Remembering Safdar Hashmi

Remembering Safdar Hashmi

—Manohar Khushalani

Having been associated with Street Theatre from late seventies my memories of Jan Natya Manch are equally old. It was way back in 1977 that I first met Safdar Hashmi. Our group, Workshop Theatre, which was formed after a workshop with Badal Sircar was rehearsing for William Hinton's, *Fanshen*, a play about revolution in a village in China. Safdar had come to meet the late Sudhanshu Mishra. He sat through our rehearsal and gave many suggestions. Our group contained people, most of whom later migrated to Television – Sudhir Mishra, Sushmita Mukherjee, Bina Pal, Anil Mehta. Only Anamika Haksar and I stuck on wholely to theatre. Sushmita Mukherjee occasionally indulges in theatre but is largely involved in Films and Television. But the two years that we did street theatre were full of intensity. Our most memorable production was Badal Sircar's *Bhooma*, for which Badal Da himself came specially to Delhi to do a workshop with us. Often people wept in our shows, and so did we, shamelessly, while performing. Although I was also performing in the Proscenium Arch, this liberty one could only take in a street play. When we came in touch with M.K. Raina, most of Workshop Theatre members opted to work in his Street Production of *Juloos* and later in *Spartacus* & *Mother.*

Our first test of our beliefs came when Raina took our performance of *Mother* to the Brecht International Festival held in Calcutta in 1978. There we were greeted by the biggest floods in the last 100 years of the city. While our street plays dealt with the underdog and deprived sections of society we were confronted with a dilemma. The floods created a pool of neck deep water around the *Dharamshala* that we stayed in. The water remained for three days and we were holed

up on the first floor at the same time that the pavement dwellers were living all around the *Dharamshala* with their aluminum utensils floating before their eyes . We were helpless – unable to offer them refuge in our own rooms. What kind of street theatre were we doing? We often debated on whether doing plays was enough and whether it should not be supplemented with social work. The answers came much later when Maya Rao, Anuradha Kapoor and myself met by chance at SRC and decided to form Theater Union. Later we co-opted fellow Prayog members like Vinod Dua , Ein Lal and Ragini Prakash, along with women activists like Urvashi Butalia and Sudesh Sehgal.

Our first play was prepared in association with several women's groups. It was called *Balatkar Kanoon* . The Rape Bill was before a Select Committee, whose recommendation would be considered before it became an Act. We examined the bill, discovered the lacunae as well as the strengths. We created a play which would warn the select committee about the loop holes while educating the common women about their rights as per the Bill. During this play we had an opportunity to interact with social workers who worked in the very communities that we performed in. Needless to say this gave us more satisfaction. Much later TU prepared a play on Multinational Drug Companies who were dumping in the Third World, all those drugs which were banned in the Developed World. This play we prepared in association with Voluntary Health Association of India and got lot of information from Mira Shiva. This information we used to create an educative play in a comic vein. This play too was a useful supplement for medical workers. We also did our bit by distributing printed literature at the end of the show. However, by now the debate on whether a street theatre group should also do social work had resolved itself. It had now dawned on us that we were performers and we should stick to that. If we created a consciousness in just a few people it would spread to others by conduction.

Some times people had created doubts amongst us about the reach of street theatre. Television was cited as a medium with a greater reach. One still remembers a talk that Safdar Hashmi gave at the Jawahar Lal Nehru University City Auditorium which was so prophetic. At that time few people owned TVs. There was only one Doordarshan channel and no private channels. Hashmi warned that TV will create antisocial vibes. While performing arts are a community affairs and bring many people under one roof the television will devided people by restricting them to their homes. He cited the example of people who visit homes of Television owners. Often the host spoke to his guest by using his ear as his mouth. Since his mouth was turned away as he himself had his eyes glued to Television. Ofcourse he saw a deliberate conspiracy in this and felt that television had been created to divide people, to break up communities and to destroy the collective spirit. So inspired was I by what he said that I went up to the stage to congratulate him.

But the real truth about TV having a greater reach has been resolved in my mind by history. The answer lies in credibility. A human being looking into your eyes and delivering a messages has greater credibility than an electronic media supported by vested interests and money power. When we did the play against Bride burning, just 200 shows were enough to create Media & Government attention on the issue. Soon the issue was seen everywhere in newspapers on television in and in films. Mera Devan's award winning film on Bride Burning, used our play's sound track interspersed with her own visuals. Theatre Union performed shoulder to shoulder with Jan Natya Manch at many venues. There we got to see each others plays – appreciate and criticise each others work. While Safdar appreciated the choreography and aesthetics of TU productions, he felt that the message was not direct. We felt that Janam plays were hard hitting but some times (not always) there was a poster effect. Though I must say Janam productions have been changing over the years and the last play that I saw

looked like a Theatre Union play to me. Since TU had performers who also acted on the proscenium stage our productions were bound to be different. However this I am talking about the eighties. Now Janam has also performed on stage – it is alive and kicking while Theatre Union has gone into hibernation.

I still remember how it was considered a taboo for a street theatre worker to perform on stage. The first time I remember Safdar showing an interest about problems of Proscenium theatre was when the Bombay police act was introduced in Delhi and theatre workers were up in arms against it. Said Hashmi in a seminar specially organised against it; "this was the first step towards government censorship of theatre". I was particularly agitated about it since I felt that police was ill equipped to understand the nuances of theatre. Little did I realise at that time, that in effect, given the usually inefficiency of the official machinery, getting a police license, irritating though it may be, was just another formality to be completed. Also, street theatre, which had the maximum potential of a political irritant was outside the purview of a performance license since these performance were not in an auditorium. Yet Hashmi spoke most ardently followed by M.K. Raina who had a foot in both the boats.

Street theatre does not mean just taking up any issue , assembling a bunch of enthusiasts, and converging the first street corner one comes across. It may take months to write a *nukkad natak* script. Workshop Theatre took three months to translate Badal Sircar's Bhooma and six months to further evolve the play! An issue may arise from a slum. It may be wife beating, or a drunkard husband, or a middle class dowry problem. It is chosen, by a general consensus, workshop sessions are organised and a script is evolved keeping in mind the target audience. Few people know that Badal Sircar's*Juloos* has been performed in Pakistan as well. Street theatre has attracted a few people because of the romanticism

involved in the whole exercise. Since they are often exposed, the police which never, likes references to its own brutalities, often tries to stop the performances. Sometimes even the audience gets pulled up because of the personal, one to one relation ship that this medium tries to establish. When the police tried to stop a performance of *Juloos* by Prayog at Connaught Place's central park, more than a decade ago, the audience intervened on behalf of the performers and battled with the police. Similarly, during the Emergency, when the police stopped a street performance at Curzon Park, Calcutta, the common people responded by turning up in thousands to watch the same performance the next day. The romanticism, however, wears off after some time. Only a few who are genuinely committed stick to the movement. "If ever you do street theatre, forget that you will be happy, forget that you will be famous, forget that you will be rich," warns Badal Sircar. However, Safdar Hashmi's unfortunate martyrdom has changed all that. "people have become more conscious of a performer's right to perform. But Street Theatre which appeared to be on the decline is bound to rise up again and fight the menaces of social evils. Be it with plays like Janam's unforgettable *Aurat* or Theatre Union's similarly memorable *Toba Tek Singh*.

Delhi's Amateur Theatre – Will it weather the storm or wither? (Manohar Khushalani)

Delhi's Amateur Theatre – Will it weather the storm or wither?

–Manohar Khushalani



It has become a matter of great concern amongst theatre lovers of Delhi as to whether amateur theatre will survive in the coming decades. An occasional performance in a packed auditorium builds up expectations of resurgence in the amateur theatre movement. In Mumbai and Kolkata there have been traditional theatre audiences. People do buy tickets and actors do get paid in those cities. About Delhi, one can say that the only culture that interests the city dwellers is either horticulture or page-three-party-culture. However, boredom with television has also led to some audience revival. But will Amateur theatre be able to support this need for cultural gratification from live performances? In the seventies and early eighties the actors who populated amateur theatre groups were intellectuals or radicals. Badal Sircar's influence was strong and street theatre movement was at its peak. The NSD actors after graduation were doing theatre and the combination of intellectual amateurs and NSD full timer was deadly and imbued vitality to the atmosphere. Street corner discussions at the NSD fruit shop and late night discussions over a glass of beer or a peg of rum was the order of the day. Even JNU and Delhi University were pumping in radically oriented and committed theatre people, audiences were growing. Spirits were really high. Those were really happy times. But then came the onslaught of television and cinema. What started as a trickle with the departure of Shiv Puri, Om Puri, Naseerudin Shah and Raj Babbar, became an

exodus as Sudhir & Sudhanshu Mishra, Neena Gupta, Alok Nath, Sushmita Mukherjee, Ravi Baswani, Lalit Tiwari, Manohar Singh, Surekha Sikri, Ratna Pathak, Pankaj Kapoor, Ranjit Kapoor, Anu Kapoor and so many others trooped out of India Gate and flooded into Gateway of India. Amongst the well known names only Manoj Bajpai, Saurabh Shukla, Sudhir and Sudhanshu Mishra were from the amateur theatre all the rest were from the NSD.
"What has NSD done for Delhi Theatre, every NSD graduate is only interested in Television and Cinema" says an amateur actor. "It is we amateurs who have kept theatre alive in Delhi". Perhaps he was right, except for Piyush Mishra; nobody from NSD was active in Delhi theatre. But, of late, the recent pass outs such as Rabajita, Swanand Kirkire, Gautam Sonti, Ajay Kumar, B. Gauri and Kalyani Hiwale have contributed to the theatre movement by working with amateurs.
Arvind Gaur felt that the word amateur had disparaging connotations. "Yes, we work with amateurs but our approach is professional," he quipped. Satyajit Sharma an NSD graduate, practicing actor in Bombay, who was active in Delhi Theatre, recalls with nostalgia his amateur theatre days and agrees with Arvind Gaur's contention. "Of course it is qualitatively professional but it does not pay". Since I have passed out from NSD my attitude has changed. Even though I belong to Delhi Theatre, the point is that I have to make a living from acting and in Delhi that is not yet possible. Though I still love theatre and perform occasionally as a stage actor as well"

But what about doing theatre in Bombay? According to Satyajit, any student who suggests that is ridiculed by his colleagues, because, for them media was the thing. However, ridicule not withstanding some NSD graduates like Naseerudin Shah, Sushmita Mukherjee continued to do theatre even though they found work in cinema and TV. Recently Neena Gupta too has made a return to theatre after so many years.

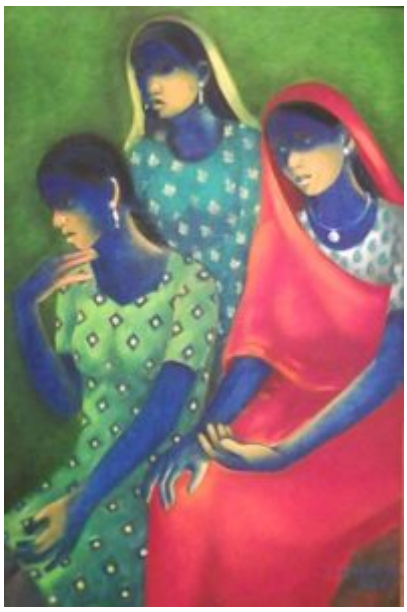
An amateur actor wanted to know what the definition of Amateur Theatre was before he opened his mouth. When he was told that an amateur is one who does not use theatre to make a living,

he agreed with the definition and disagreed with Gaur’s contention. “It is only amateur theatre which has kept theatre alive, not only in Delhi but anywhere in the world,” feels Feisal Alkazi, director of the oldest Amateur theatre group in Delhi – Ruchika. Feisal has been regenerating his group by working with children in his Little Actor’s Club. Earlier he used to infuse fresh blood through Music Theatre Workshop. Kiran Sharma who works in a Children’s theatre group found that the greatest supporters of her theatre were parents of children who participated in their workshop. Feisal Alkazi finds a much greater awareness about theatre amongst college students. So maybe the hope lies in the new generation.

Celebrating Women with Colours on Canvas(Manohar Khushalani)

Celebrating Women with Colours on Canvas

–-Manohar Khushalani



Pic above: Moeen Fatima's interpretation of Amrita Shergill's work.

This year has been designated by the UN as the Year of Women. To kick start the celebrations on the International Women's Day, prominent women artists from across the country came together to host a unique festival, curated by Radhika Srinagesh of The Chemistry of Colours. The festival was in form of an Art Exhibition at IGNCA's Mud House and was unveiled by Bhavnaben Chikhliya, The State Minister of Culture & Parliamentary Affairs.

It had three sections; 'Women by Women' showcased a few sparkling examples of Indian women who have reinvented their personal space, to let their talent blossom fully in their art. 'Colors of Courage' displayed many examples of women whose creativity is not limited by the challenges of physiognomy.Many of these differently able women lent a new unanticipated dimension to the world of their perception. But the piece de resistance of the show was the exhibition titled 'Amrita Shergil– Revisited'. Top artists of India were asked to respond to Amrita Shergil's "Three Sisters" with a painting of their own. Each artist's response was either in empathy with the painting or with the artist. Most of them chose to reinterpret the work in a contemporary context. Which was interesting because Amrita, who is an icon for women artists of the new millennium was herself far ahead of her time. Amongst the people who played a stellar role in promoting this exhibition were Madhup Mohta of Mohta Foundation, Jijo Madhvan

Hari Singh of Mantram Art foundation, Rajya Sabha MP, D.P. Singhal and Rahul Barua of South Asia Foundation.



Above: The Curator – Radhika Shrinagesh

Centre stage of the exhibition was an Installation called 'Garbha Gruha' by Sangeet Gandhi, celebrating the creativity of women and linking the womb cell with the cosmos. Jijo Madhvan's response to three sisters was to show them wearing masks that gave it a universality. It was the only painting accompanied by a poem "Roles complex, response varied, flight flight, stand up.." and perhaps be counted. Her other painting in the form of a Butterfly with a peacock feathered yellow blue orange, polka dots on wings bordered dark brown displayed the strength and resilience of a woman despite her daintiness. Iloosh Ahluwalia's 'Soni Kuri' was a dazzlingly beautiful light eyed modern young girl in blue kurta and red chunni. Her brush work displayed a remarkable control on the craft and a realism which was almost photographic. Vibha Desai's 'Elen' was a nude woman sitting on a fur almost empathising with the sensuality of Amrita. The lines were clear and economic. The form simple and direct. A large number of artist's pulled out one sister from the crowd and used her to make their statement. Gogi Saroj Pal chose to use a computer and turn one of the sister's inwards adding to the communicability amongst them. She looked at the third sister's face in a concave

mirror. Aparna Caur put the third sister in a spotlight, away from the other two. Pritam Bhatty gave the third sister a brush held like a cigarette reminding one of the famous Will's Ad of the sixties "You've come a long way baby!.
Pritam Bhatty's 'View from the balcony' displayed the artist's ability to sense light. Artists' whose work attracted attention include, Fatima Ahmed, Damyanti, Moeen Fatima, Shruti Gupta, Supriya Wadgaonkar and Lalitha Lajmi. Credit is due to Radhika for collecting so many artists under one roof in a memorable exhibition.

Tripurari Sharan takes over as Director, FTII, Pune (Manohar Khushalani)

Film Institute – looking towards a brighter future

-Manohar Khushalani



Tripurari Sharan, an IAS ranking officer took over as **Director of Film and Television Institute of India** in November 2003**.** Initially there was some scepticism in certain quarters that

perhaps an outsider has come to poach on their territory. However, with passage of time, students and teachers have come to realise that he is not an outsider but one of them who has come with a certain passion to contribute to their world. When**Manohar Khushalani** visited the campus he discovered peace and tranquillity prevailing in the campus. He also had a discussion with **Tripurari Sharan**, about his plans for the future:

MK: *What were your first reactions when you came into the Film Institute, considering the past history of this place.*

TS: Well I have been soaking in the environment. Learning its history. Getting to know a place first hand is different from hearsay. It has been interesting. I would not like to offer a value judgement at this stage

MK: *What are the changes you are planning to bring about in the Institute*

TS: We have already started a few new courses such *as script writing* and *acting* yet another course on *animation* is on the anvil. These will happen along with our regular Diploma courses which are the mainstay of our institute.

MK: *I believe the earlier experiences with the acting course were not too good.*

TS: Acting course was discontinued way back in 1978. Within ten days of my joining here, there was a festival at the Institute and I had an opportunity to interact with a lot of the ex-students and I got some inputs from them. Of course there were problems with the way the course was structured and the environment at that time. We have taken into account all those inputs and taken appropriate care. In fact a very responsible person has been made incharge of structuring the course – Naseeruddin Shah. Also Ravi Baswani who was associated with the Delhi Theatre group Non-Group and also has experience in film acting, will be conducting the classes.

MK: *Also there were problems with the kind of students the course attracted – sons of rich businessmen who came only to become stars overnight*

TS: That could be just one of the viewpoints, I would neither confirm nor deny it. In any case, our selection process is quite stringent. After the normal run of the mill tests and interviews we have a seven to ten day workshop, which helps us to screen out the kind of aspirants that you are talking about. We are also planning two scholarships for children who do not have the financial backing bur are capable.

MK: *You studied in JNU when there was a great deal of radicalisation. How do you rate the students now?*

TS: I would not term it as radicalism, rather the students then were more aware and had a socio-political consciousness. The new generation is not as keen to get into the nitty-gritty of understanding the socio-political complexities. In the present phase of liberalisation and globalisation the students are in a rush to make money or to make a mark professionally. For that kind of intellectual excitement you need to be more laid back and reflective.

MK: *Do you think that your being from the IAS cadre is an advantage or a disadvantage?*

TS:. I wasn't chosen merely as a representative of the Indian Administrative service. I am sure there were other credentials, such as having a certain sensitivity and sensibility, for which I was chosen for this job. Having said that, I would also put to you that having worked with the Government, I am more aware about the administrative and procedural complexities in managing a place like this. Since this Institution is totally funded by the Government it needs certain skills in dealing with it. That actually puts me at an advantage.

Naseer as ‘The Prophet’ (Manohar Khushalani)

Naseer as ‘The Prophet’

– Maohar Khushalani



The location: Tata Experimental Theatre at Nariman Point in Mumbai. On stage two hospital beds at right angles to each other and a screen. The audience trickles in at first but gradually the seats get filled on all three sides even the balcony that looks like a cat walk in a factory has a few odd audience members. Rishab Thaker starts the first few lines from Khalil Gibrans Poetic composition : ***The Prophet***. After a mild pause in comes the legendry actor Naseeruddin Shah spewing poetry. One wondered how the audience can be held by sheer poetry: “When love beckons to you follow him, Though his ways are hard and steep. And when his wings enfold you yield to him, Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you. when he speaks to you believe in him, Though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.” Such profound poetry was delivered with such comfort and ease that the meaning of the words was apparent due to the style of delivery.

When you say things with earnestness and conviction you carry

the audience with you. But how many actors can hold the attention of an audience continuously for so long. Naseer has that rare quality. Occasionally there was a relief from his voice when Ratna Pathak Shah entered as a nurse inconspicuously, delivered he piece and left equally quietly.
Gibran Khalil Gibran born on January 6, 1883, to the Maronite family of Gibran in Bsharri, a mountainous area in Northern Lebanon. He was barely 12 when the Gibrans embarked on a voyage to the American shores of New York. The Gibrans settled in Boston's South End. In the school, a registration mistake altered his name forever by shortening it to Kahlil Gibran. Gibran was pulled to the cultural side of Boston, which exposed him to theatre, Opera and Art Galleries. Gibran's works were especially popular in America in the 1960s. His early works were in Arabic, however, from 1918 onwards he wrote mainly in English. Among his best-known works is***The Prophet***, a book of 26 poetic essays, which has been translated into over 20 languages. The Prophet, who has lived in a foreign city 12 years(the same number of years he lived in Lebanon) is about to board a ship that will take him back to his home. He is accosted by some people, who learn from him about the mysteries of life:

"Almustafa, the chosen and the beloved, who was a dawn onto his own day, had waited twelve years in the city of Orphalese for his ship that was to return and bear him back to the isle of his birth. … he climbed the hill without the city walls and looked seaward; and he beheld the ship coming with the mist. Then the gates of his heart were flung open, and his joy flew far over the sea. And he closed his eyes and prayed in the silences of his soul. But as he descended the hill, a sadness came upon him, and he thought in his heart: How shall I go in peace and without sorrow? Nay, not without a wound in the spirit shall I leave this city."

And what were Gibran's views about various issues? There is not much space but just a few lines about marriage: "You were born together, and together you shall be forevermore. … But

let there be spaces in your togetherness, And let the winds of the heavens dance between you. Love one another but make not a bond of love:Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls. Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup. Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf. Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone, Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music." How insightful and relevant to this day.

The Real Star of Jassi is the Dad

The Real Star of Jassi is the Dad

– Manohar Khushalani

The television serial "**Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin**" has become a mega-hit and is holding out its own against "**Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi**" not only because of good marketing and packaging but also because most common people can relate to it's theme of an ordinary looking girl surviving by the dint of her intelligence and inner qualities. The lead actress, Mona Singh, who plays Jassi, is actually an attractive looking girl disguised as an ugly duckling. As an actress her inexperience shows, with repetitive expressions and a limited range of emotions. Apurva Agnihotri, the actor playing Arman Suri, is too wooden with similar limitations. The real performer is Virendra Saxena (Known as Veeru amongst friends) who plays Jassi's father.





Above:- Virendra Saxena

Above:- Virendra Saxena on the sets of Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin

He lights up the atmosphere with his energy whenever he appears on the small screen. I have had the pleasure of having directed Veeru when he worked with me in the play Empire Builders in early eighties. Having known him intimately, I can vouch for the fact that some of the dialogues he delivers in the serial appear to reflect his own approach to life. This I was able to confirm with him when I met him in Mumbai last week. He admitted he often improvised the dialogues whenever he felt that the written script needed improvement. The result is his own inimitable style of dialogue delivery which gives Mr. Wadhwa a charming but humorous personality.

Saxena comes from a modest background and hails from a small town – Mathura. Veeru and I also worked together in Badal Sircar's*Spartacus* in the eighties – a play he also translated. While I did the role of Batiatus – the slave dealer, believe it or not, Veeru, despite his wiry frame, did the lead role of Spartacus. So it is no surprise that he has risen so high, the real surprise is that he after his stellar performance in *Tamas* he has taken so long to get where he is. While there is a mind boggling list of TV serials, films and plays that Saxena has acted in he has translated and adapted 18 plays, Two of his adaptations are published. He also wrote the dialogues of the feature film ' *Tunnu Ki Tina*'. Little known to most people, Saxena is a science graduate who has developed a computer database of 2000 actors. A near miss was an offer to act in Speilberg's '*Terminal*'. Saxena was very diaappointed when at the last minute it was decided to replace Veeru with a Pakistani actor. In an industry dominated by stiff wooden

faced models, Saxena, an NSD graduate, is one of the few performers holding fort for the real acting professionals.

The original Latin story from which the serial has been adopted, is a father daughter story, and the romance with the boss is secondary. One subject that interests most TV viewers is when will Jassi be made to look beautiful. An intelligent guess is that it will only happen when TV ratings start falling for the serial. However a rumour floating amongst some knowledgeable moles is, that the viewers will have to wait for Juhi Chawla, whom Mona Singh resembles, to come on screen like Saif Ali Khan did, before the transformation takes place. The difference is that Saif taught Jassi how to handle relationships and Juhi will teach her how to dress up and look gorgeous.

Neena Gupta – Back in action in Desh (Manohar Khushalani)

Neena Gupta – Back in action in *Desh*

-Manohar Khushalani



You wanna make a fast buck. Do it in theatre. If you think you can't, well ask Neena Gupta. She was at NSD two years ago to teach the students how to. It all started when Neena met the NSD Director, Devendra Raj Ankur in Mumbai and complained that at NSD they were never told how to live off theatre. So Ankur asked her to undo that mistake and do a short workshop on how to make money in Theatre. I asked her if it was possible to make a buck in Theatre. "I am not sure if you can," she admitted, "but at least I had thought about it. And I went to NSD to share my experiences with the students." Always blunt and straight forward, a quality which came in handy when she had to keep a poker face in Star TV's *Kamzor Kari Kaun*. The first time I met Neena Gupta was in late seventies, a thin wiry girl who had just finished her PhD in Sanskrit and was raring to go into theatre. We worked together in dramatising the late Raghuvir Sahay's poetry at India International Centre.

Our other co-actors were Manohar Singh and Hema Sahay. The production was called *Images* and was directed by the late Sonu Krishen. Raghuvir Sahay was there too to correct our diction. As I moved on to work briefly with Jalabala Vaidya on India's first ever TV lampoon show, Neena followed out of curiosity, but lost interest within a day. That was her nature, adventurous, but impatient. Neena tried various things: she worked with Ruchika theatre group and acted in a play directed

by Arun Kuckreja. Then she joined the NSD, and graduated from there as an actress. I bumped next into Neena Gupta as my co-student at the FTII film appreciation course in Pune. We had an opportunity to watch Gupta act in a film because Shyam Benegal had brought a print of*Mandi* for the students. It is at Pune that I saw a change in her attitude towards Cinema. Having seen so much of good Indian and Foreign films, courtesy Satish Bahadur of the FTII and Nair of the Indian Film Archives, Neena decided to do only serious work. And sure enough her media personality transformed, as one was to see later. Even critics started taking her seriously. Her television serial *Saans* was a big success and won her many acccolades. "I produced *Saans* because I wanted to do something that a woman of my age could play a lead in," she explains, "I tried to show that even at an age of 30-35 a woman can be alive and kicking." According to her, even though a woman is tied down as a housewife at that age, she is freer because her children are grown up and she can really freak out. She attributes the runaway success of that TV soap to good team work.What really took people by surprise was when she was booked as an Anchor in the high profile *Kamzor Kari Kaun*. It put her straight into big league, for the game show was supposed to fill the vacuum created by the departure of *Kaun Banega Crorepati*. Even though the serial did not do too well in the TRP ratings, Gupta gave a rather good performance of the stern anchor who melted only occasionally.

Some time back it had appeared that Neena was bored with Mumbai and wanted to return to Delhi. She had also signaled her return to theatre by forming a theatre group *Sahaj* with Rajendra Gupta. Their first play, Surendra Verma's *Soorya Ki Pehli Kiran Se Surya Ki Antim Kiran Tak*, was premiered at the Bharat Rang Mahotsav last year. This play dealt with an ancient tradition called*Niyog*, according to which, if a King was impotent, the Queen had to spend one night with any man of her own choice, so that she can produce an heir apparent to the throne. The State Laws, which enforced such extreme measures on the Kings and Queens, had their own logic. It was to ensure that the future King had his mother's blood in him. All the five Pandavas too were borne out of*Niyog*. The play dealt with the conflict arising out of a woman experiencing

sexual fulfillment, hitherto denied to her. The play was invited to Dubai and was a grand success, so much so that she has received an invitation to do a workshop in Pakistan. However now it appears that Neena's boredom with Mumbai is over. Recently the serial ***Saans*** was being repeated on one of the channels giving Neena some much needed visibility. She has also made a big comeback in the TV serial ***Desh Mein Nikla Hoga Chand***

Secular Indian Cinema

Secular Indian Cinema

-Manohar Khushalani





Above:- Shah Rukh Khan (L) Salman Khan (R) Shah Rukh Khan

At a time when attempts are being made to divide the world and also the Indian society on the basis of religion, it becomes all the more relevant to emphasise the secular nature of this ancient civilisation. The great tolerance of our race and the concept of universal brotherhood that has awarded the Indians with International respectability. And what better way can there be than to examine the role of Muslims in the most popular of our art forms – Cinema. It just took a few

television serial like Fauji and Circus, to bring the young, then scrawny looking, Shah Rukh Khan to limelight. After that, it became just a matter of time before he entered Bollywood. Today, Shahrukh has completed over a decade as the unchallenged monarch of the Indian Film Industry. After Amitabh Bachchan, he is the industry's first super star. He is also one of the most highly awarded Indian actors of Bollywood. Besides a host of other awards, he got the Filmfare Best Actor Awards in 1993, 1996, 1997, 1998 and 2002 for*Baazigar, Dilwaale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge, Dil To Pagal Hai, Kuch Kuch Hota Hai and Devdas*, respectively. Shah Rukh Khan is a Muslim, and like so many of his predecessors and contemporaries in Bollywood, he belongs to the largest minority community (110 million) in India. His not being a Hindu has not prevented him one bit from reaching the top of the ladder. His popularity is amply demonstrated by the fact, that, in a unique poll, he has been selected by Indians from all over the world, as only the second Bollywood actor, after Amitabh Bachchan, to join the select Wax World of Madame Tussad's. Similarly, Shabana Azmi, a Muslim actress, who was earlier part of the parallel cinema movement of art films, was ultimately absorbed by the commercial cinema of Bollywood, primarily on the dint of her talent. Shabana was never a star, but, like Shah Rukh she has won a large number of accolades . She has acted in 117 films and won the National Awards for Ankur, Arth and Paar, Filmfare Awards for Arth, Bhaavana and Swami and the Screen Videocon Best Supporting Actress Award for Mrityudand Shabana belongs to a very illustrious family, which has contributed a lot to Indian Cinema. Her father Kaifi Azmi contributed as a lyricist and writer to 28 films. Some of his lyrics like "Jaane kyaa dhuundhatii rahatii hain ye aankhen mujhame" are all time classics. Shabana's husband Javed Akhtar is also a highly celebrated and respected lyricist, writer and thinker who has contributed to over 36 films. Even Shabana's niece Tabbu is doing exceedingly well in the box office and winning many awards. This is just a fragment of the contribution of Muslims to Bollywood, where

entire families have been absorbed in every creative field possible.

The history of Bollywood itself is totally linked to the history of Indian Cinema. The first film ever shown in India was way back in 1896 by a representative of the Lumiere Brothers, since then there has been no looking back. Despite the fact that the Industry was evolving separately in Bombay, Calcutta & Madras, India was a large cauldron in which various regions interacted and used each other as a bouncing board. It is interesting therefore that the first major film on the Hindu-Muslim communal divide was made in Mumbai by Dhiren Ganguly, a product of Tagore's Shantiniketan in Bengal. The film was called Razia Begum and was financed by the Muslim Nawab of Hyderabad. It was the story of a Muslim Queen of the slave dynasty who fell in love with a Hindu Subject. Yet another film, Mughal-e-Azam, on a similar subject, produced much later, in the sixties, by a Muslim producer, K. Asif, was an all time hit. It was the romantic story of a royal prince Salim, the son of the mighty emperor Akbar, who fell in love with a Hindu court dancer Anarkali. The film was a big budget extravaganza, studded with songs and dance. However the first film based on this historical event was by Charu Roy in 1928. It was called Loves of a Mughal Prince. In fact there was a remake of Razia Begum as well by another Muslim producer Kamal Amrohi in 1983 which did much better in the box office than its predecessor. Kamal Amrohi was married to a highly rated and admired Muslim actress Mahajabeen whose screen name was Meena Kumari. It was customary at that time for Muslim artists to use Hindu aliases, just as the highly awarded actor Dilip Kumar, the all time legend of Bollywood was actually Yusuf Khan in real life. After his debut in Jwar Bhata in 1944, Dilip played a variety of characters over a span of six decades; but nostalgiaphiles venerated him as the king of tragedy. His most successful films were Andaz, Aan, Daag, Madhumati, Ganga Jamuna and Ram Aur Shyam. However his performances in Oedipal dramas Deedar and Devdas are often

considered his greatest performances. It is indeed poetic justice that Devdas achieved national acclaim half a century later again with a Muslim actor in the lead role – Shah Rukh Khan. The names of Muslims who have contributed to Indian Cinema would fill many pages like this one, but more of that later.

Partition play, YATRA, moves audience (Manohar Khushalani)

The partition play, YATRA, moves Bharangam audiences

Manohar Khushalani



One has been a great admirer of Kewal Dhaliwal's work and when Madiha Gauhar, the theatre director and actor from Pakistan recommended it to me I realized that it would definitely be a momentous occasion with an intercontinental flavour. And sure enough it was. Like some of Kewal's previous productions, this too was an intensely moving experience.

Manch-Rangmanch's ***Yatra 1947***, conceived without a script and structured through improvisations, was performed in the Bharangam Fest on 9th January 2008. It draws its material from real life incidents, often from oral history–tales told by

elderly relatives who had been through the trauma of the times—portraying the suffering of the people who had to undertake arduous journeys, most often, away from their homeland, to another country and milieu. The play consists of more than 40 poems, originating from both India and Pakistan, with theatre students from both sides of the borders taking part.

At the end of the show with audience applauding quite a few of them holding lighted candles of peace and brotherhood in their hands. When Madiha Gauhar asked them if they knew which actors were from India and which ones were from Pakistan, they all said in unison “we don’t even want to know.” Such was the extent to which the audience had been moved by the depth and emotions of the poetry and the fluidly conceived choreography.

As Kewal puts it; “All of us had heard of Partition through the various stories told by our elders. As the days went by in the theatre workshop, and we started to actually perform those stories, we gained profound insights into what those people would have gone through. Thus one of the purposes of this workshop was accomplished. We have taken small steps in making the younger generation aware of the tragedy of the Partition, making them value both the countries. The play does not try to rub salt into the wounds of Partition, but rather attempts to heal them, to transform the barbed wires of hatred into soft lines of life and love. The Punjabi Theatre group **Manch-Rangmanch** hails from Chandigarh and has also taken its plays to England, Canada, Germany, USA, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Cast and Credits

John Paruej, Bakht Arif, Zora Brar, Prabhjot Kaur, Amir Ismail, M Abid Hussain, Bharat Sadana, Jaskaran Singh Sahota, Ranjit Bansal, Rajwinder Kaur Deol, Rupinder Kaur, Gurjot Singh, Gurleen Kaur, Jagwinder Singh Sodhi, Shallu Arora, Vikramjit Singh, Nitin Singh, Varun Patel, Veerpal Kaur, Gurinder Kumar, Kanwal Nain Kaur, Kanwar Gurpartap Singh,

Yadwinder Singh, Rahi Batra, Rajiv Jindal, Ranjit Tapiala, Khola Qureshi, Meena Sadiq, Shahzad Sadiq, Nirwan Nadeem, Bikramjit Ranjha, Muhammad Azaz Khalid, Shahid Zafar, Usmaan Zia, Humayun Pervez

Music: Harinder Sohal Singer: Harinder Sohal, Misha Accompaniment: Jagjit Singh (sarangi), Sony (dholak) Properties: Rajiv Jindal, Gurinder Kumar Costume: Humayun Parvez, Kunwargur Partap Sets: Shallu, Shahid and Shahzad Assistant Director: Zora Brar, Jajwinder SodhiStage Management: Varun Patel

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Casting Discordance and Difference (Keval Arora)

Keval Arora's Kolumn

Casting Discordance and Difference

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 visuality 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.

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