

Keval Arora's Kolumn – Casting Discordance and Difference

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When speaking to students about basic differences between written and performed narratives, I find their responses falling into mainly two categories. Some prefer the novel for the freedom it grants readers by virtue of the story being embodied purely as words on a page, as verbal stimuli that allow readers to visualise fictional worlds through their own imagination. Others argue in favour of the challenge posed by performed narratives in theatre and cinema because the non-verbalised quality of visual data permits considerable latitude (and difficulty) in ascribing meanings and words to that which is being shown. It is not possible or necessary to reconcile these responses because discovering greater pleasure in one over the other is a matter of temperament more than anything else.

As for the argument that data transmitted through visibility allows considerable latitude in interpretation, one needs to remember that interpretive latitude is not merely a consequence of the visual nature of performance. After all, words and speech are also vital factors in the stories that theatre and cinema offer us. It is the absence of an overarching perspective in the guise of an authorial voice that crucially produces our sensation of being left to our own devices when we watch a performance. Choices are of course exercised by the director, the actors and the several designers in shaping the performative text, but finally

spectators respond to these choices after their own fashion, sifting, digesting and naming things according to their own proclivities and experience. The best plays facilitate such latitude; only the very worst thrust pre-digested meaning capsules down spectators' gullets.

In most theatre, we see things happen on stage and find words for them as we go along, balancing and ordering information to fit into the overall scheme that gradually takes shape within us. It isn't easy: rendering the inherent ambiguity of visual data into the grasping fixity of ideas and our words for these is troublesome, but we manage nonetheless to the best of our individual abilities. It's when things don't quite fit that matters become interesting. The discordant note is quickly checked for whether it is accidental or deliberate. If we conclude that it was unplanned, the matter is set aside or filed away. But, when the discordance appears to be deliberate, spectating becomes a difficult business.

By its very nature, discordance catches us unprepared and leaves us to fend for ourselves. But how do you do that when the signposts along the way suddenly appear in an unfamiliar language? It gets even more complicated if the play induces its discordant note not simply through a belying of audience expectations but also through entering terrains that challenge the audience's sense of propriety and correctness. With one man's meat being another man's poison, spectators no longer react in contiguous fashion. The same show evokes a mixed response. Or, some performances are received with hostility, while others drum up applause beyond the performers' own expectations.

One such instance of discordance is the way racial and regional difference – skin colour, speech and accent – are presented in the theatre. We've heard Asian actors who work in the West complain of racial prejudice in casting. Not simply in terms of a ghettoization of their talent – that is, of their being employed only for the few pronouncedly Asian roles

that are available in local theatre – but also that they sometimes lose out in even this race when non-Asian actors are chosen to play Asian characters. (Remember our discontent when Attenborough preferred Ben Kingsley over our own Naseeruddin Shah for his Gandhi?) It is possible to seek legal redress when employers make workplace distinctions on the basis of racial or cultural identity. But actors are accustomed to being ousted or accommodated on the basis of whether they 'look the part'. When Roysten Abel speaks of the genesis of his *Othello: A Play in Black and White* lying in his actress wife being rejected for a role because she 'didn't look Indian enough', we are reminded that this can be an intra-cultural problem too.

Attenborough's response regarding his choice of actor for Gandhi – 'I looked only at acting ability' or something to that effect – seemed a tad too convenient at the time, but today when groups adopt the same method in reverse flow as they cast actors of colour in roles that were hitherto regarded the province of the great white male, do we not approve? However, we have to recognise the inadmissibility of regarding such levelling out simply as an equal-opportunity initiative. 'Colour blindness' is an undoubtedly progressive policy in employment offices, but I'm not sure it ought to be taken uncritically on board in the realm of performance. Directors may well deserve praise in declaring some roles to be colour neutral – not all; it would take considerable rewriting to have some roles, say, *Othello*, not played as a black man – but spectators cannot be expected to collude with such erasure when colour-neutral casting is made operative.

Take, for instance, the choice of an actor of Jamaican descent to play the king Creon in a production of Sophocles' *Antigone* that the British Council had brought down here several years ago. Having a black Creon amidst a society of white Thebans inevitably drew attention to the skin tone of the actor and posed questions as to how 'black' was being 'read' in the

portrayal of this despotic do-gooder. It is difficult to not see the actor's colour as an articulation of the tyranny Creon practises over the citizens of his state. In which case, does not the director's decision to have a 'black' actor play the role – especially as this decision seems an individualised departure from conventional practice – constitute a racial slur? The funny thing about this particular production was that everyone on both sides of the Kamani curtain seemed oblivious to Creon's pigmentation, thereby reminding us that political correctness is a sly ophthalmic disease that can strike any time in the oddest of public spaces.

The instance of Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* is slightly different. When the film version of his theatre production was screened in Delhi, most people seemed transfixed by the fact that the roles of Bhishma and Bhima had been assayed by black actors. At a discussion that followed the screening, the matter was repeatedly raised much to the bewilderment of Brook's cast. Interestingly, the indignation provoked by the casting was not consensual. Those who were upset about Bhishma 'Pitamah' being ensconced in a black skin had little problem with Bhima's coloration. On the other, those who were uneasy with the apparently racist conjunction of the Bhima actor's colour and his playing of Bhima in a manner that bordered on minstrel clowning had no problems with the quiet dignity awarded to Bhishma, the actor's colour notwithstanding.

A similar problem is 'visible' each year in the casting policy employed for student productions at the National School of Drama. In an attempt to honour the 'National' in its name, the NSD today offers acting roles in its Hindi language productions to all its acting students, regardless of their ability to speak the language comfortably. Here too, one can respect the policy of fairness that underlies this decision, but in no way does this obviate our discomfort as spectators when we are expected to ignore the aural discordance that ensues in performance. Little attempt is made to ground or

'explain' within the fiction the fact of such difference, so audiences take these productions at half-cock so to speak, responding to some and ignoring some other stimuli emanating from the stage.

In contrast stands a production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* that's been impressing audiences wherever it has played. By showcasing a cast where the tallest male actor is merely 4ft 5in to the female actors who tower above them in height, the production *DollHouse* by the New York-based avant-garde theatre company Mabou Mines embodies the questions discussed above as an unrelenting problematic. In this production, Ibsen's theme of repressive gender inequality is heightened through a set design that is scaled to cater to the men's heights, as a result of which the women find themselves constantly boxed in, cramped and ignored in a world insensitive to their needs.

Dwarfs (to deliberately use the D-word) have for long been staple figures of fun as circus clowns, and we have learnt as adults to not pander any more to the heightist prejudice inculcated in us as children. But, what does one do when a play unequivocally asks us to acknowledge dwarfism as the theatrical sign of a blustering patriarchy? Mark Povinelli who plays Torvald has said that any character he portrays always becomes "a little person", that it would be ignoring the obvious to pretend otherwise, and that this is not a matter for audiences to decide. However, it is also an accepted proposition in activist politics that the victim's concurrence is not cited to determine whether an atrocity has occurred. So, to what extent can the fact that the play's politics is beyond reproach justify the calculated use of deformity to signal that politics? Do we castigate Mabou Mines for resorting to exploitative casting in *DollHouse*, or do we celebrate the courage of the theatre group and the actor in not persuading audiences to look at plays with eyes half-shut to undeniable fact?

The jury's still out on that one.

Shiela Bhatia – A legend of Theatre & Punjabi Operas passes away (Smita Vats)

Shiela Bhatia – A legend of Indian Operas passes away

An Orbitalary by Smita Vats



Artists of Delhi Art Theatre remembering Sheila Bhatia
Shiela Bhatia

Sobbing actors and singers bid Sheila Bhatia Farewell at a Memorial Ceremony on the 22nd February, at the National School of Drama. A Theatre Legend of all times she had passed away peacefully after breakfast on 17th February 2008. Shiela Bhatia was born in Sialkot. While she had no formal training in Punjabi folk music, the only music she had learnt was till class 8, her knowledge of Punjabi folk, some say, even surpassed Bulle Shah. She drew from this knowledge all her life. She would have been 90 on the 1st of March.

Once in Delhi, she along with Hali began the Delhi Art Theatre. With Shiela Bhatia, was born Punjabi Opera. Shiela wrote and directed plays in Urdu and Punjabi. During her lifetime she wrote and produced 29 original Punjabi operas. The first was *Call of the Valley* which was based on her experiences in Kashmir (pre-partition) *Heer Ranjha* was the first full length musical that she wrote as well as directed. That play is known for the mark it left on audiences at that time. Some other plays she wrote are *Chann Badla Da*, *Ghalib Kauntha*, *Nadir Shah* and *Dard Ayega Dabe Paon*.

She lived all her life in Lahore, Kashmir and Delhi , which she finally made her home. Despite her best efforts, the Delhi Art Theatre had to be shut down due to a lack of funds and loosing artists to radio and TV. This was a huge loss to Punjabi Opera and to the nation.

Thadi Times

Thadi Times

A Short Story

By

Dr. Ravi Bhatia



Having spent the majority of my 28 years in the hospital campus it wasn't unusual for me to be quite familiar with the

surroundings. As a young child I used to accompany my father to the fruit vendor across the road, often I would find medical students clad in their aprons with their stethoscopes hung carelessly around the shoulder clustered around the teashop. On further enquiry I came to know the teashop was called *Thadi*. As I grew up, my interactions with medical students increased and slowly the word *Thadi* found a place in my jargon.

I would often dream of sitting on the *Thadi* and having a cup of tea. My father would rebuke me by saying that one has to burn a lot of midnight oil to be eligible for that rustic charm. I did burn midnight oil but as luck would have I had to go Poona for doing my medical studies as a result of which I was deprived of this rustic charm.

AFMC being a defence establishment there wasn't anything like a *Thadi* instead we had a huge canteen with well-lined chairs and uniformed waiters. A distant cry from the roadside *Thadi*. Canteen was quite often a misnomer in AFMC as one had the CSD wherein one could buy everything sundry, the wet canteen wherein one could gossip over a cup of tea, the cafeteria where one could get a hot cup of coffee and a delicious bun *bhurji* even in the wee hours of morning.

As the clock used to strike four, hordes of students used to make a beeline towards the canteen. What better was than a cup of steaming coffee to relieve one of postprandial somnolence! The discussions in the canteen used to be as varied as Sachin's cover drive to our Professor of Surgery's going abdominal girth. Our *canteenwala* had a very strong sixth sense and he somehow could guess that the monthly allowance had come from home and would promptly catch shirkers to settle their long overdue monthly bills. It is said that this man could smell money in our pockets even in presence of pungent smell of onions & garlic. Well exactly he was not a Jew, but the man could take care of money, as no other living mortal was known to have taken care. There was strong rumour that a

few renowned industrialists of Pune used to visit him after dark for consultation.

Whether the rumour is true or false does not concern me or for that matter to readers of this treatise.

Well it reminds me of the marathon runner Sardar Gurmeet Singh. His hobby was to give a feast to his fellow cadets without spending a single paise from his own pocket. It is a different thing that his pocket was always empty. To foot the lavish feasts he would lure the cricket crazy *canteenwala* into laying a bet over some obscure cricket record. Yours truly, who was considered a walking encyclopedia on sports, would often referee the bets. As a result of which I always had my share of mouth-watering omelets for free.

Canteen used to be a great place to study humanity. The jovial Jat, bulky surd, the god fearing *tam bram*, the nervous wreck, in fact, almost everyone used to be there. If there were a place, wherein one wanted to study human character, canteen was the place to be. Canteen used to also serve as a rendezvous for many of the young lovebirds, wherein they could sit for hours undisturbed. Come the exam season and the *canteenwala* used to be a happy man. For it meant an endless supply of *bun bhurjis* and cups of steaming coffees. During the exam times a visit to the canteen was mandatory for not only did it provide one with the necessary dose of caffeine but one could also discuss something important with other batch mates.

The cafeteria owner at AFMC was a pot bellied gentlemen called Laloo, one had to see him to believe how popular he was. From playing the role of agony aunt to posing as a model for the portrait competition – he had done it all. Laloo had this strong sixth sense wherein he could guess correctly as to whether the monthly allowance had arrived or not. Promptly he would ask for the dues to be settled. Laloo did help many of us in need. For those of us who were weak hearted Laloo was always there to provide us with words of encouragement and

oily bun bhurjis.

For many of my friends bunking a daily visit to the canteen was considered a sin. Canteens were visited with the same religious fervor as holy shrines were. Canteens also provided us with the necessary break one so often needed after going through the bulky harrisons and baileys.

The cosmopolitan nature of AFMC was also reflected in the nature of dishes available at the various canteens on the campus. From mouth watering *medhu vadas* to the steaming *rajma chawals* the canteen had it all. It was an assortment of dishes suited entirely for the palate.

The innovative amongst us found the canteen a great place to study. Unmindful of the clattering of cups, shouting of the seth we would immerse ourselves headlong into our Bailey's with just one motive of beating the Final MBBS exam. Café Coffee Day's punch line "A lot can happen over a cup of coffee" often used to come true in the canteen. Many great love stories started and ended over a cup of coffee.

With multiple canteens being the rule of the day at AFMC many of my friends had a fixed schedule wherein they would give a flying visit to all the three ones. The mid way canteen was one popular joint with the Girls hostel being a mere 100 meters away it did provide one with a great vantage point. For all those of us interested in bird watching midway was the place to be in. It was a feast for the eyes as well (Pun intended).

Canteens used to help a lot in increasing camaraderie between the under grads and the post graduate students. Many of our seniors would invite us for a cup of coffee and share their college days with us. Nothing had changed, only time had flown. It was over to the canteen once again.

My experience with the *Thadi* is quite limited as it was only during my internship that I was a part of RNT Medical College.

During this period *Thadi* was a place one looked to for getting some valuable tips from seniors who had made it in the P.G. Entrance. The focus had shifted from one of joyful escapades to that of serious business – the P.G entrance. One would also devise new ways of maroing Furlough so as to study for the exam. Majority of the discussions used to be regarding the P.G exam. How times had changed. *Thadis* used to serve as place for the seniors to indulge in a friendly ragging encounter with the freshers. After the ragging session was over the seniors used to throw a party for the fresher students.

Residency brought with it's own share of newer experiences, the hurried gulping of coffee so that one didn't get late for the morning rounds. Jodhpur was one place wherein one could get really spicy *mirchibadas* enough to open up all the faculties of the body. The steamingly hot *mirchibadas* and the sugary *jalebis* did provide the first year resident with all the necessary dose of carbhohydrates and proteins one needed to survive the tiring travails of residency.

Since I have always been an early riser in my life it wasn't unusual for me to visit the canteen for a cup of coffee at six in the morning. Coffee with two *Khari* biscuits was the breakfast many a times. Very often or not I found myself surrounded by relatives of patients trying to enquire about the child's health. At times I used to get flustered at this invasion of my privacy but slowly I could see their point of view as well and started enjoying the morning conversations with them. I was sometimes embarrassed at the attention showered on me by the attendants. Remember the houseman is one who remains in the ward the maximum, so it wasn't quite long before the attendants used to look up to me as the knight in shining armor. Canteen also served as place to break the ice between residents in pediatrics and gynecology. It wasn't long before having a cup of coffee with our counterparts in the gynae dept became a routine.

Time has flown by, the rustic charm of the *Thadi* being

replaced by the hot coffee in the doctors duty room. The canteen is not merely a building but is an entity. Many medical students have spent their time in the canteen and many would do so in the future. It's more than structure it's an entity by itself.

Long live the *Thadi!!!*

(The writer is an alumnus of Armed Forces Medical College, Pune, currently working as a pediatrician in Udaipur, Rajasthan)

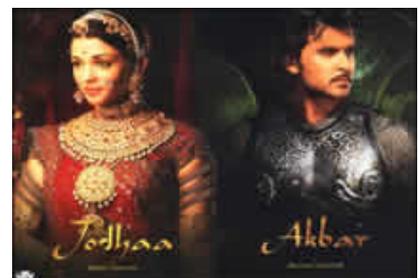
For an interesting interpretation of tam bram click the URL below:

Tam Bram I am!

Jodha Akbar – The Film

Jodha Akbar – The Film

Seema Bawa analyses this highly controversial film with a historical perspective



Actors: Aishwarya Rai and Hrithik Roshan

The historian in me could not resist having a *dekko* at a historical romance based on a character such as Akbar, who indeed is a larger

than life figure of world history. A man of vision, statesmanship and great depth Akbar was the *Insaan-e-Kamaal* of his era. Hrithik Roshan as the young Akbar indeed does not disappoint even though in terms of physique he does not match the descriptions of the historical Akbar. The scenes depicting his valour, strength and prowess in battle, though competently performed are not exceptional. It is the sheer regalness of his bearing and the small details such as the fluid and effortless movements with which he sits on the throne, an act which requires immense theatrical perfection, that help him make the character his own. The scene showing Akbar getting into a trance while listening to mystical music of Sufi dervishes is authentic to the sources and enacted with great felicity. Aishwarya Rai as Jodhaa is right out of Mughal-Rajput miniatures paintings in her stance, apparel, ornaments and indeed her entire external persona.

The character of Akbar is better delineated because of the wealth of source material available, much of which is hagiographic in nature. That is not to say that the counterview was not available as is seen from the killing of Adham Khan Akbar's foster brother. Other aspects of Akbar's prowess such as his exceptional skill as a bare-hand fighter, his dueling an elephant, his consulting philosophers of other faiths; all having basis in historical sources ring quite true in the film.

Jodhaa, on the other hand, being largely a figment of the writer-director's imagination, has been conceptualized with less depth. The single character trait that has been reiterated is her spirit, and her spirited resistance to patriarchal values which while anachronistic to the period depicted, is also quite tedious. Her depiction as a Rajput woman of honour and integrity is overstressed.

As for the characterization of secondary characters, unlike *Lagaan*, in *Jodhaa Akbar* this aspect has been largely ignored. Instead we have stereotypes paraded as Rajput Ranas, and good and faithful courtiers such as the *Khan-i-khanan* and Todar Mal versus fanatical *ulema* and scheming relatives. The entire structure of Mughal aristocracy, the *mansabdars*, so significant for the actual and visual construction of the Mughal era, is overlooked.

The film succeeds in reconstructing the sense of architectural spaces of the grand Mughal era, especially the *Diwan-i-Aam*. The battles and the epic scale are well done even though the armies rush towards each other rather than in formation.

The music of AR Rahman goes well with the film but does not stand out. The background score though is excellent.

The film is at one level an elaborate seduction of the spirited though mono-dimensional Jodhaa by a rather desirable Akbar. The plot is entirely based on coitus-interruptus, which is interrupted ad-nauseum where the consummation is heartily to be wished for so that one can finally go home. The sexual tension is very well structured and indeed works very well but for the length it has been stretched out. The political intrigues and the romance appear to be yoked together by violence and are not linked organically. Indeed they should have been two separate films.

Perhaps the entire relationship of Jodhaa and Akbar should have been read within the context of sexual politics that underlay the harem of the Mughals, which could have served as an interesting back drop to the delineation of Emperor Akbar, arguably the greatest monarch and statesman this land has seen. We know that Akbar had at least two wives (besides many concubines) before he married the Rajput princess. The Rajput princess, whatever her real name may have been, would have been competing with them for her Emperor's favours and allusions to the same may have made interesting viewing. Instead the harem intrigues center around her conflict with Maham Anaga Akbar's foster mother whose importance had waned by the time Akbar attained adulthood.

The film is largely didactic in that it addresses issues of shared cultural heritage and communal harmony without appearing to preach. The historicity of Jodhaa/ Harka or Jia Bai is irrelevant to the film.

Keval Arora's Kolumn – who's afraid of the documentary film

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who's afraid of the documentary film

Remember the cynical manoeuvring by which the Film Federation of India had, some years ago, denied entry to video documentaries in their festival? And how this had brought home the threat that this medium can pose to vested interests? After initially denying space to video films in its international film festivals, ostensibly because these were 'in a different format', the Federation had inserted a censorship clause for all Indian entries to the festival. The row that ensued had been extensively reported in the media, so a bald re-iteration should do for now. Film-makers had come together to form an organisation named VIKALP with the aim of safeguarding the rights of documentary film-makers. Launching a Campaign Against Censorship (CAC), they had run a widely attended 'Films for Freedom' programme of screenings and discussions at educational institutes.

This proactive initiative has had an interesting spin-off. It has placed the agenda of activism and its methods on the front-burner for a generation that is often written off as a self-absorbed 'I' rather than a 'why' generation. (By the way, what is this generation's current alphabetic habitation? Is it still Generation Y, or is it now staging its last stand as Gen-Z?) The video documentary has, as a result, been so comfortably privileged as the conscience keeper of the

nation that I'm tempted to play the devil's advocate and ask if theatre isn't a better mode of communication through which activist agendas can be carried out. However, before outlining crucial differences between the video documentary and theatre, let's identify some strengths that both share.

The video documentary and theatre performance have, unfortunately, often been disparagingly prized as no more than a handmaiden to other activisms – as techniques by which grass-root actions extend or advertise their interventions. Such a view has treated video and theatre as little more than a courier service, as blandly variable vehicles of a relentless messaging. Put another way, the medium has been equated with its message; and has therefore been valued, from its aims to its achievements, for the literal directness of its effort. NGOs have been particularly susceptible to this lure of social advertising, perhaps in the belief that generating the same message through a variety of formats extends its effectiveness, even though all it really does is relieve the tedium. If Doordarshan was obsessed years ago with televised puppet theatre as its favoured mode of disseminating advice to farmers and pregnant women, it's the NGOs' turn now to patronise street theatre with a similarly deprecatory optimism.

Why puppet theatre and street theatre is anybody's guess. I don't think the social sector's preference for these two forms is based on any insight into their potential. Rather, these forms are trivialised when used as a platter for pre-digested data and handed-down attitudes, as a dressing-up that goes hand in hand with a dumbing-down. Obviously, state television and the NGO sector rate the urban proscenium stage as the 'true' theatre, and puppet theatre or street theatre as cute country cousins suitable for rustic and other under-developed tastes. (Not that its performers have seemed to mind: in a shrinking market, even wrong attention is welcome as preferable to none.)

Yet, it must be pointed out that there is a faint glimmer of wisdom in the social sector's choice of theatre and documentary film for carrying out its activist agendas. This wisdom is hinged on two

features common to all performance: greater accessibility, and the affective power of story-telling. Performative cultural modes are accessible to audiences in a special way because they circumvent the barriers of literacy and the drudgery of reading. Such accessibility is then magnified through the affective power of stories that theatre and film usually place at their centre. To the extent that the theatre and the documentary film tell stories, they can never be reduced to mere data transcription codes. It is immaterial whether their stories are real or fictional, or whether these are particular instances or typical cases, because performative modes that tell stories irradiate even simple statements with a penumbra that deepens, authenticates and often problematises the business of a literal messaging. Clearly, the potential of theatre and film for activist causes remains unrealizable if these are used merely to sugar-coat mundane fare.

It is when we define accessibility in physical terms that differences crop up in the respective potential of film and theatre as activist space. Film is unrivalled in its ability to reach out to vast numbers of people. There is no gainsaying the seduction of spread: if maximising contact with people is vital to the activist impulse, the medium that reaches out more effortlessly will obviously be regarded as the more enabling one. In contrast, theatre performances exist in the singular and have to be re-constituted afresh for each act of viewing. Not only does this call for much more forward planning, it also implies that there can be no guarantee that later shows will work exactly like the earlier ones. Films, on the other hand, travel to venues more rapidly than do theatre troupes and offer an assurance of stable replication (every spectator gets to see exactly the same thing as created by its crew, give or take some transmission loss on account of projection equipment).

Of course, problems of technology and finance do cramp film-makers, sometimes so severely that I think 'accessibility' should be defined not just in terms of audience comprehension and taste, but also in terms of the artist's access to the tools of her art. However, recent developments in video technology have ensured that these twin pressures are less burdensome to today's film-maker – high-end digital

cameras have become cheap enough for independent film makers to acquire their own hardware; sophisticated editing software, faster computer processors and capacious storage disks now enable footage to be processed at home. The result: a fresh impetus to the documentary film movement which is evident in the range and number of films being made today.

It is interesting to note that if this celebration of accessible technology and reduced expenditure were to be taken to a logical conclusion, it is theatre rather than the video film that would shine in an advantageous light. It's cheaper to make plays than films, and it's possible to make them without recourse to equipment of any kind other than the human body. Most theatre performances can be designed without technological fuss in a way that even the barest film cannot. Such a theatre gains a quality of outreach that far outstrips the reach of film. For, what technology can ever hope to compete with the affordability and the portability of the body and the voice? Sure, this isn't true of all theatre productions. But I would argue that productions which depend on technological assists for their effects (take, for instance, the romance with projected images that most plays glory in nowadays) end up shackling themselves in ways that erase their fundamental nature. I say this fully aware that some of us believe that the facility which technology brings in some ways is well worth the price that has to be paid in others.

Take another difference between film and theatre. Films possess a huge advantage in terms of authenticity in reportage. They have no peer if the business of activism is to disseminate images and narratives of actuality, to show things as they actually are. But, if the primary purpose of activism is to persuade and engage with people, then the advantage that film enjoys over theatre is considerably neutralised. The very attractions of the film medium – stability, replication, transportability – become limitations from this point of view.

It is a truism worth repeating that the uniqueness of theatre performance is that it is a live event. People come together at a particular time, to a particular place, for a transaction where some people show things to others who watch. In film, there is no

equivalent scope for interaction and therefore no lively relation between actor and spectator. The idea of a collective spectatorship – where the audience becomes a prototypical community – is of course common to both film and theatre. But, in the latter, this ‘community’ includes the actor as well. It is not just the audience that watches the actor, but the actor too who ‘reads’ his audience and subtly alters his performance accordingly., Interaction, engagement and persuasion between the performers and audience is so central to theatre that it is often the richest source of dialogue in the performance event.

Where, pray, is any of this possible during a film screening? The film spectator remains more or less a passive recipient of a fixed structure. The film may well ‘play’ with the spectator’s responses, but even such playing is welded to a grid that is frozen unalterably on videotape or celluloid. Interactions in the theatre between performer and spectator are, in contrast, dynamically dependent on the particulars of that performance. In other words, the fragile instability of theatrical performance becomes a powerful opportunity for an activist intervention, as is evident in the way Augusto Boal has actors interrupt the performance and address audiences directly in his Theatre of the Oppressed. Techniques used in Theatre-in-Education methodologies (‘Hot-seating’, for instance, where spectators talk back to ‘characters’ in the play and offer their comments) is another case in point.

As I said, where, pray, is any of this possible with film?

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Book Mark – Saath Chalte Hué

• Rowing Together

*Meenakshi F Paul Reviews the Book of Poems which will be read out
live by the two poetesses at IIC on April the 28th*



Poet to poet translation, infrequent in the past, is gradually increasing as a dynamic collaboration between creative imaginations. Transcreation requires sensitivity, understanding, felicity with words, sensibility and imagination to avoid being wooden and clumsy. Often, writers are averse to their works being translated because the process becomes a mere faithful rendering, rather than catching the essence and flavour of the work.

Therefore, it is a good idea to have poets translate each other's writings, thus, giving the poems a whole new persona in clothes of different fabrics and hues while preserving the essential grain and spirit of the inspiration. Since 2005, the collaborative "Poet to Poet Translation Project" of Cove Park Resource Centre, British Council Scotland, and Edinburgh:UNESCO City of Literature successfully showcased how mutual transcreations across cultures and languages may be rewarding, both for the poets and for the readers. In India, Sukrita and Savita Singh have brought together *Saath Chalte Hué • Rowing Together* with reciprocal transcreation of poems into Hindi and English. This commendable creative cooperation between the two poets reveals how creative egos are channelled to a rich partnership; as both claim each other's poetry for themselves, imbuing them with their own colours through the prisms of their experience and imagination. The title evokes the words of Sri Chinmoy: "O my friend, / Let us claim each other first. / then let us walk together / Towards our destined goals." This kinship is apparent throughout the ambulations of the poets alongside each other.

The rendering of *Saath Chalte Hué* into *Rowing Together*, or vice-versa,

is an apt pointer to the travellers who veer away from the everyday and the obvious to burrow deep into the undiscovered, the unexplored. 'Rowing' suggests the effort made in concert, the delight of the voyage and the joy of arrival. It also gives weight to the importance of mutual trust and equal energy and commitment in the enterprise.

The poems are divided thematically into eight sections with poems by Sukrita and Singh in the original juxtaposed with the transcreated versions. The name of the 'original' writer is given at the bottom of the page, the translation alongside is by the poet rowing with her. Both blend seamlessly together largely because of the empathy between the poets, which helps them encompass not only the words but also the silences of the poems.

The first section: Hona • Being has eight poems, five by Sukrita and three by Singh. The poems revolve round the desire to be and the trepidation of the unknown. "Jab Saanp Ashray ke Liye Aaye • When the Snakes Came for Shelter" by Sukrita is a powerful and intense poem, which uses the symbol of the snakes to foreground the struggle for freedom in Zimbabwe and the continued peacetime battle against treachery and oppression of women everywhere. The translation into Hindi, for the most part, matches the English and is able to catch the sinister undertone admirably: "Her long dark limbs / Glistened / And entwined in the coiling / snakes/ As darkness slithered / Towards the break of dawn / Haunting Salvador Dali"—"Uske chharharey kaley ang / Chamakte thhé / gunthhe hué kundali marte / saanpon se / Jab pahuncha andhera rengta hua / Bhor ke ujale ki taraf / Salvador Dali ko haunt karta hua". Singh's "Prem ke Baare Mein • Of Love" captures the lost promise of Sylvia Plath's life and the poetry she could have created. The pathos of her death in lonesomeness and despair questions the man-woman relationship and the haloed idea of love.

The second theme: Srijana • Creating has five poems by Singh and four by Sukrita. Singh's poems explore the agonizing process of writing, of translating the imagined on paper: "For some times now / A poem lay within me / I told her wait as yet [...] / Why is life for such as us / so troubled / So difficult" ("Hum Jaison ka Jivan • Life of Such as

Us"). In "Gallery Mein • In the Gallery" Sukrita dextrously interplays images of steel, human flesh and trees to underscore the paradoxes of livings just like the tree trunks as pieces of art can be "A withering or a blossoming".

Section three entitled: Anyata • Othering consists of four poems by Singh and three by Sukrita. Singh uses concrete imagery in "Sara ka Sundar Badan • Sarah's Beautiful Body", "Allen ka Dost • Allen's Friend", and "Ruth ka Sapna • Ruth's Dream" to evoke alienation and emptiness. Singh employs the snow motif in many poems to underline the difficult and the sad but, paradoxically, desired experience by the poet. Sukrita's poems are musings on the life of the elderly in a materialistic and individualistic society ("America mein Budhate Hué • Ageing in America") and of the homeless but spirited poor in the workers' world ("Hum Beghar • We the Homeless") The poems are vignettes of the close 'other' within us who we are afraid to encounter. "Sunami ke Snapshots • Tsunami Snapshots" brings out the fundamental unease of the poet with the random draw of hand by nature providence. The helplessness of a sensitive mind while grappling with the tsunamic ironies and paradoxes of life is feelingly articulated.

The fourth theme: Nirkhana • Seeing contains four poems each by the two poets. Sukrita delves into the ineffable bond between mothers and daughters. The continuity of ties in womanhood through the generations is represented by the unsevered umbilical cord of the heart. The pain of birthing and separation is placed hopefully and contrapuntally to the joy of oneness: "I am, / I know now, / my mother, / as you / are yours" ("Itihas • History"). Singh's poems vivify the objectification and suppression of woman as well as her joys and strivings. "Jaise Ek Stree Janati Hai • The Way a Woman Knows" brings out these themes in an interesting metaphor: "Who can get to know the body/ As a woman would / Who can know which boat she can make with it / Which river she can cross."

Section five: Palna • Nurturing puts together three poems each by Singh and Sukrita. Singh evokes nature imagery in her attempts to "make a nest" of belonging and identification in the face of

disjointedness: "Once when I told them my name / I too am a tree I explained / Every tree refused to recognize me". Sukrita, once again, bridges the past and the present, the self and the other with resonant simplicity. An example of her layered verse is apparent in ("Ant se Prarambh • End from the Beginning", in which the primordial forest with an unfathomable well is seen "inviting lovers / to come down the spiral steps / carved on his chest, / to reach the womb of time / and touch the / beginnings of history").

The sixth theme: *Chintana* • Reflecting has one poem by Singh and four by Sukrita. The mood in this section is contemplative and gentle with nature imagery and the theme of bonding foregrounded once more. In this section, despite the loss there is an undercurrent of hope as is made clear in these words: "A suspended story, a void / That was filled / By you and you, / My children" ("Chetana Pravah • Stream of Consciousness"). The seventh section: Pira • Suffering consists of three poems by Sukrita and two by Singh. The section begins with an extremely penetrating "Akhet • The Hunt" on the Gujarat riots in the larger perspective of the brutal, mindless violence in the cycle of creation and destruction, of karma and retribution. It resurrects the: "Ghosts of unborn children / not resting till / they enter bodies of / their killers and of / those who raped their mothers". All the poems in this section make for compelling reading in these times of escalating intolerance and schisms in society. The pain and the mourning of women seek sanity in the encompassing reality where Singh laments: "So many wounds on the body / Many more on the mind / Even more on the map of the country" ("Desh ke Manchitra Par • On the Map of the Country").

The final section, entitled: Basera • Dwelling, houses three poems by Sukrita and five by Singh. "Bevafa Yaadein • Unloyal Memory" uses crisp imagery of a locked-up house to capture the nebulous eroding of remembrances with every re-remembering. "Jo Narcissus ke Saath Dub Gaya • That which Drowned with Narcissus" is a yearning for beauty that is unalloyed, perfect. "Sach Kahin Chala Gaya • Truth has Wandered Away" is a longing for freedom and truth when "We are left only with lies now / That can take us far / [...] Freedom is merely a suspect word /

Power is the real issue.”

Saath Chalte Hué • Rowing Together is a navigation of the broad stream and the backwaters in camaraderie and team spirit. The distinct personalities of the poets complement each other even as they bring their own quintessence to the venture. The reader is taken into the boat as a partner who maps the passing landscape and the stopovers as the poets take up the oars. In midstream the currents of what is meant by ‘original’ work, interlanguage exchanges, and translation as creation are met and grappled with. The baggage of the supremacy of one language is tossed overboard for a lighter, smoother sailing. Both the oars, one of Hindi and one of English, are grasped with equal fervour and command. The craft of poetic creation and transcreation is finely balanced in the rhythm of the rowers. Thus, the deep clear waters as well as the tumultuous rapids of ideas, images and words are negotiated in tandem by both the poet-translators with fluid, clean, and assured strokes. There are, naturally, a few instances when a piece appears more forceful and flowing in one language than the other. For instance, in “When the Snakes Came for Shelter” these lines of underlying portent: “She smelt no danger / Nor did they, / there’d be no holding the venom / if they did”) are somewhat watered down in the Hindi rendering. However, such log jams are very small and occasional. They do not take a bit away from the captivating world that the poets take us to sight downstream. Many poems, such as “Hum Beghar • We the Homeless” obscure the barrier of the original with the transcreated. Each version is complete in itself. Both are ‘original’ even as one is a flawless transcreation of the other. In *Saath Chalte Hué • Rowing Together* the “signposts of having co-travelled” are clear and vivid as the two poet-translators inhabit each other’s imaginative worlds in words and in silences. Medha Singh’s sketches are beautiful icons of the themes and add to the experience of reading the verse. It is hoped that this excellent volume will fuel more such collaborative literary expeditions and discoveries.

Meenakshi F Paul is Associate Professor, HPU Centre for Evening Studies Shimla-171001 (courtesy www.confluence.org.uk)

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HOLLYWOOD DIARY – Colonel Kurtz vs. Moses

HOLLYWOOD DIARY
Colonel Kurtz vs. Moses

by

Naveen Gupta

If destiny were femme fatale that lures fate, then passing away of 84 years old Charlton Heston on 5th April 2008 out of Alzheimer related complications drove this irony all the bit closer in the film noir that is life! On April 3,2008, two days before Heston's death, Marlon Brando would have celebrated his 84th birthday!



Above: Charlton Heston as Mark Antony 1950

No two actors united by death and life in the month of April were such diverse practitioners of their craft or political activists of causes they held dear to their heart. And yet there were remarkable similarities in their lives that compel a look.HOLLYWOOD DIARY – Colonel Kurtz vs. Moses

Marlon Brando was born April 3,1924 (the very same day Doris Day, the

all American sweetheart of 50s and 60s was born) to alcoholic parents as the youngest of three children in Omaha, Nebraska. His mother Dorothy Brando was a community theatre actress and mentor to a very gifted Henry Fonda, then in his teens, when not drunk! It was this troubled legacy that moulded Brando into an enigmatic rebel in real life or on screen!

Charlton Heston was born as John Charles Carter on October 4, 1923 in Evanston, Illinois. His mother remarried a certain Chester Heston, and the ten year boy was rechristened Charlton Heston. Brando's parents separated, when he eleven, and Dorothy Brando moved to her mother's home with her three children in California. Though the Brandos reunited after two years, but the young boy was fast becoming a discipline problem, something Marlon acknowledged in his 1994 autobiography, "**Songs that my mother taught me,**" - "...when you are a child who is unwanted or unwelcome...you look for an identity that will be acceptable!" so young Brando experimented with alternate identities, pretending and thus acting to deal with demons in his teen years.

Heston had no such demons, instead the young boy developed a robust sense of confidence as a defense mechanism, that contributed his charismatic sense of self on screen in the good roles he played or the over the top performances he delivered.



Above: Brando as the iconic Don Vito Corleone in The Godfather (1972).

Brando's abusive father in order to curb Bud Jr. sent him to the same military academy, where he had been educated. Marlon excelled in theatre but in his final year he was expelled for insubordinate and delinquent behaviour! He returned home to dig ditches as a summer job arranged by his father, whereas Charlton at 17 won a drama scholarship to Northwestern University. Brando went to New York, where one sister was trying to be a painter and the other had appeared as an actress on Broadway. In New York, Brando plunged headlong into New School Dramatic Workshop with Stella Adler and later at Actors' Studio with Lee Strassberg, honing his techniques of the 'Stanislavski System', or 'The Method'. This new acting style by proposed and developed by Russian dramaturg, Konstantin Stanislavski; exhorting its disciples to call upon one's internalized memories and emotions as means to express truth in a portrayal. In 1944, a knee injury exempted Brando from active duty in world war II, but Heston spent two years as a radio

operator & gunner with a B-25 Bomber squadron in Alaskan Aleutian Islands. He married his Northwestern classmate, Lydia Marie Clarke; his wife for next 64 years till death did them part.

In 1948, the Hestons move to New York (leaving behind managing of a playhouse in North Carolina) where Charlton was offered supporting role in a Broadway revival of Antony and Cleopatra, Marlon was by now already big time as Stanley Kowalski in **Streetcar named Desire**, written by Tennessee Williams and directed by Elia Kazan. Brando was the third choice for the role after John Garfield and Burt Lancaster had turned down Kowalski. Brando wore tight fitting blue jeans and torn T-shirt for the part of a brute, which has left its singular impact on fashion and glamour industries of America, and in turn the entire world! To this day, Brando's animal cry of "Stella-aaah!" twice in the play resonates in the mind of every actor, trained or untrained.

In 1950, Heston moved to TV, seeing him in CBS production of **Wuthering Heights**, producer Hal B. Wallis of **Casablanca** fame offered him a movie role. Heston's idealistic wife reminded him that they were in the big city to pursue theatre and TV, not movies! Heston cajoled her, "...well maybe for one film to see what it is like..." Meanwhile Brando was preparing with real paraplegics in a hospital ward to gain first hand experience for his debut in Stanley Kramer's **The Men**, the public was astonished to learn that the actor was not a paraplegic but paid actor. Heston was also lauded for his debut in film noir **Dark City**, which brought him to the notice of Cecil B. DeMille.

But now for next 4 years every actor alive would dwarf in front of Brando, as he would be successively be nominated for Oscars. His first hammer blow was screen adaptation of **A street car named Desire** (1951), where the rest of his co-actors, Vivien Leigh, Kim Hunter and Karl Malden walked away with Oscars! Bogart beat Brando for his role in **The African Queen**. The film also bagged the award for art Direction, out of the 12 nominations it got. Brando in reality hated Kowalski, "...he had the brutal aggressiveness...I hate...I am afraid of it..." But in his long career people were going to confuse the man with the sensational characters he created, it was something Kazan had mentioned to Williams, "In addition to his gifts as an actor...he has great physical appeal and sensuality." Brando would become a prisoner in his own gilded cage. Brando was brilliant as Emiliano Zapata in **Viva Zapata** (1952) and as Marc Antony in **Julius Caesar** (1953), he snagged the usual nominations, but the Oscar evaded him. Then came his role as

Terry Malloy in **On the Waterfront**(1954), not only did he win his first Oscar, but bagged the golden Globe, Cannes Film Festival Prize, BAFTA and New York film critics award. He still remains the only American actor to have won BAFTA thrice consecutively, from 1953-55. Marlon Brando had not only arrived, but was now the premier acting talent in the world!



Above: Charlton Heston (left) with Marlon Brando, James Baldwin, and Harry Belafonte at Civil Rights March 1963

Charlton Heston meanwhile essayed a circus manager in 1952 best picture Oscar winner **The Greatest Show On Earth**, lost the Oscar winning role of Sefton in **Stalag 17** to William Holden but hit pay dirt in 1956, portraying Moses in Demille's classic **The Ten Commandments**. Demille gave him the iconic role because 6ft3in tall square jawed Heston, resembled Michelangelo's Moses! Heston played larger than life heroes, who led masses, whereas Brando played the loner, the protagonist who was an anti-social. His characters had no code, except a commitment to style of life, in which he was betrayed by those he trusted, his own! Remember the improvised back of taxi scene with Rod Steiger in **On the Waterfront**, where his Terry Malloy laments:"oh Charlie, oh Charlie! You don't understand, I could have had class...I could have been a contender...I could have been somebody...instead of a bum...which what I am!" He struck a universal chord because Brando lamented for all our failed hopes. The Brando mystique grew from the persona of the gangster leader and outlaw with vulnerability of a Byronic hero. He was the first angry young man, the delinquent and tough rolled into one. be it Terry Malloy or Stanley Kowalski. If there were any doubts about his charismatic acting, they were put to rest in Kramer's **The Wild One** (1954) essaying Johnny Strabler. It would be another 18 years when Brando would pull a coup like that.

In **The Wild One**, Brando gave birth to rebel mixed up teenager in a first motorcycle film, where his leather clad bike gang leader terrorizes a small town with the tagline,"...nobody tells me what to do!" When a mom in the movie wonders what Brando's rebelling against, he fixes her between the eyes with the response , "...Whaddya got?" Not only crew cut T-shirts, jeans and leather jackets sold like never before but an entire bad boy brigade sprang up that aped and copied Brando-James Dean, Elvis Presley, John Lennon, Albert Finney and John Osbourne whose play Look back in anger, gave rise to the "Kitchen Sink" movement on the English Stage.

In 1958, Brando giving credo to his unpredictability in playing honest roles accepted to portray a confused Nazi officer in **The Young Lions** and turned down the role of Judah Ben-Hur so did Burt Lancaster and

Rock Hudson. Heston had previously purveyed historical roles as diverse as Buffalo Bill in **The Pony Express** (1953) and Andrew Jackson in **The President's Lady** (1953), so after completing **The Buccaneer** (1958) Heston stepped in as fourth choice as lead in **Ben-Hur** (1958). The rest is history! The film went to gross \$37 million in 1959, and Heston would like Brando would be identified with the biblical epic, bagging the best actor Oscar out of the eleven awards the film got. In 1958, Heston portrayed a righteous Mexican detective against Orson Welles, in the film noir **Touch of Evil**, helmed by Welles; critics hail it as Heston's best role ever. But **Ben-Hur** meant that Heston was going to be one-person Hollywood trek through the pages of World History. His solid frame, granite carved profile and voice to match intimidated opponents with a glare. His was righteous anger commanding respect and conveying integrity even in villainous roles. He glorified the power of the individual in sync with Middle America's vision of how the world should be.



Above: Marlon Brando as Colonel Kurtz in Apocalypse Now (1979).

The epics with Heston in lead flew thick and fast; **El Cid** (1961) **55 Days at Peking** (1963) as Michelangelo in **The agony and the ecstasy**, as John the Baptist in **The greatest story ever told**, along with Major Amos Dundee in **Major Dundee** (all in 1965) and General Gordon in **Khartoum** (1966). French critic Michael Mourlet infamously rhapsodized- "... Charlton Heston is an axiom of the cinema!" Heston crowned of 1965 by becoming the President of Screen Actors' Guild for next 6 years, when only 42. Brando was now burning his candle at both ends and was dissipating fast. He snagged another Oscar nomination for **Sayonara** (1967) but the 60s were a whole new ball game for Brando. He started the decade by forming Pennebraker named for his mother; and produced, directed and starred in psychological revenge western **One eyed Jacks** (1961).

But Brando was in a hurry to kill his rebel image and thus followed **The Ugly American** (1963) and the brilliant **Reflections in a golden eye** (1967), where John Huston directed him as the stifled homosexual Major Penderton. But he also did movies like **The Appaloosa** (1966) summed up by late Pauline Kael as "... the dog of a movie about a horse." for money. Brando's two failed marriages, numerous affairs and a new penchant for quarrelling with old time friends such as Sam Spiegel, who had produced *On the Waterfront*, during the shooting of **The Chase** (1968), kept him in tabloids, but his crown was gone. He had been voted as the top box-office star from 1953-59, now in the late 60s, Brando was a had been.

Heston was brilliant as Colonel George Taylor in **The Planet of the Apes** (1968) as Marc Antony in technicolour **Julius Caesar** (1970) science

fiction film of apocalyptic horror in **Soylent Green** (1971). And while Brando's epitaphs were being carved by critics, starting with Truman Capote (way back in 1957), Hollis Alpert, David Susskind and Dwight MacDonald for not returning to stage and abandoning craft for money. Then came the year 1972; Brando declined a young Francis Ford Coppola to portray Don Vito Corleone in **The Godfather**. Brando said, "It is about mafia... I won't glorify mafia!" Mario Puzo sent a letter to Brando to reconsider as the author felt that only Brando could do justice to the job. Coppola convinced Brando for a make-up test, which Brando did himself. The results of the audition left Paramount chief, Charles Bluhdorn, stumped! Brando boycotted the ceremony, becoming the second actor after George C. Scott to refuse an Oscar for best actor. He sent a Native American activist Sacheen Littlefeather to read his protest against stereotypical portrayal of Red Indians by Hollywood and TV. Brando was in the eye of storm once again, on 14th October 1972. **Last Tango in Paris**, premiered. Bertolucci's masterpiece had a 20-year-old Jeanne (Maria Schneider) entering into a no questions asked sexual relationship with 45 years old American expatriate Paul, grieving after his wife's suicide. The film's so called eroticism overshadowed Brando's academy award nominated performance. An embittered Brando limited by his burgeoning weight now became ever more contemptuous of his profession and worked infrequently.

Heston continued to deliver blockbusters **The Omega Man** (1973) **Earthquake** (1974) and an ever-increasing number of cameos, supporting roles and also on theatre. In 1978, Brando became Jor-El in **Superman**, as he got a pay cheque of \$3.7 million for just two weeks work. In 1979, Coppola tried to give Brando's uneven career a lift by offering him the role of iconic Colonel Walter Kurtz in **Apocalypse Now**, fashioned on Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. An overweight Brando would parade around the set, little knowing about the book or his lines. Coppola shot him in shadows with improvised dialogues in the cult classic. To utter the tagline of the character with a close-up, Coppola had to shell out the \$75,000 for an hour's work in which the cranky Brando just had to say, "The horror! The horror!" Brando argued on his part in his 1994 autobiography that Coppola had agreed to let him rewrite the script, but it was Brando's insight that Kurtz have a bald pate and lighting be so devised that the maniacal colonel's eyes were emphasized. In 1980, Brando retired after locking horns with temperamental George C. Scott in the thriller **The Formula**.

Both Brando and Heston spoke openly against racism and were active

supporters of civil rights movement. Heston campaigned for Adlai Stevenson and John F. Kennedy; and during the civil rights march held in Washington D.C. in 1963, Heston, Brando, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, James Garner, Burt Lancaster and Paul Newman represented Hollywood. In 1968, Brando cancelled his lead role in *The Arrangement*, due to Dr. King's slaying and his express desire to devote more time to civil rights movement. The assassination of Robert Kennedy that year, saw Heston the liberal democrat support President Johnson's Gun Control Act and oppose Vietnam War. Brando even funded Black Panthers Party and stopped when the radical group advocated indiscriminate violence for the revolution.



Above: Brando as Emiliano Zapata in a trailer for the 1952 film Viva Zapata!

By 80s, Heston opposed affirmative action, supported gun rights and became a Republican from Democrat and campaigned for Reagan, Bush Sr. and Bush Jr. But his indignation remained righteous; in 1992 he stunned a Time Warner Annual meeting by reading Rapper Ice-T's lyrics aloud from the song 'Cop Killer', from an album released by the company. The song preached killing police and sodomizing women. Heston stood tall, like Moses and asked, "If Adolf Hitler came back with a hot movie synopsis, every studio in town be after it...would Warner's be among them?" Warner Bros. pulled the song from the album. He was the patriarch of being politically incorrect, and won't bow down!

Brando was attacked for his anti-semitism in 1996 on Larry King Live, telling the host "Hollywood is owned by Jews," and yet in 1946, Brando was in Ben Hecht's Zionist play **A Flag is born**, fought for Israel's establishment and smuggling of holocaust survivors to Palestine.

Hollywood's Jew bosses looked the other way at Don Corleone. Family problems and ambivalent sexuality was not Heston's cup of tea, in 1990, Brando's look-alike eldest born Christian shot and killed the Tahitian lover of his half-sister Cheyenne. Christian was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to 10 years, but the great mumbler spoke for an hour in a rambling account of how his ex-wife and he had failed Christian! Cheyenne in 1995, hanged herself at 25 in Tahiti and Brando's third wife and the dead girl's mother Tarita went public with her memoirs *Marlon, my love and torment*, accusing Brando of sexually abusing Cheyenne! Saddened by these incidents Brando returned to screen despite his obesity, difficulty to memorize his lines and childish demands on set, he continued to turn Oscar nominated **A dry white season** (1989) **The Freshman** (1990) **Don Juan DeMarco** (1995) and as

Max in *The Score* (2001) with his disciple DeNiro, where he was unduly tough on the director Frank Oz, the legendary co-producer of **Seasme Street**, as 'Miss Piggy.' Heston remained in demand from his cameo in *Wayne's World 2* till Tim Burton's remake of **Planet of the Apes**. But Heston had been defending the redneck and political incorrectness as President of National Rifle Association from 1998, fighting hip replacement and prostrate remission despite Chemotherapy. In 2000 convention of NRA, Heston Moses like raised a rifle over his head and dared democrat presidential candidate Al Gore to take it away, " from my cold dead hands!" Gore lost the blue-collar votes to George Bush in an election so close that any set back was perilous! Obama and Clinton 8 years later are still asserting the right to bear arms, despite countless school and university campus shootings. Moses was an ardent supporter of Second Amendment, and who defy Moses!

In 2002, Heston went public with his Alzheimer's disease and yet a year later received Presidential Medal of Honor from the President at White house. Till Brando called it quits on 1st July, 2004 at 80, he was to be further maligned in *Brando Unzipped* by Darwin Porter, as being lover of Christan Marquand, Laurence Olivier, Cary Grant, Wally Cox, Rock Hudson, Stewart Granger and Marilyn Monroe. But Brando's neighbour Jack Nicholson had summed up his influence, " There's no one before or since like Marlon Brando...enormous and flawless...like Picasso! He changed my life!"

Heston survived unkind intellectuals like Michael Moore who ambushed him on tape while filming for *Bowling in Columbine*, or that babe eye candy George Clooney who joked about his Alzheimer's, with his Moses like dignity. But in former First lady Nancy Reagan's eulogy sums up the kind of a person Chuck was, " I will never forget Chuck as a Hero on the big screen...but a hero in life...in whatever he was doing!"

Heston played great roles whereas Brando was the greatest actor alive, and as these old world heroes finish one by one in this world of mediocrity, I mourn for them, for they were part of my childhood

HOLLYWOOD DIARY – Orson Welles

HOLLYWOOD DIARY

The Man Who Came In From The Radio

An Insight on Life and Times of Orson Welles by Naveen Gupt



1. In a recording studio, 1938



2. As Citizen Kane



3. In

'Lady from Shanghai'

In Hollywood and its sister city Bollywood; petty mean hearted men with deep pockets or brandishing imposing staffs in their hands, goad the genius. Independence and innovation are not invited unless called for. Much before the label 'indie' became synonymous with filmmakers with derring-do, one man fought with one hand tied, for over five decades to let the independent filmmaker survive and make his mark. This man who started the fire, incidentally was a rank outsider, and remained one throughout his life. Much before he was waylaid by the charms and ways of Lady Cinema, he was a templar knight of Lady Sound. He was Orson Welles; born as George Orson Welles in Kenosha, Wisconsin on May 6, 1915, as second son to an inventor father and a concert pianist & suffragette mother. When little Orson was 6, his alcoholic father separated from Beatrice Ives, his mother, and the affluent world in which Orson was born fell apart but under the wings of his artistic mother the boy imbibed life.

Orson Welles's mother died of jaundice four days after his ninth birthday, and the young boy put down his ambition to be a musician. Orson lost his father, when 15 years old, the summer after his graduation from Todd School for Boys, Woodstock, Illinois. Welles in

his later interviews never hid his guilt in neglecting his father. After a brief tour of Ireland where he bluffed his way on the stage of Gate Theatre, Dublin, pretending to be a Broadway star, he returned home and took to writing adaptations of Shakespeare. In New York, his revival of 'Romeo and Juliet,' caught the eye of John Houseman, who cast him as a lead in various productions of Federal Theatre Project—a part of Roosevelt's work progress administration, which utilized unemployed theatre artistes for work by staging plays highlighting his 'new deal.'

Welles asked to direct a project for Harlem's American Negro Theater by John Houseman, had the 'boy wonder' casting an all-black ensemble in 'Macbeth,' moved to Haiti at the court of King Henri Christophe, with a setting of voodoo witch-doctors (please someone remind me of 'Maqbool' by Vishal Bharadwaj with Shah and Puri as witches!). The play became a landmark of African-American theatre, he further consolidated his image by mounting the farce 'Horse eat hat', and 'Dr. Faustus,' where he used light as a prime unifying scenic element on a dimly lit stage. He carried a coup of sorts when he staged pro-union 'labour opera' by Blitzstein, at Venice Theater at the last minute, instead of the usual venue at Maxine Elliot, blockaded by National Guardsmen, because of a worried Congress on the overt communist tones of the opera. The hallmark of Welles's genius, in that his creativity was a spontaneous burst, full of panache and bluster, and with just a dash of improvisation, was fast becoming his calling card. He was a true genius; he never had to labour at anything he overtook.

Welles and Houseman now formed the Mercury Theatre, its actors included Joseph Cotten, Agnes Moorehead, Ray Collins, George Coulouris, Everett Sloane and other who would continue under Orson Welles baton on stage, radio and later films. Orson Welles was the first biggest superstar of the radio, which in 30s was bigger than the movies and there was no television. His ability as round the clock writer, actor, director, producer made him voice Lamont Cranston in 'The Shadow', the resounding success of which had CBS give him 'The Mercury Theatre on the air,' a weekly hour long show to produce at only 22, it was going to catapult Orson to international fame.

A day before Halloween, on Oct.30, 1938; 9 million Americans tuned into the performance of that evening- an adaptation of 'War of the Worlds,' by H.G. Wells, a science fiction novel about a Martian invasion of the earth. What they heard was ballistic and out of this world, Welles wrote and performed his play so that it sounded like news broadcast about an invasion from Mars. The dance music was interrupted by fake news bulletins about a flaming object landing on a farm near New Jersey! And although paid actors essayed the roles of news announcers, officials and members of administration that an unsuspecting audience was so taken in that people packed the roads, hid in cellars, loaded guns and wrapped their heads in wet towels as protection from Martian gas! For the first time in the history of electronic media people were stuck in a kind of virtual world in which fiction was confused for fact. News of the panic reported by genuine news reports created a national scandal, the public asking for a suitable broadcasting code to ensure a similar incident wouldn't happen again. Today we live in a age of simulation-confusion, a tool essential for television's survival; besides each ridiculous 'breaking news' is hard cash by sponsors!

Hollywood now berated Orson with offers, lures which independent minded Welles resisted but when RKO Pictures president George Schaefer offered \$500,000 for a two picture deal with complete artistic control; it became the greatest contract ever offered to an untried director. Welles and the entire mercury Theatre moved to Hollywood.

For his first project Welles settled for an adaptation of Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness', but the excessive budget and the anti-fascist tenor of story made RKO do a double turn. His second project, 'The Smiler with the knife', was not approved because the studio had no faith in Welles's protégée Lucille Ball's acting prowess. Hard pressed by RKO, Orson left his radio show to Houseman, and came up with 'American,' conceived with his fellow radio-writer Herman J. Mankiewicz; it would eventually become Welles first feature film, 'Citizen Kane.'(1941). The film was mired in controversy from the seeding only. Mankiewicz, banished from the table of the great media

baron William Randolph Hearst and his mistress Marion Davies, the actress, for being a perpetually drunk and notorious gossip based the film on an expose of Hearst's life. But Welles wanting to create a complex character asked Mankiewicz to incorporate elements from lives of Joseph Pulitzer, Howard Hughes, Robert McCormick and the 300 pages of notes he had written on 'Heart of Darkness', in the screenplay. John Houseman was summoned to keep Mankiewicz sober. But the duo in their sly malice towards their young boss worked in cunning autobiographical allusions to Welles, particularly regarding his guardianship. Welles refused unfortunately to incorporate claims about the death of Film Director Thomas Ince being killed on an excursion on a Hearst yacht. Mankiewicz, ironically later lamented and wisely so, that if this material had been left in, Hearst would never have dared to make the public connection to his own life and would have left the film alone.

The completion of the script drew in legendary cinematographer Gregg Toland, who in a moment of bravado placed his Oscar on Orson Welles's table as his calling card and asked for work! Welles with the entire Mercury group in tandem filmed, what is considered the greatest film ever made, by the critics the world over. During the 1950s young French film critics such as Francois Truffaut, Goddard, Chabrol and others were inspired by Welles 'example to make their own films in keeping with 'auteur theory', and gave birth to Nouvelle Vague. The innovative elements of Welles's style exhibited in 'Citizen Kane' were: 1. Composition in depth: the use of extreme deep focus cinematography to connect distant figures in space. 2. Complex mise-en scene, in which the frame overflowed with action and detail. 3. Low angle shots that revealed ceilings making the characters dominant yet trapped in their destiny. 4. Long takes. 5. A fluid moving camera that expanded the action beyond the frame. 6. The creative use of sound as a transition device and to create visual metaphors.

The film was well received by the critics, but it faced distribution and exhibition problems due to the entire might of Hearst thrust against it, the media mogul made it sure that it fared poorly at the box-office. It garnered 9 Oscar nominations but snagged the only one

for original screenplay for Mankiewicz and Welles. In the 1999 HBO movie, 'RKO 281,' John Malkovich as Mankiewicz reminds Liev Schreiber playing Welles – whether Welles will outdo himself at 26 ever again!

His second film, 'The Magnificent Ambersons', (1942) was an adaptation of Booth Tarkington's novel and starred Cotten, Anne Baxter and Agnes Moorehead. At the editing stage RKO and the US government, asked Welles to helm \$1 million semi-documentary, 'It's all true,' to shoot in South America. An unsuspecting Welles embarked on his mission not knowing the cleverly worked clauses that ensured that he had forfeited his rights of artistic control. 3 reels of footage from Welles' original cut was lopped off, and yet the film remains the second greatest all American film ever made, and one of the top ten films ever made in, 'Sight and Sound's' 1982 list. The film bombed at the box-office and Welles' reputation suffered a deathblow, he was dismissed along with his cast from RKO! Welles now took an increasingly active role in American and international politics and used radio and journalism to communicate his forceful ideas widely. He delivered a hit with 'The Stranger', (1946), produced by legendary Sam Spiegel, who again despite Welles' protests took to editing of the film. Welles was now convinced not to be a cog in a Hollywood studio ever and resumed his struggle for the total creative control.

His fortunes continued to waver, with success in radio, but flops on stage especially the musical, 'Around the world in Eighty days.' He agreed to helm the Columbia Pictures, 'The lady from Shanghai,' with his then estranged second wife, Rita Hayworth as co-star in 1947. Again the studio boss Harry Cohn, found the rough cut confusing and ordered extensive editing and reshoots. The film was a disaster at the time of its release in America, though widely acclaimed in Europe, however Hayworth finalized her divorce from a much-embarrassed Welles. In 1948, Welles convinced Republic Pictures to let him direct a low budget version of 'Macbeth', with papier-mache sets and cardboard crowns, it was another disaster. Welles now left US for Europe for an exile of 8 years to explore the possibilities of directing and producing films again, but the reality was that Hearst and FBI head honcho Hoover had him blacklisted in Hollywood, labeling

him a communist.

After 'Black Magic' (1948), Welles appeared as the immortal Harry Lime in 'The Third Man,' written by Graham Greene and directed by Sir Carol Reed in 1949. His bravura performance with Cotton made the film an international hit, and in a poll carried out by BFI in 1999, it was considered the greatest British picture ever made. As luck would have it Welles turned down a percentage of the gross in exchange for a lump-sum advance. Orson Welles now took to channeling his money from acting roles into self-financed adaptation of, 'Othello,' which after two years of filming on location in Europe and Morocco, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and won the Palm d'Or.

His return in 1956 to Hollywood was crowded with numerous appearances on radio and television (notably in 'I love Lucy') and films like 'The Fountain of Youth' and the 'Man in shadow.' In 1958, Universal gave him 'Touch of Evil,' at Heston's suggestion. Welles guided old friends Cotton, Marlene Dietrich, Akim Tamiroff and himself; finishing on schedule and on budget. Out of the blue, the studio wrested the film from him, re-edited and reshot the exposition scenes to clarify the plot. Welles wrote a 58-page memo outlining the suggestions and objections, but the studio executives hacked another 30 minutes to make the film pacier. Even in its mutilated form, the film won the top prize at Brussels' world fair. 'Touch of Evil', from its long-take opening of a car bombing to its denouement, reemphasized Welles' overarching vision of the world where each human act has endless and unforeseen moral consequences. His adaptation of Kafka's 'The Trial', left Truffaut disappointed but then Welles had finished the entire film on almost zero budget and on an abandoned railway station in Paris as improvised location. He completed his Shakespearean trilogy with a triumphant, 'Chimes at Midnight', fashioned from five of Shakespeare's plays and a film in which he played true to life Falstaff.

'The Immortal Story', (1968) was for French television and his final completed film, 'F for Fake' (1973) was sweeping collage of documentary and staged footage, that investigated the thin line between reality and illusion, celebrated all tricksters- including its director, who

had once wanted to be a magician.

In 1971, he was awarded an honorary Oscar for his superlative artistry and versatility in creation of motion picture. Welles sent his best friend John Huston to claim the award. Huston criticized the Academy for awarding Welles while they refused to give him any work. In 1975, AFI presented Welles with their third Lifetime Achievement Award (the other two being John Ford and James Cagney). In his later years Welles did any work, be it voicing of commercials on Radio & TV, Radio Serials and as host on Talk shows to realize funds for his projects. As a lecturer and storyteller, he had no equivalent even when serious obesity restricted his ability to travel. He died of a heart attack at his home in Hollywood, at 70, on October 10, 1985.

At the time of his death, 'The other side of the wind,' an obvious autobiographical film he had been pursuing since 1970s remained unfinished. It was a story of a famous filmmaker, played by John Huston, struggling to find financing for his film, just as Welles was forced to do many times.

Sparkling genius is its own enemy! It makes the foolish look how dumb they actually are; this is the reason why a film making maverick like Orson Welles, who in words of Martin Scorsese was, "responsible for inspiring more people to be film directors than anyone else in the history of cinema," remained an outsider in Hollywood, which did not allow him to make a greater picture than 'Citizen Kane.'

The Benefit of Doubt

T H E B E N E F I T O F D O U B T

(written in 1993 – way before the cyber-era)

by Dr. Reshma



I could hardly wait to get home. How one begins to take one's marriage for granted, even the caring and belonging, would have never struck me, had it not been for these last three months of separation, spent in Jabalpur. The old magic having been revived, I was palpitating like a newly-wedded groom headed for the nuptial bliss! I was too lost in my own little world to notice the cab screeching to a halt, or the driver waiting impatiently for his fare.

The latter, I disposed off quickly, and without even bothering to collect the change, literally leaped to the front door, intending to knock Chitra out with my sudden appearance! I was dying to see the expression on her face at that moment, and had purposely not intimated the time of my arrival to her.

But my meticulously planned-out romantic encounter turned out to be a damp squib after all, as the door was answered by our maid! Worse still, she was not even aware of her memsaab's whereabouts at that early hour. Completely deflated, I re-entered the cold house all by myself, and stretching out on my bed, dialled Swati, Anu & Priya in quick succession. But my attempts to trace Chitra came to a naught, and the eagerness to be with her got laced with a hint of irritation. Where could she be, I thought, a trifle disappointed. Though I could, from all conventional standards, be considered a loving and caring partner, I was unfortunately far too possessive about my wife, and disliked sharing her with anyone else.

Not that Chitra had ever given me a cause for complaint through all our years of marriage. It was just me I guess. For some strange, inexplicable reason, I had always harbored a feeling of insecurity vis-a-vis her, and been forever ready to jump to irrational conclusions. And worse, despite being aware of it, had been unable to do anything about it.

Barring this trait of mine, we had a reasonably good marriage going. And were certainly qualified to win any made-for-each-other contest; the absence of children notwithstanding. A clean chit from the doctors to both of us had diminished our anxieties to some extent, and we had decided to wait patiently for our little guest – whenever it chose to arrive...

The tiredness of the journey was compounded by my convoluted thoughts, and I was almost dozing when something soft and feathery tickled me. I woke up to find Chitra lying next to me, her lips on my forehead, and drew her close, with an urgency bordering on near-violence.

“Where have you been my love? Lord, how I’ve missed you these past few months!” I groaned. “And even if this doesn’t sound very original, let me say it one more time – I can’t live without you, and my little nymph, you better believe that!”

But just as I began lending credence to those lofty statements, I also noticed that it was a different Chitra that lay encircled in my arms. This was not the person I had left behind. The change was too subtle for me to define, but something was certainly missing somewhere. Perhaps that faraway look in her eyes... perhaps an uncharacteristic absent-mindedness in her demeanor... she was certainly not all there.

“Hey! Who dared to claim my wife’s presence at 9.00 A.M. in the morning, depriving me of...” I decided to lose no further moments in making up for the ones already lost, and quickly engaged myself in sealing her responses! Not very successfully though, for she did manage to wriggle one out.

“Sorry for turning your pleasant surprise into a rude shock Akshay, but Swati and I were out shopping – just some knick-knacks you know...”

Her explanations continued, and I suddenly realized why she wasn’t looking at me in the eye. For hadn’t Swati informed me

in the morning that she was off to her daughter's school? I couldn't help wondering what Chitra was up to... what was she hiding behind that lie?

I quickly banished the thought and warned myself – no, I wasn't going to let that green monster near her again. It had tormented us enough in the past; enough, in fact, to actually hurt Chitra on several occasions. But not any more. In any case, this was too insignificant a matter to merit any further attention on my part.

And yet, as the days passed, I was forced to change my opinion; and became almost convinced that I wasn't jumping to any wrong conclusions. Not this time.

I may have been the jealous possessive type. But then, how many benefits of doubt was a wife supposed to get? Thrice, she hadn't been able to explain her by-now-frequent disappearing acts. Yes, I too had started checking up on her more often – but her own alibis were invariably falling flat.

And she knew it.

What had happened to cause those dark circles under her eyes? My radiant Chitra seemed, but a pale shadow of her previous self – so withdrawn. I had been carefully controlled about my own queries so far, but it was almost a month since my return! And worst of all were her constant excuses to hold me at bay, even at nights. Something was surely troubling her. But what? Or who?

Was it another man?

I could contain myself no longer, and decided to put an end to the suspense – by following her on days that she was supposed to be “running some errands”. And ended up feeling even

further confused.

For her destination was always the same – Dr. Rathi's Nursing Home.

Hmm... so this was it! A doctor? So overcome was I with jealousy, that the possibility of her being sick did not even cross my mind. Perhaps, because whenever I'd express a concern regarding her health, she had brushed it away ever so casually, attributing everything to "just a headache".

Giving her one more benefit of doubt, I showed up at Dr. Rathi's one morning, and introduced myself as Chitra's husband. The direct approach always worked best for me.

But I wasn't at all prepared for the bombshell that followed. I sat numbstruck, as it tore me apart, and listened to a whole lot of technical jargon, without registering much. Dr. Rathi patiently explained everything and I kept nodding correctly, hoping that I was coming up with all the right questions.

The information wasn't adding up to much. The doctor seemed ignorant about the exact duration of my absence. And that probably accounted for several of the missing links. The rest resulted from my helplessly ruffled state.

Hoping that Chitra had her own reasons for withholding certain facts from the medical practitioner, I too did not enlighten him, and decided to maintain status quo.

"Well Mr. Mhatre," the doctor finally smiled warmly as he winded up and shook my hand, "Best of luck! I'm sure it'll all work out fine in the end. Don't just believe in miracles, depend on them. Good day!"

Dazed, I stepped out of the clinic, and abandoned the idea of going to work, somehow dragging myself home. Where I tried lending a semblance of order to the various pieces of

jigsaw just received. Fortunately, Chitra was actually away to a kitty – brunch this time, and I had the much needed solitude to sort myself out, having been much too stunned at the clinic to be able to think rationally.

The facts sunk in slowly... and gravely... so Chitra had conceived in my absence... but instead of growing normally, the pregnancy had developed into a “mole” – a potentially cancerous tumor... the initial symptoms being similar, the diagnosis was possible only after sophisticated investigations... but once the abortion was performed, what followed was even more traumatic... repeated urine tests, x-rays, biopsies... to make sure that it had not turned malignant.

And of-course, abstinence. A pregnancy under such conditions was disastrous for the follow-up.

At long last, things began falling into place; and it was almost afternoon when I finally set out for my office. My forehead deeply creased, I failed to notice the post-man, and nearly crashed into him, before absent-mindedly collecting the mail.

“Met Dr. Rathi today.” I announced that night as Chitra entered the bedroom, coming straight to the point as usual.

“Perhaps I’m entitled to an explanation. N O W?”

I was only pretending, but color drained out from her face completely; and if I hadn’t supported her, she would surely have collapsed. Everything that had remained pent-up inside her for so long, came flowing out now, as I held her in my arms, and stroked her hair gently.

It took a long while for her sobbing to cease completely. When her eyes finally rose to meet mine, they were darkly shadowed. I decided to put her at ease immediately.

“My darling, my love”, I murmured softly against her, almost crushing her to me this time. “How could you go through it all alone?”

She stared disbelievingly as I continued. “You little fool! Why didn’t you let me know in Jabalpur? Why? I would have left everything to be with you. You thought a baby would be more precious to me than YOU?”

Her tear-ravaged face regained some of its color, but her eyes were still clouded.

“You... know... everything...? Dr. Rathi... didn’t... I mean... didn’t... he... tell you... anything else?”

“Of-course he did...” I paused dramatically for effect, and continued with a grim look on my face, “he was afraid it might not to be a mole next time. The condition is not very common you know!”

For a moment she looked completely nonplussed. Then her face cleared, and for the first time since my return, I saw her relax fully.

I continued further. “You nut! Don’t you realize what this means? That *we* are *both* capable of producing those adorable little brats!”

I stole a sideways glance at her, and noticed the last vestiges of doubt finally melt away from her eyes. The guarded look was gone; and in its place, had appeared a serenity, that made the recently enacted scene completely worth my while. I gave her an understanding smile.

And then we held each other’s hands and laughed. As we had never laughed before. Till tears ran down our cheeks. I knew I was hysterical. She seemed exhausted.

Later, I made sure she was sound asleep, before gently covering her with a blanket, and setting out for a

walk.

It was close to midnight, and the streets were deserted. All was quiet at that late winter hour, save for the watchman's occasional whistle. A thick fog seemed suspended in the air, enclosing, and isolating the rare life-forms that had dared to venture out.

Hands buried deep inside my pockets, I turned up the collar of my parka to shield myself against the bitter cold, and began an aimless meandering, ruminating over the subject that had been plaguing my mind, for what seemed ages. I could not believe that it had all begun just this morning!

As a stray dog howled somewhere, my fingers involuntarily reached out for the letter lying safely cocooned within the recesses of my pocket.

"My dear Chitra," it began, "I have not been able to forgive myself till now..."

I had read it so many times since receiving it that afternoon, that the words were nearly ringing in my ears.

"...Though we were both to blame for what happened, I should have stayed back to see you through the painful procedure, instead of running away like a coward..."

The words continued to shatter the quiet stillness of my mind.

"...When is Akshay returning? I know I should not risk sending this, but I am being selfish again..."

The visibility was almost nil, but I didn't need any light, to read what was almost etched in my memory.

"...and so", it ended, "if I don't hear from you this

time, I promise to never ever bother you again. And believe me, it is a gentleman's promise *this* time..."

What did the stress on "*this*" mean? Had this other guy made an earlier promise but not fulfilled it? Could only one partner ever be responsible for a situation like that? Had Chitra been unfaithful in a conscious, cold-blooded manner?

I could not bear to raise any more unanswered questions; nor decide whether there was any need to get them answered anymore?

Wasn't it too late for that? For everything? I suddenly felt a strong urge to smoke.

Rapid strides took me to a nearby kiosk still open, where I lit a cigarette; and arriving at a spontaneous decision, suddenly consigned the tormenting words on that paper to the flames of the matches.

No, I shook my head, muttering to myself... Chitra wasn't going to suffer anymore... for as long as she lived...

However long that was. I decided to save the last benefit of doubt. For myself.

Keval Arora's Kolumn – Summer Whine

Keval Arora's Kolumn



Summer Whine

When summer comes, can summer theatre workshops be far behind?’ is a question that the English poet Shelley could well have asked, had he been in Delhi this summer instead of roaming around Florence one autumn some centuries ago. That’s the question he would certainly have asked had he been a Delhi parent facing a prospect far more unnerving than falling leaves, storms and winter shutdown – the prospect of kids moping around at home all day, each day of the vacations, with nothing to do. The question that Shelley did ask in his ode to the west wind (“if winter comes, can spring be far behind?”) seems far removed from parental anxieties, but it really isn’t. Well, in at least one respect, it isn’t. Both questions – the one that he asked and the one he didn’t – promise deliverance by embedding solutions in the very phrasing of the problem. If winter can be quickened by the prospect of spring, summer can certainly be lightened by a slew of theatre workshops that pop up from nowhere. And, considering you get theatre workshops in summer in a way that you can’t get spring *during* winter, summer is obviously the sweeter time.

Enough on the Shelley front. The thought of that poet as an anxious guardian, rushing kid to a morning workshop after talking intimately to the wind the previous evening, is neither inspiring nor pretty. Let’s just talk about ordinary parents, people like you and me.

The theatre workshops I speak of are obviously meant for children. They aren’t for adults. Or, are they? Stroll into

any of these workshops on 'admission day' and you'll sense tension in the air, as though it's school-admission time. Of course, it's only a summertime course..., it's got nothing to do with academic performance, marks and all that..., it's just fun and games, doing something creative, y'know... – and so, there are smiles all round. Then, out pop questions that give the game away. Many questions; take your pick. My favourite: 'How many seats do you have?' Fortunately, the kids are usually oblivious to their parents' increased pulse rate, but you need only look at the parents to recognise the theatrical cheeriness oiling their smiles.

Why? I'd love to believe their tension reveals an improvement in the way theatre is regarded today. Perhaps the media revolution that everyone's talking about has rubbed off some tinsel onto the theatre too. Then again, perhaps not. For, how many of these parents see that five-hour input each day for the next four weeks as intrinsically valuable to their child's emotional and mental well-being? Put another way, how many of these parents will extend this vacation-time regard for theatre activity into taking the child to watch plays, enabling her participation in productions, and adding rehearsal schedules to the domestic timetable? In most households, theatre is just another horse on the merry-go-round that spins to life every summer vacation. If it was 'music' last year and 'drawing & sketching' the year before, it's going to be 'swimming' or 'tennis' the next year, and so on. Children just have to be kept gainfully employed. Remember that saying about idle minds and the devil's workshop? Well, better a theatre workshop than the other one, right? Is that the reason why there's so much tension at registration time – horrors, what if the kid doesn't get in and has to stay at home?!

OK, I know these are uncharitable thoughts. I mean, it would be nicer to discover they are uncharitable rather than true. Moreover, it's better to draw such conclusions from the sudden

influx of children into summertime drama activity than nurture silly fancies about the increased acceptability of the theatre. At any rate, my lack of charity can hardly wreak damage on parents, not when they do a better job themselves – as one mother did when she advised a workshop instructor to give the children some homework “because children like homework and that’s the way they’ll take the workshop seriously”. (And, as she of course neglected to mention, keep them out of her hair at home as well!)

Don’t misunderstand me: I’m all for theatre workshops. I just happen to be somewhat sceptical about their seasonal popularity, that’s all. In fact, I’m more afraid of the other kind of parent, the one who pursues ‘Theatre & Drama’ with a vengeance and is convinced that workshops can’t be up to much if these don’t end with large-scale productions (simple demonstrations of work-in-progress being no substitute whatsoever!) somewhere in the Mandi House area. Preferably at the Kamani, that mother of all auditoria where parents and kids are accommodated in large enough numbers for productions to be financially rewarding; and where the sense of occasion is large enough for it to not matter whether your child is intimidated by the size of the stage or has been reduced to a speck in the multitude. As long as the music is sufficiently amplified to sound impressively loud (even if drowns out the children’s voices in the process), and as long as munchies are allowed into the auditorium for the convenience of little brother, elder sister, distant cousin, not so distant neighbour and grandfather, all’s *chunga* with the theatre.

The best theatre workshops avoid such productions like the plague because these end up hijacking the entire workshop schedule, de-focusing and subordinating work done earlier into a mere preparation for this ‘real’ event to come. Yet, most people prize productions very highly, perhaps because they pander to the exhibitionist streak that lurks within most of us. But, productions make very poor learning environments

because they do not allow free play to creative discovery. As productions require specific inputs, the child's learning curve is limited to the range of demands made by the particular play and its staging method. There are other hurdles. Acting opportunities in most plays stratify into major and minor roles unlike workshops where all creativity is placed on an even footing. Once a hierarchy is introduced into the playing area, vital exchanges of trust and exploration are irreparably altered. Also, because productions are expensive affairs, children tend to be instructed and shepherded much more closely in prescribed routines. As a result, in striking contrast to the freedom they possess in the workshop scenario, children's participation in plays usually amounts to their following directions, with the emphasis being on coordination and doing as they're told. Now, doesn't that sound suspiciously like school?

Of course, not all children's theatre works this way. The best plays facilitate children's contributions and in fact revolve around them. But, all said and done, there is no better way to introduce children to the power of make-believe than to lead them through a workshop method of open-ended games and exercises that tap the essentials of theatrical creativity. Games that encourage alertness, spontaneity, sharing; games that teach you to trust and be worthy of it; games that persuade you to understand and respect difference. These games can be structured as rhythm, acting, story-telling or vocalising exercises, each performed according to one's ability, with no benchmarking, no standardised or objective criteria, except perhaps honesty.

Does all this make the child a better actor? I don't think so. But it gives the young person the skills that help make a better actor, whenever he or she may choose to try that option. In the meanwhile, it helps mould the child into a more articulate, analytical and compassionate being. Sure, s/he will still be capable of slipping down some dark hole of self-

interest and pettiness, but this time with a greater awareness of self. (I can't believe it: I'm making the ordinary theatre workshop sound like one of those religious groups promising you higher consciousness.... Worse, I'm making it sound like a 'personality development' programme!)

That's another magic mantra. 'Personality development' is the bait most commonly found in advertisement flyers of programmes, especially in those where no one's sure of the benefits of what's on sale. It's a trusted market mantra because it's nebulous enough to escape definition and therefore accusation of fraud. It's trotted out as a universal benefit that accrues from all manner of activity. If you were to go by the ads, you'd find personalities being developed from horse riding – whose, the horse's or the rider's? Help! – to swimming. Frankly, the only way I see swimming help in developing personality is if you paddle into the deep end of the pool with only the class bully for company and the coach nowhere in sight. Weight-reduction programmes have also started promising personality, presumably on some scientifically charted kilogram-shed to character-sparkle ratio. And pandering to the beauty that lies in the eye of the beholder....

Sadly, many theatre workshops exploit the market similarly by positioning their theatre exercises as aimed towards 'personality development'. Sure, participants in theatre workshops do experience a new-found quickness in step, a steadiness in the voice, and a boldness of eye. These are inevitable changes, given the sustained interactions in fictional settings and real environments to which the children are exposed. But, does all this add up to 'personality'? I'm not sure; for, the 'personality' peddled here is understood as external poise, an acquiescence in socialised charm. Theatre workshops, on the contrary, do not pander to acquiescence. Instead of encouraging you to worm yourself into the eye of your beholder, the best theatre workshops teach you that the

gaze most worth cultivating is your own.

For me, the most telling evidence of the usefulness of children's theatre workshops has lain in an instructor's rueful comment that a week or so after the workshop sessions began, parents came to him with the complaint that "*bachche bigadne lage hain*". Can there be any process more precious than as this, a process that equips its participants to break free of the rules of docility and obedience that shroud our children?