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CONTEMPORARY INDIAN THEATRE

Three Voices

Erin B. Mee

What later became modern theatre in India began in the colonial cities set up by the British as commercial ports: Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay. These cities had an urban middle-class audience with values and tastes shaped by the English-style education they received, and by the need to work with the British in administration and commerce. Much of the theatre in this era copied the British drama that toured the country, and therefore took on to some extent the aesthetics, dramaturgical structures, and even the architecture of Western drama. Until the development of modern theatre in India, most performance did not take place on a proscenium stage, nor did it depend upon ticket sales, but upon patronage. The proscenium which was adopted for much of the modern theatre separated the participants from the observers; ticket sales put an emphasis on theatre as a commodity, making it available to a smaller, and wealthier, group of people.

After India gained political independence in 1947, a number of playwrights felt the need to develop a theatre that did not follow British models, but was in some way Indian. Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, along with Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, and Girish Karnad, members of what is often referred to as the “Theatre of Roots” movement, began to study Kathakali, Yakshagana, Chhau, and other traditional Indian performance forms to see what could be used in the creation of a modern *Indian* drama. As Karnad very clearly states, however, the attempt “was not to find and reuse forms that had worked successfully in some other cultural context. The hope, rather, was to discover whether there was a structure of expectations—and conventions—about entertainment underlying these forms from which one could learn.”¹



K. N. Panikkar was born in 1928 in a small village in Kerala, South India. He was exposed as a child to the many so-called folk performance forms of Kerala, and he incorporates some of the stories, music, dance steps, rhythms, and ideas from such forms as Kathakali, Theyyam, Patayani, and Kuttiyattam into his plays and productions:

Folk contains the archetypal elementary expression of man, which is related to the soil of the land. [. . .] It may be difficult to understand the rationale of a particular folk element, because the rationale may be complicated [. . .] it may be inexplicable to us, which is very interesting for me—I don't want to have a reason for everything. The absence of rationale-as-far-as-we-are-concerned is interesting to me. [. . .] [It implies a] para-rationale, where it is difficult to apply your normal reasoning to what happens or what is known in folk as *thanathu* [*thanathu* is the extreme point of imagination]. This para-rationale comes from the folk tradition.²

Panikkar looks at the underlying structures and philosophies of folk theatre, and adapts them:

I will be committing a confusion if I say that I am [. . .] trying to take elements from Theyyam—it is not like that. It is not just imitating a folk art situation—you cannot repeat in theatre what the folk artists do. That is why we make it a philosophy. Whether a particular prop or material is to be used on stage [for example a curtain] depends on the situation—we decide based upon what the situation warrants [. . .] in such a way that it suits the [theatrical] situation. That is our guideline. The parameter which is used in folk to make this decision is not the same as in theatre. That is why I stress the point that the use of folk is more a philosophy. The basic thing that has influenced me [. . .] as an essential ingredient of folk, is the rhythm. [. . .] Poetry is the next element of folk philosophy. What is poetry in folk? It is not rendered poetry, it is visual poetry. It is the visual poetry that interprets through poetic images.³

Through his work with folk forms and his experience directing Sanskrit plays, Panikkar has developed a theory, embodied in his own writing, that Indian theatre is not conflict-oriented, but transformation-oriented. For Panikkar, theatre is storytelling.



Not satisfied with playing to a middle-class audience, or in some cases wanting to make a particular statement to a particular group of students, workers, or politicians, some playwrights took to the streets. Badal Sircar of Bengal was one of the first practitioners of street theatre in India. In 1983, dismissing the then common notion that street theatre is not art, he wrote:

This concept is based firstly on the mistaken notion that anything done in a “proper and decent” theatre hall automatically becomes art, and anything outside is non-art by definition. [. . .] Whether theatre would be art or not depends on the theatre workers, irrespective of their working in theatre halls or working in streets. And as for propaganda, every theatre, in fact every art, is propaganda, as it propagates something or other. Street theatre propagates *change*, the so-called pure theatre propagates *status quo*.⁴

Safdar Hashmi, another famous practitioner of street theatre in India, was beaten to death in on January 1, 1989, in the middle of one of his performances. Hashmi was the head of Janam. (Still in operation, Janam has performed over 4,000 times since it was founded in 1973.) Janam's most famous production, *Machine*, deals with the exploitation of workers, and has been performed all over India in streets, market-places, in front of factories, at rallies, and for roughly 160,000 people at the Boat Club in New Delhi. Hashmi was killed while performing *Holla Bol* [Attack] "for workers in Jhandapur, an industrial town east of Delhi. The play dealt with the government repression of the labor movement, and was being performed in support of CPI(M)'s local election campaign. In the middle of the show, Mukesh Sharma, a right-wing political candidate backed by the Congress (I) Party, arrived on the scene, surrounded by nearly a hundred hired goons armed with heavy bamboo sticks and guns."⁵ A worker was shot, and Hashmi's head was beaten with bricks and sticks.

The work of Sircar and Hashmi had a big influence on Tripurari Sharma. In 1979, as she was graduating from The National School of Drama in Delhi, Sharma saw her first street play (one of Hashmi's), and soon after that, a play by Sircar. "I was very much interested in performing plays with an ideological base, I felt that was very important. The street theatre movement had just started, and I felt that something important was happening, a change was coming, and I was very keen to be part of that movement."⁶

Sharma's work takes several forms: she and her company Alarippu perform plays in the streets that they have written and rehearsed; she develops plays and productions collectively in workshops, using stories told to her by the members of various communities; and she directs classical plays in mainstream theatre spaces. Sharma has been asked how she can do both mainstream and street theatre, and her answer is that the different projects feed each other.⁷

Sharma's own writing is largely dedicated to giving voice to those who are not often heard, and political issues which are not being discussed. In conversation, as well as in her methods of work and her productions, Sharma is less interested in providing answers or solutions to problems; she is more interested in opening up dialogue, presenting other points of view, and providing a forum for exchange. Sharma has dealt with a broad range of subjects: communalism, the effect of the dollar on the Indian economy, governmental corruption, factory working conditions, and the stigmas attached to leprosy. Many of her projects (including the first play she ever wrote, *Daughter-in-Law*) deal with the oppression of women. In this way, she gives voice to a group that has often been doubly oppressed by class and gender.



English-language theatre has long been associated with light entertainment, and English is dismissed by some as a foreign, colonial language. English is, however, officially recognized as a national language in India, it is the language in which many

national arts debates take place, and for many upper-class urban people, English is the language in which they feel most comfortable speaking, thinking, and writing. Aside from the plays of Asif Currimbhoy in the sixties, the most famous productions of plays by Indian writers in English were mounted by the Madras Players, but these were mainly translations of plays written in other Indian languages.

Mahesh Dattani writes in English, and takes as his subject the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the oppressive weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender, and repressed desire. Their dramas are played out on multi-level sets where interior and exterior become one, and geographical locations are collapsed—in short, his settings are as fragmented as the families who inhabit them.

Dattani was born in 1958 in Bangalore. When he was ten, his parents took him to see a Gujarati play. Living in Bangalore, theatre was one way for his parents to stay in touch with their community [Gujarat is a state farther north of Karnataka, the state in which Bangalore is located] so they made it a point to attend, and they took their family—as Dattani says, it was “a major family thing.” Dattani was “struck by the bright make-up, the bright costumes, and the gaudy set, it was fascinating, it was such a surreal world.” However, it was a world he did not think he would belong to.

In the early eighties, while in college, Dattani joined the Bangalore Little Theatre, took workshops with them, directed two plays, and found he was very interested in acting. But it was not until he directed Woody Allen’s *God* that Dattani decided theatre was something he would actually like to do—and that he would like to do “something less frivolous.” In 1987 Dattani founded his own theatre company, Playpen, and began to look around for Indian plays in English, which proved more difficult than he had anticipated:

Like many urban people in India, you’re in this situation where the language you speak at home is not the language of your environment, especially if you move from your hometown. And you use English to communicate, so you find that you’re more and more comfortable expressing yourself in English. I found I could only do theatre in English and no other language. And at the same time I wanted to do more Indian plays, so this became a kind of challenge, because there weren’t many good translations—or, there may have been good translations, but they didn’t do anything for me.⁸

Eventually Dattani solved this problem by deciding to write his own plays, starting with *Where There’s a Will*.



The theatre of roots, street theatre, and English-language theatre are just three of the many kinds of theatre flourishing in India today on proscenium and non-

proscenium stages: in large and small cities, in front of factories, in village squares, in cultural clubs, in a wide variety of languages, aesthetics, structures, and forms. K. N. Panikkar, Tripurari Sharma, and Mahesh Dattani are among the most interesting and important playwrights writing in India today, and their work demonstrates the wide range of styles, philosophies, and issues being dealt with in the contemporary Indian theatre scene. Their plays will appear in PAJ's forthcoming *DramaContemporary: India* volume.

NOTES

1. Girish Karnad, "In Search of a New Theater," *Contemporary Indian Tradition*, ed. Carla M. Borden (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 101.
2. Erin Mee, "Folk Philosophy in K. N. Panikkar's Poetic Theatre of Transformation," *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* (Calcutta), Issue 7, 58.
3. *Ibid.*, 59.
4. Badal Sircar, "Our Street Theatre," *Sangeet Natak* 69, 22.
5. Eugene van Erven, "Killed in Action, Safdar Hashmi's Street Theatre in Delhi," *The Playful Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 141.
6. Interview with the author, August 30, 1996.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Interview with the author, August 27, 1996.

KAVALAM NARAYANA PANIKKAR Meaning Into Action

Kavalam Narayana Panikkar is a playwright and director, and the Founding Director of Sopanam. His plays include *Sakshi* (1964), *Avanavankadamba* (1975), *Ottayan* (1988), *Karimkutty* (1983), *Koyma* (1986), *Arani* (1989), *Theyya Theyyam* (1990), and *Poranadi* (1995). He has directed his own plays as well as the plays of Bhasa (*Madhyama Vyayogam*, *Urubhangam*, and *Karnabharam*) and Kalidasa (*Shakuntalam* and *Vikramorvasiyam*). His awards include the prestigious Kalidas Samman Award for Theatre (1996), the National Award from the Sangeet Natak Akademi for Theatre Direction (1983), the Kerala State Sahitya Akademi Award for the best Malayalam Playwright (1974), the Critic Circle of India Award for Theatre Direction (1982 and 1984), and a Ford Foundation Fellowship. His productions have been presented in Greece, Japan, Austria, the United States, and the former Soviet Union.