

Binglishing the Stage: A Generation of Asian Theatre in England

Binglish: "black English", "being English", "beastly English", "bastardly English", "be English" ... all these meanings are implicit in this word for that particular negotiation between English and Indian languages and sensibilities that is underway in contemporary England. It is within such negotiation that I believe Asian theatre needs to be sited and understood.

Asian theatre in England - as a distinct body of work - is of relatively recent vintage. The main impetus for the movement stems from the first mass migration by Asians in January and February 1968 from Kenya. It is this migration which led to the emergence of the homogenising term "Asian". A term which was used increasingly to lump Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, East African and other diasporic-migrants of Indian sub-continental origin under one catch-all term. While Asian presence in England is considerably older, Kenyan Asians, unlike their cousins from the Indian sub-continent, were predominantly more middle-class and relatively more integrated into the metropolitan economy. Kenya did not achieve independence until 1964 and so education, commerce and the polity was more closely influenced by Britain. Senior school examinations, for example, were conducted by the Cambridge Educational Board; with the result that school curricula closely resembled that in force in the "mother country". Equally, there was an emulation in Kenyan-Asian society of the range of professional and amateur theatre activity underway in England. Indeed, to a large extent, the forms of theatre activity in Kenya were essentially derivative of English popular theatre.

One of the earliest consequences of this different type of migrant was that, where theatre activity in one or other of the Indian languages (most often, Urdu, Punjabi and Gujarati) was increasingly becoming the norm amongst earlier Indian and Pakistani migrants, among Kenyan Asians theatre almost exclusively took English as the medium of communication; a practice echoed by other diasporic-Asians. (Indeed, currently, the overwhelming majority of Asian theatre companies in England have been founded by Asians from the Diaspora, as opposed to the "authentic" sites of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka.)

For the Kenyan-Asian, migration to England led almost literally to a condition of being "twice-born": once, 60 years ago, as migrant-workers and settlers from British India to eastern Africa; the second time, as African-Indian migrants to England. This condition has led - in the inevitable process of establishing an identity in England - to a discourse with Indian and Pakistani cultures; with a near-total absence of any with Africa. The Kenyan-Asians (along with those from the rest of the Diaspora), therefore, more so than the Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi migrant, have been inventing an identity in post-imperial England.

What are the textures of this invention of identity in theatre practice? And, indeed, is the search for identity the only *raison d'être* for theatre practised by this community of migrants?

To answer the latter question first, "identity" has been the inevitable sub-text of Kenyan- and other diasporic-Asian theatres. I say "inevitable" with severe qualification: had England not been racially-conscious, had Asians been perceived as an integral part of the theatre resource of the country, then perhaps there would have been no impulse to seek self-identification through the theatre. Sadly, this was not the case in the '60s, nor, to a great extent, is it the case now. It needs also to be borne in mind that the Kenyan-Asians were migrants with the most recent memory of colonial rule. Kenyan society upto Independence in 1964 was rigidly stratified along racial lines; with mutually-exclusive White, Asian and African residential and educational areas. Under the conditions of life in late-60s England, this memory had to be rapidly negotiated; indeed, for all effective purposes, suppressed, if only because schools and residential areas were broadly multi-racial.

Such suppression of memory, coupled with the incessant need to answer the question "where you from" (most often posed by whites), began the process of invention: the search for "roots". India and Pakistan, depending upon one's religious affiliation, became the inevitable (and simpler) repositories of origin. Memory, in my experience, is a seductive, tricky devil which does not always need actual experience to form a feature of the imagination. I grew up in Kenya, as did my entire family - with the sole exception of my father, who left the Punjab when he was 15 and never returned. Yet the word "Ganga" evoked images in me as a child in Kenya of a wild, turbulent, sacred river - though none of the family had ever seen that great river of India until recently. Images that had no correspondence in rivers of Kenya. Equally, as a Hindu-Punjabi, my attitude and relations with Asian Muslims was mediated through the received stories of the Partition of Indian and Pakistan into two separate nations in 1947. Is memory myth, then? Perhaps. It certainly endures long after the immediate experience, passing like the game of Chinese Whispers down the ages. Such memory seems to draw one ineluctably to the elephantine embrace of the sub-continent; tugging the Asian into a constant flirtation with England and - for the diasporic-Asian - with India/Pakistan.

This process is clearly evident in the work of the longest-established Asian theatre company in England: Tara Arts. Founded in the wake of the racist murder of a young Sikh boy in London in June 1976, Tara spent its initial years exploring the trinity of spaces (East Africa, India and England) which were the inheritance of its founder members (predominantly Asian migrants from Kenya).

Two productions in this period offer useful examples: *Yes, Memsahib* (1980) and *Scenes in the Life Of...* (1982). The former traced the genesis of Kenya colony at the turn of the century; analogizing the treatment of migrant Asians there with that being experienced in contemporary England. The latter production traced the growth from childhood in Kenya to adulthood in England of a young Asian woman. Both were essentially documents of particular moments in history. Both sought to locate a particular set of Asian experiences in more ambiguous territory. Yet, by the mid-80s, Tara's work began to express a more straight-forward dialogue: that between English-Asians and Indians.

In part, this was the consequence of a self-conscious drive to elicit the company's theatrical identity: in other words, to discover in theatrical terms that which made Tara distinctive - beyond the socio-political badges of colour, race, legal status. Tara's search was premised on classical Indian aesthetics; the central premise of which - and one which is shared by classical Chinese, Japanese and all south-east Asian theatres - is its eschewing of the photographic sense of "reality". As the earliest treatise on the theatre - the *Natya Shastra* - puts it, drama must be "a delight to the eyes as much as the ears", working on the paradox that theatre "is like a dream: it is not real, but really felt". This discourse with classical Indian dramaturgy contributed to Tara's rejection of the dominant convention of the modern English stage - the spoken word. Gesture was speech, as much as a phrase of music a sentence - or the passage of time. It is in this sense that the word, in Tara's productions, took on the texture also of dance and music.

From the late-80s, Tara began a more overt dialogue with England: texts. More specifically, the "tradaption" of European texts (as Robert LePage has called such processes): viewing Gogol, Buchner, Moliere, Shakespeare, Sophocles, Chekhov, Brecht through Asian eyes and ears. With the result that such texts, familiar canon of English theatre, became "other"; providing a neat equation with the status of Tara as an "Other", an "Outsider" theatre company within the matrix of English theatre.

This attempt to transform texts encompasses two attendant ideas: translation and quotation. In the work of Tara Arts as well as Tamasha (which originated from Tara), Kali, Hathi, Mehtaab, Moti Roti, Man Mela, Yelele and Maya - to name just a few of the companies currently in existence - both ideas provide important clues to the texture of invention in Asian theatre; as much as pointing up differences of application and approach.

In 1988, Tara Arts produced Gogol's *The Government Inspector*. The production brought together several elements of Tara's development; primarily, its creative discourse with India (achieved through the director of the production, Anuradha Kapur from the National School of Drama in New Delhi; as well as a performer and a musician from Kerala) and its approach to the transformation of texts.

Dispensing with the broadly naturalistic structure of Gogol's original play, techniques derived from Indian theatre were employed to re-invent the play. Locating the story in a mythical small-town in post-Independence India - a town which was blissfully unaware of Independence and so remained in thrall of "Blighty" (England) - the primary techniques employed were the use of a Story-teller as both narrator and character; the use of rhythm and movement as elements in characterisation; an epic structure that displaced time-and-space continuities; and the creation of a spoken text that embraced song, verse, soliloquy and dialogue. The latter was a deliberately theatrical language, comprising archaic Anglo-Indianisms alongside quotations from Chekhov, Eliot, Kipling, Tennyson, Kalidasa, Shakespeare, Salman Rushdie and Bollywood Cinema. This quotational texture seemed to offer the closest correspondence to the lives of the Asian performers: products of migration and colonization and, therefore, inheritors of a highly eclectic sense of "culture" ... a culture composed of fragments of memory, text and song. Transformed in such a way, Gogol's satire became not only an attack on material corruption but, more self referentially, an attack on one of the abiding legacies of Empire - the colonization of the mind. The grotesque nature of the satire took on a peculiar poignancy (especially when performed before Asian audiences) when, at the end, the Story-teller turned to the audience and said, "Laugh not, for then must you laugh at yourselves."

The apotheosis of this transformational texture was reached in my production of Moliere's *Tartuffe* for the Royal National Theatre (1990). (The event in-itself was significant for two reasons: I was the first of the current generation of Asians to be invited to direct at the National; and I chose for my cast members of Tara Arts - hence, an all-Asian cast was seen for the first time at the Royal National.) Setting the production in India, it was located in a period of Indian history equivalent to that in which Moliere originally wrote the play (17th century France of Louis XIV). To quote from my production note-book:

"I am setting out to translate a seventeenth century French farce through an all-Asian company of performers. This entails a double translation: once from the French original to English; and secondly to an English spoken by Asian actors, who have their own history of the acquisition of English speech. In other words, who are themselves 'translated' men and women - in that they (or their not-too distant forbears) have been 'borne across' from one language and culture to another. In order then to lay bare the fitful dimension of 'translation', I must take account of the specificity of my performers (their history), by conveying Moliere's original play-text into a form that allows the performers to make creative connections between their ancestral traditions and their English present..."

The form that this translation took was broadly derivative of Indian popular theatre conventions; most notably, *Bhavai*, from Gujarat- a form that closely corresponds with commedia dell'arte, which influenced Moliere. Moliere's story was presented "as a gift from the West" to the Emperor Aurangzeb by a French traveller, Françoise Bernier - a friend of Moliere's who travelled to the court of this emperor between 1660 and 1676; and "translated" by the Emperor's Court Poet. Indian languages were deliberately employed, and at times directly "translated" by one of the two storytellers. And these intersected a simple, almost prosaic English speech. Live music scored the entire production text. The bogus priest, Tartuffe, became an Indian "fakir" - religious mendicant. This heaping together of fragments of diverse cultures is what I characterise as *Binglish*. The production proved a runaway success at the National and on tour; eventually undertaking an extensive overseas tour.

Tamasha's production of *Women of Dust* (1992) provides a variant on the idea of translation. The play, by Ruth Carter, related the story of migrant women workers from Rajasthan, working on building projects in Delhi. A product of research in India, the production attempted to translate, for English audiences, the experience of these women. A realistic stage setting was infused with speech that attempted to recreate, in English, the particular rhythm of Rajasthani dialects. This transformation of the lives of Rajasthani migrant workers into English did not aim to establish a correspondence between the particular Asian performers and the particular stories of these women in contemporary India, nor to problematise the act of translation. Rather, the production sought to document these particular lives in a manner accessible to a broad, English-speaking audience. It offered, in other words, a slice-of-life of the "other".

Such presentation of the Other, contrasting with Tara's correspondence with the Other, has become a defining feature of Tamasha's production history. A feature that achieved its best-known expression in the 1997 co-production with the Royal Court and Birmingham Repertory Theatre of Ayub Khan Din's *East is East*. The play, set in late-60s Salford, told the story of a mixed-race family: Pakistani father, white working-class mother. The cross-cultural tensions and misunderstandings were conveyed with gentle humour, amidst a realistic set recreating a terraced house in the Lancashire town. The text interrupted an idiomatic English with idioms derived from Punjabi and Urdu. This was echoed in the taped music design- '70s rock sitting uncertainly beside '50s Bollywood songs. This enormously popular production tapped-in to the mood of the late-90s: self-confidence amongst certain sections of the Asian population mingled with a desire within the wider population for some insight into Asian life in contemporary England. That it was possible also to locate the production clearly within recent English theatrical history, was an added bonus: *East is East* is firmly within the territory paved by Shelagh Delaney's *Taste of Honey* and the other crop of working-class plays from the Angry Decade of the 1960s.

This form of presentation of the Other appears in stark contrast to Mehtaab - the first theatre company to receive Arts Council support for non-English work. Mehtaab's production of *Kali Salwar* (1996) - based on a short story by Saadat Hassan Manto about a prostitute whose customers are predominantly English soldiers serving the Raj - was entirely in Punjabi; pitching this production firmly into the territory inhabited largely by overseas productions touring England. Yet Mehtaab's producers and performers are all English-Asians. What Mehtaab seemed to be doing was to go beyond the flirtation with Indian languages into an other text that, by definition, would exclude some and include others. And, in so doing, translate (transport) its Punjabi-speaking Asian audience into a memory of pre-Independence Punjab. In this enterprise, the company seemed to be fulfilling the same need that Bollywood cinema caters for: a means of entering, for a while, the Indian sub-continent without the interference of the migratory experience.

Subsequent to this production, however, Mehtaab has entered into that flirtation with Indian languages that is, by the late-90s, the unifying feature of all Asian theatres (as evidenced by the company's latest production, *Not Just an Asian Babe*). It is with such flirtation that we enter squarely into *Binglish* - that invention of text and form which seems to point Asian theatre in both directions at once: towards the memory of ancestral lands and towards reflection and refraction of contemporary England. *Binglish* has been the site for the invention of a distinctive Asian theatre identity - whose characteristic is not its uniformity, as has been noted in this brief glimpse of the work of just three of the contemporary Asian companies.

Summary

I have sought to argue that *Binglish* has the texture of translation: the translation ("bearing across", according to the OED definition) of Asian experiences, histories, stories, sensibilities to England (the erstwhile "mother country"). Equally, that this texture is varied in approach and application across each of the companies currently operating. That it can be a presentation (documentation) to and for England; that it can be a vehicle for transporting a particular audience to the sub-continent; and that it can be a means to seek a creative correspondence between memory and contemporary English experiences.

As the millennium draws to a close, English-Asian identity is showing no signs of losing its ambivalence: at once insular and international. Generations are growing up that seem, on the one hand, to be entirely "English" in culture: idiomatic Yorkshire, Brummie, Cockney, some *sans* any Indian language and whose sense of music bears little relation to Indian music, with its preponderance of melody and rhythm. On the other hand, the very same generations seem to be more confident, more willing to assert their "Indian" identities - as is borne out by the contemporary Asian music scene. Global communications, coupled with the explosive pace of economic and social change in the urban areas of India and Pakistan, have conspired to re-ignite a fascination with the ancestral "mother

country" that, for a time, seemed to be waning (if only because, viewed from England, India and Pakistan seemed far from "modern").

Yet, this ambivalence is, to a large extent, at the expense of memories of other homelands - East Africa, South Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana. Perhaps, over the next 30 years, these other memories will come to take their rightful place in the make-up of the unique theatrical enterprise which is Asian theatre in England: a microcosm of the world on a tiny spit of land on the northern fringes of Europe; and in so doing, go beyond the translative exercise, in a manner achieved by the current giants of English Literature, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and Vikram Seth.

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