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Centre Stage with Alaknanda Samarth

Aadya Shah in an e-conversation
with Alaknanda Samarth

All my life, I'd heard of Alaknanda Samarth's work and worth, yet I never managed to see her performances or talk to her about her experiences on stage. When I first met her, I was very young, at an age where I couldn't fully comprehend what her work was about. Yet, I always felt a sense of pride because she happened to be my aunt. So I decided to interview her for PT Notes.

Her powerful words and the richness of her theatre experiences educated me on what theatre has been like in the West and here in India, through so many decades.

Aadya: Satyadev Dubey has passed away. You acted in his first and biggest hit, 'Band Darwaze'. How did working with him contribute to your growth?

AS: Dubey in 1964-'65 had a corrosive laugh, a savage impatience with existing systems and with himself. He commanded a chaste, muscular Hindi. He offered me a role in Sartre's French play *'No Exit'* (1944) in Urdu.

I'd just returned from spending 5 years in the West and I'd never acted in Urdu. First, he cast me as the lesbian Post Office clerk and then changed it to the socialite murderess. So Sulabha Deshpande and I switched roles. He played the army deserter. All three are dead. In Hell. Amrish Puri played the Valet/Death.

Every language is a map with bleeding, porous borders. It's not bandaged.

'Band Darwaze' helped my growth at the deepest level of language as consciousness. He paid meticulous attention to syntax

and the substrata of text analysis. 'She's India's only properly trained

actress,' he always said of me to my embarrassment! We didn't take ourselves seriously. To this day people who've *never seen the production describe it to me in detail*. Why did it sweep everyone off their feet? Because it was the moment that language shifted palpably and visibly on the Bombay stage and so gave rise to a new, inclusive audience. *The audience changed*. That's a revolutionary act in theatre. It doesn't happen twice. It happened in *Band Darwaze*

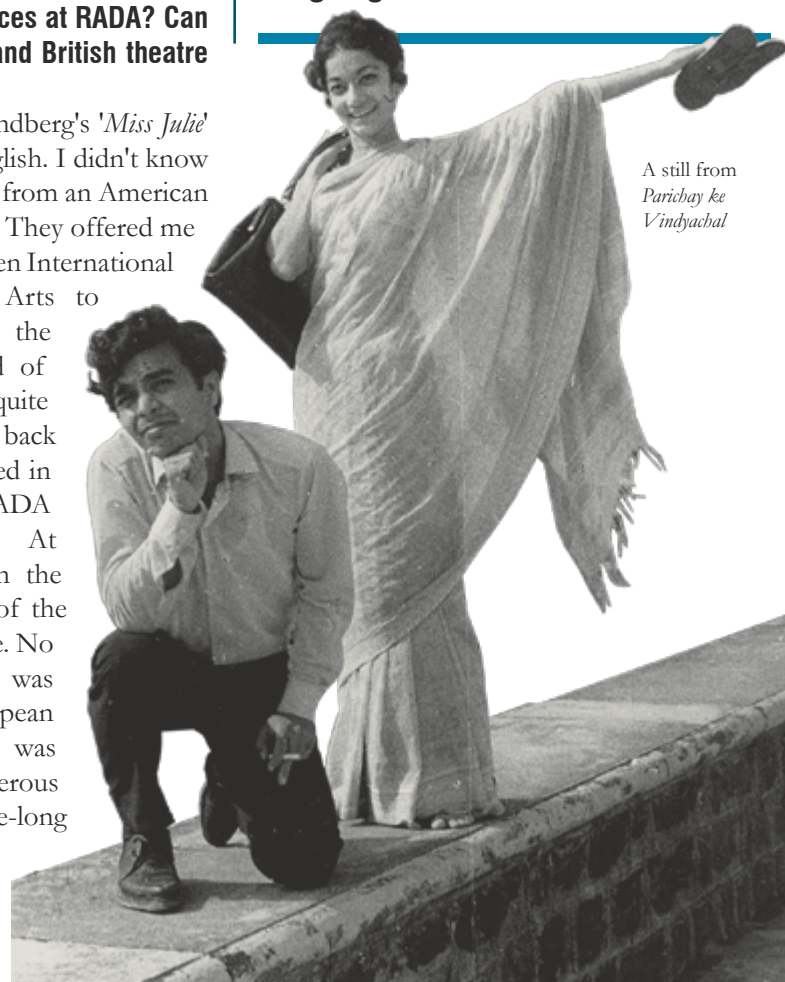
Aadya: Why did you go to train in the West? Were there Indian influences at RADA? Can you compare the Indian and British theatre scenes in the '60's?

AS: In 1959, I played Strindberg's *'Miss Julie'* opposite Mr Alkazi in English. I didn't know that there was a professor, from an American university, in the audience. They offered me a round air-trip and the Wien International Scholarship in Theatre Arts to Brandeis University in the U.S. I hadn't even heard of Brandeis! It was random, quite by chance! On the way back with my airticket I stopped in London, auditioned for RADA and got a scholarship. At RADA, India was not in the consciousness. I was one of the very first few Indians there. No one mentioned India. I was given leading roles in European classics. The peer group was wildly talented and generous with me. They are life-long

friends. I went with the flow. Voice training was the big discovery. That led me to study Indian *vachika* traditions. Neela Bhagwat worked on pre-expressive sound systems with me. Since 1993, I've known the great Voice Teacher Patsy Rodenburg. Her work on the actor's Circles of Energy and Presence is profound. Her lived understanding of Shakespeare is a revelation.

contd. on pg 2

Every language is a map with bleeding, porous borders. It's not bandaged. 'Band Darwaze' helped my growth at the deepest level of language as consciousness.



A still from
Parichay ke Vindyachal

Aadya: Can you compare the Indian and British theatre scene in the 60's?

AS: Comparisons are corrosive. Contexts are specific. In the '60's, Indian theatre had to reclaim its narrative and reconfigure. The FTII and NSD began to evolve training programmes for the modern Indian actor. Hugely painful, ongoing tasks. You know that struggle and history.

Britain saw an explosion of popular culture and a sexual revolution. Censorship was abolished in 1968. Nudity, sex and drugs shockingly appeared on stage in the musical 'Hair'. In Osborne's 'Look Back in Anger'(1956) an upper class protagonist was seen ironing for the first time! The audience gasped on the first night. In Wesker's play 'The Kitchen'(1953), cooks, cleaners, waitresses and immigrants sweated it out over the kitchen sink. On TV, Asians and Blacks became visible. The British Film Institute (BFI) did a book, 'Black and White in Colour' (ed. Jim Pines, 1992), on 45 years of Black and Asian representation. One of my portrayals was chosen as the three most radical. In 'Z Cars' a hit police series I play an Indian woman with 2 kids married to a Black man who murders a white policeman with an axe. 'A Place of Safety' deals with Institutional racism in the Metropolitan Police. Even today, that would be explosive. In 1975, I was the 1st Indian actress in a classical lead at the National Theatre at the Old Vic - the shrine where Olivier, Gielgud, Richard Burton had acted. There was no political correctness, no emerging Indian market, no flavour-of-the-month Bollywood. One had to be on the ball on stage in a star studded cast of superb verse speakers.

Today's 2nd generation British Asian actors speak English as their mother tongue. In the last decade, there are many more roles for them. British Asian dance has an international superstar in Akram Khan. But the theatre movement has been absorbed. The Bollywood imaginary has taken over. I've never been part of the Asian scene. There has been some interaction with Black Theatre and Film collectives; Played famous Arab texts like *Tenfiik Al-Hakim*; worked over the years with little known avant-garde groups like The Address, Puzzle Club, Muzikansky, Hawksmoor Music Project - maverick radicals, in studio theatres, no



A Still from *Band Darwaze*

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publicity or funds but freedom to culturally catalyse great texts in my own voice and defy categorisation.

Aadya: You taught acting at the NSD. Could you speak about that?

AS: BV Karanth invited me. I lived in India (1979-82). Acting classes were in Hindi. Some students didn't speak it fluently. I changed it so they did exercises in their mother-tongues to unleash internal rhythms. Teaching has led me to a methodology but I'm not an academic or systematic, rarely write things down. It's in the moment for the actor in front of me, their fears, time, place, reality. Every actor gets to the role in his own way. Later I worked in Trichur, directed 2 open air productions of Shakespeare and Edward Bond in Malayalam, learnt the texts by heart! Working with Tomba, I found Manipur's electrifying *vachika* rituals. In London, actors are from everywhere. Many cadences, histories of Civil War, Communism, the Holocaust. We've been exploring Cultural Memory, Sound Memory.



Satyadev Dubey

Aadya: You've done landmark solo shows. Tell us about *Kunti* and *the Human Voice* and *Medeamaterial* both in Bombay. What are the modes of rehearsal in collaborations since you live far from India?

AS: I don't think in terms of 'far and near'. There are 'Other Indias', diasporic energies, wheels within cultural wheels. It's a question of unravelling them.

Kunti and *the Human Voice* in Hindi and English, directed by Kumar Shahani was the first solo in 1987. It examined the female impulse in two distinct contexts. Kumar's sensibility and unique vision of cinema actually transformed my acting. Gave it transparency. We went on to do 5 major pieces of work together, including 2 feature films, one unfinished feature and 2 short films in London. Solos have been a constant, in music theatre, texts by Pakistani, Arab, European writers in London. In 1992, I began an ongoing collaboration with visual artist Nalini Malani. We did Heiner Muller's *Medea Trilogy*. Nalini's work is so layered. The body becomes a magical image. It's glamorous. The ground rules are not those of theatre. It's freeing.

Our latest in Switzerland in 2010 was '*Medea Revisited*'.

Texts' of this complexity are 2-3 years in the making. With shifting modes of exchange but always with constant trust. On the phone, interactive, in person and in the last lap 4-6 weeks in situ. That's the mode of rehearsal.

Aadya: Have you got any future projects?

AS: A couple of ideas, one in India. What they have in common is to test the limits of performance, acting itself and thus question the role of the audience/spectator/listener. Such work has no cultural marketability. It's working on and in process and as such on the cutting edge of vulnerability. That gives it energy.

Bulletin

The Vinod Doshi Fellowship in Performing Arts is awarded to five promising emerging theatre professionals every year. Love for the medium, talent and the level of commitment to comprehensively further the theatre movement are taken into account while selecting awardees. A sum of Rs. 1 Lakh is presented to each awardee as part of the fellowship for the period of a year to see to the meeting of the artists' expenses, for them to focus more dedicatedly on their pursuit.

AWARDEES FOR THE 2012-13 FELLOWSHIP

Himanshu Smart – Playwright

Hemant Bajban Hajare – Actor and Director

Omkar Govardhan – Actor

Aniruddha Khutwad – Director

Suruchi Aulakh – Actor and Trainer

Reflections

अनुभवी सादिया सिद्धी की 'महुआ' का अनुभव

एक अभिनेता को क्या चाहिए? करने के लिए कोई ऐसा किरदार जो उस की रात की नींद उड़ा दे, भूख प्यास भुला दे, कुछ ऐसा ही दूँड रही थी मैं।

फिलहाल तो, इस तलाश ने मेरी नींद उड़ा रखी थी, सोचा अपना ही एक गुप बना लेती हूँ, सब यही करते नज़र आ रहे थे, कुछ पड़ा, कुछ नाटक देखे, पर कुछ पसंद नहीं आया, फिर तय किया कुकिंग क्लास join कर लेती हूँ, कुछ तो creative satisfaction मिलेगा, अम्मीजान ने भी कहा कि "हाँ शादी के बाद काम भी आएगा"।

तभी मेरा फोन बजा और पता चला कि रजित कपूर मुझे दूँड हैं, उन्होंने पूछा "नाटक करोगी? टाइम है?", नेकी और पूछ पूछ, मैंने कहा "टाइम निकाल लूंगी पर नाटक ज़रूर करूंगी"। उन्होंने मेरे घर script भेजी, मैंने पढ़ी और हाँ कर दी।

"महुआ" ये नाटक writers bloc workshop का हिस्सा था, writers bloc एक खास workshop है। इस की खासीयत ये है कि ये नए लेखकों को और उनके नए नाटकों को जन्म देता है। इस साल 104 लेखकों ने इस वर्कशॉप में भाग लिया, जिनमें से 12 लेखक चुने गए। साल भर में 12 नए नाटक लिखे गये, जिनको अलग अलग थियेटर गुपस ने produce किया, इस writers bloc workshop की कामयाबी का पूरा श्रेय rage productions को जाता है।

"महुआ" rage productions की प्रस्तुती है, यह नाटक उड़ीसा की आदिवासीयों के हाल ए जिन्दगी पर रोशनी डालता है, कि किस तरह यह लोग अपनी ज़मीन को बचाने के लिए सरकार से लड़ रहे हैं, और किस तरह इस जंग में अपना सुकून खोते जा रहे हैं। इन आदिवासियों की जिन्दगी को नज़दीक से समझने के लिए लेखक आकाश मोहीमान और निर्देशक रजित कपूर ने उड़ीसा जा कर इन आदिवासीयों के साथ समय बिताया और उनकी तकलीफों को करीब से समझा।

मैंने इस नाटक के लिए तुरन्त हाँ कर दी क्योंकि मैंने पहले कभी ऐसा किरदार निभाया नहीं था। मैंने अभी तक ज़्यादातर खूबसूरत और तमीज़ तहज़ीब वाली लड़की का ही किरदार किया था, पर इस नाटक में मुझे एक वदसूरत, वदतमीज़ और गाली देने वाली 'गिल्ली' का किरदार निभाने का मौका मिला। रजित के साथ मैंने अभिनय तो ज़रूर किया था पर निर्देशक के रूप में कभी काम नहीं किया था, इस नाटक के जरिए वो मौका भी मिल रहा था।

शुरुआत के तीन हफ्ते रजित ने हम कलाकारों के साथ सिर्फ script पर ही काम किया, किस लाइन का क्या मतलब है, क्या emotion है, आवाज का क्या modulation होना चाहिए, यहाँ तक की हमने HOT SEAT EXERCISE भी की, जिस में actors, characters बन के सवालों के जवाब देते हैं, इस exercise से एक किरदार को अपने और दूसरों के किरदारों को अच्छी तरह समझने का मौका मिलता है,

थियेटर मुख्यतः एक्टर का ही माध्यम है, 3rd bell के बाद एक्टर मंच का राजा होता है, या तो वो लेखक की कहानी को खूबसूरत ढंग से जी जाएगा या फिर सिर्फ लाइनें बोल कर कहानी को ही बदल देगा



जो script में नहीं लिखा है वह भी समझ पाता है।

3 हफ्ते नाटक की script पर काम करने के बाद जब हम floor पर उतरे तो काफी हद तक नाटक समझ आ चुका था, फिर movements विठाना आसान हो गया।

इस नाटक में मेरे साथ मोना अबेंगांवकार, पवन उत्तम, प्रियांशु पनयुली और धनेन्द्र कावड़े ने काम किया।

निर्देशक के तौर पर रजित के साथ काम करने में बहुत मज़ा आया, रजित एक बहुत ही नरम दिल, पर एक सख्त पिता की तरह एक्टरों के साथ पेश आते हैं क्योंकि वह खुद एक एक्टर भी हैं, इसलिए जानते हैं कि एक्टर एक बच्चे की तरह होता है, खोज करने को तैयार, उसे प्यार से सभाला जाए तो वो आसमान छू सकता है पर इस ऊंचाई को हासिल करना एक एक्टर की जिम्मेदारी है कि वो खुद को अपने निर्देशक के सामने पूरी submit या समर्पित करे, उस पर भरोसा करे, फिर देखिए कि कैसे एक एक्टर एक ही वक्त में कई बार जन्म लेता है।

रजित ने बड़ी खूबसूरती से इस नाटक को design किया है, नाटक के दूसरे भाग में गरीबी और बेघर होने की वजह से कैसे मिट्टी के बर्तन बहोत ही सहजता से गंदे प्लास्टिक के डब्बे और बोतलों में तबदील हो जाते हैं। इसे दर्शकों ने भी देखा, समझा और सराहा भी।

'महुआ' मेरा लगभग पहला यथार्थवादी नाटक है, अमूमन मेरा रुझान abstract नाटकों की तरफ रहा है।

Writers bloc festival ने 'महुआ' से शुरुआत की, और लोगों ने इस नाटक को बहुत पसंद किया। हम सबने भी google पर इन जातियों के बारे में भी तलाश की। नाटक की costumes भी उड़ीसा से मंगवाए गये, वहीं के लोकगीत उन्हीं से गवाए भी गये। नाटक में मेरा किरदार बहुत गालियां देता

है, तो जब इस की रिहर्सल में अपने घर में कर रही थी तो मेरी बिल्ली जिसका नाम मुनिया है उसने सबसे पहले react किया, शायद उसे पसंद नहीं आया मेरा गाली देना, या फिर वो मुझे अपनी जुवान में कुछ और मजेदार गालियां सिखा रही थी, खुदा ही जाने।

थियेटर मुख्यतः एक्टर का ही माध्यम है, 3rd bell के बाद एक्टर मंच का राजा होता है, या तो वो लेखक की कहानी को खूबसूरत ढंग से जी जाएगा या फिर सिर्फ लाइनें बोल कर कहानी को ही बदल देगा। शो खत्म होने के बाद जब कभी आपको कोने में कोई शख्स गुप्से में खड़ा नज़र आये तो समझ जाईए वो नाटक का लेखक है।

हम एक्टरस ने भी 'महुआ' नाटक की script की चीरफाड़ की, शुरुआत में लेखक की इजाज़त के साथ पर बाद में इजाज़त की ज़रूरत कम होती गई लेकिन निर्देशक की इजाज़त ज़रूरी रही।

मुझे लगता है एक एक्टर को script अच्छी तरह याद कर लेनी चाहिए, निर्देशक की हिदायत को अच्छी तरह समझ लेना चाहिए, फिर 2 या तीन महीने की रिहर्सल और कुछ शो कर लेने के बाद, फिर सब कुछ भुला कर, हल्की सी उड़ान भरना शुरू कर देना चाहिए क्योंकि 34 महीने में बुनियाद तो तैयार हो जाती है जिसे भूलना मुश्किल होता है, जिसकी वजह से आप बुरी तरह गिरने से बच जाते हैं और हल्का हल्का उड़ने का मज़ा भी लेते रहते हैं, पर यह सब बड़ी समझदारी के साथ करना होता है, हद की दिवारों को संभालते हुए।

इस हुनर की समझदारी हर एक में नहीं होती, क्योंकि हर कोई एक्टर नहीं होता, जैसे की हर कोई लेखक नहीं होता या चित्रकार नहीं होता। मेरे एक अजीब दोस्त कहा करते हैं कि ऊपर वाला हर इन्सान

में एक खास हुनर की चिप लगा कर उस इन्सान को इस दुनिया में भेजता है, इस चीज़ को समझ जाना कि आप में कौन सी हुनर की चिप लगी है? अपने आप में एक हुनर है।

और अगर आप जान गए हैं कि आप एक एक्टर हैं तो थियेटर से अच्छी और addictive जगह और कोई नहीं। ■



Plays for the Month of March 2012 at Prithvi Theatre

Thu 1	6 pm & 9 pm	Moving Platform's DINNER WITH FRIENDS (A)	English	Writer: Donald Margulies Director: Feroz Abbas Khan	This is a play about four friends; two married couples. We see both couples at different ages and stages of their lives.
Fri 2 Sat 3	9 pm 6 pm & 9 pm	aRanya's LAAL PENCIL	Hindi	Writer & Director: Manav Kaul	A young school girl is relishing her new found stardom ever since she suddenly, mysteriously starts writing beautiful poetry. . What no one knows is that it is not her, but a magical red pencil that she found in class that's writing poetry.
Sun 4	5 pm & 8 pm	aRanya's MAMTAZ BHAI PATANGWALE	Hindi	Writer & Director: Manav Kaul	Story of patangbaaz bikki. It's about childhood and friendship growing up..
Tue 6	7 pm & 9 pm	Proscenium's TWO BLIND MICE	English/ Hindi	Based on: Waiting For Godot Written By: Samuel Beckett Adapted By: Chandan Roy Sanyal Director: Chandan Roy Sanyal	Vladimir & Estragon escape from a juvenile home and wait fruitlessly for someone named Godot to take them away from their miserable lives.
Wed 7	6 pm & 9 pm	Proscenium's CHUGADDHAM SYM - PHONY	English/ Hindi	Writer: Bertolt Brecht Director: Chandan Roy Sanyal	A city where sin flourishes, money is all and poverty is a crime.
Thu 8	6:30 pm & 9:30 pm	Q Theatre Productions' THE PRESIDENT IS COMING	English	Writer: Anuvab Pal Director: Kunaal Roy Kapoor	This fast-paced play explores the dog-eat-dog world of constant competition, reality television and short-lived fame.
Fri 9	7 pm & 9:30 pm	Q Theatre Productions' KHATIJABAI OF KARMALI TERRACE	English	Based On: Stella Kon's Emily of Emerald Hill Adapted & Director: Quasar	A heart warming tale of an orphan, bride, mother and matriach.
Sat 10 Sun 11	7 pm & 9:30 pm 6 pm & 8:30 pm	Q Theatre Productions' NOSTALGIA BRAND CHEWING GUM	English	Writer: Eric Gordon Director: Vivek Madan	Love sometimes makes for awkward dinner conversations... especially when it is with your ex.
Tue 13 Wed 14	9 pm 9 pm	Ansh's JOKE	Hindi	Writer & Director: Makrand Deshpande	In times of terrorism an atheist is born. Will it be a Joke?
Thu 15 Fri 16 Sat 17 Sun 18	9 pm 9 pm 6 pm & 9 pm 6 pm & 9 pm	Ansh's SONA SPA P*	Hindi	Writer & Director: Makrand Deshpande	A hilarious play about the serious issue of lack of sleep which in turn leads to an unhealthy life; Sona Spa gives you your sleep but in return takes away your dreams.
Tue 20 Wed 21	9 pm 9 pm	Ekjute's FOOTNOTES OF LIFE	Hindi	Writer & Director: Nadira Zaheer babbar	"Footnotes of Life", as the name signifies, is based on some significant events or excerpts from life that speak volumes about the unsaid emotions and undercurrents that drive our relationships and lives.
Thu 22	9 pm	Ekjute's SANDHYA CHHAYA	Hindi	Writer: Jaywant Dalvi Director: Nadira Zaheer Babbar	This play consists of monologues by four women living very different lives. As the four women in our play take you through their lives and struggles, they make you laugh ... and think, like never before!!
Fri 23	9 pm	Ekjute's BEGUM JAAN	Hindustani	Writer & Director: Nadira Zaheer Babbar	"Begum Jaan" is the story of a legendary classical singer of yesteryears. Through her narration of various events in her life, the play reflects the changing face of India from its pre-independence days to its current state.
Sat 24 Sun 25	11 am 11 am	Ipta's THE BEAST IN BEAUTY P*	English	Writer & Director: Rashmi Sharma	Beauty of love is divine and sacred. It should be protected and not be polluted by negative forces inside us and around us.
Sat 24	6 pm & 9 pm	Ipta's KABULIWALA LAUT AAYA	Hindi	Writer: Zaheda Hina Adapted & Director: Ramesh Talwar	Tagore's famous story about a homesick Afghani and his friendship with a little girl in Kolkata.
Sun 25	6 pm & 9 pm	Ipta's AAKHRI SHAMA	Hindi	Based on: Dilli Ka Yaadgar Mushaira by Farhatullah Baig Director: M S Sathyu	The story of Maulvi Karimuddin, who went from pillar to post to organize a mushaira in the Mughal court in the wake of the failure of law and order in Delhi in 1857.
Tue 27 Wed 28	9 pm 9 pm	Working Title's DIRTY TALK	English	Writer & Director: Nayantara Roy	A sexy look at India's "censored-bored", told through the story of a young England-returned scientist who has got everyone rooting for him.
Thu 29	9 pm	Rage's JAAL	Hindi	Writer: Annie Zaidi Director: Faezeh Jalali	If anyone can solve the mystery of the missing engineer in Mohagaon, it is police constable Gopal. But once he finds the truth, what's he going to do with it?
Fri 30	7 pm & 9:30 pm	Rage's THE DJINNS OF EIDGAH	English	Writer: Abhishek Majumdar Director: Richard Twyman	The story of two children stranded in the tragic impasse of Kashmir.
Sat 31	7 pm & 9:30 pm	Rage's MAHUA (A)	Hindi	Writer: Akash Mohimen Director: Rajit Kapur	Bihabund is being displaced by machines, mines and industrialization; Birsra struggles to fight for his land with an ailing grandmother, an accursed bride and...gulps of Mahua.

Partners@Prithvi

March

Every month.
Entry free, except theatre shows.

PEN@Prithvi

[2nd Sat]

Literary encounters

NO PEN@PRITHVI THIS MONTH

Vikalp@Prithvi

[Last Mon]

Documentaries and short film screenings

Mon 26 | 7 pm | Prithvi Theatre

MULLAITIVU SAGA

A Documentary film by S Someetharan - 46 MIN

Mullaitivu Saga – is a documentary that explores the textures of a well-planned genocide of the suppressed people in the island of Sri Lanka. The largest massacre in the later mankind history is taking place in the name of Final War, while a stunned and paralyzed international community is watching the whole tragedy. The war was covered under the name "The largest humanitarian rescue Mission in the world" by the Sri Lanka Government. 'Mullaitivu Saga' an episode of planned massacre of the suppressed people while most of the international human rights machinery remained a silent witness.

S. Someetharan is an audio visual journalist; working on different issues for the past 8 years. In 2004 he moved to Chennai, India and joined the Loyola College to further his studies in visual media. Someetharan, who was born just 19 days before burning of the Jaffna Public library, had witnessed the cataclysmic events of the Sri Lankan civil war and Tamil's struggle for independence during his childhood. He endeavors to shed light on the atrocities that are being perpetrated in the course of the ethnic conflict. In his effort to bring to everyone's attention the atrocities he witnessed, he has directed 'Mullaitivu Saga'.

THE LAND SPEAKS ARABIC

A Documentary film by Maryse Gargour - 62 MIN

"The Land Speaks Arabic" provides a rarely heard perspective on the creation of the state of Israel and the disaster that it represented for the Palestinian people. It also exposes many of the common myths and fabrications that are so often used to justify and rationalize the brutal and ongoing dispossession of Palestinian Arabs from their lands and livelihoods. Ms Gargour makes use of historical film footage and photographs as well as interviews with historians and Palestinians who lived through the Naqba (the Catastrophe) to chronicle the events that preceded the declaration of the state of Israel in May 1948.

"The Land Speaks Arabic" graphically tells the story of how the Zionist forces went about expelling the Palestinian people from the land where they had lived for centuries. The film contains extended interview with Palestinians who were forced from their homes during the 1948 war.

Maryse Gargour was born in Jaffa, Palestine. She studied in Paris where she obtained a master degree in journalism. She also holds a PHD in the sciences of information. She has worked in Beirut as a journalist. Currently based in Paris, Maryse Gargour directs and produces documentary films.

FREE unless mentioned otherwise.

Caferati

[4th Tue]

Open-mic @ Prithvi Café

Tue 27 | 7 pm | Prithvi Café

You are invited to recite, declaim, sing, dance, perform in any way you like 2 minutes of your own work. Sign up at the Prithvi Café at least 30 minutes before start time to be eligible.

Chai & Why?

[1st Sun]

TIFR creates accessible discussions of interesting scientific issues

Sun 4 | 11 am | Prithvi Theatre

**LIFE IN ITS TRUE COLOURS:
A HOLI SPECIAL (Part 1)
EVOLUTION OF COLOURS**

Sonia Muliylil, TIFR

Throughout natural history colour has played an integral role in evolution. From the pollination of flowers, hiding from predators, attracting the opposite sex, to warning and signalling, colour is central to life. Find out how nature celebrates with colours!

Thespo@Prithvi

[First Tue & Wed]

Theatre by youth (Tickets Rs 80)

NO THESPO PLAY & WORKSHOP THIS MONTH

Alliance Française@ Prithvi

[3rd Wed]

Rendez-vous avec le cinéma français

Wed 21 | 7 pm | Prithvi House

BETTY (1992) - 103 MIN

Cast: Marie Trintignant, Stephane Audran,
Jean-Francois Gerreard
Directed by: Claude Chabrol

When Betty is caught in flagrante, her bourgeois in-laws and husband force a divorce settlement upon her and bar her from seeing her two daughters. She is rescued from an alcoholic stupor by Laure, a middle-aged woman who takes Betty to her hotel lodgings, extends friendship and care, and listens to her story. Laure's lover, Mario, the proprietor of the bar where Betty and Laure met, is first a friend and then... Betty's next conquest.

Mehfil@Prithvi

[2nd Tue]

Discover and celebrate the beauty and cultural history of Urdu – through casual conversations and discussions in an informal gathering, - with chai.

Tue 13 | 7:30 pm | Prithvi House

Take an incredible journey into the vintage back alleys of Mumbai through its history and Urdu literature.

Please visit urduwallahs.wordpress.com



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www.prithvitheatre.org

Notes

- P*** Premier Show
- NO LATE ADMITTANCE.
- No refund or exchange of tickets.
- Children below 6 years not allowed.
- NO PARKING INSIDE JANKI KUTIR.
- PAY & PARK OPP MAHESH LUNCH HOME.
- This program is subject to change.
- Box Office timings 1 pm - 9 pm.

Front Row Murmurs

Devina Dutt reviews Cintematograph's and The Company Theatre's new production *Nothing Like Lear*, and has a candid chat with Rajat Kapoor about this new play, and his fascination with the 'clown'.

With *Nothing Like Lear*, writer and director Rajat Kapoor and actors Atul Kumar and Vinay Pathak, have once again declared their deep rooted fascination with clowns. Kapoor says the clown allows for the refraction of pure emotion, untouched by social issues, which inevitably take the play to the level of intellectual and polemical discussion. This production is primarily performed by Atul Kumar with Vinay Pathak joining in for a weekend double bill with both actors performing the same material.

A narrative framework was devised after two months of reading the main text and improvisation sessions with actors. Images and themes from Shakespeare's darkest tragedy recur and the clowns, in compulsively confessional mode, quite naturally find themselves uttering Lear's most bleak lines in perfect consonance with their more contemporary Everyman tales.

Before the play can even start the actors are on stage in their black suits, hats and oversized shoes and slightly painted faces. They hover about as the audience settle in, emboldened sometimes to attempt conversations. At first glance we recognise them as inheritors of Chaplin and the long line of anonymous clowns from the circus and vaudeville traditions who make us laugh by revealing their hard luck stories coupled with an energetic and extremely physical performance style. Although no obvious parallels can be drawn with Shakespeare's celebrated and distinctive fools, the two clowns even at this preliminary stage are able to give us a fleeting idea of what it takes to exist outside the action of their own stories and utter unsentimental and universal truisms about the business of living.

The piece begins with an insistent howl and ends too with a defeated and extended howl establishing an unforced affinity with the despair that lies at the heart of King Lear. Gaining entry into the straightforward and appealing narrative is easily achieved and the opening sections of the piece are ripe with promise. The prologue too is an opportunity to discover how two actors use different strategies and how their personalities subtly inflect the same material. In Atul's case we immediately sense his mistrust of the world as his clown



Atul Kumar in *Nothing Like Lear*



scuttles about at the far end of the stage making furtive attempts to come forward, exposing the sharp edge of a hurt he is not very good at containing. In Pathak's case the clown watches the audience like a shy child at the edge of a playground watching the game but lacking the confidence to join in. All he can do is transfer his long gaze from one to the other in the audience with a touch of chilling pacifism.

These are overtures that call for the greatest judgement from the two actors. The danger of being too direct and making premature engagements can easily set off the weekend crowd who are already primed up by the prospect of watching a "clown" play (read comedy and assured entertainment), the relaxed weekend mood and the hint of celebrity its well-known and talented actors promise.

The clown's story tumbles out amidst loud sobbing and inaudible speech. It is a tale of foolish love, of betrayal, of the manipulation of a father's love by a daughter. Yet there is something undeniably funny in his predicament, a prospect which only bolsters the viewers' already healthy sense of *schadenfreude*.

But as the narrative continues the potential that the clowns began with, their ability to entertain, harm and illuminate us winds down into the mundane particulars of their immediate narratives. The improvisation and stories emanating from it seem a bit tame and we crave for some more anarchy and greater adventurousness from the talented cast and director.

The sharp edges of the clown begin to soften and there are stretches where it becomes possible to cruise through the piece without feeling drawn into it with that sense of dark anticipation we began with. We are left with a desire for darker, deeper more idiosyncratic associations whether in the classical tradition of such characters or in the more psychotic landscape of contemporary reality. But to make more

Kapoor says the clown allows for the refraction of pure emotion, untouched by social issues, which inevitably take the play to the level of intellectual and polemical discussion.

of the clown motif in *Nothing Like Lear* we have to cobble together our own version comprising the richer moments from the play and this often requires us to resist the easy charm of what is being simultaneously offered. Towards the end of the piece when the clown obligingly drops his pants to do a little jig, it seems less of a send up or a self reflexive act arising from any notion of critical distance from his material than a nod towards an audience which is determined to have a good time in the way that it has become accustomed to over years of going to the theatre primarily in search of diversion and little else.

Perhaps it is possible to suggest that in a culture industry which disproportionately rewards the entertainment factor, an unspoken collusion between audience and theatre practitioners alike can convert a potentially subversive, awkwardly questioning play rich with pleasurable difficulties into milder fare.

DD: First, why does the clown motif attract you? When you mention the clown I presume that he is interchangeable with the Shakespearean fool or is it a more modern Chaplinesque version, or is he a medley of all? Would it be correct to say that it is the clown's ability to migrate across cultures and time that gives you the ideal open ended form to play with?

RK: This first thing of 'why a clown?' is a tough one. The honest answer is that I don't really know. There is a deep rooted fascination- the source of which I might discover after five years of psychotherapy. Is it worth finding out? Not for me. I accept it for what it is- a deep rooted fascination.

The clowns who have influenced me the most are definitely Chaplin and Buster Keaton. I love their films- their personas and consider Chaplin to be the greatest director and the best actor ever. These are the two clowns that have been my model and the source of my clowns.

Besides that, it is true that the clown gives me a stylization that gives a distance from the text. A clown is able to distill things. Moreover, if i was to rationalise, I'd say that a clown (at least in my plays) is free of social moorings. He is not bound by a person rooted in society, caste, place. That makes him free to deal with emotions in a pure fashion.

I do feel a sad clown is able to present 'sadness' in a direct and most moving fashion-

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Reflections

Silence and Violence – A Double Bind in Pinter's *Mountain Language*.

Sheena Khalid takes us through the process of workshopping and performing Pinter's provocative play *Mountain Language*.

On the 16th of February 2012, a group of 20 odd people gathered outside an old office at Kala Ghoda. When the time was right, they were ushered into a beautifully begrimed room where an actor was waiting for them. Once the audience was in, a group of weary women filed in and stood against the wall. And so the play began.

Directed by Alan Caig Wilson, this small production was the end result of a two week workshop process with 10 actors from Mumbai. This process was organized by Theatre Professionals as a pilot project towards looking at bringing various directors together with trained actors in a rehearsal space free from the stress of income or public recognition. Alan's unique treatment of the script coupled with the ensemble's understanding of the text resulted in a small yet powerful performance. The final showcase took place in an old office where the audience was led from one room to another, placing them in the same space as the torturers and the tortured.

Mountain Language was written and first produced in 1988. It marked a significant change in Pinter's writing. Unlike his previous works, *Mountain Language* is a shocking political play. Violence always played a key role in Pinter's writing; however this kind of cryptic unseen and unheard violence between the State and its prisoners and women is unique to this piece. The fact that the audience never witness any physical violence adds to the terrifying environment of this prison. The violence in the written words coupled with the repetition of certain phrases followed by sustained silences, serve as a fertile ground for actors and directors alike to explore the manner in which they can incite a reaction from the audience.

I first came across this script around six months ago. I was immediately drawn to the idea of suppression by restricting the ability to communicate. I was very lucky to work as an assistant director to Alan on this process. It was interesting to see what would come of this script if we were to put it through such a workshop process.

As a director, Alan is interested in the exploring the relationship between the actor and the audience. In his very first session with the actors he spoke of how there is a sort of membrane between the performers

and the spectators. People come into the space waiting to fall into that membrane. Longing to be taken in. He believes that it is the actor's duty to hold them back and prevent this from happening up until the right moment. *Mountain Language* begins at the entrance of a prison where a line of women have been waiting for eight hours to see their men. What starts off as formal procedure suddenly turns into a deadly game of cat-and-mouse between the guards and the women. The crux of this play lies not in the physical torture and the apparently illogical laws, but in the psychological torture inflicted on the prisoners and their loved ones. To get a better understanding of how this subjugation takes place, Alan introduced the actors to the concept of a double bind.

A double bind is an emotionally distressing dilemma in communication in which an individual (or group) receives two or more conflicting messages, in which one message negates the other. This creates a situation in which a successful response to one message results in a failed response to the other (and vice versa), so that the person will be automatically wrong regardless of response. The double bind occurs when the person cannot confront the inherent dilemma, and therefore cannot resolve it or opt out of the situation. (Wikipedia)

The characters are put in a situation where they get mixed signals; for example in the very beginning, while talking to the women, there is an absence of hate in the officers words. However there is also, very evidently, no sign of empathy. In order to engage with these concepts of strategy and how to “play” with your victim, Alan conducted various simple and light exercises with the actors. “When dealing with such a somber and heavy text, it is really necessary to lighten the mood when possible.” Be it simple games of trying to move your partner from one end of the room to another through non-verbal communication to physical games of speed and suspension, everyone was put into situations that challenged and constant shifted the individual's status. With the guards especially, it was necessary for them to understand how to control a situation and ensure that they have fun doing it.

“One sometimes forgets that torturers become easily bored. They need a bit of a laugh to keep their spirits up. This has been confirmed of course by the events at Abu Ghraib in Baghdad. Mountain Language lasts only 20 minutes, but it could go on for hour after hour, on and on and on, the same pattern repeated over and over again, on and on, hour after hour.”

- Harold Pinter, Noble Lecture Art, Truth and Politics

The very structure of the play is a double bind. The play starts with the prisoners and the visitors being forbidden to speak the *Mountain Language*. Especially between the old women and her son we see how by suppressing their ability to communicate with each other the guards essential dig away that their very being. However the in



(Top left) Alan Caig Wilson, the director workshopping *Mountain Language* ~ (All others) Stills from the play

The crux of this play lies not in the physical torture and the apparently illogical laws, but in the psychological torture inflicted on the prisoners and their loved ones.

last scene the guards introduce a new rule (“until further notice”). All of a sudden the prisoners can speak their own language. This classic dammed if you do, dammed if you don't untimely leads to the destruction of the young man.

Another quality that was required of the actors was the ability to hold and sustain these silences. As much, if not more in said in the moments of quiet than is that of speech. Unless the actors can capture the energy of their silence and eliminate the straightforward display of violence, this play will be unable to produce any effect. Here the ensemble worked intensively on discovering a psychological gesture that would reflect all the anxiety of their silences. Various experiments with Laban's efforts also aided and instructed the physical and vocal quality of the actors.

Apart from working on Pinter's *Mountain Language*, Alan also inserted two monologues and a chorus piece from Heiner Mueller's *Hamletmachine*. Alan referred to it as disturbances by Heiner Mueller. Many consider *Mountain Language* to be Pinter's most Brechtian play. A strong political voice, a uncompromising setting, dark humor, stock characters as opposed to well ground individuals as well as countless other parallels make it easy to spot Brecht's influence in Pinter's writing. According to Alan “To use Brecht without somehow changing is a betrayal of what he stood for. Likewise for us to put up *Mountain Language* without tweaking it a little would somehow take away from what the play stands for. Also, I do care for bleakness. I strongly believe in what this play stands for and I believe in its message, but the bleakness of the end is something I wished to changed. This is where Mueller comes in. He offers some sense of redemption. If you suppress people, beyond a point a revolution will come. Are you going to do

contd. on pg 8

and the same for every other emotion of course. Maybe, that is what the clowns give me. Besides- I like to laugh and clowns can make you laugh- lets not forget that.

DD: Can you very briefly describe the process of devising the script that your cast and you follow? Was there a starting image or moment that led you to explore this?

RK: There were a few starting images, yes. The most lasting one being the depressed clown- that stayed. I thought it would be interesting to see a clown join a laughter club, so yes, we started with that.

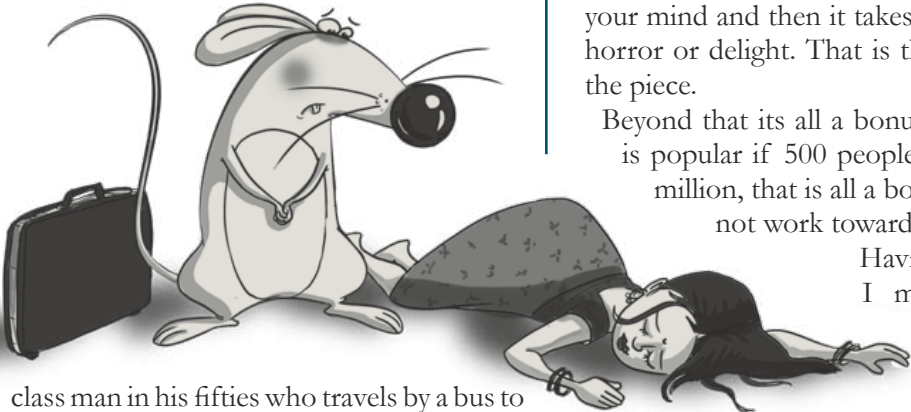
The rest of the images came from the play itself. We would read the play, scene by scene- discuss it, try and understand it and try and find what are the strong images within. Slowly some themes showed themselves to be more important than others. Of course we have all had to deal with parents and children. With ageing, betrayal, blindness, delirium, senility, darkness, nothingness,



Atul Kumar

power and the loss of it, and the fool. Each one of these became a major theme and we spent many days improvising around these themes and some others.

Another image that got stuck from the beginning was of a Maharashtrian middle



class man in his fifties who travels by a bus to go and meet his daughter. This man stayed with us- and is still present in the play. The process of writing this play was a very very exciting one- and is something that is still on. We are still chopping and changing the script everyday after the shows. Hopefully after a few shows we'd have locked it.

DD: Do you think of your theatre work as belonging to the experimental or mainstream space? How do you gauge your popularity and do you have a clear sense of who your audience is?

RK: These are questions I do not understand or try and answer for myself. I do what excites me- (in my films or theatre

work). The thing has to work. The success of the work is how close it came to how you imagined it. Because you are working in a medium- you are working against the medium and against yourself to realise a half-finished, vague image that you have in your mind and then it takes shape to your horror or delight. That is the success of the piece.

Beyond that its all a bonus- if the work is popular if 500 people watch it or 5 million, that is all a bonus. One does not work towards that.

Having said that, I must add that the 'success' of *C for Clown*

or *Hamlet- the Clown Prince* is very very gratifying. The fact that a play can run for many years- for over a hundred shows, is a new experience for me, and that the audience keeps coming back for more shows again and again is a great pleasure for which I am very grateful..

DD: Is your next production also going to work with the clown?

RK: As of now, I think so - it might change by the time I am ready to do the play (after 2 or 3 years) - but a minor dream of mine is to have 5 productions of Shakespeare's clown plays running simultaneously. Wouldn't that be great? ■

something about that? 'That is the end of *Mountain Language* for me. 'That is what I want people to leave thinking about.' The monologues from *Hamletmachine* also allowed for a deeper look into the plight of the women. It gives us the ability to see subjugation from the point of view of the person who is being indirectly tortured.

The power of a Pinter play lies in its silences and the held quality between two actors. The audience craves to understand what is not being said and there by witnesses the play more at the level of an active participant rather than a passive viewer. This notion stands in direct opposition to the lyrical beauty of Mueller's words. For some of the audience members this was a bold choice, one that challenged the preconceived notions of Pinter, for others however this was a jarring and needless exercise. Whatever the end result of this combination was for the audience, for the actors it was deeply fulfilling. It was interesting to see how one can peel back the layers in the silence and insert a totally different text within that. In a sense, this

The power of a Pinter play lies in its silences and the held quality between two actors. The audience craves to understand what is not being said and there by witnesses the play more at the level of an active participant rather than a passive viewer.

every act of inserting the Mueller text at various intervals placed the audience in a double bind. They first are introduced to a faceless silent line of women which is suddenly destroyed by the physical, sexual and emotional violence of Mueller's Ophelia. Adding Mueller in was just one way in which we could see what theatre can start, if it can start anything at all.

This engagement with Pinter and Mueller was merely a start of something more to come. For two weeks, ten actors

and one director came together to see what process they could develop in order to create a piece of theatre. To move beyond the "what" and "how" in a play and focus solely on the "why" of it is a luxury that only such a set-up can offer. In that sense Pinter presents things as they are and it is up to performers and audience members themselves to make sense of it.

For me, as someone who witnessed this process as well the final performance, the most striking quality about this piece was the ease with which these performers transformed a mundane old office space into a intricate labyrinth of torture. The room changed from a cold exterior of a prison to the complex interiors of the prisoners mind; just goes to show that the lack of certain elements cannot and should not hamper the power of one's theatre. ■

Write in! Email us at
ptnotes@prithvitheatre.org
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