

Cultural Identity

Hopefully this will be my only reference to what happened to me yesterday and it will put into context ~~to~~ a fairly scattered talk. When I arrived and showed my passport, I was stopped at the Airport (in Oporto) and, basically, I was supposed to go back to Africa. While I was waiting in the hall hoping for someone to sort out something about my peculiar status,¹ there was this bird, a little sparrow, that came into the hall, to fly around the hall entirely oblivious of immigration rules. It became a very fascinating subject for one of the immigration officers, trying to get the bird out of the hall.

So I kept on thinking about the bird when I was in this little room, they put me in ~~it~~ ^{it} was a lounge with a sofa. Thinking about how I would spend the rest of my few hours in Oporto. Then I was woken up, after some very good work by the immigration officer, and told that I was allowed in. So this morning I already had this image of the bird in my head and I've been trying to think what I should say here. I came up with five different speeches, and eventually thought well lets forget all this and let's just see what happens.

I suppose Fractures are part of an important theme in my work, in how I see my life as a peculiar kind of European, today, and I think of the 'Texture' of what I am going to say. So let me start with some thoughts.

According to ⁿ many sorts of sociologists, ~~I suppose~~, people like me, ~~(and one definition of us~~ } ^{I suppose} would be immigrants of colour) have one very peculiar drive. That is to search for roots. Where are you from? what's your origin? it's taken me some ^{time}, close to 15 years of working in the theatre in England, to also realise that roots are more properly routes, as the Americans say, meaning roads, pathways, highways. Some roads ~~to~~ lead to dead ends but there are many

roads, rather like looking at any city. Those are perhaps more important, perhaps more real, than this mythic search for where you come from and what you are.

So what are my routes, to a point, or Oporto. This is just a collection of certain images. The first thought that comes to mind is that as a child in Africa, a game that I used to play was to walk in the footsteps of Vasco de Gama around the whole continent of Africa to Western India. I have to explain this. In this school in Africa there was a pond, a huge pond, and in the pond there was this massive map of Africa, which was a relief map, with the mountains and the Sahara etc., and just North of Africa was the southern tip of Europe and to the East of Africa was India. So we used to walk around Africa and would come out of our History classes knowing all about Europe and how Vasco de Gama 'found' India. Yes 'found' India. So that is one of the routes that is definitely in my head.

Another one which in many ways led to the formation of the Tara Arts Company was in 1976, in the Summer of 1976 in London, when a young Sikh boy, 17 years old, was killed by four white men, and I, at the time was in York. I was studying to be a historian. I didn't know the boy but that event made me cry because one realised, that there was me. It was not the boy, it was not the fact that they were beating each other when he was killed, it was because he was an immigrant of colour. So that's another kind of route to that sort of 'imagined' community, that there but for the grace of God go I. That is me, I belong there, I am a part of him.

The first play we put on was a play by Rabindranath Tagore one of only two non European Nobel Prize Winners. And this particular play, *The Sacrifice*, The Post Office,² I discovered much later, was a play that was staged by a Jewish company in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942.

Extraordinary, why we chose this play in that circumstance. And here we were at another moment in time doing the play which is a similar one. Trying in some ways to make some sense of the kind of England, the kind of Europe that we have begun to inhabit. Tartuffe forms another kind of route, an attempt to trace a footnote in European Cultural History and it

therefore suggests that perhaps this play really is an Indian play and not, as we know it, a French play. While we were researching for the play we came across a letter by one Francois Bernier, a colleague of Moliere's, who at the time in the middle of the 17th century was touring India and was chronicling the particular changes that were going on in India. There was then a ruler who was in many senses the absolute exact parallel of Louis XIV. He, too had promulgated a policy of religious differences. In his chronicle, Bernier notes the existence of fakirs, begging priests. He says at one point in a letter that he wrote in 1660, that these fakirs are "all of a very handsome disposition but God help the family that does not give them a good welcome. Even though everyone in the family knows that these men have eyes only for the women of ~~the~~ family." Tartuffe was written in 1664. It seems to me that this is very much a description of this particular family. So it was a kind of cheek, a way of looking at the play from that point of view rather than approaching it as part of a classic canon of European theatre.

Another route is a little incident that happened in Sarajevo in 1993. A Muslim girl sent a letter to her lover via a Western journalist. And her lover was a Serb. And this Western Journalist took it to her lover who was part of the Serb army trying to kill her. And last year in a part of London, the East End of London, a young Bengali boy was beaten up so badly by seven boys that his scalp hung off his skull and he became a vegetable. But one of the boys was arrested because his girlfriend, a white English woman, reported him to the police. As a result she got ostracised from her community. She ended up befriending this boy who is now still a vegetable sitting in Guys hospital. And the boy who had been arrested was himself half Bengali. What was the purpose? Who was he killing? Who was he hitting? Himself, part of himself? Was he trying to rid himself of this immigrant of colour? ?

These routes have become very important to me, in some ways as I have already suggested by listing a few examples. They influence directly a particular production. In other cases they alter

the 'Texture' in which I sort of locate myself and locate our work. Rather than try and say that this is the work, it is Indian work—I don't know what that means, it doesn't make sense to me.

The only thing that keeps making sense to me is this image of looking at a mirror which has cracked, fractured into many pieces. A mirror can reflect many reflections, many different roads and thoughts. That's one kind of context.

I want to move on to talk a little about not just my company but this particular type of work that developed in England over the past twenty to twenty-five years. And through that, hopefully, suggest some thoughts about what is a multicultural Europe. More specifically, what is a multicultural theatre in Europe as we come to the end of this century and move on to the next.

I'll start with two quotes. One from a playwright called David Rudkin, in his play, the Saxon Shore, he has a note to producers and actors:

'Characters are people and people don't have accents they have speech'.

The second is an extract from a message by Vaclav Havel on World Theatre Day in March 1994.

'Theatre is more than just a performance of stories and tales; it is a place for human encounter' Speech and human encounter. The arena marked by these two concepts, I think is most vitally inhabited in England today by what is defined as Asian and Black Theatre. The theatre of immigrants of colour. Just to give a little background of this particular kind of theatre. It's the type of theatre that in some respects is very young, it's barely 30 years old since the time of emigration from these particular parts of the world to England. A period that has seen the landscape of Britain, of England in particular, change completely, forever.

British Citizens who happen to be Asian or Black. British sportsmen and women who are Black and Asian. British writers who are Asian and Black. British politicians who are Asian and

Black. British diet, British media. There is not an aspect of contemporary life in the country that is untouched by the presence of this unique cultural experience. What makes them unique, of course, is that they are all products of the British Empire. They and their descendants are here because, to put it simply, you were there. The Anglo-Saxon white was there. The presence of Asians and Blacks in Britain has profoundly provoked, what the polite call "cultural encounters", but what ^{more} accurately could be called racial encounters.

In ~~a~~ theatre, they have taken two related forms. One is ownership of space and the other is language. Both have been distinctive responses to the encounters in England and a means of redefining a Britain in our own image. The ownership of space is manifest in two ways, casting practices in theatres and the formation of Independent Companies.

Casting is obvious. If a production is to reflect contemporary Britain then it cannot ignore Britain's contemporary diversity of ethnicity.

Independent companies came about initially to achieve the space in the Theatre. To present the plays that we wanted to present and in the manner that we wanted to. To an extent, by now in the late 1990s this initial impetus ^{behind} by the formation of Independent Companies, including my own (Tara Arts), has been diluted by the increasing prevalence of what are called "integrated casting" practices. More and more Asian and Black performers can now be seen as a matter of course in our theatres. As to whether this practice, however, has led to the fulfilment of the other goals of Independent Companies, the presentation of Asian and Black texts, plays, fears, ~~is~~ is much more debatable. The only ^{three} ~~two~~ non-European Nobel prize winning playwrights, Tagore ^{and Wilcott} and Soyinka ~~have~~ ^{ing} have by and large been singularly absent from our stages for the past 30 years. It seems to me that now as we come to the next century, that for Asian and Black theatre, the contest for ~~the~~ language is the contest for the space. For both ^{allude} ~~elude~~ to the same thing: ~~to~~ redefining ^{ing} the work in our image. The historical right of all immigrants everywhere. We only have to think about Europeans in America, Africa, in Asia, in Australia.

Salman Rushdie coined a phrase in a television interview recently which I think best describes what is happening to language, to the language of theatre in England. He talked in terms of his own writing, that he is sort of trying to create "a different sort of noise" in English. That phrase, a "different sort of noise" in English. This different sort of noise is amply demonstrated in the works of the foremost English Novelists today. Salman Rushdie himself, Ben Okri, Ramesh Gunasekera, Vikram Seth, Paraseera, Amita Ghosh, Hanif Kureishi. The greatest literature of today is from these different sorts of Englishmen.

In the theatre, this different sort of noise, I have begun to characterise increasingly as 'Binglish'. (laughter) I am very glad you laughed, that is precisely the effect of it! It sort of suggests something not quite English, something maybe funny, ^{certainly} something slightly odd. And to me, what it is, is to flirt with the English language because ~~that is a state~~, that is my existential state; I am ^{in a flirtation} constantly ~~flirting~~ with English. A flirtation, that is, with a notion of how the language ought to be spoke. It is a flirtation also of course as much with trying to *be* English. We are and we're not. Its in this ambivalent ~~of~~ space, this ambivalent existential space. Of being and not being. That we contest ~~of~~ notions of language, of theatre, of space, of history. Take three contrasting examples of recent productions. One is a production of Richard III at the Royal National Theatre. The production was by our celebrated classical actors. There is a certain kind of language that I cannot bear and that is the non real language. The theatrical language, which is a tiny vein of all natural accents or as David Rudkin would say speech. So people don't speak normally they speak theatrically. And as usually happens I get very bored with the same sort of monotony of English because out on the streets I hear so many varieties of English. So I close my eyes and try to imagine what is going on. While I was having this experience, half way through the first half of the play, my eyes were closed and I was hearing a lot of English and nothing much was happening of stage and so I was sort of imagining what ~~could~~ possibly could be happening. Suddenly my eyes opened because I heard another sort of

English, I heard a Glaswegian accent and I heard Cockney and I thought, gosh this is interesting, what's going on here? What was going on was that one of the two murderers (laughter) was speaking in Glaswegian. It's nothing to do with being black or not as it was not in this case a black cast. What was being said here? ~~It was really a class look at language.~~

The other was a production by the Talawa Theatre Production Company. Talawa is a black theatre company which looks very much to Africa and the Caribbean for inspiration and they did a production of King Lear. ~~And~~ what I found extraordinary was what was going on with us as the audience. The text that they used, the way they spoke, ranged from a very clear well spoken, 'how Shakespeare ought to be spoken' type of English to, on the other hand, a very natural patois, ~~so this depended very much upon the actors and~~ Patois is a way of speaking which emerged in the Caribbean, ~~and there's a~~ particular actor ^{in manner} who spoke ^{in manner} this way and ~~therefore attacked his speeches this way.~~ What was extraordinary about the ^{event} ~~plotting~~ was that one fraction of the hall was fairly conventional, nothing theatrical was going on, but in the way the sounds were emerging there was something going on with the audience. When the speaking was very, 'as it ought to be', certain sections of the audience were very attentive and they could connect to this production. They could see where it was coming from, they had certain kinds of conventions of reading it, even though the performers were all black. When it switched, with a certain actor, ~~into~~ patois, there was a whole other section of the audience, black members of the audience, who were going yeah man, yeah man, and who were responding to the language as real, a language of the street, a language that they are part of. And so what was occurring in the production was this sort of contest within the audience about owning this product and that was occurring through speech itself. The way in which speech was being used.

And a third example, because all my examples are classic, ~~because~~ (after all I am a classics man) was a production by Trevor Nunn, of Timon of Athens. And in the production there was one Asian actor. The production was a good interpretation and it ~~relied, because many of the actors~~

~~are RSC actors, it~~ worked speech wise very much within the code that the RSC has established of how to speak Shakespeare. But this actor, the Asian actor, (who did not have a major part) he can't do it, he simply cannot do it, because whenever he speaks English it is quite clear that the rhythm of another language, his own language, Gujarati, is there. To remove that, would be to kill the actor. So there is the rhythm of Gujarati which is infecting his English, inflecting his English constantly. Watching the production, one asks, why doesn't he speak properly, why is he standing out? And reflecting upon that, this is one of the mistakes if you like, of integrated casting. It's not a question of getting the right colour, it's a question of are you listening are you looking properly at the person. For me, Trevor Nunn failed by not realising that that's his weakest link, take care of that. For it not to have come across, as here's an actor standing out, somehow he doesn't quite fit. All of his other actors were from a variety of parts of Britain. Some from Cornwall, some from Lancashire, some from Yorkshire, some from Scotland. Why did they not all speak naturally, and perform Shakespeare from that point of view. In which case what he would have had is not only a tremendous interpretation, but a tremendously real interpretation of real people within this diversity of Britain.

So is Bilingual just a mode of speech, ~~is that what I am saying~~? The rhythm of other non-English languages inflecting the natural rhythm of standard English? To some extent it is for me that. But it is also more. In essence I think it represents a challenge to do away with the notions of standard speech. It also evidences a negotiation with foreignness. A means of bringing into contemporary English other tastes, other Histories, other Cultures. I think potentially it is the language of today. A fact, amply demonstrated by contemporary popular music whose lyrics often demonstrate a zany eclecticism that embraces black American slang, Caribbean patois and Indian words in a single English sentence. Think about popular music and note the text that is going on. Think of rap and note the text that is going on. That is a confrontation, an encounter with standard notions of what is culture. Bilingual represents for me that cross-roads to modern

English. To go on oblivious of other mainly non-English voices or to embrace them and so to diversify the noise, that is the ~~problem~~ ^{the provocation of this} the different noise of the language.

There is a great Urdu poet called ~~xxx~~ ^{Ghalib} who was writing in the middle of the 18th century, sorry the 19th century, at a time when India was changing. The British dominance of India was clearly evident and he was writing in this period which was called the Mutiny. And he says in a couplet which I will say ~~first~~ in Urdu first and then translate

(Reads in Urdu)

Neither a shrine, nor a harem, a threshold, nor a door,

I sit at the cross-roads, who dare move me from there?

To return to those two ~~poems~~ ^{poems} from David Rudkin and Vaclav Havel. The Asian ^{actor} or character or black actor ^{/character} speaks, he/she does not have an accent. And his speech is a creation of several languages like the modern city of Delhi which is built upon the ever present relics of at least seven other Delhis. The word for tomorrow in several northern Indian Languages is the same for yesterday. What magical present then does such a character inhabit? How then, to encounter Macbeth, "tomorrow and tomorrow", when it might just as well be him saying, 'yesterday, yesterday'. And if we believe like Havel that theatre is the place for human encounter, how do we negotiate beyond the foreignness within all modern western societies, except by exploring the inclusive possibilities of Bilingual? All language, of course, carries memory as much as value. What, for the first colonial immigrant of colour, is the memory encased in modern English or French or German? The memory of power whether slavery or rule, I think is the inescapable patina around modern European languages. A power manifested in the modern nation mother or fathers cry to his child, not to be such a ^{ghora} (in Punjabi this means "white"). So in effect that kind of admonishment from a parent to a child is not to lose him or herself in English which of course suggests a fear, a loss of a distinct identity. That loss is not a mythic loss. I think one characteristic, (certainly of all immigrants of colour) is that we are all too conscious of loss. One

lives with the notion that I will never return home, one has lost one's home. There's no turning back. One is sort of living in a cross-road. Memories can take you back, but there's no return. You will never be what you were, where you were born, what your parents were. That is an absolute reality.

It is noticeable, this fear, amongst us. Also how our mode of English switches dependant^{ing} upon who we are talking to. For example, my name is Jatind^{-er}, the 't' is a particular sound within Punjabi, so its Jatind^{er}, but I find myself, in settings like this, certainly in England, changing so it becomes Jatind^{er}, the 't' becomes harder. One notices this constantly amongst us, when we are talking with each other there is no threat. It is like a relationship between equals so the speech is normal. When, however, one is communicating with the rest of the world you have to put on a way of connecting with the sounds of another place. Minute changes, but terribly noticeable to us. So the one is implied in the situation of equality at home, among friends, the other of inequality and that's what I mean as a kind of modern illustration, today's illustration, of the fact that language, (certainly if you look at it from the point of view of immigrants of colour) carries with it a power. This notion of power, of being enslaved, or of being colonised. Or of rebelling. By flirting with standard English, Bilingual is in effect a means of flirting with a colonising power of the language. As much as trying to bend it to become my language without me having to deny my seven cities of Dheli.

Having sketched that sort of context both in terms of Tara and Black and Asian Work I want to try to conclude with some means of extrapolating this, some sorts of suggestions, possibly, about European multicultural theatre in the coming century.

It seems to be one vital part, is to recognise that multicultural does not necessarily mean equality of power and that's an important equation to bear in mind. So it means that one can choose to say, fine, I will raid from these other cultures. I will go out to the rest of the world

and I will build my theatre. This can produce some stunning pieces of work, Peter Brook ^{offers} is just one example. Or I will try and not see this as an exploration of the others but of myself, ^{in myself.} reflecting them. How Asian have I become by drawing so much from India, how African have I become by drawing so much from Africa? These are insoluble ones, these are like personal kinds of decisions, but it all stems from that very important equation ^{of culture and power.}

To be multicultural has not necessarily meant there has been an equality of power, and that is ^{addressed.} an issue that must be. I think another undertow of multicultural theatre is that we are about making present, making evident what is absent. What is absent? I give the examples of Wole Soyinka and ^{Rabindranath} Tagore, who have not really been much in evidence in productions in England. That suggests this notion of absence. That they are absent in the imagination. Tagore came to the world's notice, ^{because of his work in relationship} with W B Yeats. What about when we respond to T S Eliot's Wasteland? How much are we aware that T S Eliot was a great Sanskrit scholar? ^{So} much of the Wasteland is littered with Sanskrit not just in actual terms of the words but conception. That is not the object of our study. ^{Or} When we examine the work of Brecht and Artaud. But let's stick with Brecht; we know that the word, that in English is alienation, he coined as a result of watching Beijing Opera. And in particular seeing the way in which the character was both actor and person. The alienating devices in Chinese Opera. But how much of that encounter do we actually examine in our schools and universities. There is an absence of this 'other' and that absence is not incidental, that was the whole process of imperial rule to make the 'other' invisible. And if we are engaged in multicultural theatre then it seems to me that it is our duty to reverse that process, to make visible what was invisible.

Creation of language, I've mentioned. Free movement. (laughter). It seems to me that we live in this very peculiar moment in time that politically we are dropping down many borders, for some, albeit only for some, but nevertheless, that is something in some ways quite exciting, and quite new in European history. To be able to go from one part of Europe to another freely, to

work in one place, and to move on from there and work in another place. And yet at the same time while this is going on there are also fears, and in some cases, very right fears, about losing ourselves and therefore that fear is manifesting itself and saying what is English about England, French about France, Portuguese about Portugal. ~~They are trying to create a distinction, to live distinctly.~~ And I think that is where we have to accept the fact that human beings, to be human, is an ideal, its a kind of liberal concept. In practice that's not ^t how we tick. We tick as particular people, with particular tastes, with particular histories, with particular speeches, with particular features. That's how we tick, but, one of things that we can see over Europe in the last 30 years, that can either be a route, ^{or} a search for one's roots, which I think inevitably will lead, everyone of us, ever backward. When I think about myself and I think about my roots, I think firstly I was born in Africa, of Indian parents, I am a Hindu, I come from the Punjab, but not just the Punjab, my parents are from ^{Hoshiarpur} ~~Shapur~~ which places me within a particular caste within the Punjab. Where is my search for roots going to end? What's that doing? ~~But~~ simply taking me back into ever small circles of insularity. Or I could change the whole sense of roots and talk of it as routes, roads. And then foresee that sense of what I am, which is all of these things, as making connections with others who are equals. Who also have concentric circles of where they are from. An image that comes to mind is that today we stand on either side of the border and at best are able to wave at each other and smile but we aren't shaking hands, because only equals shake hands.

I am aware that it's been quite a ~~sort of~~ ^{sort} fractured ~~type~~ of speech but I hope some of this will, in some ways, be of use and I particularly will look forward to discussions and especially the kind of practical implications that could come out of it. I must before that, however, simply reiterate the poem. I love it so much, if you will forgive me for this little indulgence I will repeat the poem:

Neither a shrine, nor a harem, a threshold nor a door,

I sit at the cross-roads, who dare move me from there.

Questions:

¹ Jatinda Verma was born in Kenya, and has a passport with a 'right of abode' in the UK stamp. At the time of the conference new EU legislation had just come in to operation, opening the borders within the EU to EU passport holders, but making it much more difficult to gain entry with anything but a standard EU passport. Oporto immigration had not seen one like this before.

² Republished by Irish UP in a facsimile of 1914 edition ISBN 0716513471 in 1972