Curtain Call / Keval Arora

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

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

dissolved.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Presence Perfect / Keval Arora

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The Sense of an Audience / Keval Arora

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Dabbling In Babble / Keval Arora

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Competition Virus / Keval Arora

Who Wins ?

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

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

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

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

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

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

That the man from Mahindra & Mahindra was probably convinced

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For Whom Nobels Toll / Keval Arora

Harold Pinter

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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A Matter of Applause / Keval Arora

Suspense! – Will They or Won’t They?

A critical difference between live and recorded performances

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


(Left)Virgins in Waiting
(Right)The Wedding

CAST OF CHARACTERS.

VIRGINS.10.

TOWN CRIERS 2

CROWD.

FRUIT SELLER.1

BEGGARS 2.

SCHOOLCHILDREN.3

SHOEMAKER.1

POLICEMEN.3.

STREET SINGERS 5

OLD LADIES. 2

OLD MEN 2

THE KING. 1

The KING`S ATTENDANTS. SEVERAL.

FIRST ATTENDANT.1

THE QUEEN.1

THE QUEEN`S ATTENDANTS.

FIRST ATTENDANT.1

THE KING`S SON. 1

35 speaking roles.

SCENE ONE.

PLACE. THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE TIME OF JESUS.

TIME.LATE AFTERNOON.

SCENE. A BUSY STREET IN THE CAPITAL.

AT RISE. STREET SCENE. PEOPLE ON STAGE.

ENTER FRUIT SELLER.

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

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

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

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

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

SHOEMAKER. Without that your shoe would have come apart.

FRUIT SELLER. Allright, here is a pomegranite for you

ENTER SCHOOLCHILDREN.3

(Children run around)

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

SECOND CHILD. The classroom was stuffy.

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

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

ENTER TWO OLD LADIES.(They look around.)

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

FIRST CHILD. It is a holiday today.

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

SECOND OLD LADY. So did mine.

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

ENTER STREET SINGERS.

FIRST SINGER. This looks a merry place.

SECOND SINGER SINGER. So it is.

THIRD SINGER.Let us look around.

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

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

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

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

seller,and buy fruit)

ENTER THE TEN VIRGINS.

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

.SECOND VIRGIN. It is too crowded here.

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

(The virgins form a group)

ENTER BEGGARS.

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

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

ENTER POLICEMEN.

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

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

FRUIT SELLER. It is market day today.

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

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

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

FRUIT SELLER.Hey give it back.

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

The crowd disperses to a side.The two beggars are

in front).

FIRST POLICEMAN. What are you doing.?

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

FIRST POLICEMAN(Raises baton) Yes I have.

SECOND BEGGAR. Have pity on us.

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

SCHOOLCHILD 1 Do we really get to see the king?

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

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

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

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

OLD LADY 2 They don`t care about anything.

OLD MAN1.Very true.

OLD MAN2 Not like they were in our day.

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

FIRST POLICEMAN. I did.

SHOEMAKER. Perhaps he may buy some shoes from me.

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

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

SINGERS SING. THE CROWD DANCES.

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

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

ENTER TOWN CRIERS with a roll of drums

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

I have great and important news for you..

CROWD. Tell us. Tell us.

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

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

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

VIRGINS. We will.

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

FIRST VIRGIN. Will the queen be coming now.?

SECOND TOWN CRIER. Yes she will.

SECOND VIRGIN.Are we invited to the feast?

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

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

SECOND TOWN CRIER. He is.

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

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

FIFTH VIRGIN. Are they also princes?.

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

SIXTH VIRGIN. Will there be music? 2

SECOND TOWN CRIER. The best in the land.

SEVENTH VIRGIN.Are there any dancers?

FIRST TOWN CRIER. There will be dancing till dawn.

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

NINTH VIRGIN> We are so fortunate.

TENTH VIRGIN. We will have a wonderful time..

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

EXIT TOWN CRIERS. WITH ROLL OF DRUMS

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

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

FIRST POLICEMAN. Now all you people clear the street.

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

SECOND POLICEMAN. That`s your bad luck.

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

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

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

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

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

FIRST POLICEMAN. Off with you. All of you.

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

FADE OUT

. FADE IN.

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

BRIDAL MUSIC. THE VIRGINS SING.AND DANCE

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

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

THIRD VIRGIN. We are truly chosen.

FOURTH VIRGIN.God has blessed us.

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

THE FIVE VIRGINS TEND JARS OF OIL AND THEIR LAMPS.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THIRD VIRGIN. We dare not sleep.

FOURTH VIRGIN. We will walk and keep awake.

FIFTH VIRGIN. We must be ready when the time comes

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

VIRGIN SIX. Look, our lamps have gone out.

VIRGIN SEVEN. What shall we do?

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

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

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

THEY APPROACH THE OTHER VIRGINS

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

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

VIRGIN NINE. Please do help us.

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

VIRGIN.EIGHT. Don`t be so cruel.

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

VIRGIN SEVEN. Give us just a little.

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

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

THIRD VIRGIN. We cannot.

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

NINTH VIRGIN. We will take it from you..

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

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

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

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

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

VIRGINS TOGETHER. Welcome your majesties.

KING. Come with us.

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

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

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

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

KING. Who are you?

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

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

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

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

KING. Where were you.?

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

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

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

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

ATTENDANTS HUSTLE OUT THE FOOLISH VIRGINS.

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

MUSIC.KING GESTURES TO THE WISE VIRGINS.)

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

PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS.

A note on production.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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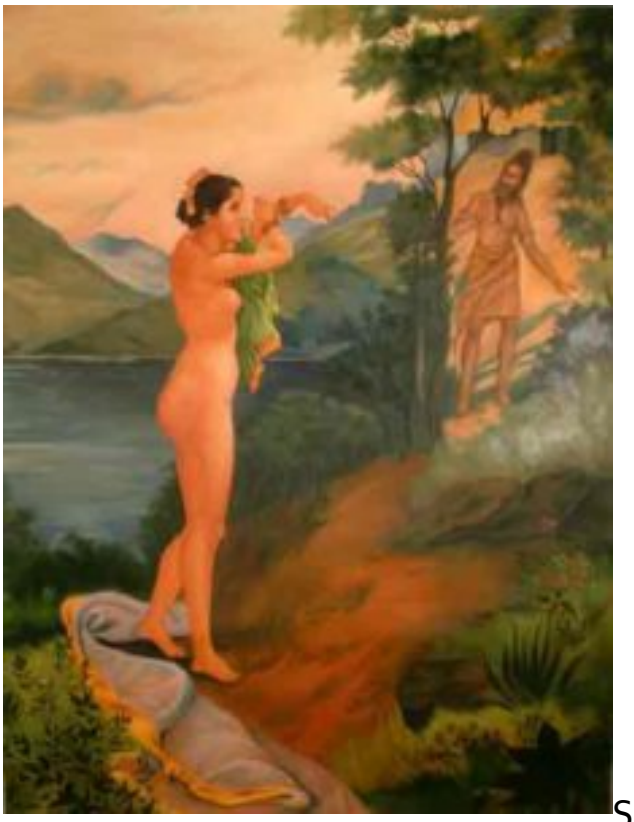
Gender Contexts in Folk Performances: A Study of the Female Performers of Nautanki / Gauri Nilakantan Mehta



Sage Viswamitra succumbs to the charms of Menaka

Source: Exotic India Art

Any context that involves control and exclusion, of the master subject, or the dominant individual or group of the situation, manifests itself through its exclusive performance or by giving high status to them. This can be seen in artistic folk theatre genres. In most situations of aesthetic authority, we can see that the exclusion or low status of one gender, mostly of females, is to establish a total power of the males. My paper will attempt to illustrate this sometimes exclusion and low status of the female performers in folk theatre genres of North India and Pakistan. It proposes to study and analyze the gender contexts of female performers in *Nautanki* within Uttar Pradesh andPunjab with a special reference to her status in society. Women have been performers since antiquity and many gender stereotypes have been attributed to her. Before we analyze the gender contexts in *Nautanki* let us briefly elaborate on the historical and social conditions of female

performers in folk theatrical forms in India & Pakistan.

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Historical and Social Conditions of Female Performers

Women have always been performers in India and Pakistan since the ancient times. The antecedents to dancing girls and courtesans go back to early ages. Statues of theIndus Valley civilization (3000-1500 B.C.) show strong associations with music and dance. A bronze figurine of a dancing girl was unearthed in the ruins of Mohenjadaro, inPakistan, that shows the popularity of performing arts in the Indus Valley amongst females. The figurine has been found in association with a large number of statues of goddesses that indicates that dancing and music must have had close associations with worship and therefore making it popular among women. Although, female worship was considered pure and divine during the Indus Valley Civilization, we have to keep in mind the paradoxical situation of female performers in later ages from fifth or sixth century B.C. onwards.

Women became the sites of orthodoxy as they were seen to be the essential carriers of tradition. According to Mandakranta Bose,

The burden of maintaining order within a family and within society as a whole fell on women…But this was a responsibility within which women quickly became imprisoned by the needs of conserving tradition. Instead of embodying positions of decision -making power and defining order, women became vehicles of orthodoxy. (Bose 4)

By looking at archeological evidences as in sculptural depictions in temples, paintings and early dramatic literature like the *Kamasutra* (800 A.D.), a treatise on the art of love and lovemaking, many scholars tend to believe that the female performers had a high social standing in ancient Indian society (3000 B.C. to 1200 A.D.). Many literary texts make

references to *Apasaras* or heavenly maidens, also accomplished performers and dancers. They lured heroes and sages from their path of duty, for eg. Sage Viswamitra succumbed to the charms of Menaka. Seduction and allurement hence is an essential characteristic of these courtesans. Dancing and performing hence had strong sensual connotations. Many of the courtesans such as Rambha, Tillotama and Manorama were widely respected and had a high social standing.

However, the relation between these respectable representations and its extension to "real" women can be argued. For e.g. the famous *Khajurao* caves of Orissa of Eastern India (800 A.D. to 1200 A. D.) depict females playing percussive instruments that later remained in the exclusive domains of the men. We can argue that perhaps these female performers (as shown in the statues) were courtesans, and it was their profession that allowed them to have access to display certain creative skills. The *Kamasutra*, written by Vatsayana, describes the skills of the courtesan, who was to be well versed in the act of love making but also needed to be equally well versed in music, dance, drama, and painting besides giving them sexual pleasure, in order to please her patrons. Respect given to these courtesans hence had sexual connotations. The paradoxes that are created between real and representations of women has been understood and defined by Dhruvrajan. According to him,

The female principle is worshipped, yet in daily life flesh and blood females are secondary citizens, humiliated depersonalized. The more a woman lowers herself the more she is praised. (Dhruvrajan 100)

This paradox can be seen in other areas of worship as well, despite the fact that female worship is an essential part of the religion of India; females are still in some isolated cases "dedicated to temples" that are called the *devdasis*. These *devdasis*traditionally were the courtesans and the dancing girls. These women had a low social status and

became victims of prostitution. *Devadasis*, or servant of god, are ceremoniously married to the gods by the symbolic tying of the necklace around their necks. As they are "married to the gods" they have a social sanction to keep sexual contact with men. The honor of helping with temple shrines such as cleaning devotional vessels and decorating shrines belonged to the *devdasis*. More significantly, following the heavenly nymph prototype, they worshiped, propitiated and entertained the deities (embodied in images) with dancing. Hueing Tsang, a Chinese visitor to India in the 8thcentury testifies to this well established institution of temple dancers, an Arabian traveler, Al Beruni remarked that about 500 dancers were dedicated in the Somanth temple.

Stigmas have been associated with female performers both historically and socially. For example, as discussed earlier female performers in the past belonged to a set class, the *devdasis* who were married to the gods. The *devdasis* who often had to "entertain" men through music and dance and sex thus had some sort of socio- religious- legal sanction because of this "marriage" to the gods. The links between marriage and performance also takes on different levels of meanings as many women performers in India also discontinue their profession after their marriages to men. As tradition places high emphasis on modesty and virtue, many women do not continue with public performances after their marriages, since they would come under the public view and scrutiny. This shows the ambivalence that is maintained towards the female performers in society. Many female performers of N*autanki* are married but they belong to certain sects & caste that allows them to perform. They primarily belong to lower caste or lower strata of the society. Thus, there is direct connection between economic status, lower position, marriage & profession that women choose.

With the advent of the Mughals in India we can see the tradition of dancing girls in courts. Performance reached the

courts from the sacred shrines of temples. Amir Khusrau, a famous writer in the 12th century A.D. recorded his praise for dancing girls. He also invited them to dance and sing in the marriage of his son. The professional performers were called nutwah, bhugleye, anjari, nat. The actors in *Nautanki* are also called the *nats* and the female performers are the *natis*. Traditionally the only women who acted and performed along with the male counterparts in *Nautanki* were these *devdasis*.

The connections between the royalty and performing arts are also a part ofIndia's cultural history. Often in the past, the court dancers were considered the courtesans, or the *nautch* girls, and sometimes the performances were performed in the brothels, which were frequented by high-ranking officers of the court and warriors. Wade points to this and argues that the courtesan dancers were considered *nautch* girls when these performances were relegated to the brothels[1] (126).

A few more examples can make the connections between the royalty and the female performers clear. Grace Thompson Seton, a British woman, who traveled in Indiaduring the early 19th century remarks on the life of "*natuch*" girls,

I entered the dancing girl quarter, which looked like any other middle class street and good fortune! One of the dancing girls was standing in a doorway, arrayed in white trousers and long yellow diaphanous sari. Her middle and feet and arms were bare. She was not young, nor to my mind, good looking, but she had well developed muscles and supported the entire family on her earnings.

I was told that if I would stay a few days longer, H.H. would arrange a *Nautch*, but that his best dancer, Moti Jan, was away, having been loaned to a neighboring Raja for a wedding festivity. The maharaja subsides all the dancing girls and therefore controls their actions. (Seton 67)

Written in the early 19th century, this quote shows that dancing was relegated to low class women, wearing “diaphanous clothes”, supporting their families through their incomes from prostitution or “entertaining” the high ranking officials of the court, their actions being controlled by the kings (Maharaja). The king clearly treated the women as possessions since these women were “loaned”. The connection between royalty and dramatic forms therefore seems to have had a long historical connection.

Amorous songs and dances were rendered by these *nautch* girls. The Calcutta Gazette, a newspaper of 9th June1808 carries one version,

O says what present from your hand

Has reached me save caresses bland

And oh! Was present e’er so dear

As love soft whispers to my ear

Mar in affliction‘s sad decay

How this poor frame wastes fast away

I languish, faint from eve to morn

Nor taste of food one barley corn (Paul, 85).

However, some low class women traditionally performed classical theatrical forms, for example *Bhartanatyam* and *Kuchipudi*, two major southern Indian dance dramas. Their primary duty was to perform in the temples as dancing girls, but they could also supplement their family income by serving as prostitutes. Many folk dramatic forms have had the traditional exclusion of females, and only few forms like the *Lavan*i and *Tamasha* of Western India have included women. These dramatic forms often use camaraderie

and sexual innuendoes; therefore, the female performers of such forms do not have high social standing. Therefore, these performances are often “popular entertainment” and quite often-religious themes are not depicted.

Thus, with very few exceptions women were effectively banned from theatrical stage, whether rural or urban, folk or classical. A striking instance of the extensiveness of this ban can be seen in *Kathakali*, an all male form folk dance drama of south India. Wade observes,

Kathakali was developed in Kerala, on the southwestern edges of the subcontinent, in a region that is traditionally matriarchal and in which women have influential in public affairs and have a reputation for considerable degrees of freedom in society in general. Yet even in this area, so deeply had the ban on women penetrated that *Kathakali* had been, and remains, an all male form.

(Wade 129)

But, historically & by large it is the female performers who have always dominated the performing art tradition in India and one such form is the *Nautanki*. Females play a very important role in the *Nautanki* performances. The next section will analyze the tradition of *Nautanki* in northern India & Pakistan with detailed references to its gender contexts.

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Gender Contexts in Nautanki

Nautanki, a secular semi operatic folk theatrical form of Northern India (Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan) and Pakistan (Punjab region) developed from *swang*and *naqqal*. Performed in large open spaces and erected platforms, the performance starts with an invocation to the gods or the *mangalcharan*, accompanied by beating of the

drums or the *nagaras*. The acts have strong and powerful story lines with tales are taken from epics, legends, and important events. The languages employed are common spoken language of the people and the texts are written in Urdu, Braj, Punjabi and Rajasthani. Dances, songs and comic acts make the routine. In the early ages most of the men acted as women in *Nautanki*, however from the 1930s we see that females performing.

Nau*tanki* is a folk form that has several hidden gender contexts within it. The role of the females, both as an actor and within in the script is intricately weaved in relations to the set historical and social conditions of women. According to Katherine Hansen,

Nautanki theatre as well as myth, epic and popular cinema do not reflect actual social relations, gender differences, and power alignments but rather produce and perpetuate them. They frame paradigms of gendered conduct that assist both women and men in defining their identities, inculcating values to the young, and judging the action of others. (7)

Thus, N*autanki* is not only a result but a cause of a particular social gender formation and vice versa. *Nautanki* plays a very important role in understanding the cultural and social formations of India and helps us to establish the notions of womanhood, & further elaborate gender relations between men and women. Gender roles are also conditioned by the cultural, psychological and social correlates of a society and it clearly defines the rules and expectations to being male or female. Gender roles are thus environmentally conditioned and theatre can play an important part in creation and maintenance of such cultural stereotypes.

The very origin of *Nautanki* has strong gender connotations. *Nautanki*, originated in the theatrical play about *Shahzadi Nautanki*, depicting a woman who was flower

light weighing only about 36 gms. Both fair and lovely she was the beloved of Phul Singh. The name of the play is associated with a desirable woman whose hands one could not win. Phul Singh is rebuked by his sister- in- law and he decides to win his pure love despite reproaches. Finally with the help of garderener or malin he gets disguised as his daughter- in- law and he meets his beloved Nautanki and unites with her. The princess here is desirable, bewitching, and a physical need and love for the man. Gender stereotypes can be clearly seen in this play as princess Nautanki is a light weighed virgin woman, untouched and a delicate beauty and Phul Singh`s manhood is rebuked. Heterosexual love between man and woman on both literal and metaphorical levels are emphasized and opposing characteristics between men and woman are thus exalted.

Sexuality is one of the dominant themes that occur in most Sangit texts or the dramatic texts. According to Hansen, incidents (ibid within the performance), images, and characters repeatedly focus awareness on the pleasures and pitfalls of sexuality. (27) The recent sangit text *Udal ka Byah* (the marriage of Udal), the hero Udal meets his beloved Phulva and wants to marry her and his attempts are thwarted by Narpati Singh and his son, who are Phulva‘s father and brother. Phulva is described to be a lissome, beautiful princess.

The *Sangit* texts or the play scripts of *Nautanki* are replete with the female stereotypes. Women in the *Sangit* texts range from seductresses to honorable virtuous women upholding their womanhood and marriages. In the text *Lucknow Ka Lootera* (The Dacoits of Lucknow) the protagonist Hamid goes to plunder a rich merchant, whose wife falls at his feet and begs for his life to be spared and when Hamid makes overtures at her, she describes herself as a ‘*pativrata*’ one who is vowed to her husband. She remarks at his attempts,

Door se baat kar paas mere na aa, yesi kalma mujhe mat sunao. Shok se loot dhan mera le jaiye, ek pativrata ka sat digao nahi

(Talk to me from afar, and don't say such things to me. You are free to plunder but do not let me break my vow of marriage Akeel, 6)

The female character is rarely seen alone and she is always in connection with the man. The patriarchal society of northern India and Pakistan defines this position of the woman in the texts. At the same time we also see Hamid frequenting a prostitute's, Chameli Jaan's "*Kotha*" or house, who is clearly a seductress and vamp. According to Hansen,

Nautanki poets delight in describing women as murderers, lustful vamps, warring goddesses, and potent sorceresses. Yet they expound an ideology of female chastity and subservience that belies the powerful posture of so many women in their stories. (171, Hansen)

Love, romance, wooing and winning are some of the common themes in the *Sangit* texts. In the play *Siyah Posh*, the daughter of the Wazir of Syria falls in love with Gabru. One day while trying to meet Jamal his lover he gets caught and his execution is ordered. The king in his daily rounds hears their love for each other and forgives Gabru who is united with Jamal.

The men in the *sangit* texts have an exalted position for example in *RajaHarischandra*, the king bequeaths everything and has to leave the kingdom. He has to earn his living by working in the crematoriums while his wife works as a servant. One day his son dies while playing and Harischandra refuses to cremate his own son as his wife cannot afford the fees. While his unrighteousness is upheld while his queen Taramati often breaks into seductive gestures like swaying her

hips and kicking her heels. Hence there are different value additions for males and females.

Many of the acts of the female performers are seductive and amorous songs dances and comic routines make the story go further along. In the play, *Lucknow keLootera*, a song and dance sequence is enacted between the dacoit Hamid and the seductress and prostitute Chameli. Chameli Jaan sings out loud,

Kya haalat banayi mere gulhjaara

Kyu utra hai chera batao tumhara

Hamid

Na khuch haal pooch meri maahepaara

Is wakt aaya musibat ka maara

(Oh my beloved why do you look so unhappy, don't ask me why my sweet heart I am in trouble, 15)

Since the performance takes place at 11 pm and continues till the wee hours of the morning, sex and sexuality are recurrent themes. Women performers are often seen in their erotic persona, clearly to please the men and allure their audiences. They hence create as well as fulfill the need "to be looked at." Mulvey describes this "looked at ness" as seen in many traditional performances,

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can connote to be looked at ness. (145)

It is this "looked at ness" of the female performers in *Nautanki* that delegates to her an inferior position as

compared to men. Irigaray, the leading French feminist comments on this fact,

Investment in the look is not privileged in women as in men. More than the other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, maintains that distance. In our culture, the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body looses its materiality.[2] (70)

In modern days, *Nautanki* is characterized by lusty singing, dancing and women often performing to the tunes of popular film songs and mimic erotic dances. The main objective of the performance is to entertain and delight their audiences. A kind of liaison is thus created and developed. There is hence an exchange of desire, a kind of courtship between the audiences and the performer that is born. The dancing and singing of submissive females appeal to the masculinity of the audiences. Therefore the performances of Nautanki, creates an imbalance for the female performer, negating her position and demeaning her persona and establishing the total power nexus of the males.

To conclude, the *Nautanki* performance creates different values for men and women, and makes a comment on existing socio-economic & political situation of female performers. Nautanki thus creates many contradictions and conflicts for the female performer however one cannot negate or undermine its creative values and inputs into the rich cultural tradition of India and Pakistan. *Nautanki* despite its strong gender biases is one of the leading folk theatrical forms that have lent its hand into many other popular mediums of communication such as films and songs. This form thus needs to be studied and understood in all aspects of its rich diversity in terms of its acting style, rich *sangit* texts, music and costume.

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[1] The British described these courtesans or the dancing

girls as natuch or dancing girls. Nautch is derived from the hindi word Natch.

[2] Irigaray cited from I C Owens Feminist and Postmodernism. Pluto press: London 1985

Let your child be what he wants to be this summer / Gouri Nilakantan

Platform for Action in Creative Theatre(PACT) and KINDERPLUME has initiated a new summer theatre workshop, Abhivyakti in the regions of Delhi and NCR. It is uniquely designed theatre workshop as it involves all the aspects of theatre namely

creative writing, puppetry, face painting, theatre craft acting and improvisation and poetry reading and recitation. According to Neeraj Kumar Mehta, the business head of PACT, a child becomes truly empowered through theatre as Abhivyakti is not a forced activity by parents who just want to get rid of their children during summer. Abhivyakti truly believes in free expression and that is being done through the powerful medium of theatre.

Many theatre workshops are going on in the capital but Abhivyakti does not believe in flocking the children like sheep in a class so the class sizes are not more than 13 children in each batch. Many parents of the Abhivyakti children are well informed and wish to continue with these classes beyond the summer which is a heartening start. No activity is repeated more than thrice and the children's consent is taken by instructors from time to time. Sheel Kalia a regular instructor at Abhivyakti has himself undergone an intensive theatre workshop and certification program. Pact believes that all instructors teaching the skill of theatre need to be not only well equipped but equipped way beyond ordinary expectations. As the children have a strong voice they should be heard by the teacher who should be capable of making quick changes in his approach if his activity is not liked for any reason.

The course has been designed in two folds, namely both the process and the product of theatre are given equal importance. Many theatre companies emphasize only on the product or the final performance is given upmost importance while others totally neglect the product and only pay attention to the process. Here at Abhivyakti both the process and the product are given significant amount of attention. Out of the 24 sessions 12 sessions involve the process while the rest of the 12 pay attention to the product.

By the end of the workshop a feeling of comradeship, confidence and enhancement of the communication skill is hoped

to be achieved in the children. The program has been designed in such manner that the age difference between the children does not impede the classes in any manner. A child as small as 4 fit in well with a 12 year old! It is surprising to see how well a small kindergarten child enjoys himself along with a 12 year old. PACT and KINDERPLUME has truly designed an innovative and path changing program in the area of theatre workshops. One hopes to continue with such further activities in the times to come.