

## The Theatre Academy Grips Project: A Report

Dr. Mohan Agashe

**MOHAN AGASHE spearheaded the Grips project in India, which intended not only to do more Grips plays but also to introduce the concept and methods of Grips to other theatre practitioners. This three-year project undertaken by Theatre Academy, Pune, in collaboration with Max Mueller Bhavan and Grips Theatre, Berlin, has seen a series of workshops and adaptations, some of which are covered in this issue. This report gives an overview, providing a frame of reference for the following articles on Grips-related activity in India.**

Grips' plays portray the world through the eyes of kids, not adults. They deal with contemporary situations and the topics of their plays are problems that children and youth have with their surroundings-authoritative education, school problems, prejudices, pollution, hostility towards foreigners, longing for friendship and love etc. Grips does not teach in the conventional sense, nor does it give answers. It shows how to ask the right questions. Grips education operates at the subconscious level. It makes children think. Grips likes to make the audience laugh; to laugh is to understand. As a theatre practitioner, I realize that making a young adult act as a child is excellent training for actors, and as a psychiatrist I think this is the most subtle and desirable way of introducing children to the realities of the world around them, especially in my culture where we tend to over-protect our children. But the most important fact is that a Grips' play means fun, music and quality entertainment.

The general outline of the project is something like this. In the first year, I invited Volker Ludwig to conduct a workshop for writers, in which he basically talked about seven of his own plays and the Grips' process of writing and producing a play for children. While he was conducting this workshop, Shrirang Godbole [who had earlier worked with Wolfgang Kolneder of Grips on a Marathi production of *Max and Milli*] was adapting and directing, entirely on his own, yet another play by Volker and Rainer, *Mannomann*. It opened on 4 January 1991 and has already completed 175 shows. The combined impact of these shows and Volker's workshop resulted in some of the participants of the workshop attempting to write a play the Grips way.

So in the second year we had an original script by Shobha Bhagwat, *Amhi Gharche Raje* (The Boss of the House), and once again we invited Wolfgang Kolneder, this time to direct an original Marathi play. While directing this play, he also conducted a training workshop for actors, so that in the future we would have a team of good actors. This play opened on 31 March 1992. On this trip Wolfgang also conducted short workshops for actors in Bangalore and Calcutta.

For both the above workshops, we had invited theatre practitioners from Calcutta, Delhi, and Bangalore to introduce them to Grips. In all, we had about 20 participants, who stayed with us for 10 days to observe and learn about the process.

Now I was in the last year of the Project and I had two things in mind: for Theatre Academy Grips Project to produce its first youth play and to produce Grips' plays in other Indian languages in other cities of India.

Around the same time as Wolfgang was conducting his workshop in 1992, Shrirang was already working on his youth play *Divas Tujhe Hey* (This Is Your Heyday), which dealt with the problems and crises faced by our young teens with westernized lifestyles, brainwashed by the media pouring into our society. Shrirang, who grew gradually with Grips, first assisting Wolfgang, then doing an independent adaptation, was now doing an original production. This play opened in May 1992 to mixed reactions. Young people liked it immensely, the seniors had their reservations.

While Shrirang was directing this play, I was busy making connections with our workshop participants in Delhi, Calcutta and Bangalore and in January 1993 I directed, for the Theatre in Education Company of National School of Drama, an adaptation of *Max and Milli* in Hindi which has done more than 75 shows. Soon afterwards, in February, Jayoti Bose from Calcutta, a participant of our workshop, opened the same play in Bengali, adapted and directed by herself with the help of Max Mueller Bhavan in Calcutta. This Bengali version has completed 100 shows. Theatre Academy visited both Delhi and Calcutta with its production of *Mannomann (Nako Re Baba)* and jointly conducted workshops for teachers, parents and theatre practitioners on the Grips concept and its application to Indian theatre, demonstrated by our show and the local production of *Max and Milli*.

In Bangalore, yet another participant of Wolfgang's workshop, Chandra Jain, along with Surendranath, succeeded in getting Wolfgang Kolneder to direct the Kannada adaptation of *Max and Milli*. This production opened in Bangalore in August 1993.

We decided to hold a festival of Grips' plays in Pune to mark the 300th show of Theatre Academy Grips' productions. In August 1993, Pune audiences watched with delight four productions of the Theatre Academy Grips Project and Wolfgang, as Chief Guest, also released a book of Shrirang's Marathi f~ adaptations of *Max and Milli* and *Mannomann*.

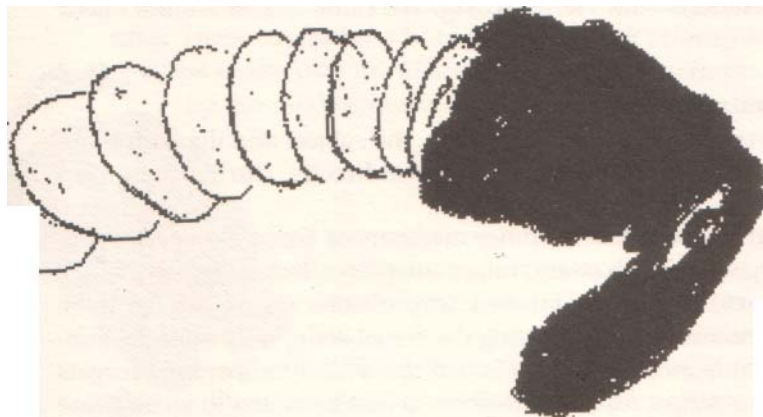
Wolfgang had a chance to discuss with us our proposed production of a youth play in which we will try to adapt the successful musical of Grips' *Line One* to our realities. The location and the characters will be Bombay-based.

March 1994 witnessed yet another exciting Grips workshop. This time we held it in Bangalore. Besides those who had done Grips productions in India, we had playwright-director duos from Bombay, Pune, Calcutta and from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In the ten-day writer's workshop, headed by Volker Ludwig with Shrirang Godbole, Jayoti Bose and Surendranath as Indian resource persons, all the participants had one common session every morning to discuss either a Grips' play or an idea for a new play with other playwright-directors, or to see any of the ten Grips productions available on video and to have independent sessions with Volker or any of the resource persons. The rest of their time they were supposed to work on their scripts. The participants from Sri Lanka had the most original idea for a play and they managed to write more than half the play during the workshop. We have four completed new scripts, and four half-written scripts to be completed in the next two months. The writerdirector duo from Bombay has already staged an adaptation of Grips play, *Stronger than Superman* in Hindi. It opened at Prithvi Theatres in Bombay on 14 May 1994.

We are currently in the process of video recording Theatre Academy productions of *Mannomann* and *Amhi Gharche Raje*. The past year has seen *Max and Milli* performed in four Indian languages in four regions with equal success. More than 400,000 people in India have seen at least one Grips play in an Indian regional language and we have ever-increasing enquiries about new shows.

## A 'Grip'ping Experience

Dr. Mandar Paranjpe



**VOLKER Ludwig the Director of Grips Theatre, conducted a workshop in Pune in December 1990. This report by a participant provides a comprehensive introduction to the methods and principles of Grips.**

### Introduction

The workshop dealt mainly with the writing of plays for children. During it we heard a lot about Grips Theatre from Herr Volker Ludwig, saw ten Grips plays on video, and had quite a few lively discussions. The workshop was prefixed and suffixed by the staging of Marathi adaptations of two Grips plays by Theatre Academy.

### The Christening of Grips

The workshop began with an introduction to the early years of the Grips movement by Herr Volker Ludwig. The origin of Grips Theatre can be traced back to the progressive students' movements in Europe during the 60s. The students initially used the medium of a sharp, hilarious, sarcastic, political *cabera* to reach the public. Some of the workers later turned to children's theatre. 'Using children's theatre as a tool of the political movement? An unthinkable proposition!' would be the reaction of anyone who is accustomed to the conventional image of children's theatre. Like everywhere else, in Germany too children's theatre meant fairy tales and demons, trick scenes and jokers. With such a background, the concept of a realistic problem-oriented children's theatre was bound to sound unsound ! But the Grips theatre not

only theorized, but also boldly practised and developed a novel concept of children's theatre which dealt with children's problems and aimed at creating awareness among children. Continuing communication with them is an essential aspect of such a theatre. The very name 'Grips' resulted from such a communication. Once a Grips worker asked a group of children what it was that the children needed most. One of the kids promptly answered: 'In order to face our problems, we need "Grips"'. The German word 'Grips' means a quick grasp over a situation, coming to grips with a challenge. Grips theatre has developed into an emancipatory but non-escapist theatre that literally en'courage's the kids.

### **The Toddling Years**

Though the basic aim of social reform through awareness among kids has remained unchanged, the Grips plays have undergone a gradual maturation. In the toddling years of Grips, children were considered part of the socially oppressed class, who had to be empowered against the tyranny of the establishment. This was considered to be part of overall social reformation. The early plays believed in the uncomplicated ideology of a straightforward 'childism'. They portrayed the conflict between adults and children. Though rebellious and effective, these plays were somewhat oversimplified and loud. But as the years passed, the Grips plays began to mature. Instead of dismissing all adults as 'bad folk', the plays began to explore the reasons for their behaviour. Thus the plays progressed from revenge to research. Children are usually frightened by the incomprehensible, the unknown-- even simple darkness. So to remove their fears the Grips theatre began to throw a light of understanding on the confusing reality surrounding the children. The early power-plays were now replaced by understanding-plays. They also began to manifest a richer variety of themes. Now they even showed some vices of children, though, of course, these vices were caused by the adult establishment! The plays also dealt with subjects like male chauvinism, racism, economic injustice, and problems of the handicapped. The plays were addressed to specific age groups like 5 to 9 years, 9 to 13 years etc. Recently some youth plays have also been staged.

After this preliminary introduction to the Grips Theatre, we watched ten Grips plays on video. This was punctuated by comments from and conversations with Herr Ludwig. We came to know more about Grips through this whole process.

## **The Genesis of a Grips Script**

A typical Grips play is written in a very unconventional way. To begin with, the subject and the author are chosen. The subjects are suggested by the children themselves, directly or indirectly, during the group meetings.

Hectic homework then begins. Not only the author but the other members of Grips also participate in the homework. The subject of the play undergoes indepth study. Information is collected in many ways, e.g. reading, observations, visits, conversations, etc. Subjective, informal impressions are considered to be as important as formal, objective information. The author starts writing the actual script only after the subject matter is properly 'cooked' in his head. What is most important is that the author deliberately forgets all his homework before he sits down to write his script. All he remembers is that he wants to write a fine play for children. The homework is done carefully, while the play is written care-freely. This ensures that the play is not reduced to an essay.

## **The Technique of Scriptwriting**

Herr Ludwig told us the sequence in which he prefers to write the script of a play: subject-characters-story-first scene last scene-middle scene-songs-and finally, the dialogues. Herr Ludwig attends the rehearsals although he cannot 'see' the play. He can only 'hear' it. (i.e. he cannot direct a play, he can only write it). The script continues to be reshaped during the rehearsals. Suggestions from all are welcome, but the final word is the author's, and the script is almost never changed after the grand rehearsal. This system helps to maintain the sanctity of the script. It also allows flexibility and freedom for the director and actors. Herr Ludwig told us about an interesting technique he has developed for refining his script. During the days of scriptwriting, he deliberately forces himself to talk to people about it. This exposes his script to, objections and questions. He has to find answers and think of new ideas. It helps him detect weak links in his script.

The way a Grips play is written is very different from our conventional concept of writing a play. We tend to believe that genuine literature has to be the spontaneous expression of an individual's talent. In contrast to this, Herr Ludwig does not seem to be allergic to group writing. In fact, according to him, group writing is especially suitable for a play. Nevertheless,

Herr Ludwig makes it clear that the dialogues must be written by one individual, the playwright alone. According to him, themes or characters may be shaped by group discussion but only a special few are endowed with the skill of writing natural, crisp dialogues. Thus, Grips draws a clear line between the 'group aspect' and the 'individual aspect' of play writing.

### **Art Plus Artisanhip**

Herr Ludwig was asked in the workshop: 'Isn't a Grips play a work of artisanhip rather than art? Doesn't it go through all the non-artistic steps of 'homework', 'study', 'analysis'? Isn't it therefore, inferior to art?' Such questions sprang from our strong bias against painstaking artisanhip. For us, only an effortless creation is worth the name of art. Ludwig's response to such questions was noteworthy. He said candidly that his plays combined art and artisanhip. He reminded us that even the classic works of Leonardo da Vinci had an element of artisanhip. He compared his play writing to shoe-making without the slightest embarrassment. According to him, the painstaking perspiration of the artisan is as essential for a good play as the easy inspiration of the artist. Grips plays are a lively lesson to those who insist that a good play has to be completed spontaneously and at one sitting. But the most important thing is that the finished play always appears effortless and spontaneous. There are no scars showing the pains taken, the homework done.

### **The Characters in a Grips Play**

You can identify a Grips play by its typical features. Its adult characters can be divided roughly into three types. The first type are avowed supporters of the antichildren establishment. The second type have taken an anti-children stance not out of conviction, but only out of custom. Their 'age-old' habit can be changed by persuasion. The third type are exceptional. They are on the children's side right from the beginning. These 'childlike' adults genuinely seek reforms in the established system. Most of the child-characters in the play are also eager to see such reforms. But an occasional child may have been spoiled by the establishment. S/he may manifest ills like male chauvinism, racism, the snobbery of the rich, etc. -

## **The Unfolding of the Scene**

The scenes follow a typical sequence. At the beginning of the play the child-characters have a disturbing experience. They feel very concerned about it. They then start asking the adult characters a lot of questions. These innocent questions embarrass the adults. The questioning amounts to a rebellion against the establishment. It exposes the contradictions, the escapist excuses of the adults. Unexpectedly, this initiates an analysis of the main problem of the play. The problem introduced in the disturbing experience at the W/ beginning of the play is elaborated through the interaction of the characters. The play proceeds like a detective story. But even tense moments of suspense, anger, or anguish are depicted in a funny, humorous manner.

A Grips play has a message for the audience but the style is neither pedagogy nor propaganda. The message is brought home just as the children in the audience are immersed in a flood of laughter or when their curiosity about 'what will happen next' is at its peak. It is delicate, subtle, almost secret. One cannot isolate any particular passage from a Grips play as its message. The message is dissolved in the fun of the play.

An important observation about the Grips plays is that no child character is left alone on stage. There are at least two kids or none. This is because if a child is left alone to face the adults around, the child may be inhibited or pressurized. So there is always at least one more child to give a feeling of solidarity.

## **Social Fantasy**

A Grips play provides the children with many moments that they love. It tickles their humour. It thrills them with suspense. It makes them feel strong. But surprising as these moments are, they are logical and convincing. There are no fabricated accidents or strange coincidences. The play proceeds as a natural flow. Does this mean that the Grips Theatre abhors fantasy? Not at all! The Grips theatre recognizes and respects the children's demand for fantasy. But to satisfy it, Grips has chosen a novel type of fantasy-'social fantasy'. Here is how the 'social fantasy' is realized: The reformist children and the 'childlike' adults in the play form a team. This team becomes active against the ills of the establishment. It looks for solutions to the problem in the play. A Grips play avoids such hallowed but often hollow solutions like 'Total Social



Revolution' or 'Radical Upheaval of the Entire System'. The solutions suggested by Grips are creative and imaginative, but at the same time concrete and practical. The play climaxes with the victory of the reformist team. This victory is shown in a dramatic, picturesque scene. Such a triumph of the reformists is extremely difficult (though not impossible) in real life. It is like a fantasy-or 'social fantasy' as Herr Ludwig has called it.

This victory gives the children in the audience tremendous courage and hope. It becomes a lasting reminder of their own potential. Why is the social fantasy so special, so effective? Because it is not brought about by the extraordinary prowess of any 'odd (super) man out', but rather by the collective action of many simple common people. So the victory does not appear to be 'filmy' and this makes it encouragingly authentic.

### **The Triumphism of Grips**

'How can a "good" play (or film) end in triumph?'. This question was the result of another piece of dogma: An art film or artistic play (as against their commercial counterparts) has to end in pessimistic defeat. It needs a tragic end to prove its worth as an artistic work. On the other hand, the commercial cinema bombards the audience with its ridiculous, unrealistic 'happy' endings. The helpless audience is sandwiched between the pessimism of the art film and the pseudo-optimism of the commercial film. The effects of these apparently opposing attitudes are surprisingly identical. Together they destroy man's hope that anything good can ever be achieved in real life. The art films convince him that reality is full of defeat; the commercial films convince him that all triumphs are ridiculously irrational and hence impossible. Such defeatism only serves to protect the vested interests of the establishment against the possible threat from a collective rebellion of the common citizens, because the defeatism convinces the common citizens that it is futile to fight. 'Grips Theatre' rejects such defeatism. It looks at the world with children's eyes. Children are not blinded with pessimistic prejudices. They can visualize a better world. The Grips plays suggest what we can do to create such a world.

## **Grips Songs**

A Grips play does not merely speak. It also sings. Its message reaches the child-audience more easily when put in a lyrical form; the song lingers in the minds of children and continues to empower them for a long time. A Grips play has songs for various functions-expressing a mood, summarizing a scene, making a humorous comment on the establishment, or visualizing a better world. The songs lubricate the prose of the play. The songs do not appear to be artificially forced into the play. They seem to naturally belong. But what makes them so effective is their melody. Herr Ludwig is a master of writing songs that combine meaning with melody. His songs are so popular in Germany that they are sung even at public meetings, demonstrations, etc.

## **Autobiographic Plays**

Many children, while talking about a Grips play, mix up references to their own home or school with the story of the play. This is not because they are dishonest, but because they honestly see themselves in the play. A Grips play reflects their reality. The credit for this transparency goes to Volker Ludwig's 'autobiographic' approach.

## **The Experience Limit**

Volker Ludwig has to take care not to cross the 'experience limit' of the kids, because he has observed that children respond only to those things that fall within their field of experience. They just cannot appreciate anything that is beyond this limit-for example, they can appreciate the giddiness resulting from the inhalation of smoke from an unserviced automobile exhaust. But they can neither see the ozone puncture nor feel the greenhouse effect of global warming. This limit of children's experience has to be respected while writing plays.

## **No Horror, Please**

The one thing that must be strictly avoided in a play for kids is horror. 'This is because many younger kids think that whatever they see in the play is actually

happening in reality. A horror scene has a damaging effect on such tender minds. When Volker Ludwig told us this, I remembered how as a child I was terrified to see on stage the omnipresent witch with her long, canine teeth.

### **An Audience of Children**

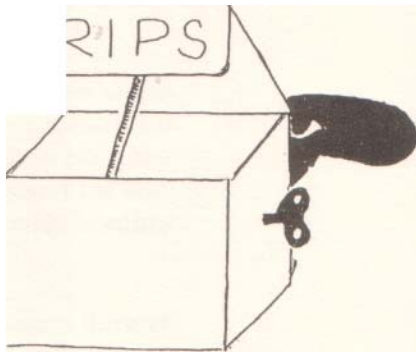
Since the child audience seems to have some limitations like the 'experience limit' or the 'exclusion of horror', does this mean that it is inferior to the adult audience? Is this a handicap for the playwright, a restriction on his/her freedom? On the contrary, one thing makes the child-audience actually superior to the adult audience. And that is their fair judgement. Herr Ludwig has observed that children (generally) do not generalize. For example, if some officer in a play is shown to be I G corrupt, the adult audience concludes that all officers are corrupt. Many spectators may even applaud in approval of this verdict. Then there may even be protests by the unions of officers against the theatre group! But it is all quite different with the child audience. They conclude only that the particular individual officer shown in the play is corrupt. Children do not carry wholesale stamps of 'Good' or 'Bad'. Their vision is not coloured by prejudice. They evaluate an event or a person on individual merit and not on the basis of a group or caste.

According to Volker Ludwig, children take time to develop a taste for Grips. Their response improves as they see more plays. The response of children is livelier and freer when there are no parents or teachers in the audience. But according to Volker Ludwig, their presence in the audience often helps in facilitating an understanding between them and the kids. Even adults enjoy the Grips plays despite the lack of violence, obscenity, scandals or gossip.

### **In Performance**

A Grips play is performed without a curtain or conventional stage, in a central ring. The spectators sit concentrically around the ring. So the play is viewed from different angles by different spectators. A Grips play is thus three-dimensional. The director has to keep in mind this third dimension. He tries to exploit it to the advantage of the play. He can have more flexibility of composition, movement, etc. In a Grips play, the child characters are enacted by

adult artists. This G ensures the availability of professional artists. The quality of acting is maintained. The children in the audience accept adult actors playing children's roles even more readily than the adult spectators do. In fact, they like to see adult actors playing children's roles with sympathy and skill. Also, as the play is performed on a plane lower than the concentric galleries of the audience, the adult characters do not appear all that tall or big. The Grips theatre has its own workshop. This makes it possible to experiment freely with stage property. Even inanimate objects become living characters in a Grips play. The multiangled view makes the stage property even more versatile.



### **The Follow up**

The performance of a play is just one part of the Grips movement. It is neither the only nor the ultimate aim. The play continues even after the performance, in the form of followup. The Grips workers talk and listen to children talk about the play. But the timing of this chit-chat is chosen with an awareness of child psychology. The child spectators are never caught immediately after a performance, because when they have just come out of the auditorium, they are excited and need time to talk to each other or think about the play or just to run around. The Grips workers approach the child spectators only a couple of weeks after the performance. In such communications, formalities like questionnaires or evaluation sheets are strictly avoided, otherwise the dialogue would degenerate into an exam., and instead of coming out with their true comments, the children would write 'model answers'. According to Volker Ludwig, the memory of children is amazing. They remember a play in detail, even after a gap of two weeks. The feedback from children fuels new ideas for Grips plays. But Grips workers do not stop even at this stage of dialogue about the play. They prepare followup literature using the subject matter of the play. Not all material compiled in the pre-script homework can be accommodated in the play. So it is now 'post-scripted' as followup literature. It is distributed

among interested ('Gripsified') teachers in various schools. These teachers then use the followup literature to keep the children informed and aware of the problem in the play through study sessions, work experience, etc.

But sometimes the Grips Theatre performs 'drama in real life'; that is, it organizes direct action programmes on issues of public concern. For example, Grips once appealed to the Berliners to boycott goods imported from South Africa when apartheid was at its worst, under Botha's regime. This non-violent campaign was so effective that South African goods soon stopped appearing on the shelves of Berlin shops. Grips conducts such a 'dramatic' activities because it is not just a 'drama company' in the conventional sense. Rather, it is a team of workers with a shared commitment to the cause of social reform. According to Herr Ludwig, Grips-like plays are possible only if such a committed group exists.

Grips has full-time and part-time workers. All these are salaried, professional artists. The pay scale is uniform, based on hours of work. The artists are encouraged to play different types of roles so as to make them versatile. Some artists have remained with Grips right from its beginning. Other artists come in, work for five to six years and then leave Grips for newer fields of experience. The newcomers are slowly 'Gripsified'. The exit of an artist is considered normal. Grips Theatre has familiar personnel like the author, director, musician, manager of sets, makeup man, costume person, etc. But it has also evolved the post of the 'dramaturg', who is the think-tank of Grips. He has to fine-tune all the strings of the Grips orchestra like the choice of a subject, homework, rehearsals, children's meetings, followup literature, etc. The dramaturg threads together the varied activities of Grips and guides the Grips movement in the proper direction. He focuses his attention on the long term goals so that they are not overlooked in the rush of day to day activities. Herr Wolfgang Kolneder is the dramaturg for Grips.

## **'For us the kids were a suppressed class and we fought for that class'**

**Volker Ludwig**

**SAMIK BAIVDYOPADHYAY and JAYOTI BOSE interviewed VOLKER LUDWIG, the Director of Grips Theatre in Germany, on his recent trip to India.**

SB: Would you want to say theatre is in a way your response, reaction, take off from the '68 movement

VL: Yes, without the '68 movement, I never would have got the idea to do theatre for children. It was really a political idea and decision. I loved to write for theatre and other things too. But it's very hard to write, one must know what for-must have a sense, must have an aim, the possibility of changing society, influencing people. From '66-'68 I did a political, satirical sort of theatre called *cabera* in Germany. It was shows mixed up with songs, *chansons*, sketches, dialogues, very funny, very serious-mixed up. We did that with the help of the Socialist Students Union of that time, the anti-authoritarian wing. At that time the students began to think of a new kind of education. We also got the idea that it would be important to do something for kids and not only for adults. Students began to found their own private kindergartens, to exercise their own anti-authoritarian ideas in the education of their children. I did the same. We had nothing to do with the children's theatre of the time, which consisted only of Christmas time fairy tales. So we just did what we were doing for grownups, for kids. Plays about their reality, their daily problems, mixed up with songs, with dialogues, to bring hope.

SB: So was the children's theatre a kind of an extension of the educational programme, where you were offering an alternative education?

VL: No, it has nothing to do with that. We were not at all didactic. We had no ideas, there was no theory in it-we had just seen some children's theatre in our own house, old friends of ours. They did something for kids. We looked at it, figured out what was really interesting for kids and what only for grown ups. They told us, because we didn't like what they did, 'Write yourself-do it better.' That was another

SB: Challenge?

VL: Yes, challenge, an additional challenge. One day these people left with their group

for a bigger theatre-and so it was one more reason-because they also brought in a little bit of money. So I had to write a play in a short time. My brother was the designer. It was still sort of a fairy tale, because we did not know any other kind of theatre for kids, but that all changed very quickly. Everything we learnt was through the reaction of the audience. We had in mind the anti-authoritarian attitudes of the students. For us the kids were a suppressed class and we fought for that class.

SB: Even for the liberation of that class

VL: Yes, yes, to strengthen their consciousness and give them a perspective from which to recognize the world, so that they know that there are economic and other reasons for what happens around them. We wanted to open their eyes, so that they could ask questions and criticize. We would educate them and create optimistic opinions and the feeling that everything can be changed. The world can be changed. It was our main headline in that phase.

JB: Was it an extension of the ideology? You wanted to achieve that extension through kids?

VL: It was a little bit like that in the beginning, but we lost these aims very quickly. Because kids respond only to things they recognize in their own reality. When they see it has something to do with them, it's okay. But tell them abstract things-they don't understand, they get bored, they begin to talk, walk out. So you become very, very modest when you work for kids. We try to find out their real needs and problems, their dreams and longings-try to make their problems ours and to write good plays for them, so that they can identify, and understand they are not alone with their problems. They see themselves on stage, at the centre, and that gives them more courage

JB: How do you make a distinction based on age? Is it purely psychological or

VL: The children's age is connected to the dialogue.

JB: And the problems also?

VL: The problems, of course, and what they can understand. Sometimes we decide the age after the opening. Normally we know, we do tests before. We've got lots of people helping us, good teachers we can trust, from the kindergartens. We never aim for those less than five

years, because when they are younger, it's not natural for them to sit on a seat for one and a half hours. So the challenge is to create the thrill, the tension, so they don't get restless. In our theatre they can just get up and walk onto stage. When they do this I know it's a bad show. The actors are not concentrating enough.

SB: When did you make the decision that grownups would be playing the children-right in the beginning?



VL: The decision was made right at the very beginning because we had no idea about kids. We were not trained psychologists, just professional actors or writers or intellectuals. The other reason was that we had to play up to fifty times a month to survive, most of it in the morning during school time. So it wasn't possible for our actors to be children. On the other hand we found that children like it very much when you do it in the right way, when you do not try to 'imitate' kids. They feel honoured when grownups do their roles. They are always astonished at how tall they are after the show is over, because in their minds they are only little children.

JB: But does your theatre have anything to do with Brecht

VL: There is something to do with Brecht-same sort of political theatre, *cabera*. Also the fact that we sing our songs directly to the audience, and not as part of the plot. And also the *Verfremdungseffekt* [Alienation Effect], which begins with the fact that grownups play children. It is important that children be aware that it is just theatre. Because if little children think it is reality, it can be very dangerous. That's why they sometimes get so scared in illusionist theatre. We must give them a chance to realize that it is just theatre.

SB: You mean it should never be so overwhelming that they are crushed



VL: Yes, that's right. That's the exact word. Even when an actor is too strong, when he feels what he suffers-it's awful for children, they are really afraid. Actors have to show how they feel inside, but not really feel it. Mustn't be too strong.

JB: Your plays always have some message, some political belief, but you put it in a very entertaining manner.

VL: Yes, for me theatre is comedy. Entertainment is the most important thing, otherwise you should not take money for tickets. You can just preach in a church. When the message is too obvious, then it's a bad play. So I do not like the word message. It's just that we want to tell stories to the kids, something interesting, something that may help them. Everything is political-even a bad Christmas fairy-tale is political in a bad way.

SB: In a negative way?

VL: In a negative way.

JB: When I used the word message I meant to say that it is not just entertainment-you have something to tell them, through your use of songs, the way you use the actors.

VL: You can put a message in a song. When it's a funny song, it stays in their minds.

SB: They even sing it later. So it stays on.

VL: Yes, when they come to the next play, they sing the songs of the previous play.

JB: After more or less every sequence there is a song which narrates the essence of the scene.

VL: Yes, this is one of the reasons why we put in songs. Another is that songs encourage children. We get a lot of letters from kids that say-I was very, very sad, and suddenly I got an idea, I sang the song and I felt wonderful again.

SB: And another thing, in the two performances I've watched of Grips plays, I felt that every time the songs came on, there was almost a kind of a vibration, where the audience was participating in a way, almost as if they were singing it internally at some level.

VL: Yes, in the beginning we let the kids sing the songs. In some of the early plays there was a. main song and a guitarist, because the kids wanted it. He sang the song with the kids. He

couldn't do anything in the second half, because as soon as the lights went off, they began to sing the song by themselves. Now the songs are more complicated.

JB: Your acting area is not the proscenium-is this a conscious decision?



VL: Yes, the stage is completely flexible, with the audience sitting all around. Our new theatre was a former cinema. We decided to build it like an arena, so the audience can sit on three sides. Sometimes we put benches on the fourth side. I like this the most. So sometimes it has the atmosphere of a football stadium. The kids look down upon the adult actors. It's a good atmosphere and a good perspective. They are not taught from above

SB: They are judging.

VL: Yes, they are judging from above what happens down below. And everybody can see much better. That's another reason. And they can see one another, the other kids opposite. So they get the feeling that it's not just me or you, but a group

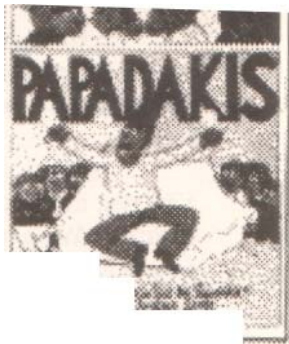
SB: A whole society, a community

VL: Yes. When the children draw what they see, they also draw the heads of the other children opposite.

JB: The form of your play is not the five-act play kind of a structure. It is more or less situation oriented.

VL: There are some plays like *Ein Fest Bei Papdakis* that have a straight classical five-act play structure. But it depends always on what we have to say, and also, the style. There are some plays with fairy tale images. Sometimes it's useful to tell kids something they cannot see in the form of pictures, like the first play about pollution in '77. Sometimes it's very realistic. Some plays, especially the early plays, are not psychological plays. The characters are real cliches, cartoons, caricatures. Other plays like *Max and Milli* are psychological plays. The style depends on the content.

SB: Do you have a well worked out system for feedback, to help identify new problems, new things arising in the minds of the children that you can incorporate into your dramatic corpus? How do you operate at that level?



VL: There is no system. Not at all. We are dependent on writers, like all theatre. We have a huge problem. I'm the only writer left. We had four. We did several plays, often two writers for one play. For one play I preferred to write with very close friends that I know very well. When we did our first youth play, we spent half a year with the youth of that class in the city and studied them till we got the feel of the language and knew their special problems. We took our actors with us. They became friends with them and so on, till we were very, very close. Up to today I prefer to write for those kids. I know them in a way better than the kids of my own class.

I'm often asked how I can write for little kids when I'm over fifty years old. You must know the subject you write on. That's the only thing. You can study any subject and

understand it. Sometimes it needs time. Many things we mustn't study at all. After 25 years, there is a sort of common or collective experience after so many thousands of plays and we can feel at once if it will be too long, too complicated

SB: So it's sort of inbuilt now?

VL: We only research or invite people when we are not sure of something in a play. When it is a special subject, of course you must study it. When we do a play about a hospital, of course the actors walk through hospitals, learn how to make beds and everything. When we do a play about a handicapped boy in a wheelchair, they spend a week going all around the city with the wheelchair and come back angry that the whole world consists only of steps! But to find out the reactions of the kids is no longer necessary. A few tests and we know. We've never had to change after the opening.

SB: Over the years, how has the attitude or response of the immediate society or the state changed?



VL: In the beginning we had huge problems because it was so completely new. When you address the needs of the audience, it has to be subversive. We often had problems. In the beginning our plays were censored, forbidden, in the early '70s. Also, everybody believed theatre for children meant a complete fantasy world without any contact with reality. Pure fantasy. So many people couldn't understand what we did. We first had to show them how kids loved it, that the age for fairy tales ends at six, seven, eight years, and then they want reality. So for our second show we invited only the kids, and put the journalists in the last row, so they were forced to look at the reaction of the kids. But we had to educate in a way, and fight. We

had a lot of good young teachers on our side especially the former Left students. They preferred to go out to the quarters of the workers and the:- were the first to come with their school classes. The moment we concentrated completely on children's theatre that was two years later, we at last got a little bit of money from the state. This improved our situation. We now have a theatre of fifty members, thirty of them fully paid. We have a repertory of eight plays and eighty to ninety thousand visitors a year and we get about 65% of our budget from the state. The rest we must get from the box office, which is hard but possible.

The Conservative Party which was in the Opposition in Berlin with 48% in the '70s, was strongly opposed to us. They fought us with every means they could think of. Ironically, it turned out to be good public relations for us, because their arguments were so ridiculous that finally normal people began to help us. It was a huge victory for us. Since then we have no more political problems. The Conservative Party has been governing Berlin since '81. This Conservative Party has more of a sense of culture than the Social Democrats. They decided- okay, it's part of our culture, good for the Berlin image, since we are more known than the other theatres of Berlin. The moment they recognized that, everything else was okay. Since then we haven't had to fear closure like other theatres.

SB: Hasn't the aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin wall, political changes, affected your position or situation in any way? I was there in '92 and I felt that there's a lot of change.

VL: Yes, Berlin has changed enormously and Berlin is a very poor city today, the poorest in Germany. The whole of Berlin now gets nothing except from Berlin. They now must pay their theatres themselves, so it's very hard. The theatres have also lost audiences because the young people from West Berlin, the students, they all went to East Berlin. There are great theatres there and so they went there

SB: The rates have also gone up.

VL: Yes, so all theatres have less audiences in Berlin. It is not just a recession but the beginning of a long, long decline. From Sweden to Italy, all over Europe- and that's the consequence of wasting resources in everything. It's especially hard for Germany. The climate, the mood, the atmosphere ... in about, five years, we will have 30% less money than now. Some theatres won't survive but we hope to survive.



JB: Coming to Grips theatre, here in Calcutta, there has been some criticism from adults. They fear that children who watch the theatre start disobeying their parents.

VL: This was what we heard in the beginning too. But it was complete nonsense; because kids as a suppressed class know exactly what they can risk and what they can't. Every psychologist would agree that there is no danger at all.

JB: What does the word Grips really mean?

VL: Just a northern German expression, it's a funny word-children love it-what you've got in your head, in your brains. It's a mixture of wit, brain, quick understanding, sense of fun, intelligence. So this word is first fun, entertainment and second intelligence, rationality. These are two very important parts of our theatre.

SB: You were telling me about the musical you had just done ...

VL: Well, months ago we started a new musical. It was a bit new, for young people, because it was a satirical Utopian theatre play about the fact that people hate political parties and don't vote any more. In this play the parties decide that because of this, even children can vote. They try to manipulate them with the help of their sponsors. But the children find out. After lots of adventures they win with the help of the party for very old people, which supports them.

JB: Do you consider Grips a methodology?

VL: That's a word I learnt in India. To say Grips is not a new style but a new method is just a bit too much. Normally a writer writes about what is in his soul. That's not interesting for kids. We don't write about what's in our souls. We write about the real needs of our audience. We try to get at their needs. Sorrows, problems, dreams, everything. But it's one society, so in a way it's also our needs and problems. I'm often asked, it must be like castration for a writer to write about other people's problems. It is not true. It is also our problem, we make their problems

ours, and realize that they are our problems and then we write plays for them. That's the main difference. That's, maybe, the method.

JB: So it's more ideology than method. You have been in India for about a month. You've come to know that many people here are doing Grips. What do you think of that? What is your assessment?

VL: I was surprised when I became aware of it. I knew from Karachi that there was this one theatre and they did our plays in '80, nothing else. But that Theatre Academy in Pune had extended to Bangalore with the production of *Max and Milli* directed by our German director, I really didn't know. I'm overwhelmed by the two plays I saw in Calcutta-I saw three productions of *Max and Milli (Care Kori Na)*-because it is so exactly done, especially the children. I remember the beginning of the third scene when you first see the aggressive boy alone for 2/3 minutes, and you learn everything about this boy through his movements and restlessness. Wonderful, a really wonderful production! And' the adaptation of *Line One*-I think it couldn't be better. It's completely adapted, not translated. I recognized a lot of characters, but developed in a completely different way. That was great. I'm sure I've learnt a little bit about Calcutta through this play. That's what they say-that if you see *Line One* you save four days of going around Berlin. So the spirit of the play was completely adapted. This is what I like.

SB: Do you see any major point of departure, from your approach, in the Indian Grips productions?

VL: No. At first I was just astonished at how close it was to ours, especially *Max and Milli* and *Mannomann*, because they take up very European problems. In this society there are other problems between castes, illiteracy and things like that. It was very interesting for me that the Indian audience accepted it despite the fact that it's something new. Perhaps they accept it because it's something that could be possible. But I'm sure that in the future our plays will be not just translated but ...

SB: New plays will be written

VL: Maybe one can use the structure, because we've got a lot of other problems that the Indians have got. In our seminar in Bangalore there was a mix of adaptations and completely new ideas and I think this is normal.

SB: You told me that you were thinking of plays from Sri Lanka-taking ideas back and even thinking of doing them back there ...

VL: I don't know if that is possible, because they are problems special to Sri Lanka. But I'm looking for plays, and maybe we can re-transform and use those forms. I've found two suitable plays. I will adapt the plays of Marathi playwrights for adults. I like them very much. That will be the beginning, and we will try to do Indian things-the beginning of a normal exchange. That's what we intend.

## **World Traveller: Reflections on the Internationality of Grips Plays**

**Volker Ludwig**

Our theatre had only come into existence out of protest against the stale kitschy-deceitful Christmas fairy tales of the German state theatres and had already been received with no understanding in the aesthetic-conservative neighbouring country of France, so what purpose could it possibly serve on other continents? A theatre which dealt entirely with the specific everyday problems of West Berlin children? Our plays had been performed in Scandinavia, Holland and Belgium, but by theatre companies which had emerged, as we had done, from the 1968 student movement and were closer to us intellectually, politically and artistically than the German children's theatre all around us. Nevertheless, in 1976, I allowed myself to be persuaded, more out of a sense of adventure, to undertake a six week trip to Brazil to hold seminars about realistic children's theatre for theatre professionals in five cities ... Grips was received with unexpected interest-ranging from extreme enthusiasm to indignant rejection. After establishing that our emancipatory theatre had not been set up as a new school *a la* Brecht or Grotowski, that it did not represent a formal-aesthetic novelty, but instead was simply a method, or rather a straightforward socio-political decision, which obviously called for certain theatrical consequences, it became interesting. When shown the products of this



'method' on video, the spectators, much to their surprise, found the plays to be lively, comical, and effective. Bearing in mind that Brazil was under a military dictatorship, it became clear that I was propagating some highly explosive material. The very idea that children's theatre could have a social function appeared revolutionary. The subversive potential of a theatre whose main concern is to learn about the real problems and desires of its audience and to make these the object of its plays, was heatedly debated by small groups in night-time bar sessions. On the other hand the bureaucratic representatives at the only seminar organized by a ministry (in Porto Alegre) needed only ten minutes to censor me, and I was forbidden to lecture or show videos for the remaining two days.

As early as 1973 Norbert Mayer from Munich had been invited by Bal Bhavan in Delhi to develop a realistic play for children with the members of the Drama Department (after intensive year long preparations). It was to be the first time that an adult theatre company performed for children. In this case *Stokkerlok and Millipilli (Chhuk-Chhuk-Bhhayya-Talamtal)* proved to be a suitable script, because the possibilities for adaptation were used to the full. Norbert Mayer recalls: 'Scene four, which features a greedy father tyrannizing his starving family-a situation well-known in India was seasoned with local flavoring such as: a vegetarian diet, the black market and shortage of food supplies. Familiar phenomena were also added: unscrupulous businessmen who stockpile supplies of food in order to sell them for horrendous prices on the black market or in times of crisis; experts in 'stretching' food: pow



*(Extracted from an article scheduled to appear in the book on Grips in India to be published by Theatre Academy, Pune.)*

## From the Outside, Looking In

Vinay Sharma

**VINAY SHARMA is an actor and director in Calcutta, working closely with the Hindi theatre group Padatik. He has also been involved in theatre activity with children for several years.**

Grips Theatre Berlin is arguably the best and by all accounts the most popular children's (and youth) Theatre in Germany today. Grips plays have been produced over 1200 times in countries on all continents. In 1984 Mohan Agashe made the decision to introduce Grips, as an ideal method for children's and young people's theatre, in Pune and so began the Grips Project in India.

*I am a theatrist in Calcutta. I also work with children in a theatre-based 'Not Theatre' activity in a programme called Happy Hours. I am writing an article on the Grips Theatre from the outside looking in'.*

"The history of German children's and youth theatre begins with the argument about traditional Christmas fairy tales. Because until 1968 Christmas fairy tales represented practically all that was on offer in the theatre for the children ... In 1969 Melchoir Schedler provoked a spirited controversy with his 7 Theses for Very Young Spectators' because he suggested the practical abolition of Christmas fairy tales and pleaded for plots which were oriented towards the reality of children. Before his theatrical discussion began, Volker Ludwig and Rainer Hachfeld had started in 1966 to set up a children's theatre which in 1972 was given the name Grips."

*A concept is an idea. A general notion. A definition is a description of a thing by its properties. It is made up of words. A word is a unit of language. Good definitions can capture a wide meaning in a few words.*

How would Grips be defined? What does it mean? 'Just a northern German expression ... what you've got in your head ... mixture of wit, brains, quick understanding, sense of fun, intelligence.'<sup>2</sup>'Berlin slang for little head.'<sup>3</sup>

After a phase in which fairy tale material was reworked in a cabaret style (1966-69) there came in 1969 the plays *Stokkerlok and Millipilli* and *Maximilian Pfeiferling*. This was the hour of the birth of the 'emancipating theatre.' The theatre concept aimed to put children and their reality at the centre and to give the audience insights into societal relations, to make these relations, transparent.<sup>4</sup> 'Without the '68 [students'] movement I never would have got the idea to do theatre for children . It was really a political idea and decision,' says Volker Ludwig.s

'We wanted to reach the workers but the workers didn't go to the theatre, so we decided to start with the children because you get them in through school.'<sup>6</sup> 'We had in mind the anti-authoritarian attitudes of the students. For us the kids were a suppressed class and we fought for that class ... to strengthen their consciousness ... give them perspective ... give them the optimistic idea that the world can be changed.'<sup>7</sup>

The Grips plays were simplistic, witty, unsentimental, unchoreographed and about the problems the children had.

*I am writing an article on Grips . I encounter words, concepts, definitions ... is there an ideology ? Is there a method ?*

Method is too large a word, according to Volker Ludwig, It's just a decision (to) write about the needs of our children. . . 'it's one society so in a way it is also our needs and problems.'<sup>8</sup> But Grips theatre has come to be associated with some characteristic features of script and performance. Adults playing children's roles, for example. A factor which now typifies Grips, but which Ludwig clarifies was a decision born out of expedience, since children couldn't possibly commit themselves to professional theatre. The plays are written in the vital everyday language of the kids, 'full of fantasy, humour, slang' which gives them their special flavour of 'reality'. There is an avoidance of metaphor and allegory in the stories and the presentation of the adults as 'real cliches'-cartoonized portrayals which children can recognize. There is a clear division of the world into pro-child and anti-child forces. There are adults 'against' the

children, 'for' the children, and in-between adults who might be influenced by the children. The plays are 'social fantasies' (' . . . to do realistic plays with an end which admits some hope ... (is) sometimes a paradox. That's the tightrope we must walk'<sup>9</sup>). The plays are graded for the children according to age groups.

*I am writing an article. I encounter 'ways but not method'. I examine them. They begin to create conflict. I have questions. How do they decide what is 'real' for the children? what their concerns are? their everyday language? the right age for the play?*

At least initially, the Grips model incorporated field researches, a lot of time spent with the children by writers/actors to study their language, their behaviour. There was interaction with the teachers and child workers, also the post-play feedback from the children. The script writing still revolves around a very free play of ideas within the group. But 'after 25 years there is a common and collective experience', research is done only on things they are unsure of and to know the reaction of the kids is no longer necessary-'there are just some tests, and we know.'<sup>10</sup> The age levels for every play are tied up with the dialogues and situations in the play. The themes tackled vary from authoritarian education and divorced parents to pollution and perspectives on life.

*Curious, from the outside looking in, I read the Grips scripts, watch the Grips video, hear the Grips songs.*

Admirable work done with remarkable style and finesse; very good theatre; subtle and delicate insights into children; dialogues light of heart and dextrous and some delightful songs with music geared to the tastes of their young audience (Alles *Plastikli* for fourteen years and upwards has all the elements of a rock show). There are moments of inspired entertainment as in the following song from *All in Stitches* 12 ( for five year olds and upwards ), a play aiming to tackle children's fear of hospitals:

There once was a bored appendix, Began to  
grumble and groan  
He lay like a dummy in a little girl's tummy And all  
he did was moan  
Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!

There was also a pair of tonsils With  
nothing at all to do There wasn't a doubt  
They were itching to get out So they  
created a balley hoo Agh! Agh! Agh!  
Agh! Agh!

Off they went to the doctor Begging  
for a better life

He said 'It's never too late to operate'

And whipped them out with his knife.

Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!

All fun and good cheer and a good show for kids but perhaps not quite. Not only.

*I am writing an ... no, not only that ... not just objectively analysing words, concepts, definitions, performance ... I am also feeling ... from the inside looking out ... there is something disquieting here, which disturbs. I find most criticism of Grips comes from the conservative section of society, parents, teachers or politicians. At the risk of being considered conservative myself I venture to voice a few reservations/disagreements with the Grips model. Because there is a need to confront conflicts in theatre.*

It is essential to expose children to the 'realities' of their immediate socio-political environment and the world at large, as Grips does wonderfully with pollution, for example. There are realities based on information and facts which cannot be denied or doubted.

But when it comes to emotions, which are personal realities, is it right to generalize? When as theatrists we take a decision to present our perception of children's reality on stage before a diverse audience of young people, we take on an awesome responsibility. For children are impressionable. One child's reality may not be another's, particularly in cultural contexts as disparate as ours. But our decisions and our theatre may put before him choices and possibilities which the child in his particular circumstance may be better off without.

Volker Ludwig's observation is that children do not generalize. ('If some officer in a play is shown to be corrupt, the adult audience automatically concludes that all officers are corrupt. But ...

child audience(s) ... conclude only that the particular individual officer shown in the play is corrupt.)<sup>13</sup>

However in my eight years of working with children (aged four to twelve years), eliciting their personal responses on a wide variety of topics and themes and based on a very obviously subjective but concerned observation of these children, I have found that most of them need a lot of coercion to respond favourably to a genre of stimulus; type of person, or class of directions which have not met with their positive initial appraisal for whatever reasons. So one policeman's uncouth behaviour invests the child with a general fear of policemen, a 'slap happy' teacher puts the child off teachers generally ...

Adults and their attitudes as revealed in Grips plays are admittedly very often universal (the tyrannical father, dissatisfied mother, etc.). But when presented in one-dimensional character types and made to interact in stilted ways, they can present a very distorted reality to children. This risk exists because these characters cannot be treated in a complex manner, nor their deeper motives and neurosis examined in a children's play because the child lacks the capacity to evaluate such characteristics.

When, in dealing with the personal conflicts of young people, with children's attitudes towards parents, family and teachers, the plays continually adopt an anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian stance, it seems they do so more out of the need to gain the allegiance of their audience and less out of their enthusiasm to satisfy the emotional need of young minds to come to terms with themselves (*Don't be Daft, Girl, Alles Plastik*).

The consistent depiction of a world of children versus adults is hyperbolic and at odds with the aim of representing to children their own 'reality'. Rather, over a period of time and with continuous exposure to these overt and sometimes even violent 'socio-critical' signals there lies a danger of hyperbole turning into reality-if not in general, definitely in the case of some children.

As for the 'vital, everyday language of the kids', here is an excerpt from a song in *Alles Plastik*:

Lick Suck, Good Luck

Lose your head, drop down dead, throat well fucked

It's killing us off, this poison in the air

A quick drag on your fag and you can go anywhere

Without fags we're drags.

Here's another, this time from *Mannomann*.

I'd love to have a father  
I am sure that would be great,  
A man about the house, a friend  
A pal, a dad, a mate  
But if he started shouting  
And screaming at us kids  
I wouldn't stand for that at all  
I'd kick him in the ribs  
I'd punch him in the stomach  
And I'd stand on every toe  
I'd pull his hair, I wouldn't care  
Because at least I'd have a go.

Grips songs are marketed on cassettes, they are immensely popular and most of them are immensely heartwarming. But there are some like the ones above. Should children and young people be encouraged to sing these songs? No research is required to know that children all over India are singing 'Choli ke peechhe kya hai' and Govinda-Karishma Kapoor's 'sexy' series of songs and other such stuff.

This is part of their vital, everyday language.

When writing original plays based on the Grips model (as is the ultimate idea) are theatrists supposed to incorporate words and songs from this 'reality' and glorify them for their audience? Would it be 'conservative' to deny young people this reality in the theatre?

The problem is not one which carries an easy solution. With the opening up of television, an awareness of children and their potential viewership is spawning a number of programmes for the youth. A majority of these are of dubious quality but they are watched. Dubiousness of quality is no guarantee of a lack of influence. The WWF series is a glaring example. If popularity with children is not always commensurate with the quality or suitability of

children's drama on the screen or the stage, children's theatrists need to take decisions with care and circumspection.

*Concepts and words are infectious. They can spread like an epidemic. A word is a unit of language. Language makes up thought. Thought resides in the head. What is in the head makes up reality.*

In coming to 'grips' with children we must keep in mind that it is much easier to decide to reveal anything that is 'real' to children than to decide what about the 'real' it is beneficial to conceal, at which stage, and for how long. Children's theatrists need to put their love for children ahead of their love for theatre.

From the Britannica 1994 Book of the Year: 'German educators faced the challenge of teaching ethnic tolerance and peaceful political action to a nation experiencing a rapid escalation of attacks by neo-Nazis on foreigners and the handicapped. A study revealed that one-third of young Germans between ages 15 and 24 held racist views or were susceptible to right-wing propaganda ... Surveys showed that two-thirds of the German public placed the blame for growing lawlessness on the heavy dose of violence and sex dominating T.V. programming. Nearly three-quarters of the population believed that a detrimental influence on young people resulted from television's removing traditional taboos from killing ... A study by the American Psychological Association found that by the time the average child completed elementary school, he or she had viewed 8,000 killings and 100,000 violent acts on the television ... Another study, released ... by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Co., showed that nearly one in four pupils and one in ten teachers had been the victims of violence on or near school property.'

Martin Estein, in *The Field of Drama* says, 'Drama provides some of the principal role models by which individuals form their identity and ideals, sets patterns of communal behaviour, forms values and aspirations, and has become part of the collective fantasy life of the masses...'

Unrest. Aggression. Violence. Amongst youth and even children. On the increase the world over. What function can (should?) children's and youth theatre serve today?

I could not find any report or study on the 'real' influence of Grips Theatre on the minds and actions of children over the last twenty-five years. I am not a psychologist nor a sociologist. I imply nothing here. These are merely questions and doubts that strike me as I write an article.



Words are harmless when you skim through them. Words are harsh when looked at long and hard enough. Concepts are general notions. They tend to disintegrate if encapsulated. Children are sometimes myths we make while trying to redefine a world that we have lost with words that we use to fit into concepts that we have come to believe in.

Our understanding of 'what's in our heads ' is at best debatable, of what is inside a child's head is still in its infancy. It is easy to believe too deeply in things 'from the inside'. Committed theatre and theatrists often tend to suffer from this. It is easy to question and dismiss too lightly 'from the outside looking in'. Theatre criticism has often confirmed this.

Between extreme belief and unrelenting scepticism there is a space where metaphor and allegory intermingle with reality, and concepts wage war with definitions, where there is enough breathing space and time to play around with ideas without necessarily subscribing to causes, and to chew upon problems without necessarily having to solve them immediately. It is this space which children's theatre must seek to perform in, for it is this region which children happily and unhappily come back to in their bid to come to terms with themselves-their identity-as they move towards adulthood, naturally ...

Grips Theatre is entrenched in its ideals, secure in its credentials, unshakeable in its popularity, sincere in its efforts, and undeniable in its validity, and this makes it all the more imperative that it be questioned intelligently, all the while.

Because children need theatre. There are few who realize this and fewer who try to do something about it. And the few who do must be made stronger.

## Notes

1 Volker Quandt, booklet on Children's and Youth Theatre in Germany (Goethe Institut,1994)

2 From the interview with Volker Ludwig by Samik Bandyopadhyay and Jayoti Bose, Calcutta, April

1994

3 Volker Quandt, booklet on Children's and Youth Theatre.

- 4     **ibid.**
  
- 5     **Interview with Volker Ludwig, by Samik Bandyopadhyay and Jayoti Bose**
  
- 6     **From interview with Volker Ludwig in video 'Adventures in the Head and Stomach',  
Goethe  
      Institut,1993**
  
- 7     **Interview with Volker Ludwig, by Samik Bandyopadhyay and Jayoti  
Bose**
  
- 8     **Ibid**
  
- 9     **Interview with Volker Ludwig in video, 'Adventures . . .'**
  
- 10    **Interview with Volker Ludwig by Samik Bandyopadhyay and Jayoti Bose**
  
- 11    **Volker Ludwig and Detlef Michel, *Alles Plastik*, translated by Peter Gilbert.**
  
- 12    **Volker Ludwig and Christian Veit, *All in Stitches (Operation Pillpopper)*, translated by  
Roy Kift.**
  
- 13    **Volker Ludwig, in the article by Dr Mandar Paranjpe in this issue.**

# The Importance of Theory

Ramanathan

**In the light of his exposure to Grips, RAMANATHAN raises some questions about the general approach to children's theatre in this country.**

Although theatre has been the subject of speculative enquiry ever since the Greeks, there is by no means a general consensus as to what constitutes or ought to constitute the body of work devoted to this art.

This is particularly true of children's theatre. In fact none of the great dramaturgical works, from Aristotle's *Poetics* and Bharatmuni's *Natyashastra*, to the recent outpourings of Antonin Artaud and Herbert Blau, ever mention children's theatre.

This is not hard to fathom, when one considers Julia Kristeva's assessment of this form of theatre as one that 'does not exist-because its semiology is a mirage. The theatre (at all times) wants ocular proof of the existence of a communal discourse from a play. In children's theatre this communal discourse is, for all profane purposes, unsupportable since it is sustained by fantasies, with its emphasis on mystery, irrational fears, personal helplessness and superstition. And as long as theatre practitioners continue to prefer the development of children through these existing methods, instead of an emancipatory movement which confronts, questions and challenges 'accepted' social attitudes and behaviour-this form of theatre will never gain legitimacy.'

In India, Rangaprabhat, perhaps the only permanent theatre for children, functions in the sleepy hamlet of Venjaramoodu in Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala. And like Grips, Rangaprabhat is also celebrating its silver jubilee in 1994.

At Rangaprabhat (unlike Grips) the children are taught, for two hours daily, body exercises, voice modulation, singing, etc. They practise storytelling and the art of developing the indigenous costumes and makeup needed for a play. The theatre idiom at Rangaprabhat follows the *guru-shishya parampara*, working with 30-40 children daily. It attempts to revive the Indian *samskara* through the dramatic enactment of Malayalam folklore. And it doesn't receive a government subsidy.

Grips follows a diametrically opposite methodology. This might be because of its roots in the student movement of the sixties. In the sixties a series of civic upheavals took place. And contrary to the predictions of Marxism, the crisis was not an economic one, nor was its central protagonist the proletariat. It was a political crisis, and even more a moral and spiritual one; its agents were not workers but a privileged group: students. Grips emerged from the debris of this movement, a theatre-movement which was to serve as a counterpoint in a post-authoritarian/fascist regime. As Viola Spolin, thinker and dramaturge, would have us believe: 'The basis of creativity is personal freedom, which in a state is resisted by the authoritarianism that has changed its face over the years from that of the parent to the teacher, and ultimately to the whole social structure.' Attempting to satisfy this external judge, the artist can lose his ability to relate personally and organically to the world, in the process also losing touch with himself and his art. Theatre, for Spolin, is a means of overcoming this loss.

The Grips plays which I had read, seen on stage or viewed on video realize this aim. And as yet, I haven't seen Walt Disney or even the local children's theatre in Bombay endorse such a discourse. Although there exists in Bombay a tradition of children's theatre with good production values, strong performances, workable scripts, and even the concept of adult actors enacting children's roles, very few of the plays from this stable have been able to provide 'issue-based entertainment.'

Perhaps, in this light, Grips is the fortunate beneficiary of its Germanic past. Because one does detect an undercurrent of the Germanic tradition of the late 19th century. After all, in the early 19th century in Germany, the dominant philosophers, Kant and Hegel, and the prominent dramatists, Goethe and Schiller, all in one way or another supported a view of art as idealization, the revelation of universal-eternal truth hidden behind mundane, empirical reality. This concept of drama as idealized life or revealed truth remains strong even today. This is also the philosophy of Grips. As William Hazlitt said about theatre: 'It is what the reality is. Not what the reality ought to be.' This approach teaches the child in the audience that there are others like himself, by showing him, as in a looking glass, what other children have felt, thought and done. It opens up the mind.

The first thing that strikes one about Grips, other than seriousness of intention, is the presence of theory, a methodology which has been formulated by a vibrant thinktank over a period of time. In

the finest traditions of *kruti-lakshi* (text-oriented criticism), specimens of texts are analysed in documented programmes which are prepared for each production like scholarly monographs. In other words, Grips is not just about creating a children's theatre whose dominant theory is supply-side economics which apparently depends on-as commercial theatre does-predicting the psychology of the public. Grips is by no means exempt from that, nor from the political pressures that go with a government subsidy. But it benefits from a discourse that so far we on the Indian subcontinent had thought irrelevant. Why are our actors, directors, writers so theoretically unconcerned, so ideologically abandoned? For instance, very few have even attempted to go into the relevance of children's theatre. Is it only a niche-market with its subservience to summer-school workshops, kid clubs, etc.? Or is it more?

This is a pity, since theory is very interesting in itself, especially when it is nourishing. Further, theory has produced an improvement in discourse. In fact, some degree of general correspondence between the theories of an era and actual practice can lead to a 'heightened awareness' in the artiste. But, unfortunately, as Mohan Agashe once lamented in passing, 'the artistes on the subcontinent do not possess the theoretical premise to realize their experience.' Regrettably this indifference towards theory is widespread. G. P. Deshpande, political theorist and playwright has put it aptly-'In the First World, the disbelief towards theory emerged at a time when the world dominance by the West was undisputed. Whereas in the developing world ... it was a reaction to this dominance, which we felt was irreversible.' In the process, the entire philosophy of development has become subservient to just one dominating ideologue, which has seized the imagination of world leaders and given the lead to those who have the monopoly of surplus capital as well as new technologies. It is a pattern of growth where all the social costs are quietly passed on to the community as a whole or, what is even worse, to poorer countries. Today, growth and consumer-power are favoured over equity and poverty alleviation, women's rights, education, health and medical care, environmental preservation, etc. And so, any movement of opposition will start asking questions about the legitimacy of such a system. The Grips plays we saw, read and discussed made me ask some of these questions. And asking a question is the beginning of opposition.

## A Director at Work

**Prasad Gadkari**

**This firsthand account observes how WOLFGANG KOLNEDER of Grips Theatre, Germany, sets about directing a group of Marathi actors in *Amhi Ghar Che Raje*, an original script by SHOBHA BHAGWAT.**

### **6 March 1992**

I join the production-unit as an observer, feeling a bit out-of-place and unclear as to what exactly I'm supposed to observe. I can't think of more than a few situations-dialogues being repeated endlessly, scenes being rehearsed many times, etc. But I find people using a different vocabulary. They are going to prepare a children's play. I feel still more sceptical, guessing that it will be another routine story of fairies and ghosts or kings and queens, or a so-called modern children's play, loaded with routine moral messages. Still, there seem to be a few unusual things here. I don't see any child on the set. All the actors are adults. Another interesting fact—this Marathi play will be directed by Wolfgang Kolneder from Grips Theatre, Germany. He is provided with a word-to-word English translation. Every actor has his/her own copy of the script. The last scene of the play is still to be written. I thus hope to watch the process from the very beginning. Formal introductions by the director follow, instructing all actors to read the script, focusing on their assigned characters.

### **7 March**

Everyone seems thoroughly familiar with the script. The director starts the discussion, saying, 'A play should be used as a medium for the exploration of children's psychological world. It should give us an insight into various aspects of their experimentation with different emotions, e.g. how the children learn to bluff, or how they learn to use anger or any other emotional expression to get what they desire.' According to him, thinking aloud about the play, asking questions about the script and finding gaps in it serves several purposes. It helps to establish a rapport by understanding communication styles, feeling at ease in identifying with the characters, enriching the characters with personal imagination, relating personal experience to

the events in the play and so on. Most of the artists are comfortable only with Marathi. I am entrusted with the job of interpreter. Initially, language appears to be a big hurdle. Many expressions from both sides (director and actors), are intellectually loaded, and full of colloquial terms and phrases, beyond simple Marathi or English. As the interpreter I often feel helpless. Gradually, the artists and director get tuned to each other. Facial expressions, and physical gestures are being prominently used to communicate. After a second, plain reading, the theme of the play is almost clear to everyone. It revolves around a nuclear family consisting of two young brothers of around ten and eight years, their overprotective affectionate mother, who is a hardworking housewife also, and their happy-go-lucky, moon-faced father. When the play starts, these two young boys have been left alone at home for the first time, as their mother is hospitalized with an acute backache. They experience many things for the first time. The fear of being alone and the joy of independence are experienced simultaneously, as no adult is present to control them. They bunk school, they eat unhygienic things from vendors, they experiment in the kitchen, they invite their girlfriend neighbour to share all these wonderful moments. They learn, they compete, they fight, they love, and when the mother returns, she finds, to her pleasure, two grown-up, caring boys and she wonders how they matured so fast within a few days. Was it just because they were left alone? The play also has two or three songs (yet to be composed) asking parents to let them be free to grow, to experiment, to learn, to be on their own. I ask Wolfgang what he expects from a children's play. 'The Grips' movement itself aims to address very contemporary social and general issues which are conveyed to the children in their own frame of reference, by using their own wavelength of understanding', says the Director.

### **8 March**

Discussion resumes among the group members. Wolfgang has started focusing on individual actors, and asking about their own personal impressions of the character assigned to them. Some add suggestions here and there. The actor portraying the younger child (Uday) begins, 'I think Uday must be either in the 1st or 2nd standard, unable to sleep alone as yet, mother's pet, eager to possess everything his elder brother has-a bigger school bag, bigger books, coloured pens etc. He uses crying as a weapon every now and then against his elder brother.' The Director keeps taking notes, every actor tries to analyse his assigned character/role in the same

manner. The Director keeps quoting experiences from his childhood and provokes the actors to relate their personal memories. He clarifies later that this exercise helped him to understand childhood in the Indian socio-cultural context, essential for directing the children's play in Marathi.

Wolfgang seems to be well read in child psychology, as he keeps explaining the internal psychology of the child's behaviour. Uday seems to have an idea that parents are born, not made, and that his own *aai baba* (parents) are perfect. His faith in his parent's omnipotence can't be challenged by anyone, at least in his presence. Whereas the older child Vinay has started observing and comparing his own parents with other children's parents. Often this older child resists his parents' attempts to impose instructions. The older child is learning to bargain, to he and to manipulate, to fulfill his own wishes. On the other hand the younger child, whenever he senses any manipulation against his 'Ideal Parents', immediately foils it by spying or leaking the elder brother's secrets/deeds. The older child has started enjoying autonomy, he he wants to try out new adventures every day, whereas the younger one can't even think of offending his 'Ideal Parents'. He experiences mixed feelings of admiration and envy towards his older brother.

Wolfgang also analyses the characters of the parents. The mother is an overprotective, affectionate lady, who alone has to handle every domestic responsibility, from rearing the children, to cooking and shopping. She feels overburdened but seldom expresses it. The father, on the other hand, is an ignorant person, preoccupied with his office and completely dependent on his wife for every small thing in life. Analysing the total family fabric, the Director feels that the mother is the hub of the family. He quotes an example from the script where father is in a hurry to go out and, in the absence of the mother, there is total chaos at home, to the extent that father can't even find his socks.

I find the actors wondering about this detailed analysis. As the Director continues, I repeatedly hear comments from the actors like, 'My mother also does the same thing'. The Director appears satisfied, as the actors are now 'identifying' themselves with events and characters. He explains, 'Identification is the main tool through which one enters into a child's role, not by mere imitation of child-like body movements. In fact, an adult should depict a child character at the emotional and cognitive level so that he won't have to resort to



disproportionate body movements, since the adult's body, being bigger and heavier, can't compete with children's body movements.'

### **9 March**

The Director's simultaneous consultations with the property-in-charge and set-supervisor are in full spate. I see him trying out various combinations of sets, entries, exits etc with the set-supervisor. The list of properties grows longer as he meticulously goes over the script every day. He has also picked up a few original Marathi words.

The character analysis is almost over, though everyone is free to ask further questions. Now the Director returns to the first page of the script and begins marking off small units, consisting of three to five dialogue exchanges. These are marked according to verbal content, cognitive meaning and emotional tone. The whole script is divided into such units and when the actors perform, they are already aware of emotional tone and rhythm. One unit can depict anger, followed by another unit depicting happiness. Proceeding unit-by-unit makes one aware of continuity and flow. A line or exchange is added or deleted in consultation with the playwright wherever the flow of the script is dissatisfactory. The division of the script into units is also a way of checking the temporal sequentiality of the events occurring in the play e.g. an event on Saturday evening has to be followed by one on Sunday morning only. The script, divided into units, undergoes two to three further readings.

### **10 March**

The Director instructs the actors, 'Imagine yourselves as 7 to 10 year old kids for the next half an hour. Imagine that you're together at a small birthday party, and act as you would in such a situation. You are free to do and use anything in the room.' The actors start, initially very abrupt and inhibited. An actor accidentally hits a table, knocks over a pickle jar and spills the pickle. Everyone freezes. 'Use it! Use this event, act on it!' shouts the Director and suddenly actors break through their inhibitions. The natural reaction of small children on breaking a pickle jar spontaneously starts coming out. 'I didn't break it!' Once the inhibitions are broken, the spontaneous themes of playfulness, rivalry, affection, sharing, start emerging. Half an hour later, the session is over. The Director starts talking about the actors' experiences. They agree that they were inhibited initially. But through the accidental breaking of the jar, which came as

a shock, they started reacting as small kids. The Director explains, 'Getting smoothly into the given role as you did is called improvisation. A good actor creates the imaginary of the events/things in the wings before entering the stage, which saves him from being abrupt or distant from the role.'

All the actors are taught relaxation exercises by the Director. In this exercise the actor lies down flat on the floor and learns to observe and monitor his/her own muscle tension by focusing on breathing and various body parts simultaneously. Kolneder explains that the regular practise of these exercises helps in controlling one's anxiety level so that it does not hinder stage performance.

### **17 March**

The whole week was spent by the Director in repeating every unit a number of times with the actors, to his satisfaction and their exhaustion. Whenever any overenthusiastic actor added dialogues in the name of improvisation, he was promptly checked by the Director, who has made himself so familiar with even the Marathi script of the play, that his index finger correctly points to the unit number which is being tampered with. All the three main child characters are supposed to be good at roller-skating. The actors enacting these roles struggle to acquire this skill. Furthermore, I see them struggling hard to adjust to the availability of space on the stage.

Background music, as well as compositions of songs and poems are used in this play. Seeing the way Wolfgang sits with the music director, discussing, appreciating, suggesting or disapproving this or that piece of music, I once again come to believe that Art and Music have no boundaries of culture or language. All the songs, written by the playwright herself, depict emotional dimensions of the child-parent relationship and various other fantasies, of the children. The songs are very lively. When I wonder if they are too loud, the Director points out the need to look at these compositions from a child's viewpoint. The child's emotional world is more open and less abstract than the adult's, so his/her expressions, especially in stage plays, can be louder. The music director prefers the actors to sing these songs in their own voices. After the recording of the songs is over, the actors are instructed to synchronize their skating movements with background music and songs. Throughout this week, I see them rolling, skating, skidding, falling and rising repeatedly, attempting the synchronization. Very sensitive about his personal communication with each team member, Kolneder appears to be very

professional in his outlook. I see him throwing anyone indulging in unnecessary talking off the set.

### **A Week Later**

I witness the last rehearsal with the songs completed and incorporated in the play. I hear the Director telling the author, 'You gave birth to all the characters but they have developed and grown up with us. So we feel more friendly towards them than you do, probably.'

## **The Essence of Good Therapy**

**DR. YESHWANT CHITALKAR, a psychiatrist, finds interesting parallels between theatre training techniques and psychotherapy when he takes part in the workshop held by WOLFGANG KOLNEDER.**

Each man sees the world through his personal perspective; Kolneder learns about life through theatre and Gripps, and I, as a psychiatrist in training, learn from the sufferers who come to me for help. At the workshop, the discovery of definite parallels was expected. I shall proceed to illustrate.

Kolneder is very serious about respect. Not merely politeness, which is superficial, a barrier to exchange and controversy, but the process of making the person you are with the most important person in the world for you at the moment. The crux of respect is a non-judgemental acceptance of differences. He made us practise throwing a ball across after making sure your co-actor knew that the ball was coming to him/her. It was clearly not their fault if they dropped the ball since you were supposed to see that they were ready to receive it. Lines delivered in a play, interpretations made in therapy, fall flat when erroneously timed.

Standing in a circle, props flying about-walking sticks and waste-paper baskets, small coins. 'Throw to the person on the right, while trying to catch the prop thrown to you from the left,' Kolneder droned, 'One ... two... three ... four. . .' in thickly accented English. The rhythm of the throwing could not be broken. It was important to not just throw your prop, but to see that it could be caught. Criticism was pointless. If all your props are dropped, find another person to whom to throw them. It is really not important who drops it-the prop has been dropped. Ill fami-

lies are bad throwers. My patient's mother gave him large amounts of money to blow up and then blamed him. The rhythm of the family was broken. It is necessary to specify, to take the trouble to make explicit what is expected. People in relationships need to do their 'prop exercise' well.

The 'point of concentration' is essential. If, while on stage one has no lines and no 'business' to occupy oneself with (it may be as ordinary as standing there and counting the tiles on the floor), one is uncomfortable. One shuffles and destroys the whole rhythm. A director who dictates movements and reactions without giving a point of concentration is a bad director, just like a therapist who talks and directs a focus-less therapeutic interaction.

Mirroring-facing your co-participant-one the actor, the other the 'mirror'. The 'mirror' here must 'reflect' all that the person does, demonstrate the ability to anticipate the movements of the other. The finger mirror, a variation, lightly touching fingertips, keeping the same contact between your fingertips and his, however he moves. No one shoves, no one pulls, contact is permanent, one silently senses and anticipates one's co-actor's moves. Kolneder challenges us to perform this exercise without deep contact, a 'mutual exchange of energy'. Empathy, the ability in psychotherapy to be inside the other, to feel with, to silently understand, to appreciate feeling as if it were one's own. With empathy, anticipation comes easily.

For Kolneder miming and acting are poles apart. Miming is what a certain emotion looks like, acting is feeling the same emotion, it's sensation. Remembering how it felt to lift a heavy stone, the texture, the pressure on the arms. Sympathy is an imitation; dealing with just the surface. Empathy (once again) is the ability to recollect similar personal experience, one's own reactions, the memories aroused, the associations made; the foundation of 'being there' for the client-understanding not intellectually, but in experience.

'Try to remember all that your right hand touched in the last thirty minutes,' he told us. 'Recollect what you touched, what touched you, how it felt, what it made you feel, and how you reacted to it. Freeze and feel the sensation at the soles of your feet, the fit of the shoe, the pressure, the difference between your two feet, the air running around your feet. Take a different part of your body. The fit of your clothes, the hair attached to your scalp.' 'Feel your breathing, be aware of your heart beat, sense the tension in your muscles,' we tell sufferers. 'Be more aware of your sensations and you will automatically realize what makes you feel that way.'

A stage is a living room, a street, a palace, a battlefield, by virtue of the actors reliving together, at a sensory level, their experiences in those places. The therapist and his patient play boss

and employee, teacher and pupil, mother and son, daughter and father, lovers. The therapist's office is transformed into classroom, kitchen, factory and bedroom, in the full reality of these places. 'Theatre space is not real space, nor is theatre time real time'. The therapist-client relationship is always a projection of an earlier relationship. Reliving *in vitro* what was experienced *in vivo*.

One of the last exercises: 'the back up'. Supporting your coactor on your back, his back to yours and his limbs in the air free of all supports. Trust felt and instilled into the dependent. The feeling that it doesn't matter that you have no support, nothing to hold on to, nothing to grab at, I will not let you fall, no matter what happens-the feeling of total trust and support that is the essence of good therapy

## From Curiosity to Commitment

Shrirang Godbole

**This playwright-director has adapted two Grips plays into Marathi, and written an original script for a youth play. He traces the growth of his involvement with Grips.**

It came very simply. I was forming my own ideas about play writing and directing with a little 'hands-on experimentation' in theatre. I had directed one or two plays in study groups or competitions. Theatre Academy (TA) as always supported these underground laboratory productions. One day Dr. Mohan Agashe offered me an assignment-to work on a new play. I heard the name Grips for the first time. I did not know then that I was stepping into a fascinating theatre phenomenon which was later to become a major theatrical commitment.

I was supposed to adapt a play for children and assist a German director. The play was *Max and Milli*. When I received the English version of the play, I started reading it very cautiously and sceptically. There were reasons for this, as I will show you.

Barring a few exceptions like works by Sai Paranjpe, Sudha Karmakar, Ratnakar Matkari, Sudhakar Prabhoo and a few others, the children's theatre scene in Marathi mushroomed in school vacations and circled around fairy tales or popular kids-love-them characters. In schools it could be a funny event in the annual programme where parents and teachers gleefully watched the young boys and girls wearing adult clothes and mouthing adult lines which seemed absolutely out of place. I had, I must confess, never taken children's theatre seriously. Neither when I was a small boy, nor when I grew up.

Moreover, we in TA had had our experiences of cross-cultural give-and-take. As an actor I was often uncomfortable with certain culture-specific concepts in the original work struggling to find a justified place in Indian cultural contexts. Further, I was going to work with a foreign director who, I believed, was going to be closer to his native realities than mine.

As I started reading the lines of the first scene, I realized that something had started working within me. The universality of children's dynamics in the play simply overwhelmed me. My scepticism evaporated and I knew what I was going to do. Adapting *Max and Milli* (*Chhan Chhote Waitta Mothe* in Marathi) and assisting Wolfgang Kolneder in direction was a thrilling experience. As a director Wolfgang was dedicated, hardworking, always observing

and gaining something out of every new person, place and experience. He taught me a different approach to human relations, object relations and associations and attitudes, while applying them to theatre.

During the adaptation of *Max and Milli* I was able to invoke my childhood emotions and memories. This gave me the confidence to adapt *Mannomann (Nako Re Baba)* in end 1990, for a playwrights workshop with Volger Ludwig. *Nako Re Baba* gave me more freedom as a playwright because the script evolved during rehearsals. Since I was the director, I could improvise the situations with the help of the actors.

I must narrate one particular experience. This play deals with a family without a father. At first the children are thrilled when the mother decides to remarry-they hope to have a fantastic time with the stepfather. But when he starts being authoritarian, chauvinistic and rough, they start hating him and rebel. A person I knew was about to marry a woman and the setting was more or less similar, except that he was not an MCP. He asked his would-be wife to see the play with the children before even breaking the news of their intended marriage. Then she could discuss the play and the possibility of such a situation in their life with the children. It worked. The new family watched the play twice to start a dialogue between the father and the children. For them it was a really useful and relevant piece of theatre.

In 1992 I wrote and directed my original youth play *Diwas Tuze Hey*, where I tried to deal with the problems faced by the MTV generation. It was a different experience to work on this play, as the imagery and the audience point of view were entirely different. It took me a very long time to stage this play because of complex choreography, character-problem diversity and the overall width demanded by the play. It needed time, people and a bank account at the same time.

I have never got a sense of completion and satisfaction with this play. Even today I keep on making changes, additions, deletions. For intellectuals the play is superficial, predictable, romantic and too simplistic. For theatre people the play is simplistic, too didactic at some points, too cinematic and predictable. Though it lacks in content, it has some dramatic moments, good music, sleek performances: but not a successful production overall.

Samar Nakhate offered some basic comments on aspects of the play ranging from content to presentation. I found most of them very pertinent. Jabbar Patel, whom I had assisted while he did a youth play *Padgham*, suggested an al fresco campus performance. Wolfgang Kolneder pointed out some serious imbalances in treatment and some obviously black and white situations. I have learnt a lot from this exercise.

In 1992 I visited Berlin and spent two months with Grips. It was impossible not to make comparisons with our own working conditions. An amateur theatre group runs on nobody's money, because there is no money. It runs on people. There may be a few cases of grant/aid from a state or cultural organization for some time, but not on a sustained basis. Many amateur groups tend to buckle under the economic constraints in spite of having a bright creative front. Then there are some professional groups which do not sustain the burden of creative consistency, again due to economic constraints. To find a via media which gives the amateur group the much needed economic viability is not simple, because the existing system has created some strange egos. In a typical amateur 'group' the hierarchy is tacit. It is almost a cliché now that a creative mind has to be indifferent about money matters. So when a production manager is running from pillar to post demanding vouchers for expenses, the Big Boss i.e. Director snaps at him for his clerical encroachment in the midst of a historical moment. Actors follow his cue and the 'management' soon becomes a team of non-creative duffers. Creative confidence tends to become intellectual arrogance and the essential equilibrium is easily lost. If not artistically, the group fails economically or resorts to occasional activity which in essence is hollow and degenerative. I have seen this happening to myself, others and to many groups.

In March 1994 a 'Playwright-Director Duo' workshop was held in Bangalore, with Volker Ludwig and theatre people from Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Bangalore, Pune, Karachi, Colombo, Dhaka and Kathmandu. This was valuable because such events give one an opportunity to analyse an otherwise subconscious process in a conscious manner. They also allow for collective brainstorming, which on many occasions creates a self awareness.

1986 to 1994. TA's Grips is 9 years, 4 productions, and 400-odd shows old. Has it matured? I am not sure. Has it rooted itself artistically or philosophically? I cannot answer this question. I can be sure of two things. It has done so emotionally and, more importantly, theatrically.



Grips has contributed a great deal to my development as a theatre person in these years. My personal involvement has increased from an initial curiosity to commitment. If during the first adaptation of *Chhan Chhote I* was going through the process semi-consciously, while adapting *Nako Re Baba I* was more selective and thoughtful about the choice of characters, objects, situations, logistics, song situations. I decided to discuss the problem from the Indian context rather than pay attention to transcription conformities. In other words, I extracted the essence of Volker's play to the best of my understanding and tried to adapt the essence rather than the details. I am quite aware of the limitations in adapting plays from other languages. The culture specificity of certain Indian problems, the prioritization of problems in India, will definitely be different from Germany. But the vital experience which I have gained during the three Grips productions has now equipped me to deal better with local situations.

I find my whole experience with Grips very rewarding for several reasons. The plays have immense entertainment value-it is always very satisfying to watch a play work at every intended moment. Both content-wise and performance-wise, they are of a very high quality. Though the issues discussed and the problems dealt with in a play always have roots in the socio-economic-political structure, on no occasion do the plays tend to become drab, didactic or propagandist. They are designed to suit the working conditions and economic constraints. The structure is kept lean. This includes creative crafting and designing. This facilitates quick set-up or dismantling, less logistical hurdles, minimum technical prerequisites. The result is high mobility, accessibility to places with minimum or no technical facilities, less stage hands. Moreover the children love the innovative playing-around with the props and sets. For the actors, the plays provide a very sound training module. These qualities make this theatre a socially relevant, high entertainment, high quality theatre, affordable for theatre groups and audiences alike.

## Why Grips?

**JAYOTI BOSE** is the director of *Sutrapat*, the Calcutta-based theatre group which introduced Grips to a Bengali audience through its Bengali version of *Max and Milli*, called *Care Kori Na*. The production, immensely popular, has already completed 100 shows. Here she talks to **BIREN DAS SHARMA** and **OISIKA CHAKRABARTI** about what makes Grips different and valuable.

Why and how does a Grips play work? For Jayoti Bose this has emerged as one of the key questions relating to the very concept of theatre for children-not merely a technical question concerning the so-called art of playwriting for children, but addressing something beyond it. 'Grips is basically a playwright's theatre,' explains Jayoti, 'and as I started working on *Care Kori Na* I realized that a Grips production depends very much on how the playwright has conceived and structured the play. Grips is not just a theatrical reconstruction of the children's whimsical world with a certain compassion and love for the little ones, but the result of an ideological comprehension of the children's situation in modern society.'

The uniqueness of a Grips play can be studied from more than one point of view. For example, one can study the simplicity of dialogues used in Grips. Children use very simple and short sentences, along with a whole range of physical expressions, emotions and gestures, to communicate. Together these form a unique 'language' essentially a children's language. In a Grips play the characters make use of this 'language' in its entirety. If one limits oneself only to the 'spoken words' one would eventually fail to comprehend the importance of this 'language' which contains more than words. Nor do they speak in the structured mode characteristic of adults, with its conscious logic. Yet at its core and in its totality alike, their 'language' is highly evocative, communicative and warmly sensuous.

In the initial phase of the translation of *Max and Milli*, Jayoti discovered how the Grips plays are written keeping this 'language' and its power of communication in mind. A Grips play represents a sensitive interaction between the adult playwright and the children's language, in which the playwright follows and respects at one\_ level the children's more whimsical anecdotal mode, and at another gives the mode a direction that is subtly logical and apparently still free, cryptic and unorganized, that opens up to the adult viewer the more serious concern underlying the project.

This makes *Care Kori Na*, or any other Grips play for that matter, unpredictable but meaningful. Some theatre workers have pointed out to Jayoti that one of the most interesting features of *Care Kori Na* is that it is simply impossible to guess what will happen next: the play is as unpredictable as children's behaviour. This, Jayoti argues, has been achieved because the play is very carefully structured in the same way children think and act. It is unpredictable, spontaneous, whimsical, yet at the same time has its own logic and rationality. Grips uses all these to identify and open up issues that concern both the adult and the children. At the same time Grips also brings in the child's perspective, their way of assessing the adults, and the way they relate to the adult world, not only interacting but trying to change it from within. This is what makes Grips so relevant.

To take part in a Grips production the adult actors go through a process of unlearning to rediscover the 'language' of the children from within themselves. They must fill in a lot of things in terms of expressions, gestures, body language from their own memories and through observation. 'My production of *Care Kori Na* has gone through different phases with different actors and actresses,' says Jayoti, 'and I have realized to what extent a Grips production is guided by the 'given' structure of the play. What seems to be impulsive and instinctive behaviour in children Grips consciously transforms, gives it a theatrical structure. One cannot just write a Grips play, say, through a workshop. One can gather information through a workshop which can be important for the playwright up to a point. But to write a play out of this would need the talent of a concerned playwright like, say, Brecht.'

As far as *Care Kori Na* is concerned Jayoti did not try to change the original much, nor did she try to substitute every single situation and character with a familiar one to make it look and feel Bengali/Indian. 'I am not really sure about the viability of such an effort in terms of the issues the play wants to address,' Jayoti explains: 'I believe that even if we do not really adapt the original Grips plays, the audience will be able to relate to the situations, will be able to understand the problems the play wants to address. For example, a simple detail-the bunk bed in *Care Kori Na*, which is not a popular item of household furniture, may be considered distracting or not culture specific in our context. Yet the audience did not mind at all. Take, for example, the character of a single working mother in the play. Such a character is still not that common in our society, but again the audience did not complain. If you try to change too much and adapt everything to our social and cultural context, the very problems or the issues around



which the play has been constructed will fail to produce the desired effect. To what extent can one make a Grips play Indian? Do we really need to adapt it totally? 'I didn't try to change every little detail in the original play. For example, I didn't change the working mother concept but at the same time I did not put too much stress on it and underplayed it in such a way that a balance is maintained. I have realized that once you are able to communicate, to touch the right chord, these little details become insignificant to the audience. This is not to say that these details are not important, on the contrary they are very important in the context of the play.

'At present I am translating/ adapting another Grips play and there are several important details which I do not want to change or make 'Indian'. *Trummi Kaputt* has a working mother. She works at a toy factory. I do not want to make her a bank employee or a teacher. The toy factory is very important in the play. If you try to change it, it will affect the very structure of the play itself. In the original play, the son of the factory owner is a classmate of the children of this working mother. The factory owner's son brings toys from his father's factory but only allows the others to play with them against a small payment. If you can't pay, you can carry his bag instead. The factory owner's son has learnt not to give anything away free-an attitude he has picked up from his father. For him everything has a price. For obvious reasons other children do not like this, but at the same time they want to play with his toys, ride his bike. Eventually the poor children break an expensive toy, and that develops into a massive problem as a result of which the mother loses her job at the toy factory. The point I am trying to make is that the toys and the toy factory are not just a detail, but an integrated part of the structure of the play. In *Care Kori Na* the children overcome the problem at the end of the day, but they do it spontaneously and not consciously. In the new play they realize the problem as an 'injustice' done to the mother who has

lost her job because of them, and consciously try to solve it in their own way though it has developed into an adult problem.'

For Jayoti, Grips is now a decisive commitment. 'Somewhere I relate to Grips from a different perspective altogether,' says Jayoti. 'As a theatre director I had earlier done Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Pratibimba* and Badal Sircar's *Baki Itihas*, simply because they are good, socially significant plays. I could identify with the plays at that level, but as a woman these plays have very little to do with my personal experiences and concerns. The way our society projects its concern towards children is only an extension of the same attitude, same stance, that it has towards women. And as I deal with my own situation in this society as a woman and mother, somewhere I relate to, identify with, the Grips plays because I feel that the concerns are the same. The oppression of women that I have seen and felt in my own milieu, the urban middle-class milieu, has been more invisible than visible, benign, gentle, and protective on the surface but tough and hard underneath. The suppression of children has the same invisibility. I somehow felt that as a woman pleading or stridently proclaiming her own case, I would always be in danger of falling into a trap of self-pity, and a lot of whining and groaning. Once I chose the option of relating to the similar oppression of children, I had the advantage of the right balance of the objective and the subjective, knowing the child as a mother, and reading her/his oppression as a woman.'

# **Of Funny Giants and Talking Sparrows: Children's Theatre in Marathi**

**Dr. Shubhada Shelke**

**SHUBHADA SHELKE has been part of the Theatre Development Programme at NCPA, Bombay, for several years. She specializes in research and documentation and has also written books in the area of Marathi theatre.**

Today we look at the very concept of children's theatre in the light of western influences. But history tells us that the seeds were sown in the Marathi theatre a few years after 1920. Lokrmanya Tilak encouraged the Ganesh festival and other group activities like melas to further the social acceptance of the theatre groups of the day. This period, acknowledged as the golden era of the Marathi theatre, saw many excellent playwrights, actors and productions; so the general social atmosphere was very conducive to drama. Even persons from the prestigious field of teaching were closely associated with theatre activities. For instance, Maharashtra's favourite playwrights R. G. Gadkari and Vasudeo Shirwalkar were school-teachers. Even the chief advisers of the theatre group Natyakalpravartak were well known teachers. Quite naturally, all this contributed to the fostering of a love for theatre in the children of those days.

The melas could be pinpointed as the beginning of this trend to promote expression amongst children. These were an hour or an hour-and-a-half long entertainment programmes comprising dances, songs, music recitals, dialogues and play enactments staged with the aim of teaching children good habits. Since these melas had many grownups in the audience, the children received much praise and encouragement.

The films of Dadasaheb Phalke were also a new phenomenon of this period. The technical attraction of this novel medium was felt by both the old and the young. G. R. Shirgopikar established the first children's theatre group, Anand Sangeet Mandali in a village, Kavhte, in 1926, believing that the correct combination of theatre and film techniques would definitely appeal to everyone. Using technical devices from cinema, like pre-recording, trick scenes, transfer scenes, moving backdrops, etc., Shirgopikar made plots

with familiar stories, interesting situations, popular characterizations, little songs and simple, easy dialogue, full of movement and attractive to watch. For example, the highlight of his hit children's play *Gokulcha Chor* (The Thief from Gokul) was a scene where Krishna denies having stolen butter and eaten it. When he opens his mouth to show his mother Yashoda that he is innocent, 16mm film technique is used to create the special effect of the whole universe in his mouth. Shirgopikar had studied drawing and technical subjects quite extensively. As a result Anand Sangeet Mandali became equated with fantastic special effects. Shirgopikar gathered around him the idle and mischievous kids of the village farmers and encouraged them to paint or play musical instruments according to their wishes. Theatre was a starting point, but the training the children received through their hobbies helped them to learn something useful. They were even paid a couple of rupees each, and at the end of the month the ten or fifteen rupees in their kitty went to their parents. Of Shirgopikar's many plays, the superhit *Gokulcha Char* was performed some 2200 times in 22 years in the neighbouring towns and villages. More importantly, there was a definite objective behind all this. Shirgopikar did not want the kids to be dependent only on theatre. Rather, he wanted them to learn some trade through theatre activities, which helped establish almost 200 kids in future professions. Unfortunately, there is no record of the development of the trend set by Shirgopikar.

Educationalist and playwright P. K. Atre made it a point to write children's plays during the same period, mainly for schoolchildren. Govindswami Aphale, G. K. Bodas and G. P. Sohoni were other popular playwrights among children then. They concentrated more on patriotism and nationalism, using historical situations, aggressive language and a style of dialogue which imitated grownups. Since no girls were available there were no female characters in the script. This was a unique feature of these plays. Due to changes in the socio-political situation after 1940, various restrictions were imposed. One of them was participation in children's performances at night. Slowly the activity faded away.

In the post-independence period, after the formation of Maharashtra State, theatre activity started receiving encouragement once again. It is against this background that one must discuss the concept of modern children's theatre and the various viewpoints that it expresses.

In the give and take of new ideas, one notices that the influence of western concepts on the Marathi theatre remained constant. Around 1957, the United States Information Service (USIS) started sending issues of the magazine *Theatre Art* to artistes. It was here that Sudha Karmarkar discovered that in the United States, grownups entertained children through the medium of theatre. She found this concept to be quite contrary to the established trends of children's theatre in India. Around the same time she got the opportunity of going to the United States and studying theatre for children for six months. Once there, she earned firsthand experience of the American way of approaching children's theatre through plays based on fairy tales with adult actors enacting the various roles, backed by research to gauge the likes and dislikes of children. After she returned to India, she established Little Theatre and attempted to duplicate this approach. With the aid of a prestigious institution like the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh, she presented *Madhu Manjari*, an adaptation of the play *Rapunzel and the Witch* that she had seen abroad. [Ratnakar Matkari, another important name in children's theatre in Marathi, worked with Sudha Karmakar at this stage, then moved on to form his own company for children's plays, Bal Natya.]

Says Karmarkar, 'When people heard that I was looking for adult actors for a children's play, they made fun of me. But that play taught me a lot about children's theatre. We treat things like magic, incantations and black magic with an essentially cruel slant. But in western children's literature, the witch on a broomstick with a black cat was someone children were familiar with and even loved. Here, when I presented her in a realistic manner with appropriate costumes, makeup and music, little kids shut their eyes with fright as soon as she entered. We noticed this especially in performances in schools where there was a marked difference in the reactions of children under ten and over ten. So we rehearsed once again and used fantasy in the witch's characterization. We reduced the harshness in her voice, gave her an acting style more suited to caricature and diluted the whole effect. So the first lesson we learnt was that while attempting to strike a balance between fear and anticipation, one has to take the age group into consideration. Accordingly, we turned the giant in *Jaduchi Vel* (The Magic Creeper) into a funny giant.

I also realized that fairy tales are an emotional need with children of a particular age group. We used appropriate sets and lighting to achieve the fantasy effect for miracles and other such phenomena. Dr Karmarkar, my husband, was an engineer by profession and he



would help us with these things. For instance, the magic creeper was built strong enough to take the weight of four actors at a time. Or in *Alladin Ani Jaducha Diva* (Alladin and the Magic Lamp), we would create the smoke from the lamp on the centre of the stage with chemicals. Inflation wasn't such a problem in those days. So we were able to match the production values of the professional theatre.

Also, I found the maxim 'Healthy Entertainment for Children' adopted by the American Children's Theatre very vital. It meant that one could combine education with pure entertainment, not in a direct manner but through the storyline. For example, when the magician tells Alladin to steal, Alladin refuses, despite his poverty. So you don't tell children directly that it is bad to steal, but you impress



Kanchan Sontakke conducting a theatre workshop with blind children

it on them through the plot itself.'

After 700 performances of various plays, Karmakar stopped writing herself. Her group produced plays on different themes relating to contemporary situations written by a number of playwrights. For example, *Chini Badaam* had the background of the Indo-Chinese war. Karmakar also fostered this movement for 33 years by going all over Maharashtra with children's theatre festivals, workshops, competitions, projects based on school curriculums, etc. By 1990, Little Theatre had done 2000 performances of various

plays. Now they have stopped doing full-length plays because the economics don't permit it.

With Karmakar's input, a controversy arose over whether adults should act in children's plays. Sai Paranjpye, another major figure in children's theatre in Bombay, took a firm stand on the belief that only children should act in children's plays. She says 'Unfortunately childhood doesn't last very long in our conditions. So I feel that it is most important to let children experience its joys freely. Why take away their right to have fun by trying to educate them and inculcate good habits in them? Rather, we must allow them to retain their childhood as long as possible. When I presented some children's plays, I gave free rein to the child in me. It's a very natural thing for children to be jovial, naughty, to display their terrific sense of humour and to entertain. Their acting blossoms naturally, they don't need to 'act'. I realized this when I first presented children's programmes on All India Radio. Pune, acting out the role of 'Tai' (the children's elder sister). I enjoyed those programmes so much that I wanted to do them before a live audience.

Bhalba Kelkar of Pune's Progressive Dramatic Association agreed to look after the production. As Sudha Karmarkar was doing her theatre in Bombay, for five years, we did these plays regularly with the help of Gopinath Talwalkar, Shridhar Rajguru and Arun Joglekar. Along with my own plays like *Pattenagri* (The City of Cards), *Jaducha Shankh* (The Magic Conch) and *Salo Ki Palo* (Run, Run), we also presented P. L. Deshpande's *Vayam Motham Khotam* (Growing Up Is No Good) and *Nave Gokul* (The New Gokul) and G. N. Dandekar's *Soneri Raja* (The Golden King). We had no idealistic objectives, we were just looking for fun.

Kids give one so much. I remember a boy who used to keep playing pranks at the rehearsals of *Zaali Kay Gammat* (Something Amusing Happened). So I yelled at him and asked him to be quiet. Do you know what he did? He didn't open his mouth but started walking on his hands right across the stage. I used this as his entry in the play. One must be able to see this kind of amusement through the eyes of children and share in the fun with them. And because I have cherished this relationship I used to share with kids, I'm able to use the same techniques even with adult actors in my work today.'

Another well-known personality in children's theatre in Bombay is Sulabha Deshpande, who was also a schoolteacher prior to her theatre career. According to her.



Kanchan Sontakke conducting a makeup session with teachers

Chandrashala, the children's theatre wing of the well-known Bombay theatre group Aavishkar, was conceived by her father, and initiated in 1978. Vijay Tendulkar wrote new children's plays especially for her. He explicated his stand in the preface of *Chimna Bandto Bangla* (The He-Sparrow Builds a Bungalow) and attached a detailed note about how the play should be performed. 'Kids keep absorbing whatever is going on around them and then imitating it through various actions. A little child tries to repeat the characteristics of other children around him, the habits of adults or new pronunciations and sounds that he hears. He imitates animals and also strives to imitate inanimate objects like aeroplanes and cars. The trend these days is to ignore all this drama and concentrate on the speech aspect of a play. But the soul of a play is lost in all this mugging up of dialogue and the stress on correct diction. We must reduce the unrealistic importance given to the word and shift our focus to the qualities of physical expression within a word. For that, we need little plays with a new form.

Mime technique is used here to express the situation and emotions. e.g. building a house, stormy rain, getting wet in the rain etc., which provides scope for individual and group movements. Emphasis should be given not on the words or dialogues, but on the free yet well-designed actions. Free expression is the soul of the play.'

Sulabha Deshpande says that even today kids enjoy Tendulkar's plays like *Chimna Bandto Bangla*, *Raja Ranila Gham Have* (The King and Queen Must Work Hard), *Chambhar Chaukaschiche Natak* (The Play of Unnecessary Questions), *Bobbychi Goshta* (Bobby's Story) or *Baba Haravlet* (Father is Lost). 'That's because they are not straightforward, simple plays. They induce you to think, to find out new things. The form in Tendulkar's plays is implicit in the plot. So the director doesn't really have to do anything different. But one has to understand it well before presenting it. Kids grasp it; often it's the grown-ups who find it difficult to follow things. For instance *Raja Ranila Gham Have* was full of symbols. The kids enacted it very well. Tendulkar wrote it before *Ghashiram Kotwal* using folk forms like Khele. It had a wall made up of people, dialogue that resembled the folk form, and so on. Or in a play like *Baba Haravlet*, the concepts of sets and costumes were taken from the universe of children. The road, the pillar, the postbox, the dancing lady on a poster, were all characters enacted by children. In these 'little plays', Tendulkar showed exactly how to balance the form of a play with the aspect of stagecraft.'

Sulabha Deshpande insists that it is theatre values, the importance of co-operation and team work, the confidence and strength one gets from theatre, that she wishes to impart through Chandrashala's work. This group has also stressed a familiarity with indigenous and folk tradition. For example, they took the form of Chitrakathi, which narrates pauranic tales through pictures, *katha*, *sangeet* and dialogue, in the kathakathanka tradition, and organized a fifteen-day workshop in which 100 children met with the traditional practitioners, talked, observed, and then evolved their own story which they performed in the same style. Chandrashala's orientation is basically training and activity. Commenting on the present situation Sulabha Deshpande says: 'Through plays written for children, if children even grow to love theatre and learn how to be free on the stage, I feel we have achieved something. Not many people are coming forward to do anything for children.'

Kanchan Sontakke has, for the last ten to twelve years, worked in children's theatre with the specific objective of using it as psychological therapy for the handicapped and to create some joy in their world. She explains, 'These kids are my laboratory. In children's theatre, I give much importance to age groups. Especially from the first to the fourth standards, the psychological needs of children change every three to six months and their activities also change accordingly. I work with all sorts of handicapped children-mute, deaf, blind, lame, slow learners, the mentally retarded

... The most important rule is to do a play with everyone's participation; there is no room here for a selection process like with normal kids. My objective is that they should all forget their disabilities and enjoy themselves.

I use certain elements of the performing arts to teach these children. Since I am a dancer, I lay a lot of stress on rhythm. I take each child's disability into consideration and then teach them about body rhythm and how to react to it. For example, deaf kids can't hear and so they don't really follow what a beat means. They have to be taught various rhythmic movements. Like I teach them to bend at the knees and call that a deep movement. This process has to be repeated several times till they fully grasp the principles. Then even though they can't hear, they watch others, absorb the correct timing and react appropriately. With blind kids, there's the question of understanding gestures. But their sense of music is good, so with the help of sounds and timings, these gestures have to be worked into their bodies. Then those body reflexes respond to particular musical pieces or rhythms. For instance, when talking of a horse in motion, one has to familiarize their bodies with his movements, almost in animation technique, teaching them how to tap their feet, stand up slowly, bend, and then run. In short, if one teaches a rhythm to the active parts of their bodies and one channelizes this training in one direction, then one gets the correct body reflexes. When one concentrates totally on their movements, one derives self-sufficient clues. And the most vital part is that they get the confidence of being able to do everything like normal children. The pleasure that this experience gives them and the change that it brings about in their personalities is amazing.

Through the month of May we also conduct workshops for their teachers, attempting to discuss the difficulties that arise while teaching these children, and trying to find solutions to them. For example, it is difficult to explain abstract concepts like proverbs or certain other information to these kids. So we started the concept of educational drama to solve this problem, presenting various theatre games and little situational plays visually. With the help of theatre people like Shivdas Ghodke, Arun Madkaikar and Gauri Kulkarni, we do one big and two small workshop productions per year, because kids learn faster through the direct experience of something.'

When one examines the views of these children's theatre workers, one realizes that the main area of controversy centres on whether theatre for children should be in the fantasy or the naturalist mode. Today, with the exposure to various media, children are becoming aware of their surroundings by the early age of three or four. When one considers how fast they mature and how

the nuclear family and the company of adults takes their childhood from them so very quickly, one feels that Sai Paranjpye's stand is important. If 'deviation from reality' is important in children's theatre, then while moving away from present-day reality and the pace of modern life, does one have any alternative but to turn to fantasy in the search for that dramatic element? Also, 'new' trends must be viewed historically. The use of adult actors that seems so unique to the Grips theatre experiment was attempted by Sudha Karmarkar or Ratnakar Matkari in the 1960s; and the trick scenes used by Karmarkar and Matkari to introduce an element of fantasy can be traced back as far as Shirgopikar. Today children's theatre in Marathi is poised at this critical juncture-whether to examine the past with a new understanding or look at the future with an eye to the pace and new challenges of modern life.

*(Translated from the original Marathi by Mukta Rajadhyaksha.)*

## No Compromises

**RATNAKAR and PRATIBHA MATKARI are both eminent theatre persons of Bombay and its environs. Ratnakar Matkari is a playwright and director, and his wife Pratibha, an NSD graduate, undertakes frequent assignments to use theatre in development work. Both are founder members and guiding spirits of Bal Natya, one of Bombay's most highly regarded children's theatre groups, which was formed in 1962 and is still active thirty-two years later. ANJUM KATYAL met them at their residence, and in the discussion that follows, both talked of their own particular experiences in children's theatre.**

AK: What was your reason for choosing to focus on children's theatre?

RM: I was associated with Sudha Karmakar's theatre since 1959, because at that time. Mambai Marathi Sahitya Sangha had a children's theatre wing also. They started with my play *Madhu Manjari*, and Sudha directed it.

AK: You wrote it specially ...

RM: Specially for them. The idea was to give a full-fledged play to children without any compromises, taking good adult actors, providing good sets, lights, music, all kinds of technical facilities which one would provide for a well mounted adult play. That was the idea.

AK: The theme?

RM: It was very loosely based on the Rapunzel story.

AK: Like a fairy tale.

RM: It was a fairy tale.

AK: Any social message? ,

RM: No, we weren't thinking along those lines ... We were concerned with giving it a full treatment-like the witch was played by Sudha Karmakar herself, and the prince was played by Dr. Kashinath Ghanekar who was a matinee idol then. That kind of thing. Godse, one of our senior artists, provided the set.

AK: Was it popular?

RM: It was very popular. That was the first time any such serious attempt was made in children's theatre. At that time there were only school plays. Here the idea was to entertain children outside schools, they should be able to come to a theatre and see plays made specially for them. Then afterwards I wrote another play for her, a fairy tale, but a comedy. But after those two plays I began to feel that children's theatre should be more elastic, more mobile than the regular proscenium theatre. That was way back in the sixties, around '61. It was expensive and tedious for children to buy tickets and come, they needed someone to accompany them to a strange place. I thought, why not go to the children? If it was difficult for children to come to theatre, why not take theatre to them? I started Bal Natya with that idea.



A scene from *Savlya Tandel* by Ratnakar Matkari





A scene from *Sardar Phakoloji Wakde*, adapted from Robert Bolt's *The Thwarting of Baron Bolligrew*

AK: It was meant to bring theatre to schools?

RM: Not that we didn't perform in regular theatres, but the idea was to be able to perform the same shows in school halls without any compromises. We didn't depend on heavy sets, on the rigid theatre that was there before. So I wrote my own plays with a little-well, experimental has become too convenient a term for everything, so I hesitate to use it-but at that time it was an experiment. I felt that a play should move like a story moves for a child, it changes its locations, it changes its focuses, I wanted a very mobile kind of theatre, with a stage manager coming in, taking the children into confidence, erecting small suggestive sets on the spot. For example, our play *Nimmashimma Rakshasa*-even now it is being done, after thirty years, this

year, as *Adhashadha Rakshasa* in Hindi-it was a parody of Alladin's story. This boy goes to the riverside and finds there is no river, the stage is blank. So he summons the stage manager who unfolds a stretch of blue cloth and says, here's the river, now proceed with the play. And the boy says, how can I fish here if there are no fish? So he pins little fish on the cloth and the play carries on. Children found it very imaginative. Nowadays we are all well acquainted with suggestive sets. In '61 it was very new and fascinating.

AK: Where did you get these ideas from?

RM: Myself. That was in fact the start of my work in experimental theatre. Because I never thought of children's theatre as different from other kinds of theatre. The audience may be children, but the basic theatre values have to be there, you can't make compromises. It's only common sense. That's how I am able to write for professional theatre and at the same time write plays with a social message. Only the audience changes, your relationship with theatre doesn't change, it's only a matter of change in style or using a different vocabulary, that kind of thing.

AK: So what would you say are the theatre values you're talking about?

RM: Awakening children's imagination, making them think, presenting them with the right values. Even while writing a fairy tale we ask them to think about what is bad, what is good, what should really be ... we say that being basically good is important. Like I've written a parody of the Ali Baba story. The title is *Ali Baba's Mule and the Thirty-nine Thieves*. The whole band of robbers is dead, and only the thirty-ninth thief, who had some ambition, is alive. When he was low down in the cadre, he couldn't do much, but now he's leader of the one-man gang-yet even now the ghost of the original captain keeps ordering him about; and here the mule is wiser than Ali Baba, who is very lazy. The mule knows how the story will end, so he takes Ali Baba to the forest, tells him what to do etc. Here also we have maintained that the innocence of Ali Baba is more important than his valour. Or take Kasim, who is very clever and cunning-because he doesn't have a good heart, just being clever doesn't count. These kind of human values reach through the fun, though creating fun is very important in children's plays.

AK: Would you say you write your plays to get such messages across, and you use the fun ...

RM: No, it comes automatically. Because I believe in them. Just as I wouldn't write an adult play just to propagate a message, I wouldn't preach, but my beliefs would come across. A children's play shouldn't preach but should show priorities, what is important ...

AK: With the kind of social changes we're facing, which influence values as well, have you had to shift or alter the values you portray?

RM: No. You can't change the basic values of human existence. But, for example, previously you would say honesty is the best policy just for its own sake, now you would say, honesty is best because it is the most convenient or practical -- after all, one lie leads to another and how long can you carry on with telling lies? You'll get caught out. This is common sense. The instances you choose to demonstrate a point may be taken from contemporary situations, but the basic values won't change. Even now I feel that innocence and honesty have their place, these are eternal values

AK: Nowadays if you see what's being produced for children, on TV, especially in the West, you feel there is no innocence

RM: That is where Walt Disney wins out. His films are full of innocence. Even now, when you see *Little Mermaid or-Alladin*, apart from the technical elegance, the amount of innocence he manages to fill them with, no one else has captured. That, I feel, is one of the major reasons for his success. You feel it indirectly. It is an important value. Not just being moralistic, but building their priorities. Like one experiment we did. Pratibha was working with CASPLAN [Community Aid and Sponsorship Programme ] for a while. She was working with slum children there. She wanted to put up a play. She wanted me to write it. I wanted to write a Pinocchio for a long time, because I think it is one of the most interesting concepts, of a puppet being converted into a boy, into a very responsible person. I said, a regular fairy tale is out of the question for slum children, they won't identify with it, they lack the context, the glamorous background. So we converted the story to the slum child's point of view. Everything changed, like the incidents of temptation. If the boy has money to go to school, he puts it on cards. In the original he meets a wolf and a cat who tell him to bury his money and a tree will grow. Here someone tells him to put his money on *matka*, and he's caught and sent to a remand home. All the aspects of their life were incorporated.

AK: What was the name of this play?

RM: *But Baingan*. We opened at the Nehru Centre, outside the main building where some building work was going on and even the worker's children were part of the audience. Gradually our plays have become more and more socially conscious. At the Arvind Deshpande festival, we put up a play based on a Russian folk tale, but I had converted it to a contemporary situation, saying that the king hoards the water and there is a famine, and a lone white cloud and a small girl create public opinion, get people to support them, one of them a poet, others who are wronged for one reason or another, they come together, and finally they manage to get rid of the king and the minister who are hoarding the water, and make it accessible to the people. The modern connotations are obvious.

AK: How do you get feedback on your plays? Do you talk to the children who watch them?

RM: In fact, since our institution is thirty years old, now we meet many adults who tell us how they've seen our plays and still remember them. They know me because of those plays.

AK: Do you do revivals?

RM: Yes, many.

AK: Which do you consider to be your best play?

RM: We have experimented with all kinds of themes, historicals, mythologicals, but every time this freshness, going a little off the beaten path, to make an impression. For example, we've used a Tamasha kind of elasticity in plays, joining scenes with songs, locations very fluid.

AK: So your experiment is with form

RM: and content

AK: and also with genre, like fairy tales?

RM: We did only one straight fairy tale, *Albatya Galbatya*, based on *The Tinderbox*, which we did to show the strength of the fairy tale as a form. For example, if we wanted to show three fearsome dogs, we took adult actors who were quite well known on the professional stage like Ravi Patwardhan or Ajay Wadaonkar, who you may have seen in serials. But they played dogs for us, really well-built dogs capable of creating fear. To show that a fairy tale realistically

presented has a strength of its own. We did one fairy tale in its pure form. Otherwise we used fairy tales just as springboards.

AK: After so much work in children's theatre, what do you feel are basic principles of successful children's theatre?

RM: Freshness. Even in actors. We take adult actors-you know, when someone was telling me about Grips, that adult actors act as children, I thought, we've been doing this for a long time. In the play *Rakshasa Raj Zindabad*, there was the character of a six-year-old *rakshasa*, which was played by a thirty-five year old. You can't take all adults for children's plays, one has to have a childlike quality. In *Nimmashimma Rakshasa* the hero was played by an actor who was about twenty-five years old, but he was so lively and childlike on stage that in the intermission there have been instances of people giving him five rupees thinking it was a performance put up by a child!

AK: Apart from freshness, you feel humour is important?

RM: Creating fun. And then if you can tell them about something, but that should be inherent in your content or style of presenting it. For example, if I take them into confidence and tell them what we're doing, immediately it forms a relationship with our audience and shows that we trust them and want them to trust us. Trust is important to us.

AK: Would you stress flexibility, movement?

RM: Yes, of course, to make things lively-music, colour, instead, perhaps, of a very realistic set. Nowadays it is more important that you teach them to live in a fast degenerating society.

AK: How do you do that?

RM: Like teaching them to be courageous about telling the truth. Formerly it didn't need that much courage to be truthful. Then things they see. In *Savyakandal*, in the novel the parents fight, the father gets drunk and beats his wife. I was asked, how are you going to do this for children? But any child living in the slums sees this everyday, knows this as a fact of life. So to hide it or paint a rosy picture is not needed. You can show them the hard facts of life, but you can emphasize how to defeat the problems. Like in this play, we emphasize how the son is

toughened by his rough childhood and how he goes out into the world and makes a success of himself.

AK: You want to leave them with a positive message, not to hide the harshness of reality but to go beyond defeatism

RM: Exactly.

AK: Because a lot of people think children's theatre should be escapist, removed from the real world.

RM: That is precisely why a mature writer is needed, and one who writes for adults as well. I always say, someone who writes and directs for adults is the only person who can do it well for children. If someone is doing it exclusively for children, under the impression that children's theatre is something totally different and apart, then it won't work.

AK: Grips theatre believes in dealing with problems children are facing, and turning that into a script. You are doing something different, using adult actors, but

PM: When Grips theatre uses adult actors, their reason is different. They have shows every day, it's a professional theatre, and they can't expect children to give up studies and just do theatre full time. But here children's theatre is done during the holidays. And it's possible for children to do children's roles. So if a child can act as a child, why should we deliberately seek an adult to do it?

AK: So you don't see any intrinsic advantage in an adult playing a child?

RM: I think they have arrived at this as a convenience.

PM: Yes.

RM: It is simply a convenience. We have taken it as a simple premise that adults will do adult roles, and children will do children's roles. It is as incredible for adults to act as children as it is for children to paint on moustaches and act as grownups!

AK: But earlier you talked of an adult playing a six-year-old

RM: That was the demand of the role. He had to look a giant but have the innocence of a six-year-old.

AK: So actually you don't support adults playing children's roles?

RM: Not at all. That would be like supporting men playing women. Earlier, during Bal Gandharva's time, people supported the idea of men doing women's roles and would have been scandalized if a woman acted as a woman. But now it's absurd! Unless there's a particular reason, like in one of our plays, a woman plays a male character, but that's because we wanted a feminine elegance and felt the female actress could do it better.

AK: You've always worked with adult actors?

RM: Mostly

AK: Professional actors also?

RM: In fact, most of them were amateurs when they started working with me, and have now turned into professionals. For example, Dilip Prabhavarkar. Now he's one of the most sought-after professional actors, with box office value. He has done fourteen productions with me, seven for children and seven for adults.

AK: How does Bal Natya function as an organization?

RM: Originally we had the idea that we would be strongly supported by schools. In the first few years we made a real effort to reach everywhere. We gave at least 100 shows a year. But we found that school authorities were not responding.

AK: Did you charge for the shows?

RM: Very nominally in the beginning. The reason for going to schools was that the children should get to see theatre inexpensively, cutting all overheads like rent for the hall, salaried managers, printing of tickets. In the beginning we had 50 paise tickets. The idea was that they should be able to afford a play as easily as buying a sweet. It shouldn't tax them or their parents. If the school gave the hall, we would send our own people to sell tickets, no bother for the school. But we found that the school authorities were indifferent. Not that they said it was something bad, they could see the children enjoyed it.

AK: Did you try it after school hours?

RM: Any time they asked us to. Saturday afternoons, whenever they wanted it. Though our actors were serving elsewhere, they found the time to do shows. Being available to children was the main idea. But the indifference of the schools just grew. Only a few schools who felt that theatre had something to do with the development of children would respond. But the rest- they do all sorts of things, raising funds, expanding schools, getting donations, they are so business minded that for them the child's personality development through theatre is a very low priority. That is why later on we started putting up plays wherever we could and just informing them. Because visiting a school five times just to get a date was beyond us ...

AK: You had a group of amateur actors who found time to rehearse and perform?

RM: Yes, but even that attitude is vanishing. There are more opportunities now, people join TV serials, professional theatre. When we started, professional theatre had its own actors and amateurs were separate. But now professional theatre is incorporating amateurs, and it's good for them because the opportunities are increasing. But it's also bad for them because they no longer find the time to concentrate on a single play and to develop themselves. For example, Ravi Patwardhan and Dilip Prabhavarkar have benefited a lot through children's plays because at that time they were serving elsewhere and when we mounted a play they were with it for two months, they could think about it, and that was in a way an education in theatre. Many people started with our children's plays, and are still grateful to the education it provided, but now they have no time even for experimental or parallel theatre.

AK: How does the group sustain itself financially?

RM: At that time I was working with Bank of India. So-whatever I could afford, save.

AK: No one was paid?

RM: We used to pay them something like smoke money, ten rupees, fifteen rupees, enough for transport perhaps. They were also working, and didn't really expect to be paid. But the expenses were sets ... when we were experimenting with styles, for some plays we also had



realistic sets. For one play, there were two or three realistic sets, the deck of a ship, courtyard of a house. I didn't want to fall into using suggestive sets as a device, just because it was easier, less trouble. No, if we felt that a play needed a certain treatment, even if it was expensive, we would do it. We would spend a lot on costumes. If a play needed several platforms, we'd get them.

AK: Who was designing all this?

RM: I did, because I used to direct, so for many plays I designed sets and costumes. But later others were trained. Like Shashank Vaidya did some of the sets-after all even when I designed them these people used to execute the sets.

AK: Did you ever approach sponsors?

RM: Not really. Basically it's a thankless job. Even if a play ran, it just about covered costs. There were no large profits, so no outside contractors were interested in handling our affairs.

AK: But can you still cover your costs just through ticket sales?

RM: Most of the time we run at a loss. Earlier we were helped by Bombay Municipality, even by the government, paltry sums, but at least we could cover advertisement costs. You know, after 1977 and the devaluation of the rupee, theatre became very expensive.

AK: Nowadays commercial sponsors seem to be everywhere, all college festivals have sponsors, can't you interest them in school plays?

RM: That's possible for one event, but if you want it on a sustained basis, throughout the year, you have to run after them. Which is very difficult for us. If someone does it for us, we don't mind. For us to create it and then have to sell it as well, that's a lot to expect.

AK: How many plays a year does Bal Natya do?

RM: Well, in the last two-three years we've slowed down a bit, but before that, about fifty shows a year.

AK: And now? In the last two-three years?

RM: About twenty-five to thirty shows last year. AK: New plays?

RM: Last year it was a revival, but the year before that it was a new play. AK: So you do about one play a year?

RM: A new play or a revival. But it's still very difficult, to get them together

AK: Especially with revivals, I should imagine, to get the team together again

RM: But we treat it like a new production. We take a whole new team. The original actors are too busy and most of the time would not look the role anymore.

AK: Have you done theatre workshops with children?

RM: We have done one under the banner of Bal Natya, but Pratibha does them all the time for different organizations.

AK: Where you actually. work with the children? What is your process of working? Do you evolve the script with the children, or do you start with a play, or

PM: I first spend eight to ten days imparting the basic theatre techniques and then take the script and start improvising with it ...

AK: Is it a pre-written script?

PM: No, I take it from their situation, their concerns. Recently I worked with adivasi girls. They had a lot of problems related with commuting to the city from where they lived, with staying and studying in the city, the hostel

AK: What was the age group?

PM: Twelve to about sixteen years.

AK: Just girls?

PM: Yes, and we made a script out of their problems. They would have brothers or sisters who were in the city, who had run into problems, they would come here to help them out ... otherwise the village girls weren't really allowed to come into the city, but when they came here they would be exposed to things, see things, sometimes meet up with social workers who got them to study-we did a play based on their life and problems.

AK: Did you do this play just for and with them?

PM: They had plans of repeating it, of doing more performances, but whether they did or not I don't know.

AK: Do you do this kind of assignment regularly?

PM: Well, for the last ten to fifteen years, I have gone to two or three places every year. Social institutions, or government organizations, cultural centres like the West Zone Cultural Centre, I did a workshop for the NSD in Himachal Pradesh. There I worked with children as well as adults. They still do those plays.

AK: When you worked with the adivasi girls, what was your aim, your goal?

PM: Well, there I was working on behalf of the government. Their aim was to introduce them to the medium of theatre.

AK: But they weren't going to be theatre professionals, so what was the specific purpose of introducing them to theatre

PM: No, with them I was trying to show them how to communicate their own problems, to be confident in front of people

AK: So you were giving them skills ... Can you describe the process, give me some concrete examples?

PM: I start by chatting with them, getting them to talk about themselves, their daily life, asking questions.

AK: Do you have set exercises?

PM: No, I prefer to respond to the needs and standards of the group I'm dealing with.

AK: What do you leave behind with, for example, this group of adivasi girls you worked with, by way of theatre experience that they can use in their own daily life? How are they enriched, and how does theatre play a role in this enrichment?

PM: Well, for one they gain a lot of self-confidence. Team spirit. They kept writing to me about how they were still together as a group, working, planning shows in schools.

RM: Those who cannot speak out in any other way, they can speak out through theatre. That is how the street play has come about.

AK: Pratibhaji, this work you were doing with slum children with the CASPLAN project, can you talk about that?

PM: I was serving as a recreation co-ordinator. There were a lot of children living in the slums in the area. Their immediate needs were to be taught about cleanliness, simple cooking, playing, they needed awareness above everything. So we started an awareness programme, using theatre as a medium. We formed a group from among the adolescents, the older children there. I started work with them first. Not just theatre, but music, painting, dance, creative arts like making puppets, how to use them, making up little scripts about social issues. Then I gave each of them a group of about twenty smaller children, and they worked with them and I would supervise. They taught the smaller ones what they had learned. This programme carried on for about ten years. They would meet every evening.

AK: Did they do any productions?

PM: Yes, for each other. Any income generating programme or social issue for which I had to deal with the community, I would work through them. Once they had developed their communication skills through theatre exercises, they found it so much easier. Even now the older kids work outside, with YUWA, they work with street children.

# Lucky Dhaku

## A Play in One Act

**Ratnakar Matkari**

*(Translated from the original Marathi for STQ by Kamal Sanyal)*

*This play does not have any special instructions as to how it is to be staged. The reason being, the directors are expected to follow their own ideas with regard to dress, movements, music, stage decor etc. A boy as old as you enters. He is wearing very colourful, expensive clothes.*

DHAKU My name is Dhaku. I know it doesn't go with the clothes I'm wearing. These clothes are worthy of a rich man's, a landlord's, son. And the name Dhaku? It's so coarse, like the name of a peasant's son, or of a destitute. But what can be done? You can change your clothes over and over again but you can't change your name so easily. Besides, I have acquired these clothes very recently. And the name? It goes back to the twelfth day after my birth. So I'm Dhaku. It may not go well with this outfit but I still remain Dhaku.

Now you may wonder how I acquired these clothes that are not suited to my name. Well. This play is all about that. As you have already guessed, I was a peasant boy. We were very poor. My father used to work in the fields. We were poor, but at least we were able to get two meals in those days. One day he died. And we had to starve quite often. The landlord took away our farm. Mother used to grow vegetables in the backyard. She started selling them, she started milching cows for others, she did shopping for others. She ran errands for people. In that way she earned enough for the two of us. I used to help her as much as I could. But whatever we did, our poverty never left us. Days went by in this manner. Then one day a funny thing happened. I had a fabulous dream. A man with a beard appeared in my dream.

*Man with beard enters.*

MAN I am the man with the beard. I have appeared in your dream.

DHAKU But I'm not asleep. I'm wide awake.

MAN Which means you're awake in your dream. (To *audience*) Children, a drama is a play of make believe. So, now you must believe that I have appeared in a dream that this boy is having. And since I have appeared in his dream he must be sleeping somewhere. The boy who is moving around in front of you is the one who is having the dream.

DHAKU But why have you appeared at all, even if it's in my dream? We are so poor, that we cannot give alms to a beggar who comes to our door. Not even in a dream.

MAN I know that. In fact, I have come because of that.

DHAKU Because of what?

MAN To make you rich!

DHAKU To make me rich?

MAN Yes.. You and your mother toil day and night. You don't cheat anyone. You don't steal and you aren't dishonest. So I have decided that you should be rich. DHAKU What's that? Who are you? Not God, surely?

MAN What business is it of yours? You do as you are told.

DHAKU What shall I do?

MAN Tomorrow, get up in the morning and start walking towards the east for ten miles. You will come across a river. There will be a bridge on the river. Make enquiries around the bridge. And your fortune will change there.

DHAKU My luck will change? What does that mean? What will happen?

MAN If I start explaining all that to you, it will be a lecture, not a dream. Now, having said all I have to, I'm going to disappear quickly.

DHAKU Saying that, the man with the beard disappeared. Oh, man with the beard, are you listening? Oh, man with the beard, where are you?

MOTHER (*waking Dhaku up*) Arre, which bearded man are you calling? Get up. Get up quick.  
From today you have to go and work at a new place.

DHAKU Where? On the bridge?

MOTHER Bridge? What bridge? You have to go to the landlord's for a new job. He's building a house.

DHAKU But will that change my luck?

MOTHER Luck? What are you blabbering about? Arre, poor people's luck never changes. We get only as much as our labour earns.

DHAKU So it was a dream, after all!

MOTHER What was a dream?

DHAKU Never mind. You can dream about anything. You don't have to believe it all. Come, give me my bhakri. I'm off to the landlord's to work. (*Mother exits. To the audience*)  
I removed all thoughts of the dream from my mind and presented myself at the landlord's. I got so engrossed in my work that I didn't remember anything else. When I came home I was so exhausted that as soon as I lay down, I fell fast asleep. But the funny thing is, as soon as I fell asleep, I had the same dream.

*The man with the beard enters.*

MAN What's wrong with you? Don't you want to be rich?

DHAKU Of course I do.

MAN Then why didn't you go to the bridge yesterday? Why did you go to work at the landlord's?

DHAKU My mother says that for people like us, a change of luck comes only through hard labour.

MAN So, you don't trust me?

DHAKU It's not that, but ...

MAN I'm telling you again. Get up in the morning and walk ten miles in an eastern direction

DHAKU A river flows there. There is a bridge on the river. I remember everything. Very well. But even so ... Oh! He's gone! Disappeared! What a nuisance! These people who appear in dreams have a very bad habit of vanishing suddenly.

*Mother enters.*

MOTHER Arre, Dhaku! Get up. Get up. Don't you have to go to work?

DHAKU Mother! Would it really matter very much if I didn't go to work one day?

MOTHER Not go to work? How will we feed ourselves? And besides, if you don't go to work, what will you do? Sit here and swat flies?

DHAKU No. No. I thought I would go somewhere ...

MOTHER Don't be silly, Dhaku. As it is I managed to get you this job with great difficulty. It won't do for people like us to be moody, child. (*Goes out.*)

DHAKU Mother was angry and saw to it that I went to work. I was in a fix. Here mother was annoyed. In my dream, the man with the beard was annoyed

*The man with the beard enters.*

MAN Are you going or not?

DHAKU I'm not saying I won't. But the problem is, I have no time.

MAN An idle man has a thousand excuses. Look here, boy. I was so pleased with you and offered to make you rich. But you aren't willing. Very well, then. Die a poor man!

DHAKU Please don't say that.

MAN Then listen to me carefully. I don't have the time to keep appearing in your dream again and again. Get up early in the morning tomorrow and start walking ten miles to the east ...

DHAKU A river flows there. There is a bridge on the river. I remember everything.

MAN Remember-such an opportunity comes only once. I came three times and that's a lot ( *Goes*)



DHAKU This time I decided that I would listen to the man with the beard. I didn't really believe in dreams. But if you get the same dream three times, how can it be wrong? Besides, I was getting a little scared of the man. On his fourth visit he might very well thrash me. So I told my mother-'Mother, I am definitely not going to work today.'

*Mother enters.*

MOTHER Why? Have you lost your mind?

DHAKU No, mother. I'm going to see if my luck takes a turn for the better.

MOTHER Your luck turning? Where?

DHAKU I was given an address in my dream. I'm going there.

MOTHER You're a fool. Have dreams ever come true?

DHAKU No, mother. But I want to be sure, so I'll go and see. If my dream comes true, won't it be great fun? We'll be rich. You won't have to work so hard.

MOTHER Nothing of the kind will happen. You'll just tire yourself out. That's all.

DHAKU So be it. You yourself always say that one shouldn't be afraid of hard work. Give me some bhakri to eat on the way. I'm off.

*Mother packs some food for him. He walks round in a circle on the stage and then sits down, eats, then again goes round in a circle and rests. Again and again. He becomes more and more tired.*

DHAKU My God! If only I had known how exhausting it is to walk ten miles! Had I known what it was going to be like, I might not have started this trip at all. And after all this effort, how do I know that I'm going to profit by it? After all, it was only in a dream ... But this river, this bridge over it, these signs are real enough. So the dream wasn't all false ...

*An old, half-blind cobbler enters.*

COBBLER Who's there? Who are you?

DHAKU It's me, Dhaku. Can't you see? Hold my hand, if you like. Where do you want to go?

COBBLER Not very far. My shop is just under the bridge. But you may come with me. I'll have company. I can't see well and it's getting dark.

*Both start walking.*

COBBLER Now, my boy. Who are you? Where do you come from? Why have you come here? I hope my questions don't annoy you?

DHAKU Grandfather, my name is Dhaku. I have come from a village ten miles away. But I can't tell you the reason why I've come here, because you'll laugh at me. You'll consider me a fool.

COBBLER Okay, okay. Don't tell me. Here's my house. May God grant you success in whatever you've come here to achieve (*goes*).

DHAKU Night. And I'm so hungry. The bhakri mother gave me finished during the ten

mile-long journey. (*Looks around*) The bridge looks deserted. How can my luck change here?(He paces *up and down from one end of the bridge to the other. Then, tired, sits down*). All I can see is the cobbler's house at one end of the bridge. Nothing else. I feel sleepy. Whatever needs to be done-better leave it till morning. If I dream the same dream, the man with the beard is bound to commend me for coming this far.

*Sleeps. Morning. Cobbler enters.*

COBBLER What? Sleeping on the bridge? Eh, boy! Get up. Is this any place to sleep? Get up. Get up.

DHAKU Who's this waking me? The man with the beard ...

COBBLER Get up. Who's this man with a beard?

DHAKU No, he never turned up yesterday. I waited and waited for him. Who are you? Oh, I met you yesterday ...

COBBLER Of course! You're the same boy. You accompanied me to my house. Eh, boy? What are you doing here? Have you found what you were looking for?

DHAKU No. But since I've come this far, I'm not going away disappointed. I'll stay on another day.

COBBLER Stay on, my boy. But if you want to know my opinion, it's best if you return home as early as you can. Think of your mother! How she must be worrying! But you modern children aren't going to listen to what we say! (*Exits.*)

DHAKU It's true I didn't listen to the cobbler at first. But after spending two days and two nights at the bridge, and after searching all over, I realized that there was no chance of my fortune changing here. What the cobbler was saying was right. Dreams never come true. My mother also said the same thing. So I'd better return home today. All I had done was waste time in which I could have earned something. And the dream proved to be false, that's for sure. Now let that man with a beard show himself in my dream, I'll give such a tug at his ...

*The cobbler enters.*

COBBLER What now, my boy? Whose what do you want to pull? Here, take this bhakri

DHAKU Cobbler dadu, I don't know what would have happened to me if you hadn't brought me food these two days. I would have starved.

COBBLER It's no big deal, really. Each of us should do whatever little we can for another

DHAKU Please forgive me for being so arrogant and not answering all your questions at the beginning. But now that I've decided to take your advice and return home, I'm going to tell you everything.

COBBLER What're you going to tell me?

DHAKU Why I came here in the first place.

COBBLER So, why *did* you come?

DHAKU I was told in a dream that my luck was going to change. I thought it meant that I would come across some hidden treasure. So I felt, why not check it out? But what hidden treasure? I came across nothing at all. Nothing. Now you tell me, where am I going to find hidden treasure here?

COBBLER Foolish boy! If there was hidden wealth hereabouts, do you think I would have remained as poor as I am? Would I have continued to mend shoes till my eyes became blind? You're a fool. A real fool! (*Laughs.*)

DHAKU You're very right. But why do you laugh?

COBBLER Arre, your mention of a dream reminded me-when I was your age, I too had a dream. I had the same dream three nights running.

DHAKU What was the dream? '

COBBLER Well, I was told I should walk ten miles to the west. There in a field I would see a small house. I was to dig in the backyard of that house. There was supposed to be hidden treasure buried there.

DHAKU Then? What did you do then?

COBBLER I wasn't a fool like you. I wasn't going to believe in a dream! Who was going to walk ten exhausting miles? Not me. If I was going to find hidden treasure, then why not in my own backyard? What d'you say? (*Laughs.*)

DHAKU You're right. What my mother says is absolutely true. A man grows rich only through hard work.

COBBLER That's it! No, even that's not true. All my life I've been working very hard. But have I grown rich? You need fate on your side to be rich.

DHAKU I agree. I'm going. I'm never going to be so foolish again.

COBBLER Take care.

*Both depart in different directions.*

MOTHER Where could this boy have gone? It's been three days since he left! I'm really worried now. (*Dhaku enters. He is very tired and throws himself down on the floor.*)  
Dhaku, what's wrong with you, child?

DHAKU Mother, I'm very, very tired. I've walked ten miles without a scrap of food.

MOTHER And all this suffering, was it of any use?

DHAKU No, mother no. You were right. I shouldn't have believed in a dream. Over there, I met a cobbler. He also said the same thing. He said he too used to have a recurring dream just like me when he was as old as I am. In his dream he was told to walk ten miles to the west. There he would find a small house in a ... *(stops abruptly)*  
Mother!!

MOTHER What is it?

DHAKU Mother, quickly! Come to the backyard with a hoe!

*Both run out. They start digging. They dig up a pot of treasure.*

So that day we discovered the hidden pot of treasure in our own backyard. If you walked ten miles to the west from the bridge you come to our house in a field. It struck me that the cobbler must have seen our house in his dream! We had to dig quite deep before we came across the hidden treasure. There were diamond and ruby studded ornaments, gold coins and what not! We became very rich. Our days of slavery and sorrow were over. And we could afford to wear the expensive clothes you see before you.

*Mother enters. She is wearing an expensive sari.*

MOTHER You were quite right. I'm glad that you believed in your dream, it has done us good.

DHAKU Mother, there's one thing I can't understand. If that man with a beard wanted to give me hidden treasure, why he didn't simply tell me that it was buried in my own backyard? Why did he make me walk till I collapsed?

MOTHER. It's quite clear. He didn't think it right that you should get it by being lazy. Fortunes do change, my child, but it's the one who works hard whose fortunes change. The cobbler never moved from his place. He never took advantage of his luck. He just sat in one place and carried on doing the same job day after day. So a man needs not only good luck but also the effort to make it work.

DHAKU Not just that. You need brains as well. What if it hadn't occurred to me that the house the cobbler saw in his dream was ours?

MOTHER Now, now. It's not right to boast. It did occur to you, but only after the cobbler told you about his dream. My son, along with wisdom one must have goodness. Let's go to the cobbler tomorrow, and give him a share of the treasure.

*The end.*

**'... And then the prince called a taxi and left the palace with the princess . . . '**

**Nandikar's 'In Search of Children's Theatre' is an ongoing project which is still evolving as it moves from phase to phase. BIREN Das SHARMA after observing the work and talking to those involved, gives an account which conveys some of the excitement and sense of discovery associated with the project, incorporating interviews conducted by JHUMA BASAK.**

'The slum children are absolutely culturally captive and alive' says Rudraprasad Sengupta, director of the project called 'In Search of Children's Theatre' initiated in 1992 by Nandikar, one of the better known theatre groups of Calcutta. Given a chance the slum children unashamedly cook up the most bizarre and impossible stories like the one in which the fairy tale prince rides a taxi and not a horse; given a chance they also enact it, bring in episodes and sketches from their own experiences of everyday life in the slum and on the pavement, and weave them together with what we commonly consider to be children's stories. The result often takes the shape of amazing theatrical fantasies embodying a wide range of real life experiences, and by thus bringing the fantastic down to earth, situates it in a reality they know. 'We have a strong feeling' says Rudraprasad, 'that their culture is just not born of deprivation, disorientation or displacement. It has a structure, a rationale, a defence mechanism. It is a remarkably stable and persistent part of their way of life.'

As the Nandikar activists started moving into the slums and slowly established a rapport with the street and slum children, the first thing they realized is the importance of theatre in the lives of these children. Like their stories, the theatre activity of these children is also a manifestation of their inner selves, of their desires, fears, anger and frustration. For them, theatre has ceased to be just

training in the art of theatre, leading to the acquiring of some acting skills from adult teachers-as the work continues, theatre has also started serving as a form of communication, a creative way of socializing and learning, a catalyst of change. At the same time, Nandikar has also realized how and why their children's theatre work stands out as a statement of the reality of these destitute and underprivileged children, a reality that has penetrated even into their imagination and creativity.

It was no accident that Nandikar's search for a children's theatre took them to the slums and pavements where the city's most underprivileged live. In the mid-eighties Nandikar started working with college and university students of the city and eventually their 'Theatre in Education' programme expanded to include about sixty schools all over West Bengal. The success of this programme helped the West Bengal school community to comprehend the importance of theatre in education, and the possibility of including it in the school curriculum is being seriously considered by them now. At the same time Nandikar also wanted to extend the experimentation beyond the schools. Since the group found it more challenging to work with students of poorer schools where the experience was also more rewarding and enriching, the urge was to reach the most deprived children, who could not often afford to go to a school, who had been forced by poverty to join the unorganized labour pool at a very tender age. Nandikar decided to call the new project 'In Search of Children's Theatre', primarily because the aim was not only to teach theatre as such, but also to help them to discover theatre out of their everyday experience, to use theatre as a tool of self-expression and as a medium of collective cultural action. One of the longterm goals was to document the entire process, keep a diary, a record, collect stories, learn and re-orientate the work on the basis of new experiences, and eventually create original playscripts out of the shared experience, which would be the children's own texts in the truest sense of the word.

A core group was formed to initiate the project, with theatre activists and enthusiasts from different professional backgrounds. Rudraprasad Sengupta stresses that the entire project is a group effort, the sum total of individual inputs. 'There was no guideline, no model to follow. It was probably the pressure of uncertainty that made us work as a collective. Individually each of us had to suffer many moments of frustrations and failures, but it was the group mentality that gave us the courage to keep on trying to face the challenge,' explains Rudraprasad. In 1992 the work began slowly and cautiously, first at Nivedita Colony (once a resettlement colony, now overgrown into a slum), and then at Calcutta Rescue, a centre for street and slum children situated in the vicinity of the biggest redlight area of the metropolis, Sonagachhi.

In the beginning the Nandikar activists wanted to learn about the children they would work with, to know, for example, how they spent their time, and to familiarize themselves with their games, their forms of recreation. The first hurdle, of course, was to make friends with them. Coming from middle-class backgrounds many of the Nandikar members found it rather difficult in the beginning. They had to cope with their own inhibitions, pretensions, and ego problems. They realized at an early stage of the- work that it would not work if they tried to enter into the children's world as 'teachers'. Moreover, the slightly condescending attitude of easy sympathy or even pity is easily recognized by the children, who simply stop expressing themselves freely.

Tirthankar Chanda, one of Nandikar's fulltime theatre workers at Nivedita Colony, talks about how the group first tried to work out a methodology:

What we realized in the first few days was that in a way these children are very lonely even within their own families. They want to communicate, to make friends, and they need someone like us to listen to and sympathize with them. So the first thing we learned was to listen to them-not, of course, at a superficial level, but honestly. Once we managed to break the barrier with the various new games we introduced, and once the children allowed us into their world, it became really meaningful. They became open and expressive, often far more so than they usually are even in their own homes. They really started communicating.

Each day we begin with simple but enjoyable games to create and hold a group mentality, to establish mutual trust and gain confidence. At the same time we also picked up, analysed and slightly modified some of their own games and gave them back to them. This is a subtle way of allowing them to rediscover differently something that belongs to them. Some games indirectly make them talk, reveal their inner selves. For example, there was a popular game called The Egg Thief which the kids used to play. We studied the game and realized that it has two aspects: reflex and concentration. We slightly modified the game and replaced one of the original rules with a new one. In its original version the principal player has to make a wordless sound while holding his or her breath. The new rule said that from now on s/he should talk continuously instead of making a meaningless noise. This forced the children to talk about themselves, about the things they see, about their feelings. We encouraged them to talk freely, and though initially they found it difficult, they soon developed a knack. While playing this game they would talk about anything, they would even use the abusive language of everyday slum life, which they would not otherwise do in front of



us. As you know, when somebody goes on talking for a while s/he ends up saying a lot unconsciously and in a way revealing his or her own self. Thus this new rule made them much more free and expressive.

I have noticed that those games which help them to be more expressive, more communicative, as well the games that need group action and not individual action, are far more popular with them than other games. We have regular group discussion where we talk about the games, whether the children like them or not, why they find some of the games difficult or problematic, why certain new games (including theatre games), do not work, why certain games are less enjoyable than others. Depending on the feedback and our own analysis we often modify the games, adjust them to suit the needs and explain the usefulness of these games in their future theatre activity. This helps the children to play a theatre game with much more enthusiasm, keeping a possible theatre production in mind, and thus making it much more productive in terms of theatre work. Since they know exactly how and where the experience of that particular game is going to fit in the context of a play, they spontaneously come up with new ideas, which is great.

How do we select the story of a particular play? Well, we tell them a lot of stories, and they also tell us a lot of stories and together we select the stories which they like most and want to work on. We divide the children into four groups and give them an outline of a scene to improvise on, and get different versions of the same storyline. After that we combine, edit and merge the four versions together and create one version. There is always a discussion among the children on every scene, which we encourage. Our job is to help them to address the relevant issues. While working on a recent production called *Rajaar Asukh* (The King's Illness) the children discovered that they can talk about themselves through theatre, they can bring in episodes from their everyday life and present it to their own people in such a way that they pay attention. As instructors we just give them an outline and the motivation, the rest is improvised and developed by the children themselves.

Sometimes at the end of a day's work you may realize that unknowingly, from a friend you have reverted to a 'teacher' and failed to reach them the way you wanted to. Once they sense that you are teaching from 'above' and not sharing as a friend, they start behaving rather mechanically. So you have to be very, very careful about the way you work. Personally speaking, while I work I constantly try to overcome my own limitations. I often face the problem of unlearning. It is difficult to get rid of one's own preconceived ideas and try to do things afresh. Sometimes it can be frustrating, but at the

same time, if one is honest about it one can always reconsider, rethink everything and try from a new angle altogether.

To initiate and continue theatre work at Calcutta Rescue was particularly difficult. Most of the children have no permanent place to live and as the families, many of them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, move from one pavement to another, there are frequent dropouts. The kids may stop coming without any prior notice, an adolescent girl may reappear (as one did) after a year with a baby in her arms-yet another victim of child marriage. There are drug addicts, alcoholics, smokers and petty thieves among the kids who come to Calcutta Rescue-These children resist any attempt at discipline or schooling. At one level these children are very sensitive, and at another level they are extremely indifferent to pain, suffering and even to death. Once the initial hurdles are crossed, once the bond is created, a whole new world opens up, not only for the children but also for the theatre activists.

Subhasish Ganguli, another fulltime theatre worker on the project, gives us an insight into this experience.

When we started working with street kids, our first experience was really shocking. The kids used to hide, they would hurl obscenities at us. They would simply not accept us. They were difficult, unruly and aggressive. To get close to them was a real challenge. But later we discovered that they were unbelievably creative-I am talking about theatre work only-and that their bodies and minds were far freer than those of the educated kids of any posh school. This is because the upper- and middle-class kids are ruthlessly socialized, taught in a particular way, and it is very difficult to recondition them. For example, they are not supposed to shout or talk loudly, they are expected to behave gently, be sweet-natured and decent. They have adopted, at an early age, an artificial behaviour pattern. As a theatre worker our first task is to give them back their individuality. They must feel and behave like children. The kids from the posh schools can understand and memorize faster because of their education, which is fine. But they are not expressive. They are taught to suppress emotion. They hide their feelings. Even their movements follow certain 'given' patterns.

But with the street kids you don't have the problem of getting something - anything - out of them if you know how to. They possess this tremendous power and courage to express freely. In our theatre work in the schools we try to help the children to rediscover that 'lost' world, help them to go as far as they want to. And this is what they also want to do because this ultimately helps them to be

what they want to be. In order to achieve this you have to make them 'big' and yourself 'small'. You have to reverse the roles. In a sense, you have to be their student and let them 'teach' you. There is a particular game which deals with the problem of whether one should speak the truth or not. The whole group was automatically divided into two different sections and each had very strong reasons for and against speaking the truth. The arguments that surfaced were simply fascinating. One said that lying helps to save one's skin. You may know who has committed a particular crime, but you can save your skin by not disclosing his name. Another said that the adults repeatedly say that we should always speak the truth. But this is a trap, a cunning adult way of getting to know our secrets. Another said that he had to lie about his father leaving the family simply to get admission into a school. He has found lying to be a very useful and positive way of working out things. In the very beginning, this is one of the ways of learning about the kids' world, how they think, dream, feel, react. This is the primary task of a trainer. The more you learn about them the closer you get and the easier you find it to get the children to be productive. As you go about it you discover new ways, new techniques.

For improvisation work we encourage them to take anything from their everyday lives. For example, I may ask them to tell me what happened yesterday under the Howrah Bridge, where many of them live. Do they have any 'news' (which may mean a police raid, a demolition of the slum, a gang fight or some family strife)? I immediately respond to the 'news' and let them concentrate on it, try to get more information, and slowly start building up on that. Why did the police demolish the slum? When did they come? How? Why did the police van pick up certain people and not others? What did you do when it happened? How did you react? Since they know more than anybody, else, only they can provide the information you want. As I go on constructing the 'news' brick by brick there comes a point when we must talk about good and bad, right and wrong, justice and injustice. This can be really problematic. I myself may not have an answer. I may not know what to do in their place, it can be something outside my 'reality'.



The core group\* meets regularly to discuss useful information and experiences coming out of the individual activists' interaction with the kids. The various inputs and data are analysed minutely by the members of the core group in order to work out the next steps. For example, one of the findings was that the street and slum children know a lot of stories, but the stories which have characters of their age and an allegorical 'journey' of some kind work best. Making up a story on their own is also very important to them. At the same time one can give them a storyline in which they can see themselves as characters. It can either be a character of their age group, or someone coming from a similar background who grows up in the process of the journey. They don't mind even if that particular character later becomes someone as big as filmstar Amitabh Bachchan.

Based on this understanding of stories in the lives of these children the group tried to develop an innovative approach to theatre. A new process of storytelling was introduced at Calcutta Rescue. During a storytelling session, at a certain point when the children were really curious, really involved, the instructor would stop 'telling' the story and let the children improvise, build the story bit by bit. Then at one point the instructor would stop them at a crucial juncture-maybe a moral dilemma, or a significant question, a matter of decision making or choosing between different options-and try to find out how the children themselves would formulate their arguments, what made them decide on one course of action and not another. The instructor would only help them to see the problem in its magnitude, the vastness of it, the intricacy of the options. Subhasish provides a very interesting example:

One day I told them the story of Yudhisthira from the Ramayana. He was accompanied by a dog on his last journey to the other world. I stopped the story

there and drew their attention to the problem. I said-imagine that Yudhisthira was given a choice: if he leaves the dog behind he will be allowed to enter heaven and will also get back his dead relatives and lots of wealth. But if he takes the dog with him he will go to hell and not get anything at all. Some children said he should leave the dog behind and get his relatives back; with the wealth he could always buy another dog. They said money was much more important than a dog. Another group was sympathetic to the dog. They said that since the dog had followed him faithfully and never left his side, he should take it with him. It would be an injustice to leave the dog behind. Then I thought that if some of the children really believe that money is much more important than anything else, it is silly to be sympathetic to a dog, and that this should be discussed in detail. So I asked a question to the first group who wanted to abandon the dog: 'Say, you are Yudhisthira. What would you do if it was not a dog but a child?' They said they would nevertheless leave him behind. 'What if it was someone you knew? A friend of yours?' They hesitated for some time but finally decided to leave even a friend behind and get rich. The argument was that one must survive, must get money to buy food. So sentimentality did not count. Then I asked, 'What would you do if it was your own brother?' This made them nervous. One said, 'Why do you bring a brother into this? We have never talked about a brother before.' When you make them see that an apparently simple problem contains a far deeper moral dilemma they try to avoid it, and if you are not careful they will break into a fight, try to solve it through violence. Violence is something that is 'normal' to these destitute children, violence is a part of the everyday life of the slum. It is different with, say, the children of a posh school. In their case the violence will be more verbal, abusive. So one must be very, very careful in handling something like this. As I continued the argument and made it more and more complex for the main speaker of the first group, he started losing supporters. Initially there were, say, ten children in his group, but as the discussion continued, as I was making it more and more difficult to decide, the children of the first group started changing their minds and joined the other group. When he was deserted by all of his friends and stood

alone, I asked him the last question, 'What would you do if it was not a dog, not a friend, not your brother, but your mother?' Then he started crying, shouting, 'Why do you talk about my parents? You didn't mention them earlier.' For him this was the height of the crisis. At this point I brought the original story back into action. Made it part of the fiction that was being worked out. The whole exercise was an experience of coming out of the story and looking at the problem in a real life situation, to relive the fictional problem and face it frontally. Later, when I went back to the fictive, it became easier for them to see the characters and their problems more clearly, they were able to improvise, create dialogues, to build up the story and portray the characters much more intelligently and meaningfully. Because this time they had 'lived' the character in their own way. There was already an emotional understanding of the characters and situations of the story, and this helped them to work towards dramatization, characterization and performance.

For them an experience such as I have described is important because it combines emotion with rationality, logic and understanding. This is very important for theatre. As the instructors, it is our responsibility to unify the whole experience, bring the children back to theatre, introduce some amount of discipline into the activities. This is the most difficult task. To keep a balance, to keep them on the right track, is the most important thing. One must also help them to give shape to their imagination. We help them to see that even imagination needs discipline: Theatre is only a medium. It helps us to test and try out certain ideas. It also helps them to see themselves, their own images, and at the same time reveal to others, to the outside world, a lot of things which have never been seen or understood in this way.

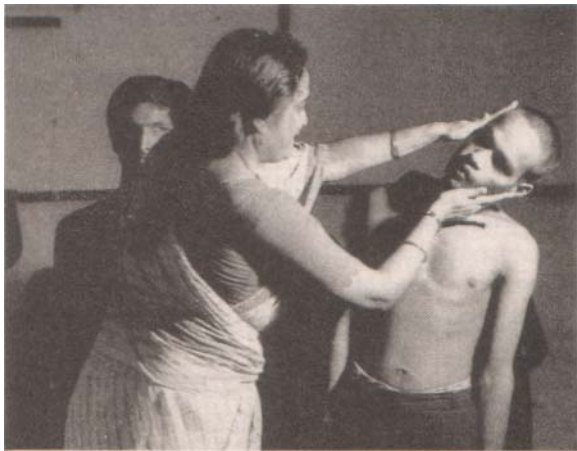
When you enter into a child's world you have to realize that you are not entering into an artificial, 'make believe' world. We believe that a child feels and understands exactly like an adult. He or she may not express it like an adult, may not have the same vocabulary, but at the level of feeling there is no difference. As you can see we don't really work with them as directors or instructors but as their friends. They take decisions, they take a lot of responsibility and they create. Our job is to prepare them, to organize and help them to achieve what they want to. The real work begins when they start doing things on their own,

when they start imagining and creating all by themselves. We have noticed that one gets best results when the children go through a lot of physical action-the kind of action they are familiar with and used to doing in their normal everyday life. One can start with a child's everyday life, what he or she does from morning to night. Once a child realizes that one is free to do, show, or enact his or her wildest dreams, then you have achieved something. Then, and only then, can you start the real theatre work.

The project entered into a new phase as Nandikar was invited by the principal of Calcutta Blind School to work with blind children and produce a play. But how can there be a theatre when the children cannot see? Nandikar decided not to prejudge, but to study the situation and develop a strategy, since there was no model to follow. But as they started working with the blind they realized that disability is not merely an external physical phenomenon, it is also internal. One must work to bring about a change from within. As far as theatre work is concerned, the biggest problem is that the blind do not have a good sense of the body, of its measurements, its proportions, its dimensions. Their world is mainly a verbal world, it is the voice, speech, sound that they use to make sense of everything, including space, distance, depth. They do not use their hands to express things. In the first phase the group was engaged in observing the world of the blind. At the same time they gradually started helping them to 'see' and understand the 'other' world by filling in the blanks with inputs of various sorts. A whole set of new games and exercises had to be invented and modified constantly through a careful process of trial and error to achieve the much desired inter-person co-ordination and communication which would be useful for theatre work. For example, a thin black rope was placed on the floor to demarcate the space and the blind children were able to make very good sense of the space by simply touching and measuring it with their feet. This was a major breakthrough in initiating them into theatre work. The result was fascinating in many ways. The audience who saw the first production could not believe that the actors and actresses were blind. There was perfect co-ordination and even the difficult compositions were done faultlessly. But for the blind children the most important achievement was the taste of success, the self confidence that came from doing something nearly impossible. This work did not end with a particular production but has been integrated into the 'In Search of Children's Theatre' project.

Understandably the project keeps on expanding and moving into new territories. Subhasish Ganguli has recently ventured to work with mentally handicapped children. For forty-five minutes he tried all the games and techniques he knew, but the children would not respond at all. He was forced to accept defeat and decided to give up. As he was leaving, a little girl of eight called to him, requesting him to stay and play with her. Subhasish cherishes this simple communication as a breakthrough.

From Nivedita Colony to Calcutta Rescue, and thence to the Blind School, each new phase has posed new challenges, but despite countless moments of failure and frustration, in the long run Nandikar activists have been able to communicate, interact and ultimately help the children to use theatre meaningfully. The whole experience has led to some interesting findings in the creative use of theatre by these children. For example, for the slum children, the importance of the fantastic, as opposed to a very realistic, theatre has emerged as a liberating force, and not as an escape from reality as generally believed. For the children Nandikar works with, theatre may well have become a synonym for life.



*[\* Members of the core group, apart from Rudraprasad Sengupta, are: Dr. Prasanta Chattopadhyay, editor of a little magazine and a professor of chemistry; Swatilekha Sengupta, lead actress, music and costume designer; Shyamal Bhattacharya, headmaster of a school near Nivedita Colony; Tirthankar Chanda, a doctorate in science; Subhasis Ganguli who has a master's degree in drama; Debasish Chowdhury, Debshankar Haldar and Partha Pratim Deb, working as full timers.]*



# **Theatre For and By Children in Karnataka**

*Two reports from Karnataka give an update and overview of children's theatre activity in the state.*

## **Children's Theatre in the Bangalore Area**

**Chandra Jain**

Theatre has a sensibility which draws from everything around it. It not only entertains, but also passes judgement, not only sensitizes but also educates.

This leads one to ask-is theatre only an adult activity? Maybe in the sense of formal theatre, yes. But in a deeper sense, no. Because for a child life itself begins with drama. Enacting adult roles, making up situations or plots, creating sets, s/he internalizes his experiences to become an actor on the stage of life. For children theatre is a natural activity. If we were to address this natural inclination more directly through children's theatre, we would help them to grow up as more complete human beings, and this process will also throw up more actors, as well as a theatre-literate audience.

In India traditionally the performing arts have not addressed children separately. Children have grown up watching the beautiful drama that permeates Indian households and society in the form of festivals, rituals, jatras, melas, folk performances the endless celebration of the cycle of life. With the advent of television and its action-packed thrillers, we have the reality of a generation growing up fed totally on electronic media with its borrowed sensibilities and its lack of genuine cultural values.

In this context children's theatre activity becomes important because it entertains, brings them closer to their roots and can also be a significant learning, developmental or even therapeutic activity. Therefore, people who have chosen to work with children to stimulate their creativity are indeed very precious.

Karnataka has a rich tradition of folk theatre like Yakshagana. Not so long ago it also had the famous Gubbi Theatre Company, the travelling company which was the training ground for B.V. Karanth and B. Jayshree, the actress and director who happens to be Gubbi Veeranna's granddaughter. Like in other parts of India, children here also grow up listening to stories from the Panchatantra, Mahabharata and such traditional sources.

It was the remarkable intuition of K.V. Subbanna, the founder of the Ninasam drama school, that led him to ask B. V. Karanth, in 1970, to do a play for children at Sagar in south Karnataka. Karanth staged *Panjarshale*, based on a Tagore story, which was a success, and toured Karnataka extensively, laying the foundation of a children's theatre in the state.

Around 1973 Bal Bhavan, the state government sponsored children's centre, acquired a visionary as its head. Vimala Rangachar modified the small hall on the premises into an auditorium designed by M. S. Sathyu of IPTA, took the innovative step of inviting local theatre groups to perform plays for children, provided the venue, arranged for an audience, and offered a performance fee of Rs 500 per show, a good amount then. Under B. K. Chandrashekar, the Bangalore Little Theatre did *The Ungrateful Man* and *Upakarya Kathe*.

The money collected by the groups for these shows began to fund mainstream theatre, attracting people like B.V. Karanth, Lokesh, N. S.Venkatram, Prema Karanth, B. Jayshree. Natranga did *Poli Kitti* by T. P. Kailasam, and Benaka performed *Dancing Donkey* or *Kuniyo Katte*, directed by Prema Karanth.

In 1974 Karanth decided to do *Ispeet Rajya*, Tagore's *Tasher Desh*, a beautiful production with music and direction by Karanth himself, with 'Nani' as makeup man, Kapanna doing lights and Ratnamala Prakash and Malathi singing. Children performed in this production.

Children's theatre was becoming a focused activity when a group called Prabhat Kalavidaru presented *Cinderella*, a commercial production in Kannada. Cinderella's golden curls, frock and glass slipper became the rage. The recorded tunes, gaudy clothes, and glitzy sets started attracting children and parents alike, weaning the child audience away from serious theatre. Schools wanted similar annual productions, sponsors equally flashy productions. Original children's theatre activity suffered.

In 1978 Bal Bhavan took the initiative of holding a scriptwriting workshop for children's plays. *Ajji Kathe* (Grandmother's Tale), written by Dandiraj of Tumkur, grew out of it. Prema Karanth was a participant. Despite her specialization in children's theatre, she had tended merely to help Karanth. She now decided to hold a workshop for children. In the summer of 1979 the first theatre workshop for children was conducted, with stalwarts like B.V. Karanth pitching in. They decided to do a production of *Alibaba and the Forty*

*Thieves* with 120 children. Chandrasekhar Kambar adapted it, Karanth did the music, and the play was a hit.

Prema Karanth repeated it with rural children at Hosur, a village outside Bangalore. To invite the audience to the evening show, the children dressed in costume and went around the village in procession. A muslim boy who was acting as a brahmin and was dressed accordingly, was noticed by his horrified mother, who took up a broomstick to beat the boy for dressing in this manner. Someone intervened, but news of the incident spread like wildfire, and the whole village was there to see the play.

Prema Karanth made these production-oriented workshops a regular feature of the summer vacations. She would take about 40-60 children between 8-16 years. They did improvisations, learnt to respond to music, developed trust and friendship with other kids, told stories and had fun while learning the basics of theatre. She believed in giving the children a lot of freedom, yet somewhere controlling them. The next workshop production was *Giant Mama*, an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant*. In 1984, she repeated *Kuniyo Katte*, the result of another children's workshop.

The Karnataka Nataka Academy, headed at the time by Chandrashekar Kambar, supported the concept and the methodology. The Academy also collaborated with Benaka Ivlakkala Kendra, the children's wing of a group started by B. V. Karanth, to conduct another workshop in 1985. The 60 children who participated in that workshop staged *Nataka Rajakumari*, a play written by Abdul Rehman Pasha.

Around this time the new theatre movement started by Barry John in Delhi was gaining momentum. In 1988 Kadambari, a group for the performing and fine arts which had started working with children, invited Subhash Udgata and V. K. Sharma, NSD graduates who had



A rehearsal of *Gumma Banda Gumma*

worked in Barry John's Theatre in Education programme. Their ideology made the child the playwright, director, musician, set designer, and production designer. The creativity of the child became paramount. The process was more important than the production. In this workshop the difference between formal theatre and informal creative drama was stressed. Prema Karanth participated as an expert, as did Pannikar and Ram Gopal Bajaj.

The workshop resulted in three small plays-*The Fisherman and the Golden Fish* by Pushkin, *Animal Rights* by Visalakshi Johri, and *Samay Anmol* by Vijaydan Detha. All had songs written and composed by the children. The costumes and sets were suggestive but natural. The productions had a fresh spontaneity.

In 1970 Kadambari brought Bansi Kaul and Bharat Sharma to Bangalore for another theatre workshop with children. Being the cosmopolitan city it is, the 60 children in the group represented the wide range of language diversity in India. The children were divided into small groups on different criteria at different times, so that there could be more interaction at different levels. It was a forty-day workshop. The first three weeks were used by the director for theatre and movement games, speech and sound exercises, movement, improvisation, etc. There were sessions where the children critically analysed their own work.

The last two weeks were given to the rehearsals of the play *Neela Ghoda*, the Hindi adaptation of *The Little Blue Horse*, a Polish play by Maria Clara Machado, who had presented it first at the international meeting for children's theatre in Paris in 1965. *Neela Ghoda* was handled largely by the children. The masks and costumes were all designed by the children. There were

five shows. The directors also decided to present, at the formal shows, some of the groups' improvisations (done appropriately in a real bamboo grove) based on a Chinese folk tale, *The Candlewick Fairy*. The children also composed music for it. The play used Tamil, Konkani, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Hindi. The smaller groups, divided language-wise, had translated their portions from English into their own mother tongues. They were put together like a collage.

Among other interesting initiatives in the area of children's theatre, one should mention Iqbal, a talented youngster from Ninasam, Heggodu, who formed the theatre group Chinna Banna, which occasionally performs Shakespeare plays for children all over the state; and K. G. Krishnamurthy, also from south Kamataka, who is doing significant work in Sagar.

In 1993 Prema Karanth came back to children's theatre with *Ajji Kathe*, the result of a month-long children's theatre workshop. Prema felt that this play had all the necessary elements for a children's play-animals, kings, queens, magicians and ghosts. It also allowed her to accommodate a lot of children the workshop had 37 children. The final product had a lot of energy and innovative ideas, and as a critic put it, 'The music by B. V. Karanth was fantastic, delicate, lilting tunes and rhythms with home truths conveyed in joyous and funny songs as befits a children's play. Colourful, lovely costumes enhance the show further.' The workshop was sponsored by NSD and the Kamataka Nataka Academy.

1993 also ushered in the Grips theatre movement with its realistic approach sans fairies, ghosts and kings. Kadambari, which had been interacting with Theatre Academy in Pune, invited Wolfgang Kolneder to direct a Grips play in Bangalore. He directed *Gumma Banda Gumma*, the Kannada adaptation of the German play *Max and Milli* done by S. Surendranath, a graduate of NSD. This production by Kadambari was done with financial support from Max Mueller Bhavan, Bangalore. Alongside the rehearsals of the play, there were workshops for theatre directors, actors, teachers and others, to introduce the concept of Grips, an alternative approach to children's theatre.

In the summer of 1994, Prema Karanth, with her unflagging energy and love for children, conducted yet another theatre workshop. The children were taught various theatre skills by experts in the field: 'Nani' teaching makeup, Karanth music, Prema Karanth costumes, G. V. Sivananda voice modulation, Malathi acting, Walter D'souza mime, and Suresh Anagalli mask-making. Each expert handled three to four sessions. The children were

provided with incentives to create a competitive spirit. Prema feels that 'unless there is competition, children start losing interest. To keep them involved and motivated, we must have competition. We have competition everywhere, so why not here ?'

Prema Karanth started using theatrical elements in her teaching years at the Aurobindo school at Delhi. She has contributed a lot to children's theatre and continues to do so. However, she finds the children less disciplined now-perhaps the distractions are too many. 'No doubt', she says, 'they are more aware, more intelligent, ready to teach even us adults. However, the television is stunting their imagination and creativity. They are more passive and require more encouragement, pushing, competition, and rewards to become active.' She feels that rehearsals bring about discipline and concentration, helping them to grow and take on responsibility. She feels that theatre activities are not getting enough support from the schools in Bangalore. There are as many as 50 NSD graduates who could work with children, but there is a lack of finances, there aren't enough scripts for children's plays, and most importantly, very few have the patience and skill to work with children.

## Children's Theatre and Ninasam

**K. V. Akshara**

Ninasam, a voluntary organization, has been engaged in diverse cultural activities over the past 45 years. Its involvement with children's theatre spans about 25 years, during which time it has produced as many children's plays and explored possibilities with regard to the nature, scope, organization and production methods of children's theatre.

Until the 1960s Ninasam remained very much a 'rural amateur theatre troupe', like the numerous similar troupes to be found in any village in Karnataka. Organizationally it was completely amateur; in production concepts and style, however., its staged works were closer to the 'Company' models. Ninasam's experimentation was confined to choosing and producing those plays of the Company genre which could be called 'literary'. The '60s marked a turning point in Ninasam's theatre activities, as its subsequent productions began to move towards what we now call 'modern theatre'.

A deep involvement in children's theatre at this stage proved advantageous for Ninasam. It was possible to indulge in experimentation in children's theatre and still escape the censorious attitude of its local audience towards the 'modern'. With their apparent indifference towards children's theatre they were willing to pardon and accept the 'modern' in this garb. This initial work with children's plays helped Ninasam digest modern concepts and methods, train new actors and actresses, and develop an audience responsive to modern theatre.

Around 1970 Karanth, who was just beginning to make his mark in Karnataka, produced *Panjarshale* for Ninasam. An open-air stage at the local school in Heggodu was specially renovated for the play, in which about 120 local children took part. The entire local rural community actively shared in the responsibilities of the production-music, costumes, making of props, rehearsals and organization. This work raised meaningful questions not only in terms of organization but also of production values. Questions like whether and how children's theatre was different from adults' theatre, what kind of plays lent themselves better to children's theatre, whether it was ultimately valuable only as a community activity or whether it was possible to create a stage work which adults, too, could relate to.

All the 10-15 children's plays that Ninasam produced between 1971 and 1985 were basically attempts at finding answers to the above questions. Over these years, attempts were made to explore a distinct idiom for children's theatre and the experience of working with children of different agegroups and social backgrounds.

These explorations entered a new phase by the 1980s. Ninasam Theatre School was established by the beginning of the decade and by the mid-eighties, the itinerant repertory troupe Tirugata was founded. The decision to include a children's play as one of the four productions that would form a part of our statewide performance tour, putting up 100 to 150 shows, was influenced by two factors: one, we were aware that a substantial part of our audience would be below 14 years of age; and two, we hoped to elicit a 'collective community response' from the audience. It was impossible to take child-artistes on these long, strenuous tours and so we took recourse to the practice of adults performing children's plays.

We had by now started to receive more information regarding children's theatre. New thoughts and ideas had begun to crystallize. Secondhand reports of children's theatre activity being conducted in different parts of India, the TIE programme in England, and Grips Theatre in Germany, started coming in. This prompted us to start considering children's theatre as a separate entity and to think of a different set of plays, a different mode of production and exhibition. *Neeli Kudure*, produced by our Tirugata repertory in its first year, was a result of this new thinking.

*Neeli Kudure* started off as a separate piece performed at any kind of open space available in school campuses during the day. The production was never simplified in terms of stagecraft. The bare stage was supplemented through costumes, props, masks and continual





A scene from *Neeli Kudure*

background music, heightening the overall effect. *Neeli Kudure* had festive, celebratory elements like dance, music and group scenes. Organizationally, however, it became difficult to integrate it with the other performances; so from the following year we began to perform the children's play along with the other three.

Then came *Alibaba*, which compelled us to do a complete rethink. This production, which profusely used the songs and speech style of the north Karnataka Bayalata folk form was as successful as the previous ones. Children and adults responded to it with equal enthusiasm. The experience again raised major questions and doubts about whether it was really right to regard children's theatre as a 'separate entity', which was the western concept; whether this notion of 'separateness' was not actually a consequence of the schismatic systems of western social life; whether this kind of a 'new children's theatre' would be meaningful for our audiences who still had a strong sense of community, and if it would be a richer experience for the children to watch these productions with their elders rather than separately and alone in schools.

Our productions in the succeeding years were shaped by this rethinking. We produced *Panjarshale* a play which appeals to both children and grownups at their different, respective levels. We also wondered if it would be worth doing adaptations of literary classic as, in the pre-colonial days, the same texts studied by adults were taught to children in simpler forms. We then experimented with a children's adaptation of *The Tempest*.

Over the past three years, however, we have been forced by technical and organizational constraints to exclude children's plays from the repertory project.

Nevertheless, Ninasam has continued all its other activities in children's theatre. Shalaranga is one such project where a group of chosen directors are sent to schools to train children in the basics of theatre and to do a production with them. Ninasam has also conducted three annual bilingual theatre and cultural workshops with children from Maharashtra and Karnataka. For the past four years, Ninasam Theatre School alumni have been engaged in producing plays with schoolchildren, in producing dramatized versions of their school texts, and in training schoolteachers in the rudiments of drama. Troupes like Chinna Banna and Kinnaramela are now working fulltime in children's theatre in the state. It is through all these activities that Ninasam's work in children's theatre carries on.

*(Translated by jaswant Jadhav)*

## Letter from America

**Lou Burman is an Associate Professor of Theatre at Washington State University, specializing in drama in education and drama therapy. On a recent year-long sabbatical he visited India, and had occasion to meet several people and groups engaged in theatre for a young audience. In this open letter he shares some of his impressions with us.**

My initial purpose in visiting India was to study street theatre, political theatre and social theatre; in other words, modern theatre that attempts to change the behaviour of a society ... My first clue that I had mistakenly limited my focus came from Vijay Tendulkar ... We had been speaking of street theatre and commercial theatre. At this point in our conversation, he said that none of these forms were important. They had no effect. I asked him, 'Assuming theatre can do something. . .'He interrupted- 'Theatre can do something provided it is done for the children: only a youth theatre which wants to make an impact, which wants to improve reality can do something ... Everything has to be done for the children as long as they are children. Whatever you do for the grownups, you cannot change them basically. And history proves that.'

I had come 12,000 miles to study the 'dynamic' form of street theatre and what I received in my first days in India was validation for my own speciality in the US-theatre for young audiences . . .

Present day India provides numerous opportunities to continue its heritage of theatre performed by young people. I recall the excellent work of children from Nivedita Colony in Calcutta that was facilitated by Nandikar. Indeed, as I think of the many youth performances I saw from the Calcutta slum youth to the affluent school in Delhi under the auspices of Barry John, to a school for the hearing-impaired in Kuppan, Andhra Pradesh, supported by the Indian Rural Reconstruction Movement, I reflect that this form of theatre may be one of the most democratic activities in India.

However, theatre by children must be distinguished from theatre for children. Theatre by children may be centuries old in India, but theatre by adults intended for issues specifically relevant to young audiences is in its formative period. (Such theatre excludes general family entertainment as may be seen in folk forms or didactic theatre imposed by adults on issues such as health and literacy.)

[In Delhi Furman attended several performances of *Circle* by the NSD Theatre in Education (TIE) company. He was impressed with their non-patronizing approach towards the secondary school students, both during the formal performance and the TIE participation session]. In India and in the States, many companies give themselves the label of TIE because they are performing for young people in an educational setting or with educational material. However, others would suggest that a TIE programme must be designed with a particular population in mind, the play developed to meet the specific needs of that group, with a major participatory element.

[Mala Hashmi and Jana Natya Manch premiered their first street theatre play for children on 1 January, 1994, the anniversary of Safdar Hashmi's death.] Street theatre activists have an advantage over those of us in the US who are involved in theatre for young audiences. Whenever we in the States produce a play, we are censored. We must clear our scripts through some school administrator or parent group or both. Even when we perform for the public, we must be careful to do scripts that will make money and not make waves-in other words, self censorship. I suspect many of these conditions are true for my Indian colleagues. But street theatre groups have no such obstacles. While the opportunity to reach the children directly without censorship is likely to remain a dream for most of us in the States, Indian street theatre groups can get the truth about society-both positive and negative aspects-directly to the children. Perhaps some street theatre groups will dedicate themselves to this purpose in the future.

[Furman met Chandra Jain in Bangalore and Jayoti Bose in Calcutta, both recent Grips enthusiasts, and saw the productions of *Max and Milli* adapted into the local languages.] If theatre for young audiences is to grow beyond its infancy in India, new works that are relevant to the Indian youth must be presented instead of the warmed-over Grips that is currently in vogue. I would hope that the time is near when original Indian plays will become the bulwark of theatre for young audiences. In my talk with Mohan [Agashe], he spoke of the 'blind westernization' of the country. I think the reliance on foreign scripts for the seedling theatre for young audiences may be the same thing. Not that it is easy to find good playwrights. Even in the States many authors will not write for a young audience. They use the same excuse many Indian playwrights offer: they would like to, but don't know how.

I had come all this distance to learn about street theatre, a genre of theatre intended to change behaviours and redirect societal goals. I had forgotten that all theatre has the potential to reach these aims. In India, I was reminded that theatre for young audiences can be the most effective form to make a difference in the lives of people.

# Theatre Log

## Pinocchio: An Ensemble Production

'Oh, I'm sick and tired of always being a puppet!' cried Pinocchio, rapping himself on the head. 'It's about time that I too became a man' (*The Adventures of Pinocchio*, Carlo Collodi).

Pinocchio. The vision conjured up is that of a wicked, precocious, mischievous child with a large nose, always upto some prank or other, but Pinocchio, as visualized by the Madras-based children's theatre group Magic Lantern, is different. Pravin, the director, says that 'it was a challenge to present the story as a children's play in a manner suited to excite their imagination and inspire their whole-hearted participation.' They had to decide whether 'the brief tale that has made Carlo Lorenzini's pseudonym and the name of his puppet household words ought to be presented as Collodi visualized it or as Walt Disney popularised it'. Deciding, wisely, to retain just the basic outline of Collodi's story and to reinterpret it to suit their own temperament, vision and style of theatre, Pravin argue that 'in the retelling of an ancient tale the storyteller is quite at liberty to retain the germ of the story but make changes or add sub-plots to the main parts to give it a different or contemporary perspective'. This production, sponsored by Child Relief and You (CRY), was shown to several Madras schools during the last week of July 1994.

Usually, in the narrative theatre using themes from epics, fairy tales, legends and myths, actors maintain the element of suspense by becoming storytellers on the spur of the moment and improvising during the narration of the plot, weaving contemporary experience into the traditional structure, thereby subtly changing the scenario. So Pravin and Magic Lantern decided that the basic mode of structuring the play would be improvisation. Accordingly, Pravin, Ayesha Rao and Hans Kaushik set to work on the basic outline of the script, giving only the sequence of events. From the original they retained the characters of Pinocchio, Geppetto, the talking cricket, the cat, the fox and the blue fairy. They added two characters-Baba Yaga, the witch from a Russian folktale and the Genie from the Arabian Nights stories. The characters from the original were changed and given definite human

traits-thereby preserving the anthropomorphic tradition followed in fairy tales of bestowing human characteristics on animals.

The talking cricket became Jeronimo Huntington Cricket the Third-a blue-blooded aristocrat from the noble family of crickets (as distinguished from the family of grasshoppers), with a strong British accent; the cat-a cunning petty thief and rowdy from the streets of Tamil Nadu; the fox-a sophisticated con man and dilettante of the Jean Paul Belmondo variety. Even the Genie, an Arabian Nights character-his Arabic origins 'betrayed' by the turban around his head-was changed into a barrel-carrying drunkard. But when it came to the character of Pinocchio and the other children, Pravin emphasized that they were to be depicted as 'normal children and not some kind of whitewashed, angelic cherubs'. They had all the qualities of modern urban children: precociousness, native cunning, the ability to believe in anything magical, the desire to break their shackles and be free, the resistance to anything formal or structured or establishment-oriented.

Perhaps this is why the play appealed to the children at large - children whose lives have been regimented by the routine of school, homework, the competitiveness forced on them by parents. The ultimate test of a successful children's play is whether it evokes total and complete involvement from children, and in that Pinocchio certainly succeeded.

Why was it so successful? The first thing that strikes one is that the play flows smoothly. It is a piece of storytelling through words, movements, mime and music. The stage extends backwards, beyond the main acting area, and forwards into the audience, like an apron. The action takes place simultaneously both in the foreground as well as in the background. The cinematic technique of 'framing' and 'overlapping' of action gives it a sense of continuous movement. The empathy between the child actors and the professional adult actors, a great deal of improvisation, a conscious effort to involve the children in the audience, spontaneity, and the obvious fun that the actors were having combined to make it an unusual production.

The costumes, designed by Padmini Chettoor, added an interesting dimension to the play. We normally assign costumes the function of hiding the normal self and 'clothing' the actor in a role. But here the costumes were what human beings would wear in their daily lives. Modem, non-naturalistic, with subtle hints like the use of particular colours or the tails of the Fox and the Cat, the antennae of the Cricket, the barrel around the Genie, to indicate

that these actors were playing specific roles. This helped the actors to identify with their roles and to retain their identity as actors simultaneously.

Another unusual way in which an actor transformed himself into the character was through the use of masks. Here they adopted the style of indigenous folk dances such as Kuttu, Kudiattam, and Tullal. Each actor chose his/her mask and made him/herself up accordingly. According to the actors their masks would change every day depending on their moods and the environment in which they had to perform. The children too would give suggestions for changing or improving the masks.

Slotted angles, slats, planks joined together in various geometrical patterns made up the basic set. The props themselves were minimal, suggestive and mounted on wheels so that they could be separated or joined to give the effect of a boat, a wheel, doors, or spaces in and through which the Fox and the Cat could run around and indulge in their pranks. A few suspended clouds made of thermocol covered with cloth, painted in blue and white, added a subtle atmospheric touch. The set was designed by Natesh and executed by Kalai Selvan.

Magic Lantern believes in the concept of ensemble theatre. The lines dividing the functions of scriptwriting, directing, acting, sets, lights, costumes have been diffused and the overlapping between functions is systematically achieved through exchange of ideas, improvisation and co-operative planning. The play literally grew day by day. It changed its form and perspective with additions from actors, viewers and children. The director's role was to hold the play together and help the actors imagine their roles and the play itself. The stress on 'images' rather than 'narrative' and on 'movement' rather than 'action' made it more dynamic. The actors and the stage were in perpetual movement. This was possible only with an intimate group with a keen understanding of one another's thoughts and needs. The sense of a group also evolved during the play. The participants actually belong to different groups: some are from Kuttu-ppattarai (a Tamil repertory group of Madras), some from Board Walkers, some are freelancers, one is a dancer from Chandralekha's group, the children are from the Little Theatre group. But for the duration of the play they became a close-knit group, drawing on each other's talents and insights. The freedom to be a part of any other group and at the same time evolve an intensely shared experience is probably the greatest achievement of Magic Lantern and their version of Pinocchio.

**Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan**



## Sixteenth Interschool Drama Competition, Calcutta

British Council Division presented the sixteenth Interschool Drama Competition at Gyan Manch, Calcutta, over the first weekend of August. Each school had an original one-act play to perform, and the awards were sponsored by Bata and Philips. This particular competition has become an established event of the school calendar, and several English-medium schools of the city regularly participate. The rules require that original one-act plays written by a teacher or student be submitted to the panel of selectors, who shortlist the best scripts. The selected schools present their half-hour productions before the judges, with the plays being directed and stage managed entirely by the school, between the teachers and the pupils. The acting is by the students, who, in many cases, also direct the plays.

There was a wide variety of themes. They ranged from awareness that the sightless are often gifted with vision and intuition (*The Window*, Calcutta International School), to the question: why do those who can show others the way die young? (*Journey's End*, Jewish Girls' School); from a satirical indictment of arranged marriages in which boys are for sale (*Arranged Marriage*, Frank Anthony Public School) to a mixed bag of indictments against the iniquitous social order (*Caesarian Operation*, Julien Day School); from the growing tendency to put aged parents into an old peoples' home (*Nocturne*, St. Thomas Girls' School), to a trip to Hades, where two schoolgirls receive much advice from the inmates (*Mayhem in Hades*, Pratt Memorial).

Amongst the scripts written by students, The Assembly of God Church School presented *jur-ASick Park*, written and directed by Subhagata Bhattacharjee. Verdant patches, the only happy plots in the vitiated environs and noisome living conditions of the metropolises, are fast falling prey to the lust of builders and promoters, whose flighty urban development projects are merely quick moneyspinners. The play was an expose of the unscrupulous practices that are perpetrated in the cities, where simpletons with dreams and dynamism are exploited and eventually dropped.

*Enter the Magi*, by La Martiniere for Boys, written by two students, Sameer Gandotra and Anuvab Pal, was an unusual play combining the real with the fantastic. A boy who starts off disliking his stepmother and father is converted after the experience of a dream which

changes his way of thinking. Repartee over the merits and demerits of comparative school systems had the young student audience in splits. When students of a Delhi board school talk of Caesar, their counterpart from a local board surmises that they had been mentioning '(a pair of ) scissors.' They deride his obtuseness, attributing it to his Madhyamik (West Bengal board) background. The boy being teased retaliates, retorting that his Delhi friends study a 'bloody course' (the Delhi board syllabus includes *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*).

The prize winning plays included Loreto House's droll play *Dial M for Murder . . . and Mayhem*, which was awarded the third prize. Written by student Sunandini Banerjee, it dealt with a cast of characters and an author of whodunits, who has to face the criticism of the characters he has invented, till the final twist at the end, when the characters overpower the author. Ferhana Jila got the special Philips award for her innovative music.

Elina Da' Silva of La Martiniere for Girls stole the show with her ebullience and excellent acting and rightly received the best actress award. Her script of their play *On Alien Land* (which won her the best playwright award) was replete with intelligent allusions and humour. Elina played the mischievous Fallen Angel, fighting tyranny of all kinds. *On Alien Land* was adjudged the second best production.

*Games Fathers Play*, by St. James' School, was awarded the first prize. Written and directed by Kaushik Ganguly, the play focused on a group of young boys uniting to form a theatre group Renaissance , that suffered a temporary setback when their lead actor Anjan (Amit Srimal) was compelled to abandon them much against his will, when a new lifestyle was imposed upon him once his father won the elections and became a leader. Although Amit did not win a prize, his histrionic skill deserves special commendation. Rishi Gulati as one of the Black Cat duo got the second prize for acting and Debasish Chowdhury, as David, was adjudged the best actor. His acting was consistent, and quite mature. The simple set with a few carefully chosen props (a ladder, a few stools, a wooden frame, and an eye-catching chart that had 'Renaissance' written on it) was effective.

On the whole most of the plays suffered from' taking on too many issues at once. In an attempt, perhaps, to be topical, the scripts ended up being a mere mish-mash of half-digested ideas. A more focused approach would have made the plays more hardhitting. In his summing up, Samik Bandyopadhyay, who has been associated with this competition since its inception, and who traditionally gives the final, summing up speech, pointed out that instead

of cluttering their scripts with several issues and points which remained undeveloped, some of them quite disconnected, a tighter focus of theme would have had more impact. Moreover, it was noticeable that the plays written by students were more effective than those written by the teachers-they were simpler, and more convincing, both in language and in treatment. Another trend one noticed was a deliberate introduction of the vernacular in a forced manner, sometimes to inject a note of comedy, at others to emphasize the local nature of the situation. Since these attempts at 'authenticity' were done with an air of artificiality, they failed to achieve their purpose, becoming mere caricatures.

This annual competition is making a valuable contribution by encouraging original playwriting, and by providing an opportunity for school students to get hands-on experience in performing in a public theatre for a large audience. One can only wish that similar competitions develop to encourage theatre in other Indian languages.

**Neena Guha**

## **Notebook**

**Rangaprabhat**, the children's theatre group which functions in the village of Venjaramoodu of Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala, turns twentyfive this year. Founded by Kochu Narayan Pillai (the idea came from the departed playwright G. Shankara Pillai), Rangaprabhat aims at the development of children's character through acting. A Rangaprabhat session begins with an invocation and hymn sung in praise of Bharatmuni. The children are divided into three main groups Kadambam, Kalari and Kalam, depending on their age and the nature of the lessons they are taking. Theatre workshops and theatre festivals are organized every year under the auspices of Rangaprabhat where theatre persons are invited to give lessons to the participants. The organization has had thirty-two productions so far, with themes taken mainly from Malayalam folk literature, and has won several laurels including the prestigious Kerala Children's Welfare Council awards.

**Anandam Cultural Centre Workshop:** Anandam Cultural Centre of Cooch Behar, a significant cultural organization of the region, organized a week-long theatre workshop (19-26 June '94) in collaboration with W.C.S.R.C. (Calcutta), exclusively for children and the youth. The workshop was conducted by the NSD teacher Siddhartha Chakraborty, in assistance with Partha Bandyopadhyay, an NSD graduate. Exercises and theatre games formed the major focus areas. The children particularly enjoyed the mime sessions, where they were asked to impersonate someone drawing water from a well or pushing a very heavy object. Basic knowledge about set designing, lights, music, voice/speech, improvisation etc. was imparted to the young enthusiasts.

**Ayana '94:** Ayana, organized by the Madras Craft Foundation as part of its cultural outreach programme, is in its third year. It is a programme by children for children, in which 1000 children participate. This year's theme was inspired by Sangam poetry which divides the land into five ecological areas: mountains, dry pastoral land, riverine areas, coastal land and desert. The show combined theatrical elements with dance, music and choreography, using masks and puppets to heighten the drama.

**Sadhya Kabirache Kay Karayache:** Sadhya Kabirache Kay Karayache ('What Is to Be Done with Kabir Today?'), a play by Kiran Nagarkar, alludes to Kabir as the embodiment of Hindu Muslim unity. The play is set in a slum where different communities live in harmony until the camaraderie is destroyed by communal tension. The play moves through riots, rampage and bloodshed but terminates with the hope that better sense will prevail and with an expression of faith in humanity. The production is directed by Gadkari Achyut Deshingkar and presented by the Marathi theatre group Abhivyakti.

**Raj Darpan:** Raj Darpan is a play built around the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876. The production is an eye opener for those who are unaware of the struggle which theatre practitioners had to wage against the oppressive Act promulgated by the British to thwart the voices of dissent that found expression in the performing arts. The play incorporates scenes from the Marathi, Bengali, Telugu and English plays of that era that were considered subversive, and also includes a court scene that brings to the fore the national arguments against the Dramatic Performances Act. Raj Darpan is not just the enactment of scenes that document the history of theatre censorship but also a powerful statement on the contemporary cultural scenario in the country. This NSD presentation was directed by Anamika Haksar, with research and directorial assistance from Rati Bartholomew. The script was written by writer-activist Sumanta Banerjee, translated into Hindi by J. N. Kaushal. The sets and costumes were by Abhilasha Pillai and Sanjay Jha respectively.

**IPTA Golden Jubilee Celebration:** The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) completed fiftytwo years of a journey begun in May 1942. To commemorate the occasion, celebrations were held spanning two years, the hallmark being a function held at Nehru Centre, Bombay. The highlight of the show was the release of a stamp by Arjun Singh, Union Minister of Human Resource Development. The stamp album was also handed over to three senior

**IPTA members:** Ali Sardar Jaffri, Dina Pathak and Mulk Raj Anand, who had also been present during the first conference (at Marwadi High School) that the IPTA held half a century ago. The names associated with IPTA virtually reads like a who's who of the art and culture scene of our country- Ritwik Ghatak, Sahir Ludhianvi, Shaukat Azmi, Kaifi Azmi, Habib Tanvir, Salil Chaudhuri, Hemant Mukherjee, Ravi Shankar, Sombhu Mitra, Tripti Mitra, Utpal Dutt, Sanjeev Kumar, Prithvi Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, M.S.Sathyu, A.K.Hangal,

Satyadev Dubey, K.A.Abbas, Balraj Sahrti, Ismat Chughtai. And the list continues. However the fifty years have not been all smooth sailing for the association, largely due to financial constraints.

The programme commenced with the song, 'Hum Deewane, Hum Parwane' set to music by Kuldip Singh. Shabhana Azmi and Farookh Sheikh then took the audience on a trip down memory lane-vivid reminiscence incorporating slides, music, and enactment of scenes from plays like *Africa jawan Pareshan*, *Bhagat Singh*, *Shatranj Ke Mohre*, and *Zulva*.

In his speech A.K.Hangal lamented the fact that the government did not have a coherent national cultural policy. However, Arjun Singh did promise that the Department of Culture 'would soon hold a dialogue to solve [IPTA's] problems' and also endeavour to 'find out ways of spreading IPTA's field of activity.' Vilasrao Deshmukh (Minister for Cultural Affairs, Government of Maharashtra) made a commitment to provide the IPTA with a piece of land-IPTA does not have even a small office to its name, in spite of its fifty-year history.

**STQ** presented *Song of Lowino*, a workshop production-a dramatic enactment in Tamil of a poem by the late Ugandan poet Okot P'Bitek. The performance took place in Calcutta in September in an informal setting. This production is the outcome of the interaction between two theatre groups, Koothu-p-pattari of Madras and Khell of Goa. Consisting of a onewoman performance by S.S.Kalairani, who speaks the poem in Tamil (the translation is done by M.Natesh), the poem is a powerful lament by a wife for her husband Okol, who, she mourns, has been thoroughly colonized by white ways, to the extent that he has grown alienated from his own culture and people. Hartman de Souza directs the piece.

**Utkal Yuva Sanskrutik Sangh** announces its second All India Multi-lingual Drama Competition and Cultural Festival in October, to be held at Cuttack, Orissa. Events will include a multi-lingual play competition, theatre seminar, theatre elocution competition, theatre artistes procession, theatre quiz and national theatre conference.

## Letters

THIS IS, IN SOME DETAIL, what we [Jana Sanskriti] have felt after reading 'The Theatre Games of Augusto Boal : A Workshop Diary' by Jhuma Basak in the April 1994 issue of the Seagull Theatre Quarterly. We have been extremely disappointed by the whole attitude with which STQ has handled the whole thing. Therefore we decided to put down exactly what we were dissatisfied with-even if it meant going into a lot of detail.

The writer very obviously entered the workshop with a very negative approach. She seems to have had a predetermined opinion about the entire workshop and in fact could have written the whole piece without actually attending the workshop. We realize, after a thorough reading of the piece, that the writer is hopelessly unqualified for an assignment of this kind. That she has very little theoretical knowledge about the theatre and the fact that she has no experience with the theatre in rural India comes through very clearly in her writing. But she has failed to realize her limitations, instead she has gone ahead, made expert comments and passed judgement indiscriminately.

We are also disappointed by the way in which the editor of STQ has allowed the writer to get away with her incompetence. We allowed the entire STQ team to be present at the Jana Sanskriti centre throughout Augusto Boal's visit in good faith. The STQ interview team was present every day and often Basak was also with them during the interview sessions. This fact raises an important question in our minds-why did Basak not ask Boal about the issues she has expressed doubts about in her article ? We had hoped that they would take an objective stand and do justice to the entire presentation in their quarterly. By doing justice we do not mean saying positive things about Boal and his work or Jana Sanskriti, by doing justice we mean constructive criticism based on a solid knowledge of the subject. Not only they have left the assignment in the hands of someone totally incompetent, they have even refrained from exercising the editor's discretion. One expects them to do this at least for the sake of the standard and reputation of their journal, if not for the sake of professional ethics.

The incredible shallowness on the part of the writer comes through in the way in which she has contradicted herself in her article. To point these out, we have quoted some parts of her article:

(a) 'This particular aspect, of analysis, I find very positive about Boal's method of conducting a workshop. He emphasizes analysing the game, understanding its process of working. This helps one to understand oneself. . .' (p30)

'But of course our interest was meant to lie more in analysing the images and understanding the form of game than worrying about what X was going through (p35) ... Rainbow of Desire worked as a group analysis but at the cost of what? What about that individual whose pain was being 'shown', 'sold' in a very different way?'

'X was made to get up and "volunteer" for the part because she happened to be the "fortunate" one who was going through tremendous oppression by her husband ... it must be remembered that X was enacting something that had happened to her. She was still facing the aftermath of that crisis. It was her reality. While the man was playing the role of her husband ... Were we not ... being oppressors of X at that very moment ?' (p35)

'A voluntary member can come and enact an incident of oppression which does not have to be a real-life incident. Though this helped us go through the whole game much more easily ... I personally find that this can actually change Boal's entire emphasis of using drama in a therapeutic manner. If one is to play a role then it becomes a "performance". The whole objective changes. If I am not mistaken in understanding Boal, then he is not interested in "performance" or a "production" but rather in finding a way of using theatre for the individual's inner development.'(p40)

The writer has asked questions about the limitations of Theatre of the Oppressed in dealing with different types of oppression. The total confusion in the manner of asking the question clearly shows that she herself is not very clear about what she is saying but feels that she must pose a question in this context. While we do not think much of this kind of forced fault finding, we feel it is our duty to answer the question and hope that it will set the writer's mind at rest. We quote the questions first: 'My question is, what if the oppression comes from a certain "system" like an office or some kind of institution? The system makes my oppression general, shared by a few, therefore public in a sense, but at the same time it is personal because it affects my personal development-in that case is it the system which is oppressing me or the representatives? Then what or who shall be dealt with as being oppressive, or is it both? How does Theatre of the Oppressed work this out? Both the oppressor and the oppressed are victimized by the entire power structure itself-then is it that easy to demarcate some individuals as oppressors and some as oppressed? Does not the



"system" become a much greater source of oppression? And it is also very personal because it does affect the development of every individual. In that case the "public" is the "personal". Then one can question whether Theatre of the Oppressed is limited to a certain pattern of oppression?'(p30)

'We were all part of that oppressive situation and equally responsible. If we are both oppressed and oppressor ourselves, then what gives us the right to talk of oppression when we are being part of that very chain of oppression? Are not our biases likely to rule us, as in this situation? What when there is intellectual oppression, what when love itself might also become an oppression? Then can we come back to an earlier question-does Theatre of the Oppressed deal with only a certain pattern of oppression?'

Our answer: Speaking on the subject of 'system' and oppression within a system, let us take the example of a feudal system. The feudal system is oppressive. If some peasants overthrow a feudal lord, the oppression will not end. The peasants have imbibed some values of the feudal lord, these values remain with them and therefore the oppression will also remain. At one level, the system has to be attacked, at another level an oppressive individual has to be dealt with. There is oppression at many levels (including intellectual, economic, sexual, oppression in love etc.), and each level must be dealt with separately. Attacking oppression at one level does not necessarily mean that oppression at another level will get automatically resolved. To take the above-mentioned example, attacking the oppressive feudal system does not make an individual peasant-turned-landlord less oppressive.

In many cases a single individual is both oppressed and oppressor. For example, a factory worker is oppressed by a factory owner. The same worker, when he comes home, oppresses his wife. A single person is dichotomized. Boal's technique helps an individual to identify the dichotomy, to understand each side, to humanize the oppressive side and reduce the contradiction between the two as far as possible.

Many individuals (or the personal) come together to form a collective (or the public). Individuals with common aspirations or interests come together to form a collective. In today's society there are so many differences-artificial and real that it is difficult for individuals to come together. An individual will stay within a collective of his own free will only if the collective meets his needs. We have to look at each individual, find out what is common amongst individuals, find out what the differences among the individuals are. If we

try to succeed in resolving the differences amongst the individuals, then the collective will also succeed. There is thus a direct link between the 'public' and the 'personal'. The public is not personal-the public is many personals put together.

The volunteer X in Rainbow of Desire exercise has received a lot of sympathy from the writer. 'I was standing there, observing her with the rest of the group, saw her cry, felt my own tears fill my throat'(p35). It was extremely human of the writer to feel this way. But before demolishing Boal, and perhaps Jana Sanskriti, for exploiting X, 'selling' her experience, oppressing her, treating her as a guinea pig and before taking up an indignantly righteous stand, perhaps the writer should pause for a moment. Pause for a moment to think how X came to be participating in a workshop conducted by Augusto Boal, how she became a leading member of a Jana Sanskriti district team, how she manages to express her desires in front of so many alien, unknown people. Today X has overcome the guilt feeling, the inferiority complex that had become a part of her life because she had been deserted by her husband. Today X can hold her head high and assert her right to an independent existence. X has arrived here-after going through a long process. Jana Sanskriti, without any hesitation, claims to have played an important role in this process. The writer, in her hurry to sympathize with X, has failed to take notice of the fact. We in Jana Sanskriti, after so many years of experience, have learnt to be very, very wary of urban educated persons concerned about the oppression in our society. They are given to these transient ways of sympathy, on the basis of which they do not think twice before condemning everyone concerned. We would like to ask Jhuma Basak if the tears that she felt that day prompted her to ever go back and find out how X was managing considering Jana Sanskriti had allowed her open access to any of its members. Perhaps it would set Basak's conscience at rest if we informed her that we have, with our limited resources, decided to support some of our whole timers and X is one of them.

From her comments on the demonstration of forum theatre, it is quite obvious that the writer has failed to understand the nature of the demonstration. It was clearly stated that this is a demonstration of how forum theatre started. It was not a demonstration of how forum theatre can be practised in rural situations. Therefore that one single demonstration definitely does not equip the writer to write off forum theatre as a 'simplistic way of dealing with problem.'

The writer says she spoke to other activists present about the possibility of forum theatre working in village situations. One is curious to know whether any of the activists present had any experience of theatre action in a village over a long stretch of time, or whether they have ever experimented with forum theatre. Jana Sanskriti has been working in the rural districts of Bengal for six years now, has tried out forum theatre and claims that it is possible in our village situation. Jana Sanskriti offers an open invitation to the writer, the theatre activists and anyone else who may be interested, to visit the villages where they are working, to stay there and see how forum theatre works. Before making such sweeping statements about the possibility of forum theatre, the writer should have done some homework. In this context, we would like to mention a comment by one of the participants, Samir Kundu, according to whom 'Forum theatre might be a negative force leading to separation and groupism among the audience. This can be labelled as "democratic" but would fail to propagate the concept of "unity"' (p 43). This shows that this participant does not believe that people should be given any scope to express their opinions or to participate in any problem solving situation, that the solution or 'unity' must come from above. His definition of democracy, almost bordering on authoritarianism, goes completely against the philosophy of Theatre of the Oppressed. And the fact that Basak has based her opinion about the possibilities of practising forum theatre in rural areas on a comment of this nature again shows how shallow her understanding is.

The writer does mention that a 'total group feeling, integral to the workshop situation, was not there.' (p42). Perhaps that is the reason why the only other participant extensively quoted is Samir Kundu (Annwiksha). We have our doubts as to how far he is qualified to make expert comments on theatre practised in rural areas. The writer has criticized Boal for not spending time informally with the participants: 'yet with so many theatre activists from all over India under one roof, why did he not once try to know about their work, the problems they face while working in remote villages . . .' (p41). One wonders how much the writer herself tried to do in this context. If she did interact with all the participants, it is not evident from her article-surely the participants more equipped to comment on theatre in rural areas were the ones belonging to rural areas.

While Jana Sanskriti admits the fact that a more careful selection of participants (perhaps with a preliminary session) and better time management could have made the

workshop more useful it certainly did not expect any petty hairsplitting from the writer (nor did it expect the editor to allow this). Perhaps the writer was not present in the first session of the workshop because Boal did speak to the participants about his sitting on a chair and wearing his shoes (both of which seem to be issues of great importance to the writer) and explain why he was doing so. Any participant of the workshop would testify to this. It is indeed unfortunate that the writer did not check up on these things before writing thus about such an eminent theatre personality.

We wish this rejoinder to be published in the next issue of the Seagull Theatre Quarterly. We respect The Seagull Foundation for the Arts for its democratic structure and are sure that this rejoinder will be taken in the right spirit.

**Sanjoy Ganguly, Jana Sanskriti, Badu.**

**P.S.** The second issue of the Seagull Theatre Quarterly was discussed at the Jana Sanskriti general meeting, as is the practice with any published matter about Jana Sanskriti. Kabita Bera, a member of Digambarpur Shakha, has written this letter to Jhuma Basak in reaction to her article on the workshop conducted by Boal. She happens to be the person referred to as X in Basak's article. An English translation is enclosed herein:

'In the month of Phalgun this year, there was a workshop at Badu. Many of us went for the workshop. Boal had come from outside India. I have heard, Jhumadi, that you have written about this workshop. You have written about my participation in the game Rainbow of Desire. You have got the impression that I was forced to participate in this game. Jhumadi, I want to tell you that this was not the first workshop of my life. I have participated in workshops before this, I have acted in plays put up in the villages, I have also taken part in forum theatre sessions. That day I participated in Rainbow of Desire of my own accord. I have been able to express the oppression in my life through it. You thought that this would make my oppression even more unbearable, but no, I knew all the other participants would not belittle my life's story, I knew they will also understand what I have gone through. By expressing my experiences like this, I have found many friends who stand by my side, who realize what I have gone through, who try to minimize my sufferings. They try to lessen the sufferings of other women like me. Jhumadi, please .come to our village and see how we are working. You may call it a game, but I think it is a problem of my life.

*(We have reproduced the unabridged text of Jana Sanskriti's letters so that our readers can follow the debate in full.*

*It would be dangerously easy to get drawn into an unpleasant wrangle with Jana Sanskriti, particularly since we are in a position to counter every accusation. However, we feel that it would be an unproductive exercise. Moreover, we realize that because of STQ's close engagement with much that is troubled and problematic in the area of theatre practice, we must be prepared for such angry responses. There are, however, a few points we would like to make*

*We disagree that Ms Jhuma Basak was unqualified for the assignment. In our opinion, she was particularly suited to this assignment, not only because of her training, but especially because of her open-minded attitude and the deep respect she bore for Boal from reading about his work with the Theatre of the Oppressed, an attitude all of us at STQ share. It is unfair to accuse her of preconceived notions just because she is recording honest impressions and doubts.*

*We feel that Jana Sanskriti's anger and bitterness springs from a basic misunderstanding of the documentation purpose. STQ's objective, an editorial decision, was to document the workshop as only one aspect of Boal in India. The very nature of a diary is to record immediate impressions and responses as they occur. It should not be confused with a critical essay or an analytical article. Care was taken to present other voices and points of view in the issue, including Boal's own, those of other workshop participants, and that of Jana Sanskriti, who were especially invited to talk about their work in activist theatre and their experience of using Boal's techniques in the Indian situation. If STQ had been ill-intentioned towards them, we would not have gone out of our way to present their point of view. A multiplicity of angles and viewpoints should not be misread as a totalizing or definitive stance by some omnipotent editor. Nor do we feel that criticizing some aspects of one workshop in any way devalues the very serious and committed work Jana Sanskriti has been doing for the past six years. Perhaps if Jana Sanskriti reads the coverage more carefully they will realize that STQ has passed no judgements, merely raised some questions.*  
*Editor]*

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR the second issue of STQ. It is simply superb. Boal's theatre and workshop are very effective. The great thing about his theatre is that it does away with the alienation between the spectator and the actor. It is humanism and democracy translated into theatre. I'm looking forward to the next issue, which I hope will be equally exciting and enlightening.

**Manchi Sarat Babu, Anantapur**

I HAVE RECEIVED THE SECOND issue and have gone through it. I had, of course, read the first issue. The standard of excellence you had all obviously set for the magazine is evident in both the issues. All theatre lovers, I am sure, are pleased with the result. I convey my praise and congratulations to all of you.

**Kironmoy Raha, Calcutta**

THE ISSUE WAS REALLY VERY good. I hope that you will be able to get equally good material and critical writers from other regions also. The weightage you have given to debate/discussion/critical evaluation and reporting of theatre events was also to my liking and I hope that you will continue in the same manner. The only suggestion that I would like to make is that one may include an occasional article which is seriously theoretical. Wish you all the best. This kind of a serious periodical is very welcome.

**Makarand Sathe, Pune**

I AM GENUINELY EXCITED THAT Seagull has undertaken such a venture, since I am convinced that the need of the moment is a theatre journal of this kind in India.

I find the design and layout of the first number particularly appealing. The illustrations are not only delightfully effective and relevant but occasionally surprisingly revealing-as in the case of the fascinating sketches and set designs by Khaled Chowdhury. As an academic, the article I appreciated most is the 'The Metamorphoses of Rudali' where the distinctions between the different genre versions have been so usefully analysed with a large number of insights indicating two types of feminist texts. Of the pieces based on interviews, while the one by Khaled seems quite exemplary, I feel that 'Rudali: The Making of a Production' required a greater degree of selectivity and further pruning in order to make it more compact

and concise. The inclusion of Utpal Dutt's poems was a very welcome feature, drawing attention to a not-so-familiar facet of that multidimensional theatre personality, reminding me of Brecht. The review of *Kamlabai is* both competent and sophisticated, if somewhat academically selfconscious.

A few suggestions and observations. Some numbers of the journal could include original plays, performance scripts, translations of plays-those which may not be publishable in book form. I would expect a serious theatre journal to carry a few articles on the theoretical aspects of the theatre, some critical indepth analysis and evaluation of the plays and productions, some scholarly, comparative, even crosscultural studies. On the whole a judicious mixture of information, documentation, reportage and high level criticism should be aimed at with an openminded and futuristic perspective. Admittedly the task is quite formidable.

**Ruby Chatterji, Delhi**

I HAVE JUST READ YOUR second issue of STQ during a short visit to India, and want to congratulate you on a wonderful achievement. It was a delight to read, and, as a frequent worker with theatre groups in India, it helps me enormously to hear views aired about issues which are central to the development of theatre here.

From the letters I see that STQ is already becoming a forum for further exchange on views of these issues.

Having known B. V. Karanth for 12 years I was most impressed with Samik Bandyopadhyay's interview which revealed a great deal about the inner workings of this seminal theatre maker.

The article which started to analyse the form and function of theatre workshops also gave me new insight into their role in different Indian situations. I hope this very important theme will be further considered in future issues. I look forward to reading more.

Good luck and thank you.

**John Martin**

I AM HAPPY THAT SAMIK Bandyopadhyay declares war on 'Bintus' and other professional interpreters of Indian theatre ('Theatrescapes', STQ April 1994). I do feel, however, that his own mapping of contemporary Indian theatre-into Professional-Commercial, Traditional, Folk, Street and Protest, Subsidized /Sponsored, the Little Little Theatre and the Big Little Theatre-is a little too one-dimensional where it needed to be many-sided, and rigid where it may have been a stretch more elastic.

Contemporary Indian theatrical practice is a complex phenomenon and, frankly, ought to throw up more by way of questions and the processes of searching and less of predictable, straightforward, boom-shak-a-lak 'categories'.

I am most uncomfortable with the term 'categories': it seems to me that one needs a term less fixed and immobile. For the conveniences of this argument, however, rather than out of any real conviction, I will set aside the 'categories' of 'Professional-Commercial, Traditional and Folk'. I will respond to the other four mapped out:

Where your columnist's gaze-because authentic theatrical practice is always evolving could have fallen on contemporary Indian theatre initiatives trying to come to grips with themselves, with their various methodologies, and as a result, possibly even their tribulations, their dreams and aspirations, he appears to have chosen the solace of an ideological bunker.

The 'categories' of Street and Protest, Subsidized /Sponsored, Little Little and Big Little Theatres may actually lead to several other, not grey, but partially black areas. I seem to suspect, however, a Bengali-Maharashtrian theatre mindset at work, one that appears to preclude any genuine questioning. He makes no mention, for instance-or, worse, leaves no space in his 'categories' for the specificities of an emergent Dalit theatre in Maharashtra and Kamataka; no mention (or space) for the entire south of India-into which of his 'categories' will he place the work of Ankanam or Root in Thrissur, Koothup-Pattarai in Madras, Natakayogam in Thiruvananthapuram?

Your columnist appears to have been most unfair with the 'Little Little Theatre', unthinking with the 'Subsidized /Sponsored' variety, facile with his generalizations on 'Street and Protest' and a trifle too smug with the so-called 'Big Little Theatre'. Bansi Kaul, a well-known theatreperson, uses the term 'Evening Theatre' to describe an event that possibly takes place in every part of the countryside people coming together after work to



rehearse and then perform a play. The Extension Services of the NSD did much to hone the theatrical practice of these 'evening groups'-although it is a pity they only chose to do so in the north of the country. Often, like parallel lines that bend to touch each other, interweave, flow, the subsidized government repertories and the 'evening groups' nurtured each other-not, as your columnist seems to suggest, without thought, casually, mechanically, but with a certain symbiosis at work.

I find it hard to believe that your columnist could actually say that the small groups were 'primarily self-indulgent and self-referential, and not particularly concerned with a continuing, developing, interacting dialogue with a community, or, if you would like, audience. A lot of the Little Little Theatre overlaps with the sponsored/ subsidized theatre, and tends to become quite irrelevant in a longer view.'

Isn't it strange that in the same issue of STQ, your columnist also minutely probes the inner workings of B.V. Karanth, a person who exemplifies the hollowness of 'categories'?

It appears, on the face of it, that the 'category' of Street and Protest theatre was utilized more to appreciate (and 'nationalize') Badal Sircar and less to actually map out the politics of theatre. Moreover, the analysis, armed to the teeth, as it were, with ideological weaponry, appears to appropriate the notion of protest. This is odd, if not downright selfrighteous. No probing of the many initiatives evolving new, radically different actor-training methodologies, no hint of those questioning performative structures, those discovering the twilight zone between the personal and the political-just a tepid recourse to 'ideology'.

Does your columnist actually wish away a vast number of theatre practitioners merely because they don't perform 'free', with 'ideological purity' (whatever the hell that means!), or to the more impoverished members of an industrial suburban community? Or at the gates of a factory? Without appearing to be rude, I wonder if I may point your columnist to the refreshingly candid (and no less political) views of Augusto Boal-again, strangely enough, in the same issue.

Also, I am afraid your columnist has hit below the belt with his comments on a theatre group 'nineteen kilometres' from Calcutta. It is fallacious (if not downright ridiculous) to say, as your columnist does, that he will 'not sit in judgement' and then, without a by-your-leave,

eloquently pronounce damning judgement! This is, if you will forgive me saying so, a little irresponsible even for gatekeepers of the ideological establishment.

One can, I suppose-like your columnist-be ga-ga about the 'Big Little Theatre'. Even to the extent of saying 'The best Indian plays and the best directorial ventures have been discovered, nurtured and presented by these groups.' The more disenchanted, I suspect, would prefer to hear of the 'bigfish-eat-small-fish' component more often at work. Those like me in Goa, those in Assam and Tripura, would rather hear about the holier-than-thou colonialization tendencies of either the Marathi or Bengali Big Theatre persons.

Yes, to be fair, Samik Bandyopadhyay does conclude with a plea to come to terms with the plurality of contemporary Indian theatre. The problem, as with most of our interpreters of theatre 'Bintu' or otherwise-is that he doesn't really believe in its existence.

**Hartman de Souza, Tivim, Goa.**

WOULD IT BE POSSIBLE TO include in your issues English translations of significant plays written in any of the regional languages? This would give us a sort of access, at least to the textual aspect of what is being done in the theatre of our 'nation state'.

At a recent seminar (August 22, 1994) held in Calcutta, organized by People's Little Theatre in memory of the late Utpal Dutt, one session was devoted to the concept of 'regional' theatre. We question the concept of 'national' theatre because of its homogenizing tendency, undermining the complex cultural heterogeneity of India, specially in terms of our multilinguality. But should one accept the tendency of homogenizing within the sphere of one regional language? There are many forms of Bengali. So if we take language as the nucleus of our "regionality" (what else can we take in verbal theatre?) then should we also respect the concept of 'subregional' theatres, instead of complacently accepting standard Calcutta Bengali as the only language of Bengali theatre?

**Dhruba Gupta, Calcutta.**

## ***Just Published***

**G P DESHPANDE**

### **PAST ONE O'CLOCK**

It is Nana's seventy-fifth birthday and the family has gathered to celebrate. Nana is a Marxist who has grown old serving a cause. His children in their vocations, life choices and attitudes reflect the range of social reality in today's India. There is the artist, his daughter, married to the poet, from whom she is estranged. There is the bureaucrat, committed to his job and his government. There is the resolutely apolitical citizen, who aspires to no burning ideals and merely wishes to maintain family peace; and there is the ardent revolutionary, the youngest son, who is working to overthrow the system and has just been released from jail. In the course of the evening, undercurrents and tensions surface as it becomes obvious that conflicting beliefs and values have driven a wedge between members of the family. There can be no happy resolution to this reality, and the play offers none. Finally, Nana is left alone, as he was in the beginning, mourning the breakdown of dialogue.

In this play, like in his earlier *A Man in Dark Times*, G. P. Deshpande, the veteran Marathi playwright and Marxist intellectual, explores political concerns in the tradition of the theatre of ideas.