Curtain Call / Keval Arora

For most of us, the curtain call is a ritual that marks the close of a performance. As a ritual it cuts both ways. It’s gratifying when we’ve enjoyed the show and wish to demonstrate our appreciation. Or, it’s a tiresome chore when we haven’t and are keen to duck our heads and run. Understandably, this spectacle of playmakers lined up to receive applause is often regarded as simply an appendage to the main event, a polite form of ‘goodbye’ and nothing more. But, I sometimes wonder if we have anything else, amongst the wide variety of conventions that govern the theatre, to match the curtain call in the way it underlines, with economy and assurance, the ‘live’ aspect of theatrical performance.

For, until that moment when performers shed their fictional selves and return to the stage in their own persons, the actor-spectator relation in the theatre is essentially no different from that found in other kinds of performance, such as the television or the cinema. That is to say, it is a relation where performers and audiences are hermetically sealed off from each other, each inhabiting qualitatively different zones of being. Sure, when compared to the actor in cinema/television who is a fixed and unvarying aggregate of pre-recorded decisions, the theatre actor is available as a ‘live’, volatile presence that forever holds out the promise of doing things differently in each performance. However, the degree to which the spectator is separated from the ‘character’ised actor in both these cases is remarkably similar. It is only with the curtain call in the theatre that the boundaries which segregate the two are comprehensively

dissolved.

When actors slip out of their ‘characters’ and step up to receive the audience’s applause, when spectators gesture their appreciation directly to the actors, the world of make-believe finally ceases to be. The actor re-enters his own (and the audience’s) world, so to speak, and a different, informal, and more ‘real’ compact between the two parties in the performance equation comes into being. On the occasions when performers and spectators have interacted after the show, either through Q&A sessions or in cocktail-fuelled get-togethers, such cohabitation has taken on a life of its own. But, even when there is no post-performance transaction, the curtain call remains an acknowledgement, albeit brief and perfunctory, of the basic contract that underlies all theatre performance and consumption. As a gathering together of distinct strands of being, the curtain call affirms in its own way the communitarian nature of the theatre – a place where people come together to enact and to witness. It is therefore possible to celebrate the humble curtain call as a distinctive marker of theatrical performance.

Am I reading too much into what is today an automatic practice rather than a deliberated expression of pleasure and praise? Perhaps. But, the fact that we often feel guilty when we do not play our part as spectators (and therefore compensate by applauding the actors’ effort even when there is little of merit in their achievement) is proof that we attach value to such gestures, even when they are at their most mechanical.

Incidentally, we ought not to confuse such transitions, as formalised by the curtain call, with similar moments in the work of Bertolt Brecht. In Brecht’s theatre, we do find transitions from a fictive world peopled by actors to the everyday world of the audience, from the magic of ‘another place, another time’ to the reality of the ‘here and now’, but here these categories are sequential and mutually exclusive.

Brecht's theatre challenges the conventions that separate actor from character, and embeds the performer's political responsibility within such equivalence. However, he works it out mainly as an interruptive device – that is, as a rupture which is most effective when it subverts the common assumption that the best works of art ought to possess an organic unity. The sequential and exclusionary quality of transition that is intrinsic to the curtain call is thus completely alien to the Brechtian project both in method and intent.

It is interesting to note that in Ebrahim Alkazi's time at the National School of Drama, the NSD Repertory did not take curtain calls. Not (though one can never be sure of the reasons for this policy) in spite of its celebratory nature, but because of it. For, the one danger with curtain calls is that these can be hijacked, by performer and spectator alike, into re-structuring relations in terms that are quite inimical to the collaborative nature of theatre production. An instance: curtain calls, especially in our English-language theatre, are often arranged as a series of separate entrances, with actors in the leading roles being the last to complete the line-up while minions in the minor parts are thrust in right at the beginning. The purpose may well be to lead the audience into a swelling applause which culminates in a final burst of appreciation for the lead actors. But talent isn't always marked by such an easy lineage – the lead may have been boringly flat, whereas a small cameo may have provided the production's abiding memory. Also, when audiences are encouraged to applaud each actor's contribution separately, and when the play's cast is stratified in a hierarchy of minor and major actors, theatre groups' claims to being ensembles of equal contributors stand embarrassingly exposed.

It is now the accepted thing, after the clapping is over and done with, for actors to call the backstage and production crew on stage, to gesture towards the lights and sound booths, and then to invite the director onto the stage. Which most

directors do after a decent pause, as if caught short by an unexpected request. Apart from the peculiar arrangement of this credits sequence, I've always found it interesting that directors preface their arrival on stage by an 'invitation' extended by the cast, especially as it is usually the director who orchestrates the curtain call in the first place! What is this – humility, coyness, or self-celebration?

Role-playing of course isn't confined only to the performers. You can find it even in something as uni-dimensional as applause. The recent tendency of Delhi's English-language theatre audiences to offer standing ovations – or, as a friend pointed out the other day, "an ovation while standing" – to even mediocre productions, in apparent deference to the pedigree of the performing group, is evidence of yet another kind of hijacking of the curtain call, and that by the spectators this time!

One spin-off of austerity such as the NSD's is that it reminds actors to look at the work at hand as something to be done for its own sake rather than for the plaudits that could come their way. I must however confess that, despite my belief that this is a good thing (especially in the environs of a training school), I too have felt cheated and resentful, when I have thoroughly enjoyed a production, at being denied an opportunity to demonstrate my appreciation. Perhaps the mainstream theatre too needs a dose of such self-denial, for it could do with less self-congratulatory preening and greater attention to quality.

The curtain call, like most artistic conventions, can be employed to great effect. Either through silence and a no-show (as in Rabih Mroue's *Looking for a Missing Employee*, performed at NSD's Theatre Utsav 2006); or through a technique of ironic quotation (as in the TAG production of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* several decades ago).

The curtain-call Peter Brook devised for his well-known

production of *Marat/Sade* closed with the chorus of asylum inmates breaking into a slow handclap in mimicry of the audience's end-of-show applause. Each time this happened during the TAG production at the Kamani (Barry John had picked up the idea from Brook's production, lock, stock and barrel), the audience's applause had petered out, as if to demonstrate that audiences are capable of lapping up even the most savage spectacles of non-conformism only so long as they aren't made to feel they're the victims. By thus undermining the sanctity of this 'last of meeting places' and challenging the comforting superiority that spectators usually feel in their capacity as observers, Brook seemed to have made his audiences experience a truth which was till then for them only an aspect of the fiction.

It's of course another matter that Brook's decision to make the actors, who played the inmates of the lunatic asylum, stay within their characters as they mimicked and parodied the audience's behaviour during the curtain call dilutes its subversive thrust considerably. With spectators finding it easy to deflect whatever discomfort they may have initially felt (these guys are mad after all!), Brook's innovation shows up as surprisingly inelastic, an innovation that agitates the surface but leaves the essential structure placidly intact.

Mroue's *Looking for a Missing Employee* was a solo narration of a man trying to piece together – through print and TV news clippings, interviews, and of course logical deduction – the story of a real bureaucrat who suddenly went missing in Beirut. The performance's highlight lay in the narration being delivered entirely through live and recorded videocam feeds projected simultaneously on three video screens. The stage, consisting of just a table and chair, remained unused throughout the performance. What then could be a more fitting conclusion to this brilliant performance of a tale of a missing man, by an actor missing from the stage, than a no-show by the performer-director during the curtain call? The

audience at the Abhimanch that January night had hung on, applauding no one in particular and testing Mroue's determination to stay away from the stage. But, as the minutes went by and the audience milled about confusedly, it struck me that we were experiencing an unscripted, impromptu performance that could be titled 'Looking for a Missing Performer'. As in the case of *Marat/Sade*, this production too extended its thematic dynamics into a space that properly does not belong to the fiction, but for precisely that reason can be used to extend meanings in a different and perhaps more resonant register.

Presence Perfect / Keval Arora

1. Barry john as Iago in 'Othello' 2. Naseeruddin Shah in 'Prophet'

Mulling over oddities that years of familiarity have lulled us into accepting as normal, one curious habit that comes to mind is the way we respond – or, to be specific, don't respond – to

the physical presence of the actor in our estimation of plays and performances. It is strange that this dimension of playmaking rarely crops up in reviews and analyses. Even if it does, the enormous contribution that the actor's physical presence makes to his role or to the play's meaning is often insufficiently acknowledged. We tend instead to focus on such qualities as are amenable to correction, training and control. (This is understandable. If skill is to be celebrated, surely skills for which we can claim authorship will come higher in our estimation than will those over which we have little control.)

Yet, our immediate experience and our lasting memories of the performances we see are mediated by and interwoven with the actor's physical presence – the actor in the flesh, so to speak. Think of Barry John's fleshy middle (he even punned on the Shakespearean word "pate" with the Hindi word for stomach) in Roysten Abel's *Othello: A Play in Black and White*, and you realise a leaner actor just couldn't have intimated that whiff of seedy corruption which Barry's Iago did. Or, remember the classic reviewer's comment about how a pimply actor in the role of Hamlet completely alters our understanding of the line that something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Jokes apart, this last comment is suspect because it suggests the argument that the core meaning of plays needs to be freed from the tactless exigencies of their performance. To my mind, this is not simply a defensive position but also an odd one, for it leads directly to a contradiction in the practice of theatre criticism.

Theatre scores over cinema through the simple fact of corporeal presence. Its qualities of face-to-face contact and physical proximity give theatre a visceral power that the technologically disembodied cinematic image can never possess. (Does that explain the pressure on the cinema to push towards greater and greater realism?) Naseeruddin Shah often speaks of the high that actors experience when performing in front of a

live audience. Audiences experience an equal if not a greater high when watching Naseeruddin Shah live on stage. This compact of physical immediacy is the true strength of the theatre. Deny it, and you dilute the medium.

How then can we speak of the physical presence of the actor as a threat to the production of meaning? Worse, how can we not speak of it at all? Theatre criticism and play reviews in Delhi tend to tread a safe path by ignoring physical and stage presence altogether. Reviewers go into all kinds of intricate details, but commenting on the physical attributes of the performers, even when it is germane to the play-text, is apparently a "no-no", and akin to an invasion of privacy. But, can one avoid commenting on the physical, in a performance art that is of the flesh? The actor's medium is his body. No analysis of a product can ever be complete if the critic fights shy of talking about its tools.

Take Yatrik's *Harvest*. Ginni, an American who contracts the body of a poverty-stricken Third World "donor", is described in the stage directions by playwright Manjula Padmanabhan as "the blonde and white-skinned epitome of an American-style youth goddess. Her voice is sweet and sexy". The actress cast in the role, Monsoon Bissel, did a competent job of emoting her role. But even with only a close-up to go by (we see only her face on television monitors), it was apparent to all that the director had taken liberties with the playwright's vision of a cellophane-packaged desirability.

Surprisingly, not a peep about this was heard from the critics who otherwise tore up the production. Probably because any comment on the actress's appearance would inevitably imply, no matter however politely hedged, that she isn't the type to fuel a fantasy ride. Such comments, though valid as a response to the production, could appear as a personal and therefore an unwarranted attack on an individual. The fear of appearing tasteless makes cowards of us all.

Considerations of taste and tact prevent issues from being tackled head-on, even when facts stare you in the face and remaining silent becomes a sign of professional ineptitude. No one, to the best of my knowledge, has yet pointed out that much of the popularity of the English-language 'Musical' theatre rests upon its flagrant display of nubile bodies dancing in gay abandon. That this is an unstated premise of the musical was unwittingly revealed by Delhi Music Theatre when it advertised its *Fiddler on the Roof*by plastering Bengali Market with posters which read in effect that 5 broad-minded girls were on the look-out for men!

Such blurring of the critical gaze becomes evident in those cases where comments on physical presence would in fact be appropriate. For instance, in the English language comedy that came to be known as the Sex Comedy in the shorthand of the print media. In a script where the male roles are envisaged as dogs on a leash, the female leash, sorry lead, usually went to an actress in whom acting talent was a bonus but the requirement of "oomph" was non-negotiable. The reviews, however, treated these productions like any other. When talking about body parts would have been far more attuned to the aesthetics of the show(ing), their focus on acting skills seemed perversely cruel to the audience, the director and the 'act'ress. Especially as (like in *Harvest*) the gap between intention and fact was often embarrassingly acute.

What is ironical about such silence is the fact that everybody on the other side of the curtain trades extensively on the physical in shaping textual meaning and audience response. After all, playwrights, directors and performers don't go through casting auditions with their eyes closed. But, when it comes to concluding the pact from this side of the curtain, the protocols of viewing shift from the aesthetic to the social. Decency and propriety suddenly stake a claim as aesthetic criteria. Comments on physical presence are derided as "nasty" reviewing, and banished to gossip boudoirs. What

better proof does one need of Delhi's theatre community being a large club (of course there's much heartburn amongst its members, but which club is free of squabbling?) than the fact that even its reviewers observe the social protocols?

I can understand analyses being circumspect if the actor's physical attributes are, as seen from a mainstream perspective, socially disadvantaged. Saying that an actor has too thin a voice to play the swaggering bully is a 'no-no'. But laudatory descriptions bring other problems. For example, there's no denying the fizz in Rahul Bose's stage presence. But, in *Seascapes with Sharks and Dancer*, this strength militated against his role as a reclusive writer. Bose thus seemed to play a man who was quiet by choice rather than situation, cool rather than conservative, and sexy rather than scared stiff. Much praise was heaped on Bose as if stage presence is a talent in its own right, regardless of the way it mangles the script.

The real complications in critical response occur when a production does not fit neatly into the black and white categories of convention. When normative perceptions of the physical are inverted, when what is conventionally regarded as 'inferior' is celebrated and the 'superior' is destabilised, the degree of difficulty gets too much for polite reviewers to handle.

Maya Rao, for instance, wouldn't win anybody's vote at a beauty contest (I say this with all the presumption of a friend), and it is this absence of the 'media'ted sense of the feminine that imparts a hypnotic quality to her stage presence. Whether it is Maya cupping her belly and speaking of the distinctive female muscles of the underbelly and the thigh in the course of her stage performance of Bertolt Brecht's short story *The Job*, or Ritu Talwar similarly challenging cultural codes of the feminine by physically emphasising the masculine aspect of her presence (in Anuradha Kapur's production of the same Brecht short story), the principle is

the same. Both refuse to conform to picture-frame ideals of the feminine as endlessly replicated by the media and internalised by a whole generation of anorexic feel-gooders, (This feminine icon is seen best in our younger film heroines. They are such clones – physically, mentally: who can tell – of each other that like quality assembly line products, it is difficult to tell them apart.) Maya and Ritu's refusal to conform marks the primary source of these actresses' challenging, transgressive power.

How can any discussion of such performances be complete if the critical discourse makes no accommodation for the body as a site of meaning? Obviously, the body is not just fair but necessary game in the business of reviewing. If sociality and its norms are allowed to thus infect the critical will, reviews may end up displaying the very symptoms that such productions seek to challenge.

Not that this solves the problem, for there is another side to the tale. Steven Berkoff explains why actors will forever be sensitive to criticism that accommodates discussions of the body: "The actor's working material is his own body. With painters, sculptors, etc, your work is separate and distinct from you. Criticism is therefore far more personally wounding to the actor that it is for other kinds of artists." In fact, in talking so carelessly of the actor's physical presence, I too may have presumed upon the insurance of friendship. It's another matter that Maya may cancel the insurance. Or, she may insist as a well-known director had declared at a workshop, that there can never ever be friendship between performer and critic.

Which simply begs the question: Why in that case should protocols of the public and the personal be so religiously observed? The actor's medium is the body. The critic must factor that into the analysis. Amen.

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FIRST CITY (July 1999)

The Sense of an Audience / Keval Arora

Most discussions – *and* demonstrations, now that the next edition of the Bharangam is upon us – of what ails contemporary theatre rarely take into account the role of the audience. In an environment where the audience's contribution to the making of meaning is barely acknowledged, it is unlikely that its responsibility for the state of the theatre will ever be admitted. Audiences do of course get noticed, but only in the context of dwindling attendance at plays, or strategies to entice spectators back to the theatre. Such 'concern' for the audience masks a worryingly patronising attitude. It sees spectators as little more than passive receptors of other people's intention, dry vessels waiting open-mouthed for the filling. One may as well not invoke the audience for all the insight that such invocations offer.

At first glance, it seems logical to exclude the audience from analyses of the theatre, for the audience does not concoct the brew being poured down its gullet. In fact, it often resists being bottle-fed and sometimes even resents the after-taste. So, on the face of it, no audience can be held *directly* responsible for the spectacle that theatre often makes of itself.

However, theatregoers cannot thereby wash their hands of the matter. The sense of an audience – an expectation of whom the play is being performed for – creeps into the decisions that

performers make, both before and during the enactment, to such an extent that it shapes the final outcome as directly as if the audience had sat in on the creative process. This happens all the time, regardless of how accurate or credible the group's idea of its target audience may be. There is, therefore, a point beyond which audiences can no longer claim 'innocence'. Spectators cannot escape responsibility for what is performed for them. Or, put more accurately, for what they accept as passable in performance. Complicity is structured into the relation between performers and spectators, even if the relation is a silent one.

Perhaps, the fact of complicity stems from such silence. No complicity is as demeaning as that in silent acquiescence. This is especially glaring in the theatre where performers and spectators inhabit the same physical space, and where exchange is immediate, tangible and therefore possible. It can be argued that it is naïve to expect a dialogue between patrons and performers when there is so little traffic between theatre groups themselves. Some groups attempt to reach out and 'talk' to its spectators beyond the footlights, but most are content or resigned to interpret their audience through ticket-sales and applause.

Nevertheless, I'd imagine that the responsibility for creating a stimulating theatre rests equally – if not finally – on those who dole out good money to see these performances. The failure of a play is often the failure of its audience, especially when spectators are unwilling, whether through politeness or indifference, to call a spade a spade. When was the last time a Delhi audience collectively protested against the quality of a production? In silently ingesting whatever is on offer – or, in protesting quietly and privately – spectators do a great disservice to those who have stopped going to the theatre, as also to those who stay away from it.

The argument that audiences are powerless to effect change is not as reasonable as it initially appears. Accomplices do not

have power handed to them on a platter. What sullen accomplices do have is unlimited opportunity to seize power for change. ‘Ticket-sales’ and ‘applause’, for instance, are two vocabularies through which spectators can register their protest. Theatre groups understand these vocabularies, for no group can afford to alienate that miniscule minority which still visits the theatre. Can you imagine any group churning out tripe, production after production, if nobody sat through it all? (As the old Sixties slogan ran: ‘Suppose they gave a war and nobody came¼’.) It is all very well for us high-minded types to have criticised Aamir Raza Husain and his theatre group Stagedoor for having inundated Delhi with a particular variety of prurient bedroom comedy a decade ago. The fact is that the Kamani auditorium had then run to full houses, and night after night, you couldn’t get tickets half an hour before the show. Husain was merely giving the audience what it wanted; it’s the spectators who turned out to be the idiots and the fools.

But Stagedoor is a soft target, one about which it is impossible to disagree. A less obvious arena of disaffection is the NSD Repertory. With most of its productions bearing the *chhap* of vintage years, several of the Repertory’s productions today seem like museum pieces that are not noticeably different from the memories of past productions enshrined in its theatre museum. Yet, the Repertory manages an audience, an army of the faithful that sees nothing wrong about being caught in a time warp. So, the NSD Repertory blithely continues on its narcissistic path of self-imitation.

In both these cases, the audience’s uncritical acceptance of the plays pre-empts self-evaluation. Surely the idea that theatre ought to reflect the aspirations of the people is not intended as a re-formulation within aesthetics of the law of supply and demand. But that is precisely how so much of so little worth gets by: after all, runs the argument, how can something be bad if the audience doesn’t think it so? That old

argument of supply & demand turns a contingent moment into a principle, and confers virtue upon the opportunist. Whenever there is a demand, there will always be somebody willing to supply the need. As to which is the cause and which the effect, you can argue yourself blue in the face and remain none the wiser. One way out of the trap, as some do-gooders have tried, is to unilaterally decide what is beneficial for the audience, irrespective of what the audience thinks is good for itself, and sanguinely offer just that for the edification and pleasuring of a benighted public. And, in the process, move from undermining the theatre from below to corroding it from the top.

Why should a group of seemingly normal people lapse into appalling taste when assembled? What is the combustion that makes otherwise alert individuals metamorphose into an uncritical, slumbering mass that is content to be led by the nose? A common explanation is that Delhi's theatre-going fraternity is a large club; and it is difficult to be honest, even with oneself, within these spiralling circles of friendship.

But social niceties alone cannot explain an audience's generosity of spirit when confronted by a poverty of imagination and taste. Of the other reasons, the feel-good factor is surely relevant. In the peculiar arrangements of our mainstream theatre, it is remarkable how a public that is lukewarm about the prospect of taking plays seriously, actually finds its anxieties evaporating into a careless geniality once it walks through the auditorium doors. The reasons for such geniality may vary. It could be a media-fuelled expectation of a good time, the grapevine recommendation of a place where "it's happening", or simply a forced attendance with obligatory smiles in tow. The consequence, however, is always the same: a frame of mind conditioned by expectation or habit into evading any kind of alert and critical response.

Watching a play is not an autonomous activity. Peter Brook defines an act of theatre as, “A man walks across [an] empty space while someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged”. But his definition leaves out the vital dimension of community that characterises the theatrical experience. (Isn’t that why watching a play all alone in an auditorium leaves you feeling so terribly lonely?) The act of collective viewing has its own rhythm, which is distinct from, say, the rhythm of watching the TV by oneself. We’ve all sensed, as part of an audience, how our responses have been imperceptibly but steadily shaped by the responses of others in the auditorium. This is exhilarating when you are one with everybody else, but it can become enormously repressive should you find yourself out of sync with the rest of the crowd.

In non-consensual situations, collective viewing constricts free response by jostling and eroding individual stances of resistance to the performance. The invidious push ‘n’ shove between people of different persuasions and profiles reduces an audience’s collective potential for reading a performance against the grain. This is why the spectator, as a member of that amorphous collective, has less interpretative control over the text than the single reader engaged in a private act of reading. Sanity is restored only when the individual spectator withdraws into looking upon his neighbours as another kind of text.

Surprisingly, spectators are often unwilling to exercise even a minimal control: witness our readiness to vocalise our appreciation of plays but not our dissent. Laughing and applauding are okay, but booing is out. By a similar compact, spectators happily exchange evaluations of the performance’s technical features – acting, costumes, etc – but are far more circumspect in reacting to the meaning of the play.

Nowhere do we find a better instance of such degradation of individual spectator response than in the mass hysteria

evident now when an entire nation of TV-gazers has been turned into one huge audience of the grand theatre called Mumbai 26/11. Such is the pressure of the people's response (as selectively promoted through privately-owned media channels) that the bloody, messy business of killing and revenge has been cleansed and glorified through the quavering rhetoric of patriotism and sacrifice into a superior civilisational activity. (Interestingly, the hawks talk of killing, while the doves talk of sacrifice. The distinction between the two remains blurred because for both, war as a routine response is here to stay.) There are a few sane voices that refuse to be swept up in this general feeling. But where are these to be heard in the clamour of the warmongers who glibly espouse counter-violence as a simple solution to complex problems?

Be it the larger theatre or the small play, failings in public discourse can usually be traced back to the failure of audiences – and, to our irresponsible habit of lapping up whatever is served. So much then for our audiences' ability to make sense.

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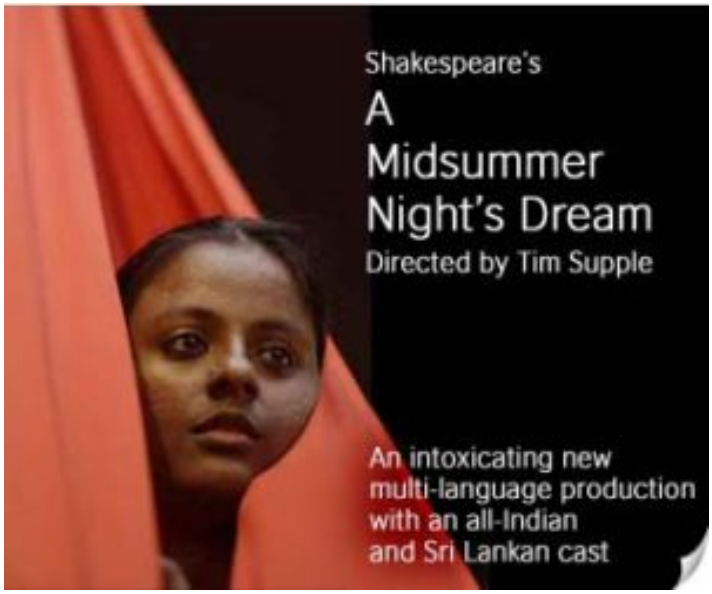
Dabbling In Babble / Keval Arora



Tim Supple's Production of Shakespeare's *Mid Summer Nights Dream* is currently touring India. Keval Arora takes on Supple for his comments (made earlier) on Indian Theatre and *multicultural collaboration.*

What is it about multilingualism that draws so many theatre practitioners to dabble in it, much like moths being drawn to a flame? And, what is it about multilingualism that makes many of them end up getting burnt by the encounter? Why is it that Tim Supple, who brought to India a perfectly competent production of *The Comedy of Errors* with the Royal Shakespeare Company some years ago, has ended up this time offering a version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that makes all the right noises but falls woefully short of making sense?

Well, actually, not all these noises were politically correct. . Supple's comments on intercultural collaboration (carried in the brochure that accompanied the premiere production in 2006) may have been a shade too driven by the enthusiasm of a 'been-there-seen-that' cultural traveller, but did he really think he would win friends and influence people by his description of Indian theatre as "less tangible, less modern, less structured than ours and often fashioned with basic design and rough execution"? However, win friends he

did, as can be gauged from Ananda Lal's comments (in that same brochure) about Supple's work. Says Lal, "Knowing the debates [revolving around issues of 'neo-colonial exploitation' in 'inter-cultural theatre'], observing him direct at close range and having asked members of the team, I can vouch for the fact that he is sensitive to the issue and its dangers. As corroborated by the performers…no appropriation occurred." (Lal also goes on to claim that Supple as "a foreign director has achieved national integration for Indian theatre before any Indian could", but I think we could let that pass as an instance of our Indian habit of being hospitable to the point of embarrassing everybody around!) The first statement is by itself a great Certificate of Merit, though it is difficult to fathom the authority with which assurances such as "no appropriation occurred" can ever be offered. Besides, the prospect of a post-colonial watchdog snooping around for evidence of appropriation during rehearsals can hardly be the kind of thing that leads to intercultural bonhomie let alone transparency!

Cordial and collaborative dealings in work processes don't guarantee that the art thus produced will be free of appropriative relations. Plays aren't exactly processed on a shop-floor where one presumes hygienic procedures will result in non-contaminated products. Nor are 'appropriations' tangible actions that can be detected in the making, like embezzlements or fraud. You can monitor rehearsals all you want on CCTV, interview as many employees (read 'actors, technicians, etc') as you like, and still discover outcomes that are suspect in their negotiation of social and cultural identity. In other words, 'appropriations' don't have to be rooted in malicious intent: often, the best-intentioned at heart still end up stepping into shit.

Take, for instance, Supple's decision to go multilingual when asked by the British Council to create a production in India and Sri Lanka. He writes, "To restrict ourselves to performers

who worked in English would be to miss out on a wealth of different ways of making theatre…. It would also be a lie." How can one not approve of such sensitivity towards our situation in the subcontinent where – and we can speak more freely than Supple feels he can – the best way of making theatre is not to be found in our English language stage. So, his decision to grant performers the comfort of working in their own languages led inevitably to *Midsummer* being conceived as a multilingual production. Though Lal is right in noting that "in the West, multilingual theatre has become fairly common, particularly in international projects", it is important to recognise that Supple's decision to go multilingual has been prompted less by the project's 'international' status than by his wish to make it accessible to the broadest swathe of performers. Not to mention his need to give the Shakespearean text its due: as he says, "whatever else a Shakespeare production might do, it should seek to reflect the time and place in which it is made with vivid honesty."

Laudable as this may sound, how true is it of Supple's own work with *Midsummer*? Does its multilingualism, which lies at the heart of this intercultural project, reflect anything at all, let alone with vivid honesty? *Midsummer* has several languages – English, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil and Sinhalese – operate indiscriminately in performance, cropping up and dropping out without evident purpose or necessity. With some characters speaking primarily in one language and others switching between languages for no apparent cause; with no patterns being discernible in the connections drawn between situation, character and the language/s used, Supple's multilingualism add up to little more than a noble-hearted linguistic egalitarianism.

Egalitarian motivations of this sort can't take you far, especially if none of these languages is textured as a living, cohabited entity. The idea that languages are grounded in

socio-cultural spaces and are imbricated in personal identity, that they shape memories of shared pasts and imagined futures, that they are as much bones of contention as means of contestations – none of these, on the evidence of the performance, seems part of Supple's plan. His production sails through the melange of tongues without once indicating that the bewildering mix of words and accents amount to anything more than a log of semantic equivalences. As a result, *Midsummer's* characters are reduced to merely speakers of many tongues, and its text flattened to opaque displays of 'otherness', which lack even the resonance and difficulty that negotiating the 'other' brings in its wake.

Surely, a multilingual theatre has to foreground language as vital to its meaning, else why should any theatre strive to move outside the confines of its single, original language? An advantage with monolingual theatre is that when all characters speak the same tongue, it is possible, as writer Manjula Padmanabhan has averred in relation to her play *Harvest*, for the language to be divested of social and geographical referents and to that extent become 'invisible'. (Writers then turn to vocabulary and intonation to bring in the desired social textures.) It is when two languages are made to coexist in the same text that questions arise as to why a character speaks in one and not the other language; questions that need to be answered even more urgently when the same character is seen to shift from one language to another.

Thus, multilingual productions pose issues of naturalness and probability in a deeper vein, and in the process demonstrate their potential to handle richer representations. But for that to happen, their discrete languages need to be tagged for difference and located in a socio-cultural hierarchy, in the same manner as these operate off-stage. If, as in *Midsummer*, the various languages on show are offered in a non-problematised, unified terrain, then I'm afraid this ends up as an aestheticised unity of the most banal kind.

Moreover, there seems to be some confusion here. Sure, Indian theatre is multilingual, as Supple claims – but only to the extent that India, by virtue of being a multilingual nation, has theatres in many languages. Texts, however, continue to be written and played mainly in a single language (including regional variations and dialects does not a multilingual theatre make!). Few theatre pieces shoulder on their back a hold-all of many languages for the simple reason that audiences aren't multilingual – at any rate, not in the broad range that *Midsummer* imagines. How does a multilingual theatre work then for audiences when its text is segmented into distinct clumps of speech which are alternatingly inaccessible to spectators (as they surely also were to the other actors on stage)? It's ironical that Supple's inclusivist gesture towards the individual actor ends up as an exclusionary experience for his spectators.

Not that the production is scrupulously caring about its actors either. For a project that kicked off with a view to enabling the non-English speaking performer, it is strange to see almost every actor in *Midsummer* speak in English at some point, regardless of that actor's comfort with the language. I have no clue as to why this happened or what it is meant to achieve. All I do know is that the thick, regional intonation of English speech in such cases showed up speakers in a poor light, and left one silently willing the actor to retreat into the comfort zone of his native tongue!

As for the claim that multilingual theatre is the theatre of the future, let me point out two small cheat codes embedded in the zone of the multilingual. One, most multilingual theatre tends to remain closeted with the classics. In other words, with such plays where spectators' familiarity with the text functions like an insurance policy because it neutralises the risk of incomprehensibility that is inevitable when languages are used in a manner that makes them only selectively comprehensible to audiences. Two, most multilingual theatres

tend to favour designs that have strong visual components and a physicalised performance style as staple features of its performance grammar, as if this is one way of working around the fact that large portions of the text may remain unintelligible to audiences. Compensations of this kind clearly signal that multilingualism of the kind favoured in international projects today is primarily a gesture towards inclusiveness and tolerance. And, like most gestures, it is unfortunately little more than that.

An earlier version of this article was first published in FIRST CITY (May 2006)

The Competition Virus / Keval Arora

Who Wins ?

As one bleakly contemplates the prospect of yet another theatre season at the university getting under way with the

IIT Delhi festival in a couple of weeks, two comments heard some time ago come back to mind. One was at a press conference several years ago when Mahindra & Mahindra was the main sponsor of the Old World Theatre festival at the India Habitat Centre, and the other had cropped up at a seminar organised during the Sangeet Natak Akademi Golden Jubilee Theatre Festival.

At the seminar where several speakers had bemoaned the absence of a comprehensive theatre policy for young performers and audiences, a delegate had contested the pessimism by praising the vibrant theatre culture in Maharashtra, and had offered an annual, popular theatre competition as evidence of the same. Regardless of the kind of theatre that could be on offer here – which I'm willing to assume, for argument's sake, is of the best quality – I found it curious that this otherwise insightful theatre person had no qualms in advocating a competition as proof that the young have a vibrant theatre culture of their own. In a similar vein, a happily earnest representative of the Mahindra & Mahindra group had sought to impress journalists and participants alike about his company's commitment to supporting youth theatre by declaring that the collegiate section of the Old World Theatre festival would henceforth be run as a competition and the best college play would be awarded a very large sum of money. In other words, college teams congregating at a theatre festival would suddenly find themselves pitched into competing against one another!

Both comments were striking for their facile assumption that competitions are places where theatre can be expected to thrive. On the contrary: competitions are the most unlikely of places for a culture of performance to take root. Competitions stifle: locking us into exclusionary zones, they cajole even those charitably inclined into antagonistic mindsets. They spawn argument rather than analysis, sniping rather than sharing, sniggers rather than joy, and putting down rather

than pulling together. If we're all willing to sing happy hosannas of theatre as a collaborative activity, why then do we blithely accept the antipathy that competitions generate? Sure, there is something called 'healthy competition', that gloriously (oxy)moronic phrase in which an all-knowing apprehension lurks unsaid beneath the thin disguise of amiability. Sure, many of us have fond memories of the fun there is to be had at theatre competitions during cultural festivals. But, pray tell, are these memories of togetherness, of the sweat and joy of a common triumph, even remotely dependent on the besting of an opponent? Our abiding memories of pleasure come from the collaborative project called theatre, from the thrill of a job well done rather than from the petty triumph of being designated lord of the little heap of the day.

What's worse is that such faith in the salutary benefits of competition is often directed exclusively at young performers and audiences, and rarely extended to all theatre activity. Take, for instance, the Old World Theatre festival. One of the nicest things about this festival is the space it allots to college theatre. In fact, this annual festival which is now all of 6 years old is unique in being the only mainstream theatre festival in Delhithat showcases youth theatre alongside the regular kind. But, the manner in which the festival sponsor put pressure on the organisers to run the youth festival as a competition suggests that our general regard for youth theatre is more well-intentioned than well thought out. It's sad enough that most colleges, in the absence of alternatives, end up channelling their theatre activities into and through competitive face-offs. It's sadder still to see festival organisers gratuitously inject competitive tension into a festive occasion, and rob the event of that very quality that makes it precious to college theatre groups.

That the man from Mahindra & Mahindra was probably convinced

that he was only doing college kids a favour goes to show how habituated we are to seeing children as racehorses meant to do us proud. It's interesting that the sponsor didn't extend the same favour to the amateur/professional theatre groups from Mumbai and Delhi invited for the festival. Obviously, he didn't think what's good for young performers is a good idea for those who have already 'arrived'. Why? Probably because most of our theatre worthies (performers and critics alike) would justifiably balk at the prospect of being ranked alongside their fellow professionals. It's another matter that many of these worthies would, at the same time, have no compunction in blooding new talent in this very manner. Why is it that we look upon the young as a sub-species of ourselves, like us and not quite like us, people who have to be taught the value of our rules even as they are controlled and manipulated by different ones?

Why do we assume that the right way to motivate young people towards the theatre is through the blandishment of competitions, prizes and the 'glamour' of winning? A theatre programme organised by Katha in 2001 as a tribute to Vijay Tendulkar is a classic instance of how infectious this virus called 'competition' can be. Last-minute nervousness about whether enough colleges would respond to their invitation prompted Katha into adding a competition element – with prizes, judges and all – into their programme that had originally been conceived on the lines of 'Forum Theatre'! Katha's transformation of even the Forum Theatre – a model of critical interchange and collaborative responsibility – into a race for marks and prizes continues to be for me the final obscenity in our blind regard for the inspirational virtues of 'competition'.

Lest I be charged with whitewashing the young as angelic innocents smarting under the yoke of an inhospitable system, let me quickly declare that I have seen enough malice and viciousness amongst young performers to last me a lifetime.

But that is precisely my point, for it is in the nature of competitions to breed bloody-mindedness, not to mention mediocrity (more of that later). Yet, it seems that competitions are here to stay. They're here to stay as far as college organisations are concerned because they are the easiest option. A one-off theatre event is so much easier to manage than sustained year-round activity, plus you get more mileage out of it. They're here to stay as far as college drama societies are concerned because competitions provide the only opportunity for students to circulate their work without the massive expenditures they would have to incur were they to take their play out on their own. Many college auditoriums – where colleges do have one – are not geared to host theatre performances; many drama societies do not have the finance to attempt full-scale productions. The short play drama competition has therefore over the years become the definitive opportunity for college students to showcase their theatre skills.

How much of an 'incentive' is the money doled out as prizes in these competitions? It's difficult to speak with finality but I am aware that college drama enthusiasts rate inter-college competitions by the quality (attentiveness, knowledge, discipline) of host audiences, as also the quality of the competition. The money offered is surely a factor, but it's never an over-riding one. The primary motivation is always that of 'putting up a good show', of earning the respect of the peer group, and of receiving critical feedback from knowledgeable spectators. There is obviously a thrill in coming 'First', in being adjudged the 'Best', but it's obvious that such rankings are valuable only insofar as they accurately record the considerations cited mentioned above.

It is not true that these motivations can be addressed solely through a competition format. The fact that many of these competitions are mismanaged adds to the frustration of performers, but that is not my concern here. This piece is

about the idea of Competition – competitions as they come off that great mould (rather, mold) in the sky, perfect forms in a perfect world – rather than the hijacking of existing competitions through ego, nepotism and cupidity. A festival shorn of the competitive element does in fact offer a more suitable opportunity in these very areas. Take, for instance, the common rationale for a system of competitions: they are supposed to be good because they spur you on to greater heights by giving you an incentive to do better. Better than what, I ask. Better than your neighbour? That's no mountain to climb. How does it matter that I'm better than my neighbour if I'm still a shit? Better than what you did before, is the much greater challenge. Besting one's neighbour, fellow participant or pet enemy can often end up rewarding only mediocrity. Competitions can leave you content with being just that one rung above your neighbour. There is no learning curve here: only a complacent, gloating one. Surely, your best competitor is yourself, just as your fiercest critic is that voice within you that leaves you in a state of constant dissatisfaction.

As one who interacts closely with college students, I'm aware that their biggest grouse is the lack of critical feedback, the sense of a vacuum in which they grapple with questions concerning their theatre. In dealing with this issue, it is as important to enable their engagement with professionals in the field as between themselves. A festival that encourages all participants to sit down together to discuss their work, to bounce their questions and comments off an expert in the field, a festival that judges each production separately in terms of its own merit instead of lumping them together in some order of relative worth, is a festival worth emulating. Given the general gloom that permeates most discussions of the future of urban Indian theatre, it is important that we teach tomorrow's generation of theatre workers respect for others' work as well as their own, and encourage them to practice critical plain-speaking regardless of whose work it is. We've been running a theatre festival of this kind at Kirori Mal

college where I teach for some years now. Believe me, it works.

An earlier version of this article was first published in FIRST CITY (November 2003)

For Whom Nobels Toll / Keval Arora

Harold Pinter

Harold Pinter passed away on 24 December 2008. He was 78 and had been undergoing treatment for liver cancer. Like most Nobel prizes for Literature, the choice of the British playwright Harold Pinter has also had its share of detractors. There have been all kinds of murmurings against Pinter getting the big prize, ranging from doubts about his literary worth to snide remarks about extraneous considerations having played a role in the selection. The prize for the slyest reaction – assuming that it wasn't the ghastly mistake it was made out to

be – goes of course to the Sky Television newscaster who assumed that the breaking news about Pinter must have been to announce his demise (Pinter had taken a bad fall some days earlier) and therefore led off with an announcement that Pinter had died, before hesitating and then correcting herself to say that he had been awarded the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature instead.

Well, to be honest, I'm not sure the word 'instead' was actually used, but given the bad grace with which his award has been received in some quarters, I wouldn't be surprised if it was. It's not difficult to figure out why Pinter's selection has been met with churlishness. On the one hand, a body of mainstream taste has tended to deride Pinter's theatre as just so much fluff. Pinter's departures from staple theatrical modes have often been seen as a thinning out of the fundamentals of theatre, and even as evidence of his inability to get the basics right – much in the manner of the standard joke that Picasso's cubism springs from his lack of talent at drawing like everyone else. Pinter's technique of conjuring up dramatic tension and menace out of thin air, so to speak, has often provoked the incredulous suspicion that is bestowed upon all innovations and departures from the mainstream.

In recent years, Pinter's political activism has provoked another kind of ire. The ill-tempered outburst of John Simon, an old Pinter baiter, on learning of Pinter's Nobel prize, is interesting for the disarmingly guileless manner in which it reveals the prejudice that feeds its indignation. When Simon says, "I would have gladly accorded him the Nobel for Arrogance, the Nobel for Self-Promotion, or the Nobel for Hypocrisy – spewing venom at the United States while basking in our dollars – if such Nobels existed. But the Nobel for Literature? I think not", he exposes the burr that's actually prickling his behind.

Evidently, what has got Simon's goat is not Pinter's literary worthlessness, but the fact that the Nobel Prize for

Literature was awarded to someone who has indefatigably campaigned against American and British adventurism in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq, and has therefore shown himself to be of the 'enemy camp'. Evidently, Simon's tirade typifies the brand of opinion which wants artists to confine themselves to their work and desist from engaging in any form of activism, especially that which pits them against the weight of majoritarian opinion. (Perhaps this is why Arundhati Roy continues to raise the hackles of professional dabblers in that hallowed literary form, the Letters to the Editor.) And, evidently, Simon believes that he who pays pipers has the moral, nay spiritual, sanction to call the shots along with the tunes.

Nah, I shouldn't trash letters to editors. For, how else could I have gleaned that lovely nugget of information, contributed by a reader to the *Guardian*, concerning "the sullen, deafening silence from Downing Street about the new British Nobel Laureate, Harold Pinter?" The British government's wariness in celebrating the achievement of a countryman simply because of his vocal (and forgivably intemperate) criticism of state policy is just the kind of silence that would be familiar to Pinter, given the evocative treatment of silence in his plays. Of a piece with such silencing is an article lauding Pinter's Nobel achievement that has been carried in the latest issue of *Britain Today*, a news magazine produced by the British High Commission in India. Unsurprisingly, it makes absolutely no mention of Pinter's outspoken criticism of British foreign policy, a criticism that he has stuck to despite constant mockery and ridicule. How else can one read the title of that article, "Master of Silence", except as a desperate act of wish-fulfilment!

Is one over-emphasising Pinter's political stance as a factor in his getting the award and in the reactions to it? I don't think so – and not simply because others have commented that the Swedish Nobel committee may have been inclined to favour a

writer who has voiced his anti-war sentiments in no uncertain terms (Pinter has famously denounced Bush as a “mass murderer” and dismissed Blair as “that deluded idiot”), given the fact that the Swedish people too were extremely vocal in their anti-Iraq war protests. If this sounds like a slur on the literary credentials of Harold Pinter, it is interesting to see him make the same connection, albeit in a less whining tone: “Why they’ve given me this prize I don’t know. … But I suspect that they must have taken my political activities into consideration since my political engagement is very much part of my work. It’s interwoven into many of my plays.” That this is a man speaking with a modesty characteristic of the greatest writers is par for the course. But, it is unusual to find a writer who values his political conscience as much if not more than his writing, especially as even readers are often uncomfortable with such privileging.

It’s not as if Pinter needed the sympathy of political fraction. His credentials as a writer are justification enough for the Nobel award. He isn’t the writer of whom no one’s heard, as some previous Nobel awardees have been. Not when his plays are widely translated and performed in other languages; not when they pop up regularly in drama syllabi of Literature Departments; and certainly not when ‘Pinteresque’ is now staple lit-crit jargon for a patented blend of mundane but oblique dialogue, brooding silences and ineffable unease, all floating gingerly on a bed of sudden incongruity. (Anyway, what does the label “unheard-of author” mean? Surely, nothing more than the writer’s works having not been translated (yet) into English, and therefore being unfamiliar to the international publishing scene….)

Pinter is now 75 years old, with a long writing and performance career of considerable range and distinction. He has acted on stage, film, television and radio. He has written nearly thirty plays since 1957, and has innumerable drama sketches, poems and prose published in several volumes. He has

directed over 25 productions of his own and others' plays, adapted novels for the stage (notably Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*) and for film (for instance, Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Kafka's *The Trial*), adapted his plays for radio and television, written over 20 screenplays (*The Servant* and *The Go-Between*, both directed by Joseph Losey, being two delightful instances), and is now so immersed in speaking out on political matters that earlier this year he spoke of not writing any more plays in order to focus his energy on such issues.

Initially, things didn't look promising; Pinter didn't burst in on the scene in the manner of other path-breaking dramatists. The 1956 commercial and critical success of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, notwithstanding its combative indecorum, had suggested that British audiences were tiring of conventional fare, but Pinter's first plays in 1957-58 (*The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*) were received with bewilderment and hostility. (That this could happen despite the praise showered on the English premiere of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1955 is curious, given the several affinities that have subsequently been noted between Beckett's and Pinter's theatrical worlds.) It wasn't until 1960 that Pinter had his first success with *The Caretaker*. From then on, plays such as *The Homecoming* (1964), *Landscape* and *Silence* (1967 & 1968), *No Man's Land* (1974) and *Betrayal* (1978)established Pinter's reputation as a unique voice in contemporary theatre. To such an extent that *The Dumb Waiter*, along with Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, soon became an absolute must-do for budding thespians in college theatre societies.

Pinter's plays revolve typically around contestations for territory. Conflicts, sparked off by intrusions into a closed space by an outside force, are conducted with a strange mix of ferocity and dulled detachment. His characters and their dialogues are rarely explicated through conventional

excavations of motivation and memory, and often viciousness and pain lurk submerged beneath an evasive surface composed of guilt, uncertainty, everyday phrases and restless silences. The 'facts' on which these contestations are pegged are usually unreliable, for there is little that is either 'true or false' in Pinteresque space.

The unnamed tension of these plays are located in such a claustrophobic, inter-personal space that Pinter's writing has been criticised for turning its back upon the political, an impression that was confirmed when Martin Esslin included Pinter in his seminal study, *The Theatre of the Absurd.* However, the later plays – such as *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language*(1988) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) – are more distinctly political. But, here too authoritarian structures of repression and torture are evoked rather than articulated, and filter through spare exchanges between oppressor and victim, and the slippages of memory and knowledge. Perhaps, this phase of Pinter's writing is less a 'shift' from his early work than an extension of earlier preoccupations into a wider territory.

Though the Nobel citation – Pinter's plays "uncover the precipice under everyday prattle and *force entry into oppression's closed rooms*" (my italics) – celebrates the dramatist as much as it does the political activist, the writer himself draws sufficient distinction between his preoccupations as an artist and as a "political intelligence" to not let the achievements of one absolve him of the responsibility enjoined upon the other. He recently had this to say of the road he's travelled: "In 1958, I wrote, 'there are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal…. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.' I believe that these assertions . . . do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?"

In an interview some years ago, Pinter had rued the bane of British intellectual life being the mockery directed at artists who take a stand on political issues, and had warned, “Well, I don’t intend to simply go away and write my plays and be a good boy. I intend to remain an independent and political intelligence in my own right.” What lovelier spectacle can there be than this – of a dramatist, who goes on to win the Nobel Prize, acknowledging that conscientious citizenship is a more urgent cry than any artistic calling?

This article was published earlier in FIRST CITY (Dec 2006) after Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature

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A Matter of Applause / Keval Arora

Suspense! – Will They or Won’t They?

A critical difference between live and recorded performances

(those in cinema or television) can be seen in the way we respond to them. Namely, in the matter of applause. When it comes to other kinds of reaction – laughing, being moved, being irritated, etc – it seems to not matter whether the performer stands before us in the flesh or as a projected image or digitised signal. (Well, some of us may fight our tears and laughter in the public space of the cinema hall, while comfortably letting go within the privacy of television viewing. But, that difference is a only a matter of public rectitude; and, in any case, it makes no distinction between live and recorded performance.) Applause, on the other hand, is a category of response that is found almost exclusively within live performance.

When a show is over, you clap. Duration, intensity and manner (seated or standing ovation) provide some variation; with whistling being reserved for in-house audiences of friends and colleagues. The end result is pretty much always the same: as the house lights go up, you clap. The applause may well be tepid and mechanical; it may even be somewhat forced when performances are of indifferent quality, but you still clap. On the other hand, we rarely do that for films or television programmes – even when we have been deeply moved. The reason for this strange gap between our private response and our public gesture is obvious. Applauding a recorded performance is pointless because there's no one there to receive the appreciation, whereas live performances exert a kind of pressure on spectators when artistes return to the stage for a curtain call. Similarly, it's only at those screenings where someone connected with the film is present that applause is sometimes heard. Or, and this has been happening of late, when the film comes with a reputation for being 'controversial' or even 'alternative' – the applause that is then offered is usually a gesture of solidarity intended for others in the audience.

It's obvious then that applause, as compared to reactions such

as laughter and tears, is not so much a private response as it is a social gesture, a protocol of communication with those around you. At the risk of schematising the division, one can perhaps argue that laughter and tears express us as individuals or as a group, and to that extent possess the authenticity of a self-authored monologue; whereas, applause, to extend the metaphor, has more the contextual push and pull of dialogue. The fact that, barring the case of a few theatrical modes, performers and their fictions tend to carry on regardless of what spectators vocalise during the performance, indicates the unidirectional nature of spectator response. Addressed to no one in particular and in no expectation of any kind of counter-response, 'laughter and tears' (I'm sorry, but you'll have to lump the phrase as a shorthand for some time) can be seen as self-articulations of the purest kind. Applause, on the other hand, occurs outside rather than within the performance, when the actor has shed his character's clothes and comes before us as s/he is. That maybe a reason why, when viewing a performance with strangers, we hold back from what we perceive as 'excessive' private response and yet do not feel similarly vulnerable when we willingly demonstrate personal appreciation in the form of applause.

Applause is a socialised response in another sense as well. For, this is what you're obliged to do for these actors who have striven to give you, if one may invert that venerable line in *Waiting for Godot*, 'such a fine, fine time'. Isn't that why many of us clap automatically at the end of a performance, even when we haven't particularly enjoyed it? It's what is expected of you, it's your part of the bargain, and to not offer it at the end of a performance seems churlish. After all, 'putting up a play is no joke, 'we must applaud the effort and intention if not the achievement', 'it's the least we can do to encourage the few who keep the flag flying' and all that, are no doubt powerful arguments that only the culturally insensate can ignore. Such is the

momentum of this socialised action that it actually takes willed premeditation on one's part to refuse even token applause.

Though much of what I've been saying relates mainly to the applause that greets performances at their end, it is possible to find a similar geniality at work at other moments as well. Especially in this terrible habit of spectators clapping in the middle of a performance. Applauding during a performance is certainly not as distracting in the theatre as it is in the case of a Western classical music – remember the bemused horror that Delhi audiences had evoked during the Zubin Mehta concert several years ago? – but it is violative nevertheless. And dangerous too, for, before you know it, such interruptive appreciation becomes the norm, for performers and spectators alike. I've heard it said so often that Western classical music performances brook no interruption, even appreciative ones, that the implication these are acceptable within Hindustani and Carnatic music traditions has become something of a truism. However, it is equally intrusive in the latter case, especially when mid-performance applause comes to be regarded as more 'authentic' (it's 'spontaneous', you see) than its automatic, polite cousin that shows up at the end. For, then, performers are persuaded to play to the gallery, to chop their own creation into a series of effects, and to lose a sense of the whole.

One of the problems with applause – arguably the most insidious one, for this is seen equally in its 'authentic' and its 'polite' manifestations – relates to this problem of 'losing a sense of the whole'. What is it that we appreciate, and I'm now speaking of the theatre, when we offer applause to a performance? The text, the play, the analysis, the experience? Perhaps, sometimes; but only rarely so. More often than not, we offer applause to the performers rather than the performance, the skills on display and the effort that went into the making of the show. On the face of it, this appears

consistent with the socialised aspect of applause I've mentioned earlier, but it is more than that. For, it is equally true of the cinema. There too we respond primarily to the actors' performances, and only secondarily to the argument the film may be offering (unless, of course, we are students of the cinema – in which case, it is the camera-work that sets our hearts pounding!). This aspect of applause is violative in fundamental ways because it compromises the integrity and cohesion of the work itself. Applause of this kind signals the constant deflection through which performances are received, through which texts are constantly reduced into an assembly of enactments, and plays into their playing.

It is difficult for most plays to survive the corrosive influence of such appreciation. Especially such plays which are not celebratory or light in tone. If they do survive, it is because of the raw power of their texts, which not even the most enthusiastic appreciation can completely swamp. I remember one such play and one such audience when *Women Can't Wait*, a solo show by the US actress Sarah Jones, was staged in the open at the IHC amphitheatre. *Women Can't Wait* was originally commissioned by *Equality Now!* for performance before government delegates to the UN Global Conference on Women's Rights held in New York. It toured Indiacourtesy *Crea* and *Tarshi*, NGOs working in the area of women's rights.

The play comprised a series of narrations by different women, addressed to an imagined assembly of government officials, as a reminder to governments and the people manning them that "they have promises to keep". The women, eight in all (from India, Japan, Uruguay, France, USA, Jordan, Israel and N igeria) spoke of brutalising aspects of their lives, made doubly intolerable by the fact of their countries' laws providing no recourse. The fiction within which these monologues were couched was that of a rehearsal: the women were rehearsing their speeches for presentation before

delegates, and in so doing, the actress presented them directly to the audience. One of the women played the role of coach and moderator, offering tips on presentation ("Speak with conviction because your audience is generally unsympathetic"; and "Smile at them. The UN people like that"), monitoring vocabulary and tone ("No, dear, I don't think you can use that word"), and generally boosting the morale of the nervous speakers.

These monologues had interesting layers worked into them, but I won't speak of that now because this is not intended as a review of the play. In fact, what I'm driving at is that *Women Can't Wait* is perhaps not even a play. Certainly, to equate it with what goes on regularly in the name of evening entertainments does it grave injustice. *Women Can't Wait* is more than a play: it is an intervention in civil space, and therefore 'culture' in the best sense of the word.

Author-director-actress Sarah Jones played all the women, using nothing but phenomenal shifts in voice, accent and rhythm to mesmerise us with the sensation of there being actually eight different women on stage before us. Oh yes, much has been made of a scarf that she used in different ways to contribute some visual variety, but I'm sure that had there been no scarf, it would have taken little away from the convincing textures of her performance.

Jones' skill at bringing to life eight different speech, gestural, social, professional and economic profiles, and binding all of them into a common articulation of indignation and protest, was clearly a major strength of *Women Can't Wait*. Yet, it was also a profound handicap. Jones had the audience so eating out of her hand that, in the course of the performance, it became unclear what the spectators were looking at. Take the instance of the honour killing that Hala of Jordan narrated. Her story was raw and bloody, and the silence in that packed amphitheatre deepened with horror at the calm brutality of familial honour. Yet, as the character's

voice trailed away, unable to complete her story, there was only the briefest of pauses before applause broke out and swelled – for what? The juxtaposition of the two moments – the character's yielding to silence and the spectators' applause – was obscene. (In hard, perhaps pedantic, terms, it was even undesirable.) But that is what Jones' ability to present yet another character movingly and "with conviction" achieved. Hala's story was picked clean of its emotional gore (mind you, these monologues were constructed from documented, real-life instances), and sanitised through our appreciation of a marvellous actress' command over voice and speech.

Instances of this kind make me sometimes wonder why so much time is spent in discussing the success/failure of performances even as we ignore the equally vital question of the success and the failure of audiences.

An earlier version of this article was first published in FIRST CITY (January 2002)

The Most Magnificent Palace in the East: The Red Fort of Shah Jahan, the King of the World / Anisha Shekhar Mukherji

Part III of the lecture delivered at the ATTIC, New Delhi

6. This was possible because the Fort was thoughtfully designed to accomodate public, semi-public, semi-private and private spaces. The public ceremonial areas were clearly and centrally positioned, marked out by straight axes, with formal courtyards that increased in size and magnificence, a succession of compelling gateways which no visitor could miss or ignore. On the other hand, the private areas, whether those of the Emperor and his family or of his attendant workforce, were located such that they were practically invisible. Shah Jahan's living areas and palaceswere atop the river-side wall, furthest from the Lahori andDelhiGates of the city. Instead of being conventional huge towering vertical complexes, they were single-storeyed pavilions, their imperial status signaled not by size but by their proportion, refinement and detailing. His private entrance to the Fort was also from the banks on the river, which was an important recreation and transportation space. In fact the siting of functions throughout Shahjahanabad celebrated the presence of the river. The Fort.s imperial pavilions on its riverside were not only located to afford stunning views across and cool breezes from the river; they were equally part

of a grand spectacle from the river, their privacy unimpaired behind intricate marble *jalis*. This river-views were continued in the large *havelis* of noblemen and Princes, public and private gardens, and ghats, all of which lined the length of the Yamuna.

In contrast, the living and working areas of the craftspeople and attendants were located beyond the high entrance streets off the Main Gates in the shadow of Fort.s towering outer walls adjacent to the city. They were densely built around twisting streets, resembling parts of the city outside the walls of the Fort, yet positioned in such a way that they were shielded from the view of state visitors and even of the Emperor who, despite being the lord of the entire Fort, as indeed of the entire empire, never needed to go into these parts of the Fort which could thus develop freely. These drawings show the areas of movement of different categories of people within the Fort-the Emperor, a nobleman, a Mughal queen, and an ordinary inhabitant of the city. The Fort was thus a microcosm of the Mughal way of life. not merely the Imperial Mughal way of life.

Rangila celebrating Holi in the Rang Mahal, Red Fort, Delhi

7. Each sub-area within the Fort had its own courtyards bounded by gateways and continuous arcades that not only provided shaded areas to work, sit or walk in, but also privacy from the other spaces around them. The open courtyards and gardens also had the advantage of flexiblity; if there were more crowds such as on the Fort’s inauguration ceremonies or at Shah Jahan’s birthday celebrations or during festivals, by spreading canopies and qanats, more covered area could be easily and quickly obtained. Thus, open space was fashioned

and designed such that it was used as an extension of built space. and built space shaded or enclosed open space so that it could be used effectively in all seasons. It was also because of these open areas sited in between built areas, that many of Shah Jahan.s original pavilions could stay virtually unobstructed and untouched, despite a greatly increasing population in the Fort during the times of his descendants. It was around the boundaries of some of the main courts and gardens or within many of the less visible ones that the later Mughal rulers and their sons and daughters got more structures built. The built spaces too, whether the grand entrance forecourts and gateways, or the Emperor.s own pavilions were multifunctional in use. Thus, the Lahori and Delhi gateways contained living quarters for soldiers, the Naqqar Khana Gateway not only provided a regulated entrance but also contained chambers for musicians. The Emperor.s Hall of Private Audience from wheer he dispensed justice also doubled up as a reception on the occasion of private celebrations. All these buildings that the Emperor stayed or worked in were not enclosed buildings but pavilions, a series of verandahs, which could be hung with carpets and covered with qanats, or left open to let the river-breezes in.

Original Proportion of Built versus Open Spaces, Red Fort, Delhi

6. Thus, the location and orientation of the buildings, gardens and courtyards that housed all these different activities, as well as their size, height and overall proportions, had ecological, functional,*and*aesthetic reasons. They were designed not only to impress a viewer or a user but also to be easy to maintain and to be lived in during the different seasons. They were practical as well as beautiful. As the Fort’s original

design shows, the proportion of open spaces in it is far greater than the amount of built structures A large amount of these open spaces were gardens, which were designed to provide pleasant and cool spaces; they are described by contemporary historians of Shah Jahan as being planted with, ….fruitful trees of diverse kinds…interlaced with each other in such a way that they sky is not anywhere visible from under them.. They were not just beautiful to see and to use, but also provided fruit and vegetables for the kitchens. In fact, Shah Jahan is recorded to himself go and pluck fruit from his gardens with his page boys early in the morning as a diversion from his more onerous administrative duties. All these qualities make the Fort not just an epitome of urban architectural patronage in Shah Jahan's reign, but also represent one of the finest examples of a sustainable way of planning, building, and living. Why do I say that? What can we learn from the Red Fort's design that is relevant to our cities and towns today?

First, that despite being the favoured residence and the prized patronage of the richest ruler in the medieval world, the Red Fort was **planned and detailed to be socially inclusive**.It was designed not just as a residence of a monarch but as a miniature city with *all* the positive opportunities for economic, social and cultural interaction that a city affords. Everyone, even the poorest of the inhabitants was a stake-holder in the Fort. Visually, and spatially too there was no bar between the direct axis linking Shah Jahan to his people.instead of the ramparts and barbicans that block the Fort from the city today, originally a bridge lead straight from the Chandni Chowk to the Lahori Gate, and further to the *Emperor's Throne of Justice* in the Diwan-i-Am

Diwan-i-Am, Red Fort, Delhi

Secondly, the Fort's design was ecologically and environmentally considerate.there was no unnecessary wastage of resources-instead of the stretches of high-maintenance lawns that pass for gardens today, the Fort.s vast gardens were essentially orchards; they worked as productive areas as well as places of pleasure, entertainment and repose; they moderated the micro-climate and used only the optimum amount of precious water. **Even the water** in the fountains used to cool and decorate the Fort.s pavilions and its gardens, or in the imperial bathing chambers was recycled.either for irrigation, or for watering animals, or for cooling the public parts of the Fort. **The palaces of the Emperor** and his family as well as their grand entrance sequences which were a succession of forecourts and gateways were all multifunctional in use.they could equally be used for people to gather, for administrative work, for court ceremonial, as well as circulation spaces.

Thirdly, the Fort's design was an example of further development of the traditional indigenous courtyard typology; where not only were the proportions of the built and open spaces of the highest order but where utilization of space was maximized despite constructing a minimum number of built structures.

Original court and garden boundaries superimposed on barracks and later construction,Red Fort, Delhi

And finally, the Fort's design displayed those qualities which make design truly great, where no element is superfluous or extraneous. None of its structures and spaces was designed as simply utilitarian or purely decorative. Each component of its design.whether the form or detail of

its gardens, pavilions, forecourts, gateways or colonnades was both useful and beautiful; the form, structure and decoration in them could not be separated from each other. These are some of the original attributes of the Red Fort, beyond just its immediate form, that need to be recognized and conserved. Conserved not just as empty shells but as an act of celebration that restores the same qualities of inclusiveness, of concern for people, for the environment and for material and human resources that Shah Jahan and his builders did. While the different layers of history which have left their mark on the Fort, make it a site of great historical interest, its *principal* value in terms of world and Indian heritage continues to *stem* from the cultural, architectural, associational and artistic value of its original design. It is thus imperative to ensure that the potency *of its original design* is physically conserved and communicated. In fact, the Fort.s ingenious planning and detailing have important lessons for not just for architectural and art historians, but also for contemporary designers and their clients, as well as for anybody who lives in this part of the world. Till this appreciation is confined to a few academics, there will never be any sustained support for the Red Fort, which above all, was a celebration of life.in its establishment, in the ceremonies that marked the Emperor.s sojourn in it, in the artists, painters, poets and singers that it patronized, in its gardens and in its trees that made life beautiful and pleasant even in the sweltering summers of Delhi. We need to reinstate all these aspects of the Red Fort.s past and its status as a cultural, architectural and artistic icon. What we need is a new method of conservation that involves people by presenting to them all the information that has so far been the domain of the scholar or the bureaucrat; that is planned and implemented in a manner that includes instead of disregarding the citizens of this country.whether as professionals, as visitors, as artists, as inhabitants, as students. We are. or should

be.equally the stake-holders as well as the guardians of our history. Perhaps then we may be able to fulfill at least a part of the wish of the makers of the Red Fort, inscribed in good faith on the walls of the Khwabgah or the House of Dreams.Shah Jahan.s own sleeping chambers in the Fort.

Shah Jahan

May the Emperor of the world, Shah Jahan by his good fortune,

The second lord of felicity

In the royal palace with great magnificence,

Ever be like the Sun in the Sky.

As long as foundation is indispensable with the building,

May the palace of his good fortune touch the highest heaven.

Image Credits:

1. **Photo: Lahori Gate, Red Fort, 1997**

2. **Plan: Lahori Gate**

3. **Mid-19thC drwg. of Lahori Gate**By

a native artist (From the *Dehli Book* commissioned

by Sir Thomas Metcalfe)

4. **18thCentury Plan of Red Fort**

Courtesy: The Oriental and India Office

Collections, British Library (Add.Or.1790)

5. **Plan: The Red Fort**

Extant structures highlighted in a detail

of the Map drawn by an Indian artist in the mid-

19th century

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.6. Plan: The Red Fort

Showing proportion and profile of built and open

structures before and after the destruction by the

British in 1857

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7. **Photo of Red Fort and its environs**

from Jama Masjid, c. 1870, Courtesy: OIOCBritish Library, photo 2/3 (76)

8. **and 9. Panorama of Red Fort**

Drawn by Mazhar Ali Khan, Courtesy: OIOC British Library

10. **Portrait of Bahadur Shah Mid-19th**

century, (From the *Dehli Book* commissioned by Sir Thomas Metcalfe)

11. **Interior View of Diwan-i-Khas**

(From the *Dehli Book* commissioned by Sir Thomas Metcalfe)

12. **Aerial ViewLahore,Agra, and Delhi Forts,** Courtesy: Google

13. **Detail: Diwan-i-Am Ceiling, Red Fort,**Courtesy:Victoria and Albert Museum, London
14. **Detail of decoration: Taj Mahal and Diwan-i-Am, Red Fort,**Courtesy:Victoria andAlbert Museum, London
15. **Miniature of Red Fort, Luckhnow**

artist, 18th century

16. **Red Fort:RiversideView** (From the *Dehli Book* commissioned by Sir Thomas Metcalfe)
17. **Rang Mahal, Red Fort: Emperor Muhammad Shah celebrating Holi**, Courtesy The Bodleian Library,Oxford
18. **Mid-19thc Plan of Red Fort: Open spaces shaded Black©** Anisha Shekhar Mukherji
19. **Photo: Diwan-i-Am, 1997**

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20. **Superimposed Plan, Red Fort**

Original courtyard and gardens superimposed on later barrack and road construction, © Anisha Shekhar Mukherji

21. **Shah Jahan’s Portrait 18thcentury watercolour**

CONCLUDED

Liberal Education in Arts, Sciences and Humanities: Status, Role and Future /

Anisha Shekhar Mukherji

Text of the paper delivered in the Seminar at the India International Centre on 13th April 2009

Architectural Sketch of The Monastery of The Russian Orthodox Church– serko.net

I would like to explore the role and relevance of liberal education in India today with my perspective of studying in nine schools in different parts of India, and my exposure to professional architectural study and practice. It is evident that our attitudes and our abilities as thinkers, policy makers, and politicians are inevitably shaped by the direction of the school education that we have received. As parents and teachers we orient our children to an unquestioning faith in 'modern industrial' technology and in a single-minded focus on jobs, so that most of them, like the post-graduate students to whom I teach 'Research Paper' in the Department of Industrial Design, grow up to be young adults with a stupefying belief that there are standard 'correct' solutions that they must 'follow'. Conversely, I believe that architecture can be an important tool in tangibly communicating and making many

aspects of basic education come alive, especially to school students.[1] We may also draw direct parallels between school and architectural education – in both of which there are many things to teach, divided in different 'subjects' for ease of assimilation.

At first glance, formal architectural training as a specialized professional course dealing with the application of knowledge, seems to be far removed from the domain of liberal education as conventionally understood. However, if from the different definitions put forth, we consider *Liberal* as: 'looking to the broad or general sense rather than the literal'[2] such a criteria is already present in architecture – which is in a sense, a microcosm of different fields. This inherent strength of architectural education has been recognized in Italy. Though a small country, I am given to understand that at one time it had four institutions that taught architecture, each with ten thousand students. And what do these forty thousand graduates in architecture do? Only a fraction practice as architects or designers. The rest study architecture because they believe that it is the best education they can receive.

As undergraduate students at the well-known School of Planning and Architecture, we were taught many subjects, which left little time for leisure or boredom. Yet, practically all the emphasis was on ***transmitting skills or information*** such as: 'how to draw perspectives, how to resolve issues of space and function in a building or a town, how to solve problems of load transmission in structures, how to describe the difference between North and South Indian temples, how to design with the principles of "modernist" architecture.' And though the varied curriculum included art, science, and humanities, these disciplines did not tie up to a whole. I remember my inability to understand *why* we had to study sociology and the young Sociology Professor's extreme discomfiture in trying to explain. Sociology was taught in

isolation much like the joinery details which we planed and sandpapered in the carpentry workshop without ever using them to produce doors, windows, boxes or any object that demonstrated how they added up.

Also implicit was the contention that European or American 'modernist' methods of construction were desirable for students in India to learn, and that vernacular or classical Indian forms and spaces may be looked at as *history*, but have no place in contemporary architecture. As an instance, if we, after a study visit to the villages of Himachal Pradesh, visualized our designs in timber, this was lauded as an understanding of the context. But the timber details we were expected to follow were those standardized and set forth in British building manuals almost a hundred years ago, not local traditional wood details. Questions such as – 'is the architecture we build appropriate to our culture, or is it elitist and redundant? Is there anything beyond the expression of our individuality and creativity that we need to consider?' were posed sporadically, and more often in the student's canteen than in the studios or lecture rooms. Today, they seem to have become even less of a concern than they were fifteen years ago. Thus, even with a *scope* of subjects that more nearly approaches 'Liberal education' than any other field of higher study, contemporary architectural training appears to comprise of 'indoctrination'—a dangerous synonym of education—rather than fostering a discernment of fundamental principles and an engagement with ethics. **Are these qualities relevant to architecture?** This question, **c**an be answered by looking at the environmental or climatic disasters that most contemporary buildings create today. The ornamental palms and stretches of lawn instead of the indigenous plants or shady trees that pass for landscape design; the size and form of cities which make them almost impossible to negotiate without the use of fuel-guzzling cars, the superficial and similar copies of popular international building trends – are all a reality before us.

Thus, it seems clear that though a wide-ranging curricula beyond narrow specialized information *should* find a place in technical, vocational and management education, this by itself is not sufficient. We also need to redefine the concept of 'liberal education' – which as we commonly understand is something bequeathed to us by the Western world. A wide-ranging study of the Classics, the Arts or the Sciences untainted by obvious motives of profit, may not necessarily make us adhere to the true meaning of *Liberal*which is defined as 'willing to respect and accept behaviour or opinions different from one's own'[3] or to its synonyms of 'progressive, tolerant, unbiased, enlightened, impartial'.

Did we have a tradition of liberal education in India before the advent of western education and can we draw any lessons from it? It appears that we did, at both a primary and higher education level. According to the research of the Gandhian historian Dharampal,[4] even in 'the greatly damaged and disorganized India' of 1800, indigenous teaching was more widespread and vastly superior to that of the British. The physical environment under which Indian schooling took place was less dingy and more natural. The methods were effectual and economical. The composition of the students in schools was inclusive, with Sudras and lower castes predominating. Though higher education in Theology, Metaphysics and Law seems to have been dominated by Brahmins in the nature of professional specialization, other subjects such as astronomy and medical science were studied by scholars from a variety of backgrounds and castes. The results of research and study appear to also have been quickly disseminated in many sections of society.

This, in many ways indicates the existence of a more liberal society than that of present times**. What are the shortcomings that prevent us from achieving such objectives today?** Considered in the light of architectural education, these are, briefly:

1. **a method and content of teaching** that is almost exclusively centred on a western modernist orientation, with a guiding principle that rejects the application of history as superfluous.
2. **an inordinate emphasis on dissemination of skills** to the detriment of knowledge or issues.
3. **a stressing of abstract theories** without encouraging their 'application'.
4. **a fragmented, linear and compartmentalized way of learning** that prevents overall comprehension.

Is there a paradox here? First we say, that specialization is an incomplete and therefore unsatisfactory way of looking at the world and dealing with it. Yet when we attempt to teach many things, we separate them into different subjects for practical reasons. Therefore, can there be only two situations—**one**, to know in great detail about only one subject, or **two,** to know about a great many subjects but still as separate systems of knowledge? Is this true of other fields of education in university/schools too? The answers may be forthcoming, if we look at some of the questions we need to ask, with respect to conventional formal education:

1. **How do we teach?**
2. **What do we teach?**
3. **Who do we teach?**
4. **Who teaches?**

In all of the above, the common feature at present is the attempt at standardization. We **teach students** without awakening a holistic interest in learning or linking back individual 'subjects' at the level of understanding different world views. We emphasise one single, standard way to design/way to research/way to cure as the only correct way, in direct contrast to the idea of the liberal. **We use a syllabus** that we standardize, rejecting 'pre-industrial' social, spatial, scientific or artistic systems as 'backward' without even knowing their features. **We enroll students from a**

‘standard’ economic and social stratum and we employ teachers of a ‘standard’ profile. As the noted scientist J.B.S. Haldane – who himself did not have a degree in science – reminds us ‘…Srinivasa Ramanujan, India’s greatest mathematician since Aryabhatta, had no degree and would thus be disqualified from teaching in an Indian University were he alive today’.[5] If our efforts are aimed at promoting standard products who replicate ‘standard’ answers, then how can we expect creative, independent-thinking and responsive children or adults? It appears that *the first step* then is to reform this ‘standardization’, which at best insulates, and at worst divorces us from our local contexts. It neither fosters respect for others nor for the natural environment, and not even the knowledge of our own strengths and weaknesses, which is the real basis for self-respect.

School education today, particularly the CBSE, stresses *isolationistic* instruction of theory to the exclusion of application. Despite the experiments in playway education in some mainstream ‘progressive’ schools, children are inundated with theoretical information from the earliest years of school or at the latest by class four or five. Even in *Environmental Science* – a compulsory subject of late – the method of assessment is to test knowledge about organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund, rather than on helping students to understand the implications of everyday actions on the environment. The overriding emphasis today on computer-assignments as an educational tool, is a part of the same isolationist view which cannot apply the lessons of environmental science to other subjects and certainly not to daily life! As an illustrative example, here I would quote the experience of a progressive and famous public-school, which sought professional advice from a leading energy-institution on how to reduce cooling costs and make its new buildings environmentally appropriate. The advice that the school received was impressively detailed and voluminous, with results from high-technology monitoring equipment and

insulating techniques. But it incredibly did not mention *the basic fact that the North-South orientation of the proposed buildings was incorrect*, and till this was corrected they would inevitably absorb maximum heat! This reveals the absurd 'blinding' that such technocratic and isolationist attitudes breed.

How should our education, technical, vocational or otherwise, remove such a 'blinkered' vision? Dr Zakir Hussain wrote an article in 1961 in the journal *Nayee Talim*,[5] which may summarize all the objectives of a truly liberal vision for centers of education, 'To train students for taking responsibilities of various social tasks…to expand the areas of knowledge…to include broad-mindedness in its students, to inspire the students to live a life of goodness and truth'. Thus, the *national* goal of education, whether we call it 'liberal' or anything else, **should first open a method of enquiry for its students to judge situations, to formulate their actions, to evolve into good human beings,** *not* to produce individuals whose sole aim is to earn more. The world is not standardized, it has unique solutions to different situations, which despite being different are all linked, and affected by all actions, great and small. The only way to understand the world is through self-realization which may begin with, but does not end, with formal education.

Is it possible to do all this by being primarily dependant on western systems of living and learning? *No.* Segregation and fragmentation, specialization and confrontation were inherent parts of the method of inquiry in the western tradition even before industrialization put this into more glaring view. As Chaturvedi Badrinath writes in *The Mahabharata An Inquiry Into the Human Condition*, a look at the history of philosophical thought in the West shows that '…when systematized into an *ism*, the various explanations of the human condition had fiercely rejected each other…But although fiercely rejecting each other, all these *isms* have one thing in common – a logic

which fragments human attributes into irreconcilable polarities, and then assumes *either* the one *or* the other is *the* reality, and constructs its world view wholly on that, or the logic of *either/or*'.[7]

In fact, unlike much of western thought, indigenous methods of inquiry seem to lend themselves more easily to holistic and wholesome attitudes to learning. The difference between these two world views – the *exclusionary* and the *inclusive* – is manifest in the answer of some Brahmins three centuries ago. Asked a question on a subject as personal and emotional as religion, by the French traveler Francois Bernier, this is what they had to say:

'We pretend not,' they replied, 'that our law is of universal application. God intended it only for us, and this is the reason we cannot receive a foreigner into our religion. We do not even say that yours is a false religion: it may be adapted to your wants and circumstances, God having, no doubt, appointed many different ways of going to heaven.'

Bernier on the other hand, could not understand this point of view. And this is what he had to say: 'I found it impossible to convince them that the Christian faith was designed for the whole earth, and theirs was mere fable and gross fabrication'.[8]

So how does all this translate into education today? Does it mean a change in the method of teaching? In the content? In both? I**n our present assessment and evaluation procedures?** Practical demands of time, space and resources imply that there will be some amount of specialization as one proceeds on the learning path, and it would never be possible to teach everything about everything. We must also recognize that in the learning curve of individuals, society and civilization, some amount of specialization is the natural path of evolution. A Benarasi weaver whose remarkable skill and creativity we treasure as heirlooms, does not learn

pottery or till the land. Were he to do so, he would have neither the time nor the skill to fashion his intricate weaves. Yet, this specialization does not divorce him from his natural or cultural context or knowledge base. He traditionally operates within a societal framework, which creates a need for his skills and which provides him with sustenance to develop these. Today, such a societal and cultural framework is missing. It can only be regenerated if even in *specialized* training at any stage of education, the emphasis is *general*, and the composition of our curricula and our teachers is *inclusive*. Colleges in their dissemination of specialized education must encourage students in theoretical and practical instruction, which is balanced and engages with cultural and social issues. Such holistic education would help students obtain a more complete understanding of the world, and avoid mindsets like Bernier's that reject everything unfamiliar, as false or untrue.

How shall we practically achieve this? By completely rejecting western systems of education or thought? By limiting study to only indigenous traditional systems? Certainly not, since that would be continuing the same exclusivist view that is the main deficiency of our education today. All education must develop an enjoyment of the process of learning, and an engagement with the natural world. The analogy may be likened to a baby, whose first efforts are aimed at resolving the objects seen, heard or felt in the immediate vicinity. This is how we are genetically coded to grow. A knowledge of local systems and sympathy with the natural world, will help to comprehend larger systems or those from other regions or cultures. As Winin Pereira clarifies in his book *From Western Science to Liberation Technology*, 'It is the traditional methods of research, development, dissemination and use that are still relevant, not necessarily all brought forward pieces of knowledge'.[9] Thus, primacy to indigenous traditional systems of learning in formative years, should help, not inhibit enquiry and direct experimentation in other systems—whether non-

indigenous, non-mainstream, conventional or unconventional. The spirit of inquiry and analysis can be furthered and coupled with an understanding of the universal and natural worlds, to eventually lead to creative, contextual, humane theory and practice.

Thus the policy formulation with regard to liberal education should be that:

1. Theoretical instruction instead of remaining abstract,**must link learning to real life**, illustrated**through stories and examples**(most people, especially children love stories, and these are invaluable in explaining even complex notions of philosophy, conduct, etc. as the Mahabharata and much of our traditional literature demonstrate).
2. **The proportion of practical instruction must be increased,and must connect to nature. Students should be encouraged to work with their hands, and learn by 'doing' s**o that satisfaction and a sense of achievement are the incentives to learn, not marks.
3. **Both theoretical and practical instruction, must include dissemination and discussion on traditional and indigenous knowledge**, through an active involvement of non-mainstream disciplines or cultures – such as folk artists, craftspeople, writers in indigenous languages – rather than just conventional academics and theoreticians. Educational experiments, such as the one where a flower-seller and her five year old daughter, were instructors to Class Six students in the Padma Seshadri Bala Bhawan in T. Nagar in Chennai for three days,as reported in*The Hindu*, should be widespread.[10]
4. **There should be an optimum size beyond which the classroom and the educational institution must not grow**. Large sizes and centralization necessitate standardization for ease of management, consume greater resources, and take away the emphasis from learning to

administration.

5. **The present system of evaluation**,**based on marks must be replaced by one based on grades**.

It is not as if these problems or the suggestions offered have not been recognized or enunciated before our time. The experiments in school and college education at SriNiketan and Santiniketan by Rabindranath Tagore and in national education as envisioned in Mahatma Gandhi's *NaiTalim*, did this almost a hundred years ago. Why have these experiments failed? Why they been largely forgotten or sidelined by mainstream education? If individuals of such political, intellectual and moral stature such as Tagore and Gandhi were unable to make a difference despite actually setting up schools and universities that applied visionary principles, is it likely that we will be able to do so? Even today, there *are* some institutional and private efforts committed to unconventional or non-formal methods of learning. The reason that these efforts were and *are* unable to make a dent in society or permeate through larger sections of it, is largely due to the Government's unwillingness to promote these as valid ways of learning. *This sort of education does not fit the official notion of development.* The idea of development as perceived by the government is still the Nehruvian one which in essence is the western industrialized model, a model which as argued earlier is incapable of accepting, like that of Bernier's mindset, any other path to an alternative development option. Therefore, the *only* way for a change to happen, is for the Government, as the overall authority responsible for running the country, to realize that the present notion of development is flawed. It must, as must we all, recognise the necessity of liberal education and endorse holistic teaching and evaluation methods. Rather than setting up new competing institutions, we need to transform our existing institutions at every level and decentralize. This implies a great deal of consensus-building through interaction, discussion and cooperation which is no doubt difficult. But it is not

impossible.

In my teaching of Research Paper, by no means sufficient in providing complete answers – especially when compared to the work of more experienced educationists – there has been a partial success in the students' ability to link abstract design and real social issues or to express themselves openly with conviction. Most of the students comprehend that the state of the urban poor and homeless in our cities today, are as affected by the disappearance of traditional livelihoods as with the plastic or metal products designed such that they can only be made in large mechanized factories. The students also realize that ostensibly beneficiary schemes of large-scale export of handicrafts may actually *hasten* their extinction by promoting standardized production possible only in 'factory-like' situations. However, the focus of their lessons in other subjects or in design studios, even when actuated by themes such as 'socially relevant design' invariably leads them to modern, mechanized engineering industrial designs. Their site visits are to factories or large multi-national firms where they foresee themselves working in the future, not on an apprenticeship with master-craftsmen. Most typical urban professionals feel they have no other option, since alternative choices do not eventually assure them of economic security. Here again the government has a larger role to play, not in terms of subsidies or grants, but in recognizing indigenous economic structures as valid, inclusive and wholesome. This would be therefore "in-sync" if the government-supported education system would become more holistic.

I would like to end with a quote from Harsh Mander in an article on a different context, but which I believe can be a guide to what we hope to achieve from this seminar, or indeed any action we do, any work we contemplate, any change that we envison, whether in education or in life: 'Gandhi offered us a "talisman" to use in moments of doubt and confusion. He asked

us to recall the face of the poorest, most defenceless, powerless man we have encountered…We must ask ourselves whether what we are attempting has meaning for this person.'[11]

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Notes:

1. Architecture gives an insight into the living conditions, methods and materials of construction, concepts of time and culture of previous generations. In fact, some countries in the world are already experimenting with using architecture as a tool for teaching school children.
2. Chambers Dictionary
3. Oxford Dictionary and Thesarus (Indian Edition)
4. Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree, Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century*, First Published by Impex India 1971, Republished 2000 by Other India Press, Goa, in association with SIDH Society for Integrated

Development of Himalayas, Mussoorie
5. As quoted in *Rabindranath Tagore, Philosophy of Education and Painting,* Devi Prasad, National Book Trust, India, Creative Learning Series, First Edition 2001, New Delhi
6. *The Hindu* Tuesday, April 7 2009, 'Polymath who shared the fun of science', Vidyanand Nanjundiah.
7. *The Mahabharata An Inquiry Into the Human Condition*, Chaturvedi Badrinath, Orient Longman 2006, p.10-11.
8. Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mughal Empire*, p. 328
9. Winin Pereira, *From Western Science to Liberation Technology,* Earthcare Books, Kolkata, first edition 1993
10. *The Hindu* Tuesday, April 7 2009, 'The hands that craft and create', Priscilla Jebaraj. The report also mentions that CBSE has already worked out a syllabus in handicrafts for an elective course in Classes 11 and 12.
11. *The Hindu* Sunday April 5, 2009, 'BAREFOOT, The silent tragedy of hunger'.

Parable of the Ten Virgins: Play Scripted for Nilakantan Gauri by Prema Sastri

(For permission to perform this play read the note at the bottom)


(Left)Virgins in Waiting
(Right)The Wedding

CAST OF CHARACTERS.

VIRGINS.10.

TOWN CRIERS 2

CROWD.

FRUIT SELLER.1

BEGGARS 2.

SCHOOLCHILDREN.3

SHOEMAKER.1

POLICEMEN.3.

STREET SINGERS 5

OLD LADIES. 2

OLD MEN 2

THE KING. 1

The KING`S ATTENDANTS. SEVERAL.

FIRST ATTENDANT.1

THE QUEEN.1

THE QUEEN`S ATTENDANTS.

FIRST ATTENDANT.1

THE KING`S SON. 1

35 speaking roles.

SCENE ONE.

PLACE. THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE TIME OF JESUS.

TIME.LATE AFTERNOON.

SCENE. A BUSY STREET IN THE CAPITAL.

AT RISE. STREET SCENE. PEOPLE ON STAGE.

ENTER FRUIT SELLER.

FRUIT SELLER. Fresh fruit.Bananas, pomegranates, grapes. I also have olives, and dates.(Arranges his baskets, and goes around soliciting)

ENTER SHOEMAKER.(He is holding a string of shoes(.Addresses. Fruit seller) I hope you have some extra fruit for me.

FRUIT SELLER. I have fruit for anyone who will pay.

SHOEMAKER. You have not yet paid me for the repairs I did to your shoe.

FRUIT SELLER. You just put in a couple of stitches.

SHOEMAKER. Without that your shoe would have come apart.

FRUIT SELLER. Allright, here is a pomegranite for you

ENTER SCHOOLCHILDREN.3

(Children run around)

FIRST CHILD. It is good not to be in school.

SECOND CHILD. The classroom was stuffy.

THIRD CHILD. The thatch on the roof was coming apart.Let`s have fun. No one knows where we are

.ENTER. OLD MEN. (They stare at the children, and shake their heads)

ENTER TWO OLD LADIES.(They look around.)

FIRST OLD MAN;(To schoolchildren)
Why are you on the street?
SECOND OLD MAN> You should be in school.

FIRST CHILD. It is a holiday today.

FIRST OLD LADY. What nonsense. My grandchild went to school today

SECOND OLD LADY. So did mine.

THE OLD MEN AND THE LADIES SHAKE THEIR HEADS IN DISAPPROVAL.

ENTER STREET SINGERS.

FIRST SINGER. This looks a merry place.

SECOND SINGER SINGER. So it is.

THIRD SINGER.Let us look around.

FOURTH SINGER. I am sure the people will love our song

.FIFTH SINGER. . Don`t be so sure about it. In the last town they chased us out.

FIRST SINGER We will sing our latest song;the one we made up in the desert.

SECOND SINGER. First let s eat something.(They go to the fruit

seller,and buy fruit)

ENTER THE TEN VIRGINS.

FIRST VIRGIN. This is where we were told to come by the temple priest

.SECOND VIRGIN. It is too crowded here.

THIRD VIRGIN. We will stand to one side, and see what happens.

(The virgins form a group)

ENTER BEGGARS.

FIRST BEGGAR. This is a good place for our trade.

SECOND BEGGAR. Ladies and gentlemen. We are hungry. Give us something.(People move away from them, as they go round.).

ENTER POLICEMEN.

FIRST POLICEMAN. Why are you people making such a noise.? You are crowding the street.

SECOND POLICEMAN. Get out of the way.(raises baton)

FRUIT SELLER. It is market day today.

THIRD POLICEMAN. .Sell your wares in the market, not here.

FRUIT VENDOR. This is my market.(Laughs)Come buy grapes, oranges bananas

SECOND POLICEMAN. I`ll give you oranges.(Snatches an orange from the basket)

FRUIT SELLER.Hey give it back.

SECOND POLICEMAN. I`ll give you this.(Raises baton, and gives a blow

The crowd disperses to a side.The two beggars are

in front).

FIRST POLICEMAN. What are you doing.?

FIRST BEGGAR. Begging sir. Have you something to give me?.

FIRST POLICEMAN(Raises baton) Yes I have.

SECOND BEGGAR. Have pity on us.

FIRST POLICEMAN. Why should I/ The king will be furious to see the street so crowded. His carriage is due any moment.

SCHOOLCHILD 1 Do we really get to see the king?

POLICEMAN. What are you doing here. ?You should be in school.

SCHOOLCHILD 2. I have to get some things for my mother.(Joins his friend.)

SCHOOLCHILD 3. We will stand in the shade..(They move to a side, trying to look inconspicuous)

OLD LADY 1. What are children coming to these days.

OLD LADY 2 They don`t care about anything.

OLD MAN1.Very true.

OLD MAN2 Not like they were in our day.

STREET SINGERS. Did you say the king was coming this way.?

FIRST POLICEMAN. I did.

SHOEMAKER. Perhaps he may buy some shoes from me.

SECOND POLICEMAN. The king buy shoes from you. That is a joke.(Laughs)

STREET SINGERS. The king is coming. Let us dance and sing.

SINGERS SING. THE CROWD DANCES.

FIRST POLICEMAN. Enough(Turns to virgins)Who are you.? VIRGINS.(Together) We are the keepers of the flame.We bring light.

SECOND POLICEMAN. Stay together then. Let us see the light.(Laughs)

ENTER TOWN CRIERS with a roll of drums

TOWN CRIER.Listen to me all you people. (The mob is silent and looks at him)

I have great and important news for you..

CROWD. Tell us. Tell us.

TOWN CRIER. The king`s son Liam is going to get married.

THE CROWD CLAPS, WAVES ITS HANDS AND DANCES AROUND THE STAGE.

SECOND TOWN CRIER. Wait. There are some special invitees. (He goes to the virgins)You ladies. You have been invited to the wedding feast to light the courtyard. Be sure that your lamps are burning bright.

VIRGINS. We will.

FIRST TOWN CRIER . The prince is going to marry the fair Sara.There will be a great feast. Liam and Sara are a fairy tale couple.

FIRST VIRGIN. Will the queen be coming now.?

SECOND TOWN CRIER. Yes she will.

SECOND VIRGIN.Are we invited to the feast?

FIRST TOWN CRIER. You are.The king and his company will get down near the statue, and walk this way.

THIRD VIRGIN. Is the prince as handsome as they say.?

SECOND TOWN CRIER. He is.

FOURTH VIRGIN. Will the prince`s friends attend the wedding?.

FIRST TOWN CRIER. He has many friends. They will come.

FIFTH VIRGIN. Are they also princes?.

FIRST TOWN CRIER. A prince`s friends can only be of his rank. They are all princes from various countries.

SIXTH VIRGIN. Will there be music? 2

SECOND TOWN CRIER. The best in the land.

SEVENTH VIRGIN.Are there any dancers?

FIRST TOWN CRIER. There will be dancing till dawn.

EIGHTH VIRGIN. Oh how lovely.(Claps her hands.)

NINTH VIRGIN> We are so fortunate.

TENTH VIRGIN. We will have a wonderful time..

SECOND TOWN CRIER Be ready with your lamps. The prince comes to the palace hall at midnight.

EXIT TOWN CRIERS. WITH ROLL OF DRUMS

FIRST POLICEMAN. The king and his court are coming.Stand back. (The crowd moves back.)

THE KING, THE QUEEN,AND THEIR ATTENDANTS CROSS THE STAGE. THEY GREET THE CROWD. THE CROWD IS RAPTUROUS.EXIT KING AND ENTOURAGE

FIRST POLICEMAN. Now all you people clear the street.

FRUIT SELLER. But I haven`t sold any fruit.

SECOND POLICEMAN. That`s your bad luck.

BEGGARS. You did not let us go near the king.

THIRD POLICEMAN. It is our job to keep the likes of you away.

STREET SINGERS. We wanted to sing, but we gazed in wonder instead.

SCHOOLCHILDREN. We will say we were invited to the wedding, and could not attend school

.OLD GENTLEMAN. Oh what it was like to be young.The young prince will be getting a beautiful bride.(Starts singing. The other old people join in.)

FIRST POLICEMAN. Off with you. All of you.

(They herd out all the people..The stage empties.)

FADE OUT

. FADE IN.

It is late at night in the outer chambers of the king`s palace. The ten virgins are on stage.,in two groups.They are carrying lighted lamps.

BRIDAL MUSIC. THE VIRGINS SING.AND DANCE

FIRST VIRGIN.I never dreamed I would be given such a great honour.

SECOND VIRGIN. To be invited to a prince`s wedding.

THIRD VIRGIN. We are truly chosen.

FOURTH VIRGIN.God has blessed us.

FIFTH VIRGIN. Let us be ready for the prince.We will trim our lamps.

THE FIVE VIRGINS TEND JARS OF OIL AND THEIR LAMPS.

SIXTH VIRGIN. I feel as if I could dance.(Dances a few steps)

SEVENTH VIRGIN. I long to sing.(Sings a few bars.)

EIGHT VIRGIN. The queen will be wearing a beautiful gown.(Walks a few steps as if trailing a gown.)

NINTH VIRGIN.There will be pearls and gems sewn on to it. (mimes studying the gems on her gown.)

TENTH VIRGIN. I bet the prince will look handsome, and have handsome friends.(Looks into space, dreamimg.)

(the wise virgins attend to their lamps:the foolish virgins laugh and chatter among themselves)

FIRST VIRGIN.It is past midnight. I can see the lights have gone out in the city’

SECOND VIRGIN. Look, the people In the courtyard are sleeping.(Light on stage shows slumbering people.

THIRD VIRGIN. We dare not sleep.

FOURTH VIRGIN. We will walk and keep awake.

FIFTH VIRGIN. We must be ready when the time comes

THE VIRGINS ON THE OTHER SIDE ARE LYING DOWN HALF ASLEEP. SUDDENLY ONE OF THEM WAKES UP.

VIRGIN SIX. Look, our lamps have gone out.

VIRGIN SEVEN. What shall we do?

VIRGIN EIGHT.Look inside the jars.There may be some oil in them.I forgot. We did not bring extra jars.

VIRGIN NINE. The other group seem to have their jars full.

VIRGIN TEN. Let us ask them to give us some oil.

THEY APPROACH THE OTHER VIRGINS

VIRGIN TEN. Dear sisters, our lamps have gone out. Can you give us some from your jars?

VIRGIN ONE. Sorry dear sisters. We do not know when the prince will come. We have hardly enough oil for our own jars.

VIRGIN NINE. Please do help us.

VIRGIN TWO. We would like to, but we are helpless.

VIRGIN.EIGHT. Don`t be so cruel.

VIRGIN THREE. We don`t mean to be, but we have to first do our own duties.

VIRGIN SEVEN. Give us just a little.

VIRGIN TWO. We cannot. The prince may come any time. Go quickly to the market place, and get more oil.

VIRGIN SEVEN. You are being mean. You can spare each of us a little oil, just a little.

THIRD VIRGIN. We cannot.

(The foolish virgins weep and wail, and get into a frenzy.They turn on the wise virgins)

NINTH VIRGIN. We will take it from you..

(There is a scuffle. The wise virgins hold on to their jars)

VIRGIN SIX. We will have to get some oil.How foolish we were not to bring extra jars of oil.

VIRGIN SEVEN Let. us go quickly, before the prince comes.

EXIT FOOLISH VIRGINS.THERE IS A SOUND OF REVELRY. ENTER THE KING, QUEEN, ATTENDANTS AND PRINCE

KING. It is dark, on one side of the courtyard. Luckily, There is light on the other. We will go that way.

VIRGINS TOGETHER. Welcome your majesties.

KING. Come with us.

THE VIRGINS FOLLOW THEM. THE PRINCE GOES OFFSTAGE. PREPARATIONS ARE MADE FOR THE WEDDING.GARLANDS ARRANGED, CHAIRS DRAPED WITH SILKS ETC.

ENTER FOOLISH VIRGINS, THEIR LAMPS BLAZING BRIGHTLY. THEY SEEK ADMITTANCE.THE KING SENDS AN ATTENDANT,

ATTENDANT. What do you want?. The King is busy.

SEVENTH VIRGIN. We were asked to attend him.(The attendant goes to the King,and whispers to him. The king comes to the door.)

KING. Who are you?

VIRGIN SIX. We are the virgins sent to light your way.

KING. I did not see any light. Did you O queen?

QUEEN. I did not. The ladies with the lamps are already with us. The rest of the hall was dark.(Turns to her attendant) Is that not so.

QUEEN`S ATTENDANT. Yes, your majesty. It was so dark on one side,we nearly tripped on our gowns.

KING. Where were you.?

VIRGIN TEN. We had gone to fill our laps with oil

.KING> You made your king wait, while you went to fill your lamps You should have brought oil with you.. You lazy, stupid creatures, I do not know you. I do not want you here. Go from hence,You should have been prepared for me like your sisters.

They will be richly rewarded. (To Attendants) Send them out.

ATTENDANT. You heard what the king said. Go from here.

ATTENDANTS HUSTLE OUT THE FOOLISH VIRGINS.

The KING TURNS .THE PRINCE HAS ENTERED WITH HIS BRIDE.

MUSIC.KING GESTURES TO THE WISE VIRGINS.)

You waited for me, prepared your lamps for me, and lit my way. Come now and join in the ceremony..(MUSIC….FESTIVITY…..BLACK OUT) END OF PLAY

PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS.

A note on production.

The script should run to ten to twelve minutes, or more.

There are song and dance sequences,a scuffle and other forms of action, which would altogether take about six minutes.Action has been mixed with dialogue to prevent a young audience from getting bored and restless..

This parable could easily be put in modern times. It depends on the production requirements, and the producer.

There are thirty five speaking parts, with a possibility of adding as many players as required on the stage in the crowd scene.

In the courtyard sequence,it is possible to use figures moving upstage, people waiting for the king, people in various stages of slumber. The prime action could be by the virgins own stage, possibly even using the apron.

The script leaves room for innovation. Finally, the presentation is up to the interpretation of the director.

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