AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR PARASURAM RAMAMOORTHI

S. MOHAMMED SHEREEF / 1999

The following interview took place on 6th August 1999 at Professor Parasuram Ramamoorthi's chamber, Madurai Kamaraj University Campus, Palkalainagar, Madurai. Throughout the interview, Ramamoorthi was courteous, co-operative, and enthusiastic. He spoke very frankly about Karnad's works in particular and about Indian theatre in general.

SMS: What do you think about Girish Karnad as a playwright?

PR: I think Girish Karnad is the symbol of success in modern theatre. He is one playwright who has received almost all major awards for playwriting in India, Sangeetha Nataka Academy Award, the Kalidas Samman Award, the Karnataka State Award and now the most prestigious Jnanpith Award. So recognition has come to him. He is also the most widely known playwright outside India. His plays are performed in Chicago, Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis and he is a very popular playwright in England also. His contribution to Indian theatre, I think, lies in the fact that he has imaged India in a proper perspective without giving himself to any isms or bias towards what form or one mode of writing. I think, that is his seminal contribution.
SMS: You have acted in and directed Western plays and Karnad plays. What were your responses as an actor in and as a director for the Western plays? What are the distinct differences that you have noticed?

PR: I was quite comfortable with the Girish Karnad play. I played the role of Kapila in 1988 and that is one play, which really fascinated me. And the problem of the body and the mind was of great interest to me. And so I could easily play the role. There was no difficulty in understanding and interpreting the role. With regard to the Western play, however much you try, that struggled me. I played the role of Banquo in *Macbeth* and I was not quite sure whether the ghost of Banquo should be real or the imagination of Macbeth. Though that scene - the Banquet Scene centers on Macbeth, still the ghost of Banquo has to appear and I was not sure what I should do with that. There are differences between the Karnad play and the Western play. I think an actor has to understand that kind of stylized acting that we have for a Girish Karnad play or some of the Indian plays or not suitable to a Western play. So one may have to choose the style of acting which will differentiate the Karnad play from the Western play. If one were not familiar with the Western style of acting, say Stanislavskian method acting, then also it is difficult to play a Karnad play. We should know the method acting and yet resist that kind of method acting in a Girish Karnad play. That is how I could put it.
SMS: I would like to know how did you perform as Devadatta after the transposition. You told me that you played the role of Kapila. How did you perform the role of Devadatta? I wanted to know what were your reactions towards the characters Kapila and Devadatta. You know pretty well that after the transposition you are neither Kapila fully nor Devadatta fully?

PR: I think that is a very interesting problem in Hayavadana. I would tell you what I had done. I saw the transposition as a kind of meta-theatre. An actor playing the role of Kapila and later switching over to another role. So there was no difficulty for me. This kind of a transformation, Ramamoorthi transforming himself into Kapila. If that is possible, Kapila transforming himself into Devadatta is also equally possible. As long as I do not identify myself with Kapila and become Kapila, then there is no difficulty at all. We used a very simple technique of just changing the costumes between Devadatta and Kapila. And the marked change in dialogues, in the delivery of dialogues, in the gestures, in the movements, especially the way in which Devadatta walks, the way Devadatta sits, the way Devadatta recites a line. They were very important and so the spectators could easily understand. I remember very well that even a very small boy, he must have been about six or seven years old, in the audience, as soon as he saw the costumes changed, he realised that the
heads have been transformed. So particularly I thought of the switching over from one role to another was absolutely easy. But in the production at London, which I had directed that who played Devadatta and Kapila had difficulties, because they were amateur actors. And they were thinking only in terms of the heads have been changed, which I think was not Girish Karnad meant. If one were to see it as a play and then there is a play within the play, where Devadatta is playing a role, the role of Kapila, Kapila is playing a role that of Devadatta.

SMS: Sir, did you direct any other Karnad plays?

PR: I have been wanting to direct Naga-Mandala. I translated that into Tamil. But the time has not yet come.

SMS: Do you think that the Western techniques help to attract the rural and the elite audience alike in the case of Karnad's plays?

PR: This is a problem. His plays are very successful with the rural audience as well as the urban. I have watched a Karnad play in a very small village in Karnataka called Ranibannur and in Bangalore city. In both the places the performances were very successful and the audience were happy. I would not say that Girish is an out and out Western influenced playwright. The local influences are stronger than the Western influences. Say the
influences like the company drama, like that of Gubbi Veeranna or the Yakshagana and because of his exposure to Natyashastra and the other traditions in India. I would say that the Indian influence is much stronger than the Western influence even in terms of techniques. How were you know that he has read Camus, he has read Sartre, he has read Anouilh and he has read Shakespeare. And as one of the earliest critics points out that there is a kind of Western influence on Girish Karnad. He is given to all that kind of isms and existentialism and all such things. But I think they all exist in a superficial level. The major influence, I think is Indian. That is precisely the reason why he is very much successful in India. I know playwrights like G.P.Deshpande and Mahesh Elkunjuvar who are predominantly influenced by Western thinkers. And that is the reason why they are not as successful as Girish Karnad. He bases all his plays on folk, legends or the epics or history of India. Right now, he is doing a work on Tippu Sultan.

SMS: Do you agree with me, if I say that Girish Karnad has very successfully changed or rather transformed Artha into Kriya and again Kriya into Renga Kriya in his plays?

PR: Yes, yes very very successfully. There are others who are doing it in the same way, say K.N.Paniker, Rattan Tayim or Habib Tanveer. They are all doing in the same way, but they are not successful as Girish Karnad.
SMS: Then, What is the secret of Girish Karnad's success Sir?

PR: The secret lies in the Western discipline of a playwright, which Karnad has learnt. The discipline of the Western playwrights in creating a scene, how to structure a scene, and how to go about still the climax, if there is a climax. This discipline, he has learned from the West. He uses that and combines it with the Indian oral tradition and company Natak traditions.

SMS: What do you think about the oral tradition in Girish Karnad?

PR: I think the oral tradition is a very strong point in Girish Karnad. The story is carried on by some kind of a narration. Either a Bhagavata or the Story in Naga-Mandala. It is this oral tradition which he has got from, say the Yakshagana, the Bajan or the Keerthan. It has helped him a great deal. Kambar also uses it. But Kambar is limited because of his limited exposure only to Karnataka. He has not seen as much of the Indian theatre as Girish has seen. He has not seen as much as the Western theatre as Girish has seen. So these are the reasons precisely why we think that there is a kind of a greater Westernism in Girish Karnad.

SMS: How do our audience react towards the Brechtian ideas of alienation and Epic theatre in Girish Karnad?
PR: Oh! One thing is that Brechtian alienation is not something which has been imported into India. So they don't see the plays in terms of Brechtian alienation. Alienation is one of the important factors of Indian dramas, especially in the folk theatre tradition, in the Therukoothu and in Yakshagana. This alienation is an important aspect of performance. So when they see Tughlaq or when they see Hayavadana or Naga-Mandala or The Fire and the Rain, they won't say this is Brecht. This is from Yakshagana. This is how the distancing is done in Yakshagana. So the rural spectators are not worried about Brecht's alienation or existentialism and all that. They are not worried about the theory. They see it and immediately recognize it as part of the Indian theatre tradition. Only academics talk in terms of it as Brechtian alienation etc., etc. I don't think it is Brechtian alienation at all. It is alienation that we have in the Indian folk theatre tradition and nor is Girish so particularly inclined towards the Brechtian alienation. Because one thing marks the difference. Brecht's purpose was totally different from Karnad's. Brecht had the kind of a-yes, this has to tell you this, that directly. He has also used history and also myth or legend or history does not aim at a debate or propaganda. He might be aware of Brecht, but I don't think he is in any way using Brechtian alienation in his plays.

SMS: Sir, one of the recurring themes in Girish Karnad's plays is isolation.
PR: Isolation?

SMS: Yes Sir, isolation is there, but still there is a positive value in his plays. What is your opinion about this isolation and positive value in his plays?

PR: Could you elaborate what do you mean by isolation? Just want to know what do you mean by that?

SMS: The characters in his plays, most of them are isolated from the society. They feel loneliness. They are kept away from others. They are not allowed to mingle with society. Tughlaq is isolated, Kapila and Bijjala also feel isolated.

PR: Who?

SMS: Bijjala in Tale-Danda, Arvasu in The Fire and the Ruin also feel isolated. He is also kept away from the society. But towards the end, it is my personal feeling that there is a streak of hope, something good is going to happen.

PR: I think you may be right. But do you know what happens towards the end that all these isolated beings get integrated into the society which probably they were not part of in the beginning. Yes, Tughlaq. I understand his loneliness. Because he does not belong to the system, he
does not belong to the society. So he feels loneliness. A kind of an outsider figure. Like, say for instance Macbeth or Caligula. But even towards the end I think in the case of Tughlaq there is no integration with the rest of the world. He identifies himself with God. But that probably would be the signal that still he is isolated. In Islam, you don't identify yourself with God. God is a distinct entity and nobody can equate himself with God.

SMS: Only we worship God.

PR: Yes, But Tughlaq says that I am one with you. But regard to Kapila, I think it is not much of isolation.

SMS: He goes to the forest, away from the society and leads an isolated life. He wants to be even away from Padmini.

PR: That is rejecting the society. Rejecting the values imposed by the society. He goes to the forest and there, there is an initial struggle between Devadatta's body and his own head. But he overcomes that unlike Devadatta who finds it difficult. When Padmini comes into the forest, Kapila is not happy in the beginning. He asks,"Why do you have come?" But once they meet, and once they join together, there is no loneliness. And when both Kapila and Devadatta die, they do not die as unhappy
individuals. They seem to welcome that kind of a death. There is very clear point that the son - the child goes back to the city. And that is a suggestion - that interpretation has been done. Then the possibility of disintegration between the body and the mind is very strong in the case of Devadatta. It is very difficult to stop the talk of the society.

SMS: What about Arvasu in *The Fire and the Rain*?

PR: Arvasu's case is different. He is not unhappy about he being banished from the Brahmin community. In fact, that helps him to become an actor which he loves. And Arvasu's desire to bring Nittilai back to life is an indication that still he has that kind of a life, not totally dejected or not that kind of an outsider figure, that you find in Camus or in the Western existentialist plays or absurd plays. I am not quite sure about Bijjala. Probably he could be, because again he represents a system of government and that is more important. It is very easy to accept Basavanna and follow him, say. O.K. inter-caste marriage is allowed. Let's abolish caste. All that is possible for Basavanna. But not for the king. Because he has to adhere to a hierarchy and a system of values and it is for revolutionaries like Basavanna to overthrow the systems. I don't think he is also an outsider.
SMS: Sir, When we read or witness Karnad's plays, there is a balance of nearness and distancing?

PR: Right, Yaa.

SMS: This balance of nearness and distancing is done especially when he deals with the current affairs. You are a theatre person. What do you think about it and how is it theatrical?

PR: First let me tell you that he does not deal with current socio-political situations, directly like any other playwright. Say, like Sircar or Deshpande. He does not deal with current affairs except in Tale-Danda, where he, I think it is unfortunate that he makes a reference in the preface. All his plays are contemporary. They are discussions on today's socio-political situations, but in a subterranean way. He is talking about man-woman relationship in a very sensitive way. He does not use modern social reality. He says, in fact it is very boring - modern social reality is very boring. He uses the myth, he uses the legends. And the performers immediately understand that, they relate to it. So that distance and nearness is something that happens to you, it touches you. Immediately, you recognise the problem as a problem of yours. But it is distanced because it is the story of Rani, the story of Appanna, the story of Padmini, it is the story of Mohammed Bin Tughlaq. It is not about
Mrs. Gandhi, it is not about Rajiv Gandhi, it is not about Nehru. But people immediately recognise these people when they read or watch *Tughlaq*. For instance when Ebrahim Alkazi produced *Tughlaq* against the background of the Old Red Fort, it is very obvious, he is talking about Nehru - the visionary, Nehru - the authoritarian, dictator. When Prasanna produced it during the emergency, they immediately saw Mrs. Gandhi. So you don't have to change the words of Girish Karnad and make it look that it is today. That is a great advantage for Girish Karnad. And in fact, I think all great playwrights have deliberately avoided contemporary social reality and have talked about the contemporary society and I would say that like Shakespeare.

SMS: How would you account for Girish Karnad's theatre as art forms and as commercial art forms?

PR: Theatre is an art form as well as a commercial activity. Girish Karnad is very much concerned with theatre as a commercial art form. He envies those people of Gubbi Veeranna theatre, who play everyday at Majestic in Bangalore. Karnad asks a question: What are the number of people who come for say a Girish Karnad play or a Mahesh Elkunjuvar play or say a Badal Sircar play. So theatre is an art form and theatre is a commercial activity. This betweenness could attract large number
people and dramatists should try to attract large audience for the performance.

SMS: What are the groups that perform Karnad's plays in English?

PR: The Madras Players performed Tughlaq, Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana in English. The Theatre Arts, Department of M.K.University performed Hayavadana at Madurai in English. Alyque Padamsee performs Hayavadana in English. So Karnad is part of the Indian English Scenario.

SMS: How does Girish Karnad establish the relationship between the West and the East in his plays?

PR: Yes his theatre establishes a very significant relationship between the West and the East. His plays are easily adaptable to the Western audience. He is very popular with the Western theatre people.

SMS: What about the impact of Western influence in writing Yayati?

PR: He wrote his first play Yayati, when he was very young - 26. He was a student of Karnataka University, Dharwar, very much groomed by people like Sankar Mokashee Sarogini Shetty, all who had just returned from US and England, C.D. Narasimhaiya. So he was very much a product of the Western Education. And so the play turned up to be a thoroughly
Western play. And therefore a great failure. It is one play that has not been translated into many languages. It has not been translated into English. It had only seven or eight performances. Girish acknowledges that it is a failure. But the play is of interest to the students of English literature, because it is a modernistic play. It touches to some extent the problem of old age and the responsibilities that go with the old age and the conflict between the old and the young. He was very much, I think influenced by *King Lear*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Though the myth is from Mahabharatha, the story of Yayati, Puru and Yayati. How a son has to give up his youth, so that his father can enjoy the type of old age, himself. It is all set up on the insecurities of old age. And there is a desire to go on with the body and living. To me, the most important point is that the body becomes a very dominant note and metaphor in the first place. This is a body that which carries Girish Karnad through all his plays. It has become a very powerful symbol in *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*. This division of a human being into body and mind is something alien to Indian philosophy. It is of the West. But Karnad is capitalising on that. He is trying to use that division in most of his plays to talk about how it is possible for some people to interpret this body-mind division. Padmini choosing Devadatta in *Hayavadana* and later being attracted to Kapila is a tale from the *Kathasarithsagara*. He
does not come to it directly but from Thomas Mann's the story of the 'Transposed Heads'. There it is a modern problem in the case of Padmini. Padmini here is not simply making a choice between two bodies, she is making a choice between two human beings. When these two human beings are described or visualised as body and mind, there is a problem.

SMS: Say about your production of Hayavadana at Madurai and in England.

PR: The two Hayavadana(s), I have been associated were of very interesting experiences. The one that I played the role of Kapila and the other I directed at London. The second one was an inter-cultural production. But both these productions were on the body element differences. In the 1988 Madurai production, for the Indian Science Congress, the theme appealed to it, because it was a problem of scientific understanding how the mind influences the body or how the body influences the mind. The stress was on the friendship of Devadatta - Kapila relationship. In the 1996 production a British Actor played the role of Devadatta and an Indian Actor Playing the role of Kapila and Padmini was played by an Indian settled in London. Three different cultures. A British playing Devadatta, an Indian Kapila and an Indian born girl selected in London playing Padmini. They represent different images. They represent
different ideas about Man-Woman relationship, about marriage. It also touched the problem of races. A young Indian born girl’s attraction towards the white man and later drifting away from the white man into the lap of an Indian.

SMS: Did you introduce any new technique in the production at London?

PR: Yes. This production also saw two Bhagavatas. In Karnad’s text there is only one Bhagavata, a team to speak. But in my production, there were two Bhagavatas one male and one female. I would touch an issue here. However much we try to be objective in narrating a story in narrating an incident there is no hundred percent objectivity in narration. There is always some element of objectivity in our narration. Even if it is a story being narrated, there is an element of subjectivity. This is precisely why we chose two Bhagavatas - a male Bhagavata narrating and a female Bhagavata narrating. The male Bhagavata could probably has some kind of a subjectivity in the attitude towards Padmini and the female Bhagavata has some kind of an objectivity towards Devadatta, so there is an element of subjectivity in narration however trained the narrator is. That is why we used two Bhagavatas instead of one. The two narrators create something different in terms of narration. The set was a
ternple and the *Bhagavata* narration added to its credibility. Thus the spectators were resembled to devotees in a temple on a special occasion.

SMS: How will you account *Tughlaq* as a play of the theatre?

PR: I have made a detailed analysis of the Western influence in the play in my article "He that playeth Sultan". But *Tughlaq* is a part of the Indian theatre tradition. It is on the company natak tradition. People may hesitate that here, there is no *Yakshagana* no *Bhagavata*, no use of dolls and things like that, and so it doesn't look like an Indian play. But what Girish does is that he structures the play in such a way that he has the liking for *Yakshagana* and he has shallow scenes and deep scenes. He introduces the two comic characters Aazam and Aziz. The comic plot is not distinct from the main plot. The comic plot becomes the part of the main plot. Towards the end we know that Mohammed realises what he is, only through Aziz.

SMS: Sir, about *The Fire and the Rain*

PR: Karnad is using a myth from Mahabharatha and *Rigvedha* to talk about theatre, I think. He is talking about the performance. He is talking about how an actor prepares himself for a role. And how an actor, after the performance rebriefs himself and a performance creates a kind of
virtual reality, not the social reality that we see. And it also talks about
the function of theatre. So *The Fire and the Rain* is about theatre,
performance and actors preparation for the performance and actors
rebriefing of the performance. The interaction between the spectators
and the performers is a very important aspect, when theatre becomes a
participatory ritual.

SMS: Don't you think that there is a cultural negotiation in most of his plays?

PR: Yes, there is. For instance take the case of *Padmini* in *Hayavadana*. A
married woman Padmini, inscribing those words of laudable admiration at
the back of the person who is her husband's friend. There is the
cultural negotiation - body as the sight of cultural negotiation. And
naturally you could notice that there are at different times, at different
levels there are cultural negotiations. We are a very orthodox community
in Madurai and so Kapila and Devadatta can never kiss Padmini on the
stage. But Kapila in London production could carry her in his arms.
This is the sight of cultural negotiation. The performance could be
made on this line.