

The Impact of Cultural Diversity on the Arts in the UK

Oslo 2001

I run Tara Arts, the theatre group which I founded with some friends in 1976. I came to England in 1968 from East Africa. These are two facts about myself, which I will expand on, as I try to offer a personal odyssey through theatre in England and try to locate that within the odyssey of Britain towards cultural diversity.

Why did three young men decide to produce a play in 1976? That year was literally the hottest summer on record in Britain. Reservoirs dried up, a Minister for Water was appointed, and racial tensions spread throughout the nation's cities. Specifically in London, a number of young Asians, students were killed, culminating in the racial murder of a young Indian boy in West London in July 1976.

This murder, perhaps because it was of a young boy - a boy who was studying aircraft engineering - ignited the community across the nation with the feeling: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." We were angry of course, we were hurt, but more importantly, we could not understand why this was happening. We quickly realized that none of us was capable of making a film, which was what we first thought of doing, so we decided to produce a play.

But there was another reason for choosing the theatre, and that was that we wanted to involve a lot of young people - people like ourselves - in the act of creating a piece of work, we wanted to engage live with an audience with the work that we were doing. We chose to adapt a play by Rabindranath Tagore who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1913.

The choice of this play, the decision to adapt it and the reasoning behind that adaptation set the tone for the company over its next 24 years and in hindsight saved it from becoming a victim of its time.

Why choose this play? It was an Indian play written in English. We wanted to recover for England its own heritage in supporting and championing this writer in the early part of the Twentieth Century. Also it was set in Fourteenth Century Bengal, and yet was dealing with the immorality of dogma. Tagore was a confirmed pacifist, and this was the play he wrote in opposition to the First World War. What he showed us was that metaphor was a fantastically resonant tool for looking at our reality. Our reasoning behind the adaptation, and the reason to do it in English, was that it was our statement that this is our language, but a language that we claim, and into which we infuse other sensibilities, other stories.

But there was another reason behind the adaptation, and that was that we would use the play, in the way which we would adapt it, to critique both white relations with non-white, and non-white relations with each other. In other words, without knowing it at the time, what we had set ourselves on the path of is our duty for being in the theatre, which is to hold a mirror up to society.

That came from some very simple reasoning. Firstly: that racism is not our problem, and secondly, that to focus just on racism would be to deny our own humanity, and our own vulnerability, and the fact that we also have lots of faults, and that racism is simply on one end of a spectrum of injustice.

So we staged this play in a local arts centre financing it through our own funds, which mainly consisted of student grants and involving actors from our local community.

After our inaugural production in August 1977, we knew this was a lifetime's task, and that we were not good enough. We began to look around for people who could help us in both developing our craft in the theatre and our company, and so it was that we met Naseem Khan.

Unknown to us, in 1976 The Arts Council of Great Britain (as it was then called), in conjunction with The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, published a report by Naseem Khan called "The Arts Britain Ignores." The report surveyed the cultural productions of metropolitan Britain's ethnic populations bringing carnival, classical Indian dance, music, theatre and the visual arts to the consciousness of a political cultural structure; which had become aware of the fringe and community arts, but still saw the world from very determinedly European eyes. Eyes that could not see art as a street celebration, that could not see earth-based movement as a valid form of dance, nor could its ears hear that the strumming of a sitar was classical music. This report in short began Britain's long journey into the light of a diverse world of art and pushed us on our journey to becoming a state-subsidised company.

We must remember that this publication coincided with that summer that I was talking of. In the early 1980's the most startling theatre company to emerge on the national scene was The Black Theatre Co-operative, and the most startling new voice was that of Hanif Kureishi. The Black Theatre Co-operative was a collection of extraordinary performers: Victor Romero Evans, Jeanette Kay, Chris Tummings. They produced the work of playwrights as diverse as Mustapha Matura and Sam Shepherd, establishing a dramaturgy that combined music with the most vivid theatre. The performers exuded an energy that was here and now, emerging from the club and the dance scenes of London.

The Co-operative's inaugural production *Welcome Home Jako* dramatically introduced Londoners not only to vibrant new talents, but also to that hitherto unknown commodity of an enthusiastic, participatory and young Afro-Caribbean and black audience. The show went on to tour nationally, before spawning a television series introducing the entire nation then to a different image of young black men and women, very different to the one that was being constantly shown on television news reports - that of young people rioting in the inner cities.

Hanif Kureishi, by contrast, was a playwright without a company, introduced to London audiences first by David Gothard at Riverside Studios. His most significant work in this early period was *Borderline*, produced by the then Joint Stock Company and The Royal Court Theatre. The play echoed the achievement of The Black Theatre Co-operative with one exception, the lack of a distinctly Asian audience. Developed out of research in Southall and other parts of British cities where Asians

were predominant, *Borderline* caught with vigour and verve the transgressive border crossings along which Asians lived in contemporary Britain; immigrant and native, traditional and modern, male and female, radical and conservative.

By 1985, sufficient culturally diverse work had begun to emerge for The Arts Council, in its report *Glory of the Garden*, to not only make ethnic arts (as it was still called) a strategic priority for funding, but also to propose a target for distribution of all public funding. While this target, even in the early eighties, fell short of the total population of ethnic minorities in the country, it represented an important shift in thinking. Needless to say that target was never achieved, because stories can never be that good... Even according to the 1994/95 figures published by The Arts Council, ethnic minority arts received a total of three percent of the overall arts budget – when the official “ethnic” population of Britain was close to 12%.

In Britain, we do have a tendency to keep one eye to developments in the United States, and certainly with regard to matters of race. Our race relations legislation followed the civil rights legislation in America. In matters of cultural policy America paved the way with positive discrimination legislation, and while we fell short of legislating this practice, we certainly took on the spirit as was evidenced in the *Glory of the Garden* report. The brave nature of this proposal should not be underestimated. I argued against it, and I was critical of it at the time. In hindsight it is an incredibly brave expression, because Britain at the time was being governed by an extraordinary individual, Mrs Thatcher. She presided over what was almost certainly the most philistine government in recent memory. She herself came to power on the back of fears, which she expressed as the native population feeling "swamped by alien cultures in their midst" along with a very clear programme, to take publicly subsidised arts kicking and screaming into the marketplace. Fortunately for the arts in Britain there was sufficient resistance to this myopic view. So, what were we doing in the midst of all this? By 1985 Tara Arts had become, what was now termed, a "professional company". In other words, we were being paid for our work and we were being subsidised regularly by The Arts Council and various other funding agencies.

The dead hand of realism

One very important thing occurred in the early 1980s, and that was we said to ourselves: "Our dramaturgy is not good enough." We asked ourselves the question: "What is Asian about our theatre?" If it is the colour of our skin, then that is a political or a social exercise, and it deserves to die, which it probably will within a decade or so. It has got to be about the aesthetic, in other words the manner in which we produce our plays - the dramaturgy itself.

Now, saying that to ourselves, we were faced with one very obvious thing, which is that we simply did not know enough, we were still not good enough. So we asked ourselves: "How do we get better?" And we looked at two things: 1) dialogue with the masters - with the greats of theatre - wherever they came from, 2) looked elsewhere, for inspiration behind the dramaturgy. And so it was that we, who are of Indian descent, discovered - in quotes - "Indian dramaturgy", and opened our eyes to an incredible world of the theatre, and to the paradoxes of theatre. While we studied Indian dramaturgy - (and this goes back 2500 years in terms of the principles of it, and in terms of how the art is to be executed) - we found a paradox that in fact the

avánt garde of modern European theatre had precisely been inspired by the very same dramaturgy. Artaud, Brecht, Peter Brook, Ariáne Mnouchkine, the great Polish director Tzadeuz Kantor.

What did these people see in that dramaturgy? What they saw was that it had not made a concession to the dead hand of realism. In its dramaturgy, the purpose of the theatre is not to reflect reality, not to be reality, but to suggest it. Drama is like a dream, it is not real, but it is really felt. An extraordinary revelation for us, and so we poured these ideas through a succession of texts. The first was *Little Clay Cart*, a play written in the 8th century AD, and again deliberately chosen. In 1985, what was happening around us, was the greatest strike that ever took place in our time. The miner's strike was the only resistance really, the working-class resistance, to Mrs Thatcher's government. Here was a play which in a fabled form, told the story of a revolution. Perfect for us to once again use metaphor as a way of describing our reality today.

We went on to explore Gogol and particularly *The Government Inspector*. Our thinking behind this play was to explore that one area which is one of the inevitable consequences not only of migration, but also in our particular case, of empire, which is the colonisation of the mind. So in our version of Gogol's play, there was this little mythical village in India, which did not realize that independence had come and gone, it was completely full of the values of England and so real status was still that conferred by Blighty, by England. They characters completely glorified in their colonisation. Gogol's fabulous concluding - "Laugh not, for you laugh at yourselves" - was devastating in what it was actually saying about ourselves.

We also produced Buchner's *Danton's Death*, and while this was about the French Revolution, its key story was the contest between doubt and certainty. We produced this in 1989, when precisely that contest was absolutely in our faces, when a fatwa had been pronounced on Salman Rushdie and his novel *The Satanic Verses*.

By 1990 the Thatcher revolution was coming to an end, and I was invited to direct at The Royal National Theatre. I chose to produce my own adaptation of Molière's *Tartuffe* with my own company, and once again using a play which had an extraordinary history. We do not know what its original version is, we only know the third version, which Molière had to rewrite because the king had censored it. But in our research, one of the extraordinary things that we found, was that there was a man called Francois Bernièr, who was a compatriot of Molière's at the middle of the 18th century. He happened to be in India while an Emperor called Aurangzeb was actually enforcing the same kinds of policies as Louis XIV was in Molière's France.

Francois Bernièr at one stage in his observations of Indians, wrote very acutely about faquirs - religious beggars, who go around from house to house). In one of his descriptions he says:

"These faquirs are all very beautiful to look at, and some of them are actually quite ugly, but heaven help the family that does not give them good food and hospitality. Even though everyone in the family knows that those faquirs have eyes only for the women in the family." That is an exact description of Tartuffe!

A new world of art

The 1990s, in hindsight, signalled a decade of diversity beginning with Anish Kapoor winning The Turner Prize, and being chosen to represent Britain at the Viennese Biennale, with his awe-inspiring sculptural work. The decade proceeded with other Asian and black directors being invited to stage productions at The Royal National Theatre, and an increasing visibility of black and Asian performers on the full range of theatre stages in the country. Ayub Khan Din produced a play-script "East is East" that became a hit-film as a new century dawned. The emergence of playwrights such as Winsome Pinnock, Biye Bandele and Ravi Kapoor, added fresh voices to a burgeoning black and Asian theatre scene.

By 1997, after three productions with The National Theatre, after producing *Oedipus Rex*, *The Tempest*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, I decided to initiate another dialogue. This would be a dialogue with the history and transformation of Britain in the 20th century, creating a modern epic of migration. This is the *Journey to the West* project.

The project looks at change in Britain through the lens of a very particular community, East African Asians, people who went from India, or were taken from India, at the beginning of the 20th century to build a six hundred-mile long railway in East Africa. Whose descendants then fled East Africa in 1968 to arrive in England, and whose descendants form the newsreaders, the workers, the shopkeepers, the performers, the politicians, the businessmen and women of Britain in 2001.

The process of this production has been a really crucial one for us. There were two sources; the great epics of migration, of journey - The Odyssey on the one hand and The Ramayana in India on the other. The second crucial source were the people themselves. We systematically interviewed three different generations living in Britain. We interviewed them and recorded those interviews on digital video, and the purpose was a very simple one, namely that those stories, which are absolutely unknown in public life in Britain, needed to be preserved. These are histories not just of those particular people; these are the histories of our country.

In a sense I suppose what we initiated was the idea of not an audience, but of partners. Some partners become partners simply because they offer their heart to us in terms of their stories. Some, who went further, and who would produce their own presentation of their story, which would start off our own play. This process went on for three years and we have now come to the end of the three parts. The trilogy will tour in February 2002, and all three parts will be shown in one day.

This is admittedly very sketchy, but history may suggest that Britain has followed a very neat linear progress over the past three decades; from the darkness of cultural diversity to the light of a new world of art. But we must remember that all modern stories carry a little sting in the tail, and this one no less so.

In November last year, the BBC transmitted a major six-part television series on British theatre in The Twentieth Century. It made not a single reference visually or orally to the culturally diverse theatre or its practitioners. We were rubbed out of history. Why? We can all speculate... But one compelling reason is implicit in the facts that make up England. We form only twelve percent of the total population of Britain. From this perspective one can choose to ignore the fact that nearly half the capital city of Britain is non-white. Where over 22 different languages are spoken.

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