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THEATRE AND EDUCATION



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Editorial

VIKRAM IYENGAR

'Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!'

So begins Dickens' *Hard Times*—in 'a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school-room'. From this undeniably depressing scene the novel takes us through the minds and hearts (of those) made, un-made, created and destroyed by this opening dictum—'In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir—nothing but Facts!'[1]

Barry John, in a scathing piece that opens this issue of *STQ*, extrapolates from this 'idea of cramming kids' heads with fact and information rather than give them some experience': 'Let them not know what they want to do with their lives, let them not know what skills or talents they have, let them not know their own minds about anything. Let them just mug books.'[2]

When I first set out to put together this special issue on theatre and education, nothing could have been further from my mind than the scenario presented by either *Hard Times* or Barry John. At that point, four years ago, my interest in developing such a theme stemmed almost wholly from my own involvement in theatre during my school days. Drama in St. James' Calcutta at that time was a hugely important and popular activity. In my 10 years there, I was involved in five major public performances, including two Junior School Annual Concerts, two large-scale musicals directed by Phyllis Bose and one production as part of the Annual Inter-school One-Act Play Competition hosted by the British Council, Calcutta. This does not take into account the many little plays, skits and performances I was involved in within the school itself—ranging from Teachers' Day entertainment to role playing competitions to Founders' Day celebrations to inter-school fests. Scripting, directing, acting, stage-managing . . . I had done it all (at some level or the other) by the time I left school. It would be impossible for me to make any sort of coherent list of the number of performances I was part of. This is not to blow my own trumpet but to emphasize how wholeheartedly Dramatics was supported and encouraged at the school. School, for myself and most of my friends, was a joy. A thriving, heaving hive of activity, fun and learning, a place which nurtured us in the true sense of the term, where anything in the slightest bit innovative was instantly allowed room and resources for development. A triannual school newspaper, an annual school magazine, the Nature Club, the Drama Club, the Puppetry Club, SPIC MACAY, elocution, debating, participating—and later conceiving and setting up—annual exhibitions on the Narmada Bachao Andolan, on World Theatre, on Dances of India, on the modes of transport in Calcutta . . . this is a basic list for just me. How much more, therefore, when you consider those with interests different from mine—the Quiz Club, Chess, Sports, Science research projects, Art, Cub Scouts . . . There is no way I can reconcile my memories of school with the dreary picture painted by

Dickens. Even that was 150 years ago. I fail to reconcile them with the image projected by Barry John four years ago. I fail to reconcile them with the experiences and attitudes of many of the students I met in college who laboured under an extreme reluctance or hesitation to do anything more than merely structured academics—a mindset that I just do not understand.

What is structured academics anyway? My most memorable classroom experiences in St. James' can be called anything but. Whoever heard of a History teacher walking into a Class 7 lesson and comparing the films *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* and *Izazat* if only to illustrate the extremely pertinent point about History being open to interpretation. Or a Geography teacher telling us hopelessly improbable—yet informative—stories about anacondas in the Amazon. Or an English teacher whose antics during the teaching of Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade* have forever etched in my mind, the words 'Half a league, half a league, half a league onward'. Or of the Bengali teacher who regaled us with stories of her childhood and her experiences of pre-Independent India. Or of a Biology teacher who opened a Class 10 lesson on Human Reproductive Biology with the immortal words, 'You all know about it'. Or indeed of a school Principal who captured our imaginations with his version of Eliza Dolittle while teaching Shaw's *Pygmalion*. And—to use a very clichéd term—last but not the least, the Biology teacher who took Mathematics for Class 8 and quietly stated in his first lesson on Geometry, 'If I can teach you to think, I'll consider my work done.'

For a good teacher, says John Mason, 'must have the propensities of an actor. When he begins to realize the value of drama, he realizes the value of communication.'[3] Many of the contributors to this issue have articulated, in various ways and to varying degrees, the answer to Moloyashree Hashmi's question, 'What is a teacher?' Someone who is willing to stretch the limits of the imagination, someone who is willing to use themselves and the students as resources in the absence of anything else, someone who is capable of exuding that energy that can 'convey the vitality of learning, the excitement of learning, the excitement of discovery'.[4] I have been lucky, extremely so it would seem, to have interacted for the most part with just such teachers; teachers who have taken care to ensure that learning is fun, that learning comes automatically and that learning is not restricted to mere memorizing of facts, but to their interpretation, that true education 'does not only inform the intellect, it informs the whole person, it informs the heart, it informs the mind'.[5] Creativity, spontaneity, imagination, sensitivity, openness . . . these are just some of the terms that will reappear again and again in the following pieces. All aspects that cannot be defined in factual terms, cannot be quantified in any way, cannot be assessed in any definite manner AND all aspects that are inherent to drama. More importantly, they are all aspects that must be imbibed in any education system that wishes to mould individuals who are well-rounded human beings above all else, people who have come to terms with the world around them and—crucially—come to terms with themselves. People who know who they are and can therefore respect and appreciate who others are.

This next paragraph may sound like an oft-repeated and somehow meaningless cry for peace, harmony, integration and whatever else springs to mind, but just for a moment let us be run-of-the-mill. More often than not, the universal panacea suggested/offered for any of the ailments which stem from a deep (though sometimes dormant) distrust (at best) to blinding animosity (at worst) takes some form of 'awareness campaigns', a nebulous idea which could, in practice, range from a political leader making placatory speeches at places of worship, to a march of some sort, to the somewhat quieter alternatives of niche publishing, dissemination of material or working

in and with communities. All these have their validity, but is it not time that we examined what it is in us (or rather, what it is that we lack in ourselves) that allows these situations to develop? Could we, perhaps, trace it back to the absence of any true system of holistic education that is essentially humanizing, that makes both teaching and learning 'a physical, emotional and sensuous experience'?[6] Could we also suggest that this has its source in a certain unwillingness in the powers that be (whether educationists, education boards, school authorities, teachers, parents or indeed, students themselves) to tackle delicate and problematic issues in a proactive and creative way, or even to keep these issues in mind in the course of teaching related or even overtly unrelated topics?

It is no sudden madness on the part of Moloyashree Hashmi that compels her to teach Hindi in an English class. But it is madness on the part of school authorities to respond to a proactive programme for peace—which must of course necessarily make use of material that records the absence of it—by saying that they wish to focus only on the positive aspects of life. What can they expect to nurture in their hallowed halls but a tribe of naïve ostriches, who, when faced with a situation that they had no idea existed, will either shift the responsibility of tackling it on to some perhaps equally unworthy shoulders, or choose to ignore it altogether and bury their heads even deeper in the sand, literally digging their own graves in the process. Who are these people who come out of this system of education? How are they expected to contribute to a society and a country and a world who's real condition they know practically nothing about? How are they to respond to a situation that demands no knowledge, no data, no amount of facts and figures, no exercises in logic and analyses?

'Bitzer,' said Mr Gradgrind [of 'Stick to Facts, sir' fame], 'have you a heart'.

'The circulation, sir,' returned Bitzer, smiling at the oddity of the question, 'couldn't be carried on without one.'

'Is it accessible,' cried Mr. Gradgrind, "to any compassionate influence?'

'It is accessible to reason, sir,' returned the excellent young man. 'And to nothing else.'

And another extract from Barry John's piece:

When you meet Class 12 students and ask them anything about social problems or issues or any personal things—

—What do you want to do with your life?

—I'm going to college.

—Why're you going to college?

—Because my father said I must go to college. My father wants me to be a doctor, my father wants me to be a ...

—What do you want?

—I don't know.

After twelve years of schooling, you don't know who you are, you don't know what you want to do, where you're at! And you don't know how to express yourself, you have no opinions about anything, no point of view to express.

Here we have two marvellous specimens of an education system that does everything but truly educate: one, rigid and unbending, fed on a diet of unchangeable and omnipotent fact, the other, directionless, confused, unable to respond to a world that exists outside the protective (and screening) sterile shells of school and home. 'It is a political issue—the way we are educating or not educating our children and preparing

ourselves for the future. Everything ultimately is political in the sense that it affects everybody and the whole quality of our lives.'[7]

Are the young adults who emerge from school every year prepared at any level for the rapidly changing world that awaits them? Will they be able to contribute in any healthy manner to the society of which they are a part, or will they live only for themselves in their own little ivory towers? Are we really stuck with an education system that is foolishly committed to producing 'imitators, followers—not leaders'? [8]

The biggest tragedy that happened was not the foreign rule so much but the enslaving of the spirit. Macaulay definitely achieved what he wanted and we, despite having access to every thought possible, are still wanting to be guided by the education policies which were decided by the others who didn't understand, who had a specific need. They wanted human beings to be brought up in this particular way so that they were not questioned. They wanted us to be clerks, to be collectors . . . Not thinkers.[9]

Is thinking independently indeed such a foreign concept to our education system? And can the infusion of drama conceptually or from the point of view of methodology, help introduce and build this, as Moloyashree Hashmi suggests? Are we (and I include all the generations gone before) ready to take up the challenge of preparing children to face a rapidly changing world? Or would we prefer to go down in history as the people who 'really brought the curtain down',[10] who insisted on churning out standardized and listless batches of children as some sort of factory process?

Ashish Ghosh asks, 'Do we need standardized people? Or, do we need creative people?' Let me rephrase Ashish Ghosh's question referring again to *Hard Times*: do we want Bitzers, shrivelled under the burden of a mound of dead facts, or do we want Sissy Jupes, who would put down a carpet with a floral pattern for its prettiness, who will ultimately stand as the only person capable of saving the Gradgrinds from themselves.

Sissy, being at the corner of a row on the sunny side, came in for the beginning of a sunbeam, of which Bitzer, being at the corner of a row on the other side, a few rows in advance, caught the end.

Are we absolutely certain that we are not gradually and remorselessly pushing the Sissys to the Bitzer end of the sunbeam and beyond?

So what are our views on standardization, uniformity and, most important of all, *difference*. Drama thrives on difference, it looks for it, actively promotes it, celebrates it as the most normal thing on earth, as *the* way to exist and understand the variety we are a part of. How can such a strength not be a crucial component in any system of education? How can we continue to teach and learn in categories and compartments, how can we continue to ignore the fact that we need to nurture the very necessary ability to make connections and linkages, to use all our faculties in tandem, to teach and learn, not through a plethora of techniques but through a very real, personally felt experience. Such ideas find little room in schools today.

What would your teacher do if you were reading a story in class and you started crying? Most teachers would be embarrassed, and ask you to leave. You are not allowed to cry, or allowed to express, or be emotional. This is what's so cruel—you can't be a child in school.[11]

You cannot be creative, you cannot be spontaneous, you cannot be responsive, you cannot be imaginative . . . so what can you be? Is it any surprise therefore that Priti Patel cries, 'Where is the excellence? We are not giving that environment to the child.' What is the environment that is demanded? What needs to be changed, what needs to be modified? And the crux of this issue of *STQ*, how much can a familiarity with drama contribute?

The personalities featured in this issue of *STQ* all have two things in common—first, a belief that the present education system must be injected with a freshness of approach which is more inclusive and holistic, and which encourages and sustains creativity and all-rounded development at all levels; and second, that the medium of drama/performance is one which is ideally suited to support such an approach. This issue provides a sampling of the variety of work which is being carried out in the vast field of drama and education in the country. This is not intended to be a representational selection, but rather a brief insight into the varied nature of the people involved in and the work evolved from the concept of drama in education. Of the seven interviewees featured in this issue one is a seasoned school principal, one is a school teacher and theatre person, one is a social scientist and theatre person, two are dancers and movement therapists and only one has actually been trained to teach drama as part of the general education system. Given the range of backgrounds, the focus of the conversations are markedly different. What is significant is the very wide understanding of the term, drama. We are not referring to just applying methods of drama/theatre as teaching and learning aids. After all, what is dramatic? The question, 'what is drama' is as complex and layered as 'what is a teacher' or 'what is education'.

What is theatre? It includes music, dance, drama, storytelling, mime—even arts and crafts. Even the stage props, masks everything, whatever may be required for a full theatre presentation. Theatre normally reflects what is happening in real life. That is what the *Natyashastra* says—what happens in the world, an imitation of that is theatre.[12]

Both Barry John and Moloyashree Hashmi ask, what is the syllabus for drama? Barry John answers, Drama looks 'at life with a capital L'. But more than that, 'Drama is something which is a felt need'.[13] A felt need to express, a felt need to communicate, a felt need to understand, a felt need to analyse, a felt need to improve, a felt need to represent, a felt need to question, a felt need to explore, a felt need to invent, a felt need to learn, a felt need to interact . . . If there is one felt need in this list which is not a felt need in education then this issue of *STQ* is nothing short of redundant.

We look at drama *and* education (both together and independently) in this issue as avenues which respond to these felt needs, and there is no one way of doing this. The cross-section of approaches and ideas which will be found in the following pages all treat this concept as central: not just the idea of doing theatre in education, or even using theatre skills as educational aids. Through this variety of approaches and interpretations of drama several other issues and concerns are touched upon. They range from something as apparently unimportant as who is bullying who in a class to dance as movement therapy for the physically disabled to opening up a discussion on the nature of tradition. For:

'Tradition is not something that is frozen in time. What becomes tradition is only that which has found value over a period of time. So if it is not alive, if it is not growing, then it will die. The moment it freezes, it's something that is supposed to be put in a museum. It has to be constantly held against the light, you verify it and you look at it and you say all right, maybe this doesn't make sense any more. It's basic essence remaining the same, it keeps on changing over a period of time.'[14]

It is the same with drama. The very magic of drama in all its forms lies in the fact that it is ephemeral, it exists in the given moment—not a second before, not a second after. It is so vibrantly alive precisely because it dies. It cannot be preserved, it can only be evolved, it can only be interpreted—it cannot be imitated. Once copied, it calcifies, much like the cloning of the brain in the present education system.

It is the same with education and educating—they must constantly evolve. And drama does this as a matter of course: it is forever mutating, forever exploring, forever illuminating, forever having fun.

'Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two [or various] fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be! We shall sit with lighter bosoms on the hearth to see the ashes of our fires turn grey and cold.'[15]

Notes

1. From Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*
2. From 'a very magical space': an interview with Barry John
3. From 'the excitement of discovery': an interview with John Mason
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. From 'a very magical space': an interview with Barry John
7. Ibid.
8. From '*education for life*': an interview with Chandra Jain
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. From 'a very magical space': an interview with Barry John
12. From 'not just a structured art form': an interview with Ambika Kameshwar
13. From'a very magical space': an interview with Barry John
14. From '*education for life*': an interview with Chandra Jain
15. The concluding lines of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*

'a very magical space'

AN INTERVIEW WITH BARRY JOHN

BARRY JOHN is a director and actor based in Delhi. He was the artistic director of Theatre Action Group and now runs his own training school in Delhi—the Imago School of Acting. He has worked extensively with children and at the college level for the Bachelors in Elementary Education programme. In this interview of March 1999, he underlines the importance of drama as a 'felt need', as an essentially human and humanizing activity that seems to be lacking in education policies today.

BARRY JOHN. Theatre is not something I trained for. I've never been to drama school. I trained in England at the College of Education, specifically to teach drama. Even in England in the 1960s (I was in college from 1964–67) Drama was a new subject, finding its feet in terms of a recognized and examinable subject. Not every school had it. It was not always very welcome, as is the situation here. A system still very Victorian, nineteenth-century, pseudo-academic, cramming kids' heads with facts and information rather than giving them some experience.

I was fortunate in this college to have someone who was quite a pioneer in Educational Drama in England—John Hodgson. He was quite an idealist and even had us envisage drama as the heart of any school and its curriculum. What is the syllabus for drama? Drama's roots go right back to prehistory, and it is based in the community—community celebrations, rites and rituals, the idea of the shaman or the witch doctor being the first actor, a performer who was a mix of poet and dancer and historian giving one the whole history of the tribe. Someone, in fact, in touch with the gods, who would interpret dreams. He was the healer . . . and very much an outsider figure, someone who was feared and revered because of his magical powers. He was the one that dressed so differently, used masks and chants and dances, and held the community together. Even in terms of education, when we talk about initiation rites, that bridging of childhood into adulthood was a special [ritual] again, often implying that adolescents should be separated from the rest of the tribe. Either living together—as is still the case in tribal communities here with boys and girls living together in separate dormitories for adolescents—or living separately. Drama even in that context was very much an element—in a way, being a via media for education. And that's what we're talking about too.

Let's make a distinction between drama and theatre. Theatre implies that you're training yourself to be a performer, for something that is performed for an audience. Not everyone has the skills to do that. Or even wants to. In drama, we're talking about something that all children can do and which all children *do* do. In school or out of school, with encouragement or without it. It's a natural God-given way . . . whatever the meaning of life might be in terms of being a human being as opposed to other species of animals. Though other animals do do it too, as Desmond Morris has talked of in his books. But there's something innate in us which just demands that we play, that we use drama to come to terms with the world around us, our understanding of ourselves, the

people that we meet, the others in our families and immediate environment. You don't teach a child to pick up a doll and play—the way the mother treats the child, the child in turn treats the doll—or to play Cops and Robbers, Cowboys and Indians . . . you can't stop it, it's just bursting out of children, all children. And in drama, one builds on that given capacity, skill and need for expression. It's so integral to our nature. I see it as a very basic need which is not answered in the kind of Victorian, pseudo-academic school system that still largely prevails. Just reading books and cramming your head is useless; it's only cerebral knowledge which you then forget because you don't need it, you don't use it. You don't know what it means anyway. Drama is something which is a felt need. To learn, to come to terms with the world, to come to terms with yourself, to learn to socialize, for the fun of being imaginative and creative, indulging your fantasy, as an emotional outlet and release of whatever it is that is suppressed or oppressed. The education system itself is oppressive—shut up, sit down, do as you're told, who cares what you are and what you think. Just do what the book says. The naughty children are often the brightest children. A child not doing well at school means he's probably very imaginative and being suffocated by this and not finding an outlet for all that is bubbling inside him. Drama's great contribution is the fact that it's very practical. It's something you *do*. It not only involves your body in a physical sense but you're also emotionally involved, imaginatively involved. It's holistic. Everything's working at once. And that's why kids love it. It's so enjoyable—you're learning with enjoyment, which is just what you're missing in schools. For many kids school is so boring, so dreary. The whole system is so cerebral, so sedentary, it's almost cruel.

There's never any problem with children, children understand. Drama speaks in their language. Unfortunately not in the language of educationists or teachers or school principals or management, who see their function as being to get as many 90%, 100% passes in the exam. That's what will give the school a name, the prestige—not the quality of the children. The child who is there doesn't seem to be of primary importance. Let the children suffer, let them find school boring. That's not our problem. Let them not know what they want to do with their lives, let them not know what skills or talents they have, let them not know their own minds about anything. Let them just mug books. And those who sail through this system, we call them intelligent, we think that this is what intelligence means. Obviously it isn't. Anyone who's going to leave school and go into work or go into college and make a contribution in life should be somebody who has intuition, who is imaginative, who is hard-working, who knows how to put his body and mind into something where work needs doing. How, in a developing country, do you have qualified engineers who are unemployed? How is that possible? When there are so many wells to be dug, providing water, sewage . . . The point is they're not prepared to work, they don't know how to work. They're not engineers, they're pseudo-engineers. The whole approach to engineering is again pseudo-intellectual and academic.

In school everything is cut up into segments. History there, Geography there, Science there, Arts there, Commerce there . . . and minds are conditioned into thinking in little boxes and we lose this ability to make connections and associations. To see life as a whole in this holistic, organic kind of a way. That's why we make the mistakes that we do in terms of the social problems we're confronted with. How do sensible people—the educated, privileged elite—create these problems of traffic, pollution, housing, corruption in the bureaucracy . . . These come from the upper echelons of society, those in control are pushing us into these mistakes. Now, how and why, if the education

system is really working, are we still in so much trouble? Why are we continually making mistakes, and why are we unable to devise any practical solutions? It's because we can't think creatively, we can't think holistically. We don't realize that what we're doing here has an effect over there. As long as we're here and making our little pile of money and buying a house and a Maruti car, we'll be doing okay. What's going on over there is not my problem, that's the Government's problem, somebody else's problem. Ultimately it comes to a point of politics. It is a political issue—the way we are educating or not educating our children and preparing ourselves for the future. Everything ultimately is political in the sense that it affects everybody and the whole quality of our lives.

I feel very strongly about drama being an important, yet missing, element in education. Not only for children in school but ultimately for the future, for the quality of life. As future citizens, the fathers and mothers that these children will become. Education is proverbially a preparation for life, but then how is it when you meet Class 12 students and ask them anything about social problems or issues or any personal things—

—What do you want to do with your life?

—I'm going to college.

—Why're you going to college?

—Because my father said I must go to college. My father wants me to be a doctor, my father wants me to be a . . .

—What do you want?

—I don't know.

After twelve years of schooling, you don't know who you are, you don't know what you want to do, where you're at! And you don't know how to express yourself, you have no opinions about anything, no point of view to express.

This is precisely what drama contributes. Even though it has no syllabus. What is the syllabus of drama? The syllabus of drama is all of life. All people, all cultures, all of history, all of literature comes into the drama class—it can. We're not studying just literature, we're not looking at just plays and playscripts, we're looking at Life with a capital 'L'. Beginning with children themselves at whatever level, their problems at home, their problems with their parents, their problems with their siblings, their personal relationships—who's bullying who in the class and why, can we deal with it, can we make a play about who's bullying who and is there any other way this child might behave? We're looking at people. People are the subject. Who are we, what are we doing, how are we living together, what are our relationships? What are we studying and why? What are the problems in the community in which we live? Not only problems [but] good things as well—celebrations . . . it can be very joyous, not all dreary, depressing stuff about social problems. But I'm looking for solutions. And, in this way, encouraging the children to think for themselves. Drama is to do with people, and people . . . can be anything and everything. There's no wrong or right way to be in terms of what you are as a person and the way you live your life. What is right for me may not be right for you as far as what you want to be, or how you want to relate to someone else, or how you want to live, or what your attitudes are. That's what's so wonderful about it, that there are so many options, there are so many different kinds of answers to these problems or issues that we look at in drama. So that stretches your mind, gives you far more understanding, far more patience with people and issues.

Another aspect of schools is uniformity. Literal uniformity—that's why we wear uniforms. We all look the same, we're all meant to behave the same, we're all studying the same stuff, and we're all expected to give the same answers. In drama it's just the opposite. We're not looking for uniformity, we're looking for difference. Let's enjoy that. Let's work with that. We can be so different, so diverse. That's what enriches Life and the meaning of Life. And it's a human right to be different, to be yourself, to say what you think—not what the book says, the government says, or your boss says, or what your daddy says. Think for your bloody self! At some point in your life, you're going to be in daddy's shoes making his decisions. Are you just going to replicate what daddy decided 20-30 years ago? The world you're confronted with is a whole new world, and daddy's answers don't apply any more. We've got to educate children for a rapidly changing world. And we won't do that by just following the book, by just doing what we're told. That's why drama's looking for *difference*. To be different, think for yourself, make your own choices—this is it's importance.

And then to empower you to express yourself. It's an empowering subject, which is again why most teachers and parents and school authorities don't like it. They hate the idea of young people speaking up for themselves or expressing themselves loudly and clearly. Saying what they are thinking, criticizing . . . it's called being naughty, it's called being rebellious, conveniently. But why can't we cope with criticism, why can't teachers cope with being criticized by their students? Or the school authorities about the school system? In a school where they have a prefectorial system, or they have head boys and head girls, or the Students Union even at the college level . . . usually they're not even elected by the student body, they are sort of placed there according to their academic results. But what a wonderful opportunity to train children in thinking for themselves! You're voting, it's training for your future role as a citizen of this country. We'll vote for a government that will work and not just be fooled by propaganda and publicity stunts and by a personality which has been fabricated by the media. You take responsibility for your vote, for your choice. Why isn't it an option in schools that children vote for their own leaders? It's again something very dramatic—doing electioneering in school, working out campaigns, giving speeches, trying to convince voters . . .

Drama, when it works well, explodes the whole system in all senses. Getting out of the classroom, getting out of uniform, the whole method. It's actually a medium, it's not only a subject. If it is a subject, as I said, it's about anything and everything. And in that way it is not a waste of time which it is often accused of being. In drama classes one important area is to work with the students themselves in terms of their knowing themselves—working with who they are, what their interests are, what their relationships are, exploring their family situation, what does it mean to be the eldest brother as opposed to being the youngest brother . . . who wears the pants in your house and who doesn't, is your mother in control or your father, your elder brother, what do you fight about, what do you dream about . . . All these things. Knowing yourself, knowing the reality of your situation, always in comparison with other children. Your experience is not the same as every other child in class. Some are more privileged, some are less privileged, some have lots of pocket money to spend and some have none, some have to work . . . and so on and so forth. So just opening up to each other in the class itself is a great learning experience. It's a humanizing experience. To learn to appreciate others' points of view, others' situations in life and yet to be able to work together. Whatever the differences, it doesn't stop us from coming together and working together and creating.

Another important contribution is tying up all else that they learn in the school in other subjects. It's not a waste of time because of that fact. You can take a chapter from History or Literature—English Literature or Hindi Literature or whatever it is. The story is the heart of drama and the heart of what children love—a good story. You might be exploring living like Eskimos, or Japanese or Chinese, or Aboriginals in Australia or whatever. It's a challenge and children love a challenge—they're imaginatively involved. And especially if you reinforce that with music from that particular area—how many of us have heard Eskimo folk songs or Aboriginal folk songs? That's the teacher's job. Teachers don't want to work as hard as drama teachers have to. Taking them off to see films where it's relevant. Taking children out of school is so important. Drama projects can revolve around a trip to a factory or a market . . . some place that the children would never have been which might sound boring to us as adults. To a child it's a whole new world. To know what a factory is. What works there, to know what some adults do. That's the world we live in and that's what they're coming to terms with. Whatever you've done in a practical, physical, emotionally and imaginatively-involved way, you remember.

In the Drama class which may be just an empty space or in a classroom, you use the space so something can happen. And that space is a very magical space for drama teachers because it becomes anywhere and anything—which is again within the language of the child, to improvise, to make do the way that they do with their imaginative involvement. Two stools can become anything—you can turn them upside down, stand them upright, they can become a boat, they become a spaceship . . . The magical quality of drama is that you can be anybody, anywhere, any time. This is one wonderful thing about being human—the powers of identification. Why do we laugh, why do we cry when we watch a movie or a play? Because we believe in it. We know it's only a play, we know it's not real but we're crying because we're involved. We have this wonderful capacity to empathize. And all that is a massive education of your feelings which otherwise don't get encouraged—in fact your feelings are numbed, you're taught not to feel, not honestly [at least]. What would your teacher do if you were reading a story in class and you started crying? Most teachers would be embarrassed, and ask you to leave. You're not allowed to cry, or allowed to express, or be emotional. You have to play this game of being little adults, even as children. This is what's so cruel—that you can't be a child in school, you have to pretend to be a little pseudo-academic adult without feelings, without reacting or expressing yourself. You just need to sit there and absorb all these pearls of wisdom.

The burden on children in terms of the books and syllabus that they have, the pressure on them, there is so much more competition, all children have to do so 'well' to get into further education, careers . . . There are more schools, more children in schools than ever before, all the time this whole system fattens itself. School fees get higher, schools get richer and bigger—it's a factory system. I guess because we're in an industrial and technological age, even our own children are being treated like fodder. It's just an industrial process, cramming these minds with information. Where's the benefit? The larger the schools get, the larger the social problems. Despite more education, there's increases in crime—and crime amongst youth and children now, not just adults. We're talking about children as well. Suicide rates, divorce rates, everything has also grown. In this context, I just *know* that people end up far more balanced, more harmonious, more at peace with themselves [in terms of] their knowledge of themselves, who they are and what they're at, and their ability to get on with other people.

It's proverbial to say about some people [there's a] good character, good personality to them. What does that mean? Usually they mean (if the bias is towards elocution) if you act in plays, the quality of your voice changes and you get confident and you're good at public speaking. That's the one narrow road that people think along, if they're encouraging at all. It only gives you a little confidence to speak at a school assembly or to stand out in school debates. The much larger and more important aspects, the fruits to be derived from it are not considered.

Teachers themselves are often not teachers, they're really not. Most school teachers now are women who are doing it just as a way of earning pocket money. It's a job which is over by lunch time. You go back home to your family life, and you're putting some money into the family kitty. A cushy job, where you just go, do the minimum, you have your text books, you don't have to think, there's not much in the way of homework, you get free periods just to mark books and give percentages. It's so cushy, it's so easy. There are very few people who are genuinely teachers interested in either the children or their subject or in teaching, in terms of looking for new ways to make their teaching more effective. This is what drama is. I've done so many workshops with teachers who are not drama teachers—they are teachers of any kind. Drama can be a subject, it should be a subject on the school curriculum. But it's also a way of teaching which any teacher can use. To have yourself as imagination, to know how to make your subject, to make the whole business of teaching and learning more interesting, more effective, more memorable, more experiential for children. Drama is there for anyone and everyone's use. Whatever it is you're teaching, to think of ways to dramatize it and make it a physical, emotional and sensuous experience. It improves the quality of your teaching—it's really very simple.

All these things apply—perhaps even more—when we're talking about underprivileged or disabled groups. Because all their needs are much greater. Average school children are already privileged, just by the fact that they're in school and wearing a uniform and getting that education as a matter of course, whatever it's quality. But in areas of special education with disabled groups or deprived children, whether it's slums or street children, children of prostitutes—they have more urgent and more special kinds of needs. Which again Drama answers, because it is all these things. One has worked with children who are wheelchair bound, or who can only crawl, or who can hardly move at all, and have to be moved. Drama is of particular use to them because its an emotional, sort of cathartic [experience]. Their whole life situation is one of suppression and oppression. They're cut off from the mainstream and basically that's our responsibility, it's our fault—those of us who are in the mainstream. Our attitudes towards them are very prejudiced, if not downright ignorant. We just don't know [for example] that a spastic child can be very intelligent. There are children from the Spastics Society in Delhi who are now studying at the BA and MA level in the university. It's a cerebral, a physical nervous condition and it's very frustrating. Some of the most successful workshops I've done have so-called normal and disabled children. Yet again, part of the humanizing aspect of it is for the normal child to become 'spastic' to appreciate what that condition really means. To them probably the most important aspect of drama is a non-clinical one, just the fact that they are children, whatever their physical or mental condition may be. And they need to play and do things which normal children do. That in itself is such a wonderful benefit, that they feel that they can play and participate in play or drama workshops. Just for the fact of the participation. All the benefits that apply to normal children apply to them. At the Spastic Society—and this is

voiced by competent people—in their drama classes they achieved more than they did in their physiotherapy classes. Physiotherapy is mindless, whatever it is. In drama, because of the imaginative and emotional involvement in what they're doing, they achieve much more. And everything—their expression, their breathing, their vocal expression—everything improves. And their commitment to their work in general, their self-esteem and their emotional . . . Obviously they're literally closeted. Their parents themselves are often ashamed of their own children. It's a shame. There are all these feelings of guilt that these parents have—'I'm responsible, I must have done something in my previous life.' An important contribution is working with children and parents and teachers to confront these issues. Most of the work has been in an institution just with the children themselves, and whatever rubs off with their teachers. But to take on the burden of all that shame that your parents and the rest of your siblings feel, and society in general . . . how can we ever know what a spastic child really feels. But obviously there's a lot that is pent up, there is a lot that is painful which gets released just through talking about it. There's great therapy in just telling your story, in just opening out and being honest. For a group to develop and for the trust to develop, so that when you open up, you can share your experiences, your past, tell your story to a group which is sympathetic, which is not going to laugh at you or hurt you in any way psychologically. That in itself is such good therapy, it's like removing a big cloud, a big boulder that has just been on you. To have that lifted, to tell your story and then of course to have it dramatized. A lot of the work one does is based on life stories, life experiences. That's not academic. Even to take someone else's story from literature or from a folk tale . . . Somehow we don't seem to be able to work without a script, but in drama we know that all the scripts are inside the children themselves. The most worthwhile and the most moving scripts are inside the children. They have so much to give, so much to tell. So many observations, so much feeling. Especially when it's a spastic child or a child in special education. The Deaf Group in Calcutta under Zarin Chaudhuri [The Action Players], they're so talented. We say that they are disabled—it's such a wrong term. Handicapped also—it's not politically correct any more. But even 'disabled'—because their abilities in other areas are so great. Disability of not hearing—why not stress the abilities, therefore, which are much greater than ours because of that. Or the blind. At the Blind School in Delhi I've done workshops. It's just amazing, the skills that they have, the sensitivity that they have. Even though they can't see. They perform on stage. Even with normal children, you can be afraid of them falling off the stage but blind people . . . ! They have this innate ability to judge distance and space, to know exactly where they're going—which is the front of the space, where is the wing, where is the furniture, where's the paperweight—they go straight to it. They know. To have that sensibility is incredible. I could never do that.

Street children are also disabled—not necessarily physically or mentally. When I talk about street children, I'm talking about the children who are essentially runaways, as are most of children I've worked with. Who are without any parental control. From a town or village from anywhere in the country, they come to the big city running away from an abusive or poverty-stricken family. And they're completely alone, whether they're 6 years of age or 8 or 10. That is their disability—they are alone, completely uncared for and living on the streets, and prey to all the worst kinds of human nature that we can imagine. Pimps, prostitutes, dadas of all descriptions . . . They become very hardened, like little old men in terms of life experience, seeing that they know more about life than you or I. Every day is a struggle for survival. So their problem is that they grow a shell, an outer skin that is very hard. Very tough to break through, but drama has this ability

to do just that. To give them an opportunity to reclaim their childhood and the more human feelings . . . again that's a great benefit.

My first intense work with these children only came with *Salaam Bombay*. Mira Nair was in Delhi and worked with Theatre Action Group, so it was natural that she called me to train these kids in Bombay. So there was a two-month daily workshop with street children and with prostitutes. That was mind-blowing. And after that I came back and had my own group—we started it for that reason, I was so moved, I was so emotional. We have a project here—Nukkad—with street children of New Delhi. The basis of the work was drama. They don't cohabit very easily, because they're always on the defensive and offensive with each other, they don't trust each other. We actually started the programme with only a Drama workshop. This was something that was enjoyable and yet educational in a non-formal way. It seemed important, actually, to explore drama itself in that way, to create the idea that kids would come together at a given time, at a given place on a regular basis and create something. That's what started the group, that's what grew the roots for the whole project. Then slowly, incidentally, other things came in. The only clothes they have is what they wear. Do they keep a bag—where would they keep a bag if they have any possessions? That is another service we offer them—lockers. They were able to keep some possessions. To have a sense of identity, of belonging, is basic. The space at the New Delhi Railway Station was a terrace where we were able to put in some lockers, where they could use the bathrooms. And we began a Learning Centre with basic literacy and maths. Some of them now are going to actual schools. There's a park nearby where we have games and sports, we also take them on trips—the cinema, the zoo . . . humanizing them, once again. We tied up with the local dhaba. It was partly funded, we used to charge them just one rupee a day—I mean, with these kids, again, nothing should be free, you have to respect the fact that they're working. It's not charity. Helping the older kids with jobs, sponsorships, training—you have to take on the responsibility of ensuring that they get a good foothold in life.

With the first batch of kids we did a play called *Jeevan ki Gadi*, which was their story like *Salaam Bombay* was. It was a concentrate of their experience. It was an eye-opener at that time—this is 1987-88—about the police rounding them up, putting them into observation homes, state homes. And life in these government homes is even worse than it is on the streets. In the name of law and order and protection . . . We showed sexual abuse by the guards and everything, the whole works. Which is the case. It's a mad cycle for these street kids. They get picked up, put into homes, they run away—it's not difficult to run away, no wall is going to stop these kids getting out if they want to—out on the streets, then picked up again . . . Some of them have been in and out of homes dozens of times. But in the homes it's just a very brutal, savage life. There's no education, there's no training, it's just jail. It's hell.

I keep repeating this word 'magical', because drama is magical. To be able to work through all that bad experience and poison . . . One of the reasons I say it's magic is that you can play through the imagination, through being creative together, through improvisation, you tell your story. It's just such a magical process. It dissolves all the hardness and boredom and lack of trust and belief in yourself. The bottom line is that it's something important for everyone. It's so much a part of our condition as human beings. It always has been, but we've forgotten in all our cleverness . . . so much we forget or overlook in our madness to make money. It's something very basic to our natures, to *all* cultures. As I said, you don't have to teach any child—it's a God-given gift.

[*Barry John with Vikram Iyengar and Ruchira Das, March 1999, Noida*]

'the excitement of discovery'

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN MASON

JOHN MASON has had a distinguished career as an educationist and has actively promoted Drama in the curriculum. He was a teacher at La Martiniere for Boys, Calcutta and later Principal of St. James' School, Calcutta. He has since been Principal of Modern School, Dubai and Doon School, Dehradun where this interview was taken in May 1999. He speaks eloquently about using Drama and dramatic technique as an educational aid and the huge learning experience that this can be at the school level.

THE TEACHER AS ACTOR

JOHN MASON: There is no doubt that my interest in drama has influenced my teaching style. From an early stage in my teaching career, I began to regard the class as an audience and found that if this audience was pleased with, not my performance but the material that was transacted, they learnt better. If they were not pleased, the learning was defective which was a great discouragement to me. We began to interpret that certain principles were necessary to create this level of receptiveness in pupils. One—and possibly *the* most important thing—was an appearance of vitality in the teacher. Just as you would expect an actor to exude the energy of his role so also a teacher has to exude energy in order to convey the vitality of learning, the excitement of learning, the excitement of discovery. I think this was the first principle that came to my mind and was transferred directly from the stage because I know that an actor who can't project himself in a lively or an interesting manner loses his audience. Then there were other things I began to determine. What were your lines, whether you are on stage or whether you are in the classroom? You have to be in a position to improvise because no matter how well you know your lines, there will always be some little gap somewhere, some little problem from one presentation to the other where your resource base is necessary. And just like a good actor will take in his stride any little hitch, so also a teacher should be ready to take a turning left, to take a turning right. You see, a good actor understands that his audience varies from day to day. A good teacher realizes that his class may be the same group of people but they also go through variables in their behaviour and their attitude depending on the time of day, the other activities that have taken place, certain influences of their immediate environment, influences of their outer environment.

A teacher must have the propensities of an actor. More than that, perhaps, when he begins to realize the value of drama, he realizes the value of communication. Of course, in theatre it's one-way, but in the school situation communication has to be both ways. You should be ensuring that your class is also able to communicate sensitively and, of course, accurately and precisely. As an English teacher, I found that a lot of my time was spent in actually speaking and encouraging others to speak. As a result, by the time I was 40 years old, I developed what the doctors describe as a Hawker's Throat. Because I was just overusing my voice. I didn't seem to have an option in school because in those days, particularly in St. James' [Calcutta], I was teaching very large classes—48 to 50 in a class. An effort to reach everybody—an actor's anxiety—and to be received and perceived by everybody, was sometimes a great strain on the throat.



Procession, 1984.

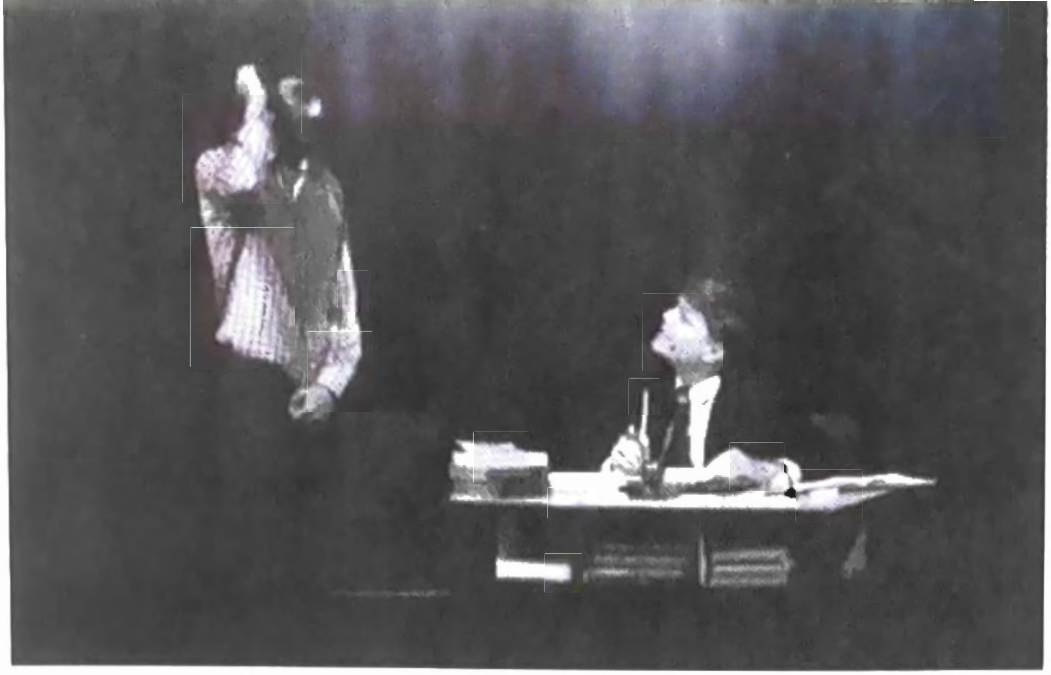
Drama as Drama

We found that the boys of the schools that I've worked with had a natural flair for drama. But I discovered that, generally speaking, they were better in drama in Hindi or Bengali than in English. Whenever they were given a play which appealed to them in Hindi or in Bengali, and where the direction was reasonably alert and perceptive, they came across much more credibly. A few years into St. James', the British Council played a fairly important role in determining certain trends that developed in St. James' School. The first year British Council [One Act Play Competition] did plays from Shakespeare. I remember St. James' put up *Twelfth Night* and were given the first prize. The second year we did plays from Shaw and we chose the opening scene from *Saint Joan* and deservedly came nowhere. In the third year there was an attempt at innovation in which they allowed improvisations and we were not too sure of ourselves, were not ready for this and didn't participate. The following year the British Council came up with the challenge of writing original plays. I feel that was a most felicitous move as far as we were concerned, because then year after year, year after year, plays used to be written generally by the same person—Mr Abhijit Sircar—and he turned out to be something of a doyen in that regard. What these plays succeeded in doing was to open up a delight in the Indian milieu through the English language. Till then we had to labour with English language plays in English cultural situations. It was very uncomfortable. Both the idiom and the structure or plot were uncomfortable. It didn't seem to work. Abhijit, with his sheer brilliance, brought a sort of Anglo-Bengali flavour into these plays. They were idiomatically Indian English and came easily off the tongue of our middle class Bengali

boys in St. James'—for that matter, anybody was able to speak that kind of language because they heard that kind of language a fair deal in the society they moved in. Then all the plays were about Indian situations, generally very topical. They either drew on Indian mythology or Indian politics or on the Indian social scene. And they were lapped up. So drama in this vein prospered in St. James'. Its popularity is clear when at audition time you would have five times as many boys volunteering as we could possibly accommodate in the play. And I used to tell Abhijit to write a play with a large cast so that we could fit in all the boys. He had a horror of large casts because, not only did he write the play, he ended up directing it.

Then when I came to Doon School I found that this 'original' play idea was worth pushing. One or two boys were writing original plays even when I joined and we began to give special recognition to plays that were original. The possibility of it began to be quite apparent in recent times when we found that the boys were beginning to write about their lives. Two plays written last year and the year before last dealt with the concerns and anxieties and lives of boys. One referred to the anxieties of negative peer pressure and dealt very skilfully with the fears of falling into bad company and the rather devious ways in which one became entrapped in this kind of negative behaviour. The other explored dominance, particularly hierarchical dominance, bullying and authoritarianism in a boarding school. These plays were very powerful because they were a cry from the heart. One sees in them a kind of cathartic power which one can only recommend. Because not only does it take out of the subconscious and place in front of one something that you can now begin to confront . . . you see, by exorcising fears and confronting them and trying to put them into narrative terms, it seems that you are on top of the problem. It seems that at least some effort is being made to analyse the inarticulate tensions and stresses that, as a teenager, you could be subject to. Because very often when a boy is asked, 'what's wrong with you? Why are you behaving in this particular fashion?' he is silent. Not out of sullenness but simply because he doesn't have an answer. He is not able to analyse himself. And so these efforts at introspection and discovery, a core that relates to many anxieties, makes a very powerful exercise. Of course there is a tendency to be a little maudlin in plays of this nature. When you ask teenagers to write, they are either very maudlin or, because of their age, their zeal and their drive to reform the world; there's a scathing satirical side which, in time, they can be encouraged to make more effective by making less obvious.

Actually this is where the transaction is possibly much more important than the product. The amount of experience that one picks up from experimenting with how to make an idea work is really the mainstay of this kind of experience. You see, in a plotted play, a ready-made play, the writer has already figured out the curve in terms of the rise and fall of audience involvement. He's timed it and unless you're crazy and sort of take 45 minutes out of the play, you are going on a pretty set path. But when you're creating your own piece, you have to see how you build up interest, how you bring it to a climactic point, and how you finally allow a resolve. You've got to create all that yourself. It is a huge learning process. You know that to this day any play that's worth its salt and which plans to appear in a theatre has hundreds of shows where, having written the play, the writer and director then watch the audience. To see whether lines are being lost. Why are they being lost? Whether perhaps what is considered to be a vital moment is of no importance to the audience. Why? And then you work in something. You drag it out a little more, you creatively make it a little tighter . . . So anybody who's going through the creative process would spend a lot of time at the back of the room



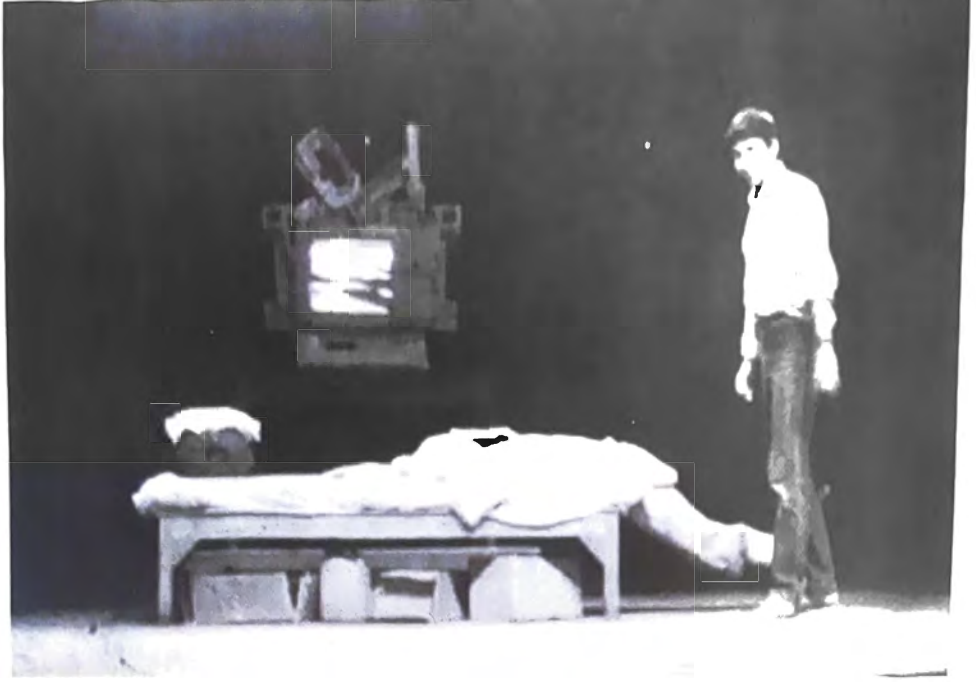
Author, Author, 1988.

listening and trying to examine impact. This is why this kind of experience is so huge. I would say you learn more about doing theatre by trying to do it all yourself. You understand character, how does it click? If you take a play that's been pre-written, and if you are reasonably articulate, and if you are able to project yourself well, it's bound to be a success. But how much more of a challenge if you structure something on your own and make it a success.

On Inventiveness

At St. James' we introduced this idea of role-play. Actually it was meant to be an English language tool—to break up this monotony of classes, listening to a teacher droning on—it was felt that from time to time a group of children would be given an idea and made to work it out. This was just one of the several ideas that were flung out by the school from time to time to try and inject more vitality in the curriculum. This one seemed to have clicked extremely well. But the very notion of role-play hasn't been fully explored and there's a lot of scope for it. It should really be tried out in many ways because it can be used in History to give an understanding in the primary and middle school level, for the human aspects of great historical moments, and it can certainly be used in Language and Literature. Even in the teaching of poetry—the relationship between poetry and the human voice and the relationship of poetry and song as well as dance, in other words, rhythm, are areas that are still wide open and need to be explored. You know, if you really want children to enjoy poetry, one way could be to try to get them to write songs. If you give them certain set tunes to begin with and ask them to find the words, from a very early age you are giving to give them an instinctive guide to the gentle disciplines of rhythm. Rhyme is not as important, rhythm is. Every child loves music, every child loves to sing. If you are able to make a relationship between a poem and a song, if you are able to identify a song that captures a rhythm, you make a big difference. I've tried this occasionally. I found it a very quick and very effective way to get across. I merely mention this because here again it is the inventiveness of the actor, it is the creativeness of the director looking for some theatrical medium through which to convey ideas.

In the classroom itself, I think people should encourage more and more writing of original material. Very often when you get stuck with a text, you are not able to



Phoenix, 1989.

adequately convey the culture of that text. I tried an experiment recently to try and discover the imaging that is going on in the child's mind when someone is reading a text. A very simple experiment and it showed a lot. I was reading *The Merchant of Venice* to Class 9—the comic scene where Lancelot Gobbo is debating whether he should meet Shylock, his master. Now the boys I was teaching were 14-15-year-olds. Most of them came from Hindi-speaking backgrounds. The interesting thing was, Lancelot is referred to as a clown. After reading a few times through the scene where Lancelot debates with his conscience and with the so-called fiend, I asked them to take any line in this piece which might provide subject for an illustration and draw Lancelot Gobbo—even if you are not an artist, just depict him in your mind's eye. In a few cases Gobbo came out looking rather like yours truly! Because in the absence of an interior system to provide some sort of nourishment, the mind is fastened on an image in front of it. So in 3-4 cases Gobbo turned out to be middle-aged, severely bald with a strange pair of ears And this was not a caricature, this was a presentation. Because the text makes a point of saying Gobbo is a young man, and yet the artist couldn't visualize Gobbo as a young man because of the model in front of him. In the other instance we found that Gobbo was shown as a clown in the circus. He is wearing a clown's costume. The moment he was described as a clown, that meant only one thing. So the imagination began to work in that direction. Here also I feel these are elements of drama in education. When you are reading a play, you want to know—what does he make of it? There should be some relationship between what is communicated and what is received.

So when you receive a clue of this nature, you begin to realize that as a director, you don't take your script for granted. Very often you just give the lines, people learn them off. There are certain words and phrases which they go deadpan on. A teacher may think he has done his job by asking the pupils to repeat after him how to say those lines. That's the worst possible way of doing it. You must not train a person in cadence. Cadence comes through understanding. A word will always be given emphasis if it is understood. Somebody who has been using the language for some years begins to know where to work his inflections. So it is very important that the understanding part is cleared before the performing part is allowed to come into action. I would therefore say, in preparing a script for performance, comprehension is the first stage. And the teacher must use every

strategy possible, whether he is reading a text just for entertainment or reading a text for an examination. If he is doing a theatrical piece, he must ensure that the explicit and implicit meanings are clear to the person. Then he steps aside and listens to the voice. The voice is a give-away When you hear a person read a line, whenever he steps on a flat, you ask the meaning of the word or phrase. Sure enough, you discover he doesn't know the idiom, doesn't understand the metaphor. He doesn't follow the inference. Because the English language is amazing for its irony and understatement. Irony is such a difficult thing to be able to understand. If one is able to get past the comprehension level, well, you'll find the performance comes along really well. One of the ways in which this comprehension exercise is effective is if one is able to make analogies. Sometimes a given situation may be difficult for a person to grasp. He's not familiar with it. An imaginative teacher will find an analogy which will create the same emotion or create the same sense or chain of feelings—in that case you can transfer by analogy.

Truths

It's basically one principle that I've understood about drama and education. Whether it is in the classroom, whether it is on the side isn't really that important in my opinion. It serves almost the same purpose. The important thing is to make sure that whatever the experience that has been acted and presented and re-lived, it has been understood as clearly as possible. It's very important that one should not use children as pawns, to make them spout stuff that they don't understand. I hate the plays where children are supposed to say adult things. You know, with double entendres and all that in them, and people laugh at this. I feel that this is a terrible violation of the principles of drama because somehow the truths that lie in an experience should be experienced in a faithful fashion.

I believe that some of the things that I have understood from drama and education have been that one comes out of an experience of this type with a better awareness. Just as extensive reading does not only inform the intellect, it informs the whole person, it informs the heart, it informs the mind, it builds a kind of an awareness. So also in drama,

Throw of Twelve, 1990.



where you are able to enter into the role, into the life, into the body of somebody else and be someone else. You develop a kind of empathy, and these are the essential aspects of drama that schools should be insisting on. So I would say perfect understanding is the first stage. I would say that entertainment is practically a by-product. I think the major reward is not the clap at the end of the show. The major reward is that the child actually begins to understand that new charcter s/he has played. And that awareness of being able to get into another domain of thought and behaviour is very powerful. That is what the school director should be aiming at.

One shouldn't be too severe, you know, because if the play's a success and people are made happy and pleased, then naturally the reward to the children who are performing is huge. One always goes into a play thinking it is going to be good. We are going to have a lot of fun, it's going to be a great experience. But somewhere along the line it has to be more than that. If it's *Charlie's Aunt*, you have to explore certain technical qualities that lie in farce, and so then realize very quickly that there is a technical side to arousing laughter. If a word comes too fast or too slow, you lose the laugh. So in a thing like a farce it's a sense of timing that is so important. Of course, there's also the great pleasure of achieving something, of pleasing somebody else, which is a very important characteristic. If one wants to do a play, it's not just a question of just learning the lines. Children have to get the meaning, have to understand certain technical elements in it, and if it's a play in which the character has some depth, then that depth should become apparent to the persons concerned. And the child must be made to feel that depth. Now there is a temptation—if you can bluff by making the person copy you. The director could often ask the person to imitate him, the way he walks, the way he talks, the way he looks. It's faster, but not better. The better way is to take time over a play. One of the saddest things about school plays is the casual manner in which they are prepared. You know, people think that you can stage a one-and-half hour or 3-act play after, say, 20 rehearsals. Because time is necessary for the personality of this person to sink in and for the transition to take place from me as the real person [to the character being portrayed].

Bull Run, 1992.



Time is needed for this transition. These are the areas where you need to be very patient allowing for the growth in a person.

We did *Inherit the Wind* in La Martiniere [for Boys, Calcutta] years ago. *Inherit the Wind* deals with the famous Bertram Stopes trial. This great Bertram Stopes trial has sometimes been referred to as the Monkey Trial also. Darwin's *Origin of Species* was taught in a school in a small town in the United States. The parents were very agitated because they were avid Orthodox Christians, and they thought that this was a dangerous idea—that man may have descended in a manner other than described in the Book of Genesis. So the play is about a trial in which the schoolmaster is tried for corrupting the minds of the youth, and the argument that then comes about is whether the Bible-like *Origin of Species* is an interpretation of God's intentions. Just as the Bible interprets God's ways, *Origin of Species* also tries to interpret the ways of Creation. It's an amazing argument. It's not either anti-Christian or pro-Pagan or anything of the sort. Its greatest plea is to keep an open mind. That play had a profound influence on the children in the cast. I had a problem initially because I couldn't seem to get a cast. People would take the script home, and then send it back the next day saying, no, it's a controversial play, we can't take part. Finally when we settled down with a group of people who wanted to try it out, they believed in it so intensely. And for all the fears that the play might be conveying some sort of anti-Christian mode, it was made very clear that it was nothing of the sort. For the final show, I invited senior members of the clergy—the Catholic Church, the Church of North India. They all came and they all appreciated the argument of the play. And Subir Biswas who was the Vicar of St. Paul's Cathedral insisted that I do the play in St. Paul's Cathedral, which of course I did, and we had a huge attendance at the Cathedral. So the point I'm making here is that the play must succeed in creating an awareness beyond just entertainment. Whatever it is. If it's a lightweight thing, then at least a technical awareness. You know, these lightweight comedies themselves require a huge amount of skill. Everybody should try different genres and see what you can learn and what you can experience from each of these different genres.

The basic underlying idea is that children learn a great deal from the plays, provided they are patient. Time is very important. Time and understanding. You can't dress up something. I remember another play which we did in La Martiniere—*Journey's End*. I was Uncle Osborne. There's a kind of avuncular relationship between Stannab, the young man and Osborne, the older man. And I knew that the play had got to me when after 3 months of rehearsal when Stannab died in one rehearsal, one day when I was saying my lines, tears sprang to my eyes. There were a few people in the audience, and you know how annoying people are at rehearsals, they keep talking all the time. I was doing my bit and Stannab was lying there and I was saying a few words . . . Everybody stopped talking because suddenly the real thing happened. And it only came out of the subconscious perception of the sheer pathos of that moment. It came through time and understanding.

[Interviewed by Vikram Iyengar, St. James' School, May 1999, Calcutta]

child's play

ABHIJIT SIRCAR

Curtain rises on a hostel room, with two beds, two desks, two chairs, two lockers connected to the foot of the beds facing the audience. The beds and desks are placed symmetrically. The set on the right is neater and cleaner than the other, but both look lived-in. There is a tape recorder on the left desk. Rajiv, wearing jeans, comes through the left wings. He is bare-bodied and has a not-too-clean towel around his neck. He moves to the locker on the bed to the right and brings out a shaving set. He goes to the tape recorder, puts a tape in and switches on loud rock music. He goes off through the left. Arun comes in from the right. Clad in kurta and loose pyjamas, he looks at the blaring tape recorder with dislike. He takes off his kurta and, taking his towel from the head of his bed, goes to the locker. He searches for his shaving set, but of course can't find it.

ARUN. Rajiv! (*Rajiv doesn't answer. Arun goes and turns off the tape recorder and tries again.*) Rajiv!

RAJIV (*offstage*). Yeah!

ARUN . Have you taken my shaving set?

RAJIV (*offstage*). Uh hum.

ARUN. How many times have I told you not to touch my things?

Rajiv pokes his head through the left wings with his face half-shaven and offers the razor.

RAJIV . You want it back now?

ARUN. Oh! Go to hell! One of these days you'll take my toothbrush too.

RAJIV. I might. (*His head disappears*)

Arun grumpily sits down on his bed and then moves to the tape recorder. He takes the tape out and throws it at Rajiv's bed and puts the tape recorder in his locker. He goes back to his bed and picks up a magazine. Kamal enters from the right. He is dressed in conventional trousers and full-sleeved shirt.

KAMAL. Arun-da, is Rajiv-da in?

ARUN. Yeah! (*Pointing to left*) In there.

KAMAL (*embarrassed*). Do you know if his money order has come or not? He told me he would return my money when it did.

ARUN (*without looking up*). I wouldn't know.

KAMAL (*after a pause and some fidgeting*). What are you reading?

ARUN (*lowering his magazine*). Listen, if you want small talk, you've come to the wrong person.

Begins to read his magazine again. Kamal fidgets in his chair. Rajiv comes in, wiping his face with the towel.

RAJIV. Arr'ey! Hello Mr Kambal. What brings you here?

Throws the towel on his bed, moves to Arun's locker and, keeping his back to Arun, brings out a bottle of aftershave lotion and applies it liberally to his face.

KAMAL. Rajiv-da, you know my name is Kamal, why do you always call me Kambal?

RAJIV. So what's wrong with Kambal?

Arun suddenly realizes that Rajiv has got his aftershave lotion. He throws a pillow at Rajiv, who expertly catches it.

KAMAL (*changing the topic*). Can you give me my money now?

RAJIV. Now wait a minute! Just because I called you Kambal . . .

Throws the pillow at Kamal and the bottle of aftershave lotion to Arun at the same time. Kamal catches the pillow clumsily and gives it to Arun.

KAMAL (*shaking his head*). It's not that. I need it for something.

RAJIV. So! I'll return it to you! Why are you fussing so much about twenty lousy bucks?

Rajiv sits on his bed and puts on a T-shirt.

KAMAL . You don't understand. I've just come back from my uncle's bank. They told me to submit two passport-size photographs as soon as possible.

RAJIV. So it's gone that far! Does that mean you've got the job?

KAMAL. More or less, I guess. I'm expecting them to let me know soon.

RAJIV (*sarcastic*). Hey, that's great! So your uncle pulled the strings.

KAMAL (*ignoring the barb*). There's no other way I'd have got this job.

RAJIV. I wish I had an uncle like that. Better still, I would like to belong to a Scheduled Tribe.

ARUN (*looking up*). You don't look like one.

RAJIV. Well! At least a Scheduled Caste. I know of a few chaps getting it certified by their local MLA's.

ARUN. You have to be a member of the party to get that.

RAJIV. I know. I should have joined politics. Maybe by this time I could have landed a job too.

Sujoy enters from right. He is also clad in jeans and T-shirt like Rajiv.

SUJOY. Hey, Rajiv-da, I got them!

RAJIV. Balcony?

SUJOY. Right in the front row, just behind D. C.

RAJIV. You got corner seats?

SUJOY. You don't have to tell me that?

Sujoy gives Rajiv the tickets and some change. Rajiv pockets it, sees Kamal watching and guiltily, brings out five rupees.

RAJIV. Look, I can give you five rupees now. (*Kamal looks dejected.*) Listen, I'll give you the rest the moment my money order comes in. That's a promise. (*Pushes the note into Kamal's shirt pocket.*)

KAMAL. But I need more.

RAJIV. Sorry, that's all I can give now.

KAMAL (*accusingly.*) You're going to the movies!

Rajiv doesn't seem to hear him. Goes to Arun's desk and picks up a cigarette packet, takes one out, puts it in his mouth and looks around for a matchbox.

ARUN (*without looking up*). That will cost you 30 paise.

Rajiv puts the cigarettes back into the packet.

RAJIV. If I gave tuition like you to idiots with rich parents, I would have thrown a carton of cigarettes in your face. (*Tosses the pack back at Arun, who catches it expertly. He smiles crookedly, but doesn't speak.*) God! I wish I had some real money. I could go into business.

ARUN (*sarcastically*). So go rob a bank.

RAJIV (*slowly the idea catches his imagination*). Say! Not a bad idea!

ARUN (*looks up*). What?

RAJIV. You know, we can do it.

KAMAL. Do what?

RAJIV. Rob a bank.

ARUN. Are you off your head?

RAJIV. No, listen, just for the sake of argument. If we plan it properly, we can pull it off.

SUJOY. I'm all for it. When do we do it?

KAMAL. Now wait a minute. What are you saying? You'll get caught.

RAJIV. Not if you plan and rehearse the whole thing to the smallest detail. (*Looking at Sujoy.*) Sujoy, do you remember that bank in Alipore?

SUJOY. Which one?

RAJIV. The one with the green shutters.

SUJOY. Yeah! Real upper-class clientele. Must be keeping a lot of cash. A nice, quiet neighbourhood too. I went in once to keep out of the rain. Only 3 or 4 sleepy employees.

ARUN (*getting interested despite himself*). So you've got your bank. Now what?

RAJIV. Now we need a get-away car.

ARUN. That's it. You're stumped before you've started. Where are you going to get a car from?

RAJIV (*to himself*). A car! A car! (*Suddenly inspired, and slamming his fist into his palm.*) Aha! Sujoy, go get Pintu.

SUJOY. From where?

RAJIV. He must be in the common room.

Sujoy goes out through the right.

KAMAL. Have all of you gone crazy? I am not getting involved in this. (*Both Rajiv and Arun ignore him.*)

ARUN. Why are you calling Pintu?

RAJIV. He's got an uncle too, just like Kambal here, who owns a garage. Just the other day he boasted about taking a Maruti and hitting a hundred on VIP road.

ARUN. That means we've got our driver, too.

RAJIV (*gleefully*). So! It's 'we' now, is it?

ARUN (*defensively*). So all right. I'm human too. I can't live on tuition money for the rest of my life.

Sujoy returns from right with Pintu in tow.

PINTU. What's the summons for?

RAJIV (*welcoming him like a long-lost brother*). Ah, Pintu my boy! (*The welcome is lost on Pintu.*) I want a car.

PINTU (*bored*). Yeah! Everybody wants one. So what do you expect me to do?

RAJIV (*as if explaining to a child*). You can get one from your uncle's garage.

PINTU. Why should I?

ARUN (*blurts out*). We're going to rob a bank.

PINTU (*raising his eyebrows*). Well! Well! A bank! Which one? The Reserve Bank?

RAJIV. Come on, we're serious.

PINTU (*sarcastically*). So you're serious, and I'm your official travel agent. Goodbye. (*Turns to go, but is grabbed by Rajiv and made to sit on a chair.*)

RAJIV. We need you to drive the get-away car.

PINTU (*looking at everyone*). You guys are really serious. (*Pause.*) OK . Let's hear some more.

RAJIV. Right! This bank opens every day on the dot of 10. That's the time to hit. Fewer clients.

PINTU. Where is it?

RAJIV. In Alipore. Real quiet place, no policemen within earshot.

KAMAL. How come you know so much about that bank?

RAJIV. I go to Alipore to meet . . . er . . . (*embarrassed*) . . . you know who. We usually meet at the street corner right opposite the bank, on her way to college. (*Pause.*) You know! I think the idea must have always been there in my subconscious, or else why did I observe the bank so closely?

PINTU. Let's get down to brass tacks. What's in it for me?

RAJIV. There's five of us. You get a fifth of the haul and a hefty bonus for the use of the car.

KAMAL. Count me out. (*Nobody pays attention to him.*)

RAJIV (*to Pintu*). Well?

PINTU. How much do you expect to get?

RAJIV. A couple of lakhs at the minimum.

SUJOY. That's 40,000 apiece. Wow!

KAMAL. Not me. (*He is still ignored.*)

PINTU (*after a pause*). OK, I'm in! When do you need the car?

RAJIV. Let's not decide the time until we've practised the whole thing a few times.

PINTU. What? You expect me to bring the car every day for practice?

RAJIV. No! No! What we do is have a dry run, just sort of rehearse the moves and timings without going anywhere near the bank. Maybe . . . maybe right inside this room.

SUJOY. So what are we waiting for? Let's start.

KAMAL (*inching towards the right*). I'm going.

RAJIV (*barring his way*). No you're not. We need you.

KAMAL. I told you I want no part of this.

RAJIV. So, you don't take part! That doesn't mean you go out and babble to every Tom, Dick and Harry.

KAMAL. What are you going to do? Keep me in this room until you rob the bank?

ARUN (*placatory*). That won't be necessary. I know you won't snitch on us. Just stay and help us.

KAMAL. Help you? How?

RAJIV. You can take the role of the head cashier. His reactions are important to our plan.

KAMAL. What am I supposed to do?

RAJIV (*exasperated*). You are going to work in a bank, aren't you? So act like a bank employee. Now for goodness' sake shut up and let me think. (*Thinks.*) Sujoy, help me with the bed.

Sujoy and Rajiv start removing stuff from Arun's bed. Arun, being particular about his things, joins them. Pintu goes to Rajiv's bed and reads a magazine. After clearing the bed Rajiv and Sujoy put Arun's bed at an angle on stage right with the head of the bed more towards the right wings.

RAJIV. OK. This is the car. Sujoy gets in the front with Pintu. Arun, you ride with me in the back. (*Everyone settles down on the bed when Rajiv realizes that Pintu is missing.*) Pintu!

PINTU (*looking up from his magazine*). Yeah!

RAJIV. Start the car.

PINTU. Where's the car?

RAJIV. We're sitting in it, for God's sake!

PINTU. You are sitting on (*pointing to Arun*) his bloody bed.

RAJIV (*exasperated*). Come on, just make believe, will you?

PINTU (*with bad grace*). Oh, all right.

RAJIV. Arun, please check how long it takes.

Pintu sits down in his position and pantomimes turning the key in the ignition, making the noise with his mouth. It's not very realistic. He goes through the motions of driving and stops abruptly.

PINTU. OK, we're there.

RAJIV. How long, Arun?

ARUN. 23 seconds.

RAJIV. 23 seconds!!

ARUN. That's what my watch says.

Everyone breaks out in laughter. Rajiv jumps up on the bed, losing his temper.

RAJIV. Now come on, you guys, can't you just get into this thing? Try to put some reality into it. You can't reach the bank in 23 seconds.

SUJOY (*placatory*). OK, OK we'll do it again. (*Rajiv gets down from the bed. Pintu spies a kit*

bag under Rajiv's bed. He brings it and puts it under his feet. Sujoy turns to Pintu.) What kind of a car are we getting anyway?

PINTU. I'll bring a Maruti compact. I'm more used to it.

SUJOY. Red?

PINTU. Yeah.

RAJIV. OK, there are enough red Marutis about, but we'll have to do something about the number plates.

PINTU. That's no problem. There are plenty of old plates hanging about in the garage.

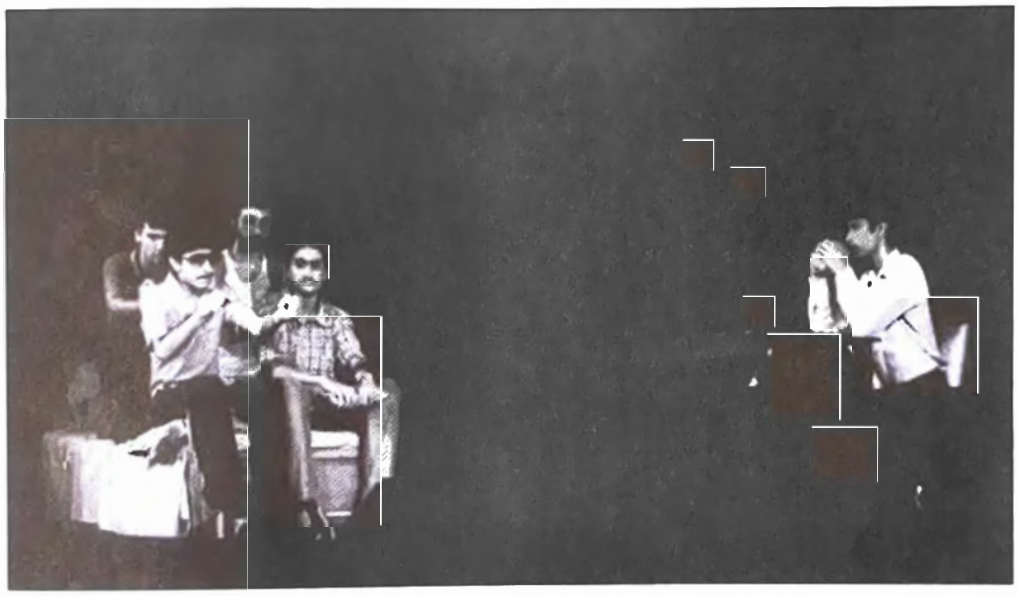
ARUN. If it's a Maruti we better sit closer together. It's a small car.

They move closer.

PINTU. Everybody, ready.

RAJIV. OK. It is exactly 9.30 now. Everybody check. (*Everybody checks their watches.*) Righto! Pintu, let her roll.

Pintu mimes starting and driving the car. The sound and motions he makes this time are more convincing. Kamal, who has been sitting on Rajiv's bed all this time, wanders aimlessly towards Arun's bed. Pintu breaks hard with a screech.



Child's Play, 1987.

PINTU. What you, you fool! You'll get run over.

KAMAL. Wha . . . ?

PINTU (*jumping up*). Rajiv, I can't drive if this guy walks about in front of the car.

RAJIV (*patiently, to Kamal*). Please sit quietly, will you? (*Kamal goes back to Rajiv's bed and sits down.*) All right, Pintu. Once more. Ready, Arun?

Arun nods. This time they go through the motions with a great deal of seriousness. Pintu, trying to increase the pitch of the engine with his voice, starts coughing and stops.

ARUN. What happened? Why did we stop?

PINTU (*recovered, with a straight face*). Traffic lights.

Everybody, including Rajiv, collapses with laughter. Pintu starts the car again, drives for some time and then stops it with a flourish.

RAJIV. There we are, right in front of the bank, Arun, how long?

ARUN. 17 minutes.

PINTU. We started too early.

RAJIV. Yeah. We should start about 9.40.

SUJOY. Better keep some extra time. (*Elbows Pintu.*) Traffic lights, you know. (*Everyone smiles.*) If we are ahead of time we can always hang around for a while.

RAJIV. Right. In that case 9.30 is OK. Let's set up the bank now. (*Sujoy and Pintu go to Rajiv's bed, get Kamal off it, and shift it more towards the left of the stage. Rajiv and Arun settle the two desks and chairs to represent the bank counter.*) Everything ready? Kamal, come and sit here.

KAMAL. What do I do? (*Sits down on the chair indicated.*)

RAJIV. Just act naturally. Now listen, everyone. When we get to the bank, Pintu stays in the car. Arun takes care of any other people who may be there. I'll take care of the bank employees. Sujoy, you go straight to the head cashier. (*Points to Kamal.*)

ARUN. Take care of people! With what?

RAJIV. Yeah, we need some weapons. We can always pick up a toy gun. (*Thinks.*) I know, we'll take some brown paper packets and make balls with lots of twine on them. They'll look just like hand-made bombs. (*Picks up an ashtray and gives it to Arun.*) You can use this ashtray, for the time being.

ARUN. I'd better clean this out. (*Exits through right wings.*)

RAJIV. Sujoy, you'd better carry a knife.

SUJOY. Where do I get one from?

RAJIV. Oh! You can buy plenty at any pavement shop. (*Rummages in his desk and produces a small bread knife.*) For the time being use this. It's sharp and looks genuine enough. (*Gives Sujoy the knife. Arun returns.*) OK. Let's move.

PINTU (*pointing a hairbrush at Rajiv.*) Your gun!

Rajiv takes the hairbrush. They pantomime entering the bank. Arun herds the other people towards the back of the stage. Rajiv herds the bank employees towards the the front on stage left, and Sujoy moves towards Kamal. Pintu remains on Arun's bed.

SUJOY (*to Kamal*). All right, hand the cash over.

KAMAL (*patting his pocket*). I've got five rupees. You want it?

SUJOY (*throwing up his hands*). Hey Rajiv-da, this guy won't let us do it.

RAJIV (*exasperated*). Kamal!

KAMAL. Well, I told the absolute truth.

RAJIV. Come on! Stop fooling. By the way, Sujoy, you must carry a large kit bag with you for the money.

SUJOY. Do I only take the 100 rupee notes or everything?

RAJIV. First the big ones and then if there is space . . . (*Stops and thinks.*) Listen, I think we'd better exchange positions. (*Give his hairbrush to Sujoy and takes the knife himself. Casually handles the knife and looks over in Kamal's direction.*) Let me deal with the head cashier.

ARUN. What happens if someone causes trouble?

RAJIV. No one will.

ARUN. But suppose?

RAJIV. Don't worry. You'll know what to do.

PINTU. Do I keep the engine running?

RAJIV. No, that will attract attention. Arun will come out first. The moment you see him, start the engine.

KAMAL. Haven't you all forgotten something?

ARUN. What?

KAMAL. A bank is supposed to have an armed guard.

RAJIV. Not this one.

SUJOY (*nervously*). Are you sure?

RAJIV. Absolutely. (*Impatiently.*) OK, can we have a full run through without any interruptions, please? Everybody check your equipment. To position. (*Everybody gets into the car, in position. Kamal stays on the chair.*) Start.

Pintu starts the car. This time everybody's actions are as realistic as possible and they actually believe. Pintu slowly puts the brakes on and stops the car.

PINTU. God! A traffic jam.

ARUN. No wonder. It's office time.

PINTU. What do we do now?

RAJIV. Nothing, just sit tight.

ARUN. But we're wasting time.

RAJIV. Can't be helped. Now listen everyone, keep your handkerchiefs ready. Before going in, cover your faces. And by the way, no using names inside the bank.

PINTU (*looking out of the window*). Hell! This can take hours.

ARUN. It's 10 already.

SUJOY. I think there's a little space on the left. (*Puts his head out of the window. Pintu revs the car.*) *Ei dada* with the cycle, please move a little bit. (*Pause.*) Thank you. OK, Pintu, just cut to your left and go.

Pintu manoeuvres according to Sujoy's instructions and accelerates.

ARUN. Watch out! (*He looks towards the back.*) You jumped the traffic light. It's still red.

PINTU. Who cares?

RAJIV. It doesn't matter. The plates are false anyway.

They go through a speedy and bumpy ride.

ARUN. Slow down, will you? You're going too fast.

PINTU. We're late aren't we?

ARUN. That doesn't mean you get us killed.

RAJIV. Just take it easy, Pintu. Being a little late doesn't matter. (*Pintu decelerates. They ride on.*) All right, we're almost there. Everybody cover your faces. (*All except Pintu mime the covering of their faces with imaginary handkerchiefs.*) OK Pintu, don't hurry now. Just slowly take it to the front door. (*Pintu brings the car to a stop.*)

SUJOY. My God! There are at least 20 people inside.

RAJIV. Can't be helped. OK, let's go.

They get down from the car together, mime the closing of the doors and move to the their respective positions with precision.

ARUN (*facing the audience*). All right. Just keep calm and nobody gets hurt. Now move. (*He herds imaginary people towards the back of the stage.*)

RAJIV (*to Sujoy*). Just herd them to one side.

Sujoy pantomimes the herding of the bank employees to left front stage, holding the hairbrush menacingly. Rajiv moves over to Kamal.

KAMAL (*to Rajiv*). Why are you doing this? Isn't there some honest way?



Child's Play, 1987.

RAJIV. No! There's nothing honest in this world. Dumb kids like you get jobs through uncles, while we guys, who are far more intelligent, are left outside, looking in. There's no way the world will give us anything unless we snatch it away. So, OK, we play along with the rules of the game. We learn to snatch. We take what we want.

KAMAL. But if people don't let you take what you want?

RAJIV (*savagely*). Then we'll crush them, smash them, trample them down.

KAMAL. You've really gone crazy.

RAJIV (*grabbing him by the collar*). Shut up, you little squirt! Stop wasting our time and hand over the money.

He lets go of Kamal who pantomimes bringing out the money. All eyes are on him.

SUJOY (*suddenly*). Watch out! He just did something.

RAJIV. What did you do, you little stink?

KAMAL. Nothing, I swear. Why are you looking at me like that?

RAJIV. Let's see. (*Moves around the desk and looks under it.*) It's the alarm—the bastard pushed the secret alarm to the police station.

ARUN. Oh my God! What do we do now?

KAMAL. Listen, I haven't done anything.

RAJIV. You dirty, dirty bastard. You bootlickers will always make life impossible for us. You have no right to live. (*He moves menacingly towards Kamal)*

KAMAL (*timidly stepping back*). What have I ever done to you? Why do you hate me so much? (*He runs to Sujoy who holds him.*)

RAJIV. I would like to carve you up into little pieces, but we haven't got much time, so I am going to make a quick job of it. (*He raises his knife. Pintu gets off from the bed.*)

ARUN (*shouting*). Rajiv!

Everybody freezes. Rajiv slowly lowers his knife, drops it on the desk and moves to Arun's bed with his head in his hands. Sujoy lets go of Kamal who stares at Rajiv in disbelief. A knock is heard. It is some time before everyone returns to reality. The knock is heard again.

ARUN. Yes, who is it?

VOICE (*off stage*). Is Kamal here?

ARUN. Why?

VOICE. There's a letter for him.

Arun motions to Pintu, who goes out through the right.

KAMAL (*shocked, to Rajiv*). You were really going to kill me.

Rajiv does not look up.

SUJOY. Just forget it, we were only play acting.

KAMAL (*vehemently*). No, you were not. I didn't know you hated me so much.

ARUN. Come on now, Kamal, we just got a bit carried away.

Kamal shakes his head. Pintu comes back with the letter and gives it to Kamal, who opens it and reads it.

KAMAL (*dully*). I got the job. They want me to start next month.

ARUN (*false joviality*). That's great! Congratulations!

PINTU. Yeah! When's the party?

SUJOY. Come on, Kamal boy, throw a big bash. Three cheers for Kamal.

Kamal extricates himself from the others and moves towards the right with a blank face. Rajiv looks up and moves to face Kamal at the center of the stage. Lights dim, highlighting only the two of them.

RAJIV. Kamal . . . Where is this bank of yours?

Everybody looks at Rajiv. Kamal stares at him in horror. Everybody freezes as the lights dim.

'a space of togetherness'

AN INTERVIEW WITH MOLOYASHREE HASHMI

MOLOYASHREE HASHMI is a theatre personality and teacher based in Delhi. She is part of Jana Natya Manch, the well known street theatre group. In this interview taken in March 1999 while she was a teacher at the Sardar Patel Vidyalaya, Delhi, she talks about her experiences with children within the classroom and how drama in the broad sense can be evolved and modified to be an approach to teaching and learning.

MOLOYASHREE HASHMI. We were doing a project on February. I thought, it's February. Let's do something on that. It began like that. One class selected a certain week and got newspaper clippings, pictures, which they thought were important. This group was from Class 4 which means they were nine-ish, nine ? Maybe some were 10 also. Now they picked up these pictures. I know that some of them were randomly picked up and not every child thought about it but every child got a picture. Then we sat in groups and all the common ones—duplicates, triplicates—we threw them away naturally. Then they put them up. They helped me categorize it. Now all this is like a theatre activity when you are doing a play. And on the basis of this they did improvisations in groups. Fascinating improvisations about what February is on the basis of what they'd done what we had talked about. I did nothing, I sat back. Getting kids to do improvisation doesn't take time. And basically that is what theatre is also all about—creating a situation out of nothing.

So here are a group of 10 kids who are given a situation. Sometimes I give a situation, sometimes I don't give a situation. That depends. And they create something. So they are doing all sorts of things, they are creating drama there. I'm not. Once they've created the drama and we've shared it, then sometimes I give them suggestions. Children are constantly doing drama. Even metropolis children who are quite over-mature in many ways sometimes. Especially children from wealthy families with a lot of opportunities and enrichment—*thik hai, sab dekh lia hai* [been there, done that]—that is the attitude in many children. But give them an improvisation to do, it works. It's like giving them a painting to do. Then all those cynicisms or the beginnings of cynicism they leave aside and things come out from within. They think they are doing theatre. Actually they are not, as far as I'm concerned. They are working out their ideas in playing terms. To me that is why they are doing it. Their creativity is being enhanced, they are working together, which is a very important skill for any human being. A lot of things are happening—language, emotions and all that happens in theatre, and the confidence of being able to create. It is something that is actually fascinating. So they know that they are not doing a play and are not going to get up on stage and get a lot of claps. That applause becomes important for some people. In fact there is a child now in Class 5 who has been going to children's theatre workshops for sometime. He is very good, but he thinks he's doing something tremendously great by going to workshops. What is happening to the child is he is unable to work in a group which is not performance

oriented. If it's performance oriented then he's fine, then he's very good. Obviously this boy's talents have grown, naturally these workshops have helped shape his thinking. By shape I don't mean, 'I'm a great adult, I must shape a child's thinking'. No. I think I've interfered too much in their thinking if they are going to not take part in an activity simply because it's not a performance. You can create joy by being together, it's like playing a game with a friend.

Now kids often do play acting, what we call creative drama, it is imaginative play. They are constantly doing things. They are playing all sorts of games which we adults have learnt as theatre games. For example, we are given a piece of cloth and told to use it in different ways. Every child is doing that. And that is what I build upon. The spontaneity has to be retained. Yet it's not the same because somewhere I'm restructuring it—they are working in a group, there is structuring there, whether I'm giving an idea or they are thinking of an idea, it's not natural play. But it is not a performance. Even when we are showing it to each other, it's not performance. We use the word 'sharing'. Let's see it, let's talk about it. Sometimes ideas that come out from there generate a lot of debate and discussion among the kids. So it's not performance, I don't have to be the greatest actor or actress. You don't have to take an idea from a serial, a film or even from a book. Think of something which you see around you. The fact that there is resource around you, that can create wonderful drama. It takes a little time for the child to be confident, but once it comes out and they see it, it works so wonderfully.

Like what they did with February. The kind of things they came out with. One was a docu-collage. In fact one of these kids said, can we make a collage of plays? I said, sure. If a nine-year-old can think of this I think my job's done, I'm happy. Some of them did all the things that had happened that February. There's one group that did Kumble—taking 10 wickets. Each one was taken differently. And I'm such an idiot. I asked, why are you repeating it? They said, Aunty we are not repeating, he has taken each in a different way. They had set up that idea. A real-life event and an interesting thing to show.

One group did just Nature, and Nature in different ways. They did something like a mime. The other thing was that they weren't supposed to use words. Their theme was Spring. There were lots of things happening in Spring like picnics and the Moghul gardens being opened. This is again information, but used in this way. There was one on weather changes. It's not yet very hot, but it's not very cold, it's in-between. They did little scenes. Somebody did the board exams. They have elder brothers and sisters who were giving board exams. In the beginning I had simply asked them, what is so important about February? And they gave me all this information. I simply asked them a question. Then the fact that February had 28 days, the idea of the leap year—all this they do in academics. And days that're important for them—their parents' wedding anniversary, their birthdays, their father's birthday . . .

One class had no February-born child while another had eight. One of the things they showed was a February evening—everybody was watching TV because of the cricket. That started us talking about TV. They know I have a very poor opinion of just watching TV all the time. So they sometimes give me politically-correct answers also. Usually I can make out. That sort of a thing generates more things. It was not just the newness of what they did. The fact that every scene happened to be different, which I thought was really remarkable. In a class of 40 there were five different scenes. They did it entirely on their own, which I found was great. I did nothing, not even guide them. By now, they are very used to using stools differently, using a chair differently. Anything that they can pick up which won't break they are free to use.

Any child exposed to a little theatre will start doing it, doesn't matter where they are. What I think is important is, instead of only doing plays, it's important to have theatre in teaching. What I'm doing is not part of the so-called regular teaching. What I'm talking about just now is a time that I can do theatre or anything I want—Activity. I'm doing discussions, experiments in Science which wouldn't normally get done in their course. Also looking at singing, doing a lot of visual things—graphics, painting, poster-making and collages. There is scope for doing all this, that's what this Activity period is there for—for doing all kinds of things. That's why it's got this silly name of Activity. Anything goes. There can be a very serious discussion on why we should believe in God, why do some believe in God, and some don't, there could be storytelling, some kind of drawing of a different kind not what they usually do. There could be theatre of course, dance, or just thinking quietly and thinking about oneself, reflecting upon oneself and then coming out with something.

By teaching I mean . . . If I'm doing English, if I'm doing the sciences, how can I use theatre to help me as a teacher and to make a child learn better. Because one thing that happens with anything related to dramatics is that you actually do it either by talking or with your entire body. So you are using space, and learning through space is something children find very useful. I'll give you a small example—solid, liquid and gases. I want to explain molecule bondage. Suppose we three are molecules. When we are gas we are free in this room, we are all over the place. We can run around. We can come close if we want to. We can move around, nothing prevents us. When we are liquid we have to hold hands. There is a bondage, if we are holding hands it can still give movement, a flowing movement. You show it in class. I get eight kids—if you were molecules of gases, what will you do? They have a gala time running around chairs and tables and the like. But since they are gases, they can't talk so they have to keep quiet. When it's liquid they hold hands, they form a line. One class asked, Aunty what will happen if we complete a circle. Somebody said, we'll form a drop. It's technically incorrect but visually that person got an idea. I explained to them it's not quite like that but visually I can see why they are doing it. I can't tell them that this is correct science, but they have got a point. When you are a solid, you'll be standing very close to each other and with your arms on your shoulders and tight, rigid, you can't move. So how will you move? You have to move en masse. Unlike liquids and gases, it will have to be lifted en masse. Visually it is seen through the body of the kids since they are doing it. I'm giving a suggestion here and there—they are asking questions which others answer. Can we climb out of the window they ask and I allow them, provided we are on the ground floor. Can we roll? Yes, some objects you can, but can you roll a table? Somebody else will point out, if it's round then it's easily rollable otherwise not. This is what they've learnt in maths—well, it's practical knowledge. Then I tell them, say you are a solid and the bonds are really strong, say we start applying heat, what will happen? The parts start withdrawing, then you withdraw and withdraw because there's more heat. You become liquid and then gas. Then we go on to solutions. If there are eight kids get four to be molecules of gas. The others dissolve in. What is easier to dissolve in? Can you dissolve into a solid? You can't, because you can't get in. They are so close to each other that no other molecule can squeeze through. To do so and be held they have to get to the liquid stage. Because not everything can dissolve in gas.

So they get an idea. This is one thing teachers should be doing more and more. I have done it not because of my theatre background but because I enjoy teaching. Lots of teachers do different things. In Language classes, for example, they do a lot of

dramatization of poems or stories. But I'm at great pains to not only do dramatization but how to learn something through what is actually very dramatic. It is theatre, but it is not a play. It's a theatre game. Concrete to abstract—the basic precept of education, as we keep on telling the teachers that. What happens is concrete things are not available in the classroom. Take an ordinary government school or a teacher who is lazy or a teacher who just doesn't know where to get it from. I'm not denigrating teachers, I wouldn't. I see wonderful work happening in government schools, much better than the so-called public schools. But say I have nothing in the classroom. I have two things—the teacher and the children. Without these two elements no class can take place. There doesn't have to be a blackboard, doesn't have to be a room. It only needs a space of togetherness. That is what drama begins with—when you do theatre you need audience and the players. But here it's not always audience and players, it's the togetherness much more.

For example, counting. Instead of doing counting with objects, just do it with the kids. There are two children, now there are two more. That is a kind of theatre—using your body. And in Odd One Out—it's a very important skill, looking at differences out of a host of similarities. It's a very important pre-reading skill. And it's a fun thing. In a class there are children with different kinds of hair—bound to be. Some long, some short, some with two plaits—you have to make a choice. A group where all have long hair except one with short hair. Tell me, who is different? But suppose there's one Sardarji and one little girl with short hair. Then they're stumped. He is different, because he is a boy. But in a group of girls, she's different because she's got short hair. So you see categories of difference change. And that is what happens in theatre, things acquire a different meaning in different situations. What happens is teachers often do things like this in the class without quite knowing it. Doing a dramatization of a story is important and essential, but it's not enough.

One thing is very important though: theatre cannot replace proper—and I'm not using 'proper' as a value-judgemental word at all—teaching of nouns, learning to divide or learning to simply read. I'm not saying that through theatre I can teach Trigonometry—of course I can't! They need to be taught the way they are. That is the level of abstraction which you need to achieve. You mustn't think that theatre can intervene in everything. Certainly not in the very senior classes. Maybe once in a way, like in Statistics. For example I have a set of statistics. From there I can make an interpretation and do something around that. I can link it up like that but in teaching Statistics I can't. I don't think it can be done. If someone can do it I'm willing to try it out. I don't think we should force ourselves like that. Everything has its own place, requirement and need. I'm not saying History should be taught through theatre, but theatre can find a place in a number of subjects, certainly in the junior and middle school. For example we can have a little market scene which a bunch of kids can devise themselves. That is the whole point. What usually happens in the class is, the teacher sets it up: you will be a shopkeeper, you will be so and so, you will be so and so. I think theatre ends then. Instead tell them, okay, you're going to do a scene of the Mother Dairy booth—think of the kind of things you'll need. That's where I will guide them. We need the guy who sells and people who come to buy. Anything else? Somebody will say, we need a machine. So make a machine. I am only giving them a little shove if they need it. Some children don't need it. Soon they completely disregard me . . . and I'm very happy then. Initially there's that hesitation. When you are doing actual money then you have to do it realistically. With money—here's Rs 5, you return how much? They're doing calculations. You can bring in maths or the characteristics of the different shapes.

Beginning with simple shapes like spheres and cylinders and going on to complex prismatic shapes which a child of Class 5 will be aware of. Here are these characters—let's make a little drama out of them. You are getting them to use their knowledge of maths. I don't know what a prism is. I've forgotten. So they'll tell me. So it's reinforcement that takes place, not fresh teaching. Theatre can help in initiating a session, in explaining and reinforcing but not in the actual teaching. It can't supplant it. It can only support it.

I think there are three aspects of theatre in a school. One is what the kids watch—their peer groups showing a play or some expert from outside or something. Some kind of performance—it could be theatre, it could be a dance or mime or whatever. That is only watching—T.I.E. does it—then there is discussion. The other kind is when they are themselves doing a play for performance which they do once or twice a year. And the third is something which they don't know is theatre—what their teacher does. And that is when it comes into their actual daily experience. And it's the last which I'm personally interested in, because that's where I've been able to do a lot of things partly because I do theatre. I find it has a lot of skills which are actually skills of learning. They are the basic theatre skills—you have to observe, you have to listen and those are learning skills. Looking, observing, expressing, understanding, analysing, debating, experimenting, making a hypothesis—all these happen in theatre. So I found quite a natural sort of . . . it was quite by chance that I happened to be interested in both. Probably if I was interested in something else I'd find connections there also. I'm sure. Because there are connections everywhere, it's for you to make them meaningful for yourself and others.

So it started coming in, lots of things that I would do in the class from theatre games, making slight changes to make the level different because I teach young children. It can become a very interesting basis for going into something else, either as a game or a improvisation technique or simply to look at things differently. I sometimes change the subject completely. Change it a little and the thrust shifts totally. Suddenly you find what I was doing with Class 1, changed slightly, can become a different kind of thing for adults. There was a very simple theatre game—giving out chits of paper which had the name of an animal on it. There was cow, dog, cat, hen, duck, crow. See it, put it away, close your eyes, then make the sound that that animal makes. And try and locate your family and hold hands. In a group of 40 there would be these five animals, eight of each. There would be two minutes of intense noise and cacophony. You have to listen and identify, get your cue and respond—basically theatre. In Class 1 when I do it, I do it outside and I help them a little bit because they are so excited. For them basically it is following instructions. I've done it with teachers in a workshop, where, for me, it's the fact that it's okay to touch the children. Specially in a mixed man-woman group, it's all the more important to do it. Even in a single sex group it's amazing—they are not willing to touch. The fact is, it doesn't matter if you're a stranger to me, it's okay if I touch you. The first time it's not an easy exercise. You do it once or twice it's very easy. They are not so excited like the children but in the process they are touching lots of people—they have to. They are also exploring space—a workshop space which is theirs, mine, it's ours. There's no wall between the two, it's not a lecture. In the workshop we have to move the chairs away and it becomes a common space, accepted space, my space. All this happens—they don't know it's happening—I know it happens because I see it work. I can see the body language changing. So the same activity is actually serving different purposes with little shifts.

I've been teaching mostly Language and Science as a teacher, occasionally Maths. In this school there is someone called the Homeroom Teacher for every class. And that is really an extension of home right from Nursery to Class 12. For two years the Homeroom teacher is with that class and they also teach one subject. Let us say I am a Homeroom teacher for Class 4A and I also take them for Maths. Other teachers will be coming in for other subjects. And I'll be doing Maths and Science with other classes. My Homeroom group will have me as a Homeroom Teacher for two years which means that any problem can be brought to me. So what happens in a period of 30 minutes—30 minutes is a long time every day. There are lot of things different teachers do at their own level. Either they do little activities, do games, do reading, they engage children in a process where there is a lot of interpersonal care—inter-, intra-, with the child, with the teacher, all that. And that time is very difficult to qualify or quantify but that is the time that really brings about a lot of changes in thinking. Not thinking in terms of specific academic subjects, but thinking about life. Let us say there is some festival—how I'm approaching the festival will also determine what I'm doing with the kids. If I'm only telling them how important it is to pray to God, I'm completely closing off the options of the child. There could be people who don't pray to God or pray differently or pray inside their heads or who don't pray at all. So it depends on what focus I'm giving. I can do Holi with them by giving them a long lecture on how important it is to play Holi decently. And some teachers do it that way. Some people will do it through generating a discussion or through a story or getting the child to look around and make rules. What rules will I make for myself when I am having my food or watching my favourite TV programme. I'll make a rule for myself and for the rest of the family not to disturb me. There are rules. Some are commonly accepted rules like traffic lights. We have agreed to follow a set of rules. That can lead to a discussion on how rules are broken. What a child can do when fathers or mothers break the rule. It's very risky, you could be killing someone—I have no qualms saying it. All sorts of things can happen in this Homeroom. I always blend subjects. If they've done something in Science and I'm teaching English, I always feel that I should be connecting the two somewhere. Very often they find a natural connection. Games, thinking, philosophizing—this is the background of Homeroom, this is the purpose of Homeroom. So the Homeroom Teacher is forming this bond with the child, and through the child the parents also have a bond with this teacher.

My principal called me some years ago and said, I want you to take one period a week for every class in junior school. Doing what? What you do in your Homeroom. You think about it and let me know. That is her trust and faith in my capabilities. Initially we started with a science activity centre where apart from the routine lots of other things would be happening. This is how the whole thing got linked up. What do you do, in your Science Homeroom classes or in the junior school? What does Science mean for junior school and the fact that all the streams come together? Should we call it Integrated Activity? I said, for heaven's sake don't, let's only call it Activity. When we said Activity, kids thought it meant craft. It's not craft only. I was absolutely unsure of what would happen in these things. Because it was too wide and open a brief for me. That's when I started making all sorts of linkages and once I started thinking I started getting new ideas. If I'm doing English nothing prevents me from doing Hindi in that period. I personally feel parents teach English at home. Okay, I'll do something else. Why should I burden the child when they are doing it at home? We are playing games, thinking about new words. Then we make games for ourselves. That is what happens when I teach a subject—drawing in different elements, different resources, different skills from

theatre to Trigonometry to Algebra. They don't know it's Algebra, I don't tell them I'm doing Algebra, I don't give them the formula. It's the concept, the approach and kids do it wonderfully. That is what activity is all about. And theatre comes in very naturally here. But there are months when I don't do any theatre. But over the years what I've tried to do is balance out things. Let's say in a given period of time, I ensure that lots of different kinds of streams are intertwined in the child's experience.

Thinking independently is one of the major things that comes out of this. And the confidence to explore—whether it is exploring an idea, whether it is exploring a drawing, or something to do with games, or theatre, or Science, or whatever. This confidence to explore and experiment, and independent thinking—that, I think, is very important, because if that is there, then you can always learn how to do something. And I think by and large they enjoy it. The other thing which is also important is working together, working in a group. And here they are getting situations where they work together.

A group of people in the Central Institute of Education, people deeply interested in Education felt that the B Ed. didn't quite equip school teachers for elementary school teaching. You had the primary teachers' courses and you had B. Ed for middle school and above. But in between, there was nothing specially for that. So you had nursery trained teachers coming in to teach 1st, 2nd, and may be 3rd or you had B. Ed's doing 4th and 5th. This is not to say that the teachers were not being able to do it. They were, in spite of a lot of odds. But the point is, can we do something more focused for this age group which would be far better. That's how it began. When they were formulating what the curriculum would be for the four years of B.El.Ed, theatre was there right in the beginning along with hands-on practical teaching. The fact that this cannot be only a technique of teaching but an entire approach to teaching was emphasized. They had talked to a large variety of people including teachers, principals, educationists, and academics and then put everything together.

Now I've been a school teacher all my life. My experience has really helped me do lots of things which I know will make sense to them. It's because I have kept abreast with theories of education and generally been aware and alert. But my experience of working with children in the classroom situation has also helped. What I am doing with teacher trainees is taking Dramatics into colleges as part of the Bachelors in Elementary Education. That has been a wonderful experience for me, because I know that somewhere I have been able to make this meaningful for them. Our purpose of having this particular curriculum for the B.El.Ed. first year is not only giving them certain skills, but the development of their own personalities. That has certainly begun. And an orientation towards pedagogy, and the philosophy of pedagogy. What happens often is that we overlook this most important thing. If I don't know why I'm doing something, then very often there's no goal. Of course I'm doing it for a job, but there is something else also—a purpose. I may not be doing the Philosophy of Education, I may not be doing the Principles of Child Development, but I've worked so long with children that I can't help bringing in all that. It's not a formal theory class, but I draw upon that. And since I know what the rest of their subjects are, I am able to make linkages in the hope that since they are seeing me make linkages, they will also—as teachers—make linkages. When we do Dramatics in B.El.Ed, the idea is not to make them theatre people. Far from it. Far, far from it. It's basically their own personality development, the relationship between pedagogy and philosophy and to be able to use some of the skills in a classroom situation. And then I draw upon their own schooling, which is very good. My schooling

was 20 centuries ago, while theirs was just a couple of years back. That helps a great deal in looking at teachers, reflecting upon the fact that, okay, what is a teacher? It's a very difficult question. You cannot make a definition of three words. A teacher is lots of things. I'm just hoping that they will be open people willing to draw upon their own resources and the child's resource in the classroom.

[*Interviewed by Vikram Iyengar and Ruchira Das, March 1999, New Delhi*]

'a self-learning process'

AN INTERVIEW WITH ASHISH GHOSH

DR ASHISH GHOSH is an actor, director, singer and children's theatre activist based in New Delhi. A teacher of Political Science to undergraduate and post-graduate students, and drama in relation to education to B. El. Ed. students, all in Delhi University, Ashish is also the Joint Director of Developing Countries Research Centre, University of Delhi. He is the Founder-President of ANANT (Association for Nascent Art and Natural Theatre). In this interview of April 1999 supplemented with additional material, Dr Ghosh speaks about the development of his theories and methodology in approaching children's theatre through his experiences of working with organizations such as the Sahitya Kala Parishad and Bal Bhavan, and later the evolution and objectives of ANANT.

ASHISH GHOSH. My family was involved in amateur theatre in Delhi. I wanted to join a college with the intention of devoting more time to theatre. That did not happen to start with and I found myself engaged in research-oriented fieldwork. It was exciting in its own way, but kept me away from theatre for five long years. Then in 1980 we opened a school in Chittaranjan Park, which ran for six years. The name of the school was Vivekananda Sikhsha Sadan. We wanted to emphasize certain ideas like activity, orientation, community participation, mother tongue at least in the primary stages, so it meant a great struggle. But we could successfully introduce some aspects of community participation including dramatics and performances of various sorts. Well, you can do that by pulling resources from the neighbourhood. But, then, it turned out to be very difficult to continue. Faced with financial problems, problems of building our own space, questions like 'what is the use of the mother tongue?', admonitions of 'be practical'—I felt as though I was living in a fool's paradise.

It is then that I thought, since the school was gone, perhaps a special area for children could be created through dramatics. This was primarily as a reaction against the formal schooling system where the equation stands thus: the children don't know anything and the teachers are the knowledge givers; we have to give and the children have to take—an establishment format for passive learning. There is something fundamentally wrong in that approach. No one can learn unless one wants to learn. Can dramatics help in better learning? Can we do something to help children be 'agents' of knowledge—where they can learn all by themselves, and where the teachers are only facilitators in that learning process? So that was the starting point.

In 1986 I had a long chat with Rati Bartholomew; we exchanged our views on the state of theatre in general and children's theatre in particular. We agreed to approach Sahitya Kala Parishad (SKP), the Government of Delhi's cultural wing, with a proposal for children's theatre workshops in summer, in different parts of Delhi. At that time children's theatre was not all that popular in Delhi. There was the National School of Drama (NSD) which had workshops in NSD itself, Rekha Jain used to do something through her Umang, Barry John was propagating the fresh idea of 'theatre in education', and perhaps there were a few others, like Prabhjyot Kulkarni. So we approached Sahitya

Kala Parishad on an experimental basis, keeping two or three major departures from prevalent notions in mind. One was to let theatre be decentralized and allow it to happen all over Delhi. Number two concerned the usual scene for children's theatre where one made a script and children acted it out. This entire process needed to be drastically changed. The children's ability to make their own scripts was to be emphasized, letting them evolve through dramatics. Children were to be their own spokespersons or the agents of their own creativity. It is only now that we hear so many people claiming that children are doing their own scripts, and that is a very positive approach. Three, we wanted to reverse the scenario of children parroting the director's instructions, and lastly, to give the impression to the children that theatre is not an expensive affair. That was unfortunately a notion prevalent in children's theatre at that point of time. The director would have a script ready and the children were made to do things like in any adult play. This scenario needed some drastic changes. We wanted to emphasize that children are quite capable of evolving their own natural game of drama. The question is: can you have children evolve their own production and call it 'theatre'? In the West they have termed such plays 'creative drama'. Children's theatre is serious business there and done by trained actors. My answer is, 'Yes, we can have children's theatre played by children,' but this will be special theatre. Two centres were opened in the first year and I think the difference was quite remarkable. For four years I continued there though Rati left in the very first year. Both of us wanted this experiment to carry on throughout the year, not as a holiday affair, but then Sahitya Kala Parishad could not do that. Rati discontinued but insisted that I continue, so I continued for four more years.

So that was the phase with SKP. We were trying out certain things, when all the scripts were created through workshops. We tried to develop a particular method—first, coming up with an idea and through the workshops, through the games, through various situations, we tried to explore the possibilities of that idea. Then there were story sessions and when the story somehow got linked up, we worked on the sequences. And when the sequences in turn were built up, we got down to the joining of those sequences and to seeking out the nuances of the story. So what really emerged is that the children had a particular perspective on things and it was very important to project those perspectives. This is my idea of children's theatre: where children explore and create by viewing the world through the lenses of child drama. The director's job is to facilitate, to ensure that children play their natural games, and to take care of the various technicalities of theatre. It was not direct education as such but more a self-learning process. We feel that this is very important in society today because creative spaces are shrinking steadily. My approach to children's theatre is to provide a platform where a child can speak out. Adult actors can never create this universe of children on stage. When adults do children's theatre, it is a different thing. What is that special method that one could apply to children? To start with I thought that the director should be the facilitator; not directing or controlling—something which has become so dominant in theatre these days. He is not there on stage but his input becomes so clearly evident—as if it is the director's play—whereas I think theatre is essentially an actor's medium.

After this SKP project I really did not do much for about two years precisely because I wanted a place where I could continue working for some time. Then in 1989 we registered our group, ANANT—Association for Nascent Art and Natural Theatre. It is true that children's theatre has provided me with simple answers to many nagging questions dealing with complex theoretical issues. First, it had to be through play—the emphasis on the play element, very natural to children, is very important. Second, it

must be treated as a process of self-actualization. Third, I find that somewhere in children's theatre or in a child's perception of the world there lies some relation to celebration and festivity. The element of fun and joy, the creative madness, the fantastic and the larger-than-life, all these seem to reach out beyond our daily horizons. This too is festivity: breaking the mundane, experiencing the release. Children's theatre must experience this release in a mood to celebrate 'The Child Within'. It is in this way that children's theatre is universal. If one can link up with this festive aspect or the celebration aspect then it becomes more joyous.

Unfortunately, theatre over the years has grown either intellectual or flimsy. A lot of children's theatre moralizes or imposes adult idiosyncrasies on the child. That at times is



Mela, 1987.

stamped as popular—before parental crowds or peer groups or patronising VIPs praising the moral of planting trees, the cries against child labour or environmental degradation and so on. What is popular? That which is propagated and patronized? Or that which releases you into joy and freedom? For that, the creation of a festive mood is very important. Traditionally, theatre has been part of a bigger festivity. The issue is to re-create that mood. How that could be done without a larger celebration, say as in Ram Lila? How to do that with the children? Three critics (those days the newspaper critics used to come on their own) used the same caption—'New Trends in Children's Theatre'—about my very first play, *Mela*, which was a 15-minute enactment of a *mela* (fair) sequence and about Rati's *Hoshiar ki Diary*. The reviews did not discuss the theoretical or technical aspects—these might not have been clear to them—but new trends were evident to them in the use of the props, the simple make-believe, the nascent approach to exchanges between buyers and sellers, the spontaneous games played with toy witches and the fairytale mode. It is there that I discovered that fantasy is deeply rooted in the dailyness of our lives. If, during my childhood in the village, I pretended to

be Veer Abhimanyu with a stick in my hand, punishing the 'enemy' shrubs on my way to victory, my own child in the city would do the same as Superman. Fantasy is created by the milieu. It was this perspective of looking at the world that is big and has to be mastered. Both the plays in different ways did this.

In *Mela* there was no story at all. At particular points children were in particular spots, maybe one buying ice-cream, another watching *bandar nach* and the third selling something . . . all sorts of activities were happening on stage. I remember Surindar Mathur, Secretary of the Sahitya Kala Parishad, crying out nervously during the technical rehearsal, 'Ashish, *yeh kya ho raha hein?*' (Ashish, what is happening?) The



Khel Khel Mein, 1988.

simple device was that the children would be in particular spots at particular moments but between those moments they were free to do anything. We played again and again to make sure that these 'extra' activities did not hamper the flow or disturb one main action at any one point of time. This concept of freedom with limits gave rise to spontaneity. This spontaneity is a very important thing and the way to develop this spontaneity without losing track of the bigger picture was the simple device that we worked on.

VIKRAM IYENGAR. So this was there in the actual show, meaning they were free to improvise as long as they could, on the day of the show?

AG. Yes, I accept it as a principle that no play is a product. It's not a final product. There was no script. *Mela* was never written, in fact it couldn't be written. If one has to write, then one has to go into little descriptions also, and then it will lose the whole essence. The subsequent plays had very good stories, some of which I tried to write down. Even Bal Bhavan, where I worked in the next phase, were very eager to publish the scripts so

we tried to write them down. My one weakness was I did not have control over the language i.e. Hindi but this had another advantage. Because I was weak in Hindi whatever inputs came, came mostly from the children. Hence I became a scriptwriter by accident, not by design. Because when the play is being put together we are not always sure, unlike a structured play where you have a lot of pre-planning. It does not work that way for us. In a workshop situation there are hundreds and thousands of reflections and sequences made but ultimately what will happen or what may actually be incorporated in the play might be just 10 to 15 percent of the whole thing. You do not always know how the links will be worked out. So there is always an open-ended air about it. There is scope for improvisation—in my opinion the essence of children's theatre—only when the basic structure is done. In absolutely structured plays children are reduced to tools in the hands of the director and I do not support that form of theatre. I hate that sort of work, where children are used as puppets. I believe that they are the agents and they must be able to do things themselves

Two things emerged in the Bal Bhavan phase. One regarding methodology—the approach of 'extending child drama to theatre'. And the other regarding the use of available resources and what it meant in terms of children's theatre. Previously, in the Sahitya Kala Parishad, the concern had been about the formal notion of children's theatre and the aim of making plays by children. In those days I used to frequently ask myself, 'what is stage reality?' or 'what is the meaning of space in theatre?' I tried to arrive at the answers by observing children and by being part of the play-making process. That gave me a lot of insight into the art of theatre. In Bal Bhavan, I came to accept that the perspective was also the methodology—extending child drama to theatre. Children act and this is the process by which they understand the world and their surroundings, and this why they imitate elders, parents, teachers, even cop-and-robber situations while playing *chor police*. To me, the question was whether child drama could be extended to theatre where we facilitate the children to act/play not as professional actors but as natural players. So if we incorporate direction and design in all these activities, it should only be to enhance the children's playing quality and not to show off great directorial capabilities or a designer's magnum opus. The dramatic element is very important, the festive aspect is important and the open-endedness of the script is important; and of course, the children's own perspective of looking at things is very important. These are things we added on in the second phase at Bal Bhavan.

VI. Did Bal Bhavan approach you or did you approach them?

AG. I never approached anybody other than Sahitya Kala Parishad. Bal Bhavan invited me to do integrated dramatics. Bal Bhavan is a place where you have everything under the sun. Its philosophy is similar to what I used to work for—open learning and a movement away from formal learning, where children can participate in any activities they choose, according to their interests. I was invited to do a special drama course for children called the Integrated Performing Arts. In that course I was offered one puppeteer, one dance teacher, one music teacher and one artist. So basically these four elements. I could always get more if I needed them, that was the understanding. In the first year I could work with all these four people and the production was also really liked by everyone because it had so many elements in it. The plot was entirely evolved by the children, blending reality and fantasy in a very creative way. It was interestingly titled *Daon Pench* (A Play of Knots). It started with a very interesting idea. On the second day of the workshop I asked them, '*Aap log kiske upar play banana chahte ho*?' and several ideas came up. Someone suggested kite flying, and the rest of them agreed. In Bal

Bhavan most of the children were from the lower middle class and the poor families of Chandni Chowk and Old Delhi, or from the trans-Jamuna resettlement colonies. They were very difficult to control but they were very interested and physically fit, so you could ask them to do anything; they were also very mischievous and had to be controlled strictly. However, they came up with the idea of kite flying which gradually became a sort of research project. What are the reaction of the parents, what are the reactions of the neighbourhood? What are the reactions if there is an accident? The workshop turned out to be a tool for investigating the entire phenomenon of kite flying. Kite flying is a game of knots, not simply of the kites but of other related things—their activites and reflections while flying the kites. So two parallel stories emerged, the form was flexible, the storyline was flexible. It was not natural and thus there was a lot of scope for stylization. So dance was introduced, as was music, then puppetry. These were all designed initially by the children following which the designer added his final touches. Hence it all came together really effectively.

In the next year at Bal Bhavan people took things for granted as happens in a *sarkari* institution—you really cannot do too much. Ultimately my work was reduced to chasing music teachers and dance teachers, so I gave up. But then they did an excellent play based on the institution of the government school. Most of the kids were from the government schools and that was the first time we became aware of certain things that actually go on in such schools. I must share with you the incident which served as the starting point for this play. There were two Muslim boys who were part of the workshop. One day they came to my house and one of them said, 'Tomorrow I have my exams'. I said, 'If you have your exams don't go here and there, just go home and study.' And he said, '*Nahi, mera bhai de dega.*' (No, my brother will sit for it). I could not understand what he was saying for quite a while and neither could he understand my surprise at his answer. Then I came to know that this is was a very usual practice in government schools. This year, in contrast to the first year, we were all hunting for a theme and none of could not agree on any one suggestion. So I asked them 'Can you make a play on this?' Everyone agreed and we started working on the children's personal experiences in government schools, from which evolved the play *Chor Chor*. That came out to be an interesting way of presenting issues, especially the horrors of the present education system. It was covered by two-three newspapers and flashed by UNI—they probably got attracted to the topic of the play. Whenever there is something sensational, more people come for it. Newspapers used front page captions like 'It's no more child's play', 'Students take their teachers to task' . . . It is then that I decided that something really serious had to be done with the educational system.

In the third year we attempted an unusual play—a 'nonsense' play—and the process was very interesting. When you ask children what sort of a play they want to do, they always say something '*jisme maza aa jaye*' (something which is fun to do) like comedy. I was working on the nonsense element and thought, let's see whether nonsense can happen or not. The end result I think had more or less my inputs; it was not entirely the children's inputs, more of a joint effort. But I had to get the children's insights otherwise there was no point in doing children's theatre. One has to get their perspective. That play was called *Oo-ta-pa-ta-ga-ga-rd—'jiska koi sidha matlab nehi hain'* (That which has no meaning). The story was woven around a sutradhar who bears the great burden of tradition, which he carries in his *jhola* (a big bag), with a thread in his hand symbolizing continuity. The thread ends at a spot called the stage. Unless he ties a new knot or a new thread he cannot proceed further. When he attempts to do so the whole situation becomes chaotic and the characters come out using all the props and costumes that the

sutradhar carries. So 'nonsense' situations did develop, but the tendency was to fall back upon 'sense'. Making a nonsense play is really difficult.

In Bal Bhavan we tried to project children's plays for adults of all ages. It was not like the earlier children's plays for children of all ages. *Chor Chor*—children giving a perspective, children saying that these things happen in school but not in a complaining tone. There are many interesting stories behind its evolution. But then these are the things that we adults must see; whatever was happening we were not listening to it from a child's point of view. It is always the adults who were intervening and trying to say this is what you are. So we tried to make a point here—that these are plays made by the children for adults. Like the simple dictum that every man has a child inside him—similarly every child has an adult within. In that self the child is 'like' an adult—observing, imitating and internalizing the 'adult'. That is why every child can rationalize like an adult but he has his own logic, argument and way of saying things.

The second thing that happened was the gradual link with education. And by education I mean more than formal education. We did a seminar with some other theatre people earlier where Mala Hashmi was present. It was organized by Poonam Batra of the Central Institute of Education, Delhi University in January, 1998. They had started the B. El. Ed [Bachelor of Elementary Education] course in which Mala was also teaching. They were very eager . . . they understood the necessity of introducing arts and particularly dramatics for teachers—the prospective teachers who were then students. But they were not very sure in what way it should be given shape, so that was the beginning. In that panel discussion there was Mala along with Abdul [Latif Khatana], Barry [John] and myself. In fact, as far as I can remember, that was the first time some exchange of dialogue took place between theatre persons on children's theatre. For so long we had not given it any real thought, we had only been working on mental images.

Children should play, playing is necessary. It is necessary for his motor reflexes, for exploration of the physical space. But why is it necessary that the child does dramatics? Why is it such a basic necessity? Simply because the child also needs to explore the mental space. That is my theory, and the question now is, how can that be linked up

Titli Boli, 1989.



with education? Unfortunately this self-learning process is absolutely curbed in our formal schooling system where it becomes a one-way traffic. Can we build up space for children where then can actualize themselves, 'learn to be'? Arts education, particularly in dramatics, is an excellent vehicle and that is our demand, that this space be opened up for the child. And not only for children of a particular age but for children of any age. Whereever self-learning stops standardization starts, and when the standardization is complete, man becomes a moron. At the opposite end is a creative person who remains playful throughout his life. This is a very clear question—do we need standardized people? Or, do we need creative people? If the latter is what we need, then children's theatre must create that space.

VI. Who were the people present there? Who were the audience?

AG. The audience comprised mainly students and some of the faculty members.

VI. Prospective B.El.Ed students?

AG. There were prospective teachers from five of the Delhi University colleges where they have introduced B.El.Ed.

VI. So this was actually when the B.El.Ed was planning to introduce dramatics.

AG. Yes.

VI. But before that they had already started the course?

AG. Yes they had started the course. Barry was taking classes in one college, Abdul was also taking classes in another college but I was new to it. Mala was not new to it.

VI. So at this time they were actually about to formalize and structure the dramatic input into the course?

AG. Yes but how was that to happen? There had been two or three other meetings including a one-day workshop with teachers-in-charge. All these five or six colleges have a teacher-in-charge for this course. So we had a workshop with them because unless they were tuned in, it would be very difficult to pass on. In the mean time NCERT had called, they were planning a syllabus change and they had accepted the four pillars of education that UNESCO had formulated which included art and dramatic education becoming part of the curriculum. This was the change. In the 1950s it was extra-curriculum, in 1970's it was co-curriculum and now they are attempting to make it part of the curriculum itself. We—Mala, Faizal Alkazi, Pandit Narendra Sharma and many others—deliberated on a syllabus for dramatics and arts in coordination with subject areas like Language, Mathematics and Environmental Studies. Our approach was holistic. We recommended against appointing a drama class which, within the schooling system, would suffer the fate of music or arts classes. The pedagogic elements inherent in performance can be internalized and used by every teacher. What they need is training and sensitization.

Recently we have done a 15-day workshop where I took five sessions not on dramatics as such but on visual arts, where dramatics formed an important component. The final demonstration was through dramatics simply because dramatics includes all types of art forms. Whenever we get to do such workshops, we think about the things that should be linking dramatics to education. Now I have been trying to divide it into three stages. One, how a teacher equips oneself with elements of drama. We remember only those teachers who have been excellent performers. It is not simply a teacher's knowledge that convinces a child, good teachers always perform; their styles may be different, one can be exuberant, one can be quiet but they have the capacity to attract

which simply put, is a performance. So then we tried to draw parallels between the qualities of a teacher and those of a performer. Amazingly enough, they were more or less the same. Voice, delivery, diction, poise, gestures, expressions—everything is the same. Only the content is different. Second, the creative drama aspect and how one uses the classroom situation for learning with children as the target group. So, the question of resourcefulness arises, exploring connections between subject areas and the space for creative teaching/learning. The teachers must also equip children to use and create resources. So first the teachers need to be equipped and then the children. Third, every school has a problem of time and pressure—in two days time some visitor is coming, we have to do something. In these teacher-workshops you come across lots of such complaints. They don't have this and they don't have that, how can they do annual day productions in such a short time? We try to be practical in introducing the idea of project work. Use drama as a project. You prepare a personal project with the children, say, on Geography, Science or any other subject. If you go on preparing, you can finalize it in a short time. I demonstrated this with the Kendriya Vidyalay teachers in Bal Bhavan. They had three days and in those three days we prepared a presentation on Geography. We asked the teachers to specify any aspect which could be used and they came up with the idea of Ganga. In three days time they cannot include everything but some aspects of the Ganga can be worked on—for example the birth of Ganga at Gangotri and then moving on to Ganga Sagar. They were divided into groups to explore the various ways of doing it. One group used mythology, another took the geo-physical aspect, still others worked on the environement. Ganga's journey was shown as the journey of a person—from birth until she merges into the sea, progressing through different ages. When she was young, Ganga was lively like the fountains or the hill streams. The growth of Ganga was linked to different geographical locations, soil conditions, pollution, rituals, to Ganga finding her lost sisters, Jamuna and Saraswati, at Triveni, their collective progress until the Farakka Barrage from where proceed under different names and meet once again at the

Nanha Nakalchi, 1997. Child actors imitating the audience—a study of child psychology through drama.





Worskhop conducted for the parents and younger ones by the children themselves (1995).

Ganga Sagar, at the fag end of their life. So you see, much can be done on a single topic and there is no need for a special teacher. Any teacher who can handle these little techniques of dramatics, of music, of art, of puppetry can do this. They use simple things—masks, finger or box puppetry, they don't have to be professional masks but anything that one can create simply. Every one of us can do something or the other. If one says, *'Mujhe taal nehi ata'*—one cannot dance because he or she doesn't understand rhythm—we can explain that one is wrong to think so because we are always moving in rhythm, even when we are walking. These are the simple tips one can give. Another example could be puppetry. In puppetry the basic principle is concentration on and contact with the puppet. It can be a rod puppet or it can be any puppet but the moment the concentration is gone the puppet will not be able to live. These little things matter a lot. These small insights into technique may help the teacher to be resourceful, and also provide children with a creative space. The only drawback is that the schooling system is not yet tuned to such integral learning although the time has come for such changes to be implemented. The authorities must be apprised of this need. Another problem is that most of the schools are looking for shortcuts, and in expensive public schools, a lot of dramatics or arts occur more as part of show business, thus subverting the motive force.

So this is what we are gearing our unit ANANT to. We have also done a special education workshop, interacting for the first time with mentally handicapped children. Physically handicapped children arouse a lot of sympathy but mentally handicapped ones are considered to be a burden. We were shocked when we found how these children were isolated and frightened because they were treated as unwelcome burdens by everyone, including their families. Irshad, who joined me in Bal Bhavan as a student, was assisting me along with two others, Manoj and Imran, who were also Bal Bhavan products. They were all problem children when they first joined and this is one instance that proves how dramatics can change people completely. The same boy who came to me and said, *'Exam mera bhai de dega'* (My brother will sit for my exam) is today an excellent facilitator at workshops.

Irshad has studied only upto Class 12. But apart from that he has done mime courses with Niranjan Goswami. He is a very eager learner. Imran, who is in the second year of college, has gone in for theatre and is doing a lot here and there. He is also working with us. Manoj, another Bal Bhavan product, is specializing in design. We are trying to engage them all. So in this particular special education programme we found that dramatics was really an enabling tool. Again, the principle was the same, so when these children are shown how to do things, they really can do a lot more than expected. Irshad conducted the month-long workshop for the mentally-handicapped and that was an immense learning experience for all of us. We did a play using a script—a change from the usual format that I use. The script was written by a friend, Kishore Thakral, based on the Panchatantra stories. The first thing that we decided was that the children were going to be alone on stage, without any support from the teachers. Earlier, the usual practice was to support the children on stage. We were sure that 'showing' off a good play was not our main objective. The *process* of helping them to do more—call it therapeutic—was more important. The teachers and the management were very nervous and said this was impossible. But the month-long workshop yielded tremendous results and the children were ready; when I took over to direct them, I found them completely prepared and eager. We went on stage, took the exact measurements and designed accordingly. Everything was pre-planned. Kashinath Raha, an excellent designer, helped us with the design. Improvisation was out of the question because it was difficult for the children to take more than one instruction at a time. It had to be a repetitive exercise yet at the same time conveying a certain spontaneity, a feeling of joy and freedom. Everything had to be done in such a way that in spite of the meticulous planning, the children did not feel restricted in any way. That was the basic challenge and I think the programme went well. Even on the final day we thought the auditorium would be a new imput for the children to tackle despite rehearsing with the measurements and props. Also we had been unable to have any rehearsals with the stage lights. The important aspects of special education are increasing the children's confidence and second, repetitive excercises. And these children enjoy repetition unlike normal children who get bored with the routine of it all. The more you make them repeat the same things the more enabled they become and many of them have shown an improvement in their formal learning as well. The name of the school is Prabhat, run by Society for Child Development under professional guidance of paediatricians and child psychologists. They are also conducting a teacher's training workshop on special education. They have invited us to take some of their classes. So this was another beginning where we explored the relationship between drama and special education.

VI. Tell me a little more about ANANT.

AG. ANANT was registered in 1989 with the initial idea of doing children's theatre and, from time to time, plays for adults. We started with Khirodeprasad Vidyavinod's *Ali Baba*, translated by Ruma Ghosh. Living in Delhi, in Chittaranjan Park, the idea came to me that that perhaps we could play a catalytic role in translating some of the classical Bengali plays into Hindi and also translating some of the Hindi or other regional language plays into Bengali. In 1989 we did only one play called *Raja ki Khoj* and now we are reviving it in a different way. *Raja ki Khoj* was a scripted play which I originally wrote in Bengali. It was based on several Panchatantra stories. We took it to approximately 16–20 schools apart from several public performances. It involved singing and dancing and was a more or less 'total' play. After that we did not do much because I was so involved with Bal Bhavan and other places. The group was practically defunct

Last year, some of the workshop children, who have grown into young adults, met and decided to form a group. Thus ANANT, which was revived only last year with a play called *Garbadjhala*. The uniqueness of *Garbadjhala* is that it is entirely based on rhymes, that too traditional rhymes mostly by important writers and poets. These rhymes have been collected and arranged in sequences in the form of a collage play. We had earlier planned 'rhyme plays' in Bengali. Many of my friends had often asked me to do something with our own children because I used to do so much elsewhere. So I casually picked up two children and did two or three plays in-between. They were all different types. One was with Bengali rhymes—a simple rendering and not a dramatization. We simply called it *Choda*. The other was *Teen Rae*. We took selected parts from the works of Upendra Kisor Ray, Sukumar Ray and Satyajit Ray, and this family's creation of a universe for children was presented through a collage play. And given this impetus, I realized that it could be dramatized in Hindi and this is what has been done.

We are now doing *Raja ki Khoj* in the *kathavachan* style. This is another exploration. I thought this was a very powerful medium being neglected. The idea came from seeing Teejan Bai on television. I first tried this in Bengali with the Murshidabad version of *Kathokata*, the Bengal version of narrative performance. The resultant production, *Kathokatay Agomani*, turned out to be a success. But then all over India there are so many forms of *kathavachan*. The form gives the idea of total theatre—involving music, songs, movement, situation, role play, dramatic build-up. It is entirely actor-oriented. There is nothing on the stage except the actor/s. Now I started this *kathavachan* style in a different way. Normally there is one singer supported by musicians. In *Raja ki Khoj*, instead of a single narrator-actor we have ten *kathavachaks* narrating and playing roles, adding dynamics in terms of visual language.

So far our work has been appreciated by the general public. I am talking of a discerning public. But the discerning public will give further inputs, whether positive or negative. One can go on working from there. So whatever we do, we will make sure we don't do stereotypical children's theatre. In fact, there have been requests from the science groups to devise plays for school children. For us this is a great opportunity. We in ANANT want to explore the different ways of popularizing theatre and also utilizing its potential for educational purposes, for equipping teachers, by relating it to subject areas, and creating spaces for better learning.

Another thing—we are not completely in agreement with [the concept of] theatre in education. This is because a self-learning, open-learning situation is different from theatre in education. Theatre in education basically wants to convey the same thing in an entertaining way. Learning must be something different, wherein I will say that theatre *is* education. So there is a vital difference between 'in' and 'is'. We have to create that space for self-actualization. The formal schooling system has shut the door on nature. That, in one word, is our goal—open the door. Theatre as education can help in doing so.

In the Sahitya Kala Parishad stage it was drama extended to theatre, in the Bal Bhawan phase it was children making plays for all ages, and now we are working on drama as education. It's a total learning situation and that learning has to be entertaining and fun.

Don't use the child, don't use anybody. A child is a person and not an object. A child has dignity. One has to recognize this first. Look for what the children are saying, recognize what they are capable of, and allow them to speak out about the world that they have inherited—how they view the world that you have created. I am sure they will make you laugh and make you wonder as well.



We Can Change, 1998, at Presentation Convent, New Delhi.

A play presenting the simple perspectives of a child will help us—the audience as well as the theatre persons—face critical issues. For example, the question of stage reality. Once, in SKP, I tackled this issue of stage reality in the course of a workshop. I usually start my workshop with a simple game of transformation—say, how many different ways you can use a pen. Children find it interesting to play it like a flute or use it like a knife or a hair pin. That year an interesting conversation took place after one round of transformations. I asked the children, 'How come this pen could be so many different things? How could that happen?' There were many responses: 'It's fun', 'It happens', 'We do it' and so on. One child, sitting quietly in the group, suddenly said, 'It happens because we accept it'. I found the answer to be at once profound and simple. It is a better answer than the famous 'as if' or 'willing suspension of disbelief'. There is absolutely no need for further theory, this is theory in itself. So I took that clue and till now there has been no need to change that. On the very first day I repeat the same thing. I come to the same answer and then I tell the children, '*Yeh mana neka aur maanne ka khel hai*'. A play is made when you accept what is happening to be true and make others accept it in the same spirit. If there is a flaw in your acceptance, there is a flaw in the play. Proceeding on this understanding, it became so much easier to communicate to children that the core of dramatic play is related to transformation and honesty. It became easier to make them realize the importance of transformation—transform yourself, transform space, transform objects and transform time. So you can inject the idea of truthfulness, honesty, integrity from here . . . and I do so.

On another occasion I worked on 'space'. I realized that children refer to three different spaces in theatre—the ideational, the stage and the auditorium. Here we can t talk in detail about these. But this much is sure that I have formed my basic notions about theatre while working with children. In children's theatre one has to go back to absolute fundamentals and seek simple answers. It is from children's theatre that I learnt

that theatre is related to festivity and celebration, to playfulness, that it has a lot to do with basic emotions and larger-than-life qualities, that fantasy has relation to milieu, and that dramatic art is a game of constructing and reconstructing reality and creating a meaningful universe.

I am not a theoretician and there is very little scope for research in the way we work. Since I am involved in some social science research I understand the value of research in the course of workshops—materials generated in the form of their activities, reflections, stories, dreams. Why can't this material be used for research? That means there is a connection between research in the social sciences and dramatics which can be explored. In the university circles I am trying to bring in this idea of performative research. It is not like a scholar writing earth-shattering books. There are little things that go on here and there which can be collected. If we go into a village and do a month-long workshop with full documentation facilities where children will play their roles, reflect on their lives, tell their tales involving their parents and their community . . . I don't think there is any research, no observer's observations that can reveal so much insight. So this is another area I am trying to explore—again, children's theatre has provided me with this input.

I think three or four things that ANANT has done are definitely different. Even if we make a play, it's from the children's own perception. Workshopping is an important component and in fact we have been doing many workshops. In Mother's International School [New Delhi] we conducted a teachers' workshop and they remarked that it was a spiritual experience—maybe they are accustomed to that sort of language! But it has to be an experience, not only technique. Techniques are important, but they must not be prominent. The experience part, the 'to be' part is the main emphasis. That is another problem. Today you have hundreds and thousands of teaching techniques, but very few people are conscious that techniques are only aids. They have to facilitate, you cannot just think teaching the technique is the be-all-and-end-all of everything. The teachers are searching for a 'bag of tricks', forgetting that pedagogy is an experience in learning, and

Gadbadjhala, 1999.



that children want to learn whatever they want to learn and not whatever they are forced to memorize. Use techniques—constantly go on searching for appropriate techniques –but help realize the potential in every child. An example: I found recitation to be an excellent method for voice training instead of artificial ways of voice culture which is so prevalent in training schools. When you recite, you learn voice modulation and breath control, learn to punctuate and create meaning, put emotion and create nuances . . . the list is endless. Traditional play-rhymes are particularly helpful for children. You may call them nonsense rhymes but they help a child to play with sound, rhythm, patterns . . . Or, say, the tongue twisters—what an excellent way to learn good pronunciation. Similarly, the traditional storytelling formats of *kathavachan*. Add to this the natural tendency of a child to dance, sing, paint—you find an all-embracing theatre emerging. These I found were excellent ways to 'train' children, if you wish to call it



Raja Ki Khoj, 2000.

training at all. There are parents who ask about 'what we teach'. Our standard answer is that we do not teach. We add that the whole world is programmed to teach a child, but we are here to provide a space where a child can make things happen and can learn as well. Many parents disapprove, and we keep hoping that one day they will come back.

As part of our children's theatre workshop, we do a joint session with children and their parents. These always turn out to be discovery sessions—there are aspects of children that parents come to know for the first time, and the same occurs with the children. After one such workshop, a child suddenly exclaimed, 'Oh, my father can dance!' and one father's response about his child was, 'My God, she imitates her mother so well!' In workshops with children, we have discovery sessions almost every day. Maybe it is this spirit that keeps us alive.

In ANANT, we have a mixed bag of people. There are young adults, seniors, parents and friends. Young people are coming, attending, learning and performing. Some go out some stay back. Our initiative is to make everyone feel that there is an importance in

being playful, in growing, in perseverance—no one will be a loser, and everyone will gain in one way or the other. This is life, this is education and this also is what children's theatre means.

[*This interview by Vikram Iyengar was taken four years ago, in the second year of ANANT. ANANT is now in its sixth year after revival. The following note from Ashish Ghosh mentions some of the developments since the interview.*]

ANANT now has several plays in its repertory—*Gadbadjhala* (Hindi) and *Daon Pench* (Hindi) and *Teene Netra* (Bengali), all by children; *Raja ki Khoj* (Hindi) and *Kisse* (Hindi) for children, played by adults; *Patrashuddhi* (Hindi) and *Dekha Andekha* (Hindi), and *Kathokatay Agomani* (Bengali), for a general audience.

Gadbadjhala has had about 40 shows; *Raja ki Khoj* has had more than 50 shows in New Delhi and elsewhere. *Kathokatay Agomani* has been performed over 60 times all over India.

ANANT has realized the importance of 'culture friendly' traditions while making plays. We believe that traditions must be included in our daily lives by constant updating and contextualizing. Four of the most popular plays do precisely that. *Gadbadjhala* uses rhymes to reflect the way of life around us, *Raja ki Khoj* is performed in the narrative style of *kathavachan*, *Kisse* uses storytelling styles from the wide range of *kissa* practices, and *Kathokatay Agomani* is able to universalize its appeal through *kathokata*.

An increasing emphasis is put on working with economically disadvantaged children. Besides the month-long work with SAHMAT earlier, regular workshops have started last year with slum children, with support from Prajna Foundation. There is a great need to expand dramatics beyond the urban middle class. A fortnight-long workshop at Gorakhpur with elected Panchayat women turned out to be a great tool in capacity enhancement.

Maulana Azad Centre for Elementary and Social Education, Department of Education, University of Delhi, collaborated with ANANT to produce a book and an audio cassette on play rhymes. This has been released as resource material for teachers, the first ever collection of traditional play rhymes in Hindi. The Department decided to collaborate after seeing our production of *Gadbadjhala*.

Preparations are on for a publication comprising plays evolved by children in workshops conducted by Ashish Ghosh.

Our work in the field of 'drama and education' is expanding. The practical work at private and government schools, increasing number of teacher training sessions all over India, involvement in more colleges for the B.El.Ed. courses, and participation in seminars, writings, etc. are clarifying our conceptual and theoretical understanding.

We have done three major school projects—two in Delhi and one in Jaipur—exploring a theme through the methods of dramatics, culminating in what can be called a 'theatre mela'.

For the fifth year in a row, our annual workshops and plays with the mentally-handicapped at Prabhat have strengthened our understanding of special education. The Society for Child Development, looking after Prabhat, is shortly starting a research-oriented project, Theradrama, with our help.



Ashish Ghosh in Kathokatay Agomani.

Both the NCERT projects—five-year-old syllabus development exercise and the School Theatre Project—have slipped into oblivion.

ANANT is now in the process of producing two new plays and planning for an extensive actor training programme.

ANANT is performing *Raja ki Khoj* and *Gadbadjhala* at the Jashne Bachpan, the National Children's Theatre Festival organized by National School of Drama on 15 October, 2003. ANANT will also participate in the Children's Theatre Festival organized by NIPA in mid-November.

'education for life'

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHANDRA JAIN

CHANDRA JAIN is a theatre personality based in Bangalore and the initiator of Kadambari, a non-profit group for the promotion of education through the performing arts, fine arts and crafts particularly among children. In this interview of March 1999, she speaks about her reactions to the prevailing education system in India, how and why the creative arts can and should be part of the educational process, and the role Kadambari plays in facilitating and encouraging the inclusion and appreciation of creative arts at the school level.

CHANDRA JAIN. Kadambari started five years ago. It was essentially begun in response to the tremendous need for children to relate to their own environment and their own traditions. If these are not a part of their childhood years, their own views and growing up, then a deficit is left in the personality which is impossible to fill later. Some people later on are able to understand that and work on it themselves. But most of them just grow up with this one-sided development and a huge lacuna remains. I have always been concerned about education among children. So it seemed that there was room for one to experiment and see how the gap could be bridged, whether the lacuna which exists in the education system today could be addressed in a different way. Keeping this in mind I decided to do a workshop for children. The very first workshop we decided to do was through folk dances and music. Because folk dances are spontaneous expressions of people's joys. And in India, the basic principle of any performing art has been celebration and the expression of the joy that accompanies it. So I felt that it would not only open the kids to the diversity that exists in India, but it would also be much simpler to relate to these, through a very active participation. There is music, there is togetherness, there are no competitions, and there is creative expression. Maybe through the music and the rhythmic patterns, we can also bring them outdoors, take them closer to Nature. Because, as you know, in folk forms it's constantly Nature that finds expression. It relates to the cycle of seasons, the time of the day, whether it's harvest time or sowing time. In a way an entire philosophy finds expression in these forms.

So we took Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar. These are the states we concentrated upon. It was a month-long workshop. And it was tremendous. Not only did they learn all the songs and discover the joy of different languages, but they started relating to all the poetry and imagery that was present. Physically it was very demanding; it's very important for the children to have the sense of energy flowing through them. Their receptiveness was immense. They used to dance four hours a day, from nine [am] to one [in the afternoon]. Then there were lots of other things to do as well. And just to share the process they had evolved, we had a presentation by the children at the end. It was a great surprise because we had almost 600 people sitting and wanting to see what would happen. It's a wonderful way of discovering not only oneself but also the environment. Throughout that year we continued working with the folk forms, connecting them with the seasons, with the festivals. We found that all these children, particularly at that first workshop, were from

varied backgrounds. Many of the children were from a very westernized background and at the end of it, the appreciation of their own identity was enormous. The following year we had a workshop on theatre, again using the Indian frame, using Indian languages. So it was not theatre alone as an activity, but theatre which became our own methodology for sensitizing the child to the world around him and discovering himself with the inherent trends of his own culture.

The second major workshop was done in collaboration with National School of Drama. We had Mr Subhash Udgata and Mr V. K. Sharma. This was in 1988 when, in Delhi, they had also begun to think about theatre in education. This was also when we were thinking of starting something and it was fortunate that we connected. For us theatre was not the only way. We felt that yes, theatre is the most complete way. We can address the same issue through the performing arts in different ways and theatrical aspects and theatrical inputs have to come in. We may focus on music in theatre, we may



Scenes from Natyarangoli, 1999.

focus on crafts in theatre, we may focus on rhythm in theatre—[anything] which finds a place in theatre but is not necessarily theatre only. These were the lines along which we were thinking and we continued calling resource people from elsewhere. We would conceptualize and think of particular themes which seemed to make a lot of sense at that point and then we would choose the person who could come and help us. So over the years we did classical music to explore seasons, poetry to explore more creativity in children . . . We called Bansi Kaul because we felt that his methodology, having the clown element which has a lot movement in it, would be suitable for children. It was wonderful because he responded to our ideas. To get a senior director like Bansi Kaul to come down and work for 45 days with a bunch of kids was really wonderful. The idealism in all of us kept on finding expression, kept on proving to us that it was time all these things went back to school and became part of the school curriculum.

So then we started going to the schools and doing workshops. That was very difficult, because the schools were not willing to give us time in their schedules. Everything had to be geared towards an annual event and they wanted us to work only with those children who had been selected for the programme, which was totally against our philosophy and methodology. We felt that every child had to go through this

experience. Some may take it up and become actors but the greater need is for people to find that link with the performing arts within themselves and then learn to appreciate it, learn to feel it and, in different ways, perhaps give expression to it. We did manage to get into three-four schools where they gave us free reign. In the month of February to work for 15 days and have the children not attending even one class was tremendous. We took it up as a challenge. one hundred and forty children, 180 children, 236—those were the kinds of numbers we were working with. And to see whether even in that short time, we could somehow, somewhere, touch upon the sensitivity of a child. In Valley School we chose Phagun as our concept and addressed that. It was February when we did it and that's the time Holi is celebrated. We were talking about Holi, about Phagun. It brought in poetry, it brought in art, it brought in music, even the crafts, the entire expression of the season happened through these various aspects. We were able to show all these connections, the theme, the lifestyle, the performing arts, and the thought process. At the end of that 15-day workshop we had a presentation for about a thousand



Scenes from Natyarangoli, 1999.

people. It was not the perfection of the performance which was the focus but more the sharing. So it did not matter if every child didn't sing fabulously or dance fabulously, but overall the sense of participation, the sense that somewhere the experience changed a child. In fact we were even able to bring in secular harmony issues, connect Vasant with Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti's durbar, connect Sufism—the same yellow colour and how it finds expression through different religions. And ultimately how the performing arts wipe out all differences leaving behind only the thought and the essence. Not taking these as disciplines in themselves but as ways of finding connections and ways of making a person more whole, more complete. This has been our training. It has never been a workshop which is just an isolated . . . not just something that is touching on technique or a particular skill development—definitely not that. Skill is a part of it. But it is the essence, the expression, the emotion of it which is more important.

Last year we felt that we were ready to work with the convent schools. They are totally cut off from the languages and the moment you cut off from your language, the sensibility gets cut off along with it. They had been hearing about us for a long time. They said okay, we will give you the three entire weeks but we can only give you Class 5. You can't take children from different classes. So how will you do it? We said fine, we will work with all the 240 children. We had already started working on the 50th year of



Rani aur Pintu.

Independence. I felt instead this was the time we really needed to look back. Because our present generation doesn't even know how difficult it was, they are just taking it for granted. It was the right moment to jump back 50 years, to enable them to connect with the past and perhaps make a new beginning. Bring back that idealism. So we tried to do this workshop with the banned revolutionary songs. So we brought in history, we brought in the crafts, we brought in music. We went back to when the British came here, linking that with our handlooms—what was it that actually attracted them. We were fortunate, we were able to get hold of the revolutionary songs which were confiscated and banned. Bansi Kaul helped us a lot and Anjana Puri, who was part of Rang Vidushak—she came down. Starting from that point—talking about the handloom and the beautiful fabrics we had, the various strengths of India—we took it further. How they came and finally became rulers, how it somewhere destroyed, you know, the spirit of India. How it was reflected even in the folk forms and what it meant for people to start feeling that they had absolutely changed in spirit. So the major events were touched upon through the songs. We had sessions on history and talked about the freedom movement, about its impact on society and lifestyles. We again linked it back to Gandhi's Swadeshi movement and how through it, we discovered our own strength, our own identity which was asserted through the charkha and the cloth. So this whole thing got tied up theatrically, musically along with historical inputs. And all 240 children performed on stage. We did five shows and received standing ovations. The children and their parents were moved to tears. One parent came and hugged me. She was sobbing. She said, I was in Bombay in my school days and for me India is my country but I had not known what message to give to my child, how to talk about it, but in this half-hour presentation you have done what we haven't been able to do.

I think this is what has been the strength of our work, not just technique, not just training children to be able to enjoy theatre. But because theatre is a very meaningful way of connecting so many other issues. And therefore theatre needs to be a part of

school education. This whole feeling of working together, where you are not into one-upmanship which is what the present system is teaching us. This is what gives children the time and space to think about issues which are larger than what they are touching upon in their various subject areas. Even History becomes a dead subject but when it is handled in this dynamic way it comes alive. I can't imagine History being a boring subject for any child, but that's what is happening right now. Languages, expressions ... what is education all about? Preparing a child to face life. Giving him those skills and abilities so that he, at one point, is not only an independent human being fending for himself, but also contributing to society. But if we do not give all these inputs it would be like training him to be a person who lives for himself, we are disconnecting him totally from society. Even when they go back to a job or any other situation, inputs have to be given afresh. How to work in a team, how to have your own sense of identity ... So I think it's very important that the whole process of education actually becomes an education for life, not an education for a degree. This is how Kadambari has been growing and working. Initially it was experimental, now I don't think it's experimental at all, because we know that it works. We have been sharing it with others.

At least in Bangalore we can say that it has generated a lot of interest. Generated an interest not only in working with children, which was also not happening earlier ... when we started the workshop for children I used to be asked repeatedly, what do you mean by workshop for children? Now all over the country when you say workshop for children it's very easy to understand what we talk about. We started working only with craft, occupying the time, keeping children busy and entertained and maybe these larger issues didn't come in. I feel it's just a matter of time, because when you are working with children you are going to start looking at these bigger issues as quality inputs, touching upon the mind of the child, helping the child to see himself as an integrated part of society. Now we see that lots of people are working with children although not enough are yet looking at theatre as development for a child. That is where we have been focusing. Not theatre in itself but [using] all that makes theatre as a tool. Keeping this in mind we decided that now was the time to go for a bigger statement where we could actually talk about art and education. To begin with, we are planning to have a national symposium on art and education. As a preparation for that we felt that without talking about it so much we should make it very experiential right away. Addressing children and the audience—where not just quality entertainment is presented, but entertainment which is rooted in their own ethos, in their own environment and in their own issues. So that somewhere that transference also happens. When we look at something only on the screen, it is like a little image that stays, but when we're sitting in the theatre it is definitely more experiential—something more. We also felt that if we wanted to address children in this particular way, why not have the best theatre available? I spoke to the National School of Drama and invited them to come down, asked them if they could revive some of their old productions. They were so supportive they even said they would go ahead and do a new production especially for this festival. B. V. Karanth has in fact been working with them—the Theater in Education Company—on Chandrasekhar Kambar's *Ali Baba Chalis Chor* as *Khul Ja Sim Sim*.

As I was saying, for Kadambari [there's the question of] the connection. So we thought if we only have proscenium theatre it will really not be complete. We decided to use the route of folk theatre. In India, theatre has really been part of day-to-day life. It has originated from the streets, from the temple courtyards and only later entered the proscenium. It's time now to bring it out again and not just wait for formal theatre inputs

where children are concerned. There's so much around us which is all theatre. It's only a question of people realizing it and making the connections. Folk theatre can be so easily brought into school. The children will not only find out about these forms, they will also find out about what goes behind it. In every field there's so much that is connected with mythological and social issues. It's not dead theatre which is only addressing issues of the past. It's live theatre, constantly innovating, constantly connecting with new issues. It can even become the idiom or rather the methodology for children to address contemporary issues. It's so much more vibrant. So we felt that folk theatre definitely has to have a place and perhaps, during this theatre festival, we will be able to show these connections. Some people will be able to understand them and it will start happening in a more vibrant manner. So the last two days we plan to have folk theatre and we are concentrating only on Karnataka. We are taking very interesting forms from Karnataka. Yakshagana—actually a children's Yakshagana group from Mangalore which has travelled around quite a bit. It started many years ago; many of those children have grown into adults and more children have been trained into it. But they are continuing it essentially as a children's group. Then Huli Vesha from South Kannada. Huli in Kannada means tiger. They paint their bodies like tigers, they interact, there's combat. Originally it used to be done by Muslims during Muharram. Then it spread and now they also perform it during Navaratri. It's a tradition which is as common to Muharram as it is to Navaratri. It is such a beautiful way of showing that performing arts have no barriers at all. And that people have no inhibitions. It's all created somewhere in the mind by others. So that group is coming which will also have one or two children—it will be almost like street theatre. Then we have Goruvar Tunitha which is from Diar Hills near Bangalore. These are actually tribals who worship Shiva. Very dramatic. Not only do they wear bearskins and headgear, they also paint their faces in a specific manner. They wear red clothes—not the vibrant red but the other kind of red—beiges and browns, a kambal [blanket] they weave themselves and lots of shell jewellery. They have a little drum like a damaru in their hand and a little flute. Then there's Dollukunitha from near Ramnagaram. Dollu is a huge drum. They dance in formations. And again we find that when these forms are presented out of context, they don't have much meaning. When we are doing something for children and talking of connections, it's very important to at least create that context. So that whole evening is being done in the format of a jatri. They have stage designers, theatre artists and architects—we are redoing . . . recreating the entire setting. They will perform there—it's made more interactive, more experiential. Then to really put this formal theatre and folk theatre together they are also doing a workshop for teachers—teachers from Karnataka. Mornings we will have workshop sessions and in the evenings they'll watch all these performances. Next morning there can be a small session for questions and answers. And hopefully they will take these concepts back with them, to their schools. Hopefully there will be some new beginnings.

VIKRAM IYENGAR. The first workshops that you mentioned, you said that you began with folk forms. Did you get resource people for this?

CJ. Maya Rao has been working with all these forms. And she had a few students who were trained in them and one or two I handled myself. The authenticity is very important. We're very clear about it. Mediocrity can have no place. It has to be excellent, a very demanding kind of thing, setting targets for them and making them work towards that. Lot of research work went into it. We got many films from the Films Division and we organized screenings for the children. We couldn't take them to those places, but at least they could see those dance forms being performed by the folk artists



Tulsi-Tulsi.

And all the songs—they were explained. Translations were given. All the children learnt those songs. It was not like teaching any one item. It grew.

VI. You approached schools only after the first two workshops. The workshops that you did independently—were they summer vacation workshops?

CJ. Yes, the very first one was a summer vacation workshop. Actually for a few more years apart from working through the year, we kept on concentrating on these. Not that we wanted to do it in summer, but the kind of intense involvement that we required from the children was possible only when they had nothing else to do. They could go back and read about it, work on their costumes, sit together and write scripts themselves. If I go back to my childhood, when we went to our grandparents' house with more cousins around, we would do plays and spend the afternoon writing. It was like taking them back to a situation where there were lots of children available, lots of friends of the same age group. We worked with ages eight to sixteen. And that works beautifully. Younger children learn so much faster and so much more from these older children, and this vertical mixing makes the activity very high calibre. Because of this we felt summer would be the right time; they had no distractions. But as more activities starting to spring up, more and more people started working with children, keeping the children busy through the summer months and we lost interest. We did not want our activities to get linked with other summer activities. For us it meant very much more. We have all chosen to work in this area because our interests are in educating the child, not to keep him entertained during their vacations so that parents are freed from worry. We try to get parents very involved, we are very demanding of them. Because we will work with the children only for 15-20 days. Unless the parents are supportive and have interacted with us and allow the children to continue the work at home, our inputs will probably go to waste. Not wasted totally, but they will not, you know, develop in the same way. We can only plant a seed, the nurturing has to be done by the parents, by the school, by

the teachers. That is why now we are trying to establish more and more of those links with the schools and the parents, so that we initiate but then it's taken over by them.

The parents are present in all our workshops. Right in the beginning we meet with them and right through the workshops, we encourage them to come and spend time, to sit around and participate. In fact the Kadambari group itself, as it has emerged over the years, essentially constitutes the parents whose children initially came for the workshops. And those who are not actively involved in the group are our biggest support. We have done workshops previously with teachers and adults where the parents have come in. The focus there becomes slightly different—it is more on a conceptual basis and not so interactive. We are analysing the process much more. With the children, we are not analysing. We just take them through the process and make it experiential. With parents, naturally, issues are raised. We had simultaneous workshops like the workshop on creative music. We would have workshops in the evenings on music appreciation. Or when we have theatre workshops for children then the parents become part of it—helping us with costumes or having interactive sessions with the director or Kadambari members sit and talk with them. Not as formal sessions but as integrated sessions. Even during last year's workshops on revolutionary banned songs, we had sessions with adults. Parents and children singing the same songs.

I must tell you what happened after the 1990 workshop. A few months later I went to somebody's house and found a child sitting and singing a song. It was a song from the play we had done. So I asked the child how she knew this song. She said, 'This is our bus song'—you know, they go together in the private buses. 'We have some songs we all sing in the bus.' Then we found out that some of the kids who were part of the workshop had taught all these songs to the children which they used to sing every day. And they had no idea it was from a play.

Last year we found in the Valley School that two of our kids had gone back and taught the songs to the others. And their mothers said, 'You haven't even taken permission from Kadambari, how are you teaching these songs?' One of the kids called me and said, 'Aunty, Mummy is saying I should have asked you before teaching the songs but I remember you told us we must go back and teach all these songs to all our friends.' So I said, 'Yes that's right. This is what we told you.' So in this way dissemination happens; more people find out about it and everything starts getting connected.

We've been doing residential workshops because we realized that despite the parents' involvement, somewhere the intensity does get diluted a bit. After working through the day, the child goes home in the evening and then participates in totally different activities. But if it's very intense for a certain number of days, it stays with them, becomes part of them. Last year we had 10 days here with Khaled Tyabji and then we went to Melkoti. It was as if everybody took on a role, as if they slipped into the lives of the people and started living like them, experiencing for themselves. So they started relating to the social issues, the community issues. It was not just living in this space and enacting a play. You take it back into life itself, it becomes theatre of life. It was really great. The way the children had started looking at spaces, looking at the aesthetics of life, looking at even wearing some of those clothes as parts of their own wardrobe. It would not have happened if they had put on a dhoti only to play a role in a particular play. And earlier when we had gone to the Janapaduloka in Ramnagaram for a residential workshop, when the children learned from the folk dancers themselves, interacted in their own language, those who didn't know Kanada so well felt the need to know and

learn the language. They realized that by not knowing the language they are actually at a disadvantage. They're depriving themselves. And by playing games using Kannada rhymes and small couplets, the philosophy of life itself became . . . like, you know, Indian philosophy is a way of life. But is it really a way of life for our kids now? No. But when you hear those little sayings in that language, when you read poetry in that language or the folk songs in this language—the thoughts behind those, they are so philosophical that without even learning about it, it becomes part of your own self. But by not having that in our lives now, we are cutting ourselves off from that stream of life. Actually that continuity in a way is at stake. Sometimes I really wonder—the way we are handling these literacy programmes, even where the continuity still exists we will kill it. We had invited some teachers also to that workshop. When they went back they started using that in their language teaching. Couplets, little rhymes—they took it back to their school and they started teaching those songs. And instead of the distance being there in learning the language, the joy emerged. The crafts got linked as they made masks and drew all these things. They understood the value of the way people lived; the whole experience got internalized. The crafts just didn't remain crafts in showrooms, emporia where you go and pick up something that you like and don't know what to do with later. When you see these connections they become very different. Like at the theatre festival, we are bringing in a little bit of craft which is a part of the performing arts. Not as little blankets being sold or little pencil stands but craft as mask making, crafts as body painting, craft as costume, craft as pottery—pots are used, clay masks are used—that connection. The compartmentalization has to go.

VI. Talking about Kannada literature, I was reading this book *The Flowering Tree* by A. K. Ramanujan—a collection of oral tales from India. I found, because storytelling is not the done thing any more, no one gives time to listen to stories, tell stories, that those traditions are dying because they are oral traditions. You can't preserve them in any other way.

CJ. Absolutely. See, the strength of the oral traditions is the regional languages. The moment we are cut off from our regional languages—whether it's Bengali or Hindi or Kannada or Marathi—we are also cut off from the traditions existing only in those languages. So the urban child is absolutely dead. And they are saying that all of this is only associated with the villages. Villages are underdeveloped, we have to raise them to the level of the cities. I don't know. I, personally, can't even relate to the word 'underdeveloped' in the context of the villages. There are certain areas, certain issues in the villages which need to be addressed. But there are certain other things about which they are far more developed. The sensibilities are so advanced. Because we can't find any other word, we are lumping it all together. By destroying their own self-confidence, by constantly telling them, 'You need to do this in order to be at the same level as the city dweller,' we are giving them an inferiority complex. We are making them so unsure of themselves that they are giving up all these things. You need to support them with certain skills and certain other abilities . . . But we are . . . you know, like what we do with our buildings—take a bulldozer and wipe it all out and then start creating all these structures and after a few more years wonder, did we do the right thing or did we not? We are hoping that with this folk theatre festival, people will understand that there is so much to learn. If they bring these folk performers into the school, if they have workshops and create these little areas for interaction where the kids could learn and realize how difficult it is to do what the performers do, there'll not only be respect for each other, there'll be so much enriching that will happen. For both sides. That's the tragedy—by

losing out on our oral traditions, by being isolated from our languages, we are losing out on this entire rich heritage or legacy we have got. It is the result of refinement over so many centuries. By keeping on mixing like this there will be a new methodology.

Again, if we are borrowing methodology from outside it will never have any place in world theatre. We have to build our own methodology reflecting our own identity, our own strength, and only then will we be able to make a mark. Why is it that Girish Karnad or A. K. Ramanujan or U. R. Aranthamurthy and all these people are respected everywhere? Because they are standing on the strength of their own traditions. Mahabharata—you can keep on rewriting it. It lends itself to every situation in life, every period in history. That human essence remains the same. But now it's time to write something else. When you're through with Mahabharata, then only can you write something else. Girish Karnad can keep pulling out *Yayati* and *Fire and Rain* or whatever, but he has understood that others will read it once and put it aside. Peter Brook will come and go gaga over it and then we will all say, 'Oh! I haven't read the Mahabharata. Let me.'

The biggest tragedy that happened was not so much the imposition of foreign rule but the enslaving of our spirit. Macaulay definitely achieved what he wanted and we, despite having access to so many of our own resources, are still wanting to be guided by the education policies formulated by the those who didn't understand us, who wanted human beings to be brought up so that their authority was not questioned. They wanted us to be clerks, collectors of taxes from here and there. Not thinkers. We have had people like J. Krishnamurthi, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore who have actually talked about holistic education . . . it was Ranade or somebody who spoke of a national policy of education. Despite having thinkers like them who talked about education in such specific terms, we are still not following their guidelines about the education of our future generations who will ultimately be contributors to the world. We are looking at imitators, followers—not leaders. We have such a huge treasury of performance styles. We need to expose our children to all that. Then only can tomorrow's theatre people use

Khul Ja Sim Sim.



these resources. They are not for the museums, they are living forms. We have been working with these forms in the schools but hopefully, after placing it on this public platform, making all the connections, perhaps it will be taken up by more people, perhaps there'll be another theatre festival for children in Calcutta, in Madras, in Orissa, wherever. And we'll realize the importance of art education. When we talk about art education, when we talk about its need to be experiential, it has to come down to theatre. Theatre has to be the choice—the complete form—natak, sangeet, craft, everything. Theatre in education—the importance of it just cannot be ruled out. We're looking at complete, sensitive, integrated human beings who will contribute to this new millenium. In India, the end of one millennium is no new thing. We go back 4000 years, so what is just one millennium to us? It's like a season ending and a new season starting. Sowing is over, reaping is over, you've started. For us continuity is a bigger issue. Not that something will end and something new will start. We don't want anything to end here. What we need to do is take stock, realize the responsibility of passing on the tradition so that we are not blamed as the generation which brought the curtain down. If anything, this is the time to start addressing the folk idioms, languages, literatures through this dramatic form so that the children will find it easy to relate to it all. The arts can be an end in themselves. We are really at that point when we need to debate and make sure that the balance is maintained. In the last 50 years, we [should be] able to fill the huge gaps that we have created and talk about the overall development of the child while retaining the basic essence of the human being.

VI. You've spoken a lot about the methodology of the workshops. Can you mention any specific incidents that have come out of those workshops? And the second thing is, now you've been working with this for 12 years, so the children who you started with must be established somewhere or the other. What do you think . . . how could you point out that there is something that Kadambari has contributed towards the children's development?

CJ. In some way or the other all these children have kept in touch with me and many of them—in fact, some in America—want to start a Kadambari there. Many of them have gone away from here but all of them are very Indian, not in the sense of Hindusthani but very well rooted; they have not felt the need to give up their identity. In fact, they are like little trees which have grown, firmly rooted and enriched. They are so open; they have taken the best from everywhere because they grew up with that sense of security, openness, aesthetic appreciation and sensitivity. And a tremendous involvement with the performing arts—they definitely opt for and support all these activities. If they are outside our country, they are like ambassadors. If they are in India, they are contributing to the society; they are part of the society, they are part of the fibre that makes society. Not like the group who may be doing very well, but are concerned only about themselves or those who are just waiting to grow wings and fly away, waiting for that time to be somewhere else. More than anything else, those who worked with us possess the need to be aware, to have that curiosity about India, to constantly keep exploring, apart from growing up as integrated and good human beings. Particularly in these times of globalization I think the need for an identity is even more acute. Not in a fanatic sense, but I feel the world would be poorer . . . It's like if there was only one smell it would be a loss for the whole world. If everything was just white it'd be terrible. At this particular time it is very important to have a cultural identity, to retain the flavours, colours, the richness. That responsibility lies much more in older cultures. By virtue of being an older civilization we are supposed to have the wisdom to understand, to sustain, to keep creating these links with the new.

What is tradition? Tradition is not something that is frozen in time. What becomes tradition is only that which has found value over a period of time. So if it is not alive, if it is not growing, then it will die. The moment it freezes, it's something that is supposed to be put in a museum. It has to be constantly held against the light; you verify it and you say all right, maybe this doesn't make sense any more. Its basic essence remaining the same, it keeps on changing over a period of time. But the moment it regains its vibrancy and you begin changing it according to contemporary needs, enriching it or taking away from it, then only will it remain tradition. Oral traditions have continued till now. If we are not able to use them, they will die. The moment you put it onto tapes, document it and have no more people learning it, it's dying, it's dead. You can only hear it later on but it will never be alive. Therefore there is a need for these oral traditions to be carried on. If it's brought back to the schools, maybe one kid somewhere will take it up, get into theatre, somehow connect. If the same community carrying on that tradition find that they can sustain themselves by this task, they will never give it up. It's like the things that we grow up with. If someone were to ask me or force me to give up putting a bindi, I may, but that pain will remain. I would never give it up [myself] unless it lost its beauty for me. For the child who has seen his father singing, for example, it's part of his system, it's part of his own identity and sensibility—he'll never give it up.

There's a puppeteer working with us—the family has a 300-year tradition of puppetry. This gentleman is a national awardee—Ranganath Rao. His grandfather used to be a puppeteer. He learnt the art too but felt that it might be difficult to live by it, so he became a teacher. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay met him and said, it is your responsibility to keep this tradition alive. This man is 60-odd now. He's going through such a tough time. For the last three years Kadambari is sustaining him—we don't talk about it. We keep on working with the children. He has not given it up. He says, 'I gave my word to Kamala Devi'. He is teaching here and there, hoping that somebody will continue this tradition. His own son did engineering and has taken up a job in a software company, but in his free time he still does puppetry. If oral traditions die it is only because society has been absolutely callous; it has not supported them, not given them an opportunity to perform. Performing arts will stay alive if they are performed, and they can only be performed for an audience. I can't be performing here and call myself a performing artist. It's by involving an audience, by sensitizing children that we can continue to have our audience.

It all comes back to the children. The responsibility of the society has to be more towards the children. I am under so much tension right now because I had hoped, for the theatre festival, we'd get support from the society, from the corporate world, the school community—everybody would come forward because something of quality, something meaningful is happening for the children. It's not been like that at all. I don't know how we are going to do it but we are going through with it and we know it's going to be absolutely brilliant. But then it's only 10–12 individuals who are taking this responsibility because we feel that we need to do this for the children. The moment the larger community, the larger society realizes the need for continuing all these things for the sake of the coming generations . . . I cannot be held responsible for allowing it to die. I have experienced all this in my life. Somebody had brought it till this point. Am I going to be the one [to leave it behind?] I felt like this many years ago. Somebody pointed it out to me—maybe my father—the significance, the beauty of all these things, the connections, the symbolism . . . Unless I pass it on and share it with the others, it dies with me. My father, my teachers, my elders did that—they passed it on to me and now I

too must pass it on. That is what everyone has to realize, particularly in our country. All of this has stood the test of time and survived till today.

The role of theatre in education is so immense. The teachers who made things more interesting by using other things, spoke very well, that was all theatrical. When you want to enhance the value of your lecture or your interaction with the children in different ways it's all theatrical. Theatre is not just what happens on the stage. That's unfortunately what all of us tend to think—that theatre means you go and watch a play. Theatre is so much more, theatre is happening everywhere, all the time. You hear that fellow selling vegetables, it's so theatrical—his voice modulation, the way he goes about it, the way he arranges his cart. The only way he can attract attention is by being theatrical. The entire awareness level increases so much when you start giving theatrical inputs. Theatre has to be part of education. It definitely enhances the ability to observe, the ability to interact, the ability to develop your intuition. At the same time it also increases conceptual thinking, abstract thinking. Because it talks about ideas—it's so abstract in certain ways. Nothing else can enhance education, child development, in the way that theatre inputs can. Everything falls into place. Whether it's Mathematics or History or Geography, the moment you start using theatre, it all comes alive. Education is all about connections just as theatre is too. It takes the essence of life, a particular situation and makes theatre out of it. If somewhere theatre can be made an integral part, not just a skill to be imparted. Not like a theatre workshop where one is taught how to deliver a dialogue, but where theatre helps a child to connect with the world at large. Not where a talented few will be picked to perform a play, but where every child would have gone through that joy of putting on a mask, putting on a different identity and coming out of himself.

AN UPDATE ON KADAMBARI'S ACTIVITIES:

NATYARANGOLI APRIL 1999

Kadambari hosted an eight-day theatre festival for children in Bangalore. The festival consisted of seven performances in Hindi by Theatre in Education Co. from the National School of Drama. One play was performed in Kannada by Kinnara Mela, a local professional ensemble from Tumari Village. Over 10, 000 tickets were sold. Adaptations of stories such as *Ali Baba* and *The Jungle Book* were very popular with the audience. During 17th and 18th April, a free event called Jatre was held where folk artists of Karnataka presented informal theatrical performances.

KADAMBARI'S OBJECTIVES IN ORGANIZING THIS FESTIVAL

1. To enable children, parents, and teachers to become aware that creativity can be expressed in a number of ways under the umbrella of theatre since it involves not just acting but an integration of several art forms such as literature, music, dance, and fine art.

2. To enable children to connect with their own environment, language, and local traditions. We cannot transact with the world outside unless we are firmly grounded in our own ethos. Thus we emphasize the role of Indian theatre.

3. In the current context of schools fixating on academic abilities and competition, Kadambari attempts to bring about an awareness and appreciation of the value of Indian theatre in education among children, parents, and educationists, not just from the

perspective of becoming an artist but to learn and appreciate the nuances of these art forms. This, according to Dr U. R. Ananthamurthy in an interview with *The Hindu*, 'will sensitize and insulate childen from yielding to the call of violence'.

4. To communicate that theatre is not restricted to formal performances in auditoria but can and should be expanded to informal spaces such as those used by folk theatre.

[*Chandra Jain, interviewed by Vikram Iyengar, March 1999, Bangalore*]

'not just a structured art form'

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR AMBIKA KAMESHWAR

DR AMBIKA KAMESHWAR is a dancer and musician based in Chennai. She has worked extensively with special education and has developed her own methodology of Creative Movement Education (CME) She heads her own institution, RASA, in Chennai. In the following piece combining an interview of March 1999 and later inputs, she speaks about her understanding of dance as a communicative force, the development of her work and methodology, and the manifold activities of RASA.

AMBIKA KAMESHWAR. I started learning dance when I was seven at Modern School, Delhi. Here arts was given as much importance as academics. As a part of the junior school curriculum, I was learning sitar, veena, clay modelling and sculpting. Dance was my optional specialization. Simultaneously, from the age of five, my mother started teaching me music. Later I received more structured and intensive training in Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Creative Dance from Kumari S. Meenakshi, Dr Narendra Sharma, and several other reputed exponents of dance. I received advance music training from the vocal legend D. K. Pattammal.

So I was learning and performing . . . but I've always believed that dance is far more than just a structured art form—doing it on stage is just one aspect of the whole experience that is dance, a very small aspect of the whole universal dance form. So my experience and exposure reinforced my belief in dance as a communicative force more than a performing art. But I am still a performer. I run my own Bharatnatyam and Kuchipudi dance school. I also teach music. Regular students come in for dance and music classes.

The value of structured dance is immeasurable.You can't underrate that. When I perform on stage—for the two hours that I'm performing, I'm not Ambika. There's that complete absence of self. So I feel dance is a complete sadhana in itself. So definitely, if an artist can lose oneself to the art form while being on stage, it becomes a meditation in itself. There's no question about it. To me dance is all encompassing—through it I communicate, share, grow, connect and develop.

This strong belief of mine got translated into a tangible experience when Mr Srinivasan, who was heading the Ramana Maharishi Academy for the Blind, invited me to teach dance to the visually impaired children. Taking up this opportunity that came my way, I would demonstrate each *mudra* and the students would feel my hands and imitate it perfectly. They would measure my steps and do every step without a mistake. This experience became a pathfinder for me.

I then started teaching children with different kinds of special needs. I volunteered to teach dance—it was still 'teaching' dance—at the Spastic Society of India. I also met Babli, then an eight-year-old child with Down's Syndrome, who expressed a desire to learn dance.

Soon word spread to other special schools in the city and I was teaching dance and music to children with different special needs, including those with hearing impairment,

orthopaedic handicaps, mental retardation, learning difficulties, children with socio-economic problems, Cerebral Palsy, Down's Syndrome and autism.

At that time I had not formalized the methodology of Creative Movement Education. My work was experimental; I was simply taking it as it came. I didn't have any formal training in teaching dance to children with special needs. I am a Ph.D in Dance Theatre. I did my Ph.D in Natya Abhinaya, that is traditional Indian Classical Theatre from Madras University.

Over the years I formalized it, based on my experience as a dancer, as a choreographer, as a musician, as a singer, as a music director and through my wonderful interaction with my special children. They were my teachers. I was learning from their feedback. They made me realize that I had to structure my dance sessions to suit their special needs and abilities.To understand their needs and to make the best use of it, I interacted with the doctors, physiotherapists, speech therapists, special educators, and other professionals. I learnt something new every day. I read, researched and collected material to devise a comprehensive method of learning and called it 'Creative Movement Education'.

Creative Movement Education (CME) was based on the principle that all human beings have a natural sense of movement, which can be tapped and channelized to help them explore and achieve their full potential. The application of this methodology resulted in better self expression and communication skills, improved physical movement and co-ordination, helped in building social awareness and enabled an individual to express one's innermost feelings.

What is theatre? It includes everything—music, dance, drama, storytelling, mime—even arts and crafts. Even the stage props, masks, everything that may be required for a full theatrical productation. Theatre normally reflects what is happening in real life. That is what the *Natyashastra* says—theatre is an imitation of what happens in the world. But what I do through theatre is to teach my special children about the real world. They learn about life skills. They learn how to behave in society, how to behave for themselves, take care of themselves and to behave appropriately in society in a complete holistic manner, and all this they are taught through theatre.

So in 1985, I volunteered to teach dance at the Spastics Society of India. I was teaching dance to some selected students who could do a little bit of work. But then I could see so many other children waiting in the wings, literally. I knew that they too could do so much if guided in an appropriate manner. So I slowly started structuring my dance to suit their needs. As I was structuring dance to suit their needs, I felt it could also be used as a developmental tool. If a child needs a fine motor function—grasp and release—it could be taught through song and dance. The learning would be through fun, through involvement, through active participation.

The children really enjoy the sessions as, in this process, learning comes automatically to them without them 'realizing that they are being taught'. Here there's no teacher-student hierarchy. We are all artists here, all performers. We are all working towards a performance and when we are working towards a performance we are learning so many things. Spontaneously, automatically—learning takes place.

However, in my mind, the goals are clear. For this child I have to achieve fine motor function, with this child I have to work on the concept of shapes, I have to make this child stand on her feet, I have to help another recognize the difference between green and yellow. With every child there's a goal in mind. But children don't realize they are being taught so many things. They just learn spontaneously.

So I would 'move and sing' to focus on particular goals such as the development of body awareness. Body awareness is very important to life in general. Many of these children lack body awareness. It's very simple. Like if you don't know what a circle is, you can't recognize the letter C for it's half a circle. If you don't know what a triangle is you can't recognize the letter A. These are pre-reading skills. Similarly there are pre-dance skills, pre-drama skills like body awareness, spatial awareness, what is forward, what is backward—all these things are required. How to utilize space, how to utilize your body; the movement of your body in space is required not only for performance but also for life. So I started goal-oriented work, teaching them skills through these structured sessions which I termed Creative Movement Education because I felt



Dr Ambika Kameshwar with her students.

everything—even writing—involves a movement, it involves a very individual skill, your way of writing is yours. Anything that brings together body and mind is creativity and movement. That's what is included in Creative Movement Education with a focus on using the theatre arts—dance, drama, music, storytelling, mime, arts and crafts—as developmental learning tools.

I was doing it on my own from 1985–89 at Spastic Society. By word of mouth some other schools came to know about it and they requested me to come and teach their children. So I said okay, but alone I can handle very few while as a team I can handle many more children. So I started RASA in 1989. Ramana Su Nritya Alaya. Ramana because I'm a devotee of Ramana. Su Nritya—Su is good and Nritya is expression. It's not just dance, not just theatre, it's Nritya—expressive dance. So Nritya Alaya is temple of that. Its acronym is very beautiful. It's RASA, the very essence. So I started in 1989 with two people who would see me working with the children and assist me in my sessions. It began like that. And then slowly, the team also grew. I was working with people who would come and see me working with the children and carry on the sessions for me. It was more visual . . . with discussions. When I structured CME, I used to keep

records for each child. I would write down that this child needs this, so this is what I gave, this is how it worked. It went wrong here, it went right here. Let's change it this way. So I documented every single thing about what I was doing. It was by trial and error. It was four years of hours with the physiotherapist, hours with a special educator, hours with the speech therapist, occupational therapist. So Creative Movement started developing towards reaching holistic goals, incorporating what was required in speech therapy, incorporating what was required in occupational therapy, incorporating what was required in special education into the methodology itself and teaching through dance movement. In 1989-90 I put down my thoughts on dance movement therapy in a small booklet. Then I started RASA and my team built up. We started two streams of



At the playground.

RASA—one with dance and drama in a structured format, structured Bharatnatyam and music classes go on . . . and the other for special needs. The one with special needs is very unique.

At first I would have a diary for each child. Let's say at the end of the term, I have had nine sessions with the child. I have planned something for how the reaction is for movement, what are the self-awareness and expression activities, i.e. how do they express, what is their reaction to music, story, drama, games, group participation, creativity. I would say six were very good, six were excellent and by a graph I would know, okay there's some problem here. Sanjay doesn't seem to be reacting at all. Why? So I'll go back and I'll think and have a discussion with the teacher and the parents. So at the next session I would think of just looking at this. I would think of putting Pradip and Sanjay together and they reacted very well. So I pair off these two. Maybe I'll get something out of that. Let me see. Then I'll go back and try again. That's how I experimented. But now, since 1994, it's all structured. Now we have proper assessment and everything; we maintain case files.

For example, almost every child will have a case like this. What is the disability, to begin with, characteristics of the disability, causes . . . Then a typical day with the child—observation. No judgements, only observations. Our whole process of intervention is non-judgmental. Why do we assess the child? We assess the child to know what level of function the child is at. But it's not wrong to be at that level. We don't say he's below this level or anything like that. We don't rank him. He's here, that's it. He's at x level. He has to go on to x plus one. That's all. So we'll take him to x plus one. The methodology is symptomatic treatment. We don't worry so much about the causes. Did the child get autism because of a problem during birth? Did the child get cerebral palsy because of something else? We just keep it in mind. But what we look at is, the child needs fine motor co-ordination. Whether he had a problem at birth or he had meningitis at three years causing fine motor problem at 16 is not our concern. He has fine motor co-ordination problems so we have to deal with that. We look at it symptomatically. The cause is not relevant to us unless it's a medical thing. Healthwise if it's a problem, then we look at the cause. But if it's rehabilitation we treat the symptoms. What do we have to achieve? How do we achieve it? Then the actual intervention. This has become our format. Props used—bedsheet, cassette recorder . . . Everything has to be ready. You can't go and make the child wait for three minutes while you fetch a recorder. What happened—for everybody it's a tick or cross. Worked or did not work. Then you look at that whole table. This is not right for this child. This is right for this child. So we move him to this session and this session we put for that child. That's how we work.

In 1994 I started a Postgraduate Diploma course on Creative Movement Education, inviting anybody who has basic creativity, a creative mind, is comfortable with their bodies and works well with children. My documentation is passed on to them through proper lectures by a faculty. We have special educators coming and talking. We have physiotherapists coming and talking. I've encapsulated the whole thing into a Diploma Course and I handle the Creative Movement and Theatre Part. The 1st two papers I handle. The 3rd paper is Anatomy, Physiology of the Body and Psychology which is important. Paper 4 is a study of different disabilities. Because no two children are alike, no two disabilities are alike. In Paper 5, we give them a brief study of the various disabilities. A child with Down's Syndrome for example has Hypotonia, he has very loose muscle tone. A child who is spastic has cerebral palsy and has a very tight muscle tone. So the way we handle the creative movement sessions will be very different for each. We might even combine a Down's Syndrome child and a child with cerebral palsy to expand each one's movement and muscle strengthening. That is our own experience, our facilitators' experience. We decide how to put it in, how best to give the muscle strengthening for the Down's Syndrome child and muscle relaxing for the cerebral palsy child. Paper 6 is on other therapeutic methodology like physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, special education . . . what is required to rehabilitate a child with special needs. Paper 7 is the culmination where we talk about Creative Movement Education for children with special needs. Then they do a project on any one disability, they specialize in any one, take up any one aspect and do a specialized project study and a case study of a single child. Then they have a viva. They are then completely equipped to handle a group of children with a different disabilities with theatre as a therapeutic tool.

It's a one-year course. That much is required definitely to be really good. Still I tell them it's only a beginning. Even after you've graduated, you've only begun. Because it's learning that you'll do while actually working with the children. Everyday they'll teach

you new things. The children are your gurus, each day they teach you something new. I learn from them everyday.

We have a day centre where children come along on a daily basis from 9. 45 in the morning till 3. 30 in the afternoon. Plus we have our work in other special schools which is our outreach programme, which is what we began with. In this programme we work with 10 outside schools where we go once or twice a week depending on the need of the school and on the need of the children. Then we have our training resource people—the Diploma in CME. We have a staff assistance programme which is a three-month course during weekends. And the orientation is just a week's course where they just get an idea as to what we do. This is just to assist our staff. They are not fully trained. They can't assess the children, they can't design structured programmes to achieve goals but they have enough knowledge to assist the staff. And then of course our awareness programmes—like lecture demonstrations, workshops and our newsletter publication.

Over the years the methodology grew to not only involve dance and music as learning tools but also the other aspects of Natya—meaning drama and storytelling as also, arts and crafts. I had also got my Doctorate in Natya Abhinaya and felt the need to give a more global term to this fast growing methodology. This is when CME (Creative Movement Education) came to be more appropriately called RASA's Theatre for Holistic Development—THD.

Over the last 14 years RASA has grown in multiple directions. We have the 'out reach programmes' through which we work with children in different special schools in the city of Chennai. We have our own Special School which rehabilitates 75 children. In RASA's vocational centre adults with special needs are given specific training in different skills. RASA offers a Post Graduate Diploma Programme in THD to train teachers. The RASA Arts Centre conducts classes on various forms of dance, music and Indian Cultural Heritage classes.

VIKRAM IYENGAR. The difference between black and yellow—treating this as an example, how would you go about the entire process of teaching someone who doesn't know anything about colours. How would you go through it?

AK. We go through several stages of learning. First is acquisition. You learn that this is black and then you are able to identify black. Then you maintain that this is black. Every time you are given black you are able to recognize it as black. This is maintenance of a skill. That's fluency. Then it's maintained—even if you're presented with black, say, after two weeks you still know this is black. This is maintenance. Then there's generalization. Wherever you see black, you will recognise black—whether it's a dupatta, or TV or a bag. So there are many stages in learning. We have to give the inputs depending on the stages of learning and depending on the disability. So how do we teach? We teach through music, dance and drama. So we make this song on black—what are all the things you see in black? A crow . . . we put together lots of things in black and lots of things in yellow. We don't want to confuse them with too many colours. So initially we start off with only one or two colours. So they will be able to identify something as not black, but they won't be able to identify it as green. That is the first stage.

VI. There's another thing I would like to ask you. I don't know, I don't have that experience. When the parents have to confront a spastic child or a disabled child in any way, there is some sort of a mental block that is formed towards the child. So overcoming that is also something that a special centre has to deal with. Because often they can say here's the child, now it's your responsibility . . .

AK. Yes, exactly. Follow-up at home is very, very important for any input. Suppose we are teaching numbers one to five to a child—for us, it is more important to teach the concept of one to five to a child. Like when I say, bring me five files, the child should be able to bring me five files. That is the concept of numbers from one to five A child may be able to write by rote from one to 100 but not be able to pick up five files, so there's no point. At home this child had a sibling who was doing this rote homework of one to 100, going to normal school. So this fellow used to simply write, write and write and get confused between school and home. This can be a terrible thing and we wondered, who's giving him these inputs. Then we realized he was doing it at home. So we have a chat with every parent who comes from the beginning to the end—there is interaction. This is what we are teaching in school and this is what we want you to focus on at home. It is better you don't conduct any session at home rather than conduct one that is misdirected. It is better to let the child just be and we will handle the child for you. We have counselling sessions also, we have a counsellor here who is a therapist as well as an MA in Psychology, and is a special educator also. People who believe that the methodology is complete in itself and that it can provide holistic rehabilitation, put their children in our centre and they see the results.

VI. Can you elaborate on some of the developments that you've seen in special children that you've worked with, some specific things you've noticed?

AK. So many things. A child couldn't move one part of the body, today he is moving it. A child couldn't hold a tumbler and sip, today the child is drinking water by himself. This is the kind of assessment that we do. We decide on certain goals to achieve. We decide by the end of the term, the child should be able to recognize one-five, should be able to recognize the colours yellow and black . . . For example, saving reflexes are not present in some children. If something's coming straight at them they won't have the presence of mind to avoid it. So these are three goals. At the end of the term if the child has achieved these goals, then we mark as achieved. Then go on to five to 10, green and red.

We vary the programme for each child. At the same time one activity can achieve several goals. We don't just have individual work, we have group work and individual work. When we are doing group work there may be a child who needs fine motor control, another child who needs to learn to wait for his turn, as far as social skills go. There may be a child who needs to be taught to tell his name, vocalize his thoughts. There may be a child who needs to comfortably stretch his legs and fold them back, that mobility, that movement may be required. Now, in a game—let's say we integrate ball play with music. This can achieve all the goals. Try and catch it—fine motor control. For another he learns how to wait for his turn, he can't just grab it. The 3rd child says his name and he gets the ball, and the 4th child is told to stretch and fold back his legs every time he gets the ball—that's his activity. Every goal is achieved, we incorporate everything into that one activity. That's our creativity. That's the facilitator's job, that is the job of CME. Where is our challenge otherwise?

Actually it's very difficult to present a very exciting visual aspect of the format of a Creative Movement session. It's very difficult. The creative movement session may be fun for all those involved but how good it'll be as a performance on stage one doesn't know. But we want to give you an idea of CME. It's time people got to know more. Most of the things are done as session work with the children. For a performance, it is just structured and put together by us. Contributions are by the children. That's what CME is all about. We are facilitators, not even teachers. Creative Movement Education does not have the hierarchy of teachers and students. We all learn together. We give them a



RASA students performing.

structure, the boundaries have to be laid out. We have to give them some parameters. The ground rules have to be laid, but there is freedom.

Right now we haven't started any vocational training unit. We hope to start one which will be also be structured towards theatre activities—making of props, making of sets . . . Year before last we got a child who we felt could do some kind of a job. This child who used to be so scared of coming by public transport, so scared of horns, wouldn't leave his mother's side, after two years at RASA—not even two years—he was ready to face the world. So we recommended him to the Guindi Vocational Rehabilitation Centre where he's working as a cycle mechanic. We do that. We do have academic skills training to a certain extent. We can teach a little of Geography and a little of Biology—not biology, but what we call Environmental Sciences—also through Creative Movement. But we don't put them through any board examinations or anything, none of our children are ready for it. If we feel that any of our children are ready for it, we will recommend them to a National Open School. But at the same time we do not deny any supportive element of Creative Movement Education even at that stage. That child should come for Creative Movement inputs for supportive work—for group skills, for socializing, for self-esteem development, self-confidence building and also supportive geography, supportive environmental sciences, supportive everything. It's only the written paragraph that we don't teach. Everything else, we teach.

There are three children in fact whom I have integrated into my regular Bharatnatyam music and dance training at RASA Arts Centre. For those children I'd like to do an Arangetram. But you have to take it as it comes.

Basically, traditional Indian theatre includes all aspects, namely—dance, music, arts and crafts and drama in its complete scope.

The options in drama are unlimited. Flexibility and creativity combined with discipline and structure provide the best combination for a learning process. Above all it

is great fun and children look forward to the sessions. The rehearsals and the performances make the whole learning process more active and joyful.

When used as a form of therapy, drama could be used for achieving specific developmental goals. The techniques used in Theatre and group dynamics, including mime, role play, role reversals, creative drama and scripted drama, could be used towards this end. Also, staging a play draws the individual to participate more actively in the therapeutic process.

Drama therapy facilitates change through the drama process. By active participation in the experiences the strengths and weaknesses of the characters in the drama, the situations, they face and the emotions they feel. In enacting aspects of life, the individual develops a more holistic insight into the life situation. This facilitates transformation—opening up a number of creative and alternative ways of dealing with life situations.

I have had the good fortune of applying the different aspects of theatre as a holistic developmental tool. Globally termed Theatre for Holistic Development, the effectiveness of this methodology is evident across abilities. Every single person who has come into contact with this methodology has benefited in some manner.

As a developmental tool for children with varied disabilities I have found it facilitating development in all the areas of development as in

—gross motor development

—fine motor development

—development of cognitive skills

—language and communication skills

—social skills development

Drama facilitates an individual's progress by its basic potential to reflect life experiences and thereby provides scope for transforming it, as and when required. A

Traditional Indian dance at RASA.



connection, therefore is created between the individual's inner world, the present moment or situation in life and the activity in the 'Drama' session. New understanding and changed ways of functioning result by this connection formed by participation in the drama session.

Dance and Movement provide one of the most personal and effective means of communication. As a developmental tool—dance provides the structure for understanding one's body and helps in the expression of inner feelings through one's body movements as well. Cognitive skills are also sharpened as the mind and body work together executing dance movements and expressions.

Music facilitates mental, physical and emotional well being. The music elements of rhythm and melody can be used both to provide emotional support and to provide an outlet for the expression of inner feelings. The contribution of music for well being is unique in the fact that every human being responds well to music.

Just as the use of Drama, Music and Dance as a developmental tool, is not structure oriented, the use of Arts is not product oriented. Neither are these purely recreational. They are *process oriented* and therefore provide a high degree of fulfillment even as the progress takes place. When Arts and Crafts are used as a developmental tool the individual is given scope to express the feelings through a variety of art media including paintings, sculpting, drawing and the like.

Dramatizing a lesson or a topic creates a greater impact than a stylized text. Story telling by way of speech and drama, mimicry and pantomime can be great fun—an unforgettable experience for all the students participating. In addition to communicating internally and externally, the drama exercises stimulate the senses and exercise the body as well.

Again, dramatizing a situation makes it possible to penetrate the surface and provide a path to knowledge—knowledge not only of what is to be studied as part of the textbooks at school, but of insights into things of equal importance if not more—such as the ability to empathize with the ideas and feelings of other people.

As mentioned earlier, the emphasis in using Drama as a developmental tool lies not as much in the performance as in the process. Therefore while enacting a particular story sequence, lesson/part of lesson/situation and the like, it is important to help the children learn to

—analyse the concept

—represent the subject effectively by understanding and evaluation

—build up a progressive sequence in the representation

—realize the importance of working as a team

—identify their own role in the process

—express themselves freely through dialogues, sounds, mime, music, dance, supportive stage accessories, and such other methods suitable to the presentation

When the right mood has been set, and all this has been accomplished, there is holistic change in the children. For example:

Gross Motor Development could result by dramatizing even a simple rhyme like 'Jack and Jill go up the hill'—walking, skipping, jumping, falling and rolling could all be incorporated into the play in a suitable manner.

Fine Motor Development automatically follows when training is given in the use of hand gestures and hand puppets, and in painting masks, folding, cutting and pasting paper to make costumes and so on.

Cognitive Skills, Language and Communication Skills and Social Skills are developed by simulating life situations in the play format. The situations are understood by repeated rehearsals, feedback, coaching, modelling and by replaying the performance till the point of mastery .

It should be remembered that these are but examples. The scope of Drama and other aspects of Theatre as a developmental tool is in fact boundless. It is as wide as the creativity of any given individual which in itself is limitless. Collectively it is absolutely without any limit.

Action as in actually 'doing' is an important means of bringing about change. Take the case of when one wants to learn to play basketball, what should one ideally do?

—talk about it?

—read a book about how to play basket ball?

—see a video on it? OR

—pick up the ball and try to throw it into the basket?

Naturally, without actually throwing the ball into the basket, it would be impossible to learn the game. Without 'doing' learning can never be complete.

Theatre activities provide *active learning experiences* and since life situations are simulated in the classroom, there is immediate transferance of the learning from the classroom to real life. *Above all it is great fun . . . indeed the best way to learn.*

[Interviewed by Vikram Iyengar, March 1999, Chennai]

'the word *special* is central here'

VIKRAM IYENGAR ON PRITI PATEL and THE ACTION PLAYERS

Priti Patel is an exponent of the classical dance form of Manipuri, a dance teacher and choreographer based in Calcutta. She heads her own institute of dance, the Anjika Centre for Manipuri Dance and Movement Therapy where she runs an integrated training programme for both normal and disabled children. She works extensively with the Indian Institute for Cerebral Palsy, Calcutta.

Zarin Chaudhuri is a noted theatre actress, director and designer based in Calcutta. Since 1973 she has been working with the Oral School for the Deaf. This interaction later gave rise to The Action Players, a company of deaf actors. Since its inception, the company has created and performed a number of successful productions in Calcutta, other cities in India and beyond. They have worked with a cross section of personalities from the world of performance including Astad Deboo and C. Y. Gopinath.

These are two examples of the world of performance meeting the world of special education in Calcutta. The word 'special' is central here. Priti Patel refuses to use the words disabled or abnormal: these are special children, she says. That does not only mean that they have special needs, but special capabilities too. After all, in my interview with her, she underlined the fact that for the first six months that she spent at the Indian Institute for Cerebral Palsy, she was at a loss as to what to do, how to handle this entirely foreign situation. She is a trained dancer coming from a background of carefully structured movement which in her own words is 'coordinated, rhythmic, smooth movement [while] spasticity is the absolute opposite of that—uncoordinated, unrhythmic, rough movement. It's dance which has to ease these out.' But the insurmountable question she faced at that time was, How?

Ultimately, it was the children at the Centre who taught her how to teach. She 'discovered a whole new field of spontaneous movement where there were no barriers. 'I began spontaneously using my Manipuri dance format to teach.' It is this spontaneity that even the most structured and codified dance must retain in the dancer, it is this spontaneity and joy in an act of creativity that must be retained and encouraged in a child by any education system, 'special' or otherwise. The situation with a spastic child is problematic in a very specific way. 'They know what has happened to them. They can see themselves in the mirror. 'When you are mentally retarded, you are aware of certain things, but not totally so. Whereas a spastic child is totally aware.' This is probably why motivation in children with cerebral palsy plummets. They put on a lot of weight. If they are asked to dance, they won't. They must be brought to a level where their inhibitions about themselves are negated. The moment this happens, they become deeply motivated and want to try their hand at everything. And because these children are aware of their own drawbacks, they take nothing for granted unlike so many 'normal' people. With older children, the results emerge through another avenue:

'With the older kids who have behavioural problems, they come and tell you what their problems are when their inhibitions are removed. They are adults. It's most difficult for the 18-19 year olds. They have sexual desires, but how are they going to fulfil



Quest for Harmony: Integrated concert(Anjika and Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy), June 2000. Photograph by Subhen Banerjee.

them? It bothers them; it's something they never talk about. But when they come to you, that's your opportunity to cure behavioural problems. That's how you do it. It's a continuous process.'

Once the spontaneity and motivation arrive, dance itself is therapy. The very act of dancing, of being involved in something that is very natural for any human body (however disabled) to indulge in, of giving leeway to something that any child responds to at a highly personal and individual level, paves the way to cure, to ease, to soothe the most severe behavioural disorders. Any form of expression works wonders.

Priti Patel recalls a visit to Hiroshima for a performance:

'The hotel that I was staying in, opposite that there was an automobile workshop. All day the cars kept coming in. The workers would have to report by 9. They would come in by, say, 7:30 in their overalls. And before joining work they would all do their Tai-chi. I was there for fifteen days and every morning they would do that. It's stimulating. Your day, begun that way, will go fabulously. I believe it. I feel it should be included in every system of education. [. . .] By the next century we are going to be the highest populated country in the world but we have no excellence in music, sports. Where is the excellence? We are not giving that environment to the child.'

It is this absence of motivation and, perhaps more importantly, motivators which dogs the steps of the existing systems of education today.

The Action Players once again prove Priti Patel's experience of learning to teach from her students. When Zareen Chaudhuri was first asked to teach Mime at the Oral School for the Deaf where she would be interacting with a group of teenagers who were either profoundly deaf, or hearing impaired, she was hesitant to begin. But soon she found that they had an innate ability to perform mime as 'they had, from their earliest days, depended on gestural language to convey their feelings, and also because they have very, very strong powers of observation.' It is quite true that people deprived of



La Chaim ('To Life'), Februrary 2003, Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy. Photograph by Subhen Banerjee.

one or more of the senses are blessed with a sixth, even if that is taken simply to mean an enhanced level for the functioning ones.

From the early shows with the Oral School for the Deaf, it was a logical step to The Action Players, a company which is now well known in the city and beyond for their skilfully crafted sequences involving mime and speaking actors. Indeed, they have explored music and even the realm of dance with choreographer Astad Deboo, responding to a pulsating inner sense of rhythm that they feel, not hear. In the film *Strictly Ballroom*, the professional dancer, Scott, is asked by a Spanish matriarch, 'Where do you feel the rhythm?' In response, he sketches a few movements with his feet. No, she tells him as she thumps his chest. It is the heart which feels it. And that is how it should be, over and above the consideration of the source of the pulse.

Playwright C. Y. Gopinath, momentarily 'struck dumb' by an invitation to work with The Action Players found himself agreeing to a proposal which he had made up his mind to politely refuse. It is worth quoting at length from his contribution to the Millenium brochure of The Action Players where he recalls the 'effortless way in which these deaf children and youths have touched my life with magic'.

'Though my profession is in communications, it has always been with those who can see, hear and talk—the so-called normal people. How on earth would I communicate with a team of the deaf? I had no knowledge of the elegant and expressive language of gestures through which the deaf communicate with each other. I could just see myself standing clumsily before a roomful of enthusiastic young deaf men and women, falling into a silence between useless words and meaningless gestures.

From the very first day of the workshop, I realized I would be learning more from the deaf than they would from me. Unfettered by language and communication conventions, they were masters at reaching out to their more stilted brethren, such as myself, and just plain and simple communicating. Indian sign language is neither highly evolved nor unified, but when gestures failed, proved inadequate, these young people would effortlessly switch to mime, at which they were so exceedingly skilled.



The Action Players

I have always been struck by the observation that it is difficult for a deaf person to say something dishonest—signed communication requires the participants to be face to face, and in eye-to-eye contact. Communication requires attention not just to the signing hands but the entire body and expressions. And while a 'normal' person can say one thing and mean another, a deaf person cannot because her pupils will always speak true.

At the workshop, I came to appreciate not only the depth of their sincerity and emotional honesty, but also their extraordinary sensitivity. There is nothing casual about a deaf person. Their need for people and communication endows them with reserves of warmth, affection and thoughtfulness that shine through the thickets and nettles of their difficult lives. Their supreme talent is in making you forget their daunting handicap and put a smile on your face with their warm humour.

As I watched them go through my workshop games and exercises, with joy and energy, I knew that between me and them, I would always be the one with the handicap.'

[All quotes and material for Priti Patel taken from an interview by Vikram Iyengar in April 1999, Calcutta. All quotes and material regarding The Action Players culled from their Millenium brochure]