

Utpal K. Banerjee in Conversation with Mahesh Dattani

Author(s): Utpal K. Banerjee and Mahesh Dattani

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## Utpal K. Banerjee in Conversation with Mahesh Dattani

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**M**ahesh Dattani has been a well-established playwright, stage-director, scriptwriter and filmmaker. Born in 1958, he started his own theatre company 'Playpen' in 1986. His well-known oeuvre of plays, out of which *Final Solution* earned him the Sahitya Akedemi award in 1998, has been staged all over India and outside: London, Leicester, New York, Washington DC, Sydney, Colombo and Dubai. Besides conducting regular workshops on playwriting and acting in Bangalore, he writes radio-plays for BBC-4. In the genre of cinema, his first film *Mango Souffle* was adjudged best picture in Barcelona Film Festival, 2003 and the second film *Morning Raga* is now on the anvil with Shabana Azmi.

Banerjee : What were your early theatre interests?

Dattani : The first play that I remember going to (apart from the ones at school) was Madhu Rye's *Koi Pan Ek Phool Nu Naam Bolo To* in Gujarati. I was mesmerized. I fell in love with the surreal world of theatre in an instant. At that time I didn't think I could ever be a part of it. It was only in college that I heard of Bangalore Little Theatre, an amateur group. I joined the group doing backstage work for them. It was great fun. I was keen to be an actor then. I did small parts but very soon I switched over to directing plays.

Banerjee : What were your sources of inspiration?

Dattani : I think I am inspired by the people around me. I admire people who overcome odds to get what they want. The late Protima Bedi was a source of inspiration. My family, my friends, acquaintances—they have, all in some way or another, figured in my plays. My dance gurus were also a source of inspiration. They were true artists living in a time when dance was not considered respectable. And yet they followed their hearts.

Dattani : Who were your role models?

Dattani : I think Girish Karnad was a kind of role model. He once told

me that he enjoys doing theatre, and he acts in commercial films for the money. He is the most important living playwright we have in our country. Other models are Mahesh Elkunchwar, Vijay Tendulkar and of course, Madhu Rye. I also admire Badal Sircar for doing what he believed in. He stopped doing proscenium theatre when he did not believe in it anymore.

The other model was my dad. He was a man who believed in hard work. His attitude was to work till you drop. And that's what he did. Even on the last day of his life, he attended to his work at the office, did the shopping, came home and died peacefully at the ripe age of 82. That is how I want to go for sure.

Banerjee : How did you enter the theatre world?

Dattani : There used to be major theatre festivals in Bangalore in the 80s involving full-length plays and lasting seven days in September–October. *The Deccan Herald* who invited our Playpen to produce a play conducted this festival, now defunct. I directed the Greek tragedy *Hippolytus* by Euripides, on the story of the love affair between Theseus's son and his stepmother Phaedra. I took up Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit* and Paul Zindel's Pulitzer Award-winning play *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the Moon Marigold* in successive years. *No Exit* was liked so much by the then Governor of Karnataka that we did it at the Raj Bhavan, followed by a thumping reception! Next I directed Allen Ayckbourn's *Relatively Speaking*, when one of our leading actresses was expecting, so I added an entire scene to 'establish' her pregnancy! But, all this while, I wanted to do more Indian plays — having been travelling to Mumbai and viewing plays by Karnad, Tendulkar and Elkunchwar. So that was the genesis!

Banerjee : How did your first play come about?

Dattani : This was *Where There is a Will* when I was 28. I was a little unsure of writing a full-length play and just did a scene with my father. The rest of the play took a life of its own—after my showing it to an actor-friend and going through some play-readings. They encouraged me to finish the play!

Banerjee : Your second play *Dance like a Man* (1987) has been a runaway success, and made into a film as well, with Anoushka Shankar essaying the dancer's role. How did it happen?

Dattani : I have been learning the classical dance of Bharatnatyam for six years, when I was in my twenties, from gurus US Krishna Rao and his wife Chandrabhaga Devi. They were already in their

serventies and frequently talked about the dance-scene half-a century earlier. It appeared that Chandrabhaga had secretly learnt Bharatanatyam from the Devadasi, Mylapore Gauri Amma (also the guru of Rukmini Devi Arundale) and guru Kittappa Pillai. They taught me to have a passion for dance, which coloured my theatre as well! The idea came from there.

Banerjee : *Tara* (1988) was another success story. What was its medical basis?

Dattani : I read the story of separating a Siamese twins, in an American journal. It is also medically true that on separation, one of them is weak, as many important veins and arteries are uniquely shared. Surgical success rate is also low. The only liberty I took was in making them of different sex. Normally, such twins belong to the same gender.

Banerjee : *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1989) was played in the UK. How?

Dattani : It came out of a long workshop I conducted with Michael Walling and was staged in Leicester Haymarket Theatre at Battersea House, before moving into London. It is about two sisters married to two brothers and their mother-in-law. It was my original story and though its relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law has an oriental touch, the UK people took it well.

Banerjee : *Final Solutions* (1992) got you the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award. How did it come about?

Dattani : It was Alyque Padamsee who saw my play *Tara* and suggested that I should write a play on communal riots. The story, which was again my original, looks at two Muslim boys who are running away from a mob and take shelter in a Hindu house. But tension develops when the householder suspects that one Muslim boy is having an affair with his daughter and prejudices surface. Incidentally, this was a turning point in my life and suddenly I lost confidence. It became a time of soul searching for me.

Banerjee : How did your links with BBC Radio 4 come about in 1997?

Dattani : Jeremy Mortimer, one of the BBC Radio producers, was in the audience in London where I was co-directing *Bravely Fought*. After the play he approached me and expressed his appreciation. He asked me if I would like to write a play on India's 50th Year of Independence. Karnad had also written *Tipu Sultan* on that occasion. Mine was a comedy. *Do the Needful*, about arranged marriage. Both the boy and the girl don't want marriage

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because they have love-interests elsewhere, but go through it – in a farmhouse – as an arrangement of convenience. Sammy Avens directed it for BBC and the link continued.

Banerjee : You changed tracks with *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998).

Dattani : This time the provocation came from Lillete Dubey, who had successfully produced *Dance Like a Man*. Set in Mumbai, it was about gay people and about how they lived: Then the gay boy's sister discovers that her fiance is her own brother's lover and is the point of tension. The play ends on a positive note, with both brother and sister eventually reconciled. For this play, I observed gay people in Mumbai.

Banerjee : Your second BBC Radio play *Seven Steps Around the Fire....*

Dattani : This was a detective story, commissioned by BBC, after having received a good feedback from the earlier play. At the centre is Uma Rao, the reluctant detective, who gets to the bottom of a murder case, while working on her thesis on gender studies. She enters the world of eunuchs and discovers a tantalizing pot of love, lust, power, jealousy and enough cruelty. In resolving the crime, she meets her own marginalized self.

Banerjee : Since you have had its stage premiere only in July 2004, do you think it has remained relevant over half a decade?

Dattani : It was done once more as a radio play in Chennai and I think it continues to be still valid. Gender issues are still as relevant as they were yesterday. Also finding one's own gender-crossover is something that the play deals with at an abstract level. The play is from Uma's point of view and traces her own journey; from a submissive upper middle-class housewife, to a more worldly-wise being. I think we are all into role-playing — as somebody's wife, somebody's father — but don't touch the core where we may be someone quite different. Eunuchs don't have such identified roles in the sense and are perhaps more liberated. Indeed, all of us have *Yin* (active) and *Yang* (passive) energies within us and in their balance lies our true identity. My research drew a lot of material from a lady-friend Deepa Krishnan who had lived with eunuchs for three years and did a documentary, *Paper Roses*, on them in 1998. Unfortunately, she perished due to pneumonia as a result of the Gujarat earthquake and we were deprived of her further research.

Banerjee : *30 Day in September* (2000-1) was again on a very different subject.

Dattani : Yes, because this was commissioned by a Delhi-based NGO, RAHI (Recovering and Healing from Incest), who deals with

survivors of childhood sexual abuse. After asking me whether I would be interested, they invited me to Delhi to meet some of the victims under counselling. Seven women (covering both young and middle-aged) agreed to speak to me. What struck me was the scar of the abuse and the trauma that stays with you even into your adult life. Some women had benefitted from counselling and found healthy relations in life, including marriage. I also met a man whose girl-friend was the survivor of such an abuse. To deal with the issue, it needed a lot of sensitivity in the way of adult-to-adult relationship. In some cases, there was a sense of betrayal if it involved the father and there was a transferred resentment against the mother who perhaps could have intervened, but didn't. Often it was a hapless mother who had just no power in society, to speak against the father as the perpetrator.

- Banerjee : *Swami and Winston* (2000-20) was your third BBC Radio play, wasn't it?
- Dattani : Yes, it was basically a thriller with a heavy social content. Here, Uma is again a detective, accosted by an English woman visiting Bangalore, to meet her bother in an ashram. She loses her dog 'Winston' and is very upset. When Uma was engaged in tracing the dog the English lady gets killed. The plot thickens, with everything pointing to the Swami. But the real murderer is someone else. It's a 60 minute whodunit, like its predecessor thriller.
- Banerjee : How was '*Clearing the Rubble*' (2001) based on the Gujarat earthquake and after?
- Dattani : I belong to Gujarat and was asked to do it by both BBC Radio 4 and BBC World Service. Basically, it has three monologues—the first by an English journalist who happens to be there and becomes a rescue-operator; the second, by a young Muslim woman who is buried under the rubble; and the third, by the woman's 14-year-old son who has survived. The mother's soliloquy is a dialogue with the child at the moment of parting, thinking that she is dying and explaining, in retrospect, why there was a rift between them. These are in the nature of 'interior monologues', taking place in the mind. Ultimately, all three monologues connect and become part of one story.
- Banerjee : Is not the same technique used in *End Game*, for the old couple interred in the two garbage bins?
- Dattani : Perhaps so, now that you mention it. But I had neither read nor seen the play earlier!

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- Banerjee : Your latest play has been yet another BBC Radio 4 play. *Uma and the Fairy Queen* (2003).
- Dattani : This along with its predecessors *Seven Steps* and *Swami*, complete my Uma trilogy of thrillers. Here Uma goes to witness Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by a visiting UK team, as sponsored by the British Council. The actor playing Oberon does not appear at the end to take the curtain call and is found murdered. His wife playing the role of Titania the fairy queen, is suspected of the foul play. The wife is in real-life the Pakistani girl Mila and the play becomes a web of three countries, UK, Pakistan and India. Finally, the mystery is solved, but Mila is not the murderer.
- Banerjee : What are your general comments on your oeuvre of the dozen plays?
- Dattani : I am at the stage of life when I want to explore new genres; from detective stories to comedies. I want to spread out. Having worked with gender and sex for 5-6 years, I want to expand into other areas.
- Banerjee : What has been your choice of themes?
- Dattani : I think my one recurring theme is the individual's struggle over societal demands or inflictions. Whether it is *Dance Like a Man* or *30 Days in September* or *Tara*, my protagonists are striving for their own space or freedom from an invisible, self-inflicted form of oppression. Most of my themes are not by choice, but dictated by my current interests. For instance, my *Clearing the Rubble* was done, as I was profoundly moved by the documentary that Deepa, who was there, made on the earthquake in my State and the sheer scale of devastation. In every case, I do a lot of homework and even if you don't use it all, it impinges on you.
- Banerjee : How do you build in your social interests in your plays?
- Dattani : I'm strongly affected by social issues, especially when it comes to power-play in class and gender. A lot of my plays deal with them and they remain the leit motifs of my plays. I am, however, not a social activist. From my long experience in theatre, I know what will work in a play, that is, what will be empowered writing. My first service is to the story and I believe that the form should serve the content. Usually, there is something like a coming to terms at the end and the audience can experience a catharsis-like situation. That's deliberate and is part of my craft!
- Banerjee : How do you reckon with the audience?
- Dattani : I've not been a slave of what my audience expects. But, none-

theless, it helps to have an understanding of the audience psyche: where are they coming from and why are they coming.

Banerjee : So, what is your worldview?

Dattani : I believe that the world is what we make of it. Just as our actions create our karma, each of us can contribute to the preservation and betterment of our world by creative action. We are all different. But if we create an atmosphere that is conducive to growth and learning different worlds can retain their uniqueness and yet find common grounds.

Banerjee : What are your other projects?

Dattani : I have just completed a movie called *Morning Raga*. In June and July this year, I have been busy with a month-long workshop on playwriting and acting at the India Habitat Centre (IHC). I also directed my earlier BBC Radio 4 play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* for stage that had its world premiere at IHC on 10th July. The play was presented jointly by Habitat World and Scene Stealers, and produced by Vivek Mansukhani.

Banerjee : What is your focus on music?

Dattani : As I mentioned, I studied classical dance (Bharatanatyam) for six years and that was the first time I heard good Carnatic music. I acquired a real appreciation of it. My personal favourites are music trends of the seventies and eighties. But now after researching for *Morning Raga*, I have developed a taste for world music and the kind that is played at the *Buddha Bar*. *Morning Raga*, with music by Amit Heri based on Carnatic compositions, is in essence world music.

Banerjee : What is your interaction with stagehands?

Dattani : I have made so many friends through theatre and many have started off by helping me backstage. I too started off as a stagehand. That is a great way to learn without your mistakes showing! Prompting for a play is one way of understanding the nuances of a script that may escape even seasoned actors! Lighting for a play requires great skill and understanding of space. It's the area where I have the least experience!

Banerjee : Anything that you may want to add....

Dattani : I returned in June and July 2004 to work in Delhi after several years. I had earlier also done a workshop for playwrights at Habitat and the response had been overwhelming. I hope that I will continue to visit Delhi to conduct workshops and direct plays—the two things I love doing the most!



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