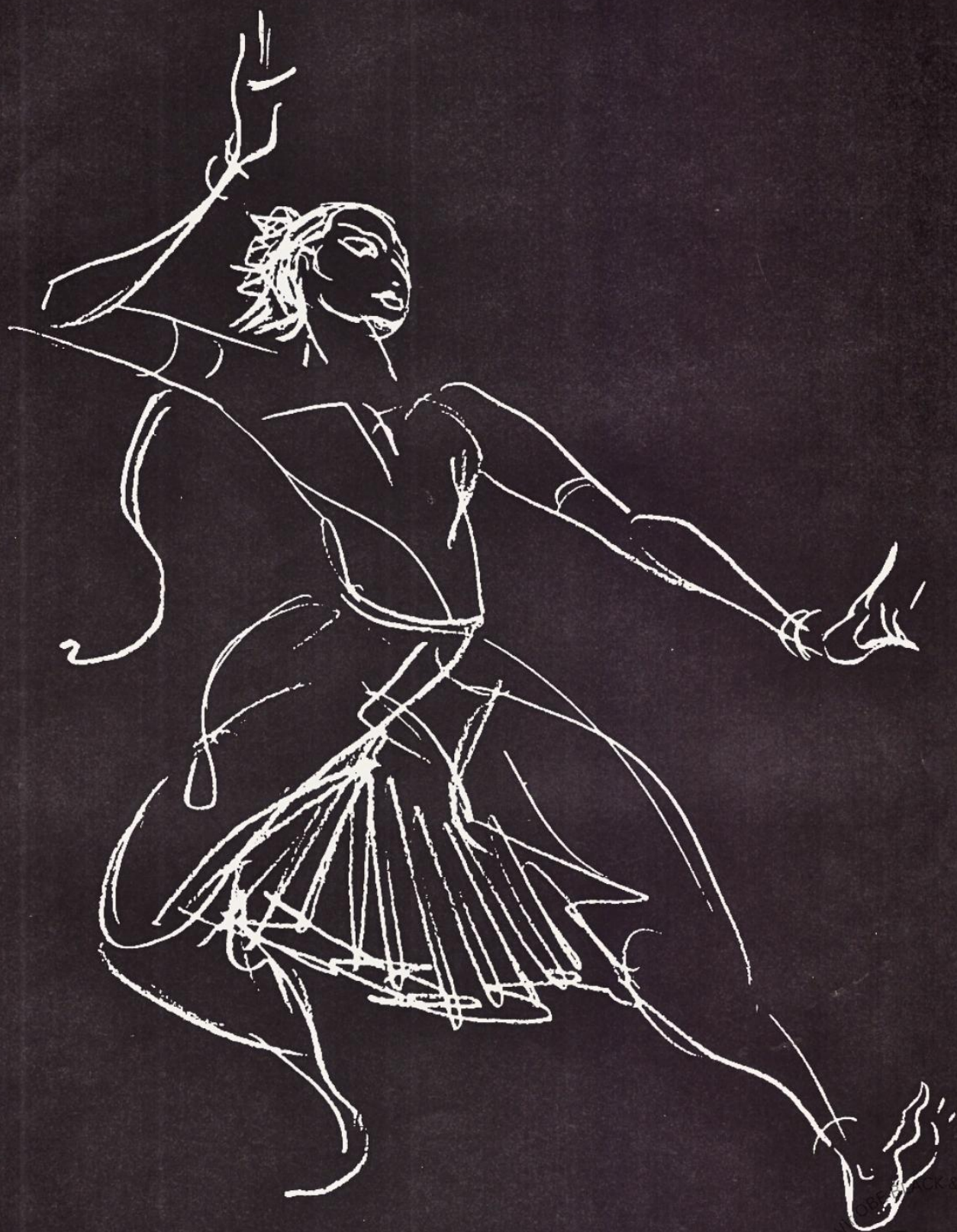


& NEWS

issue 3

april '85



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ASIAN THEATRE NEWSLETTER

& NEWS

april '85

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Cover design by courtesy of Eileen Piercy

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issue 3

Introduction

A meeting of artistic directors of all Arts Council-funded Theatre companies was convened at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, on Sunday 31st March, to discuss the policy of the ACGB and resolve upon a course of action.

This Theatre lobby issued the following statement on the 1st April :

"Over 60 artistic directors, representing all types and sizes of publically-funded Theatre Companies throughout the country, met yesterday at a unique conference.

The meeting was the largest and most significant gathering of Theatre directors ever held, and they were totally united.

1. They unanimously contradicted statements indicating that there had been any increase in their funding for 1985/86. In real terms funds have been cut.
2. They unanimously agreed that the Arts Council, because of inadequate funding from the Government, was prevented from effectively operating its chosen policy.
3. They unanimously demanded a crisis meeting with the Chairman and Secretary-General of the Arts Council in order to agree ways in which significantly more money could be secured in 1986/87, and to discuss policy for the future.
4. They unanimously undertook to organise a rally to publicize the many ways in which the great artistic and financial success of Britain's theatre is threatened."

At the Asian Theatre Forum's next meeting we have set ourselves the task of articulating a clear funding strategy to take to Arts-funding bodies. Equally important, however, is that while Asian Theatre faces specific conceptual and practical problems with regard to the Arts Council and, beyond that, the Government, it nevertheless faces these problems in the wider context of cuts in general. In other words, it would ultimately be our loss if we focus and articulate our demands only in relation to Asian Theatre. We are not a separate Arts issue : we are a part of the current crisis in the Arts.

I hope, therefore, that when we convene on Sunday 21st April at 2.00pm at TARA ARTS CENTRE we can consider our strategy in that light.

Jatinder Verma.

Feature

Dramatic Encounters of the Third Kind

One of the greatest figures of contemporary radical Indian Theatre, Badal Sircar, will be in London between April and July. We print a short article on Sircar's work.

Badal Sircar is the founder of the 'Third Theatre' movement in India. It is essentially urban theatre, that hopes to combine the strengths of Folk and conventional (Proscenium-arch) Theatres.

It can be performed anywhere and everywhere - in a small unadorned room, an open field, a public park, a crowded street corner. Where available they use artificial lights, but can do as well with natural sunlight. They never use any makeup except a stray cap or mask to identify the characters. Their costume is our everyday wear - a casual shirt and pants. There are no props, no background screens or curtains and, of course, no stage.

Each of Badal Sircar's plays - 'Bhoma', 'Michhil' or 'Spartacus' - can boast of some spectacular human collages. The use of the human voice is again significant. In 'Spartacus', for instance, the rhythmic panting sound of a group of slaves brings out at a stroke, the extent of their deprivation, agony and affinity to the beast of toil.

Unadorned, bare, stripped of all externals, it is a kind of theatre that goes to the root of dramatic performance - the ritual - where one celebrates through song, dance, mime, and the natural exuberance of the human physique.

"Theatre is not merely an art form, but a very decisive weapon of social communication"

Theatre is not merely an art form, but a very decisive weapon of social communication, social change. All practitioners of Third Theatre insist on this aspect of their form. Theatre is an experience which the performer and the spectator share.

The actor, therefore, is never separated by a picture frame or drop screen. He communicates directly to his audience which sits on the same level all around the acting area, or often within it. In Badal Sircar's 'Michhil' the audience is made to sit within the acting area so that by their very presence they become part of the collage which the performers create.

The Third Theatre's reliance on human beings rather than on external props makes it an extremely flexible and portable kind of entertainment. It can be performed in the remotest of villages. Its unadorned, direct form makes it a powerful instrument of social comment. Its emphasis on song, dance, rhymed verse, or physical feats, makes audience participation spontaneous.

Finally, because it rejects props, it is a very inexpensive kind of theatre. The production costs can never exceed Rs. 100. As a result ticket prices

are minimum (usually Re.1), and when performed in open air, the entertainment is absolutely free of cost. In a poor country like India the advantage of such a theatre cannot be overemphasised. It can be a source of entertainment for the lowest strata of the society.

"Folk theatre and city theatre both are limited. What we need is an alternative theatre"

Calcutta is proud to have Badal Sircar, one of the very prominent propounders of this new experimental theatre. He is the one who has given us the generic name 'Third Theatre'.

Sircar reacted sharply to the allegation that Third Theatre was a foreign concept and hence unsuitable for our country. 'Third Theatre' is very much Indian because it has arisen from a socio-economic situation that is peculiarly Indian. Two hundred years of colonial rule has created an unnatural situation in the country. There is a widening gap between the rural and urban socio-economic condition. This dichotomy exists in the cultural sphere as well.

"Folk theatre and city theatre both exist, but both are limited. What we need is an alternative theatre that can bridge the rural-urban cultural gap. Foreigners may have used the term 'Third Theatre' in a different way, but I have spoken of it purely in an Indian context. I call folk theatre First because it existed from time immemorial. Proscenium theatre is Second because it is only about a hundred years old. So an alternative theatre must be the Third."

Sircar explained at length why he rejected both folk and proscenium theatre. When questioned why he did not try to revitalise our folk forms and make them contemporary and relevant instead of looking at something new and experimental, he replied, "I cannot practice any folk art because I am not trained for it. Most folk forms like Yakshagana need rigorous physical training from childhood. And classical dance theatres are even more difficult to perform. Jatra is perhaps the only folk form which does not need much exertion or training. But here again we have a problem. Many folk forms have been bought and commercialised. Jatra today is a thoroughly debauched form something akin to Hindi films. In order to do Jatra today, one has to have a full-fledged professional team, abide by a star-system and rigid profit motive. And then one has to use themes which are not only irrelevant to the lives of people, but are downright backward and reactionary."

"I have myself practised in the proscenium form and therefore am acutely aware of its contradictions. 1

Dramatic Encounters.....

On stage we speak of a classless society, but force our spectator, who has bought a Rs.5 ticket, to be aware that he is superior to those who are in the Rs. 3 stalls and inferior to those in the Rs.10 category.

"We will collaborate with cigarette companies financially and yet throw around slogans about the need to destroy capitalism. We will claim to speak to the audience directly and yet confine the spectators to a darkened hall and pretend that they are not there. 'Illusion of reality' or naturalism is not a bad thing in itself but has become totally meaningless with the advent of cinema. Cinema can create the most realistic illusion with which theatre can never compete. And theatre should not try to compete because its strength lies not in its naturalism, but in its quality of 'here and now'. The spectator and performer must interact to make it theatre. So the need for an alternative theatre is there."

There is one point, which Sircar would like to reiterate. He is often hailed as the propounder of experimental theatre, a juggler trying out newer and bolder forms. "Theatre for me is a tool of communication. The content is important not the form. I believe theatre is a weapon and I have no interest in mere experimentation of form. But in order to communicate with the spectator, we must discover the form best suited for our message. So the necessity of experimentation."

Sircar is a civil engineer by profession who came into contact with theatre in a casual way. He formed his own group Satabdi in 1967.

Howard Fast's 'Spartacus' which Sircar adapted into a play needs special mention.

It was the first spectacular success of the Third Theatre form. The play was written by Sircar, but developed almost wholly by his group through a series of rigorous workshops. For the first time, there was very little emphasis on the spoken word and a total reliance on mime, dance, song, pantomime.

There were absolutely no sets, props or costumes. Groups of spectators were made to sit in different places within the acting area to create an island effect. The spaces amidst the audience was used for acting. 'Spartacus' was also the first play to be performed in open in full daylight to a motley crowd in Surendranath (Curzon) Park, Esplanade. The play was and is till today an unqualified success.

Sircar has taken their plays to remote villages, to the tribals, Santhals, and everywhere the response was overwhelming. Then, of course, came 'Michhil', one of Sircar's most performed plays, and according to many, his best. The Hindi translated version 'Juloos' has been unbelievably successful all over the country. From 1977, Satabdi began to perform regularly in open in Surendranath Park every Saturday evening, in the villages, amidst the tribals, and developed what we can truly call an open and free theatre.

(re-printed extracts from an article in the 'Indian Telegraph', Sunday Magazine

Forthcoming Projects

BRITISH ASIAN THEATRE COMPANY :

"A Man I Never Knew" - (Woh Ajnabi)
Directed by Raj Patel
Originally devised by Belgrade T.I.E.
Continues until the end of May

For details of venues contact:
Atia Shah Tel 01-986 4470

TARA ARTS GROUP

Badal Sircar, founder of the THIRD THEATRE in India, will conduct a series of theatre workshops:
April 29th - May 5th, 7 - 10pm.

'Anklets of Fire' Adaptation of 1st century Tamil play by Ilango.
Opens at the Centre : May 22nd - 25th, 8.00pm.

Further details: Rekha Prashar, Tel.871-1458.

'Crawl' - The first production from TARA-IN-EDUCATION.
May 8th-11th, 7.30pm Cockpit Theatre
Gateforth Street, NW3.

Further details: Roomana Mahmud, Tel.871-1459.

LONDON INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF THEATRE '85.

India: Calicut University Little Theatre,
Battersea Arts Centre and Community Venues
(eg. Tara Arts Centre, The Tramshed, The Clockhouse).

Formed in 1982, CULT have pioneered an innovative form of Indian Theatre, making use of a wide range of performing traditions from the Kerala area of South East India, and working them around contemporary social issues.

IN SEARCH OF THE DARK GOD examines the highly controversial subject of religion and explores the ways in which it contributes both good and harm to Indian culture and society. Using simple resources to great effect, CULT have created a theatre of unusual vitality and beauty.

Both these theatre companies will be invited to LIFT not only to perform their latest work but also to take part in a series of workshops and discussion programmes run in conjunction with existing arts organisations, including Tar Arts, Temba Theatre Company, and Pan Project.

Both productions will appear at central London venues or mainstream fringe venues, and then continue on a tour of community-based venues in London.

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Review

The Suzuki Company of Toga

'The Trojan Women'

This renowned company, led by Tadashi Suzuki, presented their version of Euripides' 'The Trojan Women' for one week at Riverside Studios.

Over some 20 years of work, this company has perfected Suzuki's vision of theatre as, fundamentally, a physical communication. Drawing upon traditional Japanese theatrical forms of Noh and Kabuki, Suzuki's method makes for highly intense physical acting, allowing him, in a sense, to sculpt human forms on stage.

The Greek tragedy of women who were the real losers of the Trojan War - as of any war - was set in the aftermath of the Second World War in Japan. Not knowing this particular play in depth, I decided quite deliberately, not to read the synopsis that accompanied this production. Decided, in other words, to let the performance fill my lack of knowledge. At the end of an hour-and-a-quarter of the show, I admit to have been none the wiser about the story itself. So, this re-interpretation of an ancient classic passed me by. There is, I believe, too great an assumption made in the arts world that classics are known, or ought to be known, by all theatre lovers. Making such an assumption leaves producers, one feels, free to indulge in 'artistic' experiments.

What of the show itself? Suzuki claims he is striving "to restore the wholeness of the human body in the theatrical context". I saw sculptural forms on a darkened stage, visually stunning, physically audacious. Take for example the Buddhist deity, who remain standing in one pose for close on an hour, intensely concentrating on the actors before him. Or the chorus, that moved rapidly every so often, and then were acting in still-images. The sculptures of the brutality of war, of rape, of the denial of the deity...these linger in the memory. An eclectic choice of music and touches on costumes could not really be appreciated by me. To a large extent this was due to the manner in which Japanese dialogues and monologues were used; only in places was the language physically expressive enough to convey a clear mood, and therefore act as a guide to the understanding of action. Too often lengthy declamations made it extremely difficult to follow sense.

perhaps I should have read the synopsis before the show. But if Suzuki claims for his theatre a physical communication, then I can only partially agree. Upper class traditional Japanese theatre - Noh and Kabuki was the equivalent of Sanskrit court theatre - married to an intensely 'artistic' approach, which appears to be artistic for art's sake alone, can prove effective as a communication only to those who are already tuned to that vocabulary. Physical theatre, as I understand it, is the usage of physical expression as another theatrical language, able to communicate itself to any audience. I am reminded here of Habib Tanvir's 'Charan Das Chor', which certainly fits that description.

What, then is there to learn from seeing Suzuki's 'Trojan Women'? Discipline and Audacity. An acute sense of discipline, that permeates not only every aspect of the actors' armoury but also of the lighting, the design and the music. A discipline without which any production is an exercise in futility. Audacity,

it can certainly be argued, is what Asian Theatre needs in gallons. Seize upon the classics of world theatre, tear them apart and re-construct them with an Asian eye. (To avoid the pit-falls of artistic indulgences).

By the way, this company's visit was the last act of David Gothard, Artistic Director of Riverside until March, when he was ousted. Gothard has been responsible for bringing the best of Indian Theatre to this country - from the Pune Theatre Company to Habib Tanvir - as well as the excellent dance and music exponents from India that were seen in the Summer of 1982.

— Jatinder Verma

Royal Shakespeare Company

'Mother Courage'

A new version, by Hanif Kureishi, of Brecht's classic play of moral politics, was recently produced at the Barbican Centre. Brecht conceived his plays as meaningful entertainment: an entertainment that rouses the gut to laughter and pity but stimulates the mind in the bargain. That dictum, if it was ever understood by the RSC's actors and director Howard Davies, was expensively stood on its head, and, in the process, this classic was done to death.

The pointed morality in 'Mother Courage' - of bravery, of the aggrandisement of war, of courage itself - was singularly evaded by the RSC: what I ask, of the Falklands? The epic structure of 'Mother Courage' translates in director Howard Davies's hands, into merely seeing actors and stage-hands effect scene changes! Songs lose both their entertainment value and their moral point. When Elif - Mother Courage's eldest son who's been dragged into the war against her intentions - sings the song of the Woman and the Soldier, the irony of this courageous coward passes us by: where we should be made to reflect upon the brutal manner in which he seized upon his cowardice to hack angry peasants to death, we are instead treated to an indulgent Mother Courage meeting her son once again. The lack of purpose in the songs was only amplified when sometimes we saw musicians - in modern dress, behind their fluorescent music-stands - appear through the mist, and sometimes did not see them at all. Music as a physical expression, above all, was hardly to be seen in this 3½ hour long epic - except when the cook started doing a sort of a Fiddler-on-the-Roof jig!

To add insult to injury, the British mainstream critics could only comment adversely on the levathan, unwieldy set! If they couldn't understand how this production was travesty Brecht's innovative political art, what hope for them to understand Asian Theatre.

I am not against classical theatre, but surely, when classics are revered, it is then we pay least respect to them. Brecht wrote 'Mother Courage'

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Review

Half Moon Young People's Theatre

'Video Wicked'

"Iqbal, a 15 year-old East Ender, is a Kung Fu white belt, who gets his kicks out of watching video films - until he meets Shirli...."

So states the publicity blurb for the Half Moon Young People's Theatre's latest offering, 'Video Wicked', written by Dilip Hiro, directed by Michel Frankel.

First of all, what is the role played by modern theatre? Is it merely to entertain, or to offer subjective political and social comments? Surely the two should be balanced and incorporated in all facets of theatre; for after all, pure entertainment, no matter how enjoyable, in the long term, is of little significance, and theatre consisting of nothing but political or social statements is fairly boring. Too few companies, if any, successfully tread the tightrope between the two; and with the Arts, particularly fringe theatre, suffering vastly due to cutbacks in funds, funds which will be even further reduced with the abolition of the GLC, we cannot afford to depend upon a safety net. One fall may be the last. Thus, a product, to be acceptable has to play a dual role, both to be entertaining and socially progressive.

Video Wicked?

If entertainment is the sole objective, then it mostly succeeds. It uses music, song, still projections and film which, even if at times slightly untidy, distorted or imbalanced, works quite well offering in some ways, a refreshing approach to youth theatre. But it also poses more questions about theatre. Projected stills are used to create market stalls, parks, shop fronts; but is that not the task of the set and cast? Fortunately, most of the time the cast were perfectly capable of creating the relevant environment for the situation themselves; in which case the projections became redundant. So why have them there?

However, film on a large screen - allowing the audience to witness Iqbal's taste in video, consisting of Bruce Lee flexing his muscles and beating up people, and Indian films of the soppy, 'entertaining' kind - was used effectively. At times it became somewhat distracting. It was also used to explore the fantasy world and the problematic mind of Iqbal, occasionally using images which were powerful and executed well technically; The problem however, seemed that the play itself tended to fall upon the use of these images, reducing the role played by the cast. Is it a video show or a play? Multi-media shows only work when they are balanced.

The cast struggled to inject some energy into the show, but were engaged in an uphill battle. The characters are written as stereotypes, and worse, played stereotypically. Iqbal wants to go to a party, his mother won't allow it fearing he'll drink alcohol and get up to no good. Iqbal has dreams about a white girl, Shirley. Shirley's brother, a racist, catches the two together and beats him up - although Iqbal is a white belt in kung-fu - and then threatens to beat her up. Iqbal vows vengeance, but only dreams of victory and the spoils.

Video Wicked is full of humour. It has the potential to make an audience laugh, but it is plagued by problems with the script and directing. The cast appear to be uncomfortable with their characters, especially Iqbal's mother, whose accent fluctuated and I had difficulty accepting her as an Asian mother.

As for any social relevance, it seemed to be lagging behind by several years. It formed impressions of adults, both Asian and white, being oblivious and incapable of understanding the youth of today and the 'culture clash'. They cling to their idiosyncratic old ways and refuse to communicate or understand, but carry on shouting, abusing and beating on those in their own way. Iqbal was a naive, sly intolerable wally who's only ambitions were to kiss Shirley and emulate Bruce Lee. "Films are based on reality", he says. Dharendra, as Iqbal, often escapes the shackles set by the director and script and shines through as an actor, if not as Iqbal.

For a play that is attempting to entertain, it certainly displays a lot of negative images. It makes flippant comments about several things but fails to deal with anything significant in depth. It tries to promote, dare I say it, 'Multi-Racism'; but if issues are not going to be tackled properly, then half-hearted, undeveloped attempts will be more destructive than not tackling them at all. (It also plays into the hands of the white media, who lap this up believing it to be a courageous step forward for 'Multi-Racism').

The show's excuse may be that it is designed for and plays to the youth. But they cannot afford to underestimate the intelligence or the youth, nor to display negative images. If companies wish to achieve both entertainment and 'social awareness', then both need to be tackled with equal respect, and be aware of the consequences if this is not done.

Half Moon Young Peoples Theatre is composed of talented actors, particularly Dharendra, and their talent, as well as considerable sums of money, will be wasted if their potential is not utilised in a more practical, beneficial manner. As one of the few companies able to reach the youth, it must seriously weigh up its responsibilities.

It's all very well saying, 'lets do a multi-racial play', but simply incorporating Asian characters and Asian leads is not enough. Asian directors and young writers need to be encouraged to develop their own styles and perspectives, producing work which is not just for the liberal white media.

Balbeer Bahi

Contd from previous page

years ago: the pace of world has changed immeasurably since then. The classic stature of the play lies in the spirit of its moral politics, not in the adherence to every dot and comma of the original text. I, therefore, stand even more surprised to see that Hanif Kureishi, who wrote this "version" from a literal translation by Sue Davis could do no more than substitute contemporary four-letter slang for whatever the German equivalent 40 years ago was. I cannot see how such productions of classics can find a new audience except amongst either those who feel obliged - for whatever reason - to sit through a performance or those who are enamoured with museum culture for its own sake.

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What do you think?

PLAYING OUT

" Playwright Hanif Kureishi has called on the GLC to abandon its black writers competition "so as not to embarrass us all further ". In a letter, a copy of which has been sent to the Diary, he spurns an invitation to judge the play section, accusing the council of "literary apartheid". Kureishi, a British-born Pakistani whose plays about the Asian community have won great acclaim at the Royal Court and Riverside Studios, tells Prabhu Gupta, organizer of the contest; "There are only good writers and bad writers. The idea of judging only black writers seems unnatural and unfair. Any decent black writer would want to win on merit. He or she wouldn't want to be awarded some special prize given because of racial origins".

Where are Asian writers ?

To date there has not been a single Asian playscript in the GLC competition.

P.S. Channel 4 is launching the second script competition to new writers for television - Debut 2.

Contact : 637-8251/439-8007

or write to Debut 2,

PO Box 2AE

W1A 2AE.

ASIAN THEATRE FORUM

At the last meeting, on 10th March 1985, several resolutions were adopted, following Parminder Vir's talk.

1. The Asian Theatre Forum will meet regularly, every six weeks on a Sunday, at the TARA ARTS CENTRE, from 2 - 5pm. Next meeting: Sunday 21 April.
2. Bearing in mind the extremely gloomy funding picture in 1986/87, it was felt imperative that the Forum develop a strategy for funding of Asian Theatre.
3. This document be used as the basis for concerted representations to the Arts Council, GLAA and Local Authorities.
4. Representatives selected by the Forum to meet with relevant officers in the Arts Council and other funding bodies.
5. A wide range of problems with funding bodies as well as our needs were discussed. These ranged from Venues to Residencies to Resource facilities.
6. It was decided to use the next meeting of the Forum to draw up a coherent strategy that all Asian Theatre companies can adhere to in principle.