

Theatre of the Immigrant

In Conversation with Jatinder Verma

Rachana Pandey, Banaras Hindu University
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Rachana Pandey. If I start with a general yet subjective query, how do you define theatre and performative practices?

Jatinder Verma. As a “sharing”. Our practice is founded on the sharing of imaginations and skills; and our purpose is to share our story with an audience – who, themselves, have voluntarily decided to share their time in our space and with us.

RP. Please share your experience to direct plays at Tara Theatre. How do you find actors preparing for an adaptation of Indian plays and application of Indian classical dramaturgy on plays?

JV. The first assumption to make is that Indian plays are just like plays from any other part of the world – i.e, they take the form of a text which has to be deconstructed and then re-assembled according to the particular vision of the director. Second comes the approach – i.e., the appreciation that ways of producing (the dramaturgy) differs from culture to culture.

In the specific instance of Indian classical plays, I found it very useful for me and the company to explore the principles detailed in the *Natya-Shastra* – with the proviso that the language of gesture (mudras) is modified to take into account both the Indian-British actors and the British audiences. I found it useful to help the actors to make *connections* with other forms that they may be more familiar with – mime, popular Indian cinema, melodrama, dance, rap, musicals - as a way of deepening their appreciation of Indian classical dramaturgy.



*[Paul Bhattacharjee & Yogesh Bhat in MiTi ki Gadi, 1984.
Design by Ann Hubbard. Photo: Chris Ha]*

RP. How does the soil-based floor of performance space at Tara Theatre create a difference in performance in comparison to regular Proscenium? Also, at Tara Arts, the seating area of the audience is closer to the actors' space of performance than the proscenium theatre with the fourth wall. Does it make performance more engaging?

JV. One of the abiding virtues of Indian (indeed, all Asian and African) theatre history has been the honest way in which it has dealt with fiction, where the performances do not pretend to be real – as began to develop in Europe with the invention of the proscenium arch. The latter “framed” presentations, much like photographs (and later, film) frame reality. This led to the practice of “realist” drama, which *pretended* to offer the reality of life.

Indian classical & folk theatre by-passes realism to get to what is essential in all drama – the truth of the situation. Tara Theatre’s earth floor and intimate auditorium forces a gaze on the situation and the art of acting. This architecture of the space means that both performers and audience are aware they are sharing a space of fiction.



[Tara Theatre performance space 2016. Photo: Helene Binet]

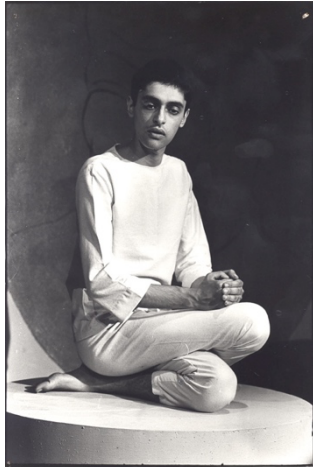
[Kali Chandrasegaram dancing in Tara Theatre 2016. Photo: Philip Vile]



RP. In one of your interviews, you said, "I had grown up with an idea of London as a place of great houses and of all the literature. But my own lived experience was often that I was simply not wanted" (Dowd, BBC News). What kind of difficulties did you face to set up a theatre house and direct plays in a foreign land as an immigrant?

JV. Racism has developed significantly in post-War Britain following the arrival of non-white immigrants from Britain’s ex-colonies. Indeed, my arrival in Britain in 1968 coincided with perhaps the most iconic speech on race relations delivered by a British politician: Enoch Powell famously talked on “rivers of blood” flowing in the streets of Britain as a result of coloured migration.

At the time when I set up Tara Arts, there were no other similar theatre companies. It took us 6 long years before we received support from government funding bodies. 40 years later, on building the theatre, I faced similar difficulties, with funding proving difficult to get.



[Paul Bhattacharjee as Gandhi in 'Lion's Raj', 1982. Written by Jatinder Verma, Directed Anthony Clark. Photo: Chris Ha]



[Rekha Prashar in 'Scenes in the Life Of', 1983. Written by Jatinder Verma, Directed by David Sulkin. Photo: Chris Ha]

RP. How is theatre a better medium to help challenge racism and give voice to people?

JV. Theatre in its very nature is diverse – mixing literature, music, dance, painting, architecture and the play of light and dark to create the most magnificent of hybrid – or bastardised – art-forms. And, central to it is the word “exotic”: it is precisely the world, situation, character that is different, foreign, exotic to the one we know that draws us to theatre in the first place, allowing us to engage with the bewildering Other in order to be provoked into seeing ourselves differently. It therefore seems to me the ideal medium for challenging racism.



[Kulwinder Ghir, Ernest Ignatius, Shyam Bhatt, Taqi Nazeer & Mamta Kash in *The Domestic Crusaders*, 2013. Design by Claudia Mayer. Photo: George Torode]

[Caroline Kilpatrick as the Fairy Godmother in 'Dick Whittington Goes Bollywood', 2012. Design by Claudia Mayer. Photo: Richard Walker]





[Antony Bunsee as the Dame in 'Dick Whittington Goes Bollywood', 2012. Design by Claudia Mayer. Photo: Richard Walker.]



[Alexander Andreou as Riaz in 'The Black Album', 2009, National Theatre. Design by Tim Hatley. Photo: Talulah Sheppard.]

RP. London is a multicultural city. How do you plan a performance that appeals not only to Asians but to the diverse audience?

JV. By assuming both that any story I choose to tell is for all audiences, and that I know neither the story nor the language it is spoken in. This enables me to constantly challenge the actors to clarify their intent and actions...and, importantly, make clear the meaning of any non-English words or phrases.



[Chris Jack and Jessica Manley in 'The Tempest', 2008. Design by Claudia Mayer. Photo: Talulah Sheppard.]



[Devan Modha, Ralph Birtwell & John Afzal as The Witches in 'Macbeth', 2015. Design by Claudia Mayer. Photo: Talulah Sheppard.]



[Robert Mountford and Shaheen Khan as Lord and Lady Macbeth in 'Macbeth', 2015. Design by Claudia Mayer. Photo: Talulah Sheppard.]

RP. Did you produce any Indian play in a language it is originally written? If yes, how was your experience with the actors and audience?

JV. These have been fewer, but I've found my approach as in the previous answer works just as well. It is to an extent easier as we *all* share the same assumption – that no one will be able to understand unless our use of language (tone, rhythm, inflection), action (gesture) and intention (*bhava*) is clear.

RP. Some classical and traditional art forms demand prior knowledge of its methods, techniques, traditions etc. from its audience. How do you deal with this challenge as a director?

JV. I feel this is a barrier – rather like in classical music – creating a sense of elitism. Theatre is for *all* & I strive to approach any play I do – whether classical or modern – as if this was the first time the play was being produced. And therefore, I need to minimize or eliminate any barriers to understanding.

RP. Do you think that technology is transforming theatre? If yes, how?

JV. Of course. Lighting is an obvious example, as is sound. Increasingly, we are seeing the use of video & projections as tools to enhance the storytelling. In some respects, these technical advancements have a detrimental effect: eg., with the increasing use of throat microphones in theatres, the emphases on vocal projection (& hence training) has decreased. Much the same can be said for the use of video, which can restrict the exchange of imagination that otherwise takes place between the actor and the audience.



[The Black Album, National Theatre, 2009. Design by Tim Hately. Photo: Talulah Sheppard.]

RP. Theatre has always been considered as a medium to bring change in society but it has its limitation as well. In what manner do you find theatre as a change maker?

JV. I believe all theatre can do is change the shape of a heart for the brief moment when we are sharing a story. By moving hearts to action, a theatre performance is like a stone thrown into a pond of still water – its ripples will go on long after the show is finished. And theatre, uniquely I think, when it is good, lodges in the heart's memory.



[Saikat Ahamed, Ravin Ganatra, Murali Menon, Ashwin Joshi, Dina Mousawi in 'Journey to the West', 2002. Design by Claudia Mayer. Photo: Stephen Vaughan]

[Mamta Kash & Dina Mousawi in 'Journey to the West', 2002. Design by Claudia Mayer. Photo: Stephen Vaughan]



References:

Dowd, Vincent. "Theatre Pioneer Jatinder Verma: 'I was simply not wanted.'" BBC News, 7 January 2020. Web. 12 June 2020.