

RANGVĀRTĀ

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With Sohag Sen's *Ekā* and Usha Ganguli's *Lok-kathā* opening in November at Calcutta, Vijaya Mehta arriving in town to be felicitated by Nandikar at its national theatre festival, and Saira Essa from South Africa slated to perform Franca Rame and Athol Fugard in early December, it seems to be a full season of women's theatre for this city. While a tradition that has taken the exploitation of women as actress and material to be granted seems to be showing cracks at last, the signs of resistance from a male chauvinist establishment are also surfacing more glaringly in the form of blistering reviews. As long as women offer their work as products moulded by a male master, resistance slumbers. As long as they 'plead' the women's cause and their plight, the male critics can afford to be patronizingly kind and sympathetic. There have been women directors and actresses who have shown a shrewd sense of this logic and have produced the right products for this market and made it to the box office. But both Sohag and Usha bring to their theatre a woman director's sensibility responding to and coping with problems larger than the condition of women. In fact, a third world situation demands a different and more complex view of feminism, with exploitation too often overlapping sex differences. In a sense the works of these two directors complement each other's. For Usha exposes the exploitation at the level of the lower

classes in the villages provoking the first stirrings of resistance, while Sohag studies loneliness in terms larger than the narrowly familial or the too universally philosophical. While Usha celebrates the community, Sohag sculpts the individual. There is something characteristically womanly in the way Sohag stretches time, holds the sentimental in leash and strains so deliberately the patience of the spectator, or in the way Usha allows violence to break out in all its raw vigour out of the musical ambience.

In this column, we have been harping on the theme of the limitations of theatre criticism in India—limitations that can be traced to the limited exposure of critics to rich enough theatric experiences and to a too narrowly constricted dependance on texts from abroad read without any experience of the models they describe or analyse. It is a sad state of things when critics fail to recognize the really significant, and fall for populism or back on deep-seated prejudice.

S. B.

THEATRE HISTORY

Shahider Daak

Shahider Daak, a shadow play produced by the Ballet Squad of the Bengal IPTA in 1946-47, was the second landmark—after *Nabānna*—in the production history of IPTA in Bengal.



The traditional shadow-play of south India and some parts of Indonesia that use puppets to retell the stories of the epics and mythology, was the primary source for *Shahider Daak* in which however actors were human beings, not puppets; and the theme drew on socially and politically relevant contemporary happenings. The marriage of the traditional and the modern was perfect, and there was no jarring note. Uday Shankar's experiments with the shadow-play, using human dancers, must have greatly influenced the IPTA production since several ex-students of Shankar's Dance Academy at Almorah, which had closed down by then, had joined IPTA. Debabrata Biswas acknowledges the debt: 'On seeing the success of Uday Shankar's shadow-play, our artistes at the IPTA prepared a play on those lines, the shadow play, *Shahider Daak*. This play was performed in several places in and around Calcutta, and artistes who could dance and sing participated in it. I would be in the singing team.' (*Brātyojaner Ruddha-sangeet*, p. 57).

A shadow-play on the 1943 famine in Bengal had been staged some time earlier at the Gandhi Maidan of Delhi, but had not proved to be very popular. Then came the communal riots of 1946, casting a sinister pall of gloom on Calcutta. Khaled Chowdhury and a few friends produced a shadow-play against the communal canker even as the communal riots raged. Niranjan Sen, the General Secretary of the IPTA, was in Calcutta at this time. He and his colleagues felt the urge to do something to bring back sanity to the mob, and the Khaled Chowdhury model, tried out on a small scale, was already there. *Shahider Daak* was born of this urge, with a script by the well-known novelist, Narayan Gangopadhyay. A series of songs and dances set the country's social and cultural background before the shadow play began against the backdrop of a typical Bengal

village, still under the grip of the man-made famine of 1943. For a prologue a man's hanging body would be seen in shadow, swaying in the wind, obviously a symbol of British colonial persecution of the common people. Then the play would begin in a hut, proceeding through several other sequences, depicting episodes and events from our freedom movement. Sushil Mukherjee played the lead role of the martyr Rameswar in this play, the title of which literally means The Call of the Martyr. Later on Niranjan Sen would recall, in the interview recorded by the Sansthan: 'Sushil would often say, Niranjan-da, I hope we don't become martyrs in real life. You have



Shahider Daak

made me play the martyr's role so many times that I sometimes feel that some day I will become a martyr.' Sushil did become a martyr during the South-east Asia Youth Festival at Calcutta in February 1948, when professional toughs attacked a reception given to foreign delegates at a Dixon Road House, and shot Sushil dead.

The script was flexible and could be changed as necessary. It would absorb contemporary political and social incidents. After the Naval Mutiny of Bombay, for instance, a song was added to the sword dance: 'The blue waters have turned red

with the sailors' blood.' Besides, as they travelled they would absorb important local incidents into their play. Naturally, when the audience saw their own tale being told within the structure of the play, they would find it more interesting and relevant.

This was intentionally done, to rouse the people of the land to the fact that it was actually the imperialist rulers of our country who were at the back of the communal split, and not Hindus nor Muslims. Since they would be the ultimate gainers, it was the duty of all Indians to unite and drive the English away.

The dance was mostly choreographed by Anadi Prasad, an alumnus of Uday Shankar's School of Dancing, and some came from the repertoire of the Central Ballet Squad of the IPTA; and the set was made by Khaled Chowdhury. When Lord Mountbatten was supposed to be alighting on the soil of India, an artiste would come towards the front screen, revolving a stick so fast in his hand that it would immediately conjure up in the minds of the audience the propeller of a plane. The innovative spirit was the guiding factor. Niranjana Sen herself looked after the lights and several others who proved their great talents afterwards were connected with it at different points of time. In music, there were Benoy Roy, Reba Roy, Salil Chowdhury, Jyotirindra Maitra, Bhupati Nandy, Debabrata Biswas, Sajal Roy Chowdhury, Jnan Majumdar, Kalim Sharafi, Preeti Sarkar, Atul Chowdhury, Kalyani Sen and several others.

Sometimes, when *Shahider Daak* was taken out of Calcutta, Khaled Chowdhury would be active in the orchestra, with his musical innovations of sharp sounds with pieces of bricks, woods or irons. The usual drums of different kinds (*dhol*, *mādal* etc.) and percussion instruments were there, but these sharper unusual sounds would intensify the power of the play.

The first recorded show of *Shahider Daak* was at Sree Cinema, for members of the IPTA. After this it was performed not only in and around Calcutta but in faraway places of undivided Bengal and Assam, in places like Mymensingh, Dhaka, Narayanguge, Barisal, Kumilla, Jalpaiguri, Tinsukia, Lamding, Tejpur, Jorhat and Shillong. It was a show well received by people in rural and urban areas alike. The *Jugantar* often contained notices about performances in and around Calcutta, and many of these were invitation shows in areas where mixed communities lived, or in the industrial belt, where the audience came from the working class, and the trade unions played hosts. Even after independence, *Shahider Daak* was performed at many places.

At the Fifth Conference of the IPTA, held at Ahmedabad, the cultural programme contained items from different provinces of India, and included the shadow play, *Shahider Daak*, a dance drama *Kalikata Jindabad*, and a programme of folk songs. Niranjana Sen wrote in *Swadhinata*, the Communist Party daily, on 7 December 1947: 'Bengal will bring the shadow play *Shahider Daak*, in which the IPTA creates a treasure out of a little recognized folk form. This shadow play has inspired a Bengal, shattered and humiliated; and has brought a new awakening to regions outside Bengal.'

An announcement made on behalf of the State IPTA by Charuprakash Ghosh, its General Secretary, on 18 October 1947, and published in *Swadhinata*, lists a series of performances between 18 and 27 October in and around Calcutta—at the Rammohun Hostel (18 October), Tirthapati Institution (19 October), Badartala, Metiaburuz (20 October), Ranaghat (21 October), Richie Road (22 October), Maniktala (23 October), Howrah Maidan (24 October), Park Circus (25 October), St James' Square (27 October)—quite a busy schedule.



Nabānno (1944) and *Shahider Daak* (1947) were not far apart, and both dealt with contemporary problems. *Nabānno*, however, posed problems of presentation since with its more elaborate sets, it could not be staged everywhere, but *Shahider Daak* could be taken to faraway places. *Shahider Daak*, with an even more direct appeal to the emotions, helped to bring back sanity, at least to some people, a claim upheld by the facts of the innumerable performances of *Shahider Daak* in different areas. Both Niranjan Sen and Atul Chowdhury recall the editor of a popular Bengali daily in Dhaka telling them, 'Had you people performed this before the riots, the riots might not have happened at all.'

Tagore, after his first exposure to the form of the shadow play, had suggested the possibility of the use of shadow puppets in a classroom situation as dramatic illustration for a lesson (*Jāvājātrir Patra*). But the IPTA went a step further in making it a vehicle for mass education and propaganda in the cause of national unity and communal harmony. At the same time it was an outstanding achievement in the revival and revivification of a traditional form as an experiment in a theatric idiom with great suggestive power. There was dramatic potential in the possibility of the contractions and magnifications of the human figure handled with such ease in this form.

SHAMPA BHATTACHARYA

THEATRE NEWS

Natya Samarohas, 1987 : Patna/Madras

The Sangeet Natak Akademi's scheme for assistance to young theatre workers has been supporting for four years now a series of zonal festivals leading to a national festival once a year featuring new works by young directors. The last two zonal festivals for 1987 were held at Patna and Madras in November for the eastern

and southern zones respectively. The six productions at Patna this year were *Maila Anchal* in Bhojpuri/Hindi, directed by Satish Anand for Kala Sangam, Patna; *Ngangbiton* in Manipuri, directed by Y. Khogen Singh for Panthoibi Natya Mandir, Imphal; *Gotia Bulakukurar Janma Britānta* in Oriya, directed by Jaidev Dash for Shilpi, Dhenkanal, *Pāshānir Chokher Jal* in Rajbanshi Bengali, directed by Sushil Chandra Ray for Uttar Banga Lokasanskriti Sanstha, Jalpaiguri; *Bandi Mosor Gaidya* in Assamese, directed by Badal Chaudhuri, for Ritwik Sanskritik Goshthi, Barapet; and *Ima Keethel* in Manipuri, directed by N. Premchand for Aryan Theatre, Imphal. An experts' committee composed of Nemichand Jain, B. V. Karanth, Kumar Roy, Manoranjan Das, Dulal Roy and Samik Bandyopadhyay selected *Ima Keethel* for the national festival. Observers at Patna included Ratan Thiyam and Dr Pratibha Agrawal.

Theatre workers in Patna agitating for more than twelve years now against the occupation of the city's finest theatre, the Premchand Rangashala, by the Central Police, chose the occasion to make a more concerted and determined bid to have the theatre reopened. They carried banners on to the stage interrupting the formal inauguration to protest against the government's indifference to the cause. Experts and observers from different States and local theatre workers assembled at a rally near the occupied theatre to join in the protest, while the experts addressed a letter of protest to the Chief Minister of the State.

A different kind of protest marked the opening of the South Zone Festival at Madras, where a small group of theatre workers called on the people to boycott the festival in protest against the Indian government's 'aggression' against the Eelam culture of Sri Lanka. The South Zone Festival inaugurated by the well known actor, Thiru S. V. Sahasranamam, at a function presided over by Dr V. K. Narayana Menon

