

Developments and Contemporary Identity

Asian Theatre Conference, Birmingham 2004

What is Asian Theatre? To put it baldly, and as simply as I can, a bunch of darkies on stage. That is its admittedly crude contemporary identity. Is this enough of a definition? I think there is a difference between Asians in the theatre and Asian Theatre. The one reflects changing socio-political realities; the other implies a distinct theatre aesthetic. There are many Asians in the theatre who do not wish to be in Asian Theatre, or who do so reluctantly, as fellow-travellers, seeing in Asian Theatre a road to the so-called "mainstream" represented by companies like the National Theatre or the RSC. For me, the question of the identity of Asian Theatre lies not in this 'fellow-traveller' attitude. So I will ignore it. And concentrate instead on Asian Theatre as a distinct theatre aesthetic of our times. An aesthetic which is, essentially and perhaps necessarily, a *masalla*.

I use the metaphor of food deliberately. Any act of theatre, it seems to me, is analogous to cooking food. You decide what dish you want to serve, line up your ingredients, start mixing them up - which can be painful, frustrating or joyous, depending upon your mood at the time as much as the manner in which the ingredients mix with each other - and then wait on luck; hoping against hope that when the dish is tasted by your guest it will have the effect you desired. Like cooks, we are the only other profession whose entire aim is to be in the best state of in-completeness: for we, like cooks, are made complete only when our audiences are present and respond appropriately to our creations. They form the unknown characters lurking around in every play.

The inspiration for this metaphor has come from the *Natya-Shastra*, a treatise on the art of performance composed around the 4th century AD in India. A treatise that, in its range of practical detail and depth of theory is unsurpassed in the world - the writings of Aristotle, Stanislavsky, and Brecht on the theatre appearing mere scribbles by dilettantes. A central concept in the *Natya-Shastra* is that of *rasa*: flavour. As in the flavour of food. Precisely like in cooking, our job in the theatre is to evoke the *rasa* we want in our audiences.

So what has all this to do with the identity of Asian Theatre? It seems to me that before we can consider this question we need to have some sense of the nature of the *masalla* that is Asian Theatre: is it garam, onion-based, rye-based, has lots of turmeric, too little cinnamon?

One of the ingredients of Asian Theatre's peculiar *masalla* is a forgotten history. The earliest recorded presence in this country is during the Napoleonic Wars, a time when England was ranged against the empire of Napoleon in France. The latter end of the 18th century and the early years of the 19th. Two English brothers brought an Indian performing troupe over to England - rather like their modern counter-parts, the International Festival directors, who scour the world for exotic new performance delights to offer modern audiences. With this troupe the brothers toured all over the country, until they got to Liverpool. Here, they were declared bankrupt and imprisoned, with the Indian performers left stranded. Somehow, they made their way back to London, to the docklands. There, they were housed in a stable. There they lived, giving performances to the locals amongst the horses and the manure. Until, 9 months later, they were discovered by the authorities as vagrants and shipped back to India.

Who were these people? Where exactly in India did they come from? What exactly, did they do? No one knows. The only reference to them is in an obscure local history record that I came across in 1989. I always remember this story because I wonder whether their history will be our history: un-sung, un-recorded, forever trapped in the memory (and perhaps bile) of those who lived at the time, at best a historical foot-note when some future historian comes to write of England at the close of the 20th century. Part of me, of course, also rebels against such a fate! So, I go on.

The next recorded instance is in 1885 - the year when the first Indian MP was elected - Dadabhai Naoroji, MP for North Finchley (Mrs. Thatcher's constituency, incidentally - though Naoroji was a confirmed Liberal; what today would be called a die-hard Labour-ite). It was in this year that the Victoria Natak Mandali put on a play in London's West End, a feat that our generation of Asian Theatre has not yet managed. The Victoria Natak Mandali was a troupe from India, presenting a style of theatre called Parsee Theatre. The Parsee Theatre is as important to the history of Asian Theatre in Britain as it was to the development of modern Indian theatre.

The Parsees of Bombay, along with the Bengalis of Calcutta, were the first Indians to encounter English theatre and theatre techniques, in the early part of the last century. But it is to the Parsees that credit must go for the introduction of English plays and stage techniques to other parts of India - which they did through a very active touring practice. And it is the Parsee Theatre - as this style of theatre began to be called - which is the true ancestor of the modern Indian film industry.

In 1848, Parsee students of English language and literature at Elphinstone College in Bombay formed a drama society to put on plays they were studying. In the same year, on 17 August, Baishnav Charan Auddy made history by appearing as *Othello* in an English-language production at the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta - the first recorded instance of an Indian occupying this famous role in an English-run theatre. Within a decade, in Bombay, 2 professional Parsee-led theatre companies had been established: the Elphinstone Dramatic Club and the Victoria Natak Mandali. It was the latter company that eventually toured London some 30 years later.

The distinctive contribution of Parsee Theatre to the development of modern Indian theatre was the introduction of the proscenium arch, of stage design (in the form of painted backdrops), of texts from England and Europe - the plays of Sheridan, Congreve, Farquhar, Massinger, as well as, of course, Shakespeare and Moliere - and of modern Indian texts.

Initially presented in English as well as Gujarati, texts soon began to be presented in Urdu and Hindi - opening-up a vastly greater audience for this type of theatre. Almost from its inception, the Parsee Theatre introduced a distinctly Indian idiom into what was then a foreign language of theatre: music and song. But perhaps a more important characteristic of Parsee Theatre, which was the foundation of its extraordinary influence and which also offers clues to modern Asian Theatre in Britain, was its eclecticism. Eclecticism is at its heart irreverent - because it is to do with borrowing without any concern for sources, or for notions of the "authentic". So Parsee Theatre took bits from traditional Indian theatre, from popular music of the times, from the structure of European realistic narrative, Shakespearean costume, Victorian stage machinery... *a masalla* to cook up satisfying dishes for audiences of the times. It was the great playwrights and actor-managers of the Parsee Theatre who introduced this same spirit of irreverent eclecticism into the modern Indian film industry; where English effortlessly mingles with Indian languages, Michael Jackson's dancing becomes Indian-ised and Rambo becomes Sanjay Dutt praying to god with a kalashnikov in his hands!

Lest people think that such *masalla* invariably cheapens and lessens the original, I recently came across an Urdu version of *King Lear*, written by Agha Hashr Kashmiri, one of the great writers of the Parsee Theatre. Written entirely in couplets, its heady dynamic made one's hair stand on end: the famous exchange between Cordelia and Lear, when she asks for nothing from her father, was turned by Agha Hashr into a stirring dispute between the young and the old. The sub-text - that beloved concept of English theatre - was entirely dispensed with; with line upon line positively forcing a potential audience to interject vocally in support of Cordelia. *Masallas*, as we all know from our food, can make or break the taste. Get the *masalla* right and you have nothing but appreciative murmurs from your consumers.

It seems that I am contradicting myself, by suggesting on the one hand that forgotten histories form part of the *masalla* that is Asian Theatre, and on the other, that it is a theatre influenced by the Parsee style of theatre. I agree, it is a contradiction. Many of us currently involved in Asian Theatre consider ourselves to be entirely new, as I've already said - without a past, only a future. If I have dwelt on the Parsee Theatre it is because I want to suggest we do have a history; and that we are consciously or unconsciously influenced by Parsee Theatre. Primarily by its spirit of irreverent eclecticism. How does this eclecticism form one of the ingredients of the *massalla* of Asian Theatre? Language, for one. However English we think we are becoming, it is a language which can never entirely become ours without the odd "Acha" injected into it! As much as Apache Indian cannot resist injecting the odd "fuTTey" into the lyrics of his derivative of Black-American rap music. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that it is only in its use of Asian languages that Asian Theatre achieves any meaning, any sense of ownership amongst Asian audiences in this country. The use of such language can vary - from the odd "wah!" in an otherwise all-English text to so-called "bi-lingual" texts to, at the other extreme, plays entirely in one or other of the Asian languages in this country.

In the 60s and upto the mid-70s the only Asian Theatre was language theatre: Marathi, Gujarati, Urdu plays, staged occasionally, by and on behalf of particular language communities. These were means of recovering lost, or losing, languages amongst the communities come to settle here. A public expression of the sentiment for what our earlier generations had lost. Equally, such productions were a means of claiming ownership, and thereby giving meaning to what was undoubtedly a mean life in cold, grey Britain. A means, in sum, of affirming one's identity.

From the late-70s onwards this function was largely supplanted by the ubiquitous video: now one could sit in the comfort of one's house, keep an eye on one's children, and watch the movies from Bombay and Madras and Karachi...movies that, once again through language, imparted a sense of identity through language and erected a sentimental cocoon for a few brief hours against the ever-threatening world outside. I had thought then that I was witnessing the end of an age: successive generations would necessarily lose fluency in Asian languages and with that, any sentimental attachment to them. I am, happily, proved wrong. Memory is not lost as easily as is fluency. So, while we have generations now who may not have the written or spoken fluency of a priest in Madras or a farmer in Punjab, they can nevertheless assert themselves as Asians only when, and by, the odd "ji" or "disham" or "vanga" - injected into their Cockney or Brummie or Yorkshire variants of English.

I have begun to call such usage of English *Binglish* (being Punjabi, it has echoes for me of what earlier generations of Punjabi writers were doing to the English language - "door" becoming "dora" and "window" becoming "binda"!). *Binglish* carries the sense both of "be-ing English" and of "not-quite English". I think this pull and push best characterises Asian life in Britain today - an ambivalence, a constant flirtation with the sense of being in England. How many of us, for example, think twice when asked who we are, especially in a foreign country?! In essence *Binglish* is descriptive of what Salman Rushdie called in a recent TV programme "a different sort of noise in English". I think this different sort of noise can be heard on the streets of our major cities, in dance, in music, in advertising campaigns - Ford's famous by-line for the Escort III: "faster than a vindaloo !" - in supermarkets, with the popularisation of Asian food, as well as in theatre. What theatre and literature - with the possible sole exception of Salman Rushdie - has not yet done is to give a distinct shape to this form of usage. But that too will come. Inevitably.

If language forms one of the ingredients of the *masalla* of Asian Theatre, then so does memory. Hounslow Arts Co-operative, which unfortunately is no more, is the only Asian Theatre company I ever saw which, certainly in its last few productions, deliberately sought to defy memory (and history) by having no reference at all to the Indian sub-continent - whether in language, in the story, in its costume and scenic details or in music. With this sole exception in mind, all Asian Theatre is characterised by a negotiation with memories of the sub-continent; whether the presenters are producing a modern play about Britain or a classical European play. Memory is a seductive, tricky devil which does not always need actual experience to form a feature of the imagination. For example, I was born in East Africa, as was 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 of a wild, turbulent, sacred river - though none of the family had ever seen the river until recently. Is memory myth, then? Why not. It certainly endures long after the immediate experience, passing like a game of Chinese Whispers down the ages. This memory of the sub-continent will tug us always into a flirtation with England.

Beyond memory and language - which I think are the defining characteristics of all Asian Theatre at the moment - we enter into the arena of possibilities and suggestions when considering the remaining ingredients that form the *masalla* that is Asian Theatre. Content is a vague ingredient, if only because - on the evidence so far - it covers such a wide range: from contemporary, traditional and classic tales from the sub-continent to contemporary stories located here to "tradaptations", as Robert Lepage calls them, of European texts (Lepage uses the word to convey the sense of annexing old texts to new cultural contexts). But one feature of the varying content that does remain constant, and so could be said to be a defining ingredient is its dialogue with the producers. What I mean by this is that, whatever the content - be it European, Indian or contemporary Asian - it suggests an obvious relationship with the individuals presenting the material; a relationship that is premised on keeping in mind a particular audience (i.e., Asians).

While all of us currently in Asian Theatre expect our theatre to be for all, which of us does not feel completely satisfied when they have at least a few Asians in the audience?! So, from this perspective, an Asian company that presents, for example a play by Beckett or Shakespeare "as is", as some sort of "universalist" gesture, is not, I would argue, undertaking an Asian Theatre production; merely, presenting Asians doing theatre. Which, as I have tried to argue all along, does not constitute Asian Theatre.

Which brings me to the final ingredient of the Asian Theatre *masalla*: form. I think Asian Theatre's form is being shaped by its dialogue with Indian films. This is perhaps as it should be, for film is the cultural reality of Asians in this country. Most of us, when we think of stories, think of film, not the stage. It has influenced and continues to influence many peoples' desire to enter the profession - and explains also why the profession is so top-heavy with performers: a minuscule number of Asians train to be stage managers or administrators. Everyone wants to be a star! Our parents, when they know we are doing theatre, can only think of film as way of trying to understand what it is we do. Indian film, uniquely, is a total form: music, movement and speech form its text. Think of the number of films without such a rich texture and it'll be hard to remember any. I find no problem in thinking of film influencing me: after all, since Parsee Theatre influenced the development of Indian cinema, I am only recovering for the theatre what was its own in the first place!

Whatever shape this dialogue with film eventually takes is immaterial, but if Asian Theatre is to go beyond the socio-political identity of a bunch of darkies on the stage, then it will have to achieve a distinction.

I have in this talk suggested some of the marks of distinction that Asian Theatre already possesses: irreverence, recovering forgotten histories, memory, language, content that directly relates to its producers, and a dialogue with film. But until these marks cohere into a recognizable *masalla*, the peculiar *rasa* that Asian Theatre can lend Britain will never quite be tasted, and so one day we might become like that troupe of Indian performers nearly two hundred years ago, performing in stables amidst horse dung and manure.

Asian Theatre's legacy, and I believe destiny, is irreverence. [Better that we see in ourselves a potential vanguard for change... and so see the relationship between our approaches to theatre and the work of such giants of Western theatre as Peter Brook & Ariane Mnouchkine in France and Peter Sellers in the United States.] We cannot completely play the rules of the game, for even when we think we know the rules, we will not quite be accepted in the club. To paraphrase Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*, 'England is a peculiar-tasting smoked fish full of spikes and bones, and nobody will ever tell you how to eat it!' That is the nature, the challenge and the excitement of being the coconuts that we all are. Salman Rushdie - again! - wrote in an excellent essay on Indian writers in English nearly a decade ago, "...we are, at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer...". I have tried to suggest that it is this ambivalent 'outsider-insider-ness' which places us in a flirtatious relationship with England and English Theatre. We ignore the character of ourselves at our peril, for then we will only practice a derivative theatre; which will be reviled, or at best patronised by all. As it deserves to be.

I cannot end without clarifying what I mean by "Asian".

In my own fairly-recent experience, I have had so-called Asians - including fellow theatre practitioners - question my casting of a Chinese man and an Anglo-Indian woman in Asian roles. The one because he was Chinese, the other because she looked white. While I readily accept that the term "Asian" is a specific product of this country's response to large-scale migration from East Africa in 1968 of people related to the Indian sub-continent - perhaps it was too long-winded for journalists to take the trouble to distinguish us, or perhaps they didn't have the patience, or perhaps still we all look the same to whites - but I do not see why I have to stick to white definitions of language. Asia after all, as any atlas will tell you, is a term for the continent which stretches from the Urals in the west practically to the Sea of Japan in the east.

It may also be argued that my speech has substantially been premised on Indian history and culture. I do not deny that. But I am all-too aware of the fact that what I have said of Indian aesthetics, for example, is echoed all over Asia - as anyone who cares to compare Chinese, Japanese, Balinese and Indian theatres will immediately appreciate.

But all this still ducks the question, what do I mean by Asian? A sensibility, more than anything else. A sensibility of flirtation informed by the lived experience of being an 'inside-outsider' in Britain; and, perhaps above all, by the desire to want to be seen as an Asian. We have a great tendency to dislike ourselves, wanting to be anything other than Asian. Perhaps because it's not hip. We're not Black enough to be Black, nor White enough to be White. More specifically, too Asian to be Indian and not English enough to be English. And so we return to learning to love being the coconuts that we are. At least the coconut produces a cooling drink, food to fill your stomach, string to make clothes and the shell to make utensils!

I will end with a story that I have often quoted, and never tire of. The story is about the Origin of Theatre. A story that forms the beginning of the Natya-Shastra, the treatise on the art of performance I mentioned earlier.

Once, during the time of the Immortals, the Gods found themselves descending into a state of absolute sin: booze, debauchery of every description, anger, violence and unbridled sex had become the order of the day. Eventually, unable to bear this state of affairs, the 3 Kings of the Gods approached a man called Bharata - a learned man. And the Gods said, "Hey, listen-up - we're in a real bad state. Now, can you come up with a new form of knowledge? A form that could delight the eyes and ears, and - most crucially - instruct us in a better conduct of life?"

Bharata agreed to take on the commission on and went to the Himalayas for a year and a day to write his treatise on this new art. When he'd completed it he passed on the new form of knowledge to his hundred children, and so they became the first theatre company in the world. Quite properly they had to inaugurate their first performance before the Gods. So all the Gods assembled in their majesty to witness this new form of knowledge. For some reason (perhaps because they were children, or perhaps because they'd tapped into an inherent quality in all performers), during the course of the performance the hundred kids of Bharata began to caricature the Gods: in other words, they took the piss. The Gods, inevitably, boomed a curse: "You are all banished to the earth, to ply your new-found trade before mere mortals through eternity - and, as perpetual outsiders."

Who are the Gods today of whom we are, or ought to be, taking the piss? And, who but ourselves, those in the theatre, are the perpetual outsiders, even for and from our own community(s)?