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"THERE is a world outside the green room." These words by Walter Eysselinck, professor of theatre in the US, now in Cairo, could sum up one view ofthe East West Theatre Encounter, held in Bombay over the last nine days, sponsored by Max Mueller Bhavan and the NCPA and co-sponsored by the Alliance Francaise, British Council, House of Soviet Culture, ICCR, Sangeet Natak Akademi and USIS.

About 25 theatre personalities from the East and West performed and discussed theatre at the NCPA and Prithvi. From India, those who participated were PL Deshpande, BV Karanth, Girish Karnad, Satish Alekar, Alyque Padamsee, KN Panikkar, Jabbar Patel, MK Raina, Habib Tanvir, Ratan Thiyam, and Alaknanda Samarth.

The speakers raised issues closest to themselves, and what came through from the Indian speakers were two main themes: the struggle for survival faced by serious theatre workers, and two, the search for contemporary forms and where the use of "folk" or traditional forms stood in this search. Girish Karnad admitted in his paper that he hasn't written a play for long because he cannot think of what form it should take — he didn't want to repeat the folk form of *Hayavadan* or do another historical like *Tughlaq*. In an interview he elaborated, "If you have a living theatre, a set of actors who're waiting for you to write a play, it's different. If you're writing in Bombay, for example, it's no use writing a play meant for an arena kind of stage. If you know what you're writing for, and you have a definite audience in mind, you can write. But where there's no theatre, you can only conceptualise, and then your play can have any number of characters, from three to 300. *I'm writing in isolation.*

"The Western participants have a very defined universe. Our cry of 'Where are the playwrights' — does it even make sense to them? They have a basic *mainstream theatre; even if they don't belong to it, they can assume the whole tradition.* We don't have that, except in Maharashtra and Bengal. For many of us it's a question of creating a theatre."

At the NCPA: above, Karnad, MK Raina

Ratan Thiyam from Manipur, whose group lives and works on a farm there, said almost the same thing. "For the West, the main issue is finding a new idiom of expression. In India, it is how to keep your organisation alive. We have talent, energy and intellectual approach which could match the best in the world, but this is what keeps us back.

"In the West, a person doing work in theatre gets known by his own name. Like Eugenio Barba's theatre. Here, whoever is doing original work, his theatre is first known as Indian theatre. This is partly because they have their own vision of theatre and they can propagate it because their economic situation helps them to do so. I too have my own vision, but if I had the facilities, I could develop it. If this problem of survival wasn't there, Indian theatre would take a leap of five to six years." In Thiyam's group, four persons stay by rotation in the repertory complex for three months, while the others tour and perform.

The question of traditional forms and modern theatre was raised by MK Raina in a rather complex fashion, linking the issue both to the role of an artist in society as well as his relationship with those to whom the form belongs. The theatre worker who picks up a folk form and uses it as an experiment is one, said Raina. Also, while using traditional devices, one can be rejecting those which stand for outdated and reactionary values. In a social situation as prevails today in North India, one would have to think about using traditional elements which are strongly Hindu, or which reflect communal identities. This led to the related question of an artist's commitment what goes on around him. Raina related his participation in relief work in the Delhi riots in November 1984. This brought forward counter-arguments about whether it is the duty of every artist to get involved actively, or whether it is necessary to remain detached and write about what is happening. "After all, Vyasa had to sit aside to write the Mahabharat while the battle was going on," said Karanth.

— JP

'All the differences make for richness'

Says Dr GEORG LECHNER, the moving spirit of the Encounter

Has the Encounter been what you hoped it to be?

I had no fixed hopes. You can never have that attitude towards a creative event, but only general expectations as to the spirit of dialogue which might ensue from it.

But if you ask me about these general expectations, I'd say I'm very satisfied. Two among the five Encounters held so far have been particularly seminal — the Dance encounter and this one.

There seem to be some standards already reached by Indian theatre, certain innovations being made as regards tradition, of which *Ghashiram Kotwal* was among the first examples. There is also successful work going on over long years by Habib Tanvir, B V Karanth, Ratan Thiyam. But there seems to be also a healthy spirit of free thinking — M K Raina, for instance, as well as Brechtian experimentation. However, I feel Brecht has to receive more attention, not particularly in more polished or successful Brechtian forms, but in a seeping into theatre of Brechtian consciousness — of openness, doubt, an analytical and critical attitude.

In your note on the Encounter, you have said: 'Modern urban Indian theatre imitates and recreates mostly rather than creates.' Can you explain?

I don't call Tanvir, Raina modern urban theatre, because they work out of their region. Not even *Ghashiram Kotwal*, which is from Pune. That is the more creative side of Indian theatre. But I juxtapose it with whatever else Bombay offers, English theatre, for instance. No doubt it is a creative act to do *Evita* well and some of Pearl Padamsee's productions have been beautiful. But is it still imitation, that it is plays not from this soil which become a starting point for these groups. Plays which should come from Indian soil are still few and far between.

I say this especially because in the West we have had real creative input from the East. There's no need to say how much Stanislawsky or Grotowski took from the East —, that is really creative appropriation of values not their own.

In the discussions, most speakers raised issues closest to them. Did you find any commonality of issues between the West and the East?

What Eugenio Barba said about actors and movement, or about training of actors, is a common issue. What Peter Brook does with the Mahabharat is of common concern fo both East and West. In the same way, you had Indian directors carefully discussing how they could take Brecht to Indian audiences in a way which would not alienate them but bring them near to his main concerns.

But do you feel the local issues, the differences, emerged stronger?

With all the differences, which should be clearly analysed and not hidden, because they make for richness, we should not weigh this aspect too strictly. We should be generous about it. Even while recognising it, we must do everything we can to share what we have in common.

'Drama is a clash of two rights, rather than of right and wrong'

FARRUKH DHONDY, playwright, short-story writer and commissioning editor for ethnic programmes on British television's Channel 4, talks to JYOTI PUNWANI

During the discussions, when the question of collectives writing plays came up, you made the point that only the play written by an individual playwright can extend the ideological bounds of theatre, can tell the audience something new. Whereas collective theatre may extend the form, but only reinforces what the audience already knows. Can you explain?

Some groups use the collective method of inquiry into the subject matter of plays. The director has an idea of the territory the group needs to explore, which is usually socio-politically volatile. So he sets the cast loose to do collective research, and then does theatrical disciplines to tie up the experience into narrative threads and build characters into that.

This makes for some exciting theatre, but there's one thing it cannot do — it cannot make the imaginative leap in ideas and perspective which I have seen made by individual playwrights. That sort of insight probably happens in the subconscious.

But is the reverse true — can an individual playwright write a good agitational play?

I've seen that done too. It is necessary too, because today, the crying need in Britain in theatre is to get away from the new consensus of thinking: anti-sexist, anti-racist, for very many assumed liberal values. There's nothing wrong in these liberal values but a mere assertion of them doesn't forward their cause. A careful examination by a considering mind could give these values a new shape. For example, the anti-racist movement is breeding the anti-racist hustler and the growth of such a character in a vacuum of power is interesting and dramatic.

You said in your talk that the Blacks in Britain are one of the most exciting generations on this planet. Why do you feel so?

Because they are a settler generation, a generation of people who are growing up in difficult circumstances and becoming very unfriendly British. It is open to that generation to change Britain as it has never been to any group in our times. Britain will change them, but they will certainly change something in Britain.

Already, Britain has had to admit that they're here to stay and had to come to terms with a strong Black political youth movement. This riotous movement will certainly get Britain to redefine a priorities, or will at least contribute to doing so. They're the only ones, for instance who've raised the police question.

Does the theatre reflect any of this?

People write journalistically about it. I guess a collective play can deal with the riots.

How creative would it be?

You ask collective play always starts with the assumption that the creativity has a purpose, the purpose usually being to teach people what they don't know and what you have the privilege of knowing. I find that assumption an awful cover because there isn't a factory worker in Britain who does not know all about profits, losses, division of labour.

But what about other issues, not capital and labour, but as you yourself mentioned in your talk, plays which deal with racism or feminism?

These issues are dealt with too, but it would be a real distortion of reality to think that any group of working class in Britain could learn anything from street theatre. But it is the promise of that which attracts funding from the state for these groups. Asian groups too fall into this. They tell bureaucrats we'll do something about racism, they set up a 'project'. The projectwallahs certainly benefit and so does the clientele of the project — legal advisers, etc. But I can't put my hand on my Parsi cap and say with any sincerity that the culture which comes out of projects has furthered either the image or the material prospects of the communities it is supposed to have done.

Is there any Asian playwright who has done significant work?

I can't think of any.

What about Hanif Qureishi? You spoke of his film *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which has been released in theatres but hasn't yet been shown on Channel 4? Why?

It will be shown. We were waiting for reactions actually.

What have they been like?

The reviews were very good. But not from Asian critics.

Why?

They feel this is a very sensitive area which shouldn't be touched. (*My Beautiful Laundrette* is about a Pakistani family in Britain whose members indulge in all sorts of legal and illegal activities, one of them is also a homosexual...)

There are three significant points here to be understood. It is true that a young and vulnerable section of society feels paranoid about the way it's seen by the rest of society. That paranoia contributes to an extremely censorious attitude within the Black/Asian community. This leads to a direct censorship of the community's own creative voices and also to a refusal to let people see them exactly as they are and evaluate for themselves. The litany goes thus: Women have to be seen as strong, Indians as virtuous, West Indians as bank managers rather than bank robbers — never mind if they're neither.. It's a demand for the ethics of the worst of Bombay films.

That is the extra-literary demand put upon Black and Asian playwright. It is a grave mistake and a historical mistake too. It means you are looking upon the British working class who'll see this sort of work on tv, as though they were Chinese peasants of the early 20th century.

Secondly, it means attributing arrogance to censors and stupidity to the masses. That can't be right.

Thirdly, it is used as an inhibition to prevent public discussion of the genuine corruption and reactionary practice which runs through even the Asian and Black communities.

What in your opinion is the function of Asian theatre in Britain?

Drama is a clash of two rights, rather than of right and wrong. If both points of view are shown as right, the audience can make up its mind for itself. The function of Asian theatre is to become a way of talking to ourselves and raising issues which we normally don't in conversation.

Dancing to different music

TONI PATEL describes how Birmingham-born Meera Syal, actress and playwright, is discovering her Asian identity

TWENTY-THREE-year old Meera Syal is a first generation immigrant living in England. Her parents who are Punjabi Hindus originally from Lahore, migrated to England in the 1960s, and settled down in Birmingham. Meera was born there. In one sense the story is typical. When her parents first went to England, it was only with the hope of making a lot of money and returning home. They were deeply attached to their homes and people and never got over the loss. In England they stayed close to people of their own community and adhered rigidly to the manners and customs they had observed back home. Nishi boy, in relation to India, they became an anachronism.

In many ways they would be shocked at the changes that have taken place here, while they themselves have heldon staunchly to the past. The tragedy of that generation has yet to be written about. In an ironical way they resemble those early Englishmen who came to India in search of wealth, hoping to return "home" with fabulous riches. There are tombstones in English cemeteries in India which tell the sad tale of their early deaths. Many men of Meera's father's generation, too, are dying early — of heart attacks that are only an outward sign of an inward sickening.

The children of the first immigrants carry the double burden of their parents' nostalgia and sense of loss of their country, and the dichotomy of cultures they experience. At home they will speak Punjabi; the girls are kept strictly in check; no mixing with boys, and certainly no dating; scores of "aunts" and "uncles" keep a critical eye on you. Outside, at school and at play, they are exposed totally to the English culture.

Meera's parents like most Indian parents were aware that a good education was necessary to get on. They urged her to study to become a doctor. They sent her to a good grammar school. Her parents expected her to do well, in return for which she would earn some measure of freedom. At school and university she did brilliantly. It was a lonely life however. She was considered goody-goody. She did not drink or take drugs, or have boy friends, and all of them were attributed to her different culture, her "alienness". She says she would play the clown with classmates to win their camaraderie; clowns we all know are very sad people.

It must have been this clowning aspect that first led Meera to the stage. Her subject in university was drama, where they did serious stuff, the classics and Shakespeare. She had no problem getting roles. Despite the sense of alienation from her English classmates she had no awareness of her true position in that society. She was herself an English since the had spent all her life there; she had no other country. Universities are unreal places. Out in the world, she got her first rude shock. Wherever she applied for an acting job she got no replies, or negative ones. She had worked as hard as anyone else, she was as competent. Why then was she rejected? She followed up some of the negative replies and got her answer: "We have no roles for Asian actors". Suddenly the realisation, she was not just an actor, she was an "Asian" actor. And roles for "Asian" actors were few.

If there were no roles then she had better write some for herself. That's how the idea of *One of us* was born. Meera wrote it in collaboration with a colleagues in her drama school. Her collaborator Jacqui Shapiro is Jewish and the choice was deliberate. Meera feels that the Jewish experience in England is similar to what the new in[illegible] now experi[illegible] taken o[illegible] Jews [illegible] tail[illegible] shot [illegible] B[illegible] M[illegible] p[illegible] Th[illegible] here [illegible] "cabaret" [illegible] puzzled me since, fo[illegible] cabaret is still nightclub, sa[illegible] tily dressed women, risque jokes, the strippers. *One of us* has no links at all with that form as we understand. It actually comes out of the Fringe Theatre, the theatre of protest which started in the sixties against stuffy and predictable drawingroom plays that said nothing about the actual experience of people, of the upheavals that were taking place in English society, the upward mobility of the educated but lower classes.

Osborne's *Look back in anger* was the first salvo and gave the working class its voice. But formally it was a dead end. It used the same proscenium arch that people were getting tired of, and it was really [illegible] of [illegible] Desi[illegible] [illegible] to the other side, to the [illegible]s. It is really the gentlest [illegible] protest, and therefore [illegible] point even [illegible] feera Syal [illegible]g Indian [illegible] supposed [illegible] of women [illegible] waiting for an audition. Nishi comes in late — on roller skates, an apron and a big prawn on hat. That's what she wears at work. Out of embarrassment she starts to make small chatter with the people around her. Gradually she begins to act out her life story in short and telling scenes. She plays all the roles without changing costumes or using props. In one scene a white waitress in the restaurant makes an ugly pass at Nishi all the while politely insisting her about her race, though no doubt, he thinks he is being very subtle with all his references to the Kama Sutra and how prawn curry is an aphrodisiac.

At home, Nishi is kept strictly on a leash, but in her father's shop, which she is expected to help run, she manages to make contact with Eric the English electrician who comes to repair the wires. Inevitably, she runs away from home. She wants to become an actress, but she only succeeds in getting a job as a waitress, acquires a bed-sitting room and takes Eric as boyfriend. But she finds that whenever Eric sees his friends in the street "he dives into the nearest bush" to hide because he is embarrassed by his Asian girlfriend.

At a party she is thrilled to be taken to because it is full of famous theatre people, she encounters this beautiful woman who assumes that since Nishi is Indian she must be adept at yoga and at cooking curries. She is puzzled to find that Nishi eats the same kind of food as everyone else. One of the most touching scenes is when Nishi meets with a street demonstration by Asians agitating about their conditions of work in a factory. They are only asking for equal wages for equal work and some very few amenities in the factory. Nishi has never thought about all this.

A voice calls her back to the reality of the audition room. It is her turn to perform. She starts to sing a snatch from Eliza Doolittle's song in *My Fair Lady*. As she sings, slowly the truth dawns on her. She can never ever play Eliza or any other such role. She is Asian, her roots, her origins cannot be denied. In her blood are different rhythms; and listening to that inner music, she slowly starts to dance; her body moves to that different music. She has accepted her true identity.

Meera Syal has realised that if she wants roles she must write them for herself. That is how she came to start writing. She has since written another play which is about abandoned Asia women living in rescue homes. To do this, she first lived in such a home, in intimatate closeness with the inmates.