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Dear friend,

Four years ago, we started a theatre journal. It was an experiment. Lots of questions. Would a journal in English work? Who would our readers be? What kind of material would they want? Was there enough interesting and diverse work being done in theatre to sustain a journal, to feed it on an ongoing basis with enough material? Who would write for the journal? How would we collect material that suited the indepth attention we wanted to give the subjects we covered?

Alongside the questions were some convictions. We knew, for example, that we wanted to pay attention to those kinds of theatre work that were off-beat, alternative, serious, sustained, activist, experimental, confrontational, small, semi-rural or rural, marginalized for one reason or another. We wanted to find a way of bringing such work to the notice of the theatre community, to help forge links, spread awareness and facilitate networking. We wanted the journal to be relevant, which meant that it had to deal with issues and problems faced by theatre persons. There should be food for the mind and soul, things that opened doors and lit up horizons, that helped one cross borders and break conventions. Inspirational stuff, perhaps a fellow theatre person talk of his/her life in theatre or how s/he overcame certain problems. Lots of ringing bells. There should be practical stuff, which one could use, which could help answer questions related to one's work in theatre. Voices of flesh and blood people. All this, and more—playscripts, debates, group discussions, serious reviews.

Part of what this fledgling journal wanted to do was to strengthen the very embattled, threatened situation in which live theatre which does not want to be *just* commercial entertainment, finds itself today. To devote a serious journal to this theatre was a way of acknowledging its presence, giving it importance, recognizing its contribution to society, giving it a voice or allowing its many voices to speak. It was a way of joining the struggle, if you will. Because every theatre person knows that today, doing theatre seriously *is* a struggle.

Anyway, today we are inviting you to help us by giving us your feedback, your inputs and ideas, which will help us take a long, hard look at ourselves. Please be as frank as you like. Please be as constructive as you can. We will be grateful if you fill in the attached questionnaire as completely as possible.

Many thanks,

Anjum Katyal, Editor
Seagull Theatre Quarterly (STQ)



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AN EXHIBITION OF THE LATEST
IN CONTEMPORARY WRITING BY:

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A. S. Byatt
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Angela Carter
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Irvine Welsh
Tom Woolfe
and many others
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Editorial

The 'believed-in' theatre Richard Schechner posits as a category emergent in international theatre is premised on the actual: the performers actually belonging to the community the theatre speaks about, the subject matter or content actually being part of the performer's reality and experience. In that sense, it stands radically opposed to conventional theatre thinking, which prides itself on taking on, making one's own, others' texts and experiences. The audience watching traditional theatre knows that it is being 'acted' by 'actors.' Those watching 'believed-in theatre', on the other hand, participate in another kind of sharing—they experience the power of testimony: this is my pain, my life, my history.

This aspect of 'believed-in theatre' is also what makes it political and activist: yoking the politics of identity to performance, voicing experience from an 'authentic' position of belonging, challenging normative perceptions from an 'insider's' perspective, demanding a renegotiation of the accepted relationship with the audience.

In the course of his discussion, Richard asked if there were any instances of such 'believed-in' theatre here. At the time, one example came to mind: the sex workers of Kalighat presenting their story on stage, acting as themselves (see STQ 9). For them, stepping across the line of invisibility into the glare of public visibility as sex workers, claiming and asserting their identity, was a major step to take, given the vicious social indictment they face in every aspect of their personal and professional lives. And their testimony raised important questions to their audience: of moral opprobrium, of responsibility, of the whole problematic of rehabilitation.

There are other instances in different parts of India, of groups and individuals using the medium of theatre to present their own community experiences to a larger world. In this issue STQ covers one such recent attempt: *Coming Out with Music*, a performance on the theme of same-sex desire and love, the first public statement by a group connected with the gay movement in Calcutta, presenting the gay point of view on stage. Highly aware of the personal risk they were taking by 'going public' in this manner, of possible repercussions at the level of family, professional life, and social acceptability, they saw it as an important first step, a way of contributing to the building of a gay community, an assertion of identity, and also an attempt to awaken heterosexual members of the audience to a more open way of approaching the reality of homosexuality.

'Believed-in' theatre in India exists, and has done so for a while, albeit without the label and the theorization. As a result of its being discussed within certain parameters, one begins to recognize its existence, its motivations, and its kinship with similar expressions nationally and internationally.

Anjum Katyal

Believed-in Theatre

Richard Schechner

On his trip to India in late 1997, the well-known theatre director and performance scholar Richard Schechner, presented a talk on believed-in theatre. Following his talk in Calcutta, STQ scheduled a discussion in which several of the points he had made were elaborated and further clarified. This extract, culled from the text of his Calcutta talk and the longer version which first appeared in the journal *Performance Research* (issue 2), is by way of an introduction to the issues taken up in the discussion which follows.

Believed-in performances—where real people really act out their lives—have long been with us. Courtroom trials, sacred and secular rituals, protest demonstrations, Gofmanian performances in everyday, and so on. Believed-in theatre is related but different. Orthodox theatre is not believed-in, in the sense I am using the phrase. The mimetic theory of theatre demands a prior or at least a separate actuality which the theatre ‘reflects’ or ‘interprets,’ but which it is not.

An example of ‘believed-in theatre’ is the Israeli Akko Theatre Center’s *Arbeit Macht Frei vom Totland Europa*¹, ostensibly a drama, with paid admissions, a theatre address, and a clearly defined schedule. I saw *Arbeit* in Akko in 1994. The production is well described by Dan Urian 1993 and Rebecca Rovit 1993.² Urian, an Israeli theatre professor, writes:

Arbeit Macht Frei is a play about memories of the Holocaust and their place in Israeli reality. Its materials are the collective biography of its actors and their spectators, the majority of whom are second generation Holocaust survivors. [...] The spectator at *Arbeit Macht Frei* is deluged by words, music and song, gestures, costume changes, props, changing locations and scenery. Many spectators have the impression that the text and the actors’ actions are to a great extent improvised. This impression is enhanced by the constant tension between the actor’s own identity, which is preserved during the performance, and the role or roles he or she plays. [...] The actors in *Arbeit Macht Frei* wrote the text employing only such facts as they had read, or heard, or experienced themselves, from sources such as documents, films, interviews with Holocaust survivors, musical excerpts, and visits to Holocaust memorials and museums. The process of writing the text took three years, during which the montage was created by David Ma’ayan, Smadar Yaron-Ma’ayan, and Moni Yosef. The rest of the work was also carried out as teamwork,

including building the set (1993: 61-62).

Arbeit is a site-specific performance for an audience of about 50. The performance in Akko begins in a parking lot where spectators were loaded into a bus guarded by actors/Israeli soldiers and driven across town to the Akko Holocaust Museum. So many Israelis are in the armed forces reserve that I wondered if they were wearing their actual uniforms. At the museum, Smadar Yaron-Ma’ayan introduced herself as Zelma, a Holocaust survivor and tour guide. Again, was she telling the truth? She explained some exhibits, then took us to the museum auditorium for a movie depicting the SS shoving children into a windowless truck with Red Cross markings whose exhaust feeds back into the cabin. This mobile gas chamber was a prototype for the gas chambers at Auschwitz and elsewhere. Was I alone in recalling the bus ride we had just taken? Watching *Ambulans* I did not know it was Polish (Janusz Morgenstern, director) and not, as it seemed, a Nazi instruction film. After the movie, Zelma turned the group over to Khaled Abu Ali (his real name), who said he was an Israeli Arab whose job at the museum was to explain to Arab school children what happened to the Jews of Europe. Again, was he telling the truth? Only later, when Zelma and Khaled appear in the rest of *Arbeit*, do we learn that these people are not who we thought they were . . . maybe. Members of the Akko Theatre Center, is the Arab an Arab, the Polish-Israeli woman—is she too young to be a survivor?

We left the Museum not knowing who was what. Back at the Akko Theatre we were ushered—herded is more like it—into a small room with a ceiling so low we had to stoop; we were packed onto hard narrow benches, the actors inches away. At our backs were small windows blocked by barbed-wire. We were in a house, in a concentration camp, in a bunker, in a theatre. At a grand piano bizarrely outsized in this cramped space, Zelma sang a medley honouring Israeli heroes plus sentimental love songs. She argued with a neighbour about who suffered most during the

Holocaust. Suddenly, the ceiling crashed down inches away from our knees and noses: behold, a fully-laden table, a kind of seder. 'Instead of a tablecloth, documents and photographs referring to the Holocaust completely cover the table. [. . .] We pass around kosher dishes of cholent, hummus, eggs, and matzo' (Rovit 1993:167). Zelma's husband Menash (Yosef) brags how the Israeli war machine is capable of crushing any Arab resistance. Obsequiously, Khaled dusts everything in sight, including Zelma, as he serves snacks and schnapps to the family and spectator-guests, while singing/explaining his plight as an Israeli Arab. When *Arbeit* was performed in Berlin in 1992, spectators were asked about the treatment of Turks. In Israel, the questions were about the treatment of Arabs. The performance drove home analogies between the Holocaust and the displacements caused by Zionism, the treatment of the Arabs, the wars for Palestine/Israel. Everything was designed to make the mostly Jewish Israeli audience uncomfortable.

When the sardonic feast ended, we were moved to an upper level. 'The naked actors are scattered in the room. Miri Tsemach sits naked in an iron bathtub thrashing about in a heap of food remains, eating and spitting them out. Na'ama Manbar is in a glass tank, swimming in a pile of papers, evidence of Holocaust survivors, and Moni Yosef is hanging from one of the walls. Smadar Ya'aron Ma'ayan, a naked, living skeleton is dancing a sort of dance of death, almost like a circus acrobat. Khaled Abu Ali, the naked Arab, runs about scourging himself and offering his whip to the spectators to lash him' (Urian 1993: 60-61).

Khaled was acting the part of a Shi'a Muslim during *t'aziyeh*, a cycle play depicting the martyrdom of Mohammed's nephew, Hussein. Laughing, crying, Khaled offered spectators the whip and bottles of beer. Sometimes, Khaled later told me, persons accept both. On the night I attended, Khaled whipped himself until there were welts on his back and buttocks. Finally, a spectator took the whip away. But this intervention did not 'end the violence'. Khaled subverted the attempt to save him by reaching into his store of whips: As soon as one was taken away he grabbed another. The Akko Theatre Center refused giving spectators a comfortable way out.³ Finally, 'Smadar approaches and embraces him, and with this tableau of the Pieta, in which the flagellated Arab rests in the arms of the Jewish deathlike figure, a refugee from the Holocaust, the play ends' (Urian 1993:61). Not the night I saw it. Khaled kept whipping himself until the last spectator, in this case me, left.

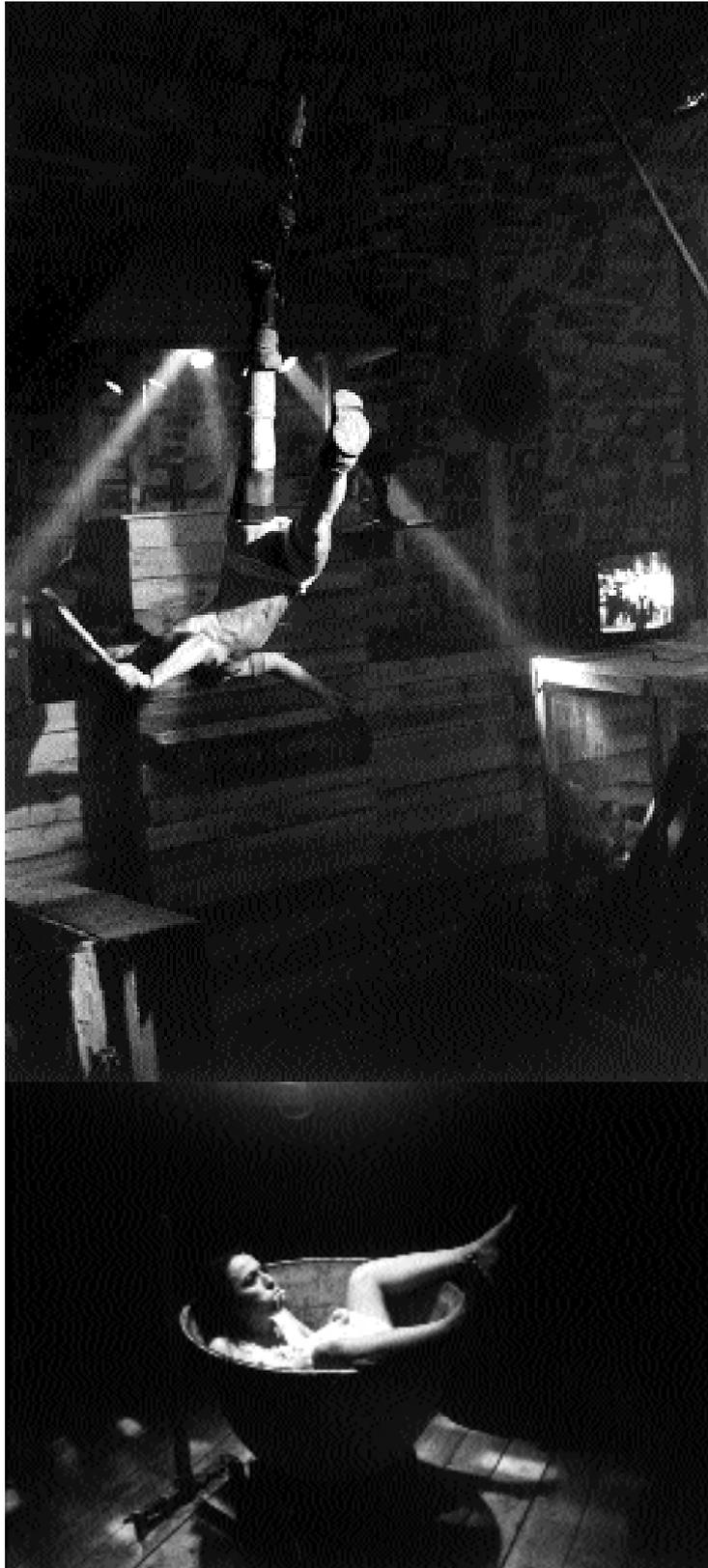
Arbeit spectators were not asked to intervene, and if they did, the intervention was exposed as

ineffective. *Arbeit's* effect emerged from the movement from site to site, the claustrophobic environment, the shared food, the intensity of direct address, the raising of historical/ethical questions and analogies. *Arbeit* inhabited a conceptual and actual space between what is usually thought of as theatrical—symbolic, not-for-real—and what is actual: the Holocaust museum, actors whose identities slip from 'self' to 'character'. A meal was served and eaten, Khaled's body bled, the welts were real. As at a seder or *t'aziyeh*, the actions were real and symbolic simultaneously. The theatrical signs were surpassed by the actuality of the actions, the doubleness of the performers. *Arbeit's* peculiar flavour was in its address to a specific community-within-a-community: Holocaust survivors and children of survivors who are Israelis. *Arbeit* is believed-in theatre not only, or even mostly, because it is a documentary or because it draws a parallel between the Holocaust and how Israelis oppress Arabs, but because, using experimental theatre techniques, its creators explore and express feelings and ideas at the precise point where the personal, the historical, and the political intersect.

Across America today, community-based theatres, celebrating rather than excoriating, engage history and memory as these shape social and personal relations. Take *Swamp Gravy* of Colquitt, Georgia, for example. In the *Swamp Gravy* series of plays, a small semi-rural town performs both individual and collective identities through recollected personal experiences, story-telling, and songs.

Swamp Gravy is an example of community-based theatre linked to the construction and expression of both individual and collective identity. In a way these plays were the opposite of the Akko Theatre's *Arbeit*, also based on community experience, but presented in an ironic, cutting, bitter, and painful way—keeping old and new wounds open. *Swamp Gravy* is about celebrating the community, even when painful. 'The people that have a part in this production, which numbers in the hundreds, have a respect for each other that was not possible before this started,' wrote Terry Toole, publisher of the Miller County Liberal (quoted in Geer 1996:109). Where 'difficult' subjects are touched on, such as violence against women and race relations, there are limits beyond which the community is not willing to go yet. Those limits are decided by the people making the *Swamp Gravy* plays.

'It isn't about theatre,' said lighting designer Brackley Frayer on the opening night of the first play. 'It's about something else. It takes some getting used to. It's anthropology,



Above and below. From *Arbeit Macht Frei*. 'Smadar Ya'aron Ma'ayan, a naked, living skeleton is dancing a sort of dance of death, almost like a circus acrobat' (Photo: David Baitzer) while 'Miri Tsemach sits naked in an iron bathtub thrashing about in a heap of food remains, eating and spitting them out'.

theatre, drama therapy, and missionary work, I thought. It's not about the play, it's about the stories; it's not about the acting, it's about the communal agon (Geer 1996:127).

The believed-in core of community-based theatre is in the fact that people are enacting their own stories and performing mostly for people of their own communities. This kind of theatre prizes conviction and sincerity, 'direct address' or 'testimony'; depending on your frame of reference, more than professional acting skills. Ironically, though millions of evangelical Americans subscribe to the public expression of religious belief—speaking in tongues, being possessed by the Holy Spirit, trance dancing, laying on of hands, healing through prayer and touch, rib-rocking preaching—the theatre as such has long been associated with untruth: the anti-theatrical prejudice is strong. Swamp Gravy is exactly the kind of theatre that can flourish in this environment—it is 'truthful' rather than 'theatrical'. What happens to this 'local knowledge' and 'truth' when Swamp Gravy performs outside of their homebase? Playing before strangers, the Swamp Gravy actors have to get 'better', even as they lose direct touch with their audience. In this, Swamp Gravy is like any 'folk theatre' on tour. The sponsors want to preserve the 'authenticity' of the 'folk' even as they want a product 'good enough' to entertain sophisticated urban audiences. The results are not always happy.

Closer to hell is the believed-in theatre of the AIDS epidemic. This theatre usually takes one of two forms. AIDS sufferers perform documentaries of their lives, a touching theatrical realism, touching because spectators know that the actors are condemned persons, infected and dying. The second kind of AIDS theatre draws on the tradition of performance art. Performance art emerged in the late 60s from Dada and Fluxus, experiments with 'projective verse', happenings, Cage's and Kaprow's Zen-influenced theories of non-judgement and present-centredness, street demonstrations, politicized art, and feminists who insisted that the 'personal is the political'⁴ A current example of AIDS performance art believed-in theatre is Ron Athey's *Martyrs and Saints* as it was performed in 1993 at New York's PS 122. This kind of specificity is necessary because Athey's theatre, like so much performance art, varies over time and venue. Athey, HIV positive, carries the virus that causes AIDS. As John McGrath describes a scene near the start of *M&S*:

Women enter. One of them begins to run needles through Athey's scalp. We realize that this is really happening, that blood is running down Athey's face. The needles form a crown of thorns. The women whip Athey, they make



Swamp Gravy, Colquitt, Georgia: doing theatre with and for the community. Photo: Walt Petruska



A Swamp Gravy tradition of 'circling up' before a show.
Photo:Richard Geer

him dance. Finally, Athey is tied to a pole, standing on a plastic sheet. A woman pushes darts into his body, slowly, agonizingly. The program tells us to remember St. Sebastian, but we forget St. Sebastian, we see only Athey's skin being pierced, his blood running down his body and onto the plastic. The panic of his blood, the breaking of his skin's barrier, destroys the theater of the moment, allows no metaphors of mysticism or s/m to insert meaning into the spectacle (McGrath 1995:26).

Athey takes great pains to set up barriers—plastic, rubber—between his infected body fluids and the not-wanting-to-be-infected audience. But still, people are afraid. For the most part, 'Athey's theatricality is blatantly badly done and cliched [...] and not even in some campy fun way; [it] is just bad theatre' (McGrath 1995:27). But intentionally so. If Swamp Gravy presents one alternative to professionalism, Athey and some other performance artists show another.

But both believed-in theatres project the same message: Something is going on here that is more actual, more true, more sincere, and more meaningful than what you get in ordinary theatre. This something is 'testimony': a town's history, a personal story, a bleeding to show one's deadly existential situation. And the players, far from being actors playing characters, becoming who they are not, are the people who they say they are.

Much believed-in theatre is about inventing presence: showing local knowledge, offering the testimony of infected blood, Arbeit Mach Frei's encounter with its specific sites and defined audiences, the Colquitt 'dialect' of Swamp Gravy. Believed-in theatre emphasizes 'history', 'truth', 'authenticity', 'origins', 'presence'. These words, and terms like them, have been 'problematized' by post-structural academic performance theorists. The makers of believed-in theatre either are unaware of this vein of thought, ignore it, or reject it. I am fascinated by how far away from academic



A scene from a Swamp Gravy production.
Photo: Walt Petruska



Ron Athey's Martyrs and Saints. "We see only Athey's skin being pierced, his blood running down his body . . ." Photo: Dona Ann McAdams.

theoretical concerns the practitioners of believed-in performances are.

Much has been written about the increasing performativity of everyday life, about how theatre has influenced and infiltrated religion, politics, medicine, the professions, sports, and almost anything else you can name. What I am talking about is motion in the other direction. How the authenticity, real or supposed, of religion, commitment, belief, and the like have helped form a kind of theatre where the people performing and the people receiving are personally invested in what's happening. This genre stands close to religion on the one side and judicial testimony on the other. Close to, but different from. Believed-in theatre operates within the theatrical-dramatic paradigm. The people making believed-in theatre tell stories by means of roles; they use dialogues and/or songs; they enact conflict and display emotions; they prepare their work through rehearsal, use varying amounts of technical means; they present work to a public, often enough a paying public, who receive what is done not as religion, not as a town meeting, not as anything but theatre. As the venues and occasions of orthodox theatre shrink in relation to film and video, believed-in theatre increases.

Notes

1. The title combines the grisly ironic 'Work Makes You Free' motto wrought in iron by the Nazis over Auschwitz's main gate, with the sardonic commentary added by the Akko Theatre: '... in Deathland Europe.'
2. Rovit writes specifically about Arbeit's showings in Berlin, and how the Akko group adapted the production for a predominantly German rather than Israeli audience.
3. The intervention reminded me of the Living Theatre's 'exemplary actions'. In these, spectators were invited to intervene and show the way violence could be intercepted or blocked. Of course, it was all make-believe: no Living Theatre violence matched what the police, or others, did; and I doubt that practising intervention on a stage promoted such actions in real life.
4. Robyn Brentano has provided a fine thumb-nail sketch of the development and scope of performance art:

Performance has been a powerful catalyst in the history of twentieth-century art not only because it has subverted the formal conventions and rational premises of modernist art, but also because it has heightened our awareness of the social role of art and, at times, has served as a vehicle for social change. [...] The term "performance art" first appeared around 1970 to describe the ephemeral, time-based, and process-oriented work of conceptual ("body") and feminist artists that was emerging at the time. It was also applied retrospectively to Happenings, Fluxus events, and other intermedia performances from the 1960s. Over the past thirty-five years, many styles and modes of performance have evolved, from private, introspective investigations to

ordinary routines of everyday life, cathartic rituals and trials of endurance, site-specific environmental transformations, technically sophisticated multimedia productions, autobiographically based cabaret-style performance, and large-scale, community-based projects designed to serve as a source of social and political empowerment (Brentano 1994:31-32).

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'A world where and is more important than or'

A Discussion with Richard Schechner

After the Calcutta session of Schechner's talk on believed-in theatre in September 1997, STQ scheduled a discussion with him. Present at the discussion from STQ were Samik Bandyopadhyay, Paramita Banerjee, and Anjum Katyal. The transcript of the discussion is reproduced here.

SB: So you feel that theatre that uses a play by a playwright, is directed by a director, is becoming more and more marginalized. Less people are going to this kind of theatre. Even actors are going off it. And this is getting more and more common. You face it there, we face it here. You suggest that there is at least another possibility—which cannot be the sole possibility—of 'believed-in' theatre which grows out of communities, or theatre which grows out of more personal performance art, expressions—and you're thinking of a space for this kind of theatre.

RS: Right.

SB: Now, when you started working in the 60s in the environmental theatre of that particular period . . . did that trend really grow and develop?

RS: The environmental theatre trend—

SB: That particular trend. We would like a little bit of a history, how you came into the scene, and took off in certain directions, and where you stand today with your work in Beijing . . .

RS: Yeah, okay. Before I do that, let me comment a little bit about what you said at the start. I don't look at the reduction of the theatre of playwrights as a problem. I just look at it as a fact. And actually, to a certain degree, a happy fact. Because I don't think that that theatre is going to vanish, by any means. It is just going to occupy—I always like to think of a spectrum—it's going to occupy a certain bandwidth of our performance consciousness.

SB: You even used the word 'niche'.

RS: Right.

SB: It will have its own niche.

RS: Right. When I went to school, which was many years ago, of course, I was given the impression by my teachers that that was all that theatre was. Something made me uncomfortable about that. I don't know what, but I said, 'That can't be.' But that's what I was taught. And all the history books I read, you know, were about—if it was theatre, it was about the productions of plays by playwrights; if it was literature, it was the playwrights. And, if it was theory, it was the theory of play construction, with a little bit extra. So, I am very glad that I think almost everybody now, even the most conservative person would say, yes, there is the theatre of drama, there is the theatre of ritual, there is the theatre of popular entertainment, there is the theatre of sports, there is the theatre of politics, etc. And that, if we don't have the same theories to deal with all these theatres, at least the theories are related. The notion of the performative, the notion of playing one's own identity, etc. etc. There are certain theories, ritual theories, as well, that can handle more than just the one kind of theatre. What doesn't get handled, what gets left out, is the theory of literature because the difference, the great division is, are you going to deal with the behaviour, of the event, or are you going to deal with the literature. Literature as drama can be used in an event but is itself not an event, from my point of view. Some people theoretically would argue that, yes, literature is also an action, is also performative. And I can accept that. It's not my cup of tea but I can accept that.

So that having been said, I want to go back to my own particular niche, because I think that sometimes where people misconstrue me, is to think that what I am interested in as a historian and a theorist, is what I do as an artist. The two overlap, the two inform each other, but they are definitely not identical. Or to put it another way, my passion as a theorist is to know as much about everything as I can. My passion as an artist is to express myself and a small group of

others who want to work with me. The two are not consistent. And, I am often asked, you know, how do you use Ramlila? I don't use it, I study it. And I am not particularly—I don't go to Varanasi to see what I can use as an artist. My artistic life and my scholarly life are parallel, they overlap, but they're not identical. So now, what you asked was really a question about my own artistic work—

SB: I don't know whether I'm correct, but it's our reading that somehow in the 60s, when you came on the scene, in the overall American situation with Civil Rights and the Vietnam issue, there was a general feeling that the settled democratic norms, the sense that everything is all right and everything will work out—this sense was given a big jolt.

RS: Absolutely!

SB: People realized that through all your entire democratic machinery, you can't wish away racialists from a nation. With all your democratic assertion, you can't stop the warmongers playing war games. Vietnam or elsewhere in the world. So, a different kind of popular assertion, a different kind of . . .

RS: Voice.

SB: . . . voicing yourself became important, and this also raised questions about the settled, established theatre.

RS: Absolutely! To get back to that part of it, my early experience was, of course, as a political activist. I don't want to toot my own horn, but I was one of the founders of a group called the Free Southern Theater. It was founded in 1964 by three African-Americans: Doris Derby, Gill Moses and John O'Neal. Doris is gone I don't know where. Gill is dead. And John and I are still friends. And that started in rural Mississippi. And we did plays in Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana. The motto of the theatre is 'A theatre for the people who have no theatre'. By the very nature of where you were performing: in churches, on street corners; by the very nature of who was coming—people who hadn't gone to the ordinary theatre, in other words, people who don't know the United States, don't know the immense rural population, more so then than now, as isolated in their own way as any villager anywhere else in the world would be isolated. Our intention was to deliver a certain content, and to make contact. Content and contact. And we performed first in, what was called at that point, Freedom Summer: 1964. A very famous summer in the United States because three young men were murdered—lynched—that summer. Two from the North—whites—and one from Mississippi—black. There's no doubt that if it had been three blacks killed, there wouldn't have been the same uproar, as two whites and one black. But there was a great uproar. And out of 1964 and all the demonstrations came the Voting Rights Bill and so forth. Similarly, shortly thereafter, I participated in the anti-Vietnam War teach-ins, and organized one of the first of those in the South—I was at Tulane University. And the movement against the War occurred in the streets, on campuses, outside of official spaces. The very nature—it had to be outside official spaces. Official spaces were not denied to us—that wasn't the problem, we could have got permits. We didn't want to use official spaces. The whole idea was to say, we are not part of that, we don't want to be identified with that. We wanted to be in a confrontation situation. And our models, of course, were Martin Luther King, and Gandhi, the whole nexus of, let's say, ahimsa—Now, I didn't have those words at that time, I'd be really lying to you if I said I did. Later on I heard of these connections. At that point, the Indian connection was not at all clear to me. I knew about Martin Luther King, the freedom movement, sit-ins, non-violent protest. Its connection to the rest of the world—I didn't have the foggiest notion.

But participating in that stuff opened my eyes to the fact that this was really theatrical in the deepest sense. It made contact with people, it communicated something to them and it was inherently dramatic—you know, it had conflict, and suspense and beauty. And a lot of people who participated in the freedom movement were not . . . it wasn't . . . we were happy. You have to realize that at that point we were also Utopian. We were very young, and by Utopian I meant, one of the great events was in 1967, we went to the Pentagon. To do two things. To march around the Pentagon seven times and see it come down—we knew it wasn't going to come down, but the walls of Jericho—and to piss on the steps of the Pentagon, which I did. This was very sexist because women couldn't do it, but we urinated on the steps of the Pentagon. That was a great symbolic act. While the National Guard and soldiers were all watching. We don't

know what those young men would have been feeling. We know what their officers were feeling, that this was, you know, a terrible thing to do. But it was also fun, you see. And it was rebellious. And the failure of the '60s, I think, was the failure to understand that real political change and symbolic political action are not equivalent. One does not necessarily follow the other. At the same time, although it's popular now to say that the 60s failed, they didn't. They got absorbed and made for certain profound changes in American society, which is far from perfect or perfectable, but different than it was before this era.

That was one great starting place for this environmental theatre, and the other starting place was exactly as you said it was, for me. The idea that my resistance to authority—and authority literally means the author—and not mine alone, but a general resistance to authority in which I participated. So when I was told by my teachers that your job as a director, as a student, is to find out what the playwright wanted and to put it on stage, my response was, Fuck you! I don't want to do what the playwright wanted. You know, that's just like doing what any authority wants. I want to find out what I and the people I am working with want, and we have certain slogans which came from the freedom movement. In other words, only work with the people who were there. Participatory democracy. It wasn't democracy of the people who were absent. It was democracy of the people who were present. So, if the writer was in our group, fine, the writer had a say. If the writer was not in our group, then the words are just material. You do with them what you feel proper. Not to necessarily disrespect, but not to necessarily try to figure out what they were about. So that was also part of the feeling in that period of time.

The other thing was my growing awareness of the historical avant-garde. In other words, what the Dadaists had done, what the Surrealists had done, the writings of Antonin Artaud, who I can still quote to you pretty thoroughly, 'theatre is a concrete physical space' or 'theatre is there to remind us that the sky could fall onto our heads at any time'. These things, or that the actor's an athlete of the emotions—athlete: physical, embodied; that the show should surround the audience instead of the audience sitting passively. I also, as a kind of young, idealist, Marxist type at that point, didn't like the whole idea of a rented seat, which was class-divided.

SB: Buying and selling.

RS: Buying and selling, but also that more money got you a better seat. Why should more money get you a better seat? I resisted that. Why should there be a better seat? Why should there be that place where the king and queen used to sit and as you move out from that everything gets worse? So I felt the need to devise a theatre, a theatrical experience, where each seat would give you a different view, would be equally good, and even better, no seats. Where people could move. If you didn't like it here, go there. Sit wherever you can. And it was out of that that I made my first happenings. And the happenings, which were the continuation of this Surrealism, Dada and so on, became the basis for the first environmental theatre production that I did. Maybe one of the earliest ones that anybody did. In 1967. Eugene Ionesco's *Victims of Duty*, in which we took over a room, instead of a theatre. We built different levels. We had places going off under the audience, around the audience. The audience could move and did move. We performed in their midst. And we took this play apart and put it back together. And that was done in New Orleans.

I'm going to jump way ahead. What happened to environmental theatre? Because even I don't really do it any more. It was a success, in quotation marks, if by that we mean that a lot of commercial interests took over its best ideas. Those interests range from Disneyland and theme parks, which are huge, participatory, environmental theatres, although they are designed to milk the money out of the consumer, to restored villages or site-specific performances by performance artists. In other words, it's so common now that it's not called environmental theatre. It's called site-specific performance, theme parks, restored villages. But what it is are totally dynamic environments in which dramas happen simultaneously, or locally, etc. And most of that stuff is junk. Although, I sometimes enjoy that junk. I would be a worse snob than I am if I didn't say that I did enjoy it sometimes. But I also recognize what it is.

For my own self, I would continue to do environmental theatre if I could afford it. At that period, in the 60s upto the mid-70s, there was a lot of government help in the theatre. I mean, we felt that anything we could take we were entitled to. There was no ideological problem of taking money, because taking money didn't support the people you took the money from. We felt it was just depriving them of a certain amount of money they couldn't spend on other

things. So there were employment programs, there was unemployment benefits, and there was direct aid for the arts. All of which you could put together, and in New York there were fairly cheap spaces in what has become Soho, which is now very expensive. And we owned our own theatre, The Performing Garage, as a part of an artist's cooperative. So that it didn't take that much money, we were able to redesign the theatre for each production. But, as the 70s became the 80s, as I left the performance group, which is the group I came to India with, with Mother Courage, and I realized that I wasn't a business person, that I just happened to have been lucky at that period of time where strangely, ironically, not only was a terrible war being fought, but there were a lot of public resources, maybe to buy out the people like me, who knows? Anyway, they were there. It wasn't there anymore under the age of Reagan. Ironically, of course, the actor-President was anti-art, anti-theatre, anti-his own past. Because he was a lousy actor. He only played the actor role well when he played the President role. Anyway.

So, I no longer had the venues. And I no longer had access to enough money to go into a place like La Mama and say, let's take out all the seats and do it this way. I mean, Alan Stewart would have let me do that if I had brought in 50,000 dollars to do it as long as I put it back the way I found it. But I couldn't raise that. So, my work at that point became . . . I worked in New York with an endstage as you saw in Faust (see STQ 4). I continued to do the deconstruction and reconstruction of texts, as you saw in Faust, but not so in Three Sisters, because I honoured—I liked that text. In other words, I don't always take a text apart. It depends on my response to the play. I mean, in Mother Courage, I didn't change anything. Chekhov, I didn't change anything. It's not that I don't like Goethe's Faust, but you can't stage it, so . . . and I don't like all of Marlowe's play. I think there's great lines of poetry in it, but I don't think it's a very good play. So that I put those together and made another text. As I did with Prometheus. So in New York, I've been working on an endstage with East Coast Artists. Now, where I have been able to do a little bit of environmental theatre is when I did the Oresteia in Taipei. There, it's mostly in a Greek-style arena. But there are two side stages. Agamemnon comes in through the crowd. So in that great scene when he walks on the purple cloth, Clytemnestra is far below him and he is up on the hillside, and the cloth is a hundred metres down and the audience is in-between. So I don't know if that answers your question.

I have become increasingly fascinated by working in multiple languages. Partly because I am so stupid with languages. I mean, I speak only English really, effectively. I can say a few things in many languages. But I really can't speak or understand any of the subcontinent's languages. But I'm, maybe for that reason, fascinated by multi-lingual productions, so that Faust had a great deal of German in it. In Three Sisters, there was a great deal of Russian—

AK: So what's the attraction of the multilingualism?

RS: Well, I think that many of us live in a world immersed in languages that we do and don't understand. In New York, you turn the radio dial, you're bound to get five stations that you don't understand, no matter who you are, because there are so many languages there. If you're living in a big city, at least my big city, I am surrounded by people who don't speak the same language I do, or we have certain bridge languages—most people in New York either speak Spanish or English. Some don't, but most do. In fact, there may be 25 or 30 languages being spoken in New York at the same time. So that's one reason. A fancier reason is that I feel that I should never do a play only in translation. There's where I do honour the playwright. If the writing is important, it's not important just in its meaning, it's important in its taste, it's actual, physical side, it's *rasa* if you will. (*Rasa* has been very important.) You can only get Chekhov's Russian if you hear it, you don't have to understand it, you can physically feel it. Same for Goethe's Faust. So that when somebody said, would you do a play in Calcutta, I said, only if it were English, because that's my language and a lot of people here speak English (we're speaking it here), Bengali, because that's the language of most people and Hindi, because that's the language that comes down from the Centre, but, also, there are a lot of Hindi-speaking people in Calcutta and that would be a very interesting thing.

The other part of it is, of course, the politics of it. In an era of fundamentalism, ethnic identity, language becomes political. So, part of what one's doing if one does multiple languages is saying, I'm going to look at that problem, if I can't solve it. And also, even if I myself am not capable of it, I want my children to be multilingual. Sometimes you can see what you can't grasp. And I want my audiences to be multilingual. And, multilingual at two levels: one, of

course, you should understand the language, but if you don't, you should enjoy a language you don't understand, just to hear it and see what it's doing to the other person, and respond to it at that level. So that's—

AK: Also the question of giving it space and respect.

RS: Space and respect—

AK: Yes. Bringing it to the forum.

RS: Right, right. I am trying that in TDR, a little bit—I'm working . . . I don't know if you know a man called N'gugi?

AK: Yes—N'gugi wa Thiongo, the Kenyan writer . . .

RS: N'gugi and I are good friends and colleagues. He does a journal in Kikuyu. And that's not spoken by very many people, especially outside of Kenya. We've proposed, and it's been accepted, that dissertations can be written in any language, the mother tongue of any of the students, including Kikuyu or Swahili or whatever it is. We recognize that if it's an American university, it also has to have an English version, but its primary version can be in its primary language. You know, it's not a perfect world. So it can't be only in [the primary language] or else, how could anybody except a Kikuyu reader to read it? But it should also be in that. And that if we publish things in TDR, if we don't publish the whole essay, we should publish a page or something in its original language, just so those who could read it, or even those who can't, should know that it has that reality. I said in my lecture that genre has become extinct, language has become extinct, you know, and that's not so terrible. At another level, of course, I want to preserve as much of the diversity in the world as possible. And I think that language is a very important culture bearer. Language, food, religion. We shouldn't go crazy and murder over these things, but we should respect them.

SB: Another thing that takes off from your lecture, bringing it to our context also, is that most theatre people still believe in the theatre of a text. A playwright's text. And at the same time they find that they don't have audiences for that kind of play. And even the playwrights realize that they have moved out of the scene.

RS: Right.

SB: So directors construct their texts, but they are still doing texts in the old manner. Trying to imitate the playwrights and follow the same rules. So it's a very messy situation, and that creates a problem. Nobody is prepared to accept that this can be a niche by itself and that there can be other areas also.

RS: Right.

SB: Now, in that context, in that kind of a situation, with that kind of thinking, this is a problem. So we are in that state, theoretically, logically. At the same time, the other thing that happens is that . . . when we saw Badal [Sircar]'s first work, there was also a question of a political activism. The kind of activism from which you came into the theatre scene in the mid-60s. Which remains more of a reality in our country, with the problems getting more and more complicated, and the strong feeling that we should be dealing with these problems, not just ignoring them and doing theatre for the sake of theatre. Now, the problem becomes, for a lot of the people in theatre here, which is also one of the questions that you address in your lecture, that quite a lot of them think that if we have 'professionals', and 'professionalism', that would be the solution to everything. Give us proper salaries, pay us well, so that we don't have to bother about anything else, there are God-given skills which just have to be acquired, and you can have a wonderful theatre. And parallel to this, that this is a poor country, nobody gives us the money, nobody loves theatre, therefore our theatre is bad and poor. And they don't even respect their own theatre, because they accept, they acknowledge, that theirs is bad theatre, because they don't have 'the means'. Give us money, we'll give you the skills, it will be wonderful.

So the problem lies there. Because you stick to that theatre, you don't recognize that the entire scenario has changed and you have to take stock of that. At the other end, there is this need for activism, need for active involvement. Badal was pursuing something, but I think he has reached a dead end. He can't pursue it any longer because, virtually, he has stopped thinking politically, though he is doing political theatre, in a sense. The initial political choice of being outside the proscenium, outside the system, remains. But, create your own ideology,

create your own area, your space, your logic, your understanding, your communication—that he hasn't developed, for all that he sticks to his own creed well.

SB: You have been in touch with the Indian theatre scene, in a way, off and on, through people, through friends, your visits. Now, given this situation, as a theoretician, as an ideologue, what are the . . . possibilities you see for breaking out of this dead-end situation?

RS: Well, really, you know, Samik, you can't ask me that kind of a question. This is where we have to have a dialogue, you know.

AK: Yes.

RS: So what do you think . . . we're sitting here, five of us . . . I mean, I'm willing to enter into a dialogue, but I don't want to be the first speaker, because I'm aware of my ignorance. I have my opinions, but they would be, let's say, abstract. Because they would just be what I would be importing, they would be an importation. So what do you think is the solution? All of you sitting here?

SB: I'm just thinking aloud—I'd like your reactions. You see, for example, one of the problems you opened up—the point of the community. A small area, a small space, geographical, cultural, a geographical-cultural space. Geography with its own culture. It tries to identify itself and celebrate itself . . . That was one of the things you showed.

RS: Let me . . . can I pick up on that a little bit? Because the cliché is, don't preach to the converted. Political theatre means, without thinking, being on the attack, performing for people who disagree with you. When you say, political theatre, a lot of people would say that. That goes back, from my point of view, to the bourgeois situation of the avant-garde. The Dadaists. I think there is another political theatre which also has a big tradition. That is—of course you preach to the converted. The question then is, what do you preach? And how far do you stretch the limits of the converted? That's where I would say there is an option. And when you say somebody's at a dead end, it's because, not only is somebody preaching to the converted, they are preaching to the converted what the converted already know. So, we have to separate that out. Are you going to be working in a community? Yes. Should you just reinforce the clichés of that community? No. Should you offend them? No! But you should be working in concert with them to stretch them a little bit, a little bit further.

When I was working in parts of Georgia, I would say, okay, there are five African-Americans in that story being told, next time we need eight. And what about the Native Americans, who have really been exterminated. So you are in the community, but you try to include more in it, and stretch that community. That would be one avenue that I would follow.

Sometimes, the plays would be better for people who disagree, but they are performed for people who agree. So that . . . one has to always realize that a performance is a relationship to a specific audience. And . . . you always want to take that audience—if you are experimenting, which I'd still dedicate myself to—a little bit further. That doesn't mean offending them, necessarily. That can mean, in this age, going a little further in a direction they might not have thought of going. And . . . stretching doesn't always mean attacking, you see. What do you think about that as a model?

SB: Yes, and the other thing—taking the example of The Living Theatre. Probir Guha.

RS: Probir Guha. Right.

SB: Now, I found Probir exciting and interesting when he was working with a community which had a certain identity of its own, as a small town and industrial suburb of Calcutta with a certain economic, political relationship with Calcutta. It was a hinterland. There was a tension between the big city and small town. And Probir was working within that cultural space. And, watching him work over the first three to five years, I could see that slowly, different ideas, different tensions, were being created, but with that audience in view. He knew that audience. He could identify that audience. And he was interacting with them, dialoguing with them.

But—and this temptation is always there—at one point you decide you have to 'universalize', 'globalize' or 'nation-alize'. In the process, you decide to present these people, my people, to people over there; simplify things, prune off the peculiar things—the tensions, the contradictions—make it simple, straight, clear, for the outsiders. And in the process, you stop interacting, or working, or dialoguing, with your community. And then you create an image of

your community which you present to outsiders.

So, this is a tendency. Now, somehow it's inbuilt into theatre to be strongly egotistic. You want to show yourself and show off. It's there, it's so ingrained that you want to go out, you want to circulate, you want to go to festivals etc. And not remain stuck in your own town. But in the process that entire relationship, what was growing over four or five years . . . now, I go back to his place, Khardah. There is no theatre there. Nobody cares about theatre. Because he has moved out of that area.

RS: Right. So there we do have a problem, where there's no quick solution.

PB: I just wanted to ask, Samik-da—there have been directors, actors and theatre people on the Bengali Group Theatre scene from a background of political activism, with the will to somehow carry it on, with the political alternative of moving away from the proscenium. They stuck to this 'established' form of doing playwright's plays. You have 'political' plays there also.

SB: I was very deliberately not bringing that in. We are talking about so many theatres simultaneously, I was keeping that theatre out of our purview for the moment. Because that is a peculiarly Bengali situation, at least since the 1940s, when the Communist Party was a minority radical force, away from the national mainstream also. And it was very important for the Communist Party to identify itself culturally. Gramsci hadn't come on the scene yet. But now when you look back from the Gramscian vantage point, you see that the Communist Party was genuinely thinking, at that particular point of time, in the 1940s, in terms of theatricalization, of going to the people with culture rather than with abstract political slogans. Because—they were smaller in number—that is the only way they could really build up something. A movement, or a revolution, from down there.

Now, the moment the Communist Party came to power in West Bengal, that entire project just collapsed. Because, now the Party was in power, and they were grateful to the theatre people who had worked for them and supported them in their difficult times. So they started giving grants, and for these groups to survive they now have to serve a very limited, a very narrow-minded, very pragmatic political project. So the politics has gone out of the theatre, though apparently it is still political. It gives you the right anti-communal, or anti-caste slogans, but beyond that it doesn't have any relevance, it doesn't have any meaning.

It can start again only if you go down to the communities. There are so many variations in the economic, political construction of the people of the state, it is not one single urban, upper-middle class–lower-middle class thing, with their political ideas and so on. Not this limited section of the converted.

PB: I'm trying to connect to what you said about stretching a community a little. I have seen a play very recently—one of the latest productions by one of these groups. It's not a 'political' play, by any means. But it ends on a note of agreeing with what the next generation is saying. Let's leave it to them, it's their world. It's your time to push off. I've seen another play where the issue is the same, a conflict between father and son, where it ends with a compromise. The father steps down a bit, the son stretches a little bit and there's a happy solution. Now, I would say that this first play that I talked about, which stresses the need to step back at a certain point, even if you don't understand, is a move towards stretching, because in our community, in the circumstances we live in, this is still a very, very, real problem. So when you say that the politics has gone out of this theatre, in a sense I agree with you, but I'm not quite ready to say that there is nothing worthwhile being done.

RS: From my point of view there are about four or five subjects and they have to be teased apart. There is the formal subject of, where is the theatre taking place? On a proscenium stage, in the street, blah, blah, blah. There is the social subject. Who makes the theatre and to whom is it addressed? And then there is the content: what is it about? Now, all of these . . . are very complicated. In other words, you can have a play without drama that still has political content. You can have a play that has a great deal of political content and it doesn't have to be on a proscenium. One doesn't determine the other. I think when people get too theatrically ideological, too much of a polemicist about theatre, they say, well, only if you're off the proscenium can you be political, which is nonsense, you know. I just saw Mueller's staging of Arturo Ui with the Berliner Ensemble, right? Berliner Ensemble, really in decline, but under Mueller for those years, really coming back. That was a terrific production. In a 19th century

theatre. The kind of theatre I shouldn't like. But I loved it. Because it was so clear, so crisp, so strong, in a small theatre.

I think that, probably, aesthetically I hate size more than I hate architecture. I mean, I hate anonymity. I want the audience to see itself and be small enough that it can form a community rather than a mass. In other words, I'm for popular culture and against mass culture. That's my ideology. And I make a big distinction between popular and mass, because I feel mass can be easily manipulated, popular is really saying, you know, people. A small enough group so that somebody isn't scared to pipe up. Now . . . well, I don't know where to go from there. I just wanted to make the point that there are these diverse kinds of performance possibilities.

Oh, I do know what I wanted to say. One thing that you haven't talked about, that is so powerful in the United States at the present time. And I'm curious whether it is so here or not. What we saw in the Ron Athey tape. In other words, not the AIDS part of it, but the theatre of personal confession, that comes out of performance art. It stands next to religion, but isn't religion because, though it can be very anti-religion ideologically, it uses certain techniques of religion. And judicial testimony. In other words, tell the truth because people would feel upset if it was 'just acting'. Even if we respect 'just acting'. Is any comparable kind of theatre going on in Calcutta today?

SB: Not exactly. But there has been a variation, which is worth discussing. There is this Bombay-based activist called Flavia Agnes, who was battered by her husband, went to the law, and the law was not supportive enough. So she learnt the law. And she started fighting her own case, fought her case through and started fighting for others, too. And wrote about it very honestly, frankly, in a book. Now this was turned into theatre. Somebody performing, a very good actress—and we are told all the time that this is a real life story, and this character is Flavia Agnes, who lives in Bombay. There were some attempts to bring Flavia to Calcutta so that she could be present on the occasion when her life was being enacted.

And she just got wild. She got angry when she heard about it. And she said, I don't want my text to be a piece of performance. I want my text to work in the minds of people and people to take off from there for activism. To take it on. It's a whole movement. I'm part of the movement, and this text is my contribution to the movement. But when you turn it into performance—and it is great acting—it is a distortion, a corruption, a violation of a confession.

RS: Well, you see, in terms of performance art, I'm both on her side and against her. In her support—the performance artist claims that only the person involved can give the performance. Because performance art, its history, comes out of painting. I can't paint your painting. I can paint in your style, but not your painting. I can paint my painting. So that it's one of a kind. So, in that sense, it's not theatre in that other niche sense. Theatre in the playwright's sense, as it developed, really was efficient, capitalistically speaking. One play can generate an unlimited number of productions. And therefore, it's very efficient. You have a royalty system working, like anything else. But performance art goes back to painting. It's only one painter, one painting. And yet it is performance, it's ephemeral, it goes away. These people will never become very rich. Maybe a Laurie Anderson. But one in a thousand. They know they can't be rich. Because they can't sell themselves to that degree. But you can't do it. If I were to get somebody who looked like Ron Athey, and shave his head, and put those things in, it wouldn't be the same. Maybe if the person was HIV positive. In that case, however, it would simply be a rip-off, it still wouldn't be the same. Only Athey can do Athey's thing. And there's some nobility in that, because it demands a constantly rethought-of art. In other words, you can't reproduce this art. You can produce it, but you can't reproduce it.

On the other hand, where I am against [Ms Agnes' response], is—of course the aestheticization of certain passions can have an effect on people. It can be used that way. And I would even argue—I haven't seen her piece—that nobody who is an effective writer or speaker doesn't aestheticize his/her own presentation of self. You know, I'm sure, again to get back to Athey, he worked out how he would put these needles in. They didn't just do it. And we as professionals know that anything effective is usually well-planned, improvised only in the vague sense of improvisation.

SB: There's a lot of craft and technique going in.

RS: A lot of craft and technique. Even in being craftless. If it moves you, you can bet that there's

craft involved, what we used to call technique. So there would be nothing wrong, it would seem to me . . . the question then is, how can the experience be used? If she writes a book, that's also a craft, you know. You produce the book, it's a physical book. And nothing is really transparent. In other words, the actual physical shape of the book is going to affect how it's read. So there's no such thing as transparency. At each step in the means of production, the means of production itself intervene and add to, or take away from, whatever it is you are producing.

AK: There is one example, in fact, of this kind of believed-in theatre in Calcutta. On 8 March, for International Women's Day, a group of sex workers who had been workshopping under the aegis of Sanlaap, an NGO working with them, put up a play for the public. The text that they evolved was based on their own life stories. And they performed as who they were. And a lot of the impact was due to the fact that they were performing their own stories. They were actually stretching their audience, because they were forcing them to consider questions, including questions about rehabilitation: whether it was justified or not justified to attempt to rehabilitate them (see STQ 9). That is the one example I can think of where that kind of theatre happened.

PB: Returning to the point about Flavia, Samik-da, I have problems accepting the kind of stance that says—this is my contribution to the movement; if you make it into a performance, then my contribution to the movement is lost or usurped by some other means. I have problems with accepting that. You may have objections to a particular kind of interpretation or presentation which you think goes against the movement, but just the fact that it is being performed, or made into a performative text, doesn't make it against the movement. The performance itself can be for the movement.

RS: I feel that even though it's a blurred line, we know when we've stepped across the line . . . a private action on public display. Once you've crossed that line—you may not know exactly where it is but you know when you've stepped across it—then you're in a different world where you have to say, yes, what I've done can be taken. I'm speaking here in private, but I know that tape recorder is on. I know that you're going to do something with this, and by the nature of my contribution I accept that it's going to be done. So if this woman is going to enter the public arena, then she has to accept that some permutation of her work, which she did not intend, will occur. Especially if it's powerful. Now, that's the irony of it. Even somebody as private as Grotowski expects to be fruitfully misquoted. That's the way it is. And if nobody bothers to quote you, you'll never be misquoted. But if you've stepped into the public arena, and never get quoted, obviously you're a failure. You know what I'm saying.

So, the nature of human communication is permutation and change. And we've all seen our own stuff being taken and done with. And of course, yes, you can object to it, but you cannot finally control it. That's why. Because it's alive by itself.

SB: Another thing . . . this applies to the performance by the sex workers and also to Ron Athey's work . . . isn't there also the danger, with this kind of thing, that there's a lot of deliberate sensationalization through the media, through radio, and the sensation is so charged, so knee-jerk, that it wears itself out in the process . . . it wears out the viewer or the receiver in the process, and they are left with, well, a kind of a contentment at the end of it all.

RS: Yes, I think that's part of it.

SB: In a way this kind of experience can be made extremely ineffectual and ineffective in the end.

AK: In fact, Samik-da, to pick up on what you're saying . . . one of the questions that I had—of course, we only saw a little bit of Ron Athey's performance—was, what makes this different from pornography, you know?

RS: To deal with my response to Samik's question first. Yes, a familiarity does deaden, and that's been the history of the avant-garde. That's just the way it is, and, particularly in a highly and increasingly mediatised society, I think the safeguard there is to say, don't work for shock. Shock is not going to last. So work for something else. Now, I would say that Athey—although it is shock, and maybe it was shocking, in the context of the American centre, to a Bengali audience at this time—himself was not working for shock, if you saw the whole thing. And maybe the live performance, which I've not seen, but I can extrapolate, is less shocking. The shocking part of it was sending those towels over the audience at the very beginning. So that . . . well, even if he was working for shock. Even if he was, in his anger, maybe, about dying, trying to say, you too,

pay attention. That's not going to—shock is an exhausted effect, especially in this century. I mean, especially with the media, the condition in the streets of many, many large cities—we no longer respond to shock. I think the great weapon now is irony and sarcasm and parody; and a lot of the art also has this charge itself against itself. And at the end of Athey's tape—what he does at the end is he dresses in a business suit, and he starts to go through the different ways you can say 'hallelujah'—how this kind of church says it, how that kind of church says it. And it gets smiles and laughs. You see, he recoups it and he turns it against and he starts to make fun of the very experience that he has involved himself in. Brecht also understood this. In other words, it's only through a kind of critical laughter that we can make certain . . .

The pornography question is different for me, because I'm not sure I know what pornography is. If I was honest about it, yes, certain sexual images excite me. So, are they pornographic? What is the condition of their manufacture? Who's volunteered to do it? In other words, is it more pornographic to look at physical pornography, or is it more pornographic to have someone sweep my floors? Depends on their wages. And it depends on whether they're voluntary. I have to be a capitalist at that level. I can only say, are they getting paid in exchange for what they are doing, are they doing it voluntarily? If they're getting paid for it, if they are doing it voluntarily, and it doesn't do any physical harm to other people, I don't have any objection to it. So—I throw the question back at you, what is pornography? And if a person puts a needle in his head, if he wants to, without it doing him any particular harm, what's wrong with that?

AK: Actually, I was looking at it from the point of view of the viewer.

RS: Yeah?

AK: If you're watching somebody going through pain, or going through some kind of very intense physical process, and there is a particular interest or excitement in you which is tied up with the fact that this is real, and this is not 'acting', isn't it similar to the experience of pornography?

RS: Well, it is performance—

AK: It is performance. I know.

RS: In other words, it would be different if we were to watch Princess Diana die in her car. I mean, this is a guy who knows what he is doing. He has arranged to be there, at that time, to do that thing. He's not a Roman in the gladiator arena. What makes the gladiator obscene is that neither the lion nor the Christian want to be there. Only the emperor and the people want to be there. But Ron Athey is neither lion nor Christian. He's made a choice. If he was a child, I would say no; or even a young adolescent, you know. But he's in his 30s, and he's made that choice. So how can that possibly be obscene? Also, the audience is always free to get up and leave. I always say that to my audiences as well. You are not chained to your seats or your place. And if they say, well, I've paid my money. Then you know the value [of the objection]. They'd rather be offended than lose a buck. I mean, in a restaurant, if you get something disgusting, do you eat it because you paid for it? You might complain, of course . . . So, anyway, that's the other thing, the audience is also there on a voluntary basis.

AK: I agree with you. But, what I was trying to question, you know, was partly triggered off by what you said about feeling cheated [if you found out that the Athey performance was not 'true' but enacted]—

RS: Right. That is a mystery to me. That is a mystery . . .

AK: How would I feel if I was told later that this guy . . . if he came up and stood in front of us and said, okay guys, this whole thing, I mean what did you think? Well, I'm not HIV positive . . .

RS: I don't know, I would . . . how would you feel?

AK: Well, I don't think I would feel cheated. I think I would feel a combination of . . .

RS: I'd feel exposed.

AK: Yeah.

RS: I guess, really, cheated is my first response. The other is exposed. Because you're right about the pornographic imagination to this degree. That I desire, against my desire, to see the real thing. So there, I'm confessing an ambivalence. My only defence is, I'm not perfect. And I don't

turn away from such performances. But I do sometimes actually turn away from performances on television. I do not look. I turn it off. I say that is not to be seen. I draw the line. I cannot look at that. Not because I couldn't see the same thing on the street. But there hasn't been any camera trying to get it for me on the street. You know, there's been a lot of bullshit about the paparazzi and Princess Diana, but underneath it there is a kind of, I think, right idea that there are certain things that we should have the decency to not force on ourselves, because we do then continue to deaden the whole community.

SB: The problem that I was raising is that, I still think it's very important to identify your community, work with your community, and stretch, extend your community through a dialogue with them. And where the problem comes in is this need, desire, greed, temptation, practicality of survival—whatever you call it. Of going out to the larger global area. And this is what's happening all the time. There's great work being done in Manipur, but a Manipuri has to do a Macbeth and bring in Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* to send it to London.

RS: This is where writers and painters have it better than performers. You can, as a writer, really be private in your writing. Somebody else can publish it, you can win the Nobel prize, and you can still, more or less, be private. In other words, your writing still occurs when you're doing it. Similarly for painting, you know. I think the performing arts have always been the lowest of the arts, identified with prostitution. Because—

SB: See, Richard, we take the trouble to read a Latin American writer, whose English is not our kind of English, even in translation. We work very hard, we labour, we accept him on his own terms. But we won't accept a Latin American play on its own terms.

RS: You see, again, the only way that a performing artist—not the writer, but the other people involved in it—can ever make a living and gain recognition is to get trapped in this paradox. Is to leave their source. I don't see an easy solution. I see what happens. You know, increased aestheticization and simplification is what happens. As it would be if painters had to paint it easier, because they had to sell more. So that does happen. Touristification. All of that stuff happens. I don't have any words of wisdom. Because I'm not going to tell these people, don't go, stay poor out in wherever you are. That's stupid . . . on the other hand, I'm not going to say that the work gets better because it becomes touristified, festivalized, whatever.

So there's a great avenue open for our readers or others to come up with a solution to this problem. Some alternative. Somebody might suggest, you know, put it on the World Wide Web. But for me nothing substitutes for live performance. It may be a small niche. Well, it isn't such a small niche. Theatre is a small niche, but live performance is very large. And no amount of media substitutes for that, you know, where you can feel the body heat and smell the sweat and see the person and . . . and also, in live performance, the sense of error. That's why sports are so immensely popular. They're mediatized, but they still fill these stadiums of a 100,000 people. Because there is that non-mediated core to it, so media is not the solution to this. Not just sending a very good video crew out to the suburbs to film it and then distribute it. I don't know. Do you have a solution to this?

AK: I just think that when groups move out of their communities, at some point it has to strike them that they are losing more than they're gaining. Being in touch . . .

RS: Right, but there's another community too. You see, when I look at Mnouchkine's [Theatre du Soleil], there is a group whose community is the global community of theatre people. And that's also community. We shouldn't sneer at that community. So that is a different community, which has its own demands. In other words, when we add up the number of subscribers to STQ or TDR or whatever, there are probably no more than 10,000 people in the world, maybe 25,000 who really are interested in this subject. But there are no more than 25,000 physicists, 25,000 of anything really, who are really interested. And that is another kind of community that some people address. When I edit a magazine, I know I am addressing that community. In other words, it's maybe 8 people in India who subscribe, and 12 people here, and I know that there are 350 in New York etc. and so forth. Whatever that community is, when I write my editorial comment, I have those people in mind. And I think, you know, we all do that, so that the other side of the local is the extended local. In other words, one can also have a community that is, to a certain degree, dispersed, but that one still feels a colleague-ship with.

And I think this happens artistically, as well. I mean, I do feel that there are certain critics,

certain minds, who, when they sit in the audience, you know, I'm addressing them. Now that may be snobbish, it may be coming back to the king and queen. They don't have the best seats, but what they say means more to me than what somebody else says.

And that would seem to me to be the only alternative. If you're going to leave your local community, then don't just be the creature of some tourist or government bureaucrats. Find another community. There are communities out there that are dispersed but intense. Rather than to have no community. That's the worst. To not know who you're talking to.

AK: What do you think, Samik-da? Do you see a solution to this process?

SB: I think it's inbuilt into theatre. Theatre has its own egotistic core . . .

AK: It wants to perform.

SB: It wants to perform.

RS: Yes, it does.

SB: I remember this wonderfully moving situation back in '66. We were in Delhi for a seminar and Joan Littlewood was there. We went out walking together. It was winter. Tripti Mitra and I were with her. Just the three of us, walking. It was getting late, and it was winter, quite cold, and people were lying down on the streets to sleep for the night. We watched. And, at one point, she suddenly said, 'Don't you feel ashamed? Don't you feel angry?' What could I say? After a while she said, 'Don't feel offended. I'm not insulting you or anything. Don't think that I'm being superior. Because we have played our role in this. We know that we are responsible for this. We Brits. We know that. So it's my shame, too. But think of me as a theatre person. Because all my life, all that I need, is hundreds and thousands of people to come to my performances and give me a big clap. And I know these people will never give me a clap, and that's my shame and that's my failure. And I'm talking just out of that. Everything comes to me from there. Because I want their claps and they are never going to clap at anybody's theatre, ever. If they're lying there.' That was so strong. And so genuine and so honest.

RS: You know, there are certain problems to which we don't have solutions. I think, you know, the most one can say is . . . the old Greek Hippocratic oath: Don't do any harm. If you can't do good, the next thing is to try not to do harm.

SB: Richard, another thing, particularly since you are one of the very few people who have been running this one periodical (TDR) for such a long time—

RS: I stopped for seventeen years, though. From 196—what was it?—from 1969 to 1986, I did not.

SB: But you came back to it. Do you really think, that the global community, which is also another community, and a fairly close-knit, sharing, sensitive community—we share a lot—will it really help if we all strive in our small ways, not too ambitiously, to develop and extend even that community? Say, there are people . . . I go to Berlin on a short visit for a seminar, and I rush to the Schaubuehne am Lehniner Platz and see whatever is on. And the last time I was there, I saw a Robert Wilson. It's in German, I don't follow German. It's a text by Marguerite Duras, it is a French text. But it's overwhelming. And I see it, I read it, I'm full of it still. Three years later.

So, there are such people in India. For example, when we had Tovstonogov's company from Leningrad come down to do Uncle Vanya in Russian, in Calcutta, there were at least 1100 people at Rabindra Sadan who enjoyed it thoroughly and who still treasure it as a great experience.

RS: Right. Right.

SB: So, if we had 1100 people in Calcutta and 1100 in Delhi or 1100 in Bombay—

RS: Right. They add up.

SB: They add up. So if we could even develop that as a kind of a support base, as a support community . . .

RS: I couldn't agree more. I think we can work on two tracks, or three tracks, simultaneously. Because I like to think that I live in a world where and is more important than or. So that it's quite possible to address a very specific audience, that is local, and to address global colleagues. And, also to try to do some good. Sometimes with my work, and sometimes, painfully to say, not through my work as an artist. That's not where my art is. But then I'll have to do other work, you know. If Joan Littlewood can't do it with her art, she can, you know, as she leaves the airport,

say, use a thousand rupees to buy some food for these people. In other words, there are ways . . . you know, guilt and shame are not my two strong emotions. On the other hand, responsibility is. So that, I just think you can address your community. You can address a community of experts. In that sense it's elite. We couldn't have this conversation with just anybody. Not even with university students, you know, it takes people who have really had certain experiences. And I must say, I enjoy this immensely. I wouldn't want to give it up.

And then there's one's responsibility as a simple human being. You know. Work in a soup kitchen. Whatever it is. Give a certain proportion of your time and effort outside of your work. If you can't do it through your work. That's what I would say. Because Brecht, at the end of his life, obviously had a great tension. Between the work he needed and wanted to write, which was not particularly politically relevant to his situation, and the situation he was in. Maybe that shortened his life—you know, that he wasn't able to, because he had ideologically put himself into such a situation . . . but I'm still glad that those four or five great humanist plays, you know, from *Caucasian Chalk Circle* to *Mother Courage* were written, even though they don't quite suit his ideology as well. Because again, he was aware of his own self-parody in there, in the good sense.

So that's what I would say today. There are worse things than living with contradiction. And one of them is living in isolation.

AK: Yes.

SB: That's some thing one should fight always.

RS: You have to stretch that community and yourself. You can't keep repeating yourself. The other thing that really repeats itself is religion. One should go to religion when one wants continuity. Art is not religion. Art has to be parody, has to stretch, has to try to change even if it comes back to itself. It can draw from religion, but it shouldn't be religion.

SB: Something which I find exciting was that, that particular community was expanding anyway. Because of people from the other small towns, which had other kinds of cultures, not exactly the Khardah culture. For example, I was noticing, the farther you move away from the city, from the metropolis, even the distances make the differences. And these people were coming to Probir's plays. And they were making demands, they were asking their questions, not very assertively, but, well, they were voicing their demands and their expectations formally. So, you grow with the community. A community is never stagnant. A community will grow. And if you are interacting with it, you're giving things to the community, the community is also giving you things back. There's such a rich give and take with a community, that if you really stay in your community, I don't think there can be any stagnation.

RS: You know, when we look at the history of art—whether it's plastic art, sculpting and painting, or performing art—in many cultures, it's always been like this. You know, Florence, or Athens, or Mohenjodaro, whatever it is . . . it's only now that we have such ability to move that we think global; and all I'm saying is that even the global should be local. That the arts have really been very, very localized. They only become universal, you know, long after their period is over, in a sense. And that theatre is peculiarly cursed because we can't preserve it. So if there is a great performance, it only remains in our memories. I remember a few . . . all the three Grotowskis I saw in my early life, the *Acropolis*, the *Apocalypses* and *Constant Prince*. I've seen videos of two of them, which just have no relationship to what I experienced. And yet I know that a hundred years from now those videos will be the document. It's not fair. Because when I look at a beautiful painting, it may be faded a bit, but it's still basically the original. It's not a black and white photo, distorted. Performance is not privileged that way. It is an oral tradition, and in that sense it changes, and it changes in relationship to its community.

Responses

Makarand Sathe, Marathi playwright and director, responds to Richard Schechner's presentation in Pune.

During his visit to Pune in October 1997, Mr. Richard Schechner delivered a lecture on what he calls 'believed-in theatre'. He also showed video clippings of a couple of plays, *Swamp Gravy* and *Martyrs and Saints*. I was present for the 'performance', as he preferred to call his lecture, which was followed by a discussion. The discussion centred mainly around the clippings of the play *Martyrs and Saints* and the comments made by Mr Schechner. I plan to comment only on the points that came up in his lecture and in his answers to the questions, which are related to a particular impression which I carried home after the event.

His lecture and his part in the discussion was really a 'performance' as he claimed. He stated his opinion that 'believed-in theatre' is the theatre that is going to survive into the next century. After a brief explanation of the concept of 'believed-in theatre', he proceeded to show us the video clips, and the discussion followed. During the discussion he kept presenting a flower to everybody who asked a question, from the bouquet presented to him earlier by the organizers. One can imagine the diversion caused by this, as many of the questioners were sitting at the rear of the auditorium and the flower had to be relayed to the person concerned. I am stating all this for a reason. I do not object to his use of the word 'performance', as I firmly believe that performances can be serious, in fact I am interested much more in them if they are serious. I am not claiming that he was not serious, but there was a particular texture to the lecture and discussion, a kind of sensibility difficult to pinpoint. However, I hope to try and give some idea of this sensibility through my observations on the different points that he raised.

The clip of the play *Martyrs and Saints* showed an HIV infected person cutting up by knives, piercing by needles and performing violent acts either on himself or on another HIV infected actor on stage. There was a lot of blood. Paper napkins or towels soaked in this blood passed over the audience present for this play. The actor was chanting the name of Christ and presenting himself as the incarnation of Christ (the needles stuck in his head representing literally the 'crown of thorns'). It was a very disturbing presentation because of the actual violence done on stage. Some in the audience could not watch it. One person, in fact, fainted and had to be carried out.

Mr Schechner talked briefly about the play, informing us about the severe reaction of the Christian clergy in America. Let us leave this out at present, as the reaction of religious groups is an issue in itself and not the point I want to discuss here. The first point I want to raise, which was also raised during the discussion, is this: Is this 'Theatre'? There are two parts to this question. Firstly, can doing actual violence on stage—or rather, only actual violence on stage, with minor extra things like chanting thrown in, be called theatre? Mr Schechner said it was, according to his definition of theatre. He then proceeded to define theatre as any performance done for the audience for a fee, which an audience sees on buying tickets. QED. Now, for me this raises many questions. If I show an actual accident, with two cars colliding head on, on stage, and charge the audience for viewing it by way of tickets, does it become theatre? If I do not charge the audience—as practitioners of so-called experimental theatre like myself often have to do, or certain ideologically committed people want to do—to view a performance, will it, according to Mr. Schechner, not be considered theatre? I would like to clarify that I am not, per se, objecting to an actual act of violence or act of physical love performed on stage as part of a play or theatre. But can doing an actual thing or performing actual life activities on stage be called theatre or art only because an audience is expected and/or is charged money to view it? The answer was that it definitely would be termed theatre; all actions done on stage are real actions, whether walking, or drinking water etc. This, in my opinion, evades the question. Any action done on stage is bound to be real. That is self-evident.

The second part of the question was equally important, and was related to the fact that the play's outward appearance resembled a ritual, and, according to Mr Schechner, this was intended. What kind of relationship between ritual and theatre was implied? With what kind of

sensibility are we looking at rituals when we treat them as theatre forms? We in India are quite accustomed to seeing people of various religious sects performing acts (or rituals) like piercing themselves with needles or horsewhipping themselves on the roads. This is not a new phenomenon to any culture, for that matter. The people who actually perform a ritual do not make any claims, as was stated by one of my friends during the discussion. The performances of such rituals are obviously based on deeply rooted spiritual and/or religious beliefs. Though I do not share their beliefs, I can still respect them and leave it at that. The mental framework or sensibility and beliefs due to which such things are done, as also the social conditions in which they are done, are very important areas of study for social scientists, especially in these times which are rightly or wrongly referred to as 'postmodern'. However, terming these activities as theatre is different. It is one thing to do an anthropological and social study of rituals and quite another to consider them as primarily theatrical performances. Contrary to the claims made of studying phenomena such as rituals or folk forms and the beliefs behind them, what actually takes precedence in the creative process is the outward form, which is so attractive to certain sensibilities. It then essentially becomes a creation devoid of any serious content, a spectacle, either with some shocking element or an elaborately decorative form. What happens to the deeply spiritual and religious (and, therefore, social) beliefs behind these rituals and folk forms, which give them their content, validity, inevitability of form (whether it be violence or dance) etc.? The trance-like state and inherent energy which is copied as spectacle becomes extremely superficial, without any content to take the place of the beliefs and philosophical undercurrents which lie behind the actual rituals. I am certain that most of us have seen such productions. *Martyrs and Saints*, as well as Mr Schechner's comments, certainly seemed to be one such specimen, though certainly more provoking, more disturbing, and, considering the people involved, more far-reachingly influential. What is more important is that it does not stop at a single performance in this case—a different kind of theatre, a different kind of underlying philosophy, is being claimed. Mr Schechner did mention Grotowski's name in passing, but did not elaborate on his recent work on rituals, due to lack of time. So this remains a comment only on what the lecture covered, and the video clip we saw.

I hope that somebody (or Mr Schechner himself) in the pages of STQ, would throw more light on the points mentioned above. As it stands, what we saw that day remains in my mind as a simplistic, self-indulgent, 'single-line message-giving' theatre, which every culture, nowadays, seems to have an abundance of. The only difference is that it has been taken up, given a proper new name, and is being promoted by a prominent theatre personality from a dominant country. In my opinion, the sensibility which calls this theatre goes beyond even what we normally call exoticism. I will return to this point again, at the end.

Now I would like to write about some of the other questions asked in the discussion, the answers given by Mr Schechner, and some observations related to them. The first was asked by a person who was quite visibly disturbed, and in fact quite angry, at being made to see the video clip of the said play. It seemed that he thought it scandalous. The question he asked was this: Is Mr Ron Athey (the creator, and main actor in the play) a moron, a mentally disturbed person, a masochist? To this Mr Schechner answered that one should separate an artist from his work. Dostoevsky and Van Gogh were confirmed as mentally disturbed; however, their creative work is held in the highest esteem, and so we should talk about the work and keep the analysis of the artist's mental framework out of it. Later he was asked if it was important for the main artist in the play to be a HIV positive person, and if the impact would have been different should the artist not have been HIV positive. Mr Schechner commented that it was an important and valid question, pointing out the most important aspect of 'believed-in theatre', in that such a theatre was supposed to be close to the real life of the performer, inseparable, in fact, from the life of the performer. In short, it was crucial to the performance that the actor was what he said he was; and, moreover, that the spectators were aware of it. If such was not the case, then the whole effort was a waste. Thereupon I requested him to refer to the first question mentioned above. I said that I also believed that art of the highest quality can be produced by mentally disturbed persons. However, in the case of Dostoevsky and Van Gogh, people have been fascinated by their creations for so many years because of the depth of the content, the complexities of human existence expressed by them through the philosophical undercurrents of their creation etc. If we strip away the shocking element from *Martyrs and Saints* what are we left with, except a kind of simple message that HIV-infected persons should not be taboo in

society? Do we in any way gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of social taboos, or any such deeper question? I also requested him to consider his answers to the two questions mentioned above. If it is important in this kind of theatre that who I am as a human being is the basis of my creation, then is it correct to separate the artist from his or her creation as he had stated in his answer to the first question? At least in 'believed-in theatre', according to his own claim, we cannot separate the two, artist and creation, or else the whole purpose of this theatre is lost. If that is so, then we cannot divulge information about the artist in a convenient manner, by informing everyone that he is HIV positive, and refusing to talk about his mental condition. He laughed heartily, accepting that he had contradicted himself. He said that he did not have an answer to this question and would have to think about it seriously. He also added in a typical manner (which I have referred to earlier, and to which I will return at the end), that he was a man of contradictions, and, in fact, that's why he was in theatre. This comment, as it was intended to, produced laughter from the audience and the matter rested there. My first question was also left unanswered. He, however, added that though he would not comment on the philosophical undercurrents etc., the reason why he had chosen to show this clip was to provoke reactions during the discussion. This hardly enlightened us on the subject concerned. So the only thing I gained from my question was the flower that he offered me, which was relayed to me by several hands. Some basic questions going unanswered did not help in negating the feelings I had at the end of the session, which I mentioned earlier.

As expected, a question was again raised about his definition of theatre, to which his answer was that he had defined it only because one is supposed to define one's terms. He also added that somebody may define it differently. The real meaning of the question—that his definition was unacceptable (the question was accompanied by a sufficiently elaborate explanation) and that the whole meaning would change if we altered the definition, making the question of definition important—was left unanswered.

I have specifically refrained from commenting on what Mr Schechner calls 'believed-in theatre' as a whole. I do not believe that one lecture by anybody, a couple of video clips, and some frugal printed material is enough basis to formulate an opinion. Neither do I want to comment on Mr Schechner's own work, as I have not had the privilege of seeing any of his productions. However, the lecture and the clip of the play by themselves create many questions and doubts, as mentioned above. Let us return to the question of sensibility mentioned above. Just a few months back, we had the opportunity to meet another American theatre personality. He is a well-known scholar on Asian theatre and a departmental head in an American university. He is an authority on modern technology and theatre, the smallness of the world etc. During his lecture he told us how his writer is located in Australia, his director in Zimbabwe, and his actors all over the world, and how they hold conferences on computer, and generally how bright the future can be, if we face the challenges of the times by using modern technology. I have heard many people including Mr Schechner (in spite of his definition of theatre), calling many situations in life theatre or art, eg. raising children, tantric religious acts etc. I can willingly accept such a comment if it is made in a very general way, probably referring to feelings very close to the creative pleasures and agonies in one's mind. However, I am afraid that such a comment has much deeper roots, and should be taken much more seriously. In a way, people who make such comments, do not, at least to a certain extent, give importance to life and actual experience itself, but treat them as 'art events' (I fail to find any better term), even if this concerns their own lives, but especially if it is somebody else's. This kind of sensibility looks open to everything at first, and seems to be flush with an overwhelming wealth of references. However, one can see it using convenient clichés to hide behind at every challenge. It seems to keep itself somehow aloof from all this wealth of association, from any deeper emotional or intellectual involvement, thus never endeavouring to reach the deeper philosophical undercurrents.

Though I am aware that my opinions are based on exposure to the very limited material available to me, I still felt like expressing myself, as I was quite disturbed by the experience. I hope this serves as a launching pad for further discussion on the points he raised, and would be very glad for further discussion on the issues raised in this piece.

Richard Schechner responds to Makarand Sathe:

I usually do not respond to criticism. But so much of what Makarand Sathe writes about me and my Pune lecture is untrue, that I need to have my say:

1. I do not define theatre as 'any performance done for the audience for a fee, which an audience sees on buying tickets. QED.' Where have I made such a definition? Has Sathe my Performance Theory (Routledge, 1988), my Performative Circumstances from the Avant-garde to Ramlila (Seagull, 1983) or any of my many, many articles on theatre and performance, during which I try to define theatre—a pretty well impossible task? But nowhere in all these writings do I say that theatre is simply what a buying audience sees. And of course theatre can occur without admission charge! I've done my full share of that kind of theatre.

2. Regarding the relationship of theatre to ritual, I have written very extensively on the subject, most particularly in essays such as 'From Ritual to Theatre and Back', 'The Future of Ritual', 'Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed', 'The Restoration of Behavior', and 'Actuals'. And from my field studies of Ramlila and Yaqui Waehma I have written extensively on ritual theatre—its relationship to other kinds of theatre. In fact, in 'believed-in theatre' I discuss some aspects of the relationship between ritual and theatre as it is emerging (in North America and Europe, at least). In my Pune lecture I dealt with a certain aspect of this complex relationship. It was not possible to deal with it in its entirety. Sathe either was not listening or he has his own axe to grind. I suggest he read my writings before he goes off half-cocked about my ideas.

3. In the essay 'believed-in theatre' there is a discussion of Athey's performance. Why would STQ publish Sathe's reductive and insulting piece asking me sometime in the future to discuss Athey's work? Why not simply refer Sathe to the essay in STQ? Clearly the essay STQ is publishing was the basis for the Pune lecture. The whole essay is in Performance Research, published in Wales. STQ is publishing an excerpt.

4. At the lecture I explained clearly that the blood-soaked paper towels hung over the audience in Martyrs and Saints did not contain HIV infected blood. I explained that some spectators at performances thought the towels did. That Sathe heard me say something I specifically explained is either a lie on his part or a fantasy. Sathe so much disliked what I was saying that he heard me say things I did not say. In any event, saying that Athey dripped HIV positive blood on spectators liables Athey.

5. Sathe uses my reference to Van Gogh in an historically absurd manner. Van Gogh was not recognized in his own day as an artist of worth. His 'creative work' was not 'held in the highest esteem'. Van Gogh died poor and unrecognized. Some artists are recognized in their lifetimes, some are not. Sathe asks how Athey's work can be important? Who knows? As I said at the lecture, we don't know at this time yet. A painter or writer leaves paintings or writings behind—they can acquire posthumous fame and importance (as Van Gogh and Kafka did). A performance artist leaves only memories and perhaps some videotapes and photos. These documents do not equal the work itself; nor can they substitute for the work. They can only be used as a kind of 'evidence' in a discussion of the work. Lamentably, Sathe treats the little evidence of Athey's work I was able to present as if he saw the work itself.

6. Sathe says that the message of Martyrs and Saints is 'that HIV-infected persons should not be taboo in society?' He wonders if, upon seeing Athey, 'we can in any way gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of social taboos, or any such deeper questions?' How does Sathe know what the 'message' of Martyrs and Saints is? The most he can say is that this is the 'message' he got from the videoclips he saw. I don't know what the 'message' of Athey's work is. I would, however, bet that it is not the simple-minded assertion that Sathe makes. In fact, I don't believe Athey's piece can be reduced to any simple or single message. Much significant art cannot be reduced to a message. Nor do I think that the 'deeper questions' raised by Martyrs and Saints are about 'social taboos'—or that these are the kind of 'deeper questions' I would expect from works such as Athey. Athey is not Brecht. I think it more likely that Athey is sharing in an experiential way his situation—in the hope that some collective or communal catharsis might be achieved. But I insist that my interpretation is only that: a possibility.

7. Sathe says that I take all life to be theatre. He means to insult me with that 'accusation'. He does not take me seriously because he does not think I take life seriously. He chides me for describing myself as a man of contradictions. However, I do not denigrate life by

seeing it performatively, as Sathe says I do. Nor do I think contradictions are inimical to ethical living. He implies that I 'hide' behind this approach to living—as if accepting life as performative would exonerate or excuse me from ethical, political or moral obligations and actions. There is enough in my actual living to show how untrue such an accusation would prove to be. Nor do I think that a performative view of life is light-hearted, though it can surely be farcical as well as tragic, humorous as well as serious, ironic as well as straight-faced. My performative approach to living is in many ways related to the maya-lila view of life deeply ingrained in much Hindu, Brahmanic and Vedic philosophy. I am not 'aloof'.

My lecture sure seems to have got his motor running.

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'Coming Out With Music': Building a Gay Community An interview with the members of Sarani

Vikram Iyengar

Sarani is a cultural group united on the gay issue, who recently presented a pioneering public performance on the theme of 'same-sex desire and love'. Vikram Iyengar met with the members of Sarani on behalf of STQ, both before and after the debut performance.

I really didn't know what to expect from Sarani's performance or, more importantly, Sarani's members. I knew that the theme of the performance was 'same-sex desire and love', but that was about all. And so I approached this first interaction with them with mixed feelings which were by no means assuaged when I sat through their rehearsal. They were obviously untrained in any dance form, and, moreover, as one of their members mentioned later, had never been in an environment of music and dance. But what was equally apparent was their unshakeable commitment to what they had undertaken, their willingness to learn and their faith in their founder, leader and choreographer—Ranjan.

Ranjan is definitely the person in Sarani. Everything revolves around him. Maybe this is because he is the only one who has had some sort of formal training in dance: a training that he has put to good use, having choreographed a number of pieces on themes ranging from the life of Buddha to environmental issues. This range of issues throws up what I consider to be a very interesting facet of Sarani. When I walked into their rehearsal on that April afternoon, I thought I was meeting a gay rights group. But this is an identity that the members of Sarani refuse to accept. No one denies that it is their 'gayness' which first brought them together, but they would rather define themselves thus: '... a rare fusion of the three "cultural streams" of Calcutta: the arts, life on the city streets and, of course, the least visible of them all—the gay sub-culture.'

The programme consisted of songs, poetry and the dance—'Behind the Screens'. The songs, written, composed and sung by Ranjan, were greatly marred by the poor quality of the sound. The lyrics, though, were thought-provoking, touching on issues of human relationships, love, the danger of HIV and, most importantly, the question of identity and community. The idea of illustrating the songs with a selection of slides lent an added dimension to the presentation.

The poems written by members of Sarani and recited with lucidity by Raja sent out similar messages.

The most anxiously awaited part of the evening was the dance. Conceived and choreographed by Ranjan, it was performed by Ashish, Indrajit, Partha, Soma, Sonu and Ranjan himself. The entire piece, performed in silhouette, was quite harmoniously strung together. The opening sequence between Ashish and Sonu I remember particularly for the marvellous performance of the former in a role that he did not at all covet! This scene portrayed a woman giving birth and then the relationship between the mother and the son. Ashish played the role of the mother and had I not seen the rehearsal, I would never have known that a man was performing. There was absolutely no trace of the exaggerated mannerisms that male performers think it necessary to introduce into a female role. Next follow the relationships that the growing child develops with his friends—relationships that gradually change as he comes to terms with his sexuality. From this realization springs a terrible sense of loneliness. This feeling of isolation fades only when he finds a companion, a partner with whom he develops a mentally and physically fulfilling relationship. This sequence between Ranjan and Indrajit, too, deserves mention for the special chemistry which the two performers managed to generate. The finale, to the voice-over of a poem written by Ranjan, involved five performers and adequately conveyed the idea of a strong, united gay community creating a space for themselves in our society.

However, even to a moderately experienced eye, the performance was far from professional, not something that one would pay to go and see. And if I were to look at it from a purely objective and critical viewpoint, nothing that Ranjan said in its defence could improve this impression. But, for me—and for many others—the important thing was that there was such a performance at all. Not because it was unconventional or daring or

against the norms of society, but because it was performed with a deep belief on the part of the performers. And whatever might have been the flaws—and there were many—there was no doubt regarding the commitment of the performers. A commitment so strong that it swept the audience off its feet. So much so that Sarani has already been asked to repeat the performance and Ranjan even has thoughts of taking it out of the state. As Ranjan said, he was not so much bothered about the quality of the programme as its content. What he wanted to portray was that the gay life was not only sex, but collaboration and community building.

In the words of Partha, 'We wanted to do something by ourselves—we wanted to make a statement . . . We know what the standards should have been. But to do it . . . A definite step has already been taken. Sarani is now seriously considering workshops in various dance forms, yoga and martial arts—all to make the body capable of more expression in order to fulfil their primary objective—communication. Communication about any issue which they may deem worthwhile, not, as they keep reiterating, just their issue.

Finally, *Coming Out With Music* was not so much a search for an identity, as I had first imagined, but a public affirmation of an existing one. An affirmation that—in the words of Ranjan's song—'The Way I Am Is Also a Way to Be.'

The first interview with Sarani was held on the eve of their debut performance, on 27 April, 1998.

vi: Can you talk about how you decided to form this group?

RANJAN: The subject of this choreographed performance is basically same-sex desire and love, and the need for community building; because we feel this whole issue is hardly talked about, and, therefore, whatever community exists is totally isolated. If you look at it from the larger society's point of view.

What happened, actually, is that I've been roaming—I'm a person from the community and I never mind calling myself gay. I've been roaming around several cruising sites like parks, cinema halls, certain bus stops and loos and—you know, everyday walking, if you keep your antennae up you come across a whole lot of persons with your inclination. So what

happened was, as my circle of such friends began to grow, I came to know from them their own personal stories. In most cases, I realized, everyone is looking for a partner, everyone is looking for a relationship. Then again, the general notion is that when we go to a cruising site, it's only to have sex. I had this idea. But I was proved wrong. Because we sit around in various parks just to meet each other and chat. General conversation—just as the so-called 'heterosexuals' interact. We do the same. We talk about our homes, our parents, jobs, careers.

Now, the point is, these topics of conversation are common to everyone. Why is it, then, that we ferret out members of our own community to talk to? There must be something special in us which makes us like talking only to people from our community. Automatically the question arises—are we not looking for a circle for ourselves? It was then that I realized there was a need to organize this community—a community whose bonding is very loose at the moment because . . . the first thing is identity. Identity is a very important factor. Everyone is not comfortable revealing his or her identity, even if the person is completely gay. But the problem is, the kind of society, the kind of structure we live in, many of us cannot freely disclose our innermost thoughts under these circumstances.

In our choreographed piece is a poem which I had written, where whatever we have done, all the actions—none of them are my interpretation alone. Everyone here has a share in it. Everyone has given suggestions. The next question is, why choreography? Because in our group we do not yet think that, with the community we now have, we are strong enough to go out in procession with banners. The day we have the strength and the capacity for that, we will definitely do it. If a revolution is needed. If surviving becomes impossible.

But the question remains—why choreography? Our group is called Sarani. Sarani means road, and a road suggests communication. All of us sat together and decided upon this name. What we have to say, we communicate—through a performance, we communicate to the audience. So choreography, I think, can also be a medium of communication.

In Calcutta there is already a gay support group—Counsel Club. I had some talent in song and dance, and after coming to Counsel

Club or around the same time—I was already trying to get together a group of people. In the many parks that I visited I met quite a lot of people who had such talents, so why not utilize them? Ultimately, that's how the group got formed.

Proshanto has been here for the longest time, Partho, others, have joined later. Soma has been learning dance from me from a very young age. At that time I was engaged in so-called heterosexual entertainment presentations. But till just yesterday, I had not been able to talk to Soma about our issue. Yesterday, I explained it to her. Soma is very sensible, she understood what we were working for and she appreciated the importance of it. We thought that this medium was the most convenient for us. I saw that most people, if rehearsed well, can dance. And the quality of performance does not matter to us at all, at least over this issue. Because where my main aim is to communicate something, if all the audience wants to see is the quality of the performance, then I should have received at least Rs 10-12000 as donation for the betterment of the programme. That no one has done. So I am not worried about quality. I will see how much I am able to communicate.

PAVAN: Actually, one of the items on Counsel Club's wish list has been to do something related to theatre. Initially, within the community or within the group, to build some sort of a theatre consciousness. And there are a whole lot of things which the group can tell its own members through a different medium. Normally Counsel Club meetings are a pretty staid affair. They're mostly discussions and can become very boring. If there is something in terms of theatre going on, it will add to the things happening within Counsel Club. So we want to become theatre conscious and then possibly think of a script.

vi: So would you say that Counsel Club is looking at theatre as a means of activism, as a means of injecting new life into the community?

PAVAN: Yes. Yes, definitely. Both within the group and outside the group. The aim is to first do it within the group or within a smaller circle. Because there are many things that can be conveyed through small skits, maybe in one of our meetings—the place where we meet is big enough to have a small skit. There are many members in the group who don't know what is happening in the other half of the group. The other half meaning the core group which does a lot of work in terms of

communicating with other people in the community through letters, planning the journal or meeting other NGOs—things like that. So if we actually get down to doing it seriously, then describe to the other members that, look, we write letters, we talk to people, we counsel people on the phone or we counsel them one to one in person, we can show that in a skit, maybe. That is just an off-the-cuff idea in my mind. There are hundreds of possibilities and CC definitely has a plan along these lines.

vi: I know that all of you here are comfortable with your identity, but involvement in the process of rehearsal and in the performance of such an issue—do you think it serves to make people who are not comfortable with it comfortable with the issue? Whether with themselves or just the issue in general?

RANJAN: This is a very important topic to discuss. In this group, all of us were not really comfortable about showing our faces during the dance. Because everyone has a personal life. And in the group I don't expect each of them to come out and proclaim their identity as I did. So the whole thing was planned as a shadow dance. But during the practice, rehearsal, just a couple of days before the programme, they themselves realized and said, no, we are working so hard and putting in so much effort to perform this, why won't we show our faces. And this was something I did not expect. When I was explaining lighting schemes to the lighting man, they came up suddenly: Ranjan, no. No shadow dance. I feel it was a first step within the group.

PAVAN: Sorry to go back to Counsel Club, but the idea behind bringing in theatre as one of the activities of the group—you are asking, do you think theatre helps a person in becoming comfortable? That is the thought behind our decision. There are a lot of people who come to the meetings but are mostly silent. One hopes that with some such activity they won't feel inhibited, won't feel shy, maybe it'll really help them to speak out their minds. Because the meetings can become very charged. People get very emotional and the discussion becomes limited to a few people. Many are completely silent, but they have something to say. And not everybody is good at writing, so not everybody can contribute an article to the journal. So theatre could be another alternative just as dance could be another alternative. All these are media for communication.

vi: So you would look at dance or theatre as a means of empowerment?

PAVAN: Yes.

ADITYA: I guess that any kind of performance, any kind of art which is so involved with your insides, will automatically make you feel more comfortable with yourself—why just this issue, normal human beings (I'm sorry to use the word 'normal' but most people would understand it only this way) only get more comfortable with themselves once they start to go beyond the normal routine of their lives. Whether they consciously realize it or not, subconsciously they will become much, much more comfortable.

vi: When you decided that you would do such a choreographic presentation and you approached people—sponsors, technicians, the auditorium, this rehearsal space—did you tell people exactly what you intended to do or has it been half truths?

RANJAN: You mean camouflage?

vi: Yes, is it camouflaged or is it completely out in the open?

RANJAN: I think I have been, maybe, a little dishonest, or disloyal, whatever you would like to call it. But where is there no camouflage? It's everywhere. More importantly, the people I have been to—I'll speak of the sponsors later, I'll talk from the administration and organizational point of view first. Birla Academy: I have given Birla Academy money, they are providing me with the auditorium. My responsibility is to make sure that their auditorium is not damaged in any way and that there is nothing obscene performed. Besides that, I can do what I like. They have no business to poke their noses into that.

vi: But they might call what you are doing obscenity, isn't that so?

RANJAN: Yes, but then I'm getting a chance to make an issue out of it. And I don't mind fighting.

vi: And this space. You are rehearsing here. Have you explained or have you just booked it?

RANJAN: I've been booking this space for a long time, for a lot of functions. I know the people here, so they don't really bother about what I do. I don't need to tell them.

vi: And the sponsors?

RANJAN: Well, as for sponsors, these days much work is being done on HIV, AIDS and sexual

health, especially in the NGO circuit. My personal and professional life—and that of another member who looks after the accounts, Pavan—is very much attached to the NGO culture. Both of us work with various NGOs on a variety of issues. We approached these NGOs. Some helped, some didn't, some turned away from us—that will always be there. We have received great support from our friends both within the community and outside. Those who understand and agree with our ideology, our ideas, our needs, our psychology. Maybe the amount of help I had expected, I didn't get. But we are working with what we have.

vi: What has the response been like? Not only help but attitudinal response to the whole idea. What percentage has been from the gay community and what percentage from the heterosexual community?

RANJAN: The thing is, everyone appreciates this kind of an initiative. But the problem remains—When you call people to see or to take part in the programme, it becomes difficult for people to decide or make up their mind. Because when there is a programme, the Press will be there. Then again, there are a whole lot of hindrances. Suppose there are two guys, both of them know about each other's sexuality, but they are not very good friends, they know each other by sight. When they go out, sometimes they don't even acknowledge each other, because maybe one of them is effeminate or is known as gay, as I am. I am widely known as a gay person, because I'm an activist—although I don't agree with the word, with the term.

So people always appreciate the effort, the initiative. But I found it a little difficult and disappointing when I—Yesterday I was informed that some people are not really comfortable coming to see the programme. Because the Press might be there and there might be cameras, and then the whole discovery of one's sexuality . . . People do get into that. But from our group members, I really got co-operation and from outsiders, even if the support is only verbal, it's okay. First I need mental support.

vi: How many people do you expect to come and see this? Because ultimately how successful you are in communicating will depend on the number of people who come to watch it, for whatever reason.

RANJAN: Actually, the thing is, in Calcutta, so far, there has been only one show on same-sex

desire—which, actually, was nothing to do with same-sex desire, it was something to do with AIDS, two gay guys with AIDS. That was a ballet. But solely on gay life and building a gay community—as far as I know, this is the first such performance. So even if half the audience comes tomorrow, 100 people, I would feel great. Because after this we will do the show again and again. The more we perform, the more people will come to know about the performance, the more words will reach their ears and their minds. And what I feel is, finally they will come. So even if I see a full auditorium after four shows—

VI: So this is basically an experiment. As of now, it's an experiment.

RANJAN: Yes.

INDRAJIT: The main thing is that all of us share this idea. We are not doing it just because Ranjan has said so. We have put the whole thing together with our individual efforts and ideas.

PARTH: He often says, which movement are you comfortable with? Do that.

INDRAJIT: He has never said, you have to do what I tell you. We have improvised, too.

PARTHA: But we don't have the basic idea, which he does. That we have to take from him. After that, we can mould it.

RANJAN: I've been involved in music and dance from a very young age. I've been on stage since the age of five. I am an only child, so I was trained in many things. But I don't like performing, even now. I am performing only because I haven't found anyone to play that particular character, otherwise I prefer working with other people and directing them. Direction is something I really enjoy.

When I was young I used to learn elocution from my mother. That's why acting is familiar ground. Then in school, from class 2 onwards, I used to learn singing with all the others. Then I learned Rabindrasangeet. I used to play games a lot, too, but I gave that up as I was very ambitious from a young age and I thought I wouldn't be able to make a name for myself through sports. How long can one continue to play? I needed something that I could carry on doing throughout my life. And studies didn't interest me at all. So in class 7 I dropped sports and took to dancing again. Before that, in school, we used to be taught simple, childish dances. But in class 7, I began going to a lady who taught at Gorky Sadan. To date I don't know the lady's name, because she never mentioned it to us. We had to call

her Didi. From her I learnt Russian ballet for some time. What I learnt is minimal, because one cannot learn anything of Russian ballet in two years. So all I learnt were a few exercises and tips. But even that helps me, because I can apply it in these compositions, try and bring in Indian classical dance and western ballet together.

VI: Has Sarani done a performance before this, or is this a 'coming out' for Sarani?

RANJAN: We have done programmes of songs, because we have many singers in our group.

VI: On the same issue?

RANJAN: No. On other issues, various issues—many programmes on patriotic songs. In dance, we have choreographed pieces on Buddhism, Spiritualism . . . Then we did a presentation of devotional songs for Ramakrishna Mission. Also a short skit on the environment, deforestation and the negative effects of industrialization.

VI: So how would you identify Sarani? It is natural to assume that it is a gay rights group. What is Sarani to all of you?

RANJAN: Well, Sarani is a group for experimental performing art. The art could be painting, sculpture—anything.

VI: What is Sarani's objective?

RANJAN: We have decided to present performances based on social issues. Not just imaginary or fairy tales—I'm not saying that those have no value. They help people relax—

INDRAJIT: What we mean is, not pure entertainment only.

RANJAN: Yes. We have decided that we will not involve ourselves in those sort of programmes. We are ready to work with any social issue. We have already worked with several and will continue to do so. Those social issues which have validity, which need to be brought into the limelight.

Earlier the group was called Srishikkhu. But that name did not seem to tally with the work that we were doing. So we sat together and decided that as the direction of our work was changing, our name must change too. We decided that whatever we presented would be very simple, so the name also needed to be simple, easy to remember and recognize.

VI: You had said that this was the first performance on this issue in Calcutta.

RANJAN: Yes. Before this, Sapphire Creations Dance Workshop had composed a ballet. But it did not deal with this issue directly. They

had done it on AIDS.

VI: So you don't know of any other group in India like yours?

RAJA: Some people hold cultural events from time to time, but not regularly and not as a group—maybe as a workshop production or something like that. I don't know of any other organized group which works together like us, which has come together with this particular social identity.

VI: So considering that this is a first—not only for you, but for Calcutta, maybe for the whole of India—what do you expect the reaction to be from tomorrow onwards? From the Press, the audience who come to see you. I'm not talking about critical analysis of what you're doing, how you dance. I'm talking about the issue. The reaction to the issue that you've raised.

RANJAN: Well, let me start with this performance. So far, all of us were not really comfortable about performing live and performing directly before the audience. So we thought that, okay, we will perform a shadow dance, so people don't see us and the audience can't recognize individuals. But then again, during these rehearsals, suddenly they decided—no, no, no, we want to show our faces. We are struggling so much with the dance. We want people to see us. I made them aware of the implications, later implications. But they are ready to deal with it. They have a logic—I don't need to be gay to perform a gay drama. And that is the united voice of the group.

VI: I would assume that for the people sitting in this room at the moment, it doesn't matter as to whether you're gay or whether you're heterosexual. It should make no difference, at least to this group. So what you are in real life is not a question that arises as far as we are concerned. As you said, it is a question that would arise as far as the audience is concerned, as far as, say, your parents are concerned, as far as the society that you're living in is concerned. So how would you deal with the reactions that come from there?

ASHISH: Well, to be very honest, I couldn't tell my parents or my dear ones to come and see the programme. Because I know their response will be very negative. And I couldn't give them the shock of their lives. It is also impossible for me to lie to them and say that I'm only performing because I know them, I just want to help—I don't know whether, had I been 'normal', I would have come and helped them. I don't think so. Because when I

mentioned this to some of my friends who are very 'normal' and are also dancers, they reacted by saying that I shouldn't get involved. So the question of asking them to come and see is beyond my . . . I'm sorry but it's a fact.

PARTHA: Today we're doing this show to create an awareness in society, so that this attitude towards us changes. If we could bring our families and tell everyone about it, then there is no sense in doing the programme at all. It loses its value. The point is that I cannot bring them today, but if the next generation does something similar—

INDRAJIT: You see, the typical Bengali culture will not accept us. They will think we are abnormal.

PARTHA: Our objective is, maybe today we cannot bring our families, but should the next generation do a show like this, they should be able to bring them.

INDRAJIT: And we also don't feel free enough at this stage to discuss such things with them.

VI: But you expect people to come to the show tomorrow.

INDRAJIT: Of course. If 100 people come out of 200, we will have been successful.

VI: Fifty percent success rate for such an issue, in a city like Calcutta which hasn't seen such things, is a great success rate. But, since all of you believe in the cause, wouldn't it be natural to first ask the people that you know to come and see it? And then expect others to come?

ASHISH: I would like to say this. I don't mind a stranger knowing, or coming to know. But my parents, with whom I'm living . . . they don't accept. I don't have the guts . . .

VI: So it's a matter of compromise for the sake of peace.

ASHISH: Yes.

RANJAN: I have something different to say here. See, whatever initiative we take, it's a part of the movement. Whatever issue, it's a part of the movement based on that issue. Never mind whether it is a gay issue or an environment issue. The basic fact is, whenever it is a social issue, our so-called well-wisher parents and other so-called well-wishers—they're so career centric—feel it's a waste of time. Then, when the idea is to take the movement forward, you might have to act a little subversive, you might have to tell some half truths and keep some facts hidden. Without that, no movement will run, without that no revolution will take place. Recently all

of us saw the film *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa*. The only reason why the Naxalite movement did not last was that there was not enough planning, patience—in my opinion, the step that they took was quite premature. Due to which, the movement was not successful. But the objectives behind the movement were very valid, very necessary. To change the social system in any way is always an important objective. But if you want to make the objective into a reality, then you have to sometimes strategize like this—there's nothing else you can do.

VI: In the future, do you think all of you will be outspoken about it, will it become a part of your identity? Not now. But once you are able to stand on your own feet and do whatever you're doing? Do you foresee such a thing?

ASHISH: I don't think I have the guts. Now or in the future.

PARTHA: I agree with him

INDRAJIT: Me too.

PROSHANTO: No change.

INDRAJIT: First of all, we are not some kind of animal. Anyone can have such desire. And, whether they're hetero or not, when men are using me, they are also committing the same act, isn't it? Then why hate us?

VI: I agree with you.

INDRAJIT: And anyway, I'm already out in the open. I have no objection to that.

VI: In the present society it is safer to keep it under wraps, definitely. I agree with you. And it takes a lot of guts to come out. But in the future, what you're doing now, the movement that you have started with this performance, to make society aware of such things and make them feel for such people—

INDRAJIT: When something is happening regularly, everyday, something that happens within everyone, how long can society keep it suppressed? It will definitely free itself one day or another. So where is the problem? In fact, we're showing this very thing in the performance. This is what is being shown. And this is happening every day. In my life, his life, everyone's life. Some people suppress it, some make fun of others, and some come out into the open. That is a personal thing. First of all, we must consider the family problem. None of us are so open with our families. Whatever we do is outside the home. We are not letting our families know because it might hurt their sentiments, they may not accept it. But I also don't want anyone else to dictate my private

life. That belongs to myself.

SANTANU: There's another thing. Whether the response is positive or negative, that comes later. What is more important is that most people aren't aware. In my experience, I have met very few people who know about it. Even if they know, they have a very vague idea about it. I think first we have to make sure that people know about it. How they take it is a later consideration. First they should know—most people don't even know the basis for it.

INDRAJIT: Two of my close friends are hetero, they hate gays, they used to say all this. But when I finally told them I was gay, their interest in me increased! They wanted to know more about it, what it meant.

RANJAN: I would look at the matter in a different way. Tomorrow we are going to perform. People will come to know that we are putting up such a performance. But that doesn't automatically mean that we are all like this. That's the first thing. Because I have to keep that policy in mind. If I have to carry on with this kind of work, then I may have to go through my entire life lying about myself. But the result of those lies, maybe I will not be able to enjoy them, but the next generation will. As far as we are concerned, it will benefit society, not take anything away from it. You wanted to know whether after this performance we would be comfortable revealing our identities—firstly, how necessary is it to do so?

SANTANU: Another thing. To whom are we going to reveal our identities? Because we cannot look at society as a unified body. There are many sections and differences in it—each will take it differently. That also has to be taken into account.

RANJAN: Suppose I tell my family. The question is, after I tell them, what will the result be? If whatever little work I do concerning this issue, if I am unable to do even that much—that ruins everything. I don't think any one of us here is so immature as to take such a step. Today, my parents know. Because, firstly, I am very free and open with my mother, and, secondly, keeping it from them is a kind of deceitfulness on my part. I had thought that if I explained myself properly, my mother would surely understand. And she did. She knows that we are doing this programme and she will come to see it tomorrow. Another friend of mine who has now gone abroad, when his father came to know we were planning this—he knows his son is gay—

himself called me up and said, won't you give me a card, I would also like to see it. So at least my mother, his father and Pavan's—Pavan looks after the management of the group—parents will both be there. In fact, we have rehearsed in Pavan's house. So at least we have four supporters. Four people becoming sensitive means that they can influence others—that's sixteen people. Why shouldn't we see the day when sixteen people support us?

vi: You have performed on various issues—environment, Buddhism. When you decided on this issue—firstly, is this the entire group or is it larger?

RANJAN: The group is larger. I have involved just those people needed for this show. That's what I do for all the shows. Because in today's career-centric life, everyone has either a job or studies, their own work apart from this. If, besides these seven people, I had forced other people also to join, they wouldn't have had any personal interest in the matter. In fact, subconsciously, they would get bored and lose interest in the group. I don't want that. I don't want to lose any friend of mine.

vi: But the others must be aware of tomorrow's programme?

RANJAN: Yes.

vi: Will they all be there tomorrow?

RANJAN: Yes.

vi: This storyline—if you could briefly just talk about the whole process.

RANJAN: About five weeks ago—I was writing it even before then—I called everyone for the first sitting. On that day, there were only 7-8 people. We decided then that we needed 21 characters—we had to, therefore, first make up that group. Ultimately, we managed to get that group together. But the trouble is, since it is an experimental performance, you need a lot of patience, commitment and discipline. These three things—commitment, discipline and patience—are hard to come by. And then, performing on such an issue, you need that discipline even more—society, anyway, has a preconceived notion that homosexuals are extremely indisciplined, which is not true. If we did not have any discipline, the 7 of us would not have been able to sit together and plan this. But many people lack this discipline.

So we started rehearsing with the initial 21. We were very happy. I felt that finally a dream would come true. But it remained a dream. Suddenly people began missing

rehearsals, turning up one hour late—and I insist on maintaining discipline. I know that because of this some people here get annoyed with me from time to time. But I have always been very disciplined from a young age. I used to be a scout. I was quite a successful scout. So discipline is very important to me. I cannot tolerate indisciplined people. I can accept you being late by fifteen minutes, even half-an-hour due to something like a severe traffic jam, but one hour late, I cannot excuse. So I had to drop many people on these grounds. It also happened that people would say, you've dropped my friend, even I will not participate. So I let them go, too.

That is why, ultimately, instead of taking Sisir Manch or some other big hall, I chose Birla Academy because it has a small stage, so 7 will look like a compact group. If I took a big stage, 7 of us would look as if we were one football team on an open ground. In the first half, I have my songs and Raja's poetry. First we had planned the dance with a script and everything. But because we do things on an experimental basis, we don't usually have a rigid script. Not even in our programmes of songs. So while rehearsing, singing, dancing, we decide, no, not this, we'll do that, no, not that, how about this instead. So that's how this performance also developed.

I had invited Indrajit and another boy, Sonu. His natural movements are very much like those of a small child. Because even in his personal life, he is very isolated, so that outer social maturity is not there in his psychology, it hasn't grown. In that way, he is quite innocent. I needed an adult who would be able to portray a particular character and yet look innocent and childlike. So I chose him. Another thing—I have had to cast a male in a woman's role. Because I couldn't find even one sensible girl of that height who would be willing to play that role. I mean, as far as girls go, if we were a heterosexual group, they might have had something to worry about in terms of our behaviour towards them, but here none of us are at all interested in women, we would not have harmed them in any way. But because of the prejudices of society . . . I personally approached three girls who dance quite well, and all three said that they could not accept the idea. And I have great objection to anyone performing without believing in what they are doing. Doing it for the sake of doing it, such people I don't want. Those three girls are all quite mature. Two of them are students of sociology at Presidency College.

Now, if girls who study sociology have such an attitude, then you can gauge the state of our social system. The future social system. Anyway—we are carrying on with our work.

vi: In which circles are you advertising? By word of mouth?

RAJA: You see, no one talks about us. We are the only ones who do so. So it is word of mouth. Those amongst us who are still in the closet, they trust us. They believe that we are better able to talk about this issue than other people. So they will come.

vi: Tomorrow do you expect a mixed group or a mainly gay group?

RANJAN: No, tomorrow it will be a mixed group. Because some people will come out of curiosity.

INDRAJIT: Some people think we are some kind of strange animal, so they will come to see what we do.

RAJA: Some people will come out of sympathy, some will come on compassionate grounds, thinking I couldn't participate but at least I can help by being there; then, of course, there will be our friends and supporters.

RANJAN: There will be quite a few people from NGOs, who are more sensible where this issue is concerned. Then there will be media. So it will be a mixed crowd. Here there is another important point that should be mentioned. That is, we are also humans. We are not some kind of animal that we will interact only with those of our own species. On the streets, as soon as a dog sees a cat, a chase begins. There is no love lost between them. But when you bring them up together, then there is no such problem between them. It's the same case here. If I don't keep myself in isolation and if those around me have some sort of sensitivity, then why should I have to live alone? I have many friends. All of us have so-called straight friends. They will come tomorrow.

A follow up discussion was held soon after the performance, on 30 May 1998, in Calcutta, in an attempt to evaluate this first-of-its-kind event and its significance for the participants and the audience.

vi: Firstly, for those of you who performed on that day, what are your individual reactions?

PARTHA: I felt very good after the performance. About two things. One, I think that whatever I was supposed to do I managed quite well. So

I'm satisfied with my individual performance. Two, the audience reaction was very positive. Initially, I was wondering what the reaction would be. By the end of it, even during the performance, I was feeling quite good as the audience reaction was so positive.

ASHISH: At first I was feeling a little uncomfortable because I was not able to perform the character I was portraying with total involvement. But during the curtain call, I saw that the audience was very happy with the performance and they liked the silhouette effect that we had used. Some people from the audience, when we were discussing the show amongst ourselves in the green room, came up to us and gave us their opinions. During the curtain call they had only been able to applaud, but when they personally came to congratulate us, I felt really happy. My only regret is that, had I done a different character, I could have danced with more involvement—that's what I thought.

INDRAJIT: Even I was a bit nervous about the role I was doing. First it was supposed to be done behind a screen. When that was changed at the last minute, I was a bit nervous about what would happen. But the overall result was quite good, successful. I was definitely happy.

RANJAN: Well . . . just before the programme I had fallen ill with high temperature and headaches, later it was diagnosed as malaria. Because of that I lost control over the whole thing. As far as the performance goes, there was a lack of synchronization in many places and it was very clear that we had had very little practice. If we had been able to stick to our original plans for the performance and rehearsed accordingly, the programme would have been much better. The audience liked it a lot, everyone was very happy and we're still getting feedback that it was an excellent performance, an excellent idea, etc. Of course, there is criticism. That is also a very necessary feedback because we can learn a lot from that.

But what I am most happy about is that many people are now showing interest in joining our group. That, to me, is the greatest success. Because to produce this programme, we had to overcome many obstacles. We performed a script originally meant for 21 people with only 7 people. Now I feel that I will be able to get 21 people with just one announcement. That is the greatest success. Because the service I have performed for the community, if the community realizes and appreciates it, that is the biggest success for

The Alien Flower, premiered in June 1996 by Sapphire Creations, was probably the first production on the subject of homosexuality to be performed in Calcutta. A brief report by JHUMA BASAK follows.

Sapphire Creations Dance Workshop is one of the few dance companies of Calcutta which is trying to confront and deal with contemporary concerns and demands of modern dance. Sudershan Chakraborty, the director of the company, points out that the philosophy of the group is to 'explore social issues through dance and create a modern dance language which is global in appeal yet Indian in content and context.'

The group's The Alien Flower, premiered in June, 1996, was the first dance production in Calcutta to present a gay man's journey through the ossified society around him. The piece was originally conceived after a real life experience of one of the members of Sapphire Creations. Since 1996, the company has repeatedly performed The Alien Flower as part of their repertoire, voicing the cause of the Gay Movement in India. The music comprised eight English poems by Sanjay Vasa and Rakesh Ratti.

Though it has gained strong support from the gay community within the country, initially it faced bureaucratic resistance in the field of dance, publicity, sponsorship and, in general, resistance from the audience. However, a comparative study over the last two years makes the group feel that there has been a growing acceptance of The Alien Flower. Pushpak Saha, the ballet master of the company, noticed that lately, at the end of a performance, people come backstage to congratulate them for The Alien Flower, their courage and concern for the cause, or simply to acquire more information about the Gay Movement. Though the group originally started with just five members, it now has more than twelve active members in the core performing body of the group.

me.

PAVAN: As an organizer, it was a first-time experience. You know about Counsel Club, the support group we have. We have worked a lot within that support group, but this was one of the most visible occasions—the issue came forward and it was out there in the open, up for everybody's criticism or whatever. I felt very happy about the kind of support we got, maybe in terms of finance, maybe in terms of moral support or even technical support from different people and organizations. The company Ranjan and I work for, from there also—it appeared as if, after so many years of working with that support group, now that we are trying to come out in the open, something has worked. People are coming forward and saying, yes, you should be doing this and we will support you.

So, if we had more time I'm sure we would have done much better work in terms of the technical side—because everything was happening at the same time, the worries about the performance, the worries about getting the money, the worries about the performers, everybody was going down with fever, and all sorts of things were happening. In the end everything went off very well. And the high point was being there on the stage and looking at all the people in the audience, uniformly beaming faces—some of them might have been laughing at us, maybe, but most of the faces were positive. That was a great experience.

And personally, my parents were there, Ranjan's mother was there, so that added something more to it, because . . . Initially, my parents didn't know the subject of the programme. They thought that this was going to be just a music and dance programme. And when they landed up, when they went through the souvenir, then my father said, this is that kind of programme. So my mother called me and said, so this is that kind of programme? I said, yes but you can't go now. So you'd better stay and see the programme. So it ended up pretty well . . .

I'm sure that in the future, from the organizing point of view, we can be comfortable and know that there is a lot of support out there. We weren't sure about that.

VI: How about you, Aditya? You were in the audience?

ADITYA: It was a very good beginning. To most of the audience, what mattered was the fact that something is happening. More than the quality of the programme, just the fact of a

step being taken—that was the most important thing.

DEBASHISH: Before this, I wasn't familiar with any such organization. This programme is the first one I have seen, and after seeing it I feel that even in Calcutta one can do a lot of things that the people of the city have not thought of before. In the other states of India, some work has already been done as far as this sort of programme goes. But this is the first of its kind that I have seen in Calcutta. And it has affected me a lot, I enjoyed the whole production very much. If I can involve myself in such an organization, then I hope that in the future I can work with everyone else and, maybe, do something good for the country. Many people think of doing something, but ultimately do not have the capacity to present it or develop it properly, but since there is such an organization, people can come forward and do things well. This is what I find most promising.

vi: How did you hear about this programme?

DEBASHISH: Through Proshanto. He is a friend of mine and he distributed cards amongst us. So that's how I happened to be there.

PROSHANTO: Among those I had given cards to, only one was absent. All the others came. The programme attendance was about 50 to 60 %. There were, of course, many opinions. Different kinds of people had come. Many of them liked it, especially some individual performances, but also the total programme. Of course there were complaints, like about our costumes. But we were so short of time. We were planning a shadow dance and that turned into a live show. We had not thought about costumes, and in 24 hours it was not possible to make them. Hopefully, in our next programme we will be able to pay attention to all aspects of the production. Since it was planned as a shadow dance, we had chosen slow movements. Done live, it might have bored some people or put them off completely. Many people have said so. But the overall report is very good. In particular, everyone is praising Ashish's performance—even The Telegraph. After the programme, Indra has become very famous. He is receiving fan mail, phone calls!

PAVAN: There were two filmmakers there. They had already approached Counsel Club with the idea of wanting to make a film on the gay issue, and when they saw the programme, I think they got convinced that something concrete was happening.

RANJAN: A very funny thing happened. Before the programme started, the auditorium was brightly lit. One of our friends, when he entered, suddenly recognized two familiar faces from his straight life (what we call straight). One was a junior colleague and one was a family friend, his father's friend. And he had to just rush outside to get away from them. When the house lights went down, he crept in and sat down. My singing was terrible, but I think Raja's poetry and the whole presentation was so effective that he later came and told me, Ranjan, this was my situation at first. But after the first half of the programme, I was sitting towards the front of the hall during the interval and I did not bother about whether anyone was looking at me or not. I turned around in my seat and chatted with others, showing my face to anyone who wanted to see it. I was so charged. And surprisingly, his junior colleague is one of my straight friends, a sitarist, and luckily the other person was the film director who wants to make a film on this issue. But—even if this feeling of being comfortable with his identity grows in just one person, I think it's enough.

vi: I was there myself, so I saw that there was about 60-65 % attendance, but how would you rate the audience—in terms of whether they were from your community or—for what reasons would you say the audience had come to see the show?

PAVAN: Well, my personal feeling is that, as Aditya was saying, we made a beginning. So this was by and large for the community, by the community. And I don't see any problem in that, because even for people of the community to come to such a programme, it is like creating a space for yourself. As one of my colleagues later mentioned to me, she said something bizarre happened to her . . . suddenly there was this feeling, after the songs and while the dance was going on, that let's all just go out and tell the whole world to mind their own business. We are what we are. So that kind of feeling was generated, and I think it was very positive that such a large number of people from the community could come in and be together. There are other places where the community is together but there are different dynamics for those places. This was a totally different place. It was like a public place. And with all the authenticity of recognition and all that. Because there was this . . . overall the Press people were there, some of the performers' parents were there,

colleagues, bosses—that kind of variety was also there. Yes, it was by and large the community and supporters of the community. But it's like making a statement: that there is strength here.

VI: Would you say that this programme would serve to make the community a more cohesive unit in terms of mutual understanding, in terms of being together, in terms of bonding?

PAVAN: I don't know how much of it will last, but I think it did make a difference, because, as I was saying, there are not many other happy occasions to be together. It was a totally different kind of atmosphere . . . I find it difficult to describe it. Cohesion must have been enhanced in some way. Because Ranjan is saying that more people are wanting to join the dance group. That's another sign of some people being pulled, coming together to do something.

RANJAN: After the show I was ill for a week or more. After that I started going to the meeting points where the community people socialize. Even today, someone asked, Ranjan, when is the next programme? I said, there's nothing planned immediately. He said, please, whenever there is something, be sure to include me. If you don't, I'll have a bone to pick with you. What is that? I don't need each person to perform on stage. But I need their presence. That is what I feel is very important. And even—for instance, Debashish has come here today, to find out about Counsel Club and all. And suddenly he told me that he wants to be a part of this group if he is thought capable enough. Aditya. Last time Aditya could not participate. He planned to perform with us but could not because of his exams. Now Suman. To me he is a kid. But the thing is he did not even come to the programme. He only heard about it from others. I met him sometime last week and he said, Why can't I be part of your group? He had come to me a long time ago for some other performance. At that time he was not really fit. But now he has shown personal interest. Even if he is not fit now, I don't mind.

What I am happy about is that people are getting interested in doing something. And at present I don't need anything more. Today, whenever I go to any cruising point, where we socialize, any haunt or joint, everyone comes to me and praises the show. And everyone wants to see it again. There is a demand. And that is why we decided to improvise the show much more and reproduce it. If the demand is there . . . And the people who could not come

apologized; they feel that they missed something after they heard the others praising it. What I secretly feel happy about is, the next time we perform, if I just put an ad. saying Sarani is performing 'Coming Out With Music'—I know I will not have to worry about selling tickets. What greater integration do you want?

PAVAN: Talking about bonding. Two things come to mind. One is bonding within the community. I think we need many more such occasions. It has to become a habit with the community, that something or the other is happening, involving them in some way or the other. And it should be our way of life also—our issue being talked about regularly to make us comfortable, to make people around us comfortable, and also people who are growing up—I mean, people in their adolescence and all. Realizing about themselves, their passage through those years of confusion becomes easier. So a programme like this, if it's on a regular basis, has a lot of potential.

Another level of bonding was with the supporters. They reacted in different ways after the programme. My boss has a background in singing. She heard Ranjan sing, and she said, if he ever writes these songs in Hindi, tell him that he doesn't have to worry about a singer, because I will sing for him. This kind of reinforcement of ties has also happened.

PARTHA: Now, because we are getting so many new people to join us and the reaction is so positive, we are feeling good about it—it's been almost completely a positive reaction, so people are being brave enough to come forward. Maybe someone who has a talent for dancing or singing will also join us now. That's a later consideration. But the first step was ours and we took the risk. We tried our level best.

VI: Is the decision to do a programme, whether it's on gay rights or whether it's on environment, taken by the group as a whole?

RANJAN: All of us here take the decision, but I make the plan beforehand and then present it to the others saying, how about doing something on this theme? If everyone agrees, we do a performance on that theme. If we cannot reach an agreement, if we see there are some practical problems, then we don't. We have dropped many plans due to this reason. Because not everyone is available during that time or not everyone is agreeable

to the theme. For this one, I first wrote the story and then we all sat together to discuss it. I read out the storyline. Everyone agreed on it and we began rehearsals. This is how we work.

VI: Are you planning any other show on this issue? Or do you know of anyone else who, after seeing your show, would like to work on this?

RANJAN: At this moment we are not planning anything else on this issue, because people haven't yet had enough of this particular script, so for some time, at least, we can carry on with it. And about other plans, I have a friend who wants to do a theatre workshop to develop a gay script, a gay theatre workshop.

ASHISH: You know, our group's very first production was on this particular issue and because of this I couldn't tell my family members to come and see it. Perhaps the issue was the reason why we couldn't get a big crowd. So I was telling Ranjan that perhaps our first production should have been on a more appealing and 'normal' issue, and then, slowly, as we made a name for ourselves, we could have brought this issue to the public. Perhaps we could have got more of a crowd instead of only our community. If this had been the plan, I could have asked other people I know, those to whom I haven't yet revealed my identity, and maybe never will, they may have come to see the programme. But because this was our first public programme, most people will now say, oh Sarani, this is a group for gays. They only perform this kind of thing. One day I told Ranjan, I am very disturbed because I don't want to identify myself as a member of this particular group formed for this particular issue only. If we had done it differently, I think we could have got more performers. They would have thought, even if I am dancing it doesn't mean that I belong to that particular community. I feel that way. It will be better if we work on other issues.

RANJAN: Experience greys a person's hair. I had wanted to start this group sometime at the end of 1994. At that time I hadn't thought of doing a programme on this issue. Then I was involved in a big way in putting up programmes of patriotic songs and dances and all that. But the strange thing is this: experience has taught me that when I wanted to work with this issue . . . if I had worked on patriotism, I could have managed two programmes a month, with my connections. But the strange thing is, in those two years I

could not even put up one show for some reason or the other, I don't know why. I could not bring people together to perform anything on those themes. But now, when I take up this issue, there are 7 people. How come so much commitment? I feel it's only because this issue relates deeply to our inner self. And that is the only way the group has been formed.

ASHISH: But doing a programme on stage also involves the satisfaction of the performer. Whenever I do a show, and see my dear ones sitting in the audience I feel a sense of satisfaction—or if I can discuss my performance and get feedback from them. But for this particular show, I couldn't do that. When the review came out in *The Telegraph*, I was so happy. But, at the same time, very sad. Because I couldn't show it to my people at home and tell them, look, this is a programme which I have done. But, of course, I had told them the time and date and venue of the show—since I was coming for daily rehearsals, they asked me where I was going, and I did tell them that I was doing a show with an NGO. So when they read the review in the paper, they didn't say anything, but my brother asked me, isn't this the show you were in? I said, yes. Then he said, please think about what you're doing. So these are real problems. Satisfaction was missing.

You see, if you've already performed different kinds of shows, I'm sure people would be willing to accept that you were doing it only as an artiste. But if this was the first stage performance of your life, then it would matter.

Actually the problem is this issue as such. I thought my identity would be disclosed. That's what I was scared of. On TV I did a drama where I was a thief. I didn't mind them seeing it. And they never asked me why I played that particular role.

PAVAN: To fuse the points that Ashish and Ranjan brought up. Ashish is saying that maybe some other issue to begin with might have been more comfortable and may have created a much wider image of Sarani. And Ranjan is saying that his experience was that it was this issue only which actually brought people together. This just reminded me of the initial months of Counsel Club, where a whole lot of debates used to go on—why are we creating this group? One of the conclusions one came to was—the reason that we are all gay, our sexual orientation, might be reason enough for us to come together in the

beginning, but it will never be reason enough to always stay together. And staying together is necessary, it is important, because there are a lot of problems which, individually, as gay people, it would be very difficult to face. But a support group can help with those problems. So if there is a justification in staying together, then we have to look beyond our sexual orientation. And then, when you look beyond, you look at each other as complete persons. The other people in the group are not just gay people. They are people with employment problems, they are people with other family problems, they have career problems, a whole lot of other problems. Environment problems, nuclear bomb problems—everything. So, then, if you believe in staying together, you'd better look at the person next to you as a complete person. Only then can the group last.

So here also, since Sarani's start has been with this issue, I think it will go further only if other common issues are also looked into and performed. As human beings we have a lot of common problems. This evening, for example, I was supposed to go for a meeting of a green group. I feel that this is an issue common to all of us. And if we get to know that group more, get to know what kind of work they are doing, there might be scope for collaboration. Perhaps a performance for them by Sarani. That kind of thing. Then that image will automatically be corrected. It has to be corrected. I mean, it is not just a group for gay issues.

Any organization, when it starts, can't afford to rest on its laurels. Expectations build up. Next time around, expectations from the audience are going to be higher. And, I suppose, expectations from within the group are going to be higher. So I think for all this, the group needs to think out its philosophy of work, or philosophy of growth—how will it grow? Personally, I have this experience of a small organization wanting to become big and grow, but in the process, the speed at which they try to grow tends to kill them off. So I think that philosophy has to be thought out. I personally believe in the statement that 'small is beautiful', and I feel that smaller steps will take you much further for much longer than bigger steps. So I think as a philosophy, possibly the organization should think about smaller performances for smaller audiences, maybe programmes which do not require very extensive planning or resources or things like that. It might be that you first

really excel at achievable goals and then move forward. That is my personal feeling. I mean, the whole group has to think about this philosophy. This will go a long way in ensuring quality. Which is important, there's no doubt about it.

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'A Love Such as Ours'

Poems and Songs Used in the Sarani Production,
Coming Out With Music

A Love Such as Ours
(The poem used in the dance
number)

Here we all are within the purview
of Society
Spending days, spending nights
looking for love.
In the crowded market place, in the
busy streets
We look for people to call our own.
Never mind whether men or
women.
What matters is that I love them.
Does this amaze you? It very well
may.
But why do you fear it?
If you search our minds, you, too,
will find a soulmate—
Someone who unconditionally
offers you love.
You feel a strange incompleteness,
suddenly, as,
Though you strive to reach out,
your union is not to be.
The yearning you feel so deep
within your breast
Is but a dream: an emotion not to
be confessed.
In the eyes of Society, a sin: in
medical terms—a psychological
infirmity
The wise call it perverted, while
others around you ignore it
blissfully.
When a love such as ours comes
tentatively into the light
You immediately deny it, fling it
back into the mists of the night!
This—our love: this—our very
existence,
How much longer can it be
imprisoned under cover of
darkness?
A thousand voices united in truth
will lift this heavy veil of scorn
A thousand voices raised proudly in
song will usher in our dawn!

Under The Blue Sky

(Lyrics of the songs sung by Ranjan)

Under this one blue sky is our home
Upon this earth on which we roam
There are all kinds of people here
So why point fingers at me?

Emotions and desires are difficult to
ignore

So why single out only one such to
quell?

You have strong desires, so do I
They are all the same, they only go
by different names.

Some seek perception, some seek
laughter.

Some seek intellect; it's the physical
some are after.

Some seek deep, undying love
Pure affection is what some seek
But of my own longings cannot I
speak?

Your desires are accepted but not
mine

Who are they these restrictions to
define?

Under this one blue sky is our home
Upon this earth on which we roam
There are all kinds of people here
So why point fingers at me?

Has Anyone Ever Stopped . . . ?

Has anyone ever stopped to look
upon my face

As they come and go?

Have anyone's eyes ever met mine
To question why the tears flow?

Has anyone ever bent their head to
my breast

To hear my heart's desire?

Has anyone ever put their hand in
mine

And faced Society's ire?

Whenever we are mentioned
I know what pictures rise before
your eyes:

Two abnormal naked figures
So easy to despise.

But why does no one realize
That what exists between me and
you

Does not involve the body alone
But our hearts and minds too?!

My eyes do not recognize such
divisions
When they search for love.
Though a thousand voices may
shout me down
My song will rise above!

The City Streets

Walking down the streets of the
city
I encounter a sea of faces.
Faces that dissolve into the crowd,
Faces that return.
What hopes and dreams do their
eyes see?
What myriad emotions does one
tiny gesture express?
My eyes meet yours, and I
understand instinctively
What it is that you seek.
A little love, a little compassion, a
little company.
Through the suffocating crowds
your eyes beckon me
Perhaps with a hint of fear, a tinge
of uncertainty,
Hoping, that as our eyes meet, so
will our hearts.
The question, unfortunately, is
whether you are a man or a
woman.
They do not care about how much I
love you
And, thus, they force us apart.
If only they would let us choose for
ourselves.
Walking down the streets of the
city
I encounter a sea of faces.
Faces that dissolve into the crowd,
Faces that return.
And remain.

Translated from the original Bengali by
Vikram Iyengar

Inside Gayland

Rajesh Talwar

A satirical play on sexuality and the law criminalizing homosexuality in India

Rajesh Talwar is a lawyer by profession who is actively associated with the AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA), one of the consistent demands of which have been that the archaic law against homosexuality be repealed.

In 1994, the ABVA filed a writ petition in the Delhi High Court asking for repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code 1860. This was in the context of making condoms available to the inmates of Tihar Jail. It was the association with the members of ABVA during the course of this litigation that became the immediate cause and inspiration for the play, an extract from which is reproduced below.

Swasthi, a young lawyer, has been seconded by the Ministry of External Affairs to participate in a month-long training programme on planet Gayland, where homosexuality is the norm and heterosexuality punishable by law. Here he works closely with Kala, the assistant to their leading female criminal lawyer, Mela Malani, on an important case, defending a couple who have been accused of having a heterosexual relationship.

ACT II Scene 1

The Office of Ms Mela Malani, senior advocate. Over three weeks have passed since Swasthi arrived in Gayland. The criminal appeal filed by Alif and Lekha against the decision of the trial court is going to come up for hearing in another two days' time. In the senior lawyer's office Swasthi and Kala are sitting quietly along with the typist and the Munshi, while Ms Mela Malani is pacing up and down like a leopardess, rehearsing various arguments to be used in the case.

MELA (pacing up and down): . . . One other method is to challenge the constitutional validity of Section 377 itself. (Turns to her junior) Kala, take out a copy of the Gayland Penal Code.

KALA: Yes, Ma'am.

MELA: Have you got it?

KALA: Yes, Ma'am.

MELA: Read section 377.

KALA (starts reading): 'Section 377. Unnatural offences—Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years and shall also be liable to fine.'¹

MELA: Is that all?

KALA: No. There is an explanation too at the end of the section.

MELA: Read it.

KALA: 'Explanation—Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in the section.'²

MELA: Hmm. Now what is meant by the expression 'against the order of nature'. Can anything really be against the order of nature?

SWASTHI (interrupting, a little hesitantly): I read somewhere that 'man is simply nature trying to understand itself'.

MELA (leaps at the statement): That's a very clever statement. What did you say? Just repeat it.

SWASTHI (repeats): 'Man is simply nature trying to understand itself'.

MELA: Munshiji, write that down. It's a philosophical statement. Can anything ever be actually unnatural? Justice Bhagwanti will like it. It is likely that the case will come up before her (gives Kala a mildly threatening look). Why didn't you think of that? All right, now take out the Constitution of Gayland.

KALA: Yes, Ma'am (takes out a copy of the Constitution).

MELA: Read Article 14. Let's see what it says.

KALA(reads aloud): 'Article 14. Equality before law—The state shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of Gayland.'³

MELA (speaking in a declamatory style): Now we can argue that Section 377 violates the equality clause enshrined in Article 14 of the Constitution. All persons are to be treated equally by the law. If two persons indulge in homosexual intercourse it is not a crime . . . in fact, society looks upon it approvingly. Then why should heterosexual intercourse be treated differently? In both cases, there is no complainant since sexual intercourse has taken place with the consent of both parties. Therefore, Your Ladyship, to criminalize a certain kind of sexual intercourse is unconstitutional and violative of the equality clause enshrined in Article 14 of the Constitution.

Everybody in the office claps.

MUNSHI:That was a brilliant argument, madam!!

TYPIST:Absolutely brilliant, madam!!

SWASTHI (slightly less enthusiastic): Brilliant, ma'am!

KALA (obviously unwilling): Brilliant.

Mela Malani gives a low bow and continues.

MELA: A further argument, Your Honour, in support of my case. Section 377 is enshrined in Chapter 16 of the Gayland Penal Code which deals with offences affecting the human body and life. Now, in the case of all the offences listed under this chapter—from causing simple hurt to murder—there is an offender and separately a victim of the crime.

KALA (interrupts in a triumphant tone): What about adultery?

MELA (frowns, speaks icily): Adultery, my dear Kala, is included in the offences listed under Chapter XX which deals with offences relating to marriage, not under this particular chapter.

KALA (sounding deflated now): Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am.

MELA (continues): In the case of Section 377, as I was saying, Your Honour, what is extraordinary is that there is no victim of the crime (repeats with emphasis); there is no victim. (Dramatically) There is no dead body, but a murder has been committed. (Softly) No harm whatsoever has been caused to anybody. Then what business does the state have to violate the privacy of two individuals and say (angrily) 'You have committed a crime.' (Softly) They have not harmed anyone.

Everybody in office claps loudly once again.

MUNSHI:That was brilliant, madam!!

TYPIST (making an O with his thumb and finger): Brilliant, madam!

SWASTHI: Brilliant.

KALA: Ball—ant.

Ms Malani bows, then continues.

MELA (addressing Swasthi and Kala): Now listen, both of you. Tomorrow being Sunday, it's an off day for both of you, but instead of simply wasting your time, I want you to dig out all the relevant case laws, put them all together and make a written brief of all the arguments for me. I want you to go through the Government reports and get me all the latest census figures, because there is yet another third line of argument which I would like to advance before the Court. In earlier judgements of the Supreme Court, it has been held that Section 377 is constitutionally valid, because without it the Government may be unable to keep a check on the population growth. The Court has held that these heterosexuals produce a lot of children unmindful of the social consequences, and therefore Section 377, even though somewhat discriminatory, is in the greater public interest. However, my impression is that the latest census figures indicate that population levels have fallen drastically. In fact, right now workers at the 'reproductory factory' are being

asked to work overtime in order to ensure that the population level is maintained and does not slip down further.

One more thing. This is for you, Kala. I want you to go to a medical bookstore and pick up a copy of the latest edition of a study by Dr Alfred Kinsey on Sexual Behaviour. Bring this book and all relevant information with you when you come to Court on Monday.

KALA: Yes, Ma'am.

SWASTHI: Yes, Ma'am. Ma'am, do you think the High Court will strike down Section 377 as being unconstitutional and ultra vires the Constitution of Gayland?

MELA (thoughtfully): That depends actually on whose Court this matter comes up before on Monday. There are two possibilities. It could come up before either Justice Bhagwanti or Jack the Ripper. If it comes up before Justice Bhagwanti, then we have a fairly good chance that the Court will hear arguments at length and ultimately even pass judgement declaring Section 377 to be unconstitutional and ultra vires the Constitution of Gayland. On the other hand, if it comes up before Jack the Ripper, he won't accept the constitutional arguments. He is a puritan, a moralist who strictly believes in the religious idea that God made man in order that he cohabit with man and woman in order that she cohabit with woman. He regards heterosexuality as a dangerous deviation, as immoral and evil. He is dead set against all modern progressive trends which favour a more liberal approach to the whole question of sexuality. Personally, I tend to agree with him—but a case is a case. I can argue equally well on both sides.

SWASTHI: This means that if we are to win this case it must come up before Justice Bhagwanti.

MELA (mysteriously): Not necessarily. Of course, since Justice Bhagwanti sits in the morning and Justice Jack in the afternoon session, we will try to manoeuvre things in such a manner that our case gets listed first thing in the morning. However, even if it comes up before Justice Jack, all is not lost. Wait and see. They don't call me Mela Malani the legal eagle for nothing!

Notes:

1. Section 377 of the Gayland Penal Code reproduced here is in fact identical to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.
2. The explanation to Section 377 of the Gayland Penal Code reproduced here is in fact identical to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.
3. Article 14 of the Constitution of Gayland reproduced here is part and parcel of the right to life and liberty enshrined in Article 21 of the Constitution of India.

The published playscript, *Inside Gayland*, by Rajesh Talwar, is available from ABVA, P.O.Box 5308, Delhi 110053.

The Mylaralinga Tradition: Believed-in Performance



Compiled from information contributed by S. A. Krishnaiah, Chief Folklorist, Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts, Udupi and a Performance Study by M. N. Venkatesh, printed by RRC, Udupi.

The pastoral god Mylaralinga has a large following in Karnataka, particularly in the northern part of the state. The worship of this deity is associated with the performance of extraordinary rituals of faith and worship during the annual re-enactment of the wedding of Mylaralinga and his consort.

The centres of Mylaralinga tradition in Karnataka are spread over the districts of Bellary, Chitradurga, Dharwar and Tumkur, two chief centres being the temples of Mylara and Devaragudda, which are situated close to each other and where the annual festival and fair are held. The former temple is surrounded on three sides by the Tungabhadra river, and the latter temple is on a hillock overlooking it. The origin of the temple at Mylara has been traced to the sage Gomuni. It is believed that Gomuni once saw a vision of a sacred cow pouring milk over an anthill. From this anthill the sage then unearthed a hidden lingam, which he glorified as 'Mylaralinga'. Legend has it that the temple was built at Devaragudda as it provided a vantage

point for viewing the dome of the original temple at Mylara. It was only later that a parallel deity, Malathesha, appeared there.

The main deities at Mylara are Mylaralinga and his consort, Gange Malavva, while those at Devaragudda are Malathesha and his consort, Mahalasa. It is likely that these deities are an offshoot of the Shaivite tradition. Though many speculate that Mylaralinga and Malathesha are one and the same, there is also strong popular belief that Malathesha is the younger brother of Mylaralinga. This kinship may stem from the fact that each of them is credited with the destruction of one of the two demon brothers, Manikasura and Mallasura. Then again, the relationship may have evolved from the actual kinship between the priests of the two deities.

The active followers of these deities are a group of wandering devotees called goravas (male devotees) and gorammas (female devotees). They are initiated into the tradition by a ritual known as Hore Horuvudu by the wodeyars, the priestly class, who are the gurus of this tradition. The devotees are distinguished by their unique costumes, which consist of a black woollen coat, a turban, a damaruga (hand drum), a necklace of cowries and a doni (square lunch bowl). Interestingly, they are not restricted to any caste or tribe.

Mass worship or jaathre in Mylara and Devaragudda is a special feature of both centres. These gatherings are organized on the twelve full moon days (hunnime) of the Hindu calendar. The most important of these is on the occasion of Bharath Hunnime (around February), which is marked by a celebration on a very grand scale and associated with the wedding of the presiding deities. In Mylara, the marriage ceremony is performed in minute detail. However, in Devaragudda the ceremony is over within minutes and the devotees then gather to bless the newly wedded couple with grains of sacred rice.

The most unique part of this festival is the worship performed by a particular group of Mylara devotees, the kanchavira. The kanchavira are Kannada-speakers who belong to a socially down-trodden community and, to demonstrate their devotion to Mylaralinga, they perform acts of service which involve physical pain and suffering. These include piercing the wrist with sharp iron nails on which are wound lighted wicks used to perform arati. The only medication for the wounds thus produced is the application of turmeric powder. It is believed that Mylaralinga will cure the wounds of his worshippers. The initiation rites of the kanchavira, called kanye shastra pawaada, involve piercing the leg with a sharp iron rod. Once initiated, the kanchavira goes on to perform even more demanding rituals such as baguni guuta pawaada, where the worshipper pierces his leg with a wooden peg and passes ropes and branches of thorn through it. Another ritual involves breaking iron chains. The ultimate miracle, according to legend, was when the kanchavira would sever his own head. This ritual was known as gandakattari pawaada. The head would then be placed in front of the deity. On applying turmeric powder, the devotee would become whole again.

A similar tradition exists in Andhra Pradesh in temples situated in and around Hyderabad, dedicated to the deity Mallanna.

The Mylara temple, where the anthill around which the temple is reputedly built is encased by the earthen image, which is further decorated with a mask and ornaments. Photo courtesy S. A. Krishnaiah.



During the initiation rites of the kanchavira, a three-foot iron rod, one end of which has been flattened and sharpened, is made to pierce the leg. The rites are called kanye shastra pawaada.



This depicts the kanchavira after performing kanye shastra pawaada. The rod has been inserted into the leg as the mark of a miracle. The kanchavira who underwent kanye shastra pawaada gradually becomes ready for other kinds of performance, such as baguni guuta pawaada.



A kanchavira performs arati by wearing burning wicks attached to a single nail stamped or pressed into his wrist.





A kanchavira performs the first stage of the baguni guuta



The second stage of the baguni guuta



The Local



Theatre of Politics/Politics of Theatre

Bhaskar Chandavarkar

'On the subject of censorship some historians have tried to demonstrate that the apparatus of censorship actually predated the birth of Theatre, and that it was the censors themselves who invented theatre so as to have some means of making themselves useful to the power of the day!'

Dario Fo in *The Tricks of the Trade*.

Commercial theatre of Bombay (now, thanks to Shiv Sena, Mumbai) has always lived perilously close to the Bollywood film industry (one is surprised it is not called Mollywood). This co-existence has shaped the existence of the theatre community. Until recently, stars on the commercial Marathi stage were also to be seen on the big screen. They juggled their dates and assignments, and almost simultaneously shot films and rehearsed plays. Today if they are seen on stage, it is because they will be in the TV studio shooting serials the following week or because they finished 'a project' the preceding week. This amphibian existence is relished by actors, playwrights and directors alike. Therefore it is natural that theatre and film worlds share many ideas, hopes, dreams, fears and worries. The unpredictable forces unleashed by the market economy in the cultural field have taught the people in theatre to be extremely cautious and made fatalists out of the most rational of producers and actors. In what is termed the 'gamble profession', anything that helps win back the money invested is good strategy. Publicity plays a vital role in ensuring returns. A play can usually recover its money after 25 or 30 shows. If it could pull crowds after that point because it is 'sensational' or controversial, the producers would be very happy indeed! Fundamental human rights, such as freedom of expression, are not as important as getting back your investment and doubling your profits. Little wonder, then, that astrologers are more important to theatre financiers than legal experts on constitutional rights. 'Auspicious' days are chosen for the first nights or muhurats. An auspicious date for submitting your script to the censor board would be more important than, say, the knowledge of what constitutes pornography. Astrologers and alpha-numerologists suggest titles for plays! A producer who placed his faith in the stars in heaven rather than on his stage always had nine letters in the titles of his productions.

This curious 'Funda'-fraternity by now must believe that Lord Rama's name is a name with magical power. Ram gives sensation. You can translate that sensation into a success! Just think of SakhaRAM Binder, GhashiRAM Kotwal and now NathuRAM Godse. Add to this RAMbharosay by Shrirang Godbole or Hussein's painting of Sita in the Ramayana paintings or the Ramayana exhibition by SAHAMAT. You could build a theory of sensation and success around these.

For the more serious observers, though, the events of the recent past have brought up very important questions. Why are plays being taken so seriously in Maharashtra? Who is trying to stop them from going on stage? Is there an ideological battle being fought here? To understand the situation and seek answers to these questions we have to look at the historical, cultural and political context in which Mee Nathuram Godse Boltoy has become such an enormously controversial play and made its author, producer and director nationally-known figures.

On 10 July at Shivaji Mandir, a play house located near the Shiv Sena headquarters in the Dadar Area, Nathuram opened to a packed house. That day rounds of applause from a large section of the audience greeted Nathuram's dialogues as the Villain-Hero of the piece justified his 'slaying' of Gandhi—the word used for assassination was wadh and not hatya. The playwright borrowed liberally from a book written by the assassin's brother, Gopal Godse, who was sentenced to life imprisonment as a conspirator to the assassination. The play, according to playwright Pradeep Dalvi, puts forward the assassin's argument, which was hitherto unknown. This is Dalvi's first play and, in an interview published by Tarun Bharat, a Marathi RSS mouthpiece, he is reported to have said that he would consider the play successful if the audience coming out of the theatre destroyed every statue and every nameplate of Mahatma Gandhi. Dalvi later claimed—but not in any hurry—that he had been misquoted by the Press.

A review of the play appeared in the Bombay (Mumbai) edition of *The Times of India* the following day. When Usha Mehta, a veteran Gandhian social worker, read the playwright's interview and the review,

she wrote letters to several leading personalities in the state and central governments. Her anguish that the performance of a play which glorified the assassin of Gandhi had been passed by the censorship board of the present state government made everyone take notice. It transpired that the play had been rejected by the board of censors, the body which is supposed to scrutinize scripts, some ten years previously when the state was ruled by the Congress party. Neither the producers nor the author thought it necessary to challenge the decision then. No one thought that the democratic right of free expression was being suspended. It was only recently, after 10 July, that the Producers' Association woke up and invoked Article 19 of the Constitution. Why did the producer re-submit the script to the recently constituted censorship board after a gap of almost ten years and without any major changes? Many incidents which cause anxiety to the theatre fraternity have taken place in Maharashtra after the Sena-BJP combine came to power. (I'm, of course, referring to theatrical performances). Recently, two performances of different groups were stopped or called off because the artistes were Pakistani singers. The first was the ghazal singer Ghulam Ali's concert and the second was that of the Sufi singers' pop group Junoon. There were agitations against films that the censorship board had passed but ruling parties did not like. Before the Nathuram controversy erupted, a literary fight had broken out against playwright Dr G. P. Deshpande, because he criticized V. S. Khandekar, a novelist who had been the first Jnanpith awardee in Marathi. The majority of writers of the right-wing parties who attacked Deshpande in their letters and columns stated that he and Namwar Singh had spoken against Khandekar from a Marxist point of view. This Marxist aesthetic, they argued, was hopelessly outdated and Deshpande and Singh in their despair had chosen to attack a great author who had upheld 'real Marathi' values. Khandekar's award had come to him, they said, for reviving the great Hindu values through his novel Jayati, based on a Vedic myth. Deshpande's critics also 'reminded' readers that Deshpande's plays were to be shunned and voluntary censorship ought to be practised against his work.

Shrirang Godbole had written a one-act play called Rambharosay ('With Faith in Ram'), which was staged during a competition in Pune, the playwright's home city. The forty-five minute skit-like play, which included a popular qawali, was watched by people in the auditorium without any protest. A day later it was reviewed by Saamna, the Shiv Sena mouthpiece published from Bombay, where it was described as blasphemous. Shiv Sena and Sangh Pariwar activists dragged the playwright and the actors from their homes and onto the stage where the one-act competition was being held. Then, in the most humiliating manner imaginable, the actors' faces were blackened by tar and the playwright was insulted in front of the audience. Godbole was forced to apologize and to repeat his apology one thousand times. Only then was he allowed to go. Godbole seems to have had the strength to withstand this torture, a friend of his told me, only because he was the official copywriter of Shiv Sena songs and election material. When some of us heard this episode in Pune and Delhi, we were aghast. But there was no invoking of the freedom of speech and expression, nobody talked of going to the court of law, the Producers' Association ignored the incident, and those who had passed the script in the censorship board continued to sit in and warm their chairs!

But back to Nathuram now. On 17 July the play was to have its next performance. In the week that followed the show on the 10th, Nathuram was discussed in all major cities of India and on television. The subject was raised in Parliament by Congress MPs. The playwright, producer and director reiterated that none of those who wanted the play stopped had actually seen it, and asked people to see it before passing judgement. Congress workers and some Leftist activists gathered outside Shivaji Mandir on the 17th. Their numbers were matched by Shiv Sena activists. Pramod Navalkar, the Minister for Cultural Affairs of the state government, was there to see for himself if the play contained anything objectionable. Pandemonium broke out shortly. Slogan-shouting was accompanied by the hurling of brickbats and stones, and the mini battle stopped all traffic on the road. Police intervened with a mild lathi-charge and, amid protests from the ticket-holding audience, the management cancelled the show that evening.

The Home Minister, L. K. Advani, then announced in Parliament that all the constituent parties of the government had great respect for Mahatma Gandhi and would not tolerate any defamation of him. He advised the state government to ensure that performances were stopped forthwith. When asked how the censorship board had allowed such a script to be presented, the response of Mr Joshi and Mr Navalkar was evasive. The state government, they said, did not pass judgement. The censor board did. They are an autonomous body and are solely responsible for their actions. The government neither supports nor opposes the theatre!

This argument is a classic case of shirking responsibility. The chairman of the board of censors, Shantaram Nandgaonkar, stated that he had neither read the script nor seen the performance of the play. But as the members of the board had found nothing objectionable, he had gone along with them. It was

later revealed that the script had been read by only one member of the board who had suggested some 'minor' changes and passed it to be staged.

In the weeks following the state government's suspension of the show, the Producers' Association and the theatre fraternity in general have started thinking about the right to freedom of speech and expression. Nathuram, we must realize, is a link in a long chain that goes back several decades. Post-independence protests against and demands for banning a Marathi play began with Tendulkar's *Vultures* (Gidhade in Marathi). C.T. Khanolkar's *Avadhya* and Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Vasanakand* were also targeted. The objections to these plays had a lot to do with what self-appointed custodians of culture thought to be pornography. Swear-words, abuses verbal and physical, incest and similar themes, they argued, corrupted the youth. Agitations and protests were also evoked by Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* and *Ghashiram Kotwal*, earning Tendulkar the curious distinction of being the playwright most agitated against!

A week before *Nathuram* opened in Bombay, another play ran aground. This was *Golpeetha*. The playwright Suresh Chikhale had had the script passed by the censorship board. The play is about a sex worker who, infected with the AIDS virus by one of her customers, decides to take revenge on them all. The play is set in a brothel/bordello in a redlight district of Mumbai called *Golpeetha*. *Shivaji Mandir*—the venue of *Nathuram*—was booked for the performance by the producers. The trustees of the theatre held an emergency meeting and decided against renting out the theatre for *Golpeetha*. Their main objection: the title of the play! 'Change the name or go elsewhere' was their message. The censorship board, which had passed the script, was helpless in the matter.

On 30 July, *Shivaji Mandir* was buzzing again, this time about a new play, *Abhimanyu*, also passed by the censors, which reportedly criticized the Mumbai police. Police department representatives demanded that the play should be seen by them before it was given the green signal. They were at the first show with video cameras and tape recorders, asserting that if they found it to be objectionable, they would arrest the playwright on grounds of defamation. The producer-playwright team was undaunted. They photocopied the censors' certificate clearing the performance and distributed copies to curious theatre-goers, assuring them that the show would go on. Others were publicizing the performance by saying that this could be the only performance. As it turned out, the dramatic impact of what was happening in the precincts of *Shivaji Mandir* was much greater than what actually happened in the play! Sure enough, Marathi theatre is alive and kicking—occasionally kicking a bit too hard. 'Being a poet under a repressive regime is worth it because you know what you say matters. It is much better than living in a society where nobody reads poetry!' said A. K. Ramanujan to some of us once. 'Never mind the price,' he said, 'You know that somebody infinitely more powerful is scared of words that you write!'

Plays could be treated as artifacts of culture. Many of them are entertaining. Some are not. But all of them are saying things that amount to political rhetoric, agendas and policies. It is necessary that these messages should be decoded consciously by people who want to support or oppose the politics that are being presented in the form of visuals, generic codes, myth, music, etc.

Cultural texts are, in themselves, rarely proved to be right-wing or left-wing. Indeed, Dalvi, the author of *Nathuram*, has maintained that he balances the arguments of Gandhi and Godse. 'At no point do I say that Godse was right in his actions. What I have done is presented Godse's side of the argument. And Godse has a right to his argument being heard!' This statement seems justified in the context of the right to freedom of expression. The government's directive to suspend performances of the play can be seen as repressive and the theatre fraternity has therefore squarely backed Dalvi.

But it is also interesting to see who invokes the Constitution in this case. It is the people who tried hard to stop the Tendulkar plays two-and-half decades ago who have now felt the need to support the rights of playwrights. It is the people who stopped *Rambharosay* in Pune who have now backed Dalvi!

Deepak Ghose, in his book *Ghashiram Ek Wadal*, a history of the trials and tribulations of *Ghashiram Kotwal*, has copiously described the vigilantes who disrupted the performances of *Sakharam Binder* and *Ghashiram Kotwal* in the early 70s. In Bombay, these people were led by young Shiv Sainiks (soldiers) called Manohar Joshi and Pramod Navalkar. In 1998, Rt. Hon. Manohar Joshi is the Chief Minister of Maharashtra who most reluctantly accepted L. K. Advani's suggestion to suspend the shows of *Nathuram*. Rt. Hon. Pramod Navalkar is today the Minister for Cultural Affairs, Maharashtra, who instructed the Mumbai police to charge one M. F. Hussain for painting pictures that hurt the sensibilities of people in India.

When Ayatollah Khomeini had issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie in 1989, Bhikhu Parekh wrote an article, published in the *New Statesman* and *Society*, where he stated that:

Once a literary work is published, it is permanently in the public realm. No expedients can

prevent its circulation or diminish its impact. Anyway the law is too blunt an instrument to deal with creative literature and bans and censorship have always done more harm than good.

The answer lies at the more social level. When a creative writer, conducting imaginative experiments and daring to think the unthinkable, outrages, hurts or provokes others, he should be challenged, criticized, asked to explain himself and made to suffer his peers' criticism and the anger of the hurt sensibilities.

It is obvious that during the last several years, a group of people has taken it upon itself to decide what kind of theatre is good for Marathi audiences. One can only hope that these dramatic events help us to understand the politics of theatre better than in the past. In Maharashtra, at least, we could be at the crossroads. Let us choose the correct route now.

As we go to Press

Herewith the last straw —

Sounds like the Government wants to play safe. Meanwhile, there is already an audio cassette set of the play. The book is in the pipeline and rumours say that a video is being considered. If money can be spun quickly—that will also be out soon.

Meanwhile the Producer-Director team has announced their next play based on the gruesome rape of a nurse in one of the Mumbai hospitals. The girl has been in coma for the last three years. A horrendous,

Plans afoot to stage Godse play again as HC 'clarifies situation'

By Our Law Reporter

MUMBAI: The playwright of the controversial Marathi play, *Mee Nathuram Godse Boltoy*, plans to stage the play in the first week of September. He told this newspaper that the remarks passed by the Bombay high court on Tuesday had "clarified the situation", hence his decision. He said he would apply for a fresh performance licence since the earlier one had lapsed.

A division bench of the court comprising Justice Ashok Agarwal and Justice S.S. Nijjar rejected Pradeep Dalvi's writ petition which sought an order striking down the reported ban imposed on the play by the state government.

The court observed that there was no cause for action since the government had not banned the play. Advocate-general C.J. Sawant confirmed that no formal order banning the play was issued by the government. The Centre had sent a letter to the state government advising a ban on the play since it

denigrated Mahatma Gandhi. However, the state government had not yet ordered a ban.

Mr Dalvi was forced to stop the performance of his play following a demonstration by Congress volunteers outside Shivaji Mandir theatre in Dadar on July 17. The police resorted to a lathi-charge when the protest turned violent.

The court also did not grant Mr Dalvi's plea seeking an order to the state government to give police protection to the artistes in view of the stiff opposition to the staging of the play.

The judges said if there was any violence during future performances of the drama, it was usual for the police to step in to maintain law and order.

The advocate-general also told the court that the producer of the play, Uday Ghurat, had voluntarily issued press statements that the drama's performance would be indefinitely suspended after vehement opposition on July 17.

Counsel for the petitioner R.V.

Gangal argued that the government's conduct on the staging of the drama only showed that the rule of law had come to an end and that staging or banning the play was left to the choice of those who organised street violence and created an atmosphere of terror.

He argued that the play could not be staged because neither the producer nor the theatre owners were ready to give dates for fear of violence.

The petitioner also argued that the state government was not bound to toe the line advocated by the Centre to ban the play because the latter was ignorant about the subject matter.

After the stage performance scrutiny board had cleared the controversial drama and issued a certificate, neither the state government nor the board could withdraw the permission or refuse to grant protection for staging the play, Mr Gangal argued.

However, the court said it would not go into the merits of the drama.

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excruciatingly sadistic crime that is likely to be sensational as a play!
I thought this might interest the readers.

'We didn't have any other life than the theatre'

B. Jayshree

My background is the professional theatre—my grandfather had a professional company. Before going to NSD, I was in my grandpa's company. From my childhood, when I was four, I was in theatre. In one way it hampered me—I was not able to study. So the school-going experience was totally snatched from me. I never experienced that. In theatre, I used to play with the children of the other company members. See, we didn't have any other life than the theatre. My father was an actor, and my mother was also acting, my grandmother, my mother's sister—everyone, the whole family.

So in this way, I lost my childhood. I didn't know what going to school was like. I feel very bad about it. I don't think I can fulfil that longing. My sister Padmashree is eight years younger than me, and as soon as she was born, Mummy and Appa put her in school.

Once my grandpa also tried to put me in a convent—myself and my aunt both went to the Good Shepherd Convent. I was so small that they paid more attention to me than to my aunt, so she complained to her mother. She said, I don't want to stay here. I'll come with you and study somewhere else. Her mother took her out. Immediately my grandfather said, she's so young, how can I leave her alone there, I'll take her out. So . . . my schooling was finished. Not even one year, just, I think, six months. So again I came back to the theatre.

There was a teacher [with the company]. We were only four children. And we used to look at the sky and the birds and think about them, while the teacher carried on teaching. We never paid any attention. One day my grandfather saw this and started saying, Arrey!

What sort of studying is this? This is all wrong! Anyway, whenever I got the opportunity, I used to sit down and study.

Once we went to Mangalore to perform and there we went to see the shipyard—just for the experience. My sister was there for the holidays. The captain had seen our production, so he asked, what's your name? But he spoke in English. I couldn't make out what he was saying, so I just giggled and ran off. My sister answered him. I couldn't . . . I was not able to follow. She scolded me—he asks you your name and you don't have the courtesy to answer! You just giggled and came away! Why couldn't you say Jayshree, your name?! I got very upset and felt very bad. I started crying and said, I must go and study. Then my mother, my father, and grandpa made up their minds to put me into school. I was . . . 13, I think.

So they put me into school in Bangalore. That too, in the seventh standard. So all of a sudden, I took tuition for six months in Kannada and six months in English . . . (laughs) suddenly I jumped into the seventh standard. I wrote an examination and luckily I passed at the first attempt. From there went on to finish and then went to the college . . .

When I entered college in Bangalore, I was not able to adjust to the situation, because all the students were bunking college, which . . . I was not able to . . . I was alone in the class. And they said, there's nobody there, so no class—even the lecturer! If everybody was there, then the lecturer was not in the mood. I said, this won't work. I told my uncle, Mr Shriranga—he's no more—a very good writer who has written many plays on politics. And he's the man who actually spearheaded Kannada theatre in Karnataka in those days.

He organized a workshop on Kannada theatre, the first in Bangalore. I was in that, as a student. And afterwards he wrote to Mr Alkazi saying, we are sending a girl from our state.

So I got the Karnataka State Scholarship to study at NSD. When I went to NSD, I found that whatever I learned, was already being done in my company. Only the technical terms were new. I . . . just comparing the company and . . . I think from there on it's been in my mind. And I'm very fond of music, dance. Carnatic music. I learnt all this when I was a child, from Chintanapalli Ramachandra Rao. He is no more now.

[At NSD], as a Kannada speaker, not knowing how to speak Hindi . . . All the classes were in Hindi and English. Even the production was based on modern theatre, classical Indian drama and western theatre . . . all these things.

One thing—because I missed going to school, I was very, very serious. And I never wanted to question anything. Now I feel that I was stupid (laughs). Once I asked Mr Alkazi when he was taking class—now I feel that it was a silly question—I asked him, sir, why do all the characters in Indian theatre take their entry from the right side, why not from the left? He said, because we write from the left (laughs) and the Muslims write from right to left. That's why it is easy to see, no. He was joking. Everyone treated me like a child. Bansi Kaul would always say, yeh to bachhi hai (she is just a child). He says so even now.

[Our batch consisted of], Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Jyoti Deshpande. We are very naughty, very, very naughty. One was good at acting, another backstage, another at lighting . . . the whole theatre. [We

were good friends.] We never fought at all. Three years, and never a fight. So . . . when I went to NSD, language became the enemy for me. Without Hindi, there was no life at all. English was second. So in first year, myself and Jyoti—she came from Pune, from Maharashtra, so she had the same problem, Hindi—we would never get the chance to act. But what to do, that was our handicap. In second year, we took acting as our specialization. Still, we were not able to get a chance. Even in second year, after taking acting as a specialization. Then we went to third year.

In third year, we couldn't tolerate it. So one day we hatched a plan, myself, Jyoti, Naseer[uddin Shah] and Om Puri. We just sat together and decided that they had to help us. They said, chalo yaar help karenge, kuch karke dekhado! Tumlog kyon aise baithe ho? (Yes, yes, we'll help you. First do something and show them! Why are you just sitting around?) We asked, are you going to help us? Arre, puchteho kyon? Tum karo! (Why do you ask? Do something!) Kyon bak bak karte ho!? Tum karke dekhado na, kuch na kuch karo! (Why do you talk so much? You do something and show them, do something or the other!) So we planned it out. In Danton's Death there is a prostitute's role, she's the main leader of the prostitutes, in the brothel—Danton used to come to her. So we prepared that. It's just one scene, but a key role. We practised it thoroughly, mugged up the lines and everything, and did the rehearsals—we were 100% ready.

Some people went and told this to Alkazi Saab, I think. The rehearsal started. We came to know that Mr Alkazi had been informed that we were ready—we knew that he was going to call us for the rehearsal but we didn't show anything. We were a little scared inside, because, suppose he asked us to act that role, come and do the rehearsal, show me how you are going to do it. We were so scared. Purposely, we went a little late—just two minutes late—to draw his attention. Myself and Jyoti. He

was just so angry, everybody was inside the auditorium. We went and sat at the back. As soon as we came in he called Jyoti and myself—People can talk all they like, but to do is very hard, come and do the rehearsal. That's what he said. Doing it on the stage is very, very difficult. You think it's a game? Come and do it! The way he spoke to us really scared us. We just looked at Naseer and Om Puri. They said jao, jao, karo. Karke dekhao. (Go, go and show him.) Then Om came up with Jyoti (myself and Naseer were practising, Jyoti and Om Puri were practising). Quietly Om Puri went and she finished. He didn't say anything. We had changed all the movements according to our feelings, but only a little bit, not totally. Then my turn had come, and I was so scared. Jyoti said, chalo yaar, kuch bhi ho jai! Lekin karo! Galat bhi karo lekin jake karo! Kuch na kuch karke dekhao! (Come on, never mind what happens! Go and show him! Doesn't matter if you do it wrong, just go and show him! Do something or the other!) I went. Naseer also came up. I took nearly five minutes just to start. I was just standing with my back to the audience, just standing. Then Naseer said, come on now, shuru karo, shuru karo, shuru karo (start, start, start). Then suddenly I started. Alkazi was so happy! He was so happy! I was inspired. He just called us, myself and Jyoti. Just hugged us. I'm very proud of you people! Very proud! Then for the first show he was . . . he came and asked us, who is going to do the first production? I said, you decide, sir. Why don't I just toss a coin?(Laughs) He was so beautiful. I cannot forget that! He had that quality, that vision . . .

So this is how I entered Hindi theatre at NSD. After that, no problem. I did, I think, three roles. Because that was my final year. Suryashikar, and Three Penny Opera.

After that I came back to Bangalore. I wanted to do theatre in Bangalore itself. As soon as I came back, I joined a group. I told you previously that Mr Shriranga had done a theatre

workshop? All the students from that workshop had got together and formed a group. I received a letter from them while I was in Delhi, saying, we have formed a troupe, as soon as you finish your Delhi stint please come back and join us. So I did. And my first production was Jasma Odan. In Kannada. It was quite successful.

From the beginning I used to love folk forms. I loved to sing, I loved music, I loved dance and I loved acting also. I feel that through music, through folk, through music, through dance, combining all those things, we can reach the audience very easily. Whether it is a difficult thing or a very simple thing, we can convey it to the audience through this music, dance and acting. So I took up Jasma as soon as I came. My very next production was Ghasiram.

For me it is much easier to reach the audience through the folk idiom. We have to fight film and television. We cannot perform the miracles these media can. We have to work hard and keep the audience with us. Whether one loves music or not, when you sing, people listen. At least for some time. Even when one is sad, one listens to music. Another thing is the rhythm. I believe that when people lose rhythm they become sad. We can make them alive if there is some rhythm, if we can give them rhythm.

Based on an interview with Sumitra Mukherji

MAJLIS: FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME

Majlis, a public trust, is a legal and cultural resource centre. The cultural resource centre intends to develop a support system for multidisciplinary cultural exchange and for individual artists seeking to work outside the parameter of institutional/market frameworks.

Under this programme, Majlis announces five fellowships to artists, performers and social activists with cultural orientation for a period of maximum one year. This fellowship programme aims to make it financially possible for individual artists/cultural activists to take time off to develop an idea/project/study. We invite proposals in the field of cultural productions, innovative research and initiative for creative interactions. Experienced practitioners of one discipline may apply for a collaborative project or for a project in another discipline. Proposals from applicants without past experience in a particular discipline will also be considered.

The programme will offer five fellowships of not exceeding Rs.10,000/- each per month and a contingency grant (based on actual expenses) not exceeding Rs.20,000/- per annum for the basic/administrative expenses in each project. However, the contingency grant will not be available for acquiring any capital equipment.

In case of production oriented projects which are expensive, like film-making or multi-media production, the programme will not be able to cover the production or infrastructural expenses.

The proposals will be evaluated by a selection committee and the decision of the committee will be final.

A mid-term report will have to be submitted to Majlis within two months from the middle of the project period. The fellowship will be resumed only after evaluating the mid-term report. On completion of the fellowship Majlis may organise a presentation of the project.

The Proposal Format

1. The proposal should preferably be in English. Proposals in other Indian languages will also be considered.
2. The first page of the proposal should carry a summary of the project in English not exceeding 500 words, and the applicant's name, address and contact telephone and fax no. The name of the applicant should not be mentioned anywhere else in the proposal.
3. The proposal should be posted to Majlis. Proposals sent by fax or e-mail will not be considered.
4. As far as possible the proposal should not exceed 4000 words.
5. The proposal should contain:
 - a. The overall rationale of the project. The needs, issues or opportunities that the project plans to address.
 - b. Details of the area/field of work, the applicant plans to cover under this fellowship.
 - c. Work plan, methodology and the tentative schedule envisaged.
 - d. The names of any other group, agency or individuals who are likely to get involved in the project.
 - e. A brief note on the applicant's qualifications, experience, interest, and present occupation including a description of other professional commitments during the period of the fellowship. Details of the work done earlier and funds received, if any, in the same field.
 - f. Work samples such as published work, paper cuttings, photographs, cassettes etc., if any.

Other Information

- Any Indian citizen residing in India may apply.
- The period of the fellowship will not extend for more than a year. An appropriate phase of a long term project can be considered for funding.
- Applicants should declare that the proposal submitted to Majlis is not funded by any other organisation.
- Expenses under contingency grant will be reimbursed every three months after submission of accounts, with original bills and vouchers. The total amount of such expenditure will not exceed Rs.20,000/- for the duration of the fellowship.
- The monthly fellowship will be paid by a/c payee cheques. The income tax formalities should be carried out by the recipient. Majlis does not bear any legal or financial responsibility in this regard.
- The contribution of Majlis should be acknowledged in the outcome of the project. However, Majlis will hold no copyright on the outcome of any project.
- No communication regarding the selection will be entertained.

Schedule

The application for fellowship should reach Majlis office by 15th September 1998.

The communication regarding the fellowship will be sent to selected fellows by 30th November 1998.

The fellowship will start from 1st January 1999.

All communication should be made to:

Madhusree Dutta

Majlis

A-2, Bldg 4, Golden Valley, Kalina-Kurla Road, Kalina, Mumbai 400 098.

Phone: 022-618 0394; Fax: 022-614 8539

This fellowship programme is made possible with a grant from HIVOS.

'This is a play that really kicks society in the guts'

An Interview with B. Jayshree



The Kannada play *Uriya Uyyale* is a one-woman performance in which the actress B. Jayshree plays Draupadi, wife to the five Pandava brothers in the epic Mahabharata. Written by Dr K. S. Venkateshamurthy and directed by S. Surendranath, the play was produced by the theatre group Spandana. The first performance was in Bangalore on 1 June 1996. This conversation with Anjum katyal and Paramita Banerjee was held following the Calcutta performance of the play, in March 1997. Also present on the occasion was Anand Raju of Spandana.

AK: I just wanted to tell you that I don't understand Kannada but I sat through the performance absolutely absorbed. I felt it was very powerful. I wanted to talk about how you thought of doing this text. Were you looking for a text which told a story like Draupadi or did you see the text and say this is something I want to do?

BJ: This play is directed by S. Surendranath, a graduate of National School of Drama, a very good writer and talented person. We asked him, why don't you direct a play for us. He said, if you're acting, then I'll do the directing.

I was longing for that, because I specialized in acting, though, due to circumstances, I switched over to direction. So I was very happy to act. Find a script which needs just a few actors, I said, not more than five or ten. Then he came to us and said, no, it should be a one-woman show. You have to act in it. No one will be with you. Nobody else on stage.

AK: What was your reaction to that?

BJ: I kept quiet. I couldn't react right away. Then I asked him, are you serious or are you just joking? Because I never thought of doing this alone. Not even in my dreams.

AR: But I would like to tell you one thing. Since Sunil Dutt's Yadein—a one man show—she has had the idea of performing a one-woman show. She must have forgotten. And even when we came to Calcutta, Snaoliji was working on Nathbati Anathbat. At that time we were also thinking of taking Draupadi as the main character, preferably in a one-woman show. But somehow it did not materialize. This was in her mind for a long, long time.

AK: Coming back to this text, to Draupadi—you were saying that finally he decided that it would be a one-person performance. At that point he had not chosen the text?

BJ: No. One fine day he rang up and asked for a reading of the play. So we called five-six people, sat down and started to read. He never told me that it was a one-woman show. It was written by Venkateshamurthy for me.

AR: Yes. When he came to know that Jayshree had agreed to act, he said, why not this? One day he rang up and told me—I rang up the playwright. He said, yes, Draupadi is in front of me. She is in a rage. She has just opened her hair and she is in a rage. This is the picture that I got, so I started writing. This is what the playwright told me. Within a day or two I got the script and gave it a reading. It was then that I came to know that the play was about Draupadi. Till that moment I didn't know whether it was a one-woman show or had two people or five people. After the reading he asked us, what is your opinion? We said, the script is very strong. We'll do it. How many characters would you like? He said, one. How? Yes, this is a one-woman show. Only one woman. You have to act. I said, no, no, no! Yes! You have to act. Alone on the stage. Nobody will be there. I said, at least a chorus. He said, no, I haven't thought of anything. Some music? I think I'm going to use music, but I don't know about that definitely.

AK: Were you feeling nervous about a one-woman show?

BJ: Yes!

AK: Because you hadn't acted for a long time?

BJ: I haven't. A long time. This is the first attempt.

AK: At a one woman show?

BJ: Yes! For two days I was very disturbed. Anand said, he is very serious. I said, you should have told me beforehand. At least I would have prepared myself mentally.

AR: Originally, he wanted to use five Pandavas, actually. We had a discussion. He wanted to use five Pandavas on the stage, but give them no dialogues. Then he said no, I'll have only their shadows. Then he said, no, it's going to be only Jayshree. With music. Then Surendra said, we'll have no music. Silence is our music here.

AK: Can we talk about the play—

BJ: Yudhistira, Nakula, Sahadeva, Bhima, Arjuna, are moving to swarga with Draupadi. She is packing food and clothes for the journey.

The play starts here. After having a bath, she comes and opens the trunk and she picks up one sari and says . . . she realizes that she is growing old. 'You are looking old. Wrinkles have started appearing on your forehead. You have grown so fat that you cannot see yourself in the mirror. You used to have such long hair.' While saying all this, she remembers her youth—how her mother used to tie her hair with such force as if it was a horse's reins, because her hair used to be so long, but now it is so short. 'My brother used to tease me by pulling my hair.' Then later she says that she will leave her hair loose, as that is how

she likes it. Then she goes to Arjuna and talks of the sky—when Krishna was there, the sky used to be a sparkling blue. But now that he is absent, it has gone dull. Arjuna says, 'No it is not the sky that has gone dull, it is your eyes.' She says, 'No, no, my eyes can never deceive me. I still remember how I spent my first night with Yudhistira. I was very scared . . . I was sitting alone on the bed on the first night when I heard the sound of footsteps. I got up with a start. Then he came to me and said softly, sit down. So I sat down and tentatively raised my head and looked at him out of the corner of my eye. I thought he would come and talk to me, make love to me, but he never said a word. Instead he sighed heavily and started speaking in such a manner that I was startled and kept staring at him. He was behaving like the rishis who, with their eyes half closed, talk continuously in a monotone without any variation. While listening to him I felt tired and fell asleep. I slept the whole night. He never did anything. This meant he was a great philosopher. He was speaking of life and death.'

'Immediately after that came Bhima. Oh God! So rough! He comes in like a storm. The way he picks me up, I feel as if a mountain has been reduced to rubble. I used to scream, let me go, let me go. How are you going to eat food meant for three days in one single day?! But I used to scream and protest to no avail.'

'But Arjuna, he was different. He was very, very delicate. He used to treat me as if I was a veena which he had placed on his lap to play. He used to provoke me like anything.'

Then she begins to talk of her hair once again. She remembers that Krishna had once said, when your hair is left open, the war of love will start. When you tie it up, the war will end, the story will end. But is this true? This business of leaving my hair loose, tying it up, will always remain a part of life. So when will the story end? While they were asleep, they killed all my children.

So then she remembers her five dead children. Suddenly she recalls that she is supposed to be preparing for their journey. So she starts packing the clothes. While she is packing, she comes across the sari she wore at her swayamwara. Thus she is reminded of her swayamwara and how she was treated there. Then after that—Kunti.

AR: When she talks about her children she says, Ashwathama killed all my children, cut off their heads and took them with him. When I arrived I could not recognize who was who. My children, when they were born, had no face, they were born unrecognized, lived unrecognized, died unrecognized; but none of my husbands shed a tear. Is it because they didn't know which child was whose? When Abhimanyu died, Arjuna cried so much. When Ghatotkacha died, Bhima cried. But now all my children are dead, and none of my husbands have shed a single tear.

AK: Yes. The other part which I found very telling was the part where you talked about Draupadi's father—

BJ: Yes, that was a new dimension which the playwright introduced—

AR: Here everything is contemporary. Even when he is talking about Draupadi's childhood, he brings in her relationship with her brothers. Her mother scolds only Draupadi, not her brothers. Draupadi asks her, why do you scold only me? She says, you're a girl. You have to behave. He is a boy, he can do anything.

BJ: So when she jumps, she is told, don't jump like this. When she runs, she is forbidden to. When she skips, she is told to stop. But boys behave like this? That is because they are boys. I, I am the one who goes up alone at night and watches the stars for hours on end, but I am only a girl. While the boys—as soon as the sun goes down, they run to their mother's side for protection. But they are boys. After the swayamwara, a small doubt creeps into her mind—did I actually want five husbands? Did all five of them love me? I was won by Arjuna, why five now? Did Kunti see me as a peg to bind all the five brothers together. Or is it because Kunti had relationships with three—

AR: To justify her actions, did she get me married to five people?

BJ: But it was too much for me. Sleeping with five people is not easy. When I am with one person . . .

Then she comes to another place and starts sorting out her jewellery. Here she is reminded of another incident. Once, at a time when she did not have her period, she was with Yudhistira. When he was not there, Arjuna came to her and said, Yudhistira is not here now. Why don't you come with me and have a nice time? Because he is not in town. She says, please get out. Our paths are different.

AR: She says, this is not the time. I am Yudhistira's now, not yours. I am like a river. A river will not follow any man. Human beings have to follow the river. A river has a certain direction. It goes only in that direction. It never changes.

BJ: It never forgets . . .

AR: So Draupadi is like a river. She will never change. You will have to follow Draupadi. Draupadi will not follow you.

BJ: Then he said, you have been touched by male ego. Within three days I can get girls who are more

beautiful than you. That is when Chitrangada, Subhadra and all the others made their appearance.

AR: This is a fantastic dialogue. He tells Draupadi, within a week I will get more beautiful women than you into my bed. She says, you might get them into your bed, but can you win their minds and hearts?

BJ: One day her father comes to her place and she tells him, why don't you tell your son-in-law not to bring—

AR:—so many women here.

BJ: Immediately his reaction is, none of them have married five husbands like you? He just puts the question to her and she is shocked. Then he says, in a Kshatriya's mind there is not only love, there is also revenge. It was because of revenge that I gave birth to you—that is why you are Agniputri, daughter of fire. It was because of revenge that I married her off, because I was insulted in such a fashion, that too, in front of Arjuna. At that moment I took an oath that, look, in the presence of Arjuna you have insulted me. This very weapon I will make my own and use it against you. If I fail to do so, I am not a Kshatriya born of Kshatriya blood! This is the oath I took. You were born after that. You were born for revenge and married for revenge. This was my dream—to take revenge.

Draupadi feels as if the ground has vanished from beneath her feet. She says, what is this? My birth . . . the way you sowed seeds in the earth, my mother . . . Like the volcanoes hidden beneath the earth, you sowed those seeds of revenge with which your mind was seething. And I am the result! And the canopy beneath the shade of which I got married became the shelter of revenge. Now I realize why Ashwathama killed all my children. I am Drupad's daughter and those were my children. So, to take revenge on Drupad, you kill my children?

AR: She tells him, that means I am not born out of love? I was born out of revenge, bred out of revenge and married out of revenge and I am going to die because of that. But where is the love in my life?

AK: Yes, I remember that part.

AR: I can understand a woman's feelings when she doesn't get love in her life—what can happen, how terrible it is!

BJ: Then she goes back to thinking of swargaloka. She says, they have all grown so old and they want to climb the Himalayas. They cannot climb stairs, and they want to climb mountains! And in that cold! Now even my brother, Krishna, is not there to help them.

Along with this incident she tries to say something but she is unable to. She runs back to the trunk, searches through it and pulls out the sari she was wearing during her vastraharan. She holds it up and says, this is the sari I was wearing when I was humiliated. From one side Dusashana was pulling with all his might, from the other Krishna was making it longer and longer. How strange it is! Both are men—one who insults and humiliates and one who protects and saves. Both are at two ends. The earth that is in between is made up of so many colours . . .

AR: . . . she begins to identify herself with the earth—

BJ: . . . so many colours—red, yellow. Then I begin to scream, Krishna, Krishna, save me, save me! That is the end of one incident. Then she goes to another. If women were not a part of men's lives, they would be destroyed. It is so strange. It is a kind of philosophy. If a man lies beside her, he becomes her child. If he lies on top of her, he becomes her husband.

AR: There is another important aspect. During her vastraharan, she says, if I do become naked, it would not be Draupadi who was made naked—it would be Dritarashtra, it would be Bhishma, it would be our society, our sanskriti which would be naked, not Draupadi. That is very important. When a woman is defamed, it is not she who is defamed, it is the society, it is the total system—

BJ: —the Yuga !

AK: There's so much of a woman's psychology here, which is so subtle—like the relationship with men, the delicacy of the way it's dealt with. The fact is that you have all these different men in one man also, isn't it? At times they are like this, at times they are like that or they can change . . . But I thought that there were certain areas which had not been explored before. Things like the girl being stopped from playing and scolded and the boy being free . . . the social conditioning, the way it was handled, told through the story of Draupadi. It need not have been. There was no reason to bring that part in, but there were many little things that were very much from a woman's point of view.

When you were working on this play, the idea of using the trunk, using the clothes—was that something that came from the director?

BJ: Yes, yes. He said, she is alone and she is talking. She needs someone to talk to. But to whom should she

talk? So she speaks to the jewellery, she speaks to the walls, she speaks to the trunk, she speaks to the cloth. I do the same thing. Sometimes I just go on talking to myself, in the bathroom or in the room. I just remembered that and did it like that.

AK: And did you have your own relationship with the Draupadi figure? What was your idea of Draupadi before, and did it change with the play?

BJ: What do I say? From the very beginning I liked the characters in the Mahabharata very much. Draupadi, Kunti . . . I always wanted to do a play on Draupadi. When Snaoliji [Snaoli Mitra] did it, we decided, no, not just Draupadi—we took five women and did Agnipatha. The play starts with Amba. There is Gandhari. The third is Madri, fourth is Draupadi and fifth is Kunti. Kunti is totally different from all the others, but she was also suffering. She had lost her motherhood.

AK: Did you write that yourself?

BJ: Yes. Before this. Before Uriya Uyyale.

AK: In that, what was the approach to Draupadi?

BJ: The way they used Draupadi . . . like you play dice. Including Bhishma, even he did not come to her rescue. Even though it was done in front of him. That was why we used masks—large masks with different expressions.

AK: Were there certain things about Draupadi that you were trying to communicate in this production? Certain ideas you wanted to bring across?

BJ: I don't know how to say it. I always follow the director first, thoroughly, blindly, because I want to convey to the audience what the director feels. Then slowly, keeping his ideas or her ideas, I transform myself, my feelings and my thoughts to the director's feeling and his thought. And bring out my experience, the real experience of my life and try to connect with the character, with the feeling of the director and my inner feelings.

AK: But did you feel that you wanted to communicate something through the figure of Draupadi? What were the important things that you wanted to get across to the audience through the figure of Draupadi, when you were Draupadi? Things that you wanted the audience to feel.

BJ: I wanted to communicate, don't use a human being for your own purposes. For revenge.

AR: No one should be a guinea pig.

AK: Okay. So don't use another human being or manipulate another human being because you want to take revenge. And you felt that Draupadi was a figure like that?

BJ: Yes.

PB: You have given a very specific answer, but apart from that, as a woman with your own experiences, did you relate to the character in certain ways which you thought it was important to make the audience feel?

BJ: . . . do I have anything to say to the audience through this character?

AK: As a woman, and as somebody playing Draupadi. In a sense, what you said about manipulating people—it happens more to women . . .

BJ: Yes.

AK: But it could happen to anybody. Power games could be played in different ways. Were there any particular things which, as a woman, you felt . . . for example, for me, what was really very moving about this play, was that it explored the question of a woman's relationship with a man—the sexual, the physical relationship. And I don't think I've seen many plays here in India where it's even talked about. The fact of what a woman could feel. On the one hand there was a reaction to the five very different ways in which the men were with her, and also the feeling of having to share yourself, of having to sleep with several men. You know, it was a complex thing—it wasn't all good, it wasn't all bad. Now, that kind of a thing, it's very rare to find it in a play and I found it very touching. So can you talk about that a little bit? What are your thoughts about it?

BJ: I'll try to answer. I don't know how far I am going to succeed. When I was doing this play—I haven't mentioned this to anyone. Today you are asking me, so it's coming out. There is one particular sequence where Kichaka follows Draupadi. He troubles her like anything and she goes to Yudhishira. Look, this Kichaka is troubling me. Will you help? He says, no. How can I? Because I am in disguise at the moment. Next she goes to Arjuna. And he says, no, I cannot because I'm wearing ghungroos and bangles, so how can I come to your rescue? So then she goes to Bhima—if you don't listen, I am going to hang myself, I am

going to kill myself. I am going to burn myself, sacrifice myself. And he says, how can you? You came out of the fire.

AR: Fire cannot burn you. You are Agniputri. How can it burn you?

BJ: And she says, yes. What you are saying is true. I cannot. And if I want to die I cannot even drown in my tears because they are filled with insults. My entire body is filled with poison—I cannot even take poison. There is only one way. Just turn aside and stand still. I'll take a rope and hang myself from your neck. Then Bhima fell silent. The next day I saw Kichaka lying mutilated in front of me. Everybody's life is like this. Those who do not think of themselves as human, who are not individuals in their own right, who do not think in these terms, finally they all meet this same fate—like this lump of flesh.

AK: Are you saying that when she was being treated as less than human by Kichaka and also by the men she went to for help . . .

AR: We are all made of the same material. Kichaka, when he is dead, becomes a lump of meat. She says Yudhistira, Bhima, Karna, all of you people, all the men, when you are beaten nicely, thoroughly and made into a lump . . .

BJ: . . . they become like dough . . .

AR: You are no different, she says. So she equates these people with Kichaka. Okay, he's dead now but what are you people? You didn't try to save me! But still you have a good name.

BJ: There is another incident where she relates herself directly with the common people. When before the vastraharan she is brought before the court, she asks, what is this? Why have I been brought here? The five of you—what are you doing just sitting here? Look how long your moustaches are, look at your bows and maces! Why are they there? What for? Go and throw them away! If anyone ill-treats a common man's wife, her husband comes running up with an axe. What about you?

AK: I was just thinking that in the play, in the text, this business of honour, of the men not being able to protect or save the woman, this comes in very often in various ways. Like even when you told us of two or three incidents where she goes to the men—it's always a question of saving the honour of the woman and the fact that the man cannot save the honour or fails to save the honour. Is there any other way, rather than looking to the man to save the honour of the woman, is there any other way provided in the text, where this doesn't have to be the only solution. One way was, you said a little while ago, that it is not the woman who becomes naked, it is the people who are dishonouring her. It is the society that is dishonoured, not the individual woman. Now, that's one way of turning the thing around. But is there any other thing, any dialogue she speaks, or any answer that she comes up with in the text, where she is bypassing the fact that the man has not saved her, by coming up with some other thing from within herself as a woman?

BJ: The river. She compares herself to the river and says you have to follow me. I am not going to turn back.

AK: Tell me, as a performer, when you started using this single person form what did you feel about it? Did you feel that it was a source of strength—because you know most people think of theatre as a community art, everyone doing it together. Now, did you feel that you were happy with the single- person form? Did you feel it gave you some flexibility or advantage, or did you miss the support?

BJ: No, I didn't miss any support. It's a kind of a challenge. You can test yourself, you can judge your capacity.

AK: So for you it was a tremendous challenge.

BJ: Yes. Beyond a doubt. Because it is a totally different character. And the play starts with that character. With her dialogue. I was shivering on the stage. What is going to happen? Not to me or the character. I never think about the theatre or the character or myself. What is going to happen? That's all. To whom, I don't know.

PB: In connection with this one-person performance, do you think this is a form that needs an actor or an actress with versatile abilities like singing, dancing, acting all combined?

AR: As a member of the audience I have seen various types of plays for the last thirty years. I have seen many actors and actresses who are very well versed in all these different skills. In my opinion this particular play—one woman-show—need not have any music, songs, choreography, because even though Jayshree is a very good singer, a good choreographer, actress, dancer, the director did not use any of these abilities, only her acting.

BJ: This production was designed for an audience on three sides. And the stage was actually a Kudiaattam

stage, where you cannot go out of the stage. It is a restriction which is given to Draupadi as well as to the actress.

AR: The stage itself was designed in the form of a dice, and the space for acting was very limited, because Draupadi was caught. She couldn't escape. She must have felt claustrophobic.

AK: And this is all evolved by the director. Now, when you look back, how can you evaluate what you contributed to the production as an actress, as a woman, as a very experienced theatre person? Beyond, of course, the fact that you acted the role? Did you feel that there were certain aspects that you contributed to?

BJ: Yes. Like the scenes where she imagines Yudhistira, Bhima and Arjuna. And there is another episode where she remembers Hidimba and Subhadra talking about their husbands. Suddenly, Hidimba started to laugh and said, you know, my husband is very hot-tempered. I cook for him so well, the right mixture of salt, chillies and spices, yet he is never satisfied. He is always criticizing something or the other. Never marry a husband who can cook! There's always something wrong—either there is too little salt or the vegetables should have been cooked more . . . I am Dravidian, that's why he keeps on like this.

Subhadra says, I've worked out a solution. Whenever he used to sit down to eat, I would flatter him, saying what a brave man he was. Immediately, he would start telling me the story of his battles 105 times! So he was not even aware what he was eating. You should also do the same thing. Immediately, Draupadi feels, whom should I speak about? I don't want to talk about Yudhistira because he doesn't interest me. Nor am I interested in Nakula and Sahadeva. And I feel hesitant to talk about Bhima and Arjuna in front of these two. With me, both Bhima and Arjuna are like tamed cats. Whatever I serve, Bhima praises it and eats heartily. Even if there is no salt, Arjuna compares it to amrita and eats the whole thing. Why is it that they don't exercise the rights of a husband with me? It is because I am not just their wife but the wife of others as well. When one sees that something belongs also to another, one tries hard to grab it for himself. When Duryodhana sees me, he tries to get my attention, Kichaka keeps winking at me, Sandhava starts p u l l i n g a t m y p a l l u , a n d Dusashana . . .! Let's not talk about him! He is worse than a dog!

When I come across my swayamvar sari, I start remembering everyone who had attended. My mother and attendant used to train me in how to sit and behave. I suddenly thought, what will happen if some old man shoots the eye of the fish and wins me? My mother said, no, no, think only of his valour, not of his age. Then how is it a swayamvara? My mother shushed me and did not reply. When I saw the gathering, I did not know whether to laugh or to cry. They were all such old people! The range was from 20 to 70. And they all wanted me. I just wanted to get swallowed up by the earth. When Karna comes in, I ask who he is. I hope that he hits the fish! When he starts taking aim, someone in the gathering starts laughing and mocks him. Suddenly Karna loses concentration and fails to hit the target. Insulted, he leaves. My mind, too, follows him but at that moment there is a stir. A young Brahmin boy . . .

In the swayamvara, she becomes like a child, about ten years old. That was my sister's daughter, Pitambari. She used to do such things. I observed her closely. She helped me.

AR: One advantage with this play was that only Jayshree, Surendra and myself worked on it. Once in a while, one or two of our seniormost actors used to come and watch. Towards the end. So the play really evolved in a very nice way. The script was very strong. And I was very confident of Jayshree carrying it off. But still I had my doubts. Without music, without . . . because I am used to music, choreography—

BJ: And even the music part of it. When I was studying at NSD, we had been taught songs of the monsoon. So I used those two songs and the third one was sung by my great grandmother, a song my mother had once sung to me. So these three . . .

AR: This is a play that really kicks society in the guts and says, look at what you have done. Don't do this. It has that power.

BJ: There was one aspect that helped me a lot in developing my character, Draupadi. That is the relationship between the father and the mother. That was the new thing which we found—Agniputri. That was my beginning for this play. From there I started developing the other portions of the play.

AK: You mean the fact that she had been fathered as an act of revenge?

BJ: Yes. Maybe the opening of the trunk—that action may be the beginning of the play. But for me to be able to develop this character, that was the beginning.

AK: What struck you about that?

BJ: How the revenge was achieved! What was there in the seed—sometimes I feel that even I have experienced this.

AK: That's what you said, you said that was the basic message you wanted to get across.

PB: Because you are speaking so strongly about the script, do you have any idea what kind of an impact it left upon the audience?

BJ: A mixed opinion, at least in Bangalore. But many people liked it very much.

PB: I'm not asking about the production. What I'm asking is—does the script leave them disturbed?

BJ: That's what I'm talking about. The script. But in Pune, they were very disturbed. In Bangalore they were disturbed.

AK: Disturbed in a negative way, like they didn't like it or . . . ?

BJ: No, no. Not like that. They were in tears. Some people, on the intellectual level said, he hasn't said anything new. But others—in Pune, after the show there was a silence of nearly . . .

AR: . . . one and a half minutes. They didn't even clap, the audience. House lights came on and everything. They were just sitting dumb. I thought they had not understood the play at all.

BJ: We were under the impression that they had not realized that the play had finished. I just did namaskar and I was about to go and then they started clapping like mad. They came inside and said, don't think that we didn't like the play because we didn't clap. We were so moved we didn't know what to do. We were really disturbed, we were shaken.

A Space for Theatre:
The Prithvi Theatre
Festival

Sameera Iyengar



'1997—fifty years of Indian independence and the nation will be looking at its achievements—it's progress in every field. Within this period of contemplation and introspection it is perfect for the Prithvi Theatre to showcase good Indian theatre

... 26 varied, Indian performing groups to choose from, all celebrating the diversity of our cultural backgrounds over an 18-day programme, with over 40 performances at 4 select venues across the city.

The troupes will come from Kerala, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Manipur, Delhi, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Pondicherry, and our very own Maharashtra, performing in 9 different languages. Along with the performances there will be film screenings on Indian theatre, sale of theatre-related books, playscripts, etc. at the venues, and 'platform' presentations prior to each scheduled performance.'

Prithvi Festival '97 brochure

The Prithvi Theatre Festival is one of the major theatre festivals in this country today. Major, in the sense that the festival is well established and well known; it invites and presents troupes and artistes from various parts of India and the world; and it can confidently boast that the plays it presents are invariably well attended. Such audience approval can only mean that in the Bombay theatre-goer's mind, the Prithvi Festival has come to bear the stamp of quality. But what do we mean by quality? In the above extract, the Prithvi Theatre Festival promises to 'showcase good Indian theatre'. What is Prithvi Theatre's concept of good Indian theatre? In fact, how does it even understand the term 'Indian theatre'? And what does it understand by 'good'? Does it just serve as a body which 'showcases' this 'good theatre', or does it have an ideology beyond merely exposing Bombay audiences to good Indian theatre, whatever that means? This idea of showcasing—does it fall into traps of irremediable elitism, or does it somehow escape that trap?

Healthy Chaos

When I first read the brochure, the image that jumped to my mind was of a slick, extremely well-organized extravaganza of Indian theatre, a celebration perfectly in keeping (especially so in our 50th year of independence) with the well-established, state-encouraged way in which we tend to celebrate 'India' and what is perceived as Indian. In this type of celebration, a sort of museumization occurs—we, a particular type of elite, walk/sit through a number of objects/productions, all bearing the legitimate stamp Indian, and view with sentimental pride the variety and diversity of India that lies spread before us. We then often go home to a life that is Indian, because it is ours, but which neither seeks nor finds a lasting connection to the 'Indian' that we have just experienced.

When I entered the grounds of the Prithvi Theatre on the evening of 7 November, I walked into a loud, over-the-top 'platform' performance of a Moliere play. A mass of people, both audience-to-be and passersby, were crowded around the platform. People at the back had found parapets and other elevations to stand on. Others were sitting in the Prithvi cafe, ignoring the performance and immersed in their own discussions over coffee. Young people with Prithvi tags around their neck were all over the place—some looking harassed, some teasing those looking harassed, all looking like they belonged to the place (I later realized that these were the student volunteers who actually did all the legwork for the festival). My earlier impression was all wrong. There was no sanitized museumization here at the Prithvi Festival. Rather, the atmosphere that prevailed was one of the healthy chaos that speaks of vibrant life.

As I spent time at the Prithvi Theatre over the next few days, I became aware of the number of people who also seemed to be hanging around the theatre during the day, even when there were no shows on. Of course, the theatre group scheduled to perform next was there, causing the actual theatre space to resound with the sound of actors' voices, hammering and banging as sets were hurriedly (re)constructed, tuning of musical instruments and so on. In addition, there were the student volunteers, members of various troupes who were just arriving, or just leaving or somewhere in between, and those I would call Prithvi Theatre regulars—people like Makarand Deshpande who have grown through Prithvi and who are part and parcel of its personality. It is this personality of Prithvi that I try to capture in what follows, because I believe there is something unique in it that saves the festival from being merely another successful showcasing. There is something in this personality which makes Prithvi an ongoing, dynamic, charged entity, where the festival is not an end but an annual expression of its being.

Prithvi Theatre is currently run by Sanjna Kapoor. The festival directors are Sanjna Kapoor and Divya Bhatia. I spoke to them on 10 and 11 November. Even though their schedules were hectic, they gave me a lot of time. Both interviews/discussions began in their office, a tiny room crammed with festival-related material: lists of volunteers, dates, troupe arrival and departure information—all the organizational aspects of the festival. Phones rang, cellular phones rang (Who's phone is ringing this time? Where is it?!), volunteers squeezed in on the floor surrounded by books, posters and whatever else they were working on, faxes came in, people came in, people left, more people came in . . . chaos, chaos and more chaos, but things got done, things were getting done, and there was no doubt about it, things would get done. In the midst of all this, attending to things as they came up and also attending to my demands for information, both Sanjna Kapoor and Divya Bhatia impressed me with their composure. No backbiting, no ill-temper, no alienating anyone. When I asked Divya about it, his answer was simple: you just accept that everything is not within your control.

A Space for Theatre

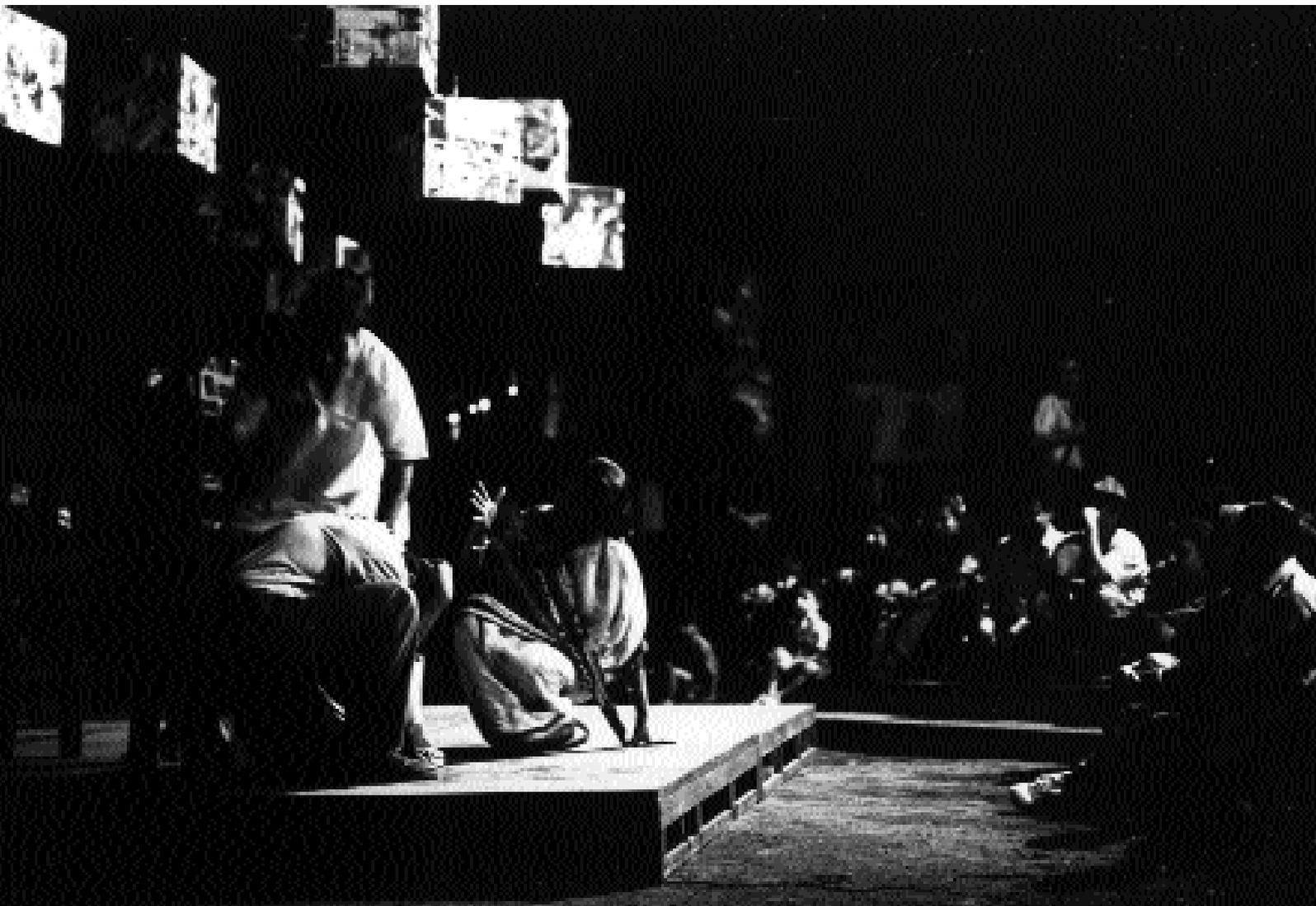
Prithviraj Kapoor wanted a theatre on the piece of land that Prithvi Theatre now occupies in Juhu, Mumbai. The initial structure was built by him in 1962. After his death, the Shri Prithviraj Kapoor Memorial



Trust was formed with the object of continuing his work of encouraging interest in theatre. A new structure was built on the old one's foundations. The leaflet on the Prithvi Theatre Workshop informs us: 'It has been designed not only for performances, but also for rehearsals, discussions and meetings. In short, it should inspire the greatest possible interest in the professional theatre.' A thrust stage with audience seating arranged in a steep bank on three sides of the acting area was decided upon. The capacity of the auditorium is about 225. 'Our aim is to rediscover the intimate and compelling actor/audience relationship that has been lost in today's theatre . . . We hope we have built a 'space' which will be stimulating and challenging both to the directors and actors who use it, as well as exciting and involving for the audience' (Prithvi Theatre Workshop leaflet).

These originary goals of the Prithvi Theatre—to encourage and inspire interest in professional theatre and to provide a space that is exciting and challenging to both artistes and audience—continue to be the ideological framework on which Prithvi is run. At least, such is the impression I got from my conversation with Sanjna Kapoor, who has been running Prithvi Theatre for the last nine years. Sanjna is very clear about what she perceives as immediate needs in the Bombay theatre scene today. She points to a lack of workshop culture and a constant complaint about the lack of decent scripts. She also points to the practical difficulties of survival faced by theatre groups who are not yet established. Last but not least, she stresses that now that an audience has been built, the need is to build a larger, and more discerning audience.

The day-to-day running of Prithvi Theatre is based on these premises. There is something on every day at the Prithvi Theatre (except Mondays, which are cleanup days), and the Bombay audience knows it can walk into Prithvi and find something going on. While this practice is based on encouraging a



consistent theatre-going audience, Sanjna is also concerned about the fact that this insistence on producing and presenting on a daily basis sometimes leads to work of lower quality. This works against the perceived need to create a more discerning audience—this tension is apparent when Sanjna states that she would rather have dark nights than trashy plays at Prithvi. The trick for her, then, is to strike the balance that will help her get both a larger audience and a more discerning one.

Also, having something on in Prithvi every day is not just geared to a theatre audience, but also to theatre practitioners themselves. Firstly, Prithvi offers subsidized rates for groups to perform on weekdays, while full rates are still charged on weekends. Secondly, the activities at Prithvi include not only plays, but also workshops, playreadings and anything else worthwhile that theatre people can come up with. So far, most of these ventures have been short term, for various reasons. For instance, after the 1992 festival, 4 hours were taken out of every Monday holiday for open-house workshops for actors. Theatre people like Satyadev Dubey and Naseeruddin Shah conducted these workshops.

This decision also saw the start of the platform performances, which have now become a regular feature at Prithvi. There is a terrace area just outside the entrance to the actual building, and it was decided that the immediate outcome of the workshops could be performed there. These platform performances were scheduled for weekends, and open to anyone of calibre who was keen. For one year, the participants of the Monday workshops got together for platform performances. After that, the workshops were stopped. They were felt to suffer from a lack of structure. Furthermore, since they were open-house and only 15 people were accepted each Monday, there was no screening for experience and this kept more experienced people away. Nevertheless, the workshop was not without its immediate successes. The platform performances that grew along with it developed Makarand Deshpande into one



of the most prolific playwrights in Hindi, and also a director whose work shows much experimentation with form. These platform performances live on even now, despite the workshop being defunct (an indication that Sanjna's observation about the lack of a workshop culture in Bombay is not unfounded). They take place every weekend, in between shows, and they are free. The performance can be of any type, not necessarily a play. In the interests of quality, those wishing to perform are screened. Work which experiments with form and style is encouraged. But here, too, there is a problem of attitude. These platform performances seem to be considered of lower status, since they do not occur in a 'sanctified space'. Thus, people who should—the more established and the more experienced—tend not to take these performances seriously, and often refuse to take part in them.

There have been other aborted bids at running workshops. After the 1992 Festival which focused on playwrights, the Prithvi management hoped to set up a longterm playwright's workshop, but this was not to be. However, aborted attempts are not read by Sanjna as omens of the impossibility of realizing Prithvi Theatre's vision. Instead, she says, she has a strong belief that 'everything has its own time'. One cannot force things if the environment is not ready. One can only wait and try again, and again, and keep trying. And this is exactly what Prithvi Theatre seems to be doing. In March '97, Ramu Ramanathan ran a three-day English playreading theatre festival at Prithvi. It was free for the audience. Nine scripts were performed. The festival met with an amazing response, all the more remarkable given the supposedly inconvenient timings, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Now there are monthly playreadings of original, unperformed scripts. The idea is to have it open to scripts of all languages. There has been a great response with scripts in Hindi and Marathi, so far. On average they are receiving two scripts a month from all over Maharashtra. This is quite unprecedented, especially as there has been no formal publicity, just reviews and word-of-mouth communication. These playreading sessions seem to be better organized, too. Ramanathan has a screening process, which helps vouch for a basic standard. The script is read by actors and not by playwrights. The exciting thing is that a bank of scripts is building up due to this exercise. Of course, Sanjna is quick to point out that this is also the enthusiasm of a beginning, only time will tell if it will be able to sustain itself.

At this particular juncture, certain things seem to be working in favour of Prithvi. For instance, Sanjna pointed out that TV talent seems to be wanting to return to theatre, using TV as their source of financial sustenance. The repercussions of this remain to be seen, but it could increase the pool of talent, as well as change the contours of financing. Prithvi itself is on the brink of a change in its funding structure. Starting from 1982, Prithvi Theatre had been the recipient of longterm sponsorship by Vazir Sultan Tobacco Co. This patronage continued for 10 years and covered losses as well as the festivals. The last few years have not been as comfortable, and the Theatre has now set in motion its plans to create a corpus fund for itself. Opposite the Prithvi Theatre gate, a residential building is under construction. This building is to provide Prithvi with the corpus fund necessary. Furthermore, the first three floors of the building will belong to Prithvi, providing the space for a library (and for the bank of scripts building up), for rehearsals and workshops. Sanjna feels that a venue of this type, which allows for and facilitates constant work with writers, actors and directors, will fulfil an immediate need felt by theatre persons in Bombay. This building will go towards making that dream a possibility.

While interacting with Sanjna, her thoughts always seemed to be flying to something beyond all the numerous things at hand. She talked about having to take risks, about working towards a theatre culture where one dared long runs for shows. She pointed to Dinesh Thakur who did *Tughlaq* over a month. She herself does not aim for that kind of longevity immediately, but is working on the idea of having allotments of five to six days a month. As I see it, larger runs for larger audiences is an experiment worth undertaking, and not only in Bombay. Longer runs would test both the play and the size and sustainability of the audience. Furthermore, it would allow the people actually involved in the production to react to their experiences and to audience response. There would be time for a play to be tested, reworked and honed. These are possibilities that are unfortunately missing for many on the Indian theatre scene today.

One of the biggest obstacles that such an idea faces, that the entire theatre scene in Bombay faces, is the hectic schedule of life in Bombay, which makes it impossible to undertake much outside immediate work and home obligations. This concern was voiced by Sanjna, too. In Bombay, there is already a hectic schedule for too many people. Getting to places takes a substantial amount of time. Add to all these time pressures the amount of time to be spent at the actual theatrical event, and people feel exhausted just thinking about it. Thus, the kind of theatre culture that Prithvi is trying to create is very difficult to sustain. The committed theatre worker has to push very hard just to keep basic theatre practice going. Experimenting with theatre, workshoping, trying longer runs, etc. are even more difficult to undertake and sustain. The unfortunate thing about this problem is that there is very little that the theatre worker or

organization can actually do to change this particular aspect of the societal system within which s/he exists. The work that is being undertaken by Prithvi has to be done, and is being done, with the full knowledge of this problem. The fight, then, is to create a love for theatre so great, both in practitioner and audience, that it is able to overcome the exhaustion of Bombay. It seems to me that Prithvi's insistence on activities other than just plays, at least in part, comes from a similar understanding. The stress on quality becomes all the more imperative—how can one hope to get people to keep time for theatre unless there is a process of its continuously upgrading its standards and (re)creating itself?

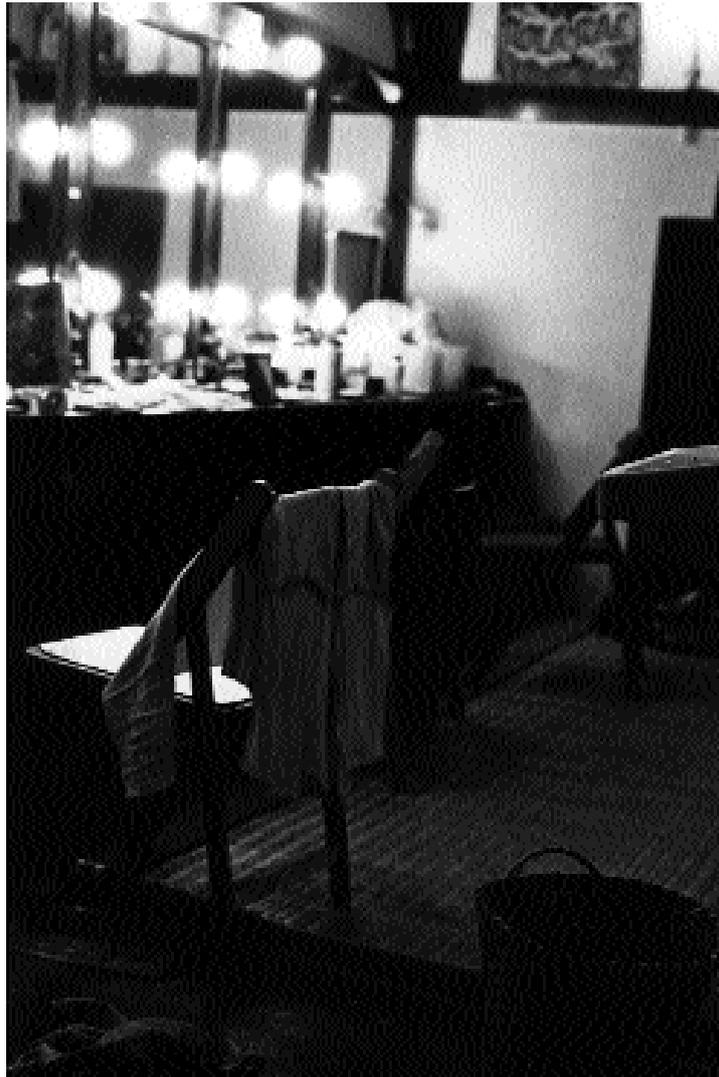
One of the other big problems faced by Bombay theatre is the strong influence of cinema. This explains some of Sanjna's insistence that Prithvi Theatre has to work towards building a more taste-conscious audience. So many people in Bombay are so used to film as the primary form of entertainment that often their expectations from theatre derive from their experience of film. Thus, Prithvi has people ringing up with questions like *show kya hai aaj?* (what show's on today?), *comedy hain kya?* (is it a comedy?), and so on. People ask if there are evening (6 to 9) or night (9 to 12) shows. Films and film-viewing practice inform these questions. And Sanjna insists again that Prithvi needs, not just wants, to get some of the old type of audience, the more discerning audience, back. If theatre starts being dictated to by the practices of film, theatre itself as an art form runs the risk of being destroyed. For theatre cannot hope to equal film if it imitates it. And in the process theatre will also lose what is unique to itself. Thus, another imperative for the work of institutions like Prithvi Theatre is the battle for quality—which encompasses the idea of experimentation, change, exposure, constant improvement, productivity, a discerning theatre audience and a committed theatre community. Experimentation and change, not for the sake of being different, but because one must not get stuck in a rut, because the form or content which was communicated yesterday may have no meaning today. A discerning theatre audience and a committed theatre community, because without that theatre as a force and as an art will die. Exposure, constant improvement and productivity, because without these theatre cannot really live, and merely surviving is not enough.

The Annual Festival

The Prithvi Theatre Festival was initially conceived in 1983 by Jennifer Kapoor. It was to celebrate the 5th anniversary of Prithvi Theatre, and its success in building an audience. As stated in the Prithvi web page, international theatre companies and the best Indian talent were invited to this festival. The success of this festival led to it being conceived of as an annual affair. Due to the untimely death of Jennifer Kapoor, this project was not begun in 1984. Kunal Kapoor, with the help of Feroze Khan, subsequently took over, and the annual festival became a reality. The festival is now held every November and marks a big event in the theatre calendar of Bombay. Of the 13 festivals that have been held so far, 6 have been International and 2 have been Children's Theatre festivals. In 1992, Sanjna Kapoor (by now the director of Prithvi) and Feroze Khan set up the first of the theme-based festivals: 'The Playwright at the Centre of Theatre'. This festival sought to explore various genres in terms of scripts and the actual process of production from the playwright's point of view.

The idea for the 1997 festival grew out of the experience of the 1995 festival on 'Contemporary World Theatre'. One of the striking features of the latter festival was that the groups from abroad were borrowing freely from other cultures in their work, in terms of actors, languages, styles, music, instruments, costumes—Germans were using Noh, European influences were apparent in the theatre of the English and so on. The excitement generated by this work prompted the Prithvi people to ask a host of questions about our own theatres. The groups from abroad receive funding and are able to travel. This must open up vistas for their work. Do we have groups with this potential? How do various Indian groups work/manage? What are the economics of our theatres? Divya Bhatia lamented that we had no historical conception of our theatre(s). The desire was to know, really know, about the theatre of India. The 1997 festival was conceived out of this desire. It was to serve as an opportunity to explore Indian theatre, and share this exploration with the people of Bombay. The festival was 'Theatres of India' after the magician P. C. Sorcar's famous water trick 'Waters of India', where an unending stream of water keeps pouring out of the vessel.

In order to select participants, the organizers of the festival had wanted to travel extensively and see for themselves the various theatres in different parts of India. For example, there were plans to really explore theatre in the North-east, using government help for accommodation etc. The idea was to avoid falling back on the big names and to really look for exciting, innovative work from less experienced, less well-known theatre practitioners. Unfortunately, the seed money that was required for this was not forthcoming. The work of scouring the country may have been viewed as far too experimental by



potential financiers. Eventually, the organizers ended up doing as much exploring as they could wherever they happened to be on account of other work. When the funding did finally come through for the festival—they got it on the deadline they had set for themselves—there was not enough time left to undertake extensive travel. The organizers had to make many decisions from Bombay, and rely on other people’s viewing experiences and suggestions. Thus, Sanjna pointed out, the festival turned out to have big names in a way that they had not planned. Divya was quick to point out that where they had been able to explore, they had managed to attain some of their goals. Furthermore, the Bombay groups were not necessarily big names—in fact, there were some who felt slighted at not being part of the festival even though they had the credentials. But, as Divya stressed, the festival was not meant to be a status event, but an exploration of the kinds of work being done in theatre all over India.

When I was talking to Sanjna Kapoor in her office, Na. Muthuswamy of Koothu-p-pattarai walked in to take his leave of her. It was obvious that Sanjna felt strongly about things that she had wanted for the festival which had not worked out. She stressed that the festival needed to be a platform for interaction between various groups, a place where they could spend time and get to see each other's work. There should exist a situation wherein one could also try and understand the scenario within which each group works—the culture, economics and concerns that form their context. None of this had happened at this particular festival. Firstly, the organizers could not manage to get enough performances for each group. It had been hoped that each group would perform at least twice. Even though three other theatres were being used in addition to Prithvi Theatre—St. Andrews, NCPA Tata and NCPA Experimental—the dates required for so many performances were not available. Maybe, if fewer groups had been invited to the festival this would have been possible. It would have meant not having such a vast variety of groups/artistes participating, though, and the organizers may not have wanted to compromise the range of representation they had managed to gather. Hosting out-of-station people for an extended period of time also required more money, and this too was a problem. Thus it ended up that few groups got to be around for any performances other than their own. Mostly they arrived a day or two before they performed and left with about the same amount of maximum margin. There were other ideal plans that had to be put aside. The organizers wanted in-depth seminars which were to be carefully prepared. One paper was to be passed around to 5 people. This paper and the 5 responses were to be then circulated to 20 people. Then all these people were to be invited to the seminar. It was hoped that, amongst other discoveries, this would lead to a review of the common elements that affected the various theatres of India. The organizers also wanted to have kiosks/information booths for institutions like the National School of Drama, Lalit Kala Akademi etc. The seminar idea was given up because it was found that the Nehru Theatre Centre had also planned a seminar at the same time. The kiosks had to be abandoned because the budget for the festival was slashed by half.

But the festival did not end up being merely a big extravaganza. It is true that a number of plans had to be scrapped. Yet, despite all the constraints, the festival managed to be a site of exploration, where people did have access to events and facilities other than the shows. There was a book stall at Prithvi Theatre, comprising a good selection of literature on theatre, as well as the other performing arts. At St. Andrews a book display was created on a table on the night of every show. It was natural for people to browse through these books as they waited, and that in itself was an opportunity created, since, as far as I know, access to such a selection is not easily available to a potentially interested public. This engagement with books could not be created at the NCPA—they have strict rules about display.

In addition to this, there was a newsletter brought out, which gave information on and around the festival, with short articles on related topics or about the artistes performing.

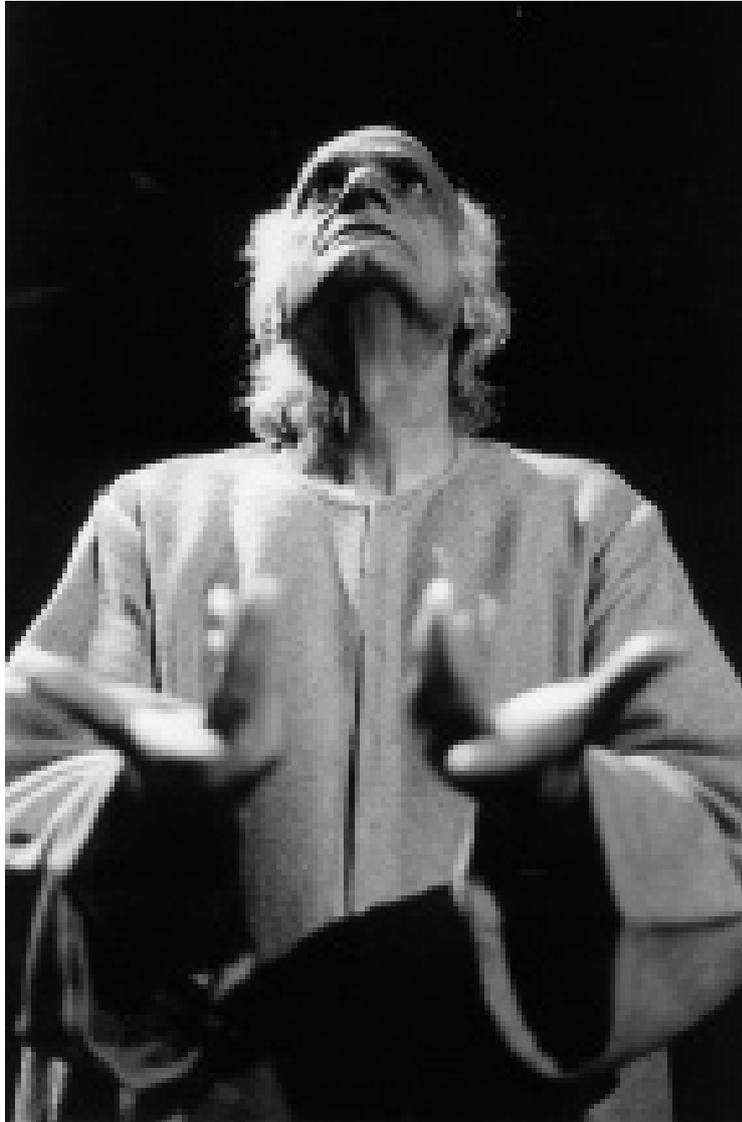
A number of 'Lecture and Demonstration' events were held. H. Kanhailal gave a lecture-demonstration on 14 November which was advertised as 'An encounter with the ongoing practice and attitude of experiment with tradition—the necessity of a new performance art'. On 17 November, Usha Nangiar from Kerala gave a 'lecture on the basics of Koodiyattam, followed by a short performance/demonstration'. This was followed by a presentation by Veenapani Chawla of Adishakti, Pondicherry on 'traditional and contemporary theatre—links and departures'. On the first Sunday of the festival there was a panel discussion consisting of Teejan Bai, who had already performed at the festival, Ratan Thiyam and Mallika Sarabhai who were yet to present their work, Anjum Katyal representing STQ, whose newly released double issue on Theatre in Manipur Today was just out, and Dr Sunil Kothari who emceed the proceedings. Amongst the artistes present were Ratan Thiyam's entire troupe, the artistes of Koothu-p-pattarai (who had also already performed), and Teejan Bai's accompanists. The discussion was held outdoors in the Prithvi Cafe and I believe the casual elegance and the openness of that ambience inflected the proceedings of the panel. There was no point during the discussion at which I felt overawed by the personalities present, even though they were talking about work which I personally thought was awe-inspiring.

Or maybe it had to do with that nebulous sense of a 'Prithvi personality' that I am trying to convey, where serious commitment and engaged thought go hand-in-hand with a young casualness—I say young, because the casualness did not strike me as pretentious and studied, but rather the outcome of the fact that there seemed to be no overwhelming ego running the show. Just a lot of exuberant people trying to do the best they could.

The author is a theatre worker and scholar presently engaged in research in activist women's theatre.

Photographs by Meenal Agarwal, courtesy: Prithvi Theatre.

'Making a thinking dancer'
An Interview with Narendra Sharma



Narendra Sharma. Photo: Pradeep Bhatia.

Narendra Sharma is one of this country's pioneering dancer/choreographers. In this interview for STQ with Biren Das Sharma, interjections by the interviewer appear in italics, within brackets.

Escaping to Almora

Shall we start with how I came into dance? In college I came into dance accidentally, because of certain mental circumstances. I'm talking about 1939-40. I belong to a small town, Aligarh, and I was born on 21 September 1924, and brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family. My guardian was my maternal uncle—with my early background, I could never have imagined that a person like me could have gone into the field of dance. Moreover in UP, dance was . . .

Nobody knew anything about dancing, any sort of dancing. But, somehow I was of a different mental make-up. I was a restless child. And I was a misunderstood child because I took part in a lot of activities and games and . . . you know, they wanted to restrict me to the very Brahmin culture, not very orthodox, but still, their way of life was different. Then I gradually lost interest in my studies and the life I was living. There was a pressure from home and a reaction from me, and the tension grew, and finally I realized that this was not my choice of a way of living.

I had some Bengali friends, through whom I came to know about Uday Shankar (because Bengalis knew much more than we did). And through them I heard that he had opened this school. I got the Almora address, and secretly I corresponded, wrote a letter, got the prospectus. I saw Uday Shankar's photograph in the magazine Akash Vani. And somehow, then, intuitively, without any argument or logic, I really felt that was my path. The way I have to go. And then the prospectus from Almora's Uday Shankar's India Cultural Centre came. Without knowing what dance was, what the life of a dancer was, I decided—

(How old were you at the time?)

I was fourteen years old. But you know, at the age of fourteen, belonging to a small town and not being educated in a public school, never having left the town or having the confidence to roam around—that was my position and mental make up. Sometimes I do feel that I took a courageous step in those days. For a boy with that background.

Anyway, I had decided, and I think another two of my Bengali friends also, all of us decided . . . and they gave me thirty rupees, half-scholarship, they were encouraging me, enthusiastic, sort of. There was an administrator, an American administrator—George A. Bass.

(How did your parents react?)

I didn't talk to them because I knew they would not permit me. For me to go into dance, you know. I did very casually mention it to my mother, to whom I was a little closer, but never clearly—I knew I would not be permitted to enter such a field. Because my maternal uncle who was my guardian, was a zamindar. He had his own villages and things. And my life was planned as an agriculturist with education and modernizing and all these things. But being a son who was not always obedient, I decided to go.

When I talked to my friends and said let's go now, they backed out. But I decided to go on my own. And one day, when all my family members had gone to a marriage, I just went out, for the first time travelled alone, with eight rupees in my pocket and that, too, I had picked up from my parents' place. That was a very, very significant journey for me. I went from Aligarh to Bareilly, changed trains for Kathgodam and took the bus and went to Almora. And I was not very impressive-looking because I wore shorts, we were never allowed to wear pants and all and I had an attache and a blanket. And that's how I went to Almora.

I reached in the evening and I was taken to the office. It was a very modern institution. I happened to meet Mr Bass. That was the first time I had ever talked to a foreigner. They were intrigued by me, this boy who had run away from home—and I didn't have anything with me. It was a severe winter in Almora. So somebody said, all right, you stay in the night. We will see tomorrow morning, what is decided. So they collected blankets for me and lit a fire and I was kept there.

The next morning they said, you cannot be admitted, because you are a minor. Unless we have permission from your home, we cannot admit you. And then I was taken to the police—in the long run it worked out. They contacted my people in Aligarh and my uncle said, fine, if he is so keen, let him stay. And so it was worked out.

I was in the first batch. The Almora centre was started in 1939. In 1940 March, the first session started. In 1939, he was preparing what was to be done. His studios were being built.

There were five–six small studios. The big studio was very large—it must have been about 60 ft x 120 ft. Wooden studios.

The first class I joined was the evening class, improvisation class. I started with improvisation. Simple . . . and I did my best to impress and all. And that's how I started. But for me it was really a very different atmosphere. I used to stand at the back and not show myself too much, I was self-conscious. I was a very-hard working student. I used to work even during lunch recess and all. There was a mess, where we had our lunch and dinner, and a hostel where we slept. And we had lanterns, because there was no electricity. So I was given a room, and mentally I was trying to adapt myself to this new situation. But I was very, very inspired and I wanted to build my own confidence. It's a long story, you know, the process of working there.

Training under Uday Shankar

Almora centre . . . Uday Shankar's personality . . . I don't know what word to use, hypnotized or . . . I was almost possessed by him. I had tremendous respect. What you call shraddha. And the organization he had, the discipline, eight o'clock everybody had to be there, on time. Everybody had to be neat, clean and you must know how to sit in a studio. You can't stretch your feet, as soon as you enter the studio, you must have a way of sitting, of working. It's not the dance as such, but the way of being in it, in a disciplined way.

There used to be a general class at eight o'clock in the morning which the students and the troupe members attended. Troupe members were the dancers with whom he used to travel and perform. Students were a different category and by that time he had already brought in teachers—Shankaran Namboodri, one of the top Kathakali teachers, whom he accepted as a guru. Then there was Kandappa Pillai, Balasaraswati's teacher. The top teacher at that time. After some time, Guru Anabir Singh, the top man from Manipur. Then, of course, Ustad Alauddin Khan was there. And, of course, Ravi Shankar, who was very young in those days, and Ali Akbar . . .

After the morning class, there was a technique class. He had developed his own technique of dancing, certain steps, certain exercises, certain things that he had developed himself. After that, there were classes of Bharatnatyam by Guru Kandappa Pillai. Guru Kandappa Pillai's class used to be held generally before lunch. After that we used to have lunch. And Kandappa Pillai was a hard master. I was lucky to have Kandappa Pillai, because I was in the first batch. After a year, he died. I think he must have been around 45. He died young. So ours was the only batch that learned from Kandappa Pillai.

Then we had class with Guru Shankaran Namboodri, Kathakali. That, I think, was before Bharatnatyam classes. In the afternoon, there was a theory class. Theory was taken by Mrs Shastri—you know Lakshmi Shankar's mother—and also Rajendra Shankar. After theory class there was a break, we had tea and then there were games, generally badminton. And finally there was a class which was called improvisation class, which Dada took. That was the essence of the whole training. He used to take general class, technique class and improvisation class. In improvisation, he came up with new subjects every day. The subjects varied—for example, you are in a forest and it is dark, and suddenly there is a storm. What will your reaction be? One of the rare things in these classes was that there was always an orchestra available, because he had his own musicians in the troupe, and they attended this also. They had to improvise the music. There were a lot of instruments, he had one of the best collections of instruments. Being very versatile musicians, they would compose. Especially one Jiten, who died very early; he was a very talented music composer. Nagen De was the flautist, Dulal Sen was the sarodist. We had music classes also. Taken by Vishnu Das Shirali, his music director.

It was a thrill to be in improvisation class because you were free to do any movement. He had a way of doing improvisation. For example, he would draw ten different lines on a blackboard. He was a painter, you know. There was one flowing down like this, another shooting up like this, each line had a character. Now, he would say, look here, you don't see anything else but this particular line. Close your eyes and see it in your mind. That line. And start feeling the flow of the line and know the character of the line. Usually we used to sit in a semi-circle, and there was a very big drum. He used to sit down also and on the drum he used to just give a beat, to create an atmosphere, and everybody would close their eyes and think of that particular line. And then he would say, now start doing what you have felt about it. And the music was there,

the flute was there, the sarod was there—it was not only movement, he was training the mind. He was making a thinking dancer. And he always said, you must think before you do it.

I read Indian philosophy and I was connecting it with this thought. You have an image inside and then you put the image outside. So there were stories, sometimes there were very abstract subjects, sometimes a musical melody, sometimes a sort of episode. Coming from life to actual feeling, to develop a style. Now, you have been pricked by a thorn, felt the pain. Recollect that pain. Put your hand into hot water. Feel the hot water. Put it in cold water. Even if you don't put your hand in hot water, you must be able to feel the sensation without the water. If you can feel the hot water, you can feel the greatest character you have to depict. That is the basic thing. The feel has to come. If you can't feel that, you won't be able to express even a complex character. So that was a step. He brought down dance to be learned from life itself.

Now, coming to body movement, what I call the technique class. He would say, move your shoulder, the range of the shoulder is this much—up and down. Geometrically, you are going like this, and you are going like that. So this is the potential and limitation of your shoulder. Next, the neck. It doesn't revolve like this. The neck can go this way and that way—find the geometrical designs, as if you can draw from the neck. Concentrate only on the neck. Concentrate only on the shoulder. Concentrate only on your fingers. Human fingers are very peculiar, you know, so many joints, if you analyse it, in such a small space there are so many joints and so many movements that you can go on doing, a hundred thousand movements, and when you combine this with the shoulder, the movements just multiply. Finally you have a choice of the whole body to draw upon. So the body language you develop like this. The feel language you develop like that. And then you combine them like this.

And then we would discuss, also. Later on I analysed what a remarkable approach it was.

(How did you relate this very modern concept of discovering new movements and forms and all that, with traditional techniques?)

See, traditional techniques he used only to enrich your body language. He said, don't play with the traditional techniques. You learn exactly what it is. But this is what I am giving to you to enrich your body language through the styles. He never believed in patchwork. One movement of Kathakali, one movement of this, no, no. If you have enriched your language, it automatically comes.

For example, if I compose, I can never say from where the movements are coming. Because it is a part of the total whole, you know. You don't feel, I have used Manipuri, now to make it more forceful I'll use Kathakali, no, no. It automatically flows. And once you have a body language, you never know if you are drawing from modern dance or somewhere else. It blends into a total whole.

People did not develop their body language as such, with the techniques he had developed. If you don't have the technique to know the body, body language can never develop. You fall back on styles. Because they are a readymade language.

Each student had to do his own choreography: after every two months, sometimes one month, sometimes three months. His own work was presented formally on stage. The music was provided by the troupe. Of course, there was no lighting, only gas lamps. We did our own costumes, because he had a lot of costumes, and you could borrow from there. And your composition was assessed the next day.

I did four or five significant compositions during my stay at Almora. At an earlier stage, I was sort of taking the folk element and . . . it was vibrant, without much intellectual input . . . But later on I was doing a different kind of work. I did a piece called Divine Musicians, with the Manipuri Kartali, though of course the style was different. The background took a certain base movement. They keep on doing this and I go on improvising. Then they take another movement. Then they keep the base. In the whole dance they did about four or five movements. As a background. And I went on improvising. That was an interesting composition.

Then I did a folk dance, which was copied from his Bhil dance, so I got a scolding, why do you copy me, that sort of thing. And finally I did a very beautiful piece, which really made me and him very, very happy. I called it a crane dance. I took a style from Java Bali. He used to show films of Java Bali, which he had visited. And there was a beautiful hand movement, which

fascinated me. I composed a dance on that, a tragedy—the male bird gets shot, and the female remains while the whole crowd goes away. It was a very beautiful piece. He liked it very much.

Actually, he was very happy with my work. In fact, when I joined Almora Centre, in the very beginning, it seems, he told somebody, this boy will do something one day. Because he had an eye. He could pick, out of forty people, a boy standing somewhere at the back—this boy has or this girl has potential. He talked to my maternal uncle, who visited the centre, and said, this boy has the will to do something in life. There was another person at the centre, Zohra Sehgal. And the combination of the genius of Uday Shankar and the organizational ability of Zohra Sehgal—she drafted the whole course, the whole five-year syllabus. And she was also a remarkable teacher. She was very precise and detailed in her teaching. Dada was inspiration and sparks would fly and he would do this and that, you know. Zohra Sehgal was more organized.

In summer, there was a break for fifteen days, a complete holiday and we used to go to the mountains. In addition to this, he started a two-months course in summer. The people who joined were not dancers, they were the people to whom he would project what he really wanted to do. The Bharatram family and Shanta Gandhi were in the summer course, Satish Chandra, these people came just to get a feel, he was giving them a feel of his concept. Many people used to visit, like Harindranath Chattopadhyay. He was fascinated, and very fond of my work, you know. Actually, till his last days in Bombay he remembered me. Ustad Alauddin Khan. Again, because I was sort of a simpleton, he used to also love me very much. Then K. M. Munshi, Vijaylakshmi Pandit, her daughters . . .

Another talented man was Kameshwar Sehgal, Zohra Sehgal's husband, he was my class-fellow. Of course, he died later on. Guru Dutt was next to me in class, you know. Guru Dutt was in Almora. Mohan Sehgal, the film director, was in Almora. Annu Mallick's father, Sardar Mallick, was my class-fellow. And Devi Lal Samar, who started that whole institution in Udaipur, was in Almora. Intellectuals, scientists . . . They were fascinated. That was the atmosphere. So I remained there.

Another contribution by Uday Shankar is the shadow play. Shadow play is a complete reversal of stage technique. You see, on stage, as you come forward, you are closer to the audience. In shadow play, the closer you go to the light at the back, the closer you are to the audience, because the shadow grows. He developed a remarkable technique of shadow play. He did Ramayana. An open air theatre had been made in Almora. And a big screen. And from the villages, thousands of people used to come. Beating dhols. And I remember, in the hills the processions used to pass by with masks. We used to make masks. All the characters used to pass through the audience and then go on to the stage. And then the Ram Lila in shadow. Villagers would never come empty-handed. So someone brought a watermelon, they used to bring presents.

In 1939, a group went to Almora to see if dance could be used in some form for basic education. Because Uday Shankar was experimenting, and whether it was educationalists, or politicians, or intellectuals, he had gripped everybody. Even at that time, he was thinking about linking dance with education.

So this was Almora. Almora used to work from March to October. November, December, January, February, it was closed. Students would go home and he would tour all over the country with the troupe. Long tours all over the country. That was the schedule. I remained till the end.

(When did you leave Almora? Why?)

I left in July, when I had almost completed my fourth year. Slight tensions had begun in Almora. I was not part of it. But since it was among the students, he was very hurt with me. He said, look here, why did you get involved? And then he said, for the time being you go. Come back later. So I said, all right, fine. After this the centre closed down.

Entertaining the Troops: Dil Khush Sabhas

Because of that, we never got together again to build up the movement. And our group went to IPTA. That was another landmark achievement of this movement. And there I started relating my

art to social conditions.

(Can you talk about how you got involved with IPTA?)

Yes, this is very interesting. My first assignment was in Calcutta. Harin Ghosh was here and he used to know me very well because he used to visit Almora. He knew my talent. I was searching for a job and field of work, so I came to Calcutta during World War II. Calcutta was being bombarded by the Japanese. People were running away from here, but I came to Calcutta. My parents said, what are you doing? But I said, no, I have to find my own way. All the businessmen, especially, were running away from Calcutta. I stayed with an English family, at first, and then they had introduced me to a family in Kalighat, a Bengali family, with whom I stayed. I met Harin, and he said, come I will help you. I got two jobs here. Working in two schools, 150 rupees in each school. That was a good amount in those days. Teaching dance. And at the same time I got a job from Harin Ghosh. He would give me eighty rupees a month plus food, travel and everything. And I would travel to entertain troupes—Indian troupes—in the World War II. These were called Dil Khush Sabhas by the government, and he used to take contracts to entertain Indian troupes. He assembled a group of about twelve people. They were short items, folk items, a variety show.

I joined because I wanted to travel. We went straight to the North-west frontier, on a three months' tour. Then it was extended for another three months and we were to go to Iran, Iraq and right up to the front at Teheran. You see, allied forces were in Teheran, and the Indian soldiers were also fighting along with them. So after this we went to Bombay and we went by ship. We went to Basra, right up to the Russian border, where the allied troops were. We were performing in trucks. At two in the afternoon, perform in this place, that place, that sort of thing. There were musicians, dancers. It was a thrilling, very thrilling experience. And really I came to know . . . what a terrible situation it was in Teheran. Full of these American soldiers, all drinking and . . . it was terrible, I had never seen such things. Can you imagine soldiers from five or six nations? And that was the centre. From there the supplies used to go. I used to see the supplies going by train, and Russian soldiers guarding the train.

Then the tour was over. I came to Karachi. We travelled all the way from there to Calcutta. And in Calcutta, the tour ended. So now the question was, what next? I could have stayed in Calcutta and waited, but I chose to go back home to Aligarh. And then again the question, what next? As you can see, this 'what next' has haunted me every now and then! A friend of mine, Advani, and I got together and decided to try something. His father was working in Burma Shell. We came to Delhi, but couldn't find a job. Not even in schools. Because dance was not part of the syllabus. His father said, why are you wasting your time? You'd better come and get a job in Burma Shell. So he went off.

I went to Bombay because . . . there was a girl in Almora, Sumathi, a very good singer, who was from Bombay. Her sister was Sushila Rani. She was working with Baburao Patel in Film India. And she happened to be in Delhi. I met her, and she said, come to Bombay. At least you can, sort of . . . So I took a train to Bombay. Now, where to stay? Mohan Sehgal and Sardar Mallick were working at Prithvi Theatres. They used to rehearse in a hall where they slept at night. So I slept there with them. During the day I would roam around. That was a period of struggle for all of us. Gradually I came to know Sajjan, the actor. One day he said, come and sleep in my room. There are eight or nine people there already, you might as well come too. So I went there and put my bedding on the floor. During the day we would go up to the roof.



Narendra Sharma in Bhoomika's ballet *Antar Chhaya* (Inner Reflections). Photos: Pradeep Bhatia.

With the IPTA Central Squad

IPTA had already done Spirit of India. That was before I joined. But Shanti Bardhan and Sachin

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Narendra Sharma in Bhoomika's ballet Antim Adhyay (The Last Chapter).
Photos: O. P. Sharma.

bungalow belonging to some Parsis. We met and he said, you come along. I was very interested and said, where is this happening? Before that I used to just join in if there was a dance. That was why Mohan Sehgal had taken me on. At that time Gundappa was also struggling. So we were all together and used to chat a lot about Almora and all that. I liked the idea and said, I'll come.

There I came to know P. C. Doshi and his whole party. I liked the atmosphere very much. I stayed with IPTA for about two years, or maybe more. The spirit was tremendous. You see, it was a commune. Eating together . . . Dina Pathak was there. Shanta—she became Shanta Gandhi. Gul [Bardhan] was there. I joined as a teacher and associate choreographer to Shanti Bardhan.

This was the central troupe of IPTA. Central Squad. Now, there was beautiful coordination between Shantida, myself and Sachin, Dina Pathak, Gul, Shanta and Nemichand Jain—he was one of the musicians, jaltarang—Dasarath, there was a certain Reddy who used to sing, Nagesh . . . we three were the teachers and choreographers, and the rest of them were the students. Reba, Bimal Roy's sister, a girl called Priti from Calcutta.

A tremendous spirit. We used to just carry on working. And then they decided to do India Immortal. The whole programme was not the ballet, it was a part of a programme of about 45-50 minutes. There were short items choreographed by me. One was Holi, then there was my Divine Musicians. Sachin composed a piece. There was an excerpt from the Ramayana in folk style. And we ended with India Immortal. I played the part of the Britisher, John Bull. That was a main role. Ravi Shankar did the music.

It was related to the freedom movement. There was a terrific combined choreography. Shantida was the leader. And everybody was impressed with the way things were going in that bungalow. Whether it was Balraj Sahni or Khwaja Ahmed Abbas. And the Central Troupe became a sort of a centre for such activity. The other part of IPTA consisted of drama groups. Balraj Sahni was there, you know, Kaifi [Azmi] was there, Jaswant Thakkar. That was in Ahmedabad. And our first show, I think, was in Calcutta. Those were the days when plays like Nabanna, people like Sombhu Mitra, Bijan Bhattacharya—even Nikhil Chakravarty remembers those days. It was a very powerful presentation. Wherever we went—we went from Calcutta to Patna, from Patna to Lucknow . . . right up to Lahore. Even now Ved Vyas and B. C. Sanyal remember this. And then we came to Bombay. India Immortal was even seen by Nehru.

And then the IPTA started shrinking. In ideology, in the way of presentation, thematically, you know . . . somehow the whole thing . . . I do not know the details of the story, but somehow we felt that now the working of IPTA would change. The liberal working atmosphere would go. And in course of time we had to leave—myself, Sachin, Shantida, Abanida, Ravi Shankar. All of us had to leave IPTA.

The Party wanted to give IPTA a certain direction. Which did not suit us. You see, the liberal, open working that was there, became . . . because, after all, the initiative was taken by the Party at that time. And the entire organizational side, financial side. They felt that the cadre should work in the political field. I do not know the details. I only know that there were certain pressures from the Party, indicating that now the ideology and presentation would be different from what had been done. It didn't suit us. Differences grew between the artistes' group and the cadres. And then there was no other way except to leave. We felt very bad, because we had relationships with the students, but there was no other way.

Discovery of India

So we went from this bungalow to another bungalow, Matgaokar's bungalow in Beriguli. All of us went there, Ravi Shankar also, Abanida. We were again in a common mess. We started working, earning from friends' contacts. We had a common kitchen. Abanida's wife was running the mess. And naturally, since we were the core of the people who had done India Immortal, we were approached to do Discovery of India, under the banner of Indian National Theatre. The project was by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. She was in Delhi and Nehru wanted Discovery of India to be produced and presented at the first Asian Conference in March 1947, before Independence. The show was presented in Regal Theatre in Delhi. Pandit Nehru and Lord Mountbatten were there and it was a great success. And then it was presented in Calcutta, and in Bombay for two weeks. For two weeks we had full houses. And that was the Discovery of India phase. After Discovery of India, another phase starts.

(When we try to use classical forms to portray modern themes, why can't we do it? Is it the limitation of the form, or is it the limitation of the dancer, the choreographer? How do you look at this problem?)

I think that's a very interesting question and I will tell you, perhaps not very theoretically,

but from my experience. I have often been asked why there's so much modern work being done outside India, while we are still reviving tradition, and out of tradition trying to create something.

As I told you, I was trained in an institution which had the best of tradition (not just one tradition, quite a few of them) and the best of the modern. And not only that, my teacher, my guru, Uday Shankar, had a very clear perspective on tradition, of the potential and the limitations of tradition; and the potential and future of contemporary forms—he had a very clear perspective.

Of course, it was only afterwards that many styles came into the limelight. For example, in Almora we didn't know Odissi, or Chhau. But various styles did come onto the platform. We were always going back to history. After Independence, when we said we have to shape our dance tradition, we were concerned only with revival. And that, too, very sentimentally, not with a proper perspective. Naturally, at that time, so far as dance and music, especially dance, were concerned, we were keen that whatever had been in bad shape in the colonial period, must be revived and preserved.

Now, this was a very good idea, because through revival we could find our own identity. It was not a new idea. Uday Shankar had this in mind in the late 40s, in Almora. So it was nothing new, but we overlooked his perspective. There were great experiments done before Independence and we could have taken many things from them. But instead of examining and analysing that movement, we took our own course in a very sentimental fashion. It was more a personal view of revival, not a policy as such. So all this revival started, and we had Kathak Kendra, which is patronized by the government. In the south there are Rukmini Arundale's school [and] Kerala Kalamandalam. After Odissi came on the scene, it was well patronized; and there have been good individual exponents of it. But now Indian dance is really groping, because all over the world it is recognized that modernity has to come, and we are not preparing ourselves to grasp this situation, which Uday Shankar was already doing in those days.

But time, space and audiences compel the arts to innovate. And these dances which were in the courts and in temples, came to the proscenium stage. The proscenium was different from the earlier settings. The audience was different, the space was different, there were technical things like lights, sound. I feel that while we were reviving the tradition, we were not reviving a performing space for traditions; architecturally, we were not thinking of where these forms could be performed. There was only this very large stage, the proscenium stage, with the audience at a distance. I wish we could have different types of performance areas. After all, the forms were intimate, meant for very close audiences. But everywhere you had the proscenium stage, large distances and audiences. Intricate eye movements could not be seen after the fourth row. [But] they came and performed and the patrons said we have revived [this and we have revived that]. Gradually we started taking a sort of undue satisfaction that our culture was so great and thousands of years old. So with the revival came this artificial satisfaction

Moreover, a lot of scholarship and research was done on the traditions. So we were all the time in an atmosphere of revival. Along with those institutions where dance was completely focused on one form, like Kathak or Bharatnatyam, for the sake of revival we also started establishing troupes. For example, every classical dance institution has now a troupe and we started thinking that this solo dance must go into group dance. Modern choreography is not [just] group dance. It is an ensemble-oriented art. Now, when classical solo dance was converted into group dance, it began losing its character, which has been established for centuries. And in a way we, for the sake of group work, were de-structuring what has come down as tradition. And now, I ask this question to classical performers, how far can one de-structure tradition? What will be left of the tradition? This is a very important question. Moreover, when they started ballet productions in classical dance, they started taking themes. I saw a performance by a very reputed dancer: she was doing Bharatnatyam to Tchaikovsky's music! I really don't understand this. This is just experimenting any old how; just taking up some modern theme like environment and oppression of women is very amateurish.

But, meanwhile, I was following the process I had learnt with Dada Uday Shankar. Our training was different from [that of] the classical people. They start with the styles, which have their own content, form and subject matter. We start with the body, the natural body, with

natural phenomenon and its potentialities. So we could relate [our art] much more to life itself, with our body. Style, for us, is to enrich our imagery of movement, just as any modern drama person will study Shakuntala or any ancient text to enrich his work.

Let me tell you my point of view. It is not the styles—after all there are only six or seven styles—there is also folk, there's tribal, and apart from all these, there is a way of life in India. You see, we don't walk like western people, we don't use movement like they do. They have their own background and we have our own. So for me, it's not the styles of folk or classical or anything, it's the life itself. And as I told you, Uday Shankar wanted his dancer to be a thinking dancer and once you combine thinking with the dance, you are very open. Your body opens, your perspective opens.

You have to move from actual reality and imaginatively draw symbols, and here the difficulty of a modern choreographer comes in. You see, art you can make only when you make images out of reality. And that's what I try.

'Classical' people face difficulty in doing contemporary subjects because their style, their movements, have certain relationships with a certain form and content. Beyond a point, if they break it, they are de-structuring it. So they have the limitations of their own style. They can stretch out to some extent and not more. Whereas the limitation of a modern dancer is that he could make a generalism of modernity. Now, I work in between. I draw images. For example, one of my earlier subjects was death—Antim Adhyay. It deals with death, and the idea for that production came to me when I visited a graveyard in Delhi. I went into it accidentally and after the busy street, it was so beautiful. [There was] an abundance of nature, peacocks and the graves. On one side there's nature and on the other there are graves, and the idea came that we dance life, why shouldn't we dance death? And then ideas came. It took time for me to [formulate it]. Then I wanted to connect it to life, so there's a death due to speed, in traffic, there's a triangular emotional tension when there is a death, and a woman has to die for somebody's death. One of the images is that mountaineers put death under their feet, that I can hold death in my grip. For me the problem was the ending. So I took one of Tagore's last poems, Shesher Kabita, 'The ocean of peace in front of me . . .' and there's a procession of death and a man who has fulfilled his life—it's a willed end and he is taken away. It was a very fine production and very successful.

Another production which I had done, Wolf Boy, is about superstition. How man is selfish, he can kill anybody for his own [purpose]. It's the story of a child abandoned by an unwed mother and brought up by wolves. He is caught and he has a tussle with the men who were trying to humanize him. Ultimately, he is branded as a symbol of evil and is sacrificed because there is a famine in the village and the priest says that unless he is sacrificed and his blood is spilled in the fields, there will be no fertility. And actually, I have studied anthropology also and there are cases where a human child has been brought up by wolves. I got this idea when I was seeing a dance on a classical [theme] and I thought that it was too ornamental and decorative. When I came outside I felt that life is not ornamental; we have to find characters who are not ornamental. Then suddenly I remembered a case long ago, a boy, Ramu, was caught in Lucknow. I worked on that story and again it's one of the finest productions that I have done. What I mean to say is, I take from life.

There's another piece, a twelve-minute piece, Alingan. It's poetry in dance. There's a male and a female character and they twine, embrace . . . I wanted a slow sort of a thing because there is always a spirituality behind this. I never wanted to bring speed into it. And that idea came to me while drawing some figures on the board and improvising. That's how I work. Now, I can work on these themes because I have been trained to do this. But with classical [dancers], there are limitations.

And [government] policy towards dance is throwing lot of money into classical dance, which is causing distortions, de-structuring the classical form. I think it is very important to preserve the classical. But unfortunately, some classical dancers feel that if they are very fine soloists, they can do choreography. Choreography needs the same years of experience as they have had in their own styles. I have been doing choreography for the last 55 years and I feel I still have to learn it. The classical dancer who has devoted a lifetime to solo performances cannot overnight become a choreographer. What he does is adapt a solo dance into a group dance. But that is not what choreography is. And I think it's time that dancers think this over seriously, both in the interests of preserving tradition as well as looking ahead in the field of dance.

(So you think someone who has been trained only in a classical form cannot approach modern dance without a total reorientation of his thinking?)

No, you see, if somebody starts with classical dance . . . I don't take anyone who has been trained in a

classical dance into my troupe because I have to unlock the body for my purpose. I must get a fresh person so that I can shape him. Though somebody who is starting will certainly find limitations in his [form].

Thematically, I think classical dancers have a lot of limitations as far as contemporary subjects are concerned. As I do not have, I can interpret. I have done Ramlila, Bharatiya Kala Kendra—I started it, and it's going on even now. I started it in 1957, as a modern choreographer. There my perspective was very different. It had its own devotion. Of course, at that stage I was in a different frame of mind, and again I was relying not on the sentimental but the aesthetic experience. Through such a popular subject you can easily get into aesthetics because the audiences will come, and you can easily make it into a very religious experience. People will be there. So why not train them in aesthetics? But then I felt I had to go beyond, you see. I have to do something else also, having done the mythology. But because I was trained in a certain method, I could move away from those themes.

I had used Kathakali movements in Ramlila, though I didn't know [Kathakali]. I had an expert Kathakali dancer. He gave me the movement, I modified it and put it in. I think they can create, they can stretch out much more from the classical once they have the capacity to grasp the 'essence' of the classical. There's a difference between knowing the classical and knowing the essence. The rose, everybody smells it, it's pleasant. But the attar is something else altogether: it's the essence . . . So that the essence of classical—again you need a thinking dancer for that, and then, perhaps, you can do it.

(When you talk about classical and modern dance in India, classical dancers will say that their dance is 'Indian' and modern dance is too influenced by the western ideas coming from outside. This labelling of a particular dance as 'national' or 'Indian,' how do you look at this debate?)

I understand that modernity in India should have its own identity. But that does not mean that Indian dance cannot be modern. After all, Tagore created many songs, he drew melodies from other parts of the world. Each has its own flavour. Theory-wise, and [according to] some of the research work of historians who have written about dance, [modern dance is] much more from the west. I have been reading History of Modern Dance . . . the very beautiful objectives and principles of modern dancers. After all, dance principles, certain principles can be universal. You can apply them anywhere. Moreover, I think modern India is also Indian. Modern dancers can be and will be, my way of presentation [is]. If the same subject is taken by the west, they will treat it in a very different way. So we must maintain our identity, not maintain it forcibly, but any thinking dancer will keep his own identity. I mean just because temple art and the court art are Indian—I would certainly call any work on the proscenium stage [Indian]. And why should we not? For example, take the tape recorder. We are dancing Indian dances because we are able to record . . . nobody can afford musicians these days. And most of the classical people also use it, time compels them to. So why should we not? We must be open.

Theatre Log

The Action Players:

Celebrating their 25th Year

The Action Players (TAP) started out in 1973, when Zarin Chaudhuri was first invited to teach mime to young teenagers of the Oral School for Deaf Children in Calcutta. The association of the Players with the school has continued, though since the late 1980s the Players, then young adults, have presented their shows under their own name. Many school leavers still join the company. Ms Chaudhuri's association with the Players has continued.

Ms Chaudhuri discovered soon after the collaboration began that the children had a natural aptitude for mime as they had, from their earliest days, depended on gestures to communicate and also because they had very strong powers of observation. Their first show, *An Evening of Mime*, was performed in 1974 and the first public performance, *Sense and Nonsense*, was performed in 1976. Music was introduced into the performance for the first time, drawing on the children's inner sense of rhythm.

There have been many innovations and milestones since those first productions. *In You Light Up My Life* (1980), sign language and voiced narration by hearing actors was introduced, which were also used in *Prime Time Mime*. In the late 1980s TAP performed *Funny Folk*, which was performed without sets, lights, costumes or props, and this show toured Delhi and Jamshedpur and was later made into a serial for Doordarshan by Focus. In 1989-90, they presented Satyajit Ray's short story *Potol Babu Film Star*. Modern dance became part of the Players' repertoire after *Dancing Dolphins*, which was choreographed by Astad Deboo, and which included interpretations of three Vikram Seth poems from *Beastly Tales from Here and There*. This was performed in Mumbai, Pune and Delhi. Their most recent production has been *The Banyan Tree*, which was written by C.Y. Gopinath and performed in Calcutta.

In *Heart Strings*, their Silver Jubilee presentation, the Players return to their roots as a mime company. The show is a mixture of mime, music and voiced narration. It incorporates old items from the Players' repertoire in the section called 'Nostalgia'. It then deals with the issues and concerns of the present day in 'Now' and presents the Players' vision of the new millennium in 'Next'. The show is directed by Zarin Chaudhuri and Gopal Bhattacharya, a deaf actor. The company comprises thirteen deaf actors and three voicing actors,

including familiar faces like Janan Abbas, Prema Kela, Sundeep Kedia and Kumar Shah. The show opens at Gyan Manch on 16 September 1998 and plays from 18 to 23 September.

Sayoni Basu.

Based on the TAP press release.

Asom Ranga Katha's Theatre Workshop

A workshop was organized by Asom Ranga Katha (ARK), the centre for theatre training, research and performance in Guwahati, at Beltala Buniyadi Vidyalaya from 5 July to 25 July 1998. It was conducted in three phases, Interactive, Intensive Training and Observation, with feedback sessions at the end of each phase. The twenty-eight participants had been selected from all over Assam.

The Intensive Training was conducted by Niranjana Bhuyan, the director of ARK and of the workshop, with the well-known H. Kanhailal. Niranjana Bhuyan collaborated with Deepjyoti Kakati and Tapajit Dutta Bora in the Interactive phase, with Dulal Roy, the famous playwright-director as guest lecturer. Bhupen Chakravorty and Dipak Changkakoti conducted sessions on Voice Development and Musical Aesthetics respectively. Participants were also given the opportunity to interact with famous playwrights, directors, poets, social workers and artists of the state. The most important aspect of the workshop was that a special informal training method was implemented, giving primary importance to individual talents.

In the colourful closing ceremony, participants presented improvised plays, group songs and mime. The chief guest was Badal Das, the eminent theatre and cinema actor, and the ceremony was anchored by Prashanta Baruah.

Banadeep Goswami

Guwahati

Donga Satteiah : An Adaptation of Habib Tanvir's Charandas Chor

This is a report on the production of Donga Satteiah, an adaptation of Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* by Janapadam, a community theatre repertory of Andhra Pradesh, in April 1997 at Ravindra Bharathi Auditorium, Hyderabad.

For those moved by the flutter created by Voregimpu ('Procession'), a Dalit adaptation of Badal Sircar's *Procession* by Janapadam, their latest production, *Donga Satteiah*, was not a

surprise.

Denchanala Srinivas, poet and theatre activist, adapted Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*, making it a poetic chronicle of the recent newsmaking assaults on Dalits by the landed upper-castes in Andhra Pradesh. Dalitization of all the different spheres of public articulation, like politics, education, poetry, theatre, fiction and films, is the most conspicuous development in Andhra Pradesh today. One significant aspect of this development has been the open claim of caste identity by the Madiga (untouchable-leather tanners) community, which waged a successful political war to protest against the reservations for all Dalit communities. Srinivas associates his adaptation with this claim by freely using the word Madiga in the play.

Incidents like the murder of Kanchikacherla Kotesu (a Dalit labourer) by upper-caste landlords, which created a great political and cultural turmoil in Andhra Pradesh, have clear-cut parallels with *Charandas*, especially the murder of *Charandas* by the upper-class woman who falls in love with a social outcast, in this case a thief. Based on such parallels, Srinivas transforms *Charandas Chor* into *Donga Satteiah*. The name *Satteiah* has allegorical potential as the word for 'truth' in Telugu is 'satyam', which also sounds like a typical Dalit name. *Charandas* becomes *Madiga*. The police, the Minister and the Maharani address *Satteiah* derogatively by his caste name. The Maharani accuses him of attempted rape and orders him to be burnt alive (*Kanchikacherla Kotesu*, too, was burnt alive).

Life in the Madiga community is evoked in this play through the sound and rhythm of the dappu, an instrument identified with this community. They have claimed the playing of the dappu, a traditional occupation, as a proud symbol of its identity during their current political campaign. The aesthetics of this instrument and its music have been used in the choreography of the Dalit songs. The immolation scene was enacted with oil torches, the stylized movements of the torch-bearing soldiers heightening the agony and pathos of the scene.

Newspapers in Andhra Pradesh have given wide coverage to the performance. The contemporaneity, ethnic flavour, political punch, fast-paced action, quick-witted satire, intricate ideological analysis and Dalit articulation of what has been called 'the first major Dalit play in Telugu theatre' are the features which caught the attention of all the theatre critics.

Dr Sumanasri

Theatre Workshop for the Tribals of Telengana: A Report on the Production of *Mavonate Mavo Raj*

After working in the Telengana area of Andhra Pradesh for three months on the life of tribals in the area, I conducted a two-month workshop beginning on 19 June 1996, organized by the community theatre group *Janapadam* in Utnoor. My plan was to produce a play on contemporary problems, specially those centred around the *Awal Committees* ('The Committees of Mothers').

The forty participants, belonging to the Gond, Kolam and Thoti tribes, ranging in age from sixteen to fifty, were selected from villages in Adilabad district on the basis of their skills in performance, music and dance and their awareness of problems faced by tribals. The group included fifteen women, who were members of the *Awal Committees*. The majority of the participants were illiterate.

For the first ten days the director trained the tribals through exercises and theatre games, such as those popularized by Augusto Boal and Clive Barker. These aimed at building concentration and confidence among the participants and developing their awareness at different levels. The participants, who were initially inhibited about talking to the director, could soon improvise and perform three-minute plays projecting their problems.

The traditional dances of the community, like *Gusadi*, *Dhimsa* and *Pharra*, were adapted to suit the needs of the play. A group of *Gusadi* dancers were asked to contribute to the script and dances. The problems encountered in the day-to-day experiences of the workshop participants were collected and documented, along with reports on the functioning of *Awal Committees*, and short plays based on these were improvised. The script for a full-length play evolved out of these improvisations.

Mavonate Mavo Raj ('One Rule in Our Village') begins with a performance of *Gusadi* during the *Akadi* festival and outlines the conditions leading to the formation of *Awal Committees*. It highlights issues which shape tribal life, such as land alienation, migration of non-tribals into tribal areas and the exploitation of tribal women. The central character is a woman who is supported by villagers who share her viewpoint. The play shows up the superstitions in tribal life in the name of 'tribal culture' and advocates an assertion of tribal autonomy over their land and their culture, and an end to the traditional exploitation. It underlines that formulating policies of tribal development without the participation of tribals will not serve their needs. The necessity of literacy is stressed through a scene based on Habib Tanvir's play *Sadak*. The play ends with the traditional *Pharra* dance.

This play is an example of community theatre in the sense that the content, form and context

relate to the tribal group to which the actors and audience belong. The traditional methods of communication of the tribals were effectively adapted by the participants at the workshop to articulate and analyze their contemporary problems.

Denchanala Srinivas

KOOTHU-P-PATTARAI is one of India's most respected contemporary theatre movements engaged in a relentless pursuit of identifying, preserving and promoting various expressions of our cultural repertoire. For over two decades now, Koothu-p-pattarai has addressed a variety of social issues by adapting folk art expressions to modern theatre. But Koothu-p-pattarai's biggest contribution to our tradition and culture has been in the direction of instilling a sense of dignity and pride in each one of us about our heritage, and particularly among the exponents and performers of folk art. Under the stewardship of N. Muthuswamy, a celebrated writer, Koothu-p-pattarai has earned rich accolades for its invaluable contribution to Tamil theatre and, more importantly, our tradition.

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- This process will help him realize his full potential and translate it to make theatre relevant to today's society.

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FILMS ON WOMEN AND THEATRE

These films on women and theatre are available at Gendeavour/Voicing Silence:

1. Pancha Bhutam (Tamil/English): A condensed version of a night-long performance in the traditional Tamil style known as koothu. Using the five elements (Pancha Bhutam) as characters, the story evolves and is presented, according to the theatrical conventions of koothu, to convey the message of conservation of natural resources, the role of forests and the need to live in harmony with nature.

2. Kulavai '96 (Tamil, English subtitles), directed by Mina Hari and produced by the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation: This workshop on women's theatre brought together for the first time theatrepersons with a concern for gender issues and social activists using theatre as a tool (see STQ 9). The film documents excerpts from the performances of seven groups from across the country, 'workshop' sessions, and interviews with participants which convey the feel of this celebratory coming-together. This film was selected for the Information Section of the 5th Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary Short & Animation Films 1998.

3. Paccha Mannu (Tamil and English, English subtitles), directed by Mina Hari and produced by the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation: A film documenting the cultural jatha on female infanticide organized by Voicing Silence, the group which advocates 'women's theatre for women's development' in 1996. The film demonstrates the process by which an interactive street play is used to stimulate discussion and clarify issues. Brief segments of the play Paccha Mannu are interwoven with audience feedback and lively spectator-performer interactions, along with comments reflecting the perceptions of all the participants. Intended for use as a teaching tool. Paccha Mannu was selected for the Competition Section of the 5th Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary Short & Animation Films 1998.

4. Women Stage Artists of Tamil Nadu, (Tamil, English subtitles): This archival documentation gives details about women stage artists of Tamil Nadu representing different genres: traditional theatrical forms as well as contemporary (urban, street and experimental). Excerpts of performances by each are supplemented with basic personal information and brief interviews.

Please contact us at:

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