

& NEWS

Issue 2

December 1984



ASIAN THEATRE NEWSLETTER

Parminder Vir OBE BLACK & ETHNIC ARTS ARCHIVE
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& NEWS

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Introduction

This second issue of the News-Letter comes out at a time when the future of Asian Theatre in Britain hangs very much in the balance. The Government's proposals for abolition of the GLC and the Metropolitan County Councils, coupled with the Arts Council's strategy for "weeding" the garden of artistic activity in Britain, is bringing a very great pressure upon Asian Theatre - which in many ways is still in its infancy; certainly as far as funders are concerned.

Added to these large-scale pressures, we are also witnessing a mushrooming of "multi-racial" companies: in some cases, eg. the Half Moon, this is a relatively recent phase, in others, we see the actual birth of such companies.

Such activity impels us all to ask ourselves questions about our theatrical practices, and to ensure that funding bodies as well as audiences are clearly aware of the particular angle and importance of our practices. Towards this end, we have invited Parminder Vir, to talk about "What Asian Theatre after the abolition of the GLC?" This address will be presented to the next meeting of Asian Theatre activists: on Saturday 23 February, at the TARA ARTS CENTRE.

The current issue carries reviews of some recent "multi-racial" plays, as well as a Guest Column by Rakesh Bhanot - who suggests a preliminary critique of Asian Theatre.

Finally, may I repeat once again that you do respond either to articles in the News-Letter or with information on your activity.

Jatinder Verma.

Please send enquiries and contributions to:
TARA ARTS CENTRE
356 Garratt Lane
Earlsfield
London S.W 18 4ES
Tel. 01-871-1458/9/0

GUEST COLUMN

Some Thoughts on Asian Theatre - Rakesh Bhanot

In the development of Asian(Black) Theatre there is a need for "a body of constructive and consistent criticism" (Fay Rodrigues) and according to Farrukh Dhondy "It is the function of criticism to turn individual works of art into a body of literature." He goes on to say that "Black Drama in Britain will remain an occasional set of plays until the critics eye and viewpoint give them, through the process of praise and slugging off, the coherence of a phenomenon." The artefacts are there in various forms and guises, as well as the critics. What is needed is more dialogue.

Asian Theatre groups deal with all sorts of themes and topics - some of them seem to have a strong political commitment, others look back to our "roots"; some perform only in English, others use Asian languages etc. Hence, there is a problem with what we mean by Asian Theatre, but this should not militate against serious discussion of the subject - a necessary discussion without which the efforts of the numerous groups of Asian Theatre activists are likely to become/remain peripheral. All of us, writers, actors, administrators, critics, interested parties, have a role to play in ensuring that these efforts are not wasted, that they are channelled into some sort of cohesive whole.

There has already been much discussion about the state of Asian Theatre and I am not sure what I can add to comments I have made elsewhere (ARTRAGE 1984). However, it is said that the people, more often than not, need reminding rather than instruction and I would like to expand on one or two points made in my article.

In talking to a number of Asian actors, actresses, writers and other people involved with Asian theatre, both professional and amateur, I get the feeling that there is at present a sense of excitement amongst Asian Theatre activists. This may have something to do with the fact that there has been a great upsurge in funding for Asian Arts activity, especially in London, or that we have seen much more Asian Drama on television or that a new group, the Asian Theatre Cooperative (ATC) is about to produce its first play. However, in spite of this there are a number of issues (problems?) which need to be tackled if we want to avoid dissipating the energy and exuberance which is with us at the moment. These problems are concerned with the way we portray ourselves on the stage and the way we run our organisations. Of course, there are problems about funding and sponsorship and these will be touched upon later.

"...our experiences...are not limited to anger and protest."

The issue of what we write about, the subject matter of the plays, is important because if we keep writing protest plays about Asians being the victims of racism, about the problems of adjusting to a hostile society etc., we will end up perpetuating the very stereotypes that we are trying to eradicate. Yes we do live in a racist society, yes artists have a responsibility to their communities, yes (great) art can come out of anger and protest but our experiences in this country are not limited to anger and protest. True, we need drama which reflects social injustices but we shouldn't confine ourselves to such a narrow focus.

Drama cannot exist in a vacuum and "artists need to be nurtured by a receptive and critical audience if their work is to mature." (Akua Rugg, Race Today).

There is a strong theatrical tradition in all parts of the sub-continent but whether we can say the same of the various Asian communities in this country is debatable. Part of the problem is to do with language. Earlier this year I attended the Punjabi Conference which was held in Coventry. I was amazed that a group of people who had come together to promote, amongst other things, the Punjabi language and culture should conduct its business almost entirely in English. It was even more amazing to learn that many of the young people there didn't understand much Punjabi! I have a suspicion that this situation is similar in other Asian communities. Plays which make extensive use of Hindustani are likely to be seen as (to quote what Farrukh Dhondy said in a different context) 'much urdu about nothing'! I am not sure what the solution is when it comes to filling the theatres or community halls or wherever Asian theatre groups perform. No doubt some research into what audiences want would be useful. Audiences may not always necessarily want to see serious drama. They may want to escape from the problems which confront them daily; they may want to be entertained. This is not to suggest that serious drama cannot be entertaining. Hopefully, those who write for the stage or television will appreciate the need to deal with the whole of our experience in this country and not to concentrate on the problem side.

"There are many gods in India and even more gurus."

The question of how Asian Theatre groups are run is important and worth considering. In an article about the future for Britain's Black Theatre, Farrukh Dhondy criticised the black artistic movement for failing to evolve democratic, accountable political structures from within itself. "Too often the company which staged the plays was the brainchild of a single individual and the assembled players treated as that individual's puppets. Puppet shows seldom pay their puppets." (F. Dhondy, RACE TODAY). There is some truth in this and I have the impression that some Asian Theatre groups suffer from what I call the Guru-syndrome. There are many gods in India and even more gurus. Perhaps the idea of guru-worship is so deeply ingrained in the minds of many people that they cannot operate without it.

Another feature of Asian Theatre groups is that "they tend to be male dominated" (a young Asian actress). Sexism is just as obnoxious as racism and perhaps even more rampant in Asian society than in European countries. Those who like to write plays centred around problems may like to consider how sexism operates both within our own communities and within the theatre groups themselves.

Theatre groups cannot exist without audiences and critical appraisal and it goes without saying that they are doomed to failure without adequate funding. This problem has become more acute with the attitude which the Arts Council has adopted towards non-western arts. It has always been a mystery to me why Asian businessmen and Asians in general are happy to contribute huge quantities of money to the building of Temples, Mosques etc. and hosting Gurus(!) from India, but shy away from sponsoring

Forthcoming Projects

ASIAN CO-OPERATIVE THEATRE (A.C.T.)

Workshops - Riverside Studio

9.12.84 'Movement' - led by Maya Rao
16.12.84 'Voice and the Actor' -
led by Cecily Berry

ACT's first production will be 'Hansa of the Hamlets' by Farrukh Dhondy which will be presented as part of GLC's Black Theatre Season.

Further Information : Tel. 01-552 2248

BRITISH ASIAN THEATRE COMPANY :

"A Man I Never Knew" - (Woh Ajnabi)
Directed by Raj Patel.
Originally devised by Belgrade T.I.E.

14 - 16 Dec. '84 Pentameters Theatre
7.30pm Three Horsehoes Heath Street
NW 3

19 - 22 Dec. '84 Oval House Theatre
7.30pm 52 Kennington Oval
SE 11

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

HOUNSLOW ARTS CO-OPERATIVE

Touring 'One nation under a Groove' Jan./Feb. '85

For details of venues, contact : 01-572 8957
or H.A.C. c/o Community Rooms
Town Hall, Treaty Road
Hounslow, Middlesex.

TARA ARTS GROUP

"Miti ki Gadi" - Adapted from the 8th Century
play by Shudraka.

Directed by Jatinder Verma.

11 - 14 Dec. '84 Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan
7.45pm 4A Castletown Road
West Kensington W 14

9 - 13 Jan. '85 Oval House Theatre
52 Kennington Oval
SE 11

For details of other venues, contact:
Rekha Prashar Tel. 01-871 1458

NEW ART FORUM FOR WEST LONDON

Over 70 people attended the inaugural meeting of the West London South Asian Arts Forum at Lancaster Hall, Southall, recently. The forum was initiated by Nina Gulati (Ethnic Arts Officer, Hounslow), Devdan Sen (GLAA-The South Asian Music Project), and Kirpal Marwaha (Co-ordinator, Southall Arts), to create a dialogue between the people working in the field of Asian Art. It is hoped that the forum will eventually become representative of South Asian Arts throughout the Greater London area.

ASIAN WOMEN WRITERS WORKSHOP.

The Asian Women's Writing Workshop first started meeting early in September at A Women's Place. The impetus for establishing such a workshop came from a feeling that unless Asian women who are interested in writing started to meet each other and recognize each other as writers that it would be a long time, if ever, before we saw literature written by Asian women.

Why is it important to have writing from Asian women you may well be asking? Why do women need special treatment? There are Asian writers who have made it on their own, why not women?

Why indeed!

If we accept that we need literature and the various functions that it serves within society then we should acknowledge that this literature should be produced by both sexes and by people from different classes so as to represent the views of those different sections in the imaginative form. To take this further and to apply it to our lives in Britain: in this country we are a society being pushed into invisibility, into silence, the resulting impact of which is greater on women than men. Literature breaks this silence, gives visibility: connects us to each other. In order for this to be wholly effective we need, in addition to male writers, Asian women writers too.

The workshop aims to encourage women to start writing, whatever their field of interest, i.e. whether poetry, short stories, drama etc.

For those who have never tried writing they can get suggestions on how to start and develop a piece of work. The workshop can look at different ways in which poems or short stories are constructed and encourage incorporation of these ideas as well as experimentation. Women who have done some writing can bring it along with them and get a feedback; they'll find out which parts need more work and they'll get a discussion on the ideas contained within the piece.

Discussions have so far considered the different ways in which Asian women see each other; how to write children as characters; the fear of violence all women live with; our relationship with our mothers and the lives these older women have led, how we are affected by racism in this society. Most of these have been generated by work brought to the workshop. It is hoped to produce an anthology of writing from the workshop, eventually.

The workshop is open to all Asian women, whether they want help in starting to write or whether they write already, and to women who write in languages other than English.

Just come along on Thursday evenings, 6.30 - 9.00pm at :

A Woman's Place
Victoria Embankment
London, WC2 (right next to Embankment tube station).

(Contact: Ravi Randhawa).

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REVIEW

— Hardial Rai looks at
Half Moon's 'Raj'

— TARA reflect on Welsh
experience.

TARA - TALIESIN

For three weeks in September TARA ARTS and TALIESIN THEATRE from Wales engaged in a unique workshop collaboration, in London and in Cardiff.

The two companies came together to explore the contrasting mythic traditions of ancient India and Celtic Wales. Given the vast scope of such an enterprise, it was decided quite early on to focus on two basic sources: The Mahabharata and The Mabinogion; and to seek to develop a unique "third" story, that would confine elements from both traditions, as well as the experiences of the participants.

The first two weeks were spent in London, in the Commonwealth Institute; the last three days of which were open to the public, to participate in and contribute to the direction of the explorations already made by the two companies. In the final week, a presentation arising from this collaboration was offered to the public in Cardiff's Chapter Arts Centre. The presentation developed out of the workshops in London was neither formally scripted nor directed by any single individual; and changed from day to day.

The experience of working with another company, with an entirely different sense of purpose to its work; has been invaluable for Tara, and we would wish for more such collaborative enterprises. Critics we all need in theatre, especially in Asian Theatre; but there is no equivalent of the self-criticism, the relook at oneself, that comes from having to engage in a specific piece of work with another, quite different organisation. Long-standing assumptions about the work, about audiences etc., are challenged, and one learns either new ways of fighting for them or throws them overboard; the approach to work is tested; the politics of the work are tested - resulting again in either a sharpening or a realization of one's vagueness. Most importantly, one realizes - as certainly Tara Arts have - what contribution, in formal content and political terms, Asian Theatre is making to the theatre scene at large. If Asian Theatre is ever to satisfactorily seek to answer the question, what is "Asian" about Asian Theatre - as it must do if it seeks to survive under that label - then collaborative projects with other companies must be engaged in, as much as producing our own works, and developing a critical tradition.

A detailed report on this project, as well as a video, are available. For further information contact: Rekha Prashar at TARA ARTS CENTRE.

Half Moon Young People's Theatre

RAJ

It seems that the 'Raj revival' (or the guilt conscience of the British middle classes of their colonial past) has not only come to stay with the other pet subjects of the British Drama writing wallahs, but has now also entered the classroom!

From 'Doolaly Days' to the 'Jewel in the Crown', the revival has merely compounded a glorified nostalgia and a retrogression of racism as belonging to the past. No attempt has been made to transcend onto the playground or the streets of Britain today.

So what, then, is the purpose of a T.I.E. production?

If it is to add a perspective of the British Empire absent in the History textbooks, then the Half-Moon's Young People's Theatre's recent production of 'The Raj' falls flat of its objective. Originally devised by the Leeds TIE, the play's content is no more than a story of divided loyalties.

Nandita, a young Indian girl, brought up in the 'servile environment' of the cantonment of the British Army, moves after marriage to Amritsar. But a quick widowhood forces her to find employment as a nanny in a household where her Uncle Ganesh is the head servant. This is the time of 'Quit India' movement. Violent scenes outside create unease for the servants at home, and they are quick to assume the role of apologists for the nation. Nandita's cousin returns home as a deserter from his regiment who, on British orders, have been massacring Indian villagers near Burma. He is kept in hiding by Nandita for some months until she finally confesses to her mistress in the hope that her loyalty will be rewarded by leniency towards her cousin. The cousin is executed, her uncle is sent to prison for harbouring a deserter and she - well her confession is seen as her loyalty to the Empire and she is allowed to continue in her employment. But Nandita has found her conscience; she not only quits but also refuses to take a farewell present from her mistress.

TIE's greatest profit is its art of story-telling in keeping with the school audience, primary and secondary alike. The form and the imagery become the most important element of the production. The devisors of 'The Raj' seem to have relinquished this responsibility and present something which is not only crude and insensitive but which, to an extent, reinforces racist images. Asian characters are presented in subservient roles. Few human qualities are bestowed upon them. In one scene, the Sahib's pet dog is killed by Indians during the clashes of 'Quit India', an image, which by its nature, plays unfairly on the emotions of the school children and invites a judgement as to who the 'baddies' and 'goodies' are. On the set, the presence of a Union Jack, hung above all else, perhaps reflects an underlying statement of the play.

It is to Half Moon's credit, however, that the play was devised from improvisations in which the whole company participated. It is a pity that the Asian members of the company were unable to direct the educative element of the play away from the indulgent theme of divided loyalties to the fundamental question of what the British were doing in India in the first place.

REVIEW

MULTI-CULTURALISM or ANTI-RACISM ?

JATINDER VERMA assesses the NIFTIE forum

The Newham International Festival of Theatre-in-Education took place between 14th - 20th October. A variety of T.I.E. Companies had presentations of their work, including the Half Moon Young People's Theatre, Carib Theatre and Common Lore.

Mid-week an open forum was also arranged, along the theme of "T.I.E in a multi-cultural environment." Main contributors to the forum were Anton Phillips, from Carib T.I.E. Company, Jenny Caan from Theatre Centre, Seiso Serulta, Multi-Cultural Advisor of Northampton, and Jatinder Verma, from Tara Arts Group. The forum was chaired by Brian Heap, from the Jamaica School of Drama.

By not having a formal structure, the forum suffered from the generalities that are all too common in such discussions. Questions of why should T.I.E. concern itself with multi-culturalism in the first place: the limitation of T.I.E. in multi-cultural curricula; and therefore the specific strengths of T.I.E. vis-a-vis multi-culturalism, remained ill-defined. A brief resume of comments made during the forum may be interesting, if only to suggest what kind of questions need to be formulated:

"As a multi-racial company, the (Theatre Centre) company intends to work in an anti-racist way in its approach."
-Jenny Caan; Theatre Centre.

"Multi-culturalism in education and 'anti-racism' do not seem to me to be a million miles apart."
-Anton Phillips; Carib TIE Co.
Anton saw Carib as offering "media models".

"It seems to me multi-culturalism must be about finding universals."
-Brian Heap, Jamaica School of Drama.

"The real issues are equality - and equality is justice ... Drama seems to be able to talk of things a teacher can't do in a normal lesson."
-Seiso Serulta.

"Kids naturally operate multi-racial casting when they engage in improvisations."
-Sean Fiddes, Festival Organiser.

One of the more interesting contributions during the forum was that 'multi-culturalism' in a theatrical context must concern itself with tackling the very forms of theatre. So that, for example, a multi-culturalism that manifests itself in a multi-racial casting policy and a multi-racial content, without questioning the structural forms of existing theatre in Britain - dominated by a highly naturalistic tradition - is bound to make only a peripheral impact. An Asian actor playing King Lear, therefore, will only be perceived as an 'Asian' playing a classical role - which could at worst be seen as tokenism, or at best, a liberal move forward. But while the latter may be the view of producers of the show and the actors involved, this will not be true of the audiences' perceptions of the show since we will 'pick-out' the Asian actor. To gain acceptance of the show on its terms, therefore, producers have to concern themselves with challenging the formal limitations of theatre.

An analogy is offered by some of the experiments in theatre in India. For very long, theatre in the cities has been dominated by Western imports - ranging from Shakespeare to Agatha Christie. So that a production of, say, *Macbeth*, is enjoyed by the 'educated classes', familiar with Shakespeare and seeking to hear the text in the theatre that they had to learn by heart in order to pass their Matric. exams. For the vast majority of Indians - in small towns, in villages, where they haven't had the privilege of such 'civilized' literature - the 'beauty' of *Macbeth* is 'khichdi' at best! However an experiment conducted in the 70's, where *Macbeth* was produced using the conventions of a South Indian folk style, *Yakshagana*, immediately made the production more broadly accessible - using as it did songs, dance, music, masks, an open stage and minimum props. And, perhaps most importantly of all, *Macbeth* itself had had to change itself to fit the style. Thus, 'tradition' - the 'West', in this case - had been reinvigorated, and had become uniquely 'Indian'.

"Of what contemporary British production can one claim that it is/was uniquely 'multi-cultural'?"

Of what contemporary British production can one claim that it is/was uniquely 'multi-cultural'? That, I would argue, is ultimately the challenge facing T.I.E. in a multi-cultural context, on an artistic level. Politically, T.I.E. has to align itself unequivocally with anti-racist forces within educational circles: and thus see its role as helping teachers and other educationalists develop a thorough-going anti-racist approach to education: from curricula to staff to extra-curricular activity, such as sports and plays. Looked at from this point of view, T.I.E. practitioners become no more than stimuli for the creative explorations and political battles of teachers and students.

So, T.I.E. companies' first question to schools who seek to invite them in to promote 'multi-culturalism', should be, what steps are you taking to promote anti-racism in your school?

Further details of the festival are available from:

Shea Fiddes
Monega Drama Centre
Monega Road
London E.12
Tel: 01-472 0717.

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Meetings

'Sandesh' fire

In Southall on 24th June, fire broke out at the offices of 'Sandesh', a small Punjabi newspaper with a circulation of about 2,000. It was apparently started by a petrol bomb device. Complicating the tragedy, a Sikh employee who had recently arrived from India, died from horrific burns.

The Police in Southall quite rightly started investigating into the incident on a charge of manslaughter and arson. However, the method of this inquiry is of great concern to Asians and other Civil Rights Groups.

The background to this fire was assumed to be political. Only three weeks prior to this, the Punjab crises - the shooting of Sikh activists and the storming of the Golden Temple - had outraged Sikhs all over the world. 'Sandesh', apparently, was the only Punjabi newspaper to support the Indian Government's view of the situation, and this had upset a number of Sikhs. This seems to have been sufficient to convince the Police that the fire had been motivated by Sikh resentment and the investigations that followed blatantly infringed upon basic liberties and codes of decency. A number of orthodox, respectable Sikhs were taken in for questioning without any caution to their rights. Pretexts of helping Police with inquiries for minor incidences, such as laceration to tyres, were used. Individuals were then held and interrogated about the fire for up to 46 and 72 hours. In one case, a writ of Habeas Corpus had to be sent to release the individual from custody. In another a whole family was taken in. Religious sentiments were abused. In one case, the Police searched a house without a search warrant and violated all the religious customs of the house despite the pleas of the occupants. At least 25 people were taken in from time to time, none were charged.

During all this time, nine of the Asian institutions approached came to the aid of these victims. The supposed community leaders of Southall turned a blind eye; in the absence of any Asian protest, the Police were, no doubt able to exercise a freer hand.

The incident poses a number of important questions for the Asian community in Britain. Clearly, the community is linguistically and religiously diverse and on occasions matters will arise which will be of greater significance to one section of the community than another. But if the abuse of civil liberties of any one section is allowed to pass unchecked by the rest, then the whole of the Asian community will lay itself open to exploitation and will find itself weaker. The policy of divide and rule can still be very effectively wielded.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of Sikh reactions in Britain to political developments in India, the Asian community as a whole cannot absolve itself of the responsibility to defend the basic rights and liberties of a group when it is under attack from the institutions in Britain. In this case it failed to do so and as a result, the Sikhs have been forced to start a campaign on their own.

We thank Asian News and Views for giving us the opportunity to highlight this important issue.

Other bodies showing concern please write to;

Sikh Legal Defence Campaign
c/o Southall Rights
Uxbridge Rd., Southall, Middx.

Asian Theatre Meeting

The second meeting of Asian Theatre activists is to be held on :

Saturday, 23 February 1985, 2.00pm.

"What Asian Theatre after the abolition of the GLC ?"

Invited speaker : Parminder Vir - GLC

(Ethnic Minorities Arts Adviser.)

TARA ARTS CENTRE
356 Garratt Lane
Earlsfield S.W.18.

GLAA - Members Meetings.

Greater London Arts Ordinary Members Forum has organised six sub-regional meetings in order to gather views from the membership on the strategies and proposals included in 'More Than Meets The Eye'. These views will inform the Ordinary Members Forum's own subsequent debate.

Details of meetings from :
Greater London Arts
25/31 Tavistock Place
London, WC1H 9SF.

...STOP..PRESS.....

BUCHI EMECHETA...will talk about her writing to the Asian Women Writers Workshop on 17 January 1985.

For further details, contact: Ravi Randhawa
c/o A Woman's Place
Hungerford House
Victoria Embankment
London WC2.

Some Thoughts on Asian Theatre

contd. from page 1

artistic ventures. It would be wrong if Asian Theatre groups had to rely entirely on funding from charitable Asians but the fact remains that they have a role to play. Without proper funding many of the efforts of Asian Theatre groups are likely to remain amateurish.

There are problems, not all of them are insurmountable especially if the efforts of individual groups are consolidated. I am not arguing for one single Asian Theatre group. There ought to be many more groups but there is a need, as I said at the beginning, for more dialogue and discussion. Critics should have the courage to say openly and honestly what they feel and actors and writers should have the integrity to listen and take note of critical comment, whether it is "praise" or whether it is a "slagging off". I fear that if some of the problems I have outlined in this paper are not dealt with, it may be more of the latter.

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Added to these large-scale pressures, we are also witnessing a mushrooming of "multi-racial" companies: in some cases, eg. the Half Moon, this is a relatively recent phase, in others, we see the actual birth of such companies.

Such activity impels us all to ask ourselves questions about our theatrical practices, and to ensure that funding bodies as well as audiences are clearly aware of the particular angle and importance of our practices. Towards this end, we have invited Parminder Vir, to talk about "What Asian Theatre after the abolition of the GLC?" This address will be presented to the next meeting of Asian Theatre activists: on Saturday 23 February, at the TARA ARTS CENTRE.

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Jatinder Verma.

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