I know how to do it (*shrieks loudly*)—like this.

In Rupmahal I loved acting as Krishna. I still remember a scene from *Tipu Sultan*, because I'm very patriotic by nature, I prefer it to romantic roles. (*She acts out the scene*).

Laimayum Thambal Devi (67): I have acted in so many roles that I can't even begin to count them. I acted in Aryan, Rupmahal. I was always the heroine. Sita, Shakuntala, are roles that I played very often. In the Nehru Dance Academy I got a lot of medals for my dancing and acting, maybe more than 20. State Kala Akademi, Sahitya Parishad—I got medals from them, too.

Our plays were mostly held from 6 p. m. onwards. The audience was usually huge. I was in Calcutta for 6 months learning Hindi. We had to learn the dialogues by heart. I acted in a lot of plays. Raja Buddhachandra even awarded me a gold medal. I went to a lot of places, all over India, usually for dance performances, not so much for plays. Now I have retired. When I was working in the Nehru Dance Academy, I had to concentrate more on the work there, so I gradually stopped working in plays. Even afterwards, when I was approached to act again, I didn't take up the offer since it had been a long time and I might have forgotten how to act.

Congress President Dada Nilamani Singh was the first director I worked with. He taught me how to act as Sita in Rupmahal. I did many plays under him. In Aryan I had to speak in Hindi. My director was Oja Kalachand Shanti. I acted as Chitrangada, and I did many other roles, too. I've lost count of them.

It's not for love of money that I acted, it's because my heart was in it. My father was against my joining theatre, but still I persisted. Staying at home I was unhappy, but whenever I got the chance to do a play I was overjoyed. If I couldn't get permission to act in a play I would even stop eating.

We were not given any salary as such, but rather some money for our expenses. Some of us were given more, some less. The payment was not good.

Khongbamtabam Ongbi Randhoni Devi (65): I started very young. Between the ages of 7-12 years, I was with Oja Jugindro. Then, when I was 14/15 years old, I went to Aryan where I was asked to play Krishna. When I joined, theatre was something that was laughed at and I was advised by everyone not to get involved in it. When I was acting, I remember I was slapped a lot by Oja Ibungoyaima. I was a child then, and it hurt and I cried a lot. I was scared to tell my family whenever I had to play that role.

My father once got involved in a local play and acted as Yudhisthira. Seeing him rehearsing and wearing different costumes attracted me, and I became very interested in theatre. But it was very difficult then, being involved in theatre. Because of my interest and involvement in theatre, I never completed my studies. Theatre in Manipur meant a lot of hardship. I somehow studied upto class X. But people laughed at me and called me a mad woman and other names all the way from my home to the school where I learnt singing, and all the way back, too. I would be crying but I would walk like that to school, to learn singing.



Bimola Devi (*top*) and Rashi Devi (*bottom*)

My friends and I had decided to do Khubakishei, but Pabung Dhanachandra told me

to join MDU instead. At that time I was in Aryan doing *Bhaktaraj*. It was a very touching play, and the audience would weep a lot. Seeing the effect of the play and the acting on them, I wanted to continue acting. Their applause filled me with a desire to act. I didn't think about my father's disapproval or anything else. All I knew was that I wanted to act. Pabung Dhanachandra took me from Aryan almost by force and made me join MDU. I was still a child then, I hadn't yet matured into a young lady. In those days the props were practically non-existent. Sometimes the things we did were dangerous. Like, when I acted as a young Brahmin I had to be bodily thrown, wrapped in sacks, near the fire that was lit on stage. And I remember that I was terrified, taking the name of all the gods just before I was flung down. The first two times nothing went wrong but the third time my hair caught fire and there was a big commotion, with everyone rushing on stage and throwing water on me. When the fire was put out, I realized that the audience was crying. I didn't realize why they were crying, but the sight fuelled my desire for acting.

In *Sarat Purnima* I acted as Purnima and I got a lot of medals. I was very young, and seeing me in this role people said that I was fit to be a heroine now. Another role was that of Thambal, and I was very closely identified with it, to such an extent that when I got married and stopped working for a while; this play was not staged anymore. When my grandchild was 14/15 years old, I acted in a film based on Thambal [Thambalnu, a character from an early 19th century tragedy; later dramatized as *Yairipok Thambalnu*].

I directed 2 plays—one got first prize. It was at a time when I was very popular as an actress and MDU didn't want to let me go at any cost. Though the money was very little, as little as Rs 60, I didn't think about the financial aspects—costumes were so expensive too! But the feeling I got when I stepped onto stage in bright, colourful costumes and heard the applause of the audience, and saw the tears they shed at my performance—that was what kept me going. It was then that I decided to direct a play. Our group toured a lot of rural places putting up this play, using local talent wherever possible.

We were very badly paid. Aryan approached me to join them on a performance in Assam. I joined them, leaving MDU. I left because they hadn't paid me for a year, but the performances we had to put up were as many as 3 a week. I acted in *Haorang Leisang Saphabi* too, and after I stopped playing the main role, there was no one else in Manipur to play it.

My first trip outside was to Cachar. We had gone there to put up a performance. The food was very bad. I was acting as Thambal. When we reached the place we were exhausted. I remember the public there was amazed when they saw us lying down, dead tired. They wanted to beat us up because they believed that some of us were dead and they wouldn't allow us to keep a dead body in their village. We had to shout, using the mike, that there was no dead body, we were simply lying down because we were exhausted! I was asked to stay on for a year to help the school there. I was offered some money for this. Since I hadn't been paid any money for a year, I agreed to stay on. I directed the play *Usman Thambal* [Usman and Thambal are two lovers from the Muslim community] there and the performance earned enough money to build a portion of the school.

Pabung Lalit taught me a lot about how to act as a heroine, also Pabung Dhanachandra and Dada Nilamani. Pabung Lalit taught me all the minute details in Thambal; in order to show me how I was to cry he devised a strategy. One day I was called and accused by him of taking a 100 rupee note that had been lying on a table. I denied it, but he stood firm. In my anguish, I started crying violently and even fainted. Later he told me that I should cry like that for the play!

Khundrakpam Tamphamani Devi (52): I started very young. I acted as a small boy in *Raj Kumar*. My sister would teach me while I held her baby and she cooked. I didn't get the chance to act as a heroine then, because I got married very early. I had my child at the age of 16 years. After my marriage, my father-in-law, who was very fond of theatre,

would take me to MDU and get me involved in plays there. I thought I was very bad-looking, though I had beautiful hair. I didn't think I would be liked by the audience, and so I stayed quietly at home, even though I had the desire to join theatre. My sister was an actress, and she took me to Aryan one day. I was asked by the directors there what I could do, so I sang a few songs, but they were still doubtful, saying that I was too ugly. I asked them whether I could join if I learned how to act. So they decided to take me on.

I got a lot of awards. My life revolved around Aryan and I learnt everything there, even reading and writing. I played a variety of roles, some negative ones also. In Jamshedpur I took part in a social play and won the award for Best Actress.

My husband started to stray when I was involved in theatre, though I wasn't aware of it. One day I told him that I had to go somewhere for a play, and I asked him to take me there in his vehicle. At first he refused, saying that if I wanted to continue acting we would have to separate. But I told him not to say things like that, and finally he agreed to take me to this place for the play. He left me there, and while I was on stage, at that very moment, the sound of drums was heard—he had got married to another woman at the very moment I was on stage. My life has been like this. Because of my love for theatre and acting, I even had to separate from my husband. But I don't regret it. Because if I had stayed with him I could never have been able to educate my children the way they have been educated. I could do it only through my earnings from the theatre.

Even now I'm still active. From the day I entered the Publicity department, I have not rested for a day. I've been involved in acting, dancing and singing.

Kshetrimayum Rashi Devi (46): In 1969, at Aryan Theatre, I first acted—as Gaidinlieu. I did not have any childhood ambitions of joining theatre. After my marriage and 3 children, I happened to tell Eigya [an honorific used when referring to Brahmins] Manihar that I would like to act in order to earn a living, and my mother also requested him to take me under his wing. That's how I started. I became known as the one who acted as Gaidinlieu. But I did not know anything about acting. My mother, too, never guided me other than to tell me once to turn my face this way and not that way. She never accompanied me or guided me during rehearsals. Instead, she looked after my 3 kids while I joined the theatre to earn a living. But Eigya Manihar, Eigya Shyam, they were there and they taught me. I remember a scene from Gaidinlieu (*acts out the scene*).

Regarding social plays in Aryan, I acted as Tombi, and also in *Tirtha Jatra* (Pilgrimage) as a married woman whose husband moves around with other women. I got first prize for my role. On the radio I acted as Krishna, and also in *Laibaak lei* (Earth Flower). I can't remember all the roles now, they were so numerous.

In the beginning, when I first started acting I had to face many adverse reactions from the people in the locality. They said I was bad and I wanted to do bad things and that's why I joined theatre; they threw stones at me, called me names and criticised me.

At that time I used to earn only Rs 25. They were difficult times, I had to really struggle and face a lot of trouble. My mother was mostly ill. I sometimes had to call the *maibi* [healers with mystical powers] to stay with her while I went off for a performance, and I had to hurry back as soon as it was over. I acted mostly as a tribal woman, and people began to call me a tribal woman even outside the theatre, although I wasn't too good as one. I didn't know much about acting in theatre, I simply did what I had to. Though I didn't get individual prizes as such, I did get prizes as part of a group.

Regarding social plays, it was mostly Eigya Shyam who taught me, as they were mostly held at Aryan. I acted in other theatres too, almost all of them—MDU, Rupmahal, etc. Right now I take part in (government) Departmental dramas.

Yenkhom Roma (49): I started acting from the late 60s onwards. I was very young when I started. Laisram Somorendro used to give me small parts to play in local functions from the time I was in class III or so. In class IX or so I was part of the Student Artistes' Association. We would put up performances—singing, dancing, acting—during the

holidays. We had the ambition of helping those in need with the money we earned thus—like, we helped the victims of the fire in Thangmeiband from our funds. In 1966–67 during the All Manipur Drama Festival I acted in *Kathokpa* written by Ramcharan and won the Best Supporting Actress award. Then, in 1968, in Arambam Somorendro's *Judge Saheb ki Emung* (The Judge's Family) I won the Best Actress award during the same festival held that year. Other than this, I also acted in a few of Kanhailal's plays. I started first with singing and dancing—dance dramas by Tagore; as Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth; in plays by Badal Sircar and Sartre.

The role I liked most was that of Indu in *Asangba Nongjabi* (Azure Clouds), M. K. Binodini's play. I was very young then, and fearing that I might go wild, as we had to do a lot of touring, I was made to rehearse separately. I considered those days challenging, because I was very young, and all the others were my elders and veteran actors/actresses. Ratan Thiyam, on returning from the National School of Drama, put up a production in which I was Gandhari.

In 1972, when films were first made in Manipur, an advertisement appeared in the newspaper that *Madhuri* was going to be made into a film and I was told by my friends to apply. I was reluctant because, as I told them, only very beautiful women join films and there was no chance for me (*laughs*). By that time I had already got a couple of awards for Best Actress in theatre. I was finally persuaded to join by some of the directors like Eigya Shyam, Arambam Lokendra. That film, as luck would have it, won the President's Award for Best Regional Film. I have acted in 5 films altogether—3 of them won national awards, and in one I won a state award and the Best Actress Award.

Transcribed and translated by Elizabeth Vesant.

Despite our best efforts, it is possible that due to logistical reasons, not all the actresses present at the session could be represented here. We regret our inability to include them all.