Chapter - VIII

The Quotidian Philosophy of Creation: An Ethnographic Account of The Company

We all may have ideologies and utopian visions, but the real world does not ever seem to conform to them. Is this a sign of a failure of our utopian vision? The noise of reality never conforms to the purity of our ideals. However, through the daily acts of creation and conflict, we know that this vision gives us focus, direction and hope. This section takes us beyond our histories of training and philosophies of creation. It provides a vibrant and conflicted ethnographic account of the ways in which the utopian vision of Modernity in Theatre has translated into our practice.

As Michel Foucault\textsuperscript{440} has pointed out, “the world is not accomplice to our cognition”.\textsuperscript{441} This is never truer than when we read ethnographic accounts, where what we are told about a situation and the way the situation unfolds are sometimes running in parallel tracks. This section documents my creative journey into Punjab, activating nascent urban theatre desires, formalizing a process of training, and creating performances through translation and collaboration between cultures, regions and (in the case of the Naqqals) even genders.

\textsuperscript{440} Michel Foucault (15 October 1926 – 25 June 1984) was a French philosopher, sociologist and historian. He held a chair at the Collège de France with the title “History of Systems of Thought,” and also taught at the University of California, Berkeley. Foucault is best known for his critical studies of social institutions, most notably psychiatry, medicine, the human sciences, and the prison system, as well as for his work on the history of human sexuality.

\textsuperscript{441} As Foucault argues in his article “The Order of Discourse”, the world is not “the accomplice of our cognition”; on the contrary, discourse should be conceived as a “violence which we do to things”. The “will to power” is an attempt to endow the constant stream of creation with a finality, i.e. to give it a form. It reveals itself in all human relations, in cognitive processes and in social processes.
The argument I wish to make here is how in a cross cultural matrix with histories and modernity’s combining and arguing, a synthesis is found through a simple strategy. We do not sit on history, nor sit on ideology, nor talk about politics. For the theatre practitioner the direction in which our modernity and our tradition moves us is not towards some high values of deep truth – everything moves towards the spirit of theatre, towards dreams and what we are, where we come from, whether we are realists or magic realists. Chimera is what we make and try to activate, in our actors, in our audiences and in ourselves.

This is not a metaphorical or poetic answer. In a nation where history has as much power and beats through our blood as much as the modern, the only solution is to create beyond choosing one over the other, or subordinating one to the other – if you wish to create through the lessons of modernity, we cannot forget that we are in a (Pre) Modern matrix. If we look at our contemporary scenario and see that the “past persists within the Modern”, we subordinate one over the other. Alternatively, the truth of our (Pre) Modern matrix is that “the past persists, and the Modern persists, and the future is not victory between these two”. Creation is not about ideology or thought, but about something beyond – and that is where the idea of chimera and memory come in. A dream is not modern or prehistoric, psychoanalytic or spiritual.

The Training of the Body and the Mind

Theatre training is a phenomenon of the twentieth century, and deals with both the concept and construction of an actor’s process towards the creation of a role. There has been no systematic training for a modern actor and most attempts have been experiential and haphazard, with each director using the actors as guinea-pigs to formulate nascent and half-baked ideas. On the other hand the traditional performer has a rigorous and systematic method of training, for example the Kathakali, the ancient dance-drama from Kerala. When one refers to the training of a traditional actor there is absolutely no confusion. An actor who is training in any one of the traditional existing performance forms has the legacy of a structured system already formatted in terms of the body

442 Kathakali (from katha, story, and kali, drama) celebrated dance drama from Kerala.
movement, the voice patterns, the singing, the story-telling skills under the guru shishya parampara, along with a code of ethical values and life style structure, that are as essential as the training systems.

It was not until the beginning of the last century that an explosion of interest in the power and potential of training the actor took hold of training institutes in Europe. This was partly due to a growing awareness of the rigorous training that went into training a traditional performer and aspiration for a similar process for the modern actor studying in drama institutes was being envisaged. The beginnings of a documented training system and training tools evolved through the work of Constantin Stanislavski who, in his seminal book *An Actor Prepares*, informs both the concept and construction of the actor’s role, and consequently the entire dramatic process. He studied the actors that he admired during that period and started to extrapolate and theorize on their work. Through this observation he stipulated a series of exercises that came to be known as the ‘system’.

He underscored the significance of ‘The Magic *If*’ which was the imagination and was the starting point for all actors. *If* I was Othello, *if* I was King Lear, *if* I was Ophelia and through the magic *if*, to reach ones emotional memory. Stanislavski propounded that the actor creates from his/her own life and that is what gives flesh and blood to his/her performance. This book was not an abstraction; it is a practice oriented document, where actual experiments on training methods evolved through exercises and improvisations that were conducted with actors, and led to a working method for the actor. It was also called the ‘system’, because it was coherent, logical and systematic. This ‘method’ or ‘system’ is not a theoretical construct; it is a process. Written in a semi-fictional style, the ‘system’ was born out of a tangible activity and the solutions he found were lived and experienced creatively and not the consequence of a hypothesis that he presupposed.

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443 guru shishya parampara (the traditional form of imparting knowledge – (guru-teacher, shishya-students, and parampara- tradition)
444 Stanislavski’s system is an approach to acting developed by Constantin Stanislavski, a Russian actor, director, and theatre administrator at the Moscow Art Theatre (founded 1897). The system is the result of Stanislavski’s many years of efforts to determine how a human being can control in performance the most intangible and uncontrollable aspects of human behavior, such as emotions and artistic inspiration. The task of our generation,” Stanislavski wrote at this time, is “to liberate art from outmoded tradition, from tired cliche and to give greater freedom to imagination and creative ability.”
Once this attempt at rationalizing the acting process started, its pedagogical aims lead to a new series of studies in drama schools and drama academies. The aim was to investigate the nature of acting and also to disseminate this information and knowledge to prepare the actor for building his character. Each system of working had its own set of assumptions, about the nature and training of an actor and what the job of the actor was within this process was outlined.

Most drama schools in India started using the Stanislavski system as the basis of training and this filtered down to most people working in this field. It became part of common wisdom and was modified and adapted according to the circumstances, locale, interpretation and context of the creative theatre practitioner who used the system, as a basic tool of reference and training. It also helped in creating a craft for acting.

This system fast gained currency and most of us trained in drama school, swallowed these ideas, spat out some, radicalized the rest and changed and transformed them in accordance with our own needs and working conditions. The technique of any art no matter how inspiring it may be, can become a dampener in the hand of a mediocre artist, but the same technique in the hand of a master can become an ignited flame.


Trained at the National School of Drama, I was also influenced by the teachings of Stanislavski, but my four years of working with BV Karanth at Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal had given me an insight into the rich local traditions that existed in each state of India. When I started working with the Naqqal performers, I was not really interested in the form as something ‘material’ far removed from my urban world, to be cited and imitated, and neither was I looking to create a ‘patch’ and ‘paste’ sort of experimentation. What interested me was how performers coming from different sides of the road could, through an encounter, create magic, and create combustion.

When I formed my own group The COMPANY in 1984 in Chandigarh, I was looking for a vocabulary for training urban actors and searched for these tools in
traditional forms that were available in Punjab. Most training processes available for the urban actor in India were based on Western systems of training. As theatre in urban India had still not formulated its own acting protocols, most directors working in different regions dipped into their own local traditions in an attempt to generate their own individual acting alphabets that could best express their creative endeavours and individual affiliations.

I wanted to create a theatre genre that would supply contemporary answers for the difficulties traditional actors had been facing regarding the way they related to modernity with all its complexities. It was considered that tradition was something that belonged to some sort of vague past, and was not capable of expressing contemporary thought in a theatre performance. But for me tradition was not something 'out there', but was a living, dynamic reality capable of providing insights into the present.

The Naqqal tradition through which I explored my work belonged to rural Punjab and did not have well-developed theatrical traditions in terms of aesthetics, technique and style. But working with traditional impulses and urban actors helped me in exploring a theatrical lexis where unusual encounters could happen. This was an attempt to reach a

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445 Kavalam NarayanaPaniikkar: Panikkar (1928-) often centers his plays on existing or inverted myths and parables. Although rooted in Kerala’s heritage and the Natyasastra, he absorbed varied trends from world theatre. Adept at all traditionalist and ritualistic forms from Kerala, Panikkar employed new rhythms in his stylized often poetic and musical dialogues with a result that his drama combined music, dance and literature. He explored the martial arts of Kerala called kalari and classical forms like kathakali and kuttiyattam imaginatively to give appropriate shape and visual communication and to accentuate auditory impressions. He related the splendor of Sanskrit plays to the ingenuity of folk and tribal traditions and worked with the Chakiar, the Kutiyattam performers.

Habib Tanvir (1923-2009): Hindi and Urdu playwright, actor, director, musician manager and poet. The turning point in is life was when he directed Mitti ki gadi (Mricchakatika: a Sanskrit play written by Sudraka) for the Hindustani Theatre, introducing a few folk artist from Chhattisgarh, then left to create his own theatre group, Naya Theatre (1959), an started adapting and scripting plays in English, Hindi and Urdu. In 1970, he revived his famous production Agra Bazaar with an all folk cast from Chhattisgarh. The experiment finally became convincing and acceptable when he switched the language of his plays to the Chhattisgarh dialect. Ideologically leftist, theatrically Brechtian, he worked with genuine rural performers.

Ratan Thiyam(1948-): Manipuri director who sought a meaningful exploration of traditional culture and folk themes. His delved into the epic stories from the Mahabharata, through music, dance and martial arts of Manipur.
space where the distinction between conflicting histories did not matter, and which could be explored to express my own creative affinities. The *Naqqal* tradition had a repertoire of story-telling techniques, raucous humour, wild singing, along with its strong tradition of dancing that was performed by female impersonators. Folk performances are invariably connected with a particular place, particular practice and a particular social space. Most traditional actors practicing a particular form are part of a family troupe that comprised of actors, clowns, singers, musicians and dancers—all related to each other, either through blood or through marriage. It was a very humbling experience when they opened up their art for me and allowed me access to their training, their ritual practices, their songs and their stories.

Most of these groups have, to a great extent, moved away from their traditional art as it was not considered financially viable to continue practicing it. Today they can be found singing at a village wedding or at a village fair, gyrating furiously to the latest commercial Bollywood hit. During the Ramlila festival they earn a tidy packet, dancing to a disco beat while the singers render lyrics pertaining to the *Ramayana*.

The ballads in their repertoire may belong to the narrative tradition or include popular film songs depending on the occasion. This form (like most other local forms) has been commercialised, globalized, culturally uprooted and simplified, wrenched from the specific demands of their histories and practices. In this way many traditional arts have ceased to exist and this cultural extinction cannot be stemmed. This is an inevitable process, as circumstances change, needs change, and tastes change.

Working with them for the last twenty four years, along with urban actors, a way of working has emerged which combined, through fusion and differences, a new way of looking at history, performance, space, image, text, this synthesis that as much connects, as it throws up differences, has become for me my theatrical metaphor. From these displaced and fragmented cultural practices, a new way of performance has emerged as a

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*Ramlila:* (literally ‘Rama’s lila or play’) is a dramatic folk re-enactment of the life of Lord Ram, ending up in ten day battle between Lord Ram and Ravan, as described in the Hindu religious epic, the *Ramayana*. A tradition that originates from the Indian subcontinent, the play is staged annually often over ten or more successive nights, during the auspicious period of 'Sharad Navratras', which marks the commencement of the Autumn festive period, starting with the Dussehra Festival.
collective enterprise, equal, yet not identical but certainly without hierarchy. Standing side by side with the residues of traditional arts were actors from the urban milieu, bringing their own particular ways of working. Since the last twenty four years working in this group has been very revealing. The core of my work has been to see this group of people from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds, make a theatrical event together. For me the most important aspect of people coming together is to make the act of theatre inseparable from the needs of people to come together, to establish links, to make connections and through that to find new ways of working and creating. Through this encounter new protocols were invented, enabling me to explore a multiplicity of styles. I found during the course of my work, a willingness in both the urban and rural actors to shed the skin of their separateness and enter into the cultural and emotional terrains of each other’s lives. Our inherited set of values went through a shredding machine and I saw how working with female impersonators made the actors not only realign their concepts towards femininity on stage, but also the way masculinity was perceived and constructed on stage. Using the energies of tradition, with urban attitudes, I worked towards a crossing over, not only of gender, but also towards the dynamics of exchange, interplay and interpretation.

“The fact that the modern never properly belonged to us as Indians, or we to it, does lead to anxieties about misappropriation. But they are often pragmatically resolved. In visual arts, for example, eclecticism becomes the preferred option, and the sense of aesthetic differences begins to be resolved to our advantage.”

Process and Production

When we think of collaboration between different energies, we think in terms of trying to negotiate with diversity, which we try to evacuate for ourselves by showing vigilance to the history we live in and are aware of. Moving between rural actors and urban actors helped me in breaking boundaries, and made me recognize that the making
of theatre is a collaboration between various diverse forces that come together and make a very interesting entry into contemporary theatre.

Every time I prepare a new production, I keep on wondering if I still know how to direct. I always start from point zero. My actors often say to me, ‘you have many years of experience behind you, then why this insecurity? Why this uncertainty?’. You know how to manage a text’. But I say to myself, ‘perhaps, I now know a little better how to search and process. Theatre is an adventure, because one never knows where it’s going to take one. The production slowly reveals itself, like a chrysalis coming out of a cocoon. It is this mystery, this alchemy of the unknown, the unforeseen elements that make theatre so alluring. One never knows what will be the shape and form of the production until it burst forth onto the stage, and is received by an audience. Whenever I decide to direct a play, I choose the text according to my state of mind. I look for myself in the characters that are being portrayed. Each production of mine becomes a world that I create along with the actors. I become inextricably linked with the story of the characters and become as much part of the journey as the actors. I know it is not possible to be completely honest in life, but when I direct actors on stage it becomes hard to avoid the truth. Peeling the layers off the actors’ cliché and congested gestures in order to produce moments that are dazzling does not only produce truth on stage, but also forces me the director, to confront my own masks as well. Each text I pick up has its own compulsions, limitations and subversions – working on it internally as well as chalking out patterns of doing and suggesting modes of thinking for the actors and director.

To come back to the basic question; How do I as a director make a text ready for performance, and how do I recognize when the performance qualifies as ‘ready’, is a question that lies at the heart of my directorial search and anxiety. Yet these words ‘training’ ‘performance’, can become acts of interpretation, and hence of debate. When I as a director create a performance, it is based on the least tangible elements of my experience. It is my way of responding to the world in a way which is not always conscious or deliberate, but mysterious and deeply felt.
For me, sometimes a gesture from one actor is enough to frame a situation as performance, and sometimes a hundred dancers leaping in space can leave me cold. To write about the transformation of a text into a performance is a daunting task. Daunting because if I had any road map, or even the beginnings of a concise answer, I would retire.

I have not formulated any theory about my work, yet that does not mean that there is no theory behind my work. What you say or write about your work really has no meaning as every thing that you do in a production happens during the rehearsal, with actors and their imagination— who are the sole arbiters on the stage which they make manifest through the performance. That becomes the theory and the research regarding methodology and practice. Many theories have been formulated and many directors write about their views on theatre, but to me this is mere rhetoric as through these writings one does not get any idea about how actual rehearsals are conducted. But yes, there are methods and every director has one, maybe an unconscious one. I am sure I have one too, I don’t really know it. But what is significant for me is to ‘watch’ and ‘listen’ to the actors during rehearsals. I do this with passion and concentration. If I had to formulate a theory it would be that you ‘have to believe in what you are doing, to believe in the emotional turmoil, anger, joy, pain strength and weakness of the character you are portraying’. It is essential that an actor feels like a child, learning, seeing, experiencing everything afresh. It is not only by becoming a child, but by entering into your childhood. This can only be possible if an actor strips away the clichés that have been gathered and allow the imagination to play. The most significant aspects of how a character evolves and grows is actually parts of the unrecorded history of the actors, their stories, their testimonies, their struggle to reach the spirit of their characters. As a director, I provide the hawk’s eye—never relaxed, never losing sight. Each lapse in concentration, or an actor resorting to a cliché, is pounced upon and plucked out. I have never set out any theoretical positions, and feel a deep mistrust for supremacy of the word over action. I am more in the business of creating theatre, analyzing plays, creating a visual image to unearth the hidden text then to theorize or create a rhetoric about my work.
Punjabi Theatre - 1984

Punjabi culture lends itself very easily to a myth making industry that dressed its reality in such a way that the ‘copy’ became more real than the ‘original’. As a copy is always a distorted image of the real, a few exaggerated, larger than life qualities started getting associated with the Punjabi theatre. As a theatre director certain questions have concerned me. First and foremost the issue of language. Punjabi as spoken in Hindi films is a gruff patios of pidgin Punjabi interspersed with juicy aphorisms. This became the gauge in the way the language was perceived. When I decided to set up a Punjabi theatre repertory, I was teased by my theatre colleagues who said, “The next time we meet Neelam, she will be the impresario of a giddha and bhangra team.” All this was said in jest but somewhere it set me thinking. It was almost as if the image of Punjabi culture, as something loud, frivolous, comic and crass, had become ossified. The cliché that reiterates, ‘Punjab has agriculture, but no culture’. It has always struck me that those who rely on this silly line must be far more illiterate than those they deride, knowing as they do so little about Punjab and Punjabis. I have never been able to separate culture from the earth. To till the land and see the tree you planted grow is akin to the joy that an artist feels when he/she has painted a painting or created a play. Culture is inextricably linked with agriculture. The Punjabi language, dance, music is replete with images from the earth and the joys of procreation, growth and renewal. I must admit in all honesty, and even with a sense of pride, that I have always enjoyed the mesmerizing beat of the dhol and the vigorous movements of the giddha and bhangra. The lyrics, replete with innuendos- earthy and risqué- appeal to me. I used to wonder why Punjabi was considered an unsophisticated language and why the Sikh were always being seen as the bumbling taxi driver in Bollywood films or was the butt of jokes. I questioned why he was never shown as the lover or as a hero in Hindi films. My mind resonated with verses from the Guru Granth Sahib and songs from Heer Ranja, Sohini Mahiwal and Sassi Punnu( sufi love stories., Punjabi folklore)

When I first arrived in Chandigarh in 1984, I attended a lecture by a distinguished theatre critic who while delivering a paper on Indian culture referred to Punjabi culture as the ‘Balle Balle’ culture, with a dismissive gesture of his hand. At that time I made light
of that jibe, but in retrospect it really bothered me. To me this seemed like a full-blown dilemma of description.

It was difficult working in an environment that mocks its own culture. Along with this was the pusillanimous attitude of the Government towards the arts. One incident that stands out is when my group was invited to perform at the ‘Festival d’ Avignon’. The Punjab government had agreed to fund the travel expenses. Details had been worked out, the airline identified, the baggage weighed and two weeks before our departure I was tersely informed that the chief minister had refused to sign the grant file. Even more ridiculous was the explanation offered. The then Chief Minister’s party had lost a local by-election and he was in no frame of mind to be generous to a local theatre group performing in France. ‘I have no voters in Avignon, why should I waste money to pay for shows that bring no political benefits to my party’. So much for the state as patron of the arts.

As a theatre director working in the Punjabi language, I am concerned with doing theatre, not trapped by question of whether the theatre I do is regional or national. I work in the language of the state with actors from the state in which I live. It is ironical that in Punjab I am perceived as a director who is ‘not-one-of-us’. The reason being, I take stories and plays from different parts of the world, rather than direct plays written by Punjabi playwrights. It is strange that while we are quick to defend the freedom of the artist, we sometimes hail fusillades at those who do not fit into the boundaries of our expectation. I believe that any play, text or literature carried from one language to another enriches and adds to the living tradition of theatre. By doing western plays in Punjabi translation, does not in any way damage my relationship with my language. For me its like expanding what I truly loved, theatre. To be more specific, everything has its source that sets the imagination to work. The stage is an empty space, what is it filled by? Language? Scenery? Props? It is actually the imagination of the audience and the actors that are bound together for that brief fleeting moment in which theatre is created. It is the discovery of lost relationships, between man and society, between the visible and the

489The Festival d’Avignon, or Avignon Festival, is an annual arts festival held in French city of Avignon. Founded in 1947 by Jean Vilar, it is the oldest extant festival in France and one of the world’s greatest.
invisible, between languages and genres. What exactly are these intangibles? What is this game that the actors are inviting the audience to participate in? Is this the magic of theatre? But what does it really mean?

Devising Through Improvisation

Most of the actors who are part of my theatre production have worked with me for over twenty years. The work that I have done with them has already given them a sense of self-discipline required for an ongoing sense of learning regarding the work. But with each play, I expect them to work beyond the theatrical conventions that have been accumulated over the years. The first process is to make them shed acquired mannerisms, gestures, voice patterns from previous successful productions. The entire process requires an unlearning, a deconditioning, a peeling away of the known, in favour of the impossible, the unknown potential that is buried, hidden, somewhere beneath and needs to be searched out. This is only possible when an actor shows responsiveness, openness, an ability to have a team spirit. For all this to happen the body must be sensitive and receptive, that is just one aspect of the requirement. The emotions must be open, the voice must be malleable, and the mind must be alert. Very often, the actor makes the mistakes of not being able to separate the real from the fake. This recognition comes only when the actor surrenders completely and is willing to undertake a journey within the self to shake off dead habits that have become encrusted within him.

An example

In 2004, the actor Lisa Ray came to Chandigarh to prepare for the role of a widow in Deepa Mehta’s film, ‘Water.’ Her coming to Chandigarh and working with my group was an attempt to give her a window into another kind of life. Lisa has spent a major part of her life between Bombay and Toronto. Being transported to a village in Punjab must have been an unusual experience for her. Making cow dung cakes, bathing under a hand pump, washing clothes in the river, milking the cows, exposed her to an entirely different rhythm of life and relationships. What was interesting for me was to

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449 Lisa Ray—a film actor who did the main lead in the Deepa Mehta film ‘Water’, a film on widows.
450 Deepa Mehta 1950 in Amritsar, Punjab, is an Indian-born Canadian film director and screenwriter.
observe whether actors from different cultural backgrounds could transcend the habits formed by the society within which they have lived, and take the risk of entering unexpected zones, outside the circle of their experiences. My workshop with her was based on the premise that if an actor experiences the physical world of the character that he/she is portraying, then a new set of principles could be inscribed on the body. This may seem an artifice, but changed material circumstances can alter inner reality. I understand that when Ben Kingsley\textsuperscript{451} played the role of Gandhi he prepared for the role by becoming a vegetarian, learning to spin the wheel, sleeping on a hard floor, wearing a dhoti and also practicing celibacy.

I always like to make my actors work in alternative spaces. I like to take them away from their familiar rehearsal space and make them do for example, a death scene in the kitchen, a love scene in the garden, a crowd scene under the table, a rape scene in a trolley, a meal in a tub of water. To play the scene illogically and irrationally can sometimes (most times) reveal fresh dimensions of the way it can be played in complete contrast to the way it was written. This method, at least for me and my group, throws up endless surprises in the way scenes can be conceived and constructed outside the conventional ways of working. Sometimes I make them do an intimate scene while chopping wood, or washing clothes, exhausting them through a physical action that is repetitive, and invariably, far removed from the context of the scene. This gives them a completely fresh perspective of the scene. And physical exhaustion can make every molecule in their body alert and alive- which helps in giving a transparency to the scene. As the body is too exhausted to resort to the familiar, to the known – a voice, and an energy emerges that is not driven by the ego or by virtuosity, but by a psycho-somatic integrity that physical exhaustion and changed perspectives can bring about.

My work with my actors involves a whole lot of physical action. I like the actors to create a relationship with objects. A connection with the material world. A sense of ‘inner’ truth through ‘outer’ reality. When I work I like them to do, rather then speak.

\textsuperscript{451}Ben Kingsley, played the role Gandhi (1982) in a film directed by Richard Attenborough.
What ever they do on the stage, must be really done in actuality. They must believe in the action that they are undertaking and believe in the physicality of the action. When they write a letter they must not just scribble but actually write the letter, when they read they must actually read, when they cook on the stage or drink tea it must be real and not faked, or be a simulated action. The truth of an action will release the truth of an emotion. Once the truth of the action has been established, this leads to the truth of the emotions as well. In this whole process improvisations play a very important role in making a production imaginative and also in enabling the actor to swerve away from cliché acting. Improvisation gives the actors space to go into any direction that their imagination carries them towards. This, for me, is the key for preparing the actor. This helps to ‘unsettle’ the actors’ habitual response and open them to varied energies, and also work on different sorts of exchange between the actor and his co-actors, and the actors and the audience.

When I build a production I have no formal form or style in mind, no idea about how the play will begin, evolve and end. The relationship between surface forms and the underlying impulses is what provides the sense of truth to a play. Rehearsal is the ritual through which the intricate network of relationships and images will emerge- nothing is preplanned, everything is a surprise. I always tell the actors why would an audience want to watch you, there has to be something ‘special’ that you do that would create in them a desire to watch you. What is that energy that will pull an audience in your direction, make them interested in your world. Mere external effects will not make an audience sit up and take an interest in you. It is the quality of ‘truth’ that can never be faked, that can never be artificially constructed. It is this energy that radiates and pulls an audience towards you. This can only happen if the actors take an intense journey within themselves, by stripping away their artifice, their silly mannerisms, their clichés, their stock responses and discover a special form of perception. To experience a performance truthfully, you have to alter the way you look at performance. Suddenly one is shaken out of one’s everyday complacency and something fresh and vital gets exchanged. This can only happen if an actor can transform his/her entire being. It’s a sort of alchemy, a mystery

I have never had intellectual discussion with my actors, about the text, as I do believe that the rational mind is not such a powerful tool in creativity as instincts,
intuition and make-belief are. The development of the intuition in theatre is stimulated in many different ways through the body. The body is the vehicle and the carrier of different memories, instincts and also is the mediator of all experiences, the stockroom of knowledge and memory, it is when knowledge, mind, body and emotions coalesce into one another that an intricate web of connectivity takes place and flows out towards the audience.

Before I begin any work, I make my actors go through body and voice improvisations for almost half the rehearsal schedule, with the sole aim to unlock and release the hidden potential of each actor and also to discover the images hidden within the play. For me, it is essential to translate the text into visual images. For a long time the actors and myself collaborate in creating a visual language that will become metaphor of the text. But these images are within the text, whenever I have tried to impose images from the outside, I have been forced to reject them and replace them with what actually stems from the text. These images become raw material for the performance.

The way this preparation is done, is to allow the actors a lot of time for improvisations, giving situations from the play and making the actor position himself/herself within that situation. Work on stage business, play with objects, collective exercises involving group rhythms and vocal exchange. Using whatever one can lay hands on, balls, cloth, food, garden implements, trunks, sticks, mud sand, dried leaves, sticks, stones colour, newspapers, mattress, water, make-up, simple everyday objects that make-up our daily and ordinary lives. To try and use familiar objects in an unfamiliar way. This sort of preparatory work is like preparing an actor and the team, not only for ‘individual’ work, but also create a pooling of the creative impulse.

In my recent work I have tried to enlarge the consideration of text to take into account meanings that are constructed during performances. I have addressed classical text from the resource of my own personal expression and imagination. The challenge is
locating plays by Lorca\textsuperscript{452}, Racine\textsuperscript{453}, Giraudoux\textsuperscript{454}, Ibsen\textsuperscript{455}, Themba\textsuperscript{456}, Karnad\textsuperscript{457}, Lessing\textsuperscript{458} in my own social history, vernacular moorings and local traditions.

**Personal Histories, Journeys. Rehearsal space, Determines Production**

The endless ways in which space can be transformed, articulated and animated is what I experienced when I built an amphitheatre in my back-garden. But the vagaries of the weather and irascible neighbours forced me to find an alternative space. The adjoining house belonged to a relative and had been lying semi-constructed for a long time. It is interesting to note, how the space in which you work, to a great extent determines how space will be used in the final production. The unfinished house had been lying in disuse for the last few years and had a forlorn look to it. The walls were up and so was the flooring, with wooden frames defining the doors and windows; enough in its unfinished,

\textsuperscript{452} Spanish pronunciation: ( 1898 –1936) was a Spanish poet, dramatist and theatre director. He was murdered at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War by persons likely affiliated with the Nationalist cause. He is thought to be one of the many victims who 'disappeared' and were executed by the Nationalists.

\textsuperscript{453} Jean Racine (1639 – 1699) was a French dramatist, one of the "big three" of 17th century France (along with Molière and Corneille), and one of the most important literary figures in the Western tradition. Racine was primarily a tragedian, though he did write one comedy.

\textsuperscript{454} Hippolyte Jean Giraudoux (1882 – 1944) was a French novelist, essayist, diplomat and playwright. He is considered among the most important French dramatists of the period between World War I and World War II.

\textsuperscript{455} Henrik Johan Ibsen (1828 – 1906) was a major 19th-century Norwegian playwright, theatre director, and poet. He is often referred to as the "father of modern drama" and is one of the founders of modernism in the theatre. His plays were considered scandalous to many of his era, when Victorian values of family life and propriety largely held sway in Europe and any challenge to them was considered immoral and outrageous.

\textsuperscript{456} Can’ Themba was a South African short-story writer

\textsuperscript{457} Girish Raghunath Karnad (1938-) is a contemporary writer, playwright, actor and movie director in Kannada language.

\textsuperscript{458} Doris Lessing (1919-) is a Zimbabwean-British writer, author of works such as the novels *The Grass is Singing* and *The Golden Notebook*. In 2007, Lessing won the Nobel Prize in Literature
slightly dusty state to allow us sanctuary. With our harmoniums and drums, our backdrops and platforms, we set ourselves up like a ragtag army of *de trop* refugees. This became our new rehearsal space. Pulling wires from our side of the house, we suspended naked bulbs and managed to get a fan whirring. The openings in the living room became entry points and the gaps in the wall were covered with black cloth to keep peeping toms away. Theatre teaches you adaptability and within moments we had adjusted to our new space feeling we had always been there.

The first show of *Kitchen Katha*459 was done there. We removed the French window frames, pitched up a marquee in the garden, blanked the entrance of the living room from the rest of the house and performed before an audience of one hundred people.

The change from an amphitheatre to a construction site changed the nature of my work. I saw how the work was being shaped by the space in which we rehearsed. When we worked outdoors, my productions had endless entries and exits, flamboyant costumes, rickshaws, crowd scenes, and elaborate sets. It now became more restrictive, intimate and contained. Once the actors made their entry on stage they never left it, as there were no exit points available for them. The other interesting factor was that all backstage activity ceased as no backstage area was available now! It was as if all the artistic decisions had to been worked out through practical solutions decided by the existing rehearsal space.

Due to working in an intimate space and seeing the actors from close proximity, I could hear the changed patterns in the actors breathing during an emotional moment: the capturing of a sigh, the welling up of laughter. Now I only wanted to showcase my work in personalized spaces, without the grandeur of a proscenium arch, velvet curtains and push-back seats. I remember that our run-down ramshackle rehearsal space in this under construction house had a festival director gushing that it would take Peter Brook many million dollars to create this sort of atmosphere for his theatrical productions!

**The Search for a Language of Training**

459 The play has been written by Surjit Pattar, and is based on Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Hot Chocolate* and Isabel Allende’s *Aphrodite.*
The starting point for any rehearsal is punctuality and the actors who come late are berated vehemently. Latecomers are slowly eased out of the group, as this is one rule that cannot be trifled with. If theatre was an individual activity then the way you scheduled time would be a personal matter, but as it is a community activity, one member cannot make the rest of the group wait. The other rules which are equally significant are a respect for the space in which you are working along with all the objects and properties that are provided to the actor in the course of the rehearsal. Constant instructions are given to the actors that most of the material that is used by the performer during rehearsals must be given the same respect, if not more, as you would give to your personal belongings.

I realize it is essential that actors comprehend the script completely and therefore give them clear instructions. I have realized that you can only push an actor as far as he is willing to go. The analogy that comes to my mind is that you cannot force a flower to open before its time; the same is true of actors. Some actors can be pushed harder than others, some wilt under pressure, while others flourish. It is important that an actor not only understands what he is doing on stage but also understand why he is doing it. I tell the actors that every gesture, expression and movement that is used on stage must not only have a purpose but must also be measured with precision and contain an idea. No gesture, movement or position can be an empty shell. It must become the vehicle for an idea to be shared, communicated and illuminated. Vagueness or generalities have no place in the theatre. I also stress that whatever thoughts they have while performing must be in relationship to the thoughts of the character they are portraying. “I must hear you think,” is one of my favourite lines to my actors.

One of my actors that I interviewed for the thesis narrated his experience while creating his role in the play ‘Little Eyolf’ by Henrik Ibsen. While playing the role of Little Eyolf tells the story of the Allmer family. At the outset of the play, the father, Alfred, has just returned from a trip to the mountains. While there, he resolved to focus foremost on raising his son Eyolf, rather than continue to work on his book. Eyolf, though described as having “beautiful, intelligent eyes,”

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460 Little Eyolf tells the story of the Allmer family. At the outset of the play, the father, Alfred, has just returned from a trip to the mountains. While there, he resolved to focus foremost on raising his son Eyolf, rather than continue to work on his book. Eyolf, though described as having “beautiful, intelligent eyes,”
Eyolf, and as we started with a sense of journey- I saw myself as water, a bubble, something ephemeral. As I knew I was going to die, I saw myself as a bird, a balloon- so to manifest the feeling I had towards my own character, I chose to establish my character through blowing soap bubbles. The image of the feet sticking out of the tub- (very difficult for a actor to be cramped within a narrow tub, and only let his feet be within the field of visibility) I suffered from cramps every time after the rehearsal, but for me it was a very crucial position. What happens to Eyolf, where does he go? I wanted to show just the feet- it has a reverence- also it was his feet that were damaged. So his feet is being nurtured, massaged, and made to heal. The clash between father and mother were due to the fact that he was an invalid, with debility in his feet. Actors want to take challenges- it may be difficult but what is the fun without risk461:

It is essential that the rehearsals create a place were an actor feels safe to share his deepest emotions and thoughts with a group without fear of failure. I do not understand the concept of the director who monitors every pause and controls each movement of the actor, as if he is designing a mathematical formula, forgetting that actors are alive and their bodies have a will of their own. An actor with ‘The Company,’ Vajinder Bhardawaj during the rehearsal of the play The Suit’ articulated his process at arriving an image to support the text.

In The Suit, at one point of the story, in a soliloquy, I was looking for an image to externalize my inner dilemma. I took a rope and started encasing my face (the image that I had in my mind was between a voodoo doll and a mummy). As the rope was difficult to

461 The play Little Eyolf was staged by ‘The Company’ on the 16th December 2008 at the Kamani theatre in Delhi. This play was a commissioned project by the Norwegian Embassy and the Ibsen society. The remarks above where made by the actor Hitender Kumar who played the role of ‘Little Eyolf’.
manipulate, it was substituted by a bandage. It was as if I had to shut off my pain through the bandages. After that I started cutting paper masks and throwing them on the stage. Almost as if I was removing the masks from my life and facing my pain head-on. It also became more than that. The various facets of my being were being made visible through this tale of pain.462 (June 2008; Chandigarh)

To me the worst director is one who wishes to squeeze out all the fun from rehearsals and theatre and who looks at each production that celebrates life and laughter as a threat to an intellectual position. I can never be one of those gummy directors who sit in a corner chewing their own cud, wanting to monitor every move. Neither do I believe in working out my play in isolation, far removed from the body impulses of the actors. I work out all the moves with my actors during rehearsal. Nothing is pre-planned or pre-prepared. I have no problems sharing my uncertainties and vulnerabilities with my cast, making them participate in an ambiguous journey that we have all decided to undertake together.

Process and Search

Most of my productions begin with an idea, which is sometimes fairly amorphous. But there will be one idea that will grab me and I hold on to it, hoping it will germinate. In this process a seed is born, which is then nurtured and made fertile by the work.

There are so many plays within a play: First I grasp the obvious layer of the narrative, then suddenly something else leaps out and I try to grab it. During rehearsals something else happens, each actor discovers the story differently, things start to expand,

462 The play is based on a three page story, and dramatized by Surjit Patar. In this understated theatrical fable, penned by South African writer Can Themba, a young married couple (Philemon and Matilda - Bunty and Mina in the Punjabi version) are faced with a tragic moral dilemma. When the husband discovers his wife with her lover, he forces her to keep the man’s discarded suit and treat it as an honored guest. The suit of clothes even joins them on walks. Despite the absurd nature of this punishment, it slowly provokes the free-spirited but repressed wife’s mental destruction—a metaphor for the insidious emotional abuse of apartheid that plagued South Africa. This is the story of a bitter, and brutal account of the collapse of an apparently happy marriage, of infidelity, alienation and the inability to communicate. ( ‘The Suit’ performed by the theatre group ‘the company’ in Punjabi – performed in Chandigarh, Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bhopal, Ludhiana, Amritsar, Trivandrum with the show in the year 2007-2009)
and multiple visions enter the frame. Each actor is like an explorer with a torch and a map trying to trace a road that will lead them to the inner core of the character.

A brief sketch of some of the productions done by ‘The Company’ Yerma: 1992

Lorca’s Yerma\textsuperscript{463} required a rethinking of the meaning and performances of the character both on the stage and in the text. To examine the way the characters develop, change and respond to the events in their life. These events, which might happen outside the frame of visibility, sometimes not even noticeably alter the manner in which the characters appear in the play.

*Yerma* is categorised as a folk tragedy, but while reading it, I did not think that it was a bleak, despairing saga of a woman’s inability to conceive a child. What really attracted me was the poetry and its intense imagery. The pagan woman, the crazy girl, the pregnant wife, the laundresses, the actors in the village fair, were really funny characters and I was sure that I knew them. They interested me, their world attracted me. I saw *Yerma* as a joyous woman who, on her wedding night, is smelling green apples on her wedding sheet. This certainly is not a sad or morose woman!

Being a celebrated play *Yerma* had became a symbol of a doomy, character carrying the angst of being barren and hence not a complete woman. (a traditional point of view) I shifted the meaning from its realistic framework, making it a theatrical metaphor. *Yerma* was earthy Spain, which I shifted to Punjab, with its language, song, colour and all the Spanish characters felt very much at home in a Punjabi village. The struggle between sterility and the forces of fecundity in this classic had got fixed over the years in the way it was ‘looked’ at ‘interpreted’ and ‘analyzed’. My attempt was to free the narrative from its fixed position of seeing, by allowing fresh meaning to be explored and articulated. The search for characters and the search for costumes are interlinked. The

\textsuperscript{463}The play is about unfulfillment. Its heroine, Yerma—\textsuperscript{—}\textsuperscript{—}and even her name translates literally from the Spanish as ‘barren’—is a young peasant woman at first happily enough married. But she longs for children. Years pass and her need for children, and the pressure of the society she lives in, become unbearable. Her honor does not permit infidelity, and her husband is contented enough in his childless marriage. Eventually her character and her circumstances force her into one last irrevocable act—\textsuperscript{—}the murder of her husband, who dies, strangled in a final embrace.
moment an actor enters the stage, the audience must be able to locate the character, socially, psychologically, in terms of their status, family life etc. In *Yerma*, I layered the costumes the actors wore, a skirt upon a skirt, a shirt upon a shirt. Many scarves were given to the actors, some to wrap around their head, tie around the waist, drape around the shoulder, flinging casually to become a swing, a baby’s cradle, a mask, a shopping bag. This served two purposes, the practical and the artistic. As the actors play many roles, a slight shift in the costumes or a removal of one layer of clothing makes them enter into another character.

The laundresses scene in *Yerma*, was the scene which I had a lot of fun doing. The scene is fairly central to the play and in a certain way shows the thoughts of the community. How women, come to wash clothes in a river and exchange venomous information about *Yerma’s* inability to conceive. I situated the scene in a *dhobi ghat*, pulling the experiences from the archives of memory and saw it enter into the work space. The woman, with layered costumes, looking larger then their original size, washing clothes, drying turbans, squeezing sheets, starching saris, with buckets of water flowing all over the stage, dovetailed with memories that were reminiscent of my childhood.

The final act, where *Yerma* strangulates her husband, made me deconstruct the text visually and conceptually, and rearranged some of its main motifs. What are the images and rituals connected with death? There is the white sheet, fire, earthen pot, and

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464 Just short of our house, near a small bend, was a dhobi ghat. The clothes and sheets from the various hospitals and hostels were washed here. There was a banyan tree at the entrance to the dhobi ghat and its shadows created arabesque patterns on the summer ground. At the base of the tree was a stone image, smeared with fresh vermilion paste, lit with a small diya. The stone tiered structure of the ghat, with its eroded surface, had black water running through it. Bare bodied dhobis lined up against the stone parapet, swishing a length of cloth in the air before slapping it down on the hard surface leaving a debris of dirt, detergent and soapsuds.

I would roll up my salwar and like the dhobis, plunge myself into the astringent water feeling my feet sink into the mud. The water bubbled between my toes while a nimbus of mosquitoes left red blotches on my body. The drying clothes dancing in the sun, endless yards of dyed turbans and long saris, revealed and hid images of the various people who entered and exited the drama of this ghat. Many years later while choreographing the laundress scene in Federico Garcia Lorca’s play *Yerma*, I recognized the connection between my memories and these images. The realization of the overlapping of life, fiction, creativity and play blossomed within me with a force that I have still not forgotten.

302
because she kills her husband there is a sense of blood. Yerma enters the stage, carrying a brass thali with five diyas. The figure five was essential as it represented to me the five elements of life, the five elements that make the body. Along with this she carries a clay pot that contains red water to suggest blood. During her dialogue with her husband, she pours the red water extinguishing the diyas (earthen lamps, lit with oil) and also symbolically anointing her hands (as the reference from the text indicates that she kills with her hands). She then moves towards her husband and hurls the remaining contents of the pot towards him, while simultaneously a white sheet like a rang patti (A hand held half curtain) comes up in front of the husband on which the red colour splatters. She then breaks the pot on the ground to the sound of mourning. The sound patterns had been created by Karanth, where he took the traditional notes of the syapa (professional mourners), and recast them to produce sounds that were stylized.

Phaedra465 2000

This is an extract from my work diary during the time when I was rehearsing Jean Racine play.

The question in Phaedra is who is faithful to whom? Paradoxes of fidelity – a magnificent question. In Phaedra, everyone is unfaithful to everyone and yet the main question is that everyone has a desire for fidelity. Passion and fidelity are abstract questions; they have to do with matters of the heart. I saw all the characters living in their own circle of solitude. Most of the objects chosen for the play were shaped round. The earth is round, the circle of life, what goes round comes around, was reiterated in the production design. Phaedra lies in a round shaped bed, encased as if in a coffin or in a water-bag, almost like being inside the bowels of the earth or inside the womb. Her unresolved passion for her step son was shown by making the actor enter into a huge metal caldron filled to the brim with grain, in fact brimming over, while she sits within it, as a goddess of fertility, of plenitude. All the movements of the actor in the caldron

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465Jean Racine was born in 1639 and educated by the Jansenists. Rejecting these teachings, Racine began writing for the theatre in 1660, and by the time of Phaedra, performed in 1677, had nine plays to his credit, several of them masterpieces of the French classical theatre and containing some of the greatest poetry in the French language.
were circular, with the grain grating against the iron vessel creating the sounds of churning.

While directing Jean Racine’s *Phaedra*, I found that the moment the male characters came on stage, my imagination would get blocked. Further reading made me realize the need for shifting sequences and striking imaginary dialogues with presences that I made absent, in an attempt to make them more palpable and real. Realistic narration was shed and replaced by soliloquies and monologues. I saw the play as a conflict between the voice of reason and the demands of passion. *Phaedra*, dammed by history and myth, had been represented as a woman who lusted for her son. But I saw her as a vulnerable person assailed by her fears, her loneliness and her need for love. *Phaedra* is slowly dismantled from her mythic image and seen as a woman raging with passion—a passion that was outside the limits of conventionality. The myth is elucidated through theatrical means, writing with the actors’ bodies the fateful intersection between gender and empire. I made it a play of two characters, *Phaedra* and her maid Anenone. *Phaedra*’s body became the text written in space and the actress played reflectively with the meaning that she created. In a certain way this sort of performance became a theatrical mirror, inviting the audience to shift their ideas on how desire and ethics are constructed by thwarting any attempts to arrive at a biological or ideological truth. Neither Greece nor India needed to be evoked to contextualize the story. The *mise en scène* is semiotic, not as a site to produce historical signs, but a space whereby the language of theatre can manifest itself—montage, non-linear time, simultaneous action, songs, dancing, chorus etc.

“The vehicle of drama is flesh and blood, and here completely different laws are at work. The vehicle and the messenger cannot be separated.”* Plays, especially from classical literature, have got ensnared in canonical production styles that have over the years become prescriptive and fixed, both in the way it is reproduced and received. Almost as if the play, which is a ‘flesh and blood’ thing, has been sealed by time and its rendering is pre-decided. In my production of *Phaedra*, I tried to foreground the ambition, violence and misogyny and sheer political expediency of patriarchy within which *Phaedra* is placed. I had complete sympathy for *Phaedra* and I wanted to set up a

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466 The Empty Space Peter Brook; page 22.
critique of the patriarchal system, in an attempt to strip away layers of time and conventions and to allow the text to speak for itself.

Naga-Mandala 2005

Naga-Mandala was a play I first directed in 1989. To revisit the same in 2005 was a difficult decision. How do I wipe the slate clean, get rid of all the baggage of the previous production? The task became even more difficult when part of the cast is the same, along with the music. But before I thought of doing the play, I wanted to know if the text still spoke to me or engaged my passion. It was amazing to realize that even after fifteen years the play had a freshness and relevance that I could deeply connect with. So overwhelming was my excitement that I could feel images chase one another. Normally one has to read a text several times before it becomes visible. In most plays there is never any congruence between the play as read and the play when performed, but this play seduced me with new layers of expression that I had overlooked in my previous production.

Yet I was assailed by many questions. How was I going to resolve the indefinite tension between the real and the otherworldly characters? How to create the transformation of the husband into a snake? How to communicate the philosophical and conceptual resonance inherent in the play? How to resolve the contradictions of a text that is set in reality, but at the same time eschews reality?

Revisiting a play also meant that I had to consciously avoid using any of the images, movements or choreography of the previous play. It was almost as if I was playing out my own duality along with the characters of the play.

I approached the play with playfulness. Making the actors improvise from the play without the text. Nudging them into taking risks, sloughing off fixed approaches, pushing them towards developing their own personal vocabulary, continuously urging them to experiment, explore, have fun, ritualize, dramatize, push all frontiers, drop the confinement of their limits and learn to fly. Provoking them into exploring the ambiguous world that Girish Karnad creates where fictional characters and real characters
intermingle and the lines between the visible and the invisible are blurred. Certain extraordinary things happened during rehearsals which I tried to hold on to, with the hope that the spontaneous recklessness does not get lost in a structured performance.

I have always been more interested in process then in results. For *Naga Mandala*, the actors were told to pick up whatever object attracted them, which enabled them to discover the character in all its infinite possibilities. As we perform in a space that is near the garden, a whole range of garden instruments are lying around. For the scene of the chorus of flames, the actors had squashed into a wheelbarrow and carried baskets in which they had put in tea and biscuits and other edibles that had been leftover from their tea break. This was the scene of the chorus of flames who have escaped from their home, to come to an abandoned temple. It was as if the metaphysical elements in the play are given a situation that is mundane. This clash provided between the ‘mundane’ and the ‘fantastical’ provided the dramatic tension.

I always tell my actors – be outrageous in your imagination, but what ever you do on the stage has to be justified through word, action and the given situation. Even more significant than that is to personalize your role - draw it from the self, from your emotional, psychological and imaginative apparatus, bringing into play your memories, your histories, your experiences, your observation – filter them through your imagination and make them layered and rich in texture and thought, but never lose sight of the role. Your entire line of thought and state of thought has to resonate with the role that you are portraying.

In the transformation scene, the scene where the snake after drinking the magic potion, the actor playing the role runs wildly across the stage, from right to left and from left to right, banging against walls, falling, rising as if trapped in a storm - he then falls into a huge tub which is then covered with a wide piece of cloth. The cloth becomes the force against which he struggles. The cloth, swaying and flapping with the force of the actor’s struggle, makes it seems as if a mythic and epic struggle is going on between man and the forces of nature. Sudden silence and then slowly beneath the cloth, emerges the character/snake transformed physically and emotionally, slithering out
of ‘the hole’ to meet his beloved. It is as if a new birth has taken place, and the creature of this new creation emerges, like a butterfly from a chrysalis- shedding layers and layers behind him.

Developing a script through improvisations

In the last couple of years scripts have evolved during workshops. I give an idea, or a situation to the group, and they figure out various ways in which the idea can develop. Through physical action through improvisation, through objects, through memories that loop, and swirl, take sharp times, and sometimes even play against the text. The basic instruction given before the workshop begins is- ‘what ever you do, please don’t do it to show to me or to yourself, this is a sure way of showing nothing’. This rehearsal space is not to prove anything, but a space to train yourself for theatre. Sometimes, in the absence of a script, rehearsals can become chaotic. This is how the plays Kitchen Katha and Sibo in the Supermarket evolved. For months, my actors and I had been picking ideas, developing them, discarding them and then picking up something else. While working with Surjit Patar, (my collaborator for the past twenty years) I would find that he would go off in one direction, while I would be lost somewhere else. A skeletal blueprint about the story was drawn out through improvisation and creation of images. Surjit Patar was trying to create not only the text, but also the context in which to locate the daily struggles of life and history.

But I was floundering in my own uncertainties. I saw exhaustion and panic written on the faces of the actors. It was as if there was a collective mental block. The actors looked at each other, uncertain of what they should do or think. Unable to create anything

Sibo In Supermarket is based on a two-page short story called “Supermarket Soliloquy” by Moira Crosbie Lovell. In the story the narrator uses a Supermarket for an allegorical exploration of the past. It is in the impersonal environment of the supermarket that Sibo recognizes what she has lost. Each product that she picks up sets off a series of memories, that makes connections with what she has left behind.

It is the story of a woman, who is struggling to find a space that she can call home in the face of disruptive displacement. In the supermarket, she sets her self in two time frames. The time that she left behind, and the present. And she travels through both of them simultaneously. There are traces of events, people and emotions in Sibo’s mind, which she manages to trace in the disinfected floors of the supermarket. The story is about a woman who has left her homeland, whether by choice or the force of circumstances, and the struggle to reconstruct a semblance of home.
new they rehearsed old ideas, dead images, and cliché humour. The actors would look at me for practical guidance and I would feel despondent, because I knew I had nothing to give them. Everyday I would try to resurrect the script with a saline drip, but what I desperately needed was creative adrenalin.

Bhadhur, a female impersonator, who has been with the group for many years, began his improvisation by opening a trunk. He took out a wig, combed it carefully and lovingly pinned it on his head. Then he began hooking a blouse around his non-existent breasts, and then wrapped a shimmering sari around his ageing body. After this he pulled out an onion, and started to peel it layer by layer, munching it with intense concentration. By now the entire rehearsal space was smelling of onions. To watch a piece of improvisation performed truthfully is to see in a different way. We all felt awaken, shaken out of our everyday inertia, as if a boulder had been lifted off our imagination. It had nothing to do with anything grand or epic, but it was something marvellous and honest. An actor gradually transforming himself into a woman and proceeding to eat an onion, two images seemingly opposite and illogical, created a provocatively organic image that unlocked for all of us a daring adventure where anything was possible. It sent a wave of magic through the assembled group because of the unexpectedness of the situation.

In the same play two of my actors Ramanjit468 and Vajinder469 try to build a simple and dramatic relationship with an egg. They faltered and stumbled, yet it was necessary for them to get to the centre of the image, pull out the image that was hidden within the object. To seek that out the actor has to undertake an intense and private journey within the self. The egg in the play extends itself to many layers of meaning. It is first an egg, to be consumed, and then shifts into becoming an object of inquiry. Rites of passage, the awareness of sexuality, scrambled eggs to be eaten, the smashed egg symbolizing smashed wombs and broken dreams. The object— which is the egg—slowly transforms itself into a metaphor as the actor starts interacting with it. All these images

468 Ramanjit Kaur (1975-) has worked with The Company since the last 22 years. She is the recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Yuva award as best actress for the year 2006. A national award for acting.
469 Vajinder Kumar (1983-) has been working with The Company since the last 7 years. A recipient of The Sangeet Natak akademi Yuva Award for the year 2008. He has also worked in the film ‘Videsh- Heaven On Earth’ by Deepa Mehta.
Food is daily philosophy and anthropology. It is a strange world that places one outside oneself. There is always negotiation, of eating or not eating that extends into matters cultural that include habit, hygiene, *to wash or not to wash*. Food universally incites hunger, consumption and over consumption. It’s also about giving, as smells are gateways of sharing. The vegetable market with its large fountains of food piled on plastic sheets on the roadside, to the piles of vegetables on wooden carts, a feast of colours, a reflected sense of *muchness*. The array of colours, textures, shape and the smells of different vegetables have always nurtured my tactile and olfactory sensibility. The chopping, cutting, grinding, and cooking of vegetables plays a therapeutic role, as it involves, discipline, precision and imagination. A papaya being cut into equal halves seems to suggest the womb, the birth of man. The pomegranate -seeds of life ... The sensuality of the aubergine. The sense of touch while kneading dough – the magic of transformation of grain, into flour, into dough, into a hot *rotis* – nurtures the spirit and renews our sense of life, seeping away with one stroke the fatigue and disappointments gathered along the road of life. This breaking of bread, this sharing of food, bonds and connects us with the earth from where it was produced.

*Kitchen Katha* was first performed in the year 2000, and since then has been through various transformations. For many years I had been toying with the idea of cooking live on the stage, to celebrate the potential of plunging into another world. A world filled with the aroma of mustard seeds and cumin, with an actor performing with the sting of onion juice in the eyes and musicians singing while grinding wheat, chaffing the grain or lighting the fire. Cooking was the central element but aspects of theatre could not be ignored or undermined. To create a balance between the ‘real time of cooking’ and ‘stage time’, the action had to be tightly choreographed with military precision and order. The backstage area resembled a kitchen where actors prepared for the show by partially cooking the food, as uncooked food effects the success of the show as much as an
uncooked performance! The cast delivered their lines, sang songs, played musical instruments while stirring pots, kneading flour, peeling oranges, boiling potatoes – trying to retain, at the same time, their dignity as actors. The food was a part of the cast as well, and tried to retain its identity as food, during this process!

Consuming food on stage while managing lines and giving expression requires not only dexterity but also an understanding of your own digestive system. *Kitchen Katha* is a story about women and food and has no fixed narrative. Here the actor is telling the story of her grandmother in a community kitchen. The story is transmitted through the body of the character who is remembering the past. Papaya smeared on her face, pomegranate dripping from the fingers, flour flying in the air, reconstructs memory through food. I used a series of ideas, which could have fallen into ambiguity, but due to the conviction and emotional integrity of the actors, all those ideas got a tangible and material shape. I remember while working on *Kitchen Katha* I had suspended a pumpkin on a small swing in front of the stage, hanging from a bamboo frame that was six and a half feet high. This bamboo frame was positioned at the edge of the stage and became the entry point to the kitchen. My actors one day asked me what the pumpkin symbolized, I answered that I did not know but it just seemed right. They laughed accepting it as a valid reason for it being there. They give me the sort of trust that comes from innocence. A few years later I was in Pondicherry and saw a pumpkin outside every shop. I was told that it was auspicious and kept the evil eye away. We make certain choices which our immediate memory is unaware of, but somewhere an ancient image is stored, which can resurface spontaneously into our creative space. Ever so often I am asked, how I thought of certain images in my play- a pomegranate being split into two and its juice dripping to create an image of a woman making love for the first time in *Kitchen Katha*. It really comes from the kitchen. When one is seeking ways to extend the narrative and create metaphors, then one identifies the stuff that one is surrounded by and seeks an appropriate one to best illuminate the meaning behind the text.
The Suit (2006)

The Suit is based on a three page short story by a South African writer called Can Themba. It was a collaborative process, where actors, directors and musicians jointly contributed to make the play happen. In this production I wanted to capture the pulse of the working class and wanted the actors to collect stories and bring them back into the theatre. It is a bitter and beautifully written account of the collapse of an apparently happy marriage, of infidelity alienation and the inability to communicate. In The Suit, as there was no regular script the actors discovered the characters through improvisations. It was as if through actions, the situations and the narrative were being developed.

The three paged story with sketchily described characters and Patar’s poetry, that did not blend with the narrative, become a stumbling block. The actors struggled to merge the poetry with the narrative. It would have been easy to just erase the poems, but I was loath to do that, as the poetry gave the entire production a sort of philosophical tenor. How do we resolve these contradictions? Through improvisations we managed to create two separate rhythms for the play- one was on the surface level of event that carried the narrative forward, the other was the ethical and social dilemmas which were expressed through the physical actions of the characters and that also created the imagery of the play. When the husband hears about his wife’s infidelity- there is a storm of emotions going through him. I told the actor to do spot running and build up exhaustion, and then to collapse- (almost as if a huge banyan tree has been uprooted) then to cling on to that which is familiar (his tiffin box- his wife’s cooking- that evokes feelings of being safe) he then starts to stuff food in his mouth, but because he is so devastated with the news, the food refuses to be pushed down the gullet and spews out of his mouth- this, in another way, was an attempt to show his inner anguish and turmoil. On another level, the wife’s anguish is shown through her washing clothes. How a mundane action of washing, transforms into a scene of self-flagellation. This later resonates in the scene when the husband oils his body. The simple act of oiling the body builds up to the husband slapping
himself in self-loathing. In the end, the ultimate humiliation that he exercises on his wife, when he tells her to make love to the suit. Suggestions of necrophilia—the actors worked on a combination of ‘death dance’ and ‘dirty dancing’ before they arrive at the point where he forces her to make love to the suit— in an act of horrific voyeurism. The entire play was built up through situational improvisation. The bathing of the actors, the washing of clothes—with the actors constantly ad-libbing, bringing memories from their own lives, their own humour and their own way of looking at the text.

Conclusion

There are two connotations of the word training that need to be transformed. The first is ‘the hypodermic model of training’, where there is a “guru” or a “master” who has a range of knowledge that the student lacks. The second is the “diamond in the rough” assumption that suggests that the student “does not know”. While these assumptions might be accurate for a different discipline, in theatre we try not to assume that innovation and growth can only happen after mastery. The hypodermic model is irrelevant not because theatre is a democratic space, but primarily because the act of creation does not happen through one way communication. The range of variables and the contingencies of space and text and relationships between people, make such formal mechanisms a little quaint and ambitious. The task of the director is not to “block” the intensities, the energies, the dreams and the emotions that emerge during the course of the work.

Which brings us to the second point – while the student might be a “diamond in the rough”, we have to keep reminding ourselves that is not only the actor that grows and journeys, it is also the director. The performer, through improvisation, surprises the director and makes the text come alive in different ways. There is no “master template” we seek to follow, merely thoughts, ideas, directions and potentials. So what then is the essence of training if it is not the practice of teaching them something we know and making them bring a text alive in accordance with our vision. The most succinct way I can put it is thus - it is an attempt to eliminate his resistance to something new and ‘out of
the box.’ Not so much a collection of skills, but an eradication of blocks, an opening out towards the future. Walter Benjamin, when he looked at Paul Klee’s painting remarked:

“A Paul Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

In theater we are hurled towards the future. The trainer in me watches my actors perform from a tiny corner in the wings - skin upon skin, animating and encountering each other, giving us a peep into the complex whole that strings the images together. The joy, laughter, tears and pain of the character enter into the memory of the actor, inscribed on flesh, imprinted on the soul. Seeing them on stage carrying my ideas and vision before an audience, untethered, I feel a pleasurable redundancy. And for me, the end of any

470 Paul Klee (1879-1940) was a Swiss painter of German nationality. His highly individual style was influenced by movements in art that included expressionism, cubism, and surrealism. He was, as well, a student of orientalism.

471 There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees on single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm. (The painting was owned by Walter Benjamin and the description of the painting was an analogy to ‘The angel of history’)

transition between text and performance is this: becoming vaporous, like a ghost, exorcised by the performance. The trainer has to disappear, and like the angel of history, we are propelled into the future during the performance, forgetting the events that have led us to that very moment. Training does not mean an acquisition of knowledge, as much as the liberation from quotidian events, erasing and subsuming everything for that very moment when the performance meets its audience.