

the Maltesers I buy she eats,
and drinks my fiery Kia-Ora.
My heart heaves a sigh
As they pull down where we saw *El Cid*
And *Blue Hawaii*.
But that was when I was a kid,
Wanting to be Paul or Ringo,
And the Gaumont and the Regal
Already ran Bingo,
And it was illegal
To see women being completely bare.
Now there is a frost in the air,
So it is cold, cold, cold.
Besides which, I am now getting pretty old.

WILL BELLENGER

Hello Snowman,
standing in the cold.
How's your heart this morning?
If I may make so bold.

My toes like yours are freezing.
So is my heart.
Alike, till the weather changes, Snowman,
then we must part.

You will soak away in the garden,
Snowman, I dare say;
but then much the same will happen to me,
I suppose, one day.

RALPH ROCHESTER

In Memorium

You would have been fifty, Elvis.
Tempus fugit. They called you *The Pelvis*
And belittled your acting,
But you have a great voice
And as for your films
You had very little choice.
When I see Priscilla
Appearing in *Dallas*,
I wish you were still a
Living being instead of an echo
On my stereo.

MARGARET ROGERS

Small green pound
Lying crumpled in my purse,
You're really quite disgusting,
Though the new pound coin seems worse.
As you droop, limp and dirty from the tips of my
fingers
Though pride has all gone, affection still lingers.
You're going green pound,
Though loud we may holler.
How soon will it be that your name's changed to
dollar?

KATIE MALLETT

The Third World War
Nearly started today,
When a Soviet Missile
went astray.
Fortunately, it did not get out of hand,
It crashed in Finland.
If its trajectory had not curled,
It could have been Fin World.

R. J. PICKLES

I think there's something melancholy
In a dumped supermarket trolley.
I saw one last week vandals had
Pushed in a hedge. It is quite mad.

Lord Sainsbury must lose quite a bit.
If I were him, I'd have a fit.
Now policemen with the rise in crime
For rustled trolleys have no time.

But weeds will rise and trolleys hide.
Some bird with nous will nest inside.
Maybe — who knows? — it is more jolly
To be a wild recycled trolley.

GEORGE MOOR

New Statesman 1 February 1985

Naseem Khan ACTing



ASIAN THEATRE has been a bit of a spectre over the years. Now here, now there; now you see it, now you don't. Around ten years ago the BBC had problems finding enough Asian actors for their television Hindi soap opera *Parosi*. And back in 1970, when I visited a youth drama group in Southall, things were even less promising. The group was among the first of its kind and, for all its successes, fraught with problems — parental misgivings, clashes of loyalty, a total failure to enlist girls (whose marriageability would have been harmed by such a dubious activity). It will take a long time, said people sagely, for an Asian theatre movement to develop in Britain.

The opening in the West End this week of the Asian Co-operative Theatre, with a play in English about life in Britain, proves that they were wrong. But, significant as it is, it would be a mistake to regard ACT's opening as a lonely sign of triumphant maturity. The Asian theatre movement has in fact been bubbling and simmering away all over the country in the past ten years or so. The only trouble is that, being locally based, it has all too often been invisible. And, being often not in English, it has been inaudible to many too.

The scope of the Asian language theatre has rarely been acknowledged. The alternative Festival of India (with which I worked) had no problems in providing different language productions from local groups for every day of its theatre week — Gujarati, Hindi/Urdu, Punjabi, Malayalam, Bengali, Tamil, English. It remains, however, the submerged section of the Asian theatre iceberg — energetic (within its own limits), well attended, but confined. An unknown section of British amateur theatre, and one that is unlikely to figure, for instance, in the deliberations next week of the first conference of the Central Council for Amateur Theatre.

On the other hand, would language theatre groups welcome overtures from CCAT and similar bodies? The work that I have seen has had its sights firmly on 'back home' — from Calcutta to Bombay — on issues of caste and community, using devices and characters like comic servants that owe nothing of their existence to Spitalfields, say, or Tooting Bec. Given such a fierce denial of being in Britain, the independence of that early Southall drama group, under the direction of Harbhajan Viridi, is even more striking, with their Hindi versions of Beckett and Pinter and prizes at local drama festivals.

Beckett, Pinter — some might say — can that be Asian theatre? Viridi has had his successors: a recent production of Chekhov in Urdu, for instance; a Hindi version of *Dial M for Murder*; an Asian cast performing *Hedda Gabler* in

English. It all brings back the arguments that have run through the more visible world of black theatre. What is it? Who is it for? Where should it be performed? 'I don't think Asian performers on stage, or Asians writing, constitutes Asian theatre,' said Jatinder Verma of the Tara Arts Group firmly.

Or should it be issue-based (a dangerous idea since it assumes that Asians can be defined only in terms of racism)? The new ACT gives itself a flexible brief: 'the aim of generating new plays from the Asian community with a content that is contemporary and relevant to Asians in Britain today'. Tara Arts, our best known community-based group, would go further in defining areas. Beginning in 1976 in response to the stabbing of Gurdip Singh Chaggar and the total lack of a young Asian radical voice, their early work was documentary-style agitprop, popular with English radicals but low on Asian audiences. That, says Verma resolutely, need not be an index of 'lack of Asianness', but they have, nevertheless, shifted ground, feeling in addition the hot breath of the Hindi film — gorgeous, song-girt and hugely popular — on their necks. Their latest production of an Indian folk tale took them further on a new path. 'Most Asian theatre focuses on a specific content, the Asian Experience. But the current dominant forms are white. Form and content together is the political exploration that is necessary.'

The language theatre movement may be able to consider solely community audiences, but Tara wants more ('It should be valid for all'). So does the British Asian Theatre. 'The audience has to be Asian,' says Raj Patel firmly. But they expect mixed audiences at the colleges, schools and community centres to which they've taken their popular *The Man I Never Knew* over the past two months. Practicality as well as theory dictates that professional theatre groups look beyond the Asian community. An unalloyed experience of inadequate venues, low funding and dearth of critical attention drains the spirit, which is why both BAT and Tara are keen to build up a mainstream, small-scale touring network.

And this is, of course, where the ACT comes in. 'We are the first really professional Asian theatre,' says H.O. Nazareth proudly, 'not a community touring group.' They want to gain 'the critical attention of the mainstream' by its own professional standards. 'The idea that we should focus on Asian audiences is completely out.'

With Farrukh Dhondy as author of their first play and the platform of the GLC's Black Theatre Season, there is no doubt that they will get both the attention and the prestige they seek. There is no doubt either that the arrival of ACT is welcome. 'In the past,' said the GLC's Parminder Viri, 'Asian theatre has gone from one extreme to the other, either introverted or mimicking the West.' ACT is making a definite bid to step out of the ghetto — geographically, emotionally and financially. But what it should not do is to confirm the belief that something in the West End is necessarily better, more important, more worthwhile than less visible work. For if the ACT were to appear to condone this First Class/Second Class division, it would impoverish the very field from which it sprang.

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