

newspaper' scenes, new military, political, economic, and social problems became the material of drama, and doubts and questionings were answered in a humorous, understandable way for the skeptical peasantry. When the Reds occupied new areas, it was the Red Theater that calmed the fears of the people, gave them rudimentary ideas of the Red program, and dispensed great quantities of revolutionary thoughts, to win the people's confidence. During the Reds' 1935 Shansi expedition, for example, hundreds of peasants gathered about the Red players with the army, and flocked to see them.

The whole thing was 'propaganda in art' carried to the ultimate degree, and plenty of people would say, 'Why drag art into it?' Yet in its broadest meaning it was art, for it conveyed for its spectators the illusions of life, and it was a naïve art because the living material with which it was made was the living men to whom it appealed were in their approach to life's problems also naïve. For the masses of China there was no fine partition between art and propaganda. There was only a distinction between what was understandable in human experience and what was not.

One could think of the whole history of the Communist movement in China as a grand propaganda tour, and the defense, not so much of the absolute rightness of certain ideas, perhaps, as of their right to exist. I was not sure that they might not prove to be the most permanent service of the masses, even if they were in the end defeated and broken. For millions of young peasants who had heard the Marxist gospel preached by those bearded youths, thousands of whom were now dead, the old exorcisms of Chinese culture would never again be quite as effective. Wherever in their incredible migrations destiny had moved these Reds, they had vigorously demanded deep social changes - for which the peasants could have learned to hope in another way - and they had brought new faith in action to the poor and the oppressed.

Notes

Ed. note: The Chautauqua movement began in New York State in 1874. A traveling lecture series and summer school, it was the prototype of institutions to further popular education in the US.

The 'decadent' and 'meaningless' Chinese opera died hard. Thirty years later the GPCR drafted opera stars wholesale to produce modern plays in forms which would 'serve the people' by dramatizing revolution and the Thought of Mao Tse-tung, and which were not susceptible to undesirable historical analogies. *The Red Lantern*, a play of the 1960s popularized during the GPCR [Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution], was in content basically the same play as *Invasion*, of 1936 - lacking only the comic relief of the marauding goats.

Ed.: See note 9, p. 25.

Safdar Hashmi

from *THE RIGHT TO PERFORM*

UNLIKE HANDKE, HASHMI FAVORS conjoining street and institutional theatre, hoping to provide a performative alternative to what he decries as the mediocre films dominating Indian popular culture. Hashmi situates Indian street theatre in the tradition of agit-prop, with its working-class protagonist, commitment to socialism as *the* political solution, and adaptation of popular cultural traditions. The militant aspect of agit-prop, too, was tragically present in Indian street theatre; Hashmi was murdered by his adversaries while performing in the street.

I. From 'Jana Natya Manch: The First Ten Years Of Street Theatre, October 1978–October 1988'

Contemporary Indian street theatre has been drawing in equal measure from our folk and classical drama as well as from western theatre. The political pamphlet, the wall poster, the agitational speech, the political demonstration - these have all gone into creating the diverse forms adopted by our street theatre.

Street theatre had become inevitable when the workers began organising themselves into unions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As such, it is a twentieth century phenomenon, born of the specific needs of the working people living under capitalist and feudal exploitation.

It is basically a militant political theatre of protest. Its function is to agitate the people and to mobilise them behind fighting organisations.

In India, however, street theatre has developed in a different and more ambitious manner, especially during the last dozen years or so. The street theatre workers of the present generation, unlike the pioneers of the forties and the fifties, have become more conscious of its distinctly formal aspects. While unabashedly accepting the ideological nature of their theatre and its unconcealed alignment with political forces, they are no longer producing only poster plays.

In our view there are two reasons for this new development. Firstly, in our cities, with one or two exceptions, there is no tradition of theatre-going. The masses of our urban population have never been to a theatre. Our theatre, even the best of it, has remained mostly confined to a very select group of theatre-goers. The theatre, on its part, has also not been addressing itself to the common, working people. If our urban theatre had been a major cultural force – a living and popular art form reflecting the hopes, aspirations and struggles of the people – then perhaps our street theatre too would have remained only a functional propaganda device, surfacing every now and then to focus attention on burning issues. But since our mainstream theatre is by and large out of tune and touch with the majority of our people, the need remains for a fully developed people's theatre, a theatre which is available to the masses. The street theatre workers now have first hand experience of the artistic inadequacy of poster plays. Such plays serve a purpose, but they satisfy neither the people's need for a fuller theatre, nor the actors' and directors' craving for more challenging and stimulating material. Since conditions have continued to be unfavourable for a mass expansion of proscenium theatre, they have been seriously seeking to develop street theatre itself. Secondly, their long association with street theatre has gradually opened before them the unforeseen possibilities of the development and flowering of street theatre into a full fledged art form. The circular acting area, the conditions of performance, the proximity of the actor and the spectator have all demanded a new acting style, new dramatic structures, new writing skills, a new kind of training, a new use of music, verse and chorus and a new method of theatre management. Even the audience-performer relationship in street theatre is something unique and new and demands have already led to some amount of serious work on the language, structure, grammar and aesthetics of street theatre.

This new street theatre, though still in its infancy and struggling to discover itself, needs to be seen against the backdrop of its phenomenal expansion. During the last dozen years or so it has spread to almost all corners of India. Today there are hundreds of amateur troupes writing their own plays or freely adapting and translating scripts from other regions and languages and giving an enormous number of performances. Jana Natya Manch alone has given 4,300 performances of 22 different plays, in 90 cities, during

the last 10 years, seen by over two-and-a-half million people. This body of theatre, though still by and large disregarded by the mainstream theatre, has today become an inseparable part of the theatrical landscape of India. Especially in North India, after the sharp decline of the already weak proscenium theatre in the past few years, street theatre appears to have become at least in terms of the number of performances and the size of its audience, the major theatrical activity. In our opinion, today it is not possible to form a complete picture of contemporary Indian theatre without including street theatre.

This brings us to the unfortunate tendency to project street theatre as a rebellion against the proscenium theatre, or as standing in opposition to it. This absolutely erroneous notion has been created by adherents of both kinds of theatre. On the one hand, some exponents of street theatre have tried to counterpoise it against proscenium theatre, dubbing the latter as a bourgeois, decadent and constricting genre, condemning it as a theatre of irrelevance, of airy-fairy philosophy, of frivolity, and concluding thereafter, that a genuine people's theatre is impossible on the proscenium stage; on the other hand a large number of proscenium wallahs¹ have consistently refused even to accept street theatre as a valid form of dramatic art.

In our view it is absurd to speak of a contradiction between proscenium and street theatres. Both belong equally to the people. Yes, there is certainly a contradiction between the proscenium theatre which has been appropriated by the escapists, the anarchists and the revivalists and the street theatre which stands with the people. Just as there is a contradiction between reactionary proscenium theatre and progressive proscenium theatre, or between democratic street theatre and reformist and sarkari [Ed. note: government-sponsored] street theatre.

Equally absurd is the tendency to dismiss street theatre as political advertisement or a mobile poster. One reason for such comments is of course the voluntary insulation of the proscenium wallahs from street theatre. It is a fact that most of them have not been able to keep themselves abreast of the latest developments in street theatre. The other equally important reason is the extraordinary amount of shoddy fare that has been produced in the name of street theatre. However, there may be another, deeper reason for such comments.

Historically, proscenium theatre has become a place where one concentrates on the finer and subtler aspects of life, a place for meditation, reflection and introspection. All this is fortified by the serious and formal atmosphere in the hall, the silence and the darkness.

Since this kind of intensity and concentration is not obtainable in a street situation it is asserted that it is impossible to achieve any depths of analysis or beauty or any force of presentation in street theatre.

We believe, and we are certain you will all agree with us, that the implements and devices of artistic expression are created by the dramatist's creative

perception of life, and not the other way round. True one artist may find it possible to work only within his inherited or acquired discipline. Nobody need quarrel with that. But to reject as incomplete, indeed unrecognisable, one or all disciplines other than his, is wholly unacceptable and unscientific.

Let us be very clear on this. Theatre cannot be dependent on the frills and trappings which surround it. Drama is born with force and beauty in any empty space whether square, rectangular or circular. The play comes alive whether the spectators are on one or all sides, in darkness or in light. One of the greatest bodies of theatrical work that mankind has ever known, the Greek classical drama, used to be performed in sunlight, in front of some 15,000 people on all three sides of the acting area. Shakespeare performed his plays in the courtyards of inns, market places and gardens. His Globe theatre had the reputation of being one of the noisiest places in London where ale was sold in the pit even as a scene was in progress. Brecht described his ideal audience as one which could smoke and drink while watching the play, and vocally express its expert opinion of the agent on the stage like soccer or boxing fans at a match. Closer home, many of the most vibrant theatres of India are traditionally performed in the fields or in open stages. Theatre did not begin with proscenium, nor has its evolution reached the final stage, with it.

Polemics apart, we believe that street theatre is doing something which is of singular significance. At a time when all forms of community entertainment are fast disappearing, when the video and TV have started marketing encapsulated entertainment to be consumed at the level of the nuclear family or the individual, street theatre is once again reviving art which can be enjoyed at the community level, in large gatherings. In this sense it is already playing the role that a fully developed and popular theatre should.

We think it is high time that a living relationship was formed between all those who are committed to healthy theatre whether they are in the proscenium theatre or in street theatre. When new approaches to street theatre are being adopted, the theatre fraternity has a role to play in development of new techniques, new skills and new training methods. The established and the gifted playwrights of the mainstream theatre too have a role to play in enriching the repertoire of scripts for the street theatre. The critics have a role to play in devising new criteria for evaluating this theatre in its own terms. The talented directors and teachers have a role to play in helping street theatre realise its potential.

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of our street theatre, we extend an invitation to our colleagues in the mainstream theatre to cooperate with us in developing and enriching our street theatre.

(October 29, 1988)

II. From 'Concept of People's Theatre: *A Jana Natya Manch Experience*'

[. . .] Any gathering of organised or unorganised workers, students or any group of general public can be an occasion for Janam to stage their playlets. A circle of 15–20 feet radius and people around it is sufficient for it to stage a play. A students' convention against communalism, authoritarianism and unemployment; a demonstration against computerisation; a preparatory meeting for some working class rally; strikes and lockouts; literary seminars or even the victory celebrations of trade unions can be the right opportunity for a performance by Janam. The themes of its plays always keep a close touch with popular mass movements. Its plays on communal riots, the defective education system, the Industrial Relations Bill, women's emancipation, or the political economy of the bus-fare hike achieved phenomenal success only because of the emotional nearness of the themes to the everyday life of the people. For that matter all street plays have to be bold, succinct and direct; and so they are. These aspects of street theatre are necessitated by its limitations of time, space and money.

In order to keep itself alive and involved in the day-to-day people's movement, it can't afford to wait for relevant scripts to be written by professional and celebrated dramatists. Involvement of culture with people's movements requires immediate analysis of the current political and socio-economic developments and preparing a new play on that within a day or two, if not in a couple of hours. This leaves no scope for professionals and celebrities to come into the picture. In this matter Janam is not dependent



Figure 4.1 Hashmi's company, Jana Natya Manch, performing in Sahibabad.

on any professional's services. It is competent enough to write, design, visualise, direct and present plays on its own. All the script writing, designing, direction, music composing, etc. are done collectively in Janam.

In 1973, when the Delhi branch of IPTA [Ed. note: Indian People's Theatre Association] almost became inactive and defunct, a few members came out of it and formed Jana Natya Manch. Its first play was a Bengali play *Mrityur Atit (After Death)* by Utpal Dutt. Thereafter *Bharat Bhagya Vidhata*, a satirical play in Hindi by Ramesh Upadhyay on the misuse of election machinery, was taken up and shown in the far-flung working class colonies and factory gates in addition to colleges, public parks and middle class areas. It was also staged in a few towns of UP [Ed. note: Uttar Pradesh (Northern Province)] during the 1974 mid-term assembly elections.

[. . .]

Due to the high cost and resources involved in these full length plays and paucity of usual sponsors, mainly the trade unions, totally shattered and impoverished during the nightmare of the emergency, not many shows could be done. But Janam felt the huge cultural gap before the demoralised working class and decided to fill it up with an alternative healthy culture. At this specific juncture the need for low cost and need based topical theatre was seriously felt. Hence the necessary drift to street theatre.

Its first post-emergency street play *Machine*,² depicting the machinations of the establishment in collusion with the police and security forces against industrial dissent, just coincided with the first ever all-India all trade union rally against the Industrial Relations Bill at the Boat Club on November 20, 1978. This play helped to rejuvenate the morale of a working class audience of about one lakh [Ed. note: a lakh = 100,000] at the joint rally. Since then over 70 shows of this play have been done, mainly in working class audiences.

[. . .]

In December '78 the news of communal riots in Aligarh shook the country and within a week Jana Natya Manch was out in the streets with its play *Hatyarey*, analysing the political and economic factors which antagonise the traditionally harmonious co-existence of two communities. Performance of this play, ironically, coincided with the second phase of communal violence let loose on the common people of Aligarh. Contrary to Janam's apprehension, they have in fact strengthened the communal harmony by performing this play in troubled, sensitive and minority localities.

In February '79, the state owned Delhi Transport Corporation burdened the common commuter by suddenly raising its fares sky high. Within 24 hours, Jana Natya Manch took the 12-minute play *DTC Ki Dhandhli* to the bus stops exploring the political economy of the fare hike including mismanagement, corruption and rackets of the top bureaucracy. Instant success of the play was evident from the mass appeal and participation it received along

with the conversion of each show into a street corner meeting in protest against the fare-hike. This play was shown to about 30 thousand people in 35 performances in different bus-stops of Delhi within a week. Ultimately, the corporation had to partially withdraw the raised fares and even rationalise the fare structures being followed prior to the hike.

JANAM's next play, *Aurat*, depicting the plight of working women, is a universally successful play. Primarily written for and first staged to meet the specific requirements of the first Northern Indian Working Women's Conference (CITU), this play has been performed over 70 times till now. In several glimpses it shows the various stages of woman's life as a daughter, as a wife, as a student, as a mother, as an unemployed young woman, as a worker and finally as a revolutionary; all within 27 minutes. The argument of the play is that women's struggle for equality is only a part of the broader united struggle of the working classes.

In July '79 many All India students and youth organisations of divergent opinions converged in Delhi for a seminar on authoritarianism and communalism. The seminar focussed attention on unemployment, educational reforms and lowering of the voting age to 18 years. This congregation of students from all over India was presented with the 15-minute play *Teen Crore* [Ed. Note: teen means three; crore is a large numerical unit], specially in incorporating the three problems facing our student and youth. Thereafter it was performed in various colleges also.

[. . .]

Due to the topicality and mass involvement of all these plays the audience participation has become a regular feature with Jana Natya Manch. It gets regular suggestions from its audience about improvements and themes of new plays. [. . .] To meet the increasing demand for an alternative and healthy cultural form they have to often go out of Delhi . . . This way Jana Natya Manch is almost leading an All India People's theatre movement emanating from the Hindi heartland.

Notes

- 1 Ed. note: Difficult to translate precisely, a wallah is a professional, an advocate, a practitioner.
- 2 Ed. note: The 'emergency' was a maneuver by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to run the country along dictatorial lines in the name of internal security.