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The Arts

THEATRE

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It Just Does Not Pay

WHAT is happening to contemporary Indian theatre? How absurd is it, for theatre in India to resort to the 'Absurd theatre' for ideas, without having experienced its essence? Or, is it in the grip of a xenophobic phase which, like all other phases, shall disappear without striking anywhere? To what extent is the Hindi film to blame for this? To find out, INDIA TODAY'S CHITRA SUBRAMANIAM spoke to four stage personalities—Dina Pathak, 55, Naseeruddin Shah, 30, Farooque Shaikh, 32, and Shaukat Kaifi, 51—who have established themselves in the film world too, but maintain their affiliations with theatre.

■ **Naseeruddin Shah:** The state of the Hindustani theatre is unproductive and quite pathetic. While every other region has drawn from its traditional forms and evolved a coherent identity, which in turn explains the number of good Marathi, Bengali, Gujarati and Kannada plays, the Hindi theatre has nothing to draw from. Yes, I know there is the *nautanki* but look at it today. Its music is film music and the form has become so bastardised. And this is just one of the great harms which the Bombay film world has done.

This could be because the effects of colonialism were strongest in Uttar Pradesh. Even the landscape there has no identity. And having nothing to fall back on, the Hindustani theatre started aping the theatre movements in the West—an altogether ridiculous exercise because as a nation we haven't been through such traumatic experiences. I also think that there are too many scattered ideologies working as we all haven't grown from a common base. No, I do not think that there is a lack of feeling. In fact, sometimes I think there is too much of it. It all stems from a lack of technique and foundation.

We could go back to our classical plays for inspiration but there is no aspect of those plays which the Hindi films have not done to death. So much so that a man who reads the original today is bound to say that this is the script of a Hindi film.

I don't know where it must all start. The nation as a whole has not been through any collective experience which could manifest itself in any movement. Unless the commercial cinema suffers a severe setback in terms of audience attendance, I don't see any great hope for theatre in the 1980s.

The pity is that a lot of young people are using the theatre to get into films—but you cannot blame them, after all what



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does theatre pay? I do believe that your commitment has to feed you. You've got to be alive to fight for a cause and theatre does not feed you. So it is a vicious circle. This work with the traditional forms of theatre that has been going on is bound to pay dividends and I have great respect for the people who are doing this kind of thing. But in the process of finding or evolving a new form we are losing the audience who would rather go to a film.

Today I can do a play with Smita (Patil) and Shabana (Azmi) and we will get an audience, but people will come to see us and not the play and that defeats the purpose. I don't know what the solution is.

I don't think that the audience today is more demanding. When I joined the National School of Drama in 1970 I was told that things are bound to improve. I've seen no change and we still play to audiences of 10 and 15. We did *Waiting For Godot*. I know it is not fair to stage a play like that and expect a full house but you'd be surprised that we did get a full house. But the tragedy was that the people found it a funny play and they sat and laughed through it. What do you do?

There is also a great need, I think, for good writers who can execute new ideas. All our playwrights have been preoccupied with trying to produce masterpieces without realising that they are just a part of a process. Recently in Bombay some students tried street theatre which was a great success. I admired them for their guts because I am incapable of doing that. This shows that there is a lot of commitment, especially in the younger generation. It only needs to be properly guided. So, my generation will have to keep on at it and hopefully the younger people will be able to bring about change. They really are being exposed to much more today.

■ **Shaukat Kaifi:** What does theatre pay? If theatre has not evolved it is because it does not provide enough to run a house. And why should any good writer waste his time when he knows that there are hardly any returns? The Hindi stage particularly has made no progress and if things remain the way they are, it will not survive long.

I have been associated with the Indian People's Theatre Association (Ipta) of Bombay and even today when we do a play we have to go around begging for money. My husband (Kaifi Azmi) has also been asking people to help us but every theatre should be self-supporting. Why are Marathi plays doing so well? It is because they are able to stand on their own feet. So, I think that money is really the greatest problem.

The audience itself is so film-oriented. Do you know that even a person like Prithviraj Kapoor was unable to run his theatre? He ran into debts all the time trying to keep it going. He would have his shows on Sunday mornings and there would be no audience. And, none of his three sons has done anything to keep theatre alive. Yes, Shashi has built a small theatre which does solve the problem of place but there are a thousand groups in Bombay and that theatre is booked for months. Why can't the government make theatres?

Also, there is a great need for good



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writers in the country. Writers with a certain amount of commitment who are willing to experiment. We had a group from Lucknow which tried to do *Gogol* in the *nautanki* form and the response was so bad. This is because I think people have got used to seeing a particular kind of theatre and do not react to new trends. There exists a group of people which patronise theatre but which is so isolated. The common man is just not attracted to theatre and this could be because what we have today is not entertaining enough. The younger actors are unable to sustain audience interest and seen in this light I do not think Hindustani theatre will last. While the regional language theatre has been able to save itself from the film menace, the Hindustani theatre seems to have been the worst hit.

I do not know what will happen to the theatre in the 1980s. There has to be some sort of a commitment in the actors and writers if things have to improve. Personally I am committed to the communist ideology because that I think is the only solution for this country.

■ **Dina Pathak:** The state of contemporary Indian theatre is not as prolific as it should be and it is not so much the problem of money. Today the preoccupation seems to be with the form rather than the content and that distresses me greatly. It leaves

us totally on the surface and does not take us to the problems of the theatre. What has happened is that our ethos has not been able to really penetrate the theatre movements when it comes to the thinking theatre—the theatre with a thought behind. And that theatre has been conducted by the intellectuals who have become as confused, vague and superfluous as the intelligentsia finds itself today. Even the influences which we have absorbed in our day-to-day life are so much on the surface, that it doesn't satisfy and carry us forward. Nobody wants to stand for any ideas, and there is total lack of ideology.

There must be a need in our youth also to express itself and that has taken them to two sources—to the study of classical Indian theatre which was totally absent and secondly to the folk theatre. They do inspire a lot but mere inspiration is not enough. Something should grow out of it and that can happen only if it is properly nurtured. What is likely to happen is that it will also become a cliché. Theatre, if it has to run, has to be professional and proficient, and any good theatre should sell. It can and should have an experimental coterie which is not governed by the demands of the box-office. In fact these groups of people who are now experimenting with new forms should combine professional and experimental theatre.

What is happening in the world of

theatre is the product of the spadework done by the Ipta in the 1940s. It comprised the cream of the intellectuals who are today scattered all over the country. Theatre people are going into films and I see no reason why they shouldn't. They are after all sister media and no good artist should miss any of them. And who says theatre doesn't pay? The good Marathi, Gujarati and Bengali theatre artists are fabulously paid.

I also think that we are testing ourselves on very little work. We haven't got down to the essence of it all and we are looking for results. We are also very lazy people,




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—Dina Pathak

socially irresponsible and egotistic. If 10 people work together with an intensity, that intensity will create a product which will sell. The younger people today are committed but so many things go by the fashion and this is where the critics can help. We should evolve a sound cultural policy.

The students of today are alive to these problems and I am glad to say that they are not glamour-struck—they are well meaning



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—Farooque Shaikh

and in them I see great hope for the future.

■ **Farooque Shaikh:** You can expect to survive on singing or film acting but you cannot survive just on theatre. You cannot perform in your dining room and be happy. You need an audience and theatre in this country has just no patronage. One of the biggest and perhaps the most historically sound is the Ipta which has literally been trying to shove theatre down people's throats. Not that all the Ipta does is wonderful but then it has been trying, and there are various reasons for the lukewarm response it gets. Theatre is looked upon predominantly as an entertainment media and in order to provide that, it has to compete with the other entertainment media, primarily the film. Now for five rupees if I can see an Amitabh Bachchan and a Shashi Kapoor and a Rekha and Raakhee dancing, prancing, romancing in India and abroad, why should I go to see a play?

But theatre in the major cities is now struggling to get up—it is no longer lying down, as it was in the early 1970s. People are very gradually making theatre a habit which is a good sign but even today for a Hindi play to fill an audience of about 600 is a major feat, and one rarely hears of a Hindi drama making any profit. In Bombay we have a small section which patronises English theatre regularly but

unfortunately English theatre as we have it today doesn't have anything innovative to offer. It's only good for a few laughs.

In order to get any response you have to perform on stage and that is becoming ever so expensive. There is a lot of enthusiasm among the younger people but they are bogged down by the lack of facilities and patronage. The student element which is getting into theatre today is helping greatly in building an awareness. Some of them will and should go into films. Many of them will eventually drop out but they will maintain an interest in theatre and there will be an audience.

As far as commitment is concerned, I think what matters is whether or not you are committed to theatre. An ideological commitment is not a prerequisite and can sometimes be a disqualification. I can do good theatre without being committed to any 'ism'. Also the kind of esoteric intellectualism that we have is just not required—neither in theatre nor in cinema nor in any walk of life for that matter. There is nothing to be said against intelligent theatre but this kind of intellectualism might not be intelligent in the first place.

There is hope for theatre and the audience is getting receptive. It will of course be a very slow climb but a beginning has been made.

