

# Nostalgia Street by Manohar Khushalani

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Manohar Khushalani has been involved with various aspects of theatre for more than 20 years. He is a theatre critic and practicing actor and director. He is also the honorary President of North Indian Film Association.

Having been associated with more theatre from the last decade are memories of Jaya Manoj Manohar. One group, Workshop Theatre, which was formed after a workshop with Balraj Sanyal was rehearsing for William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play about communal relations in a village in China. Balraj had come to meet the late Indira Gandhi. He got through her retention and gave more suggestions. Our group consisted people, most of whom have engaged in education—Indira Mahata, Indira Mahata, Raju Rai, Anil Mahata. Only Anandika Mahata and I stuck on to theatre. But the two years that we did when theatre was full of activity. Our most memorable production was Balraj Sanyal's *Shakti*, for which Balraj himself came specially to Delhi to do a workshop with us. Other people were in our shows, and so did we, occasionally, while performing. Although I was also performing in the production with Mr. Sanyal, my only role in a recent play. When we came to meet with Mr. Sanyal, most of Workshop Theatre members agreed to work in his next production of *Julius and Caesar* in Lucknow and Delhi.

One day one of our beliefs came when Balraj took my performance of *Shakti* at the Delhi International Theatre Festival in Calcutta in 1978. There we were greeted by the biggest floods in the last 100 years of the city. While our circus plans dealt with the performing and depicted scenes of society we were confronted with a dilemma. The floods caused a pool of such things were around the atmosphere that we stayed in. The water remained for three days and we were kept up on the first floor in the room that the previous day they were being all around the atmosphere with their shimmering sounds. Hearing before their eyes. We were helpless to offer them refuge in our own rooms. What kind of scene shows were we doing? We then debated on whether doing plays was enough and whether it should not be supplemented with social work. The answer came much later when Mrs. Raju, Anandika Raju and myself saw a chance at the NIC and decided to form Theatre Union. Later we recruited fellow Forum members like Vinod Dutt, Raju Lal and Raju Prakash, along with some artists like Urvashi Kulkarni and Balraj Sanyal.

Our first play was prepared in association with several women's groups in one called *Shakti Karmans*. The first film was before a better reception, whose recommendation would be considered before it became an act. We examined the film, discussed the factors as well as the strengths. We created a play which would show the other dimension about the household while educating the common women about their rights as per







the bill. During this play we had an opportunity to interact with social workers who worked in the very communities that we performed in. Besides to say the girls in more satisfaction. In fact later Theatre Union prepared a play on malnutrition drug companies who were dumping in the Third World, all these drugs which were banned in the developed world.

The play was prepared in association with Voluntary Health Agencies, ones of India and got a lot of information from Mrs. Sanyal. This information was used to create an interactive play in a social sense. This play was a useful supplement for medical workers. We also did not let the marketing proceed because at the end of the show. However, by now the debate on whether a more theatre group should also do social work had reached itself. It had now formed an act that we were performing and we should spread to others by conducting.

Somebody people had created doubts amongst us about the success of social theatre. Television was cited as a medium with a greater reach. One still remembers a talk that Balraj Sanyal gave at Jawaharbal Nehru University City Auditorium which was so graphic. At that time the people around TV. There was only one Indian channel channel and no private channels. Sanyal seemed that the TV will create a social sense. While performing acts are a community effort and bring many people under one roof, the television will divide people by entering their own homes. He cited the example of people who visit homes of widows, orphans. When the host speaks in his game by using his act as he speaks. But his speech was raised more as he himself had his own child in the television. Of course, Balraj saw a different complexity in this and left the television had been created to divide people, to break up communities and to destroy the inclusive spirit. He inspired me to try what he said that I went up to the stage to congratulate him.

But the real work about the TV having a greater reach has been reached in my mind by liberty. The answer lies in flexibility. A human being looking into your eyes and delivering a message has greater impact than an electronic media supported by social systems and money power. When we did the play against child burning, just 200 shows were enough to create media and government attention on the issue. Later the case was seen everywhere in newspapers, on television and in films. Mrs. Sanyal's award winning film on child burning, and our play's members' involvement with her own rituals. Theatre Union performed exclusively to Sanyal with Jaya Manoj Manohar in many instances. There we got to see each other's plays—appreciate and critique each other's work. While Balraj appreciated the choreography and autonomy of Theatre Union production, he felt that the message was not direct. We felt that Jaya Manoj Manohar was hard being but sometimes (not straight) there was a greater effect. Though I must say Jaya Manoj Manohar has been changing over the years and the last play that I saw looked like a Theatre Union play to me. Since we had members who also acted on the production stage our productions were bound to be different. However this I am talking about the rights. Now Jaya Manoj also performed on stage—in a show and looking while Theatre Union has seen one liberation.

I still remember how it was considered a taboo for a show about workers to perform on stage. The first time I remember Balraj showing an interest about problems of government workers was when the Bombay police act was introduced in Delhi and many workers went up to him.

again is, that theater is a medium specially required against it, "this was the first step towards government ownership of theater". I was particularly agitated about it since I felt that the police was ill-equipped to enforce the success of theater. Little did I realize at that time, that in effect, given the usual ineffectiveness of the official machinery, giving a police license, however though it may be, was not another formula to be considered. Also, every license, which had the maximum potential of a political license was outside the purview of a performance license since these performances were not in its jurisdiction. The Madison episode was actually followed by M.K. Ramesh who had a hand in both the issues.

Great theater does not mean just mixing up any ideas, introducing a touch of symbolism, and conveying an idea like over-criticism and other ideas. It may take months to write a well-thought-out script. Working Theater took three months to translate Rishi Rishi's *Almas* and six months to *Leiber* realize the play! An actor may write from a story, it may be with training, or a playwright's hand, or a middle-class downy problem. It is theater for a general audience, working artists are required and a script is evolved keeping in mind the target audience. Few people know that Rishi Rishi's *Jahan* has been performed in Pakistan as well. Great theater has attracted a few people because of the tremendous content in the whole exercise. Since they are often exposed, the police which never likes reformers in its own territories, often tries to stop the performances. Sometimes even the audience gets pulled up because of the personal use in one relationship that the audience uses to establish. When the police tried to stop a performance of *Jahan* for *Prayer* at *Commonwealth Place's* central park, more than a decade ago, the audience intervened on behalf of the performers and handed over the police. Similarly, during the Emergency, when the police stopped a street performance in *Green Park, Calcutta*, the common people responded by turning up in thousands to watch the same performance the next day. The communists, however, were all about some time. Only a few who are gradually converted stick to the movement. "If you see a street theater, forget that you will be happy, forget that you will be famous, forget that you will be rich," says Rishi Rishi. However, today theater's subliminal message has changed of that. People have become more conscious of a performer's right to perform. But great theater which appeared to be an idea theater is based on the up-again and fight the message of social work. It is with these the *Janan's* contemporary scene or *Theater Group's* similarly successful *Take Toll* group. □

