Chapter - IX

Conclusion

Training and Creating Chimera

“All that is solid melts into thin air” – Marx

“...interest me in Asian theatre is that actors are creators of metaphors. Their art consist of showing passion, recounting the interiority of human beings [...] the actors ‘aim is to open up human beings, like a pomegranate. Not to display their guts, but to depict what is internal and transform it into signs, shapes, movements and rhythms’. (Ariane Mnouchkine473: Collaborative Theatre: page 87)

An effective method of understanding modern Indian theatre is to investigate the institutions that were established to fund and guide its growth. This thesis has tried to trace out the trainings that were imparted at the NSD and the key figures who attempted to establish the meaning and practice of Indian theatre. The institute is key, because the institute does far greater things than “fund” or “bureaucratize”. It also provides its participants with a vocabulary and a metaphysics – the institute creates the horizon within which theatre people think and can know. Even deviations from this are measured against it. The ‘Modern’ in Modern Indian Theatre was this, a framework of creation, expression and collaboration, which was no longer abstract. A meeting point for the multiple histories and traditions we have, a reactivation of these histories, an archiving of forms and genres, and, on top of this, a new framework of Modernism. A framework that made training independent of form – in other words, it created a space where training was not Kathak training, Mime training or Music training. By formalizing “Dramatic Training”, a lot of practitioners could see beyond their regional and traditional practices and this “universalizing” created a new spirit. This is evident in the training pool that is being processed ‘now’ in the National School of Drama.

473 Ariane Mnouchkine: One of the most celebrated theatre director’s in Europe. And over the past thirty five years has run the Theatre du Soleil in Paris.
Within this context, then, trying to demonstrate how Punjabi theatre “fits into” the broader National Framework is a difficult task. This is because a large part of Modernism was the break with the entire Idea of the monolithic Indian Nation, with various cultures and languages somehow being a “part of it”. This assumption was challenged by the secularizing of training which led to a newer Idea of the Modern Theatre – The Nation was the multiple experiments, explorations and performances taking place within it. There was no “regional level” theatre because there was no centre against which to judge it. The paradox of the NSD was this – it was a national entity that had, at its heart, an elevation of everything that had been positioned as regional. The egalitarianism of this gesture should not be seen as an accident. All European Modernists, whether in Painting (Picasso), Theatre (Artaud) or Literature (Eliot) performed similar gestures where all cultural forms, all geographies and languages were to be equal. This is not to say that there have not been hegemonic contestations, where forms are hijacked to represent a pre-modern and mythic National entity (take for example, the entire tourism and profiteering around “Ethnic fashion” or “Classical Dance”). This regressive and conservative anti-Modernism is often perpetrated by our very State, who in their “Craft fairs” and “Cultural Programmes,” stifle the lived and dynamic nature of these forms and discourages any experimentation, as it goes against the idea of Indian Culture.

This thesis classifies Modern Indian Theatre as any form that embraces the uncertainty of its art, the joy of experimentation, the dynamic recreation and revaluation of its beliefs and clichés, and the openness to all forms. Modern Indian Theatre is not regional, or defined by geography, but by an orientation – an openness towards the Other, and a complete recognition of the Otherness, the unfamiliarity, within our own certainties. This belief is the essence of critical Modernism, and is carried forward by a range of practitioners within the country. In the context of Punjabi Theatre, my work has attempted to do this. While the ‘elements” of my work are very clear, the attitude is what is critical. As practitioners we do not fight for funding or audiences or good reviews, but we fight to ensure that, in the face of the nature of reality and globalization, how can we retain our own uncertainty and active transformations. Unfortunately, Punjabi Theatre has struggled between these two attitudes. There is the hegemony of regionalism that persists,
and its stasis makes it anti-Modern. This is what we need to fight against. The Nation is a region, and the region remains undiscovered. This is the essence of Modern Indian Theatre.

**Otherness in The Company**

My relationship with this form (*Naqqal*) through my own personal experiences have shown me that how the actor in this folk form is a creator of metaphors. Most of the stories that they enact are based on warriors, kings, gods, goddess and divine lovers, what does the actor do? The actor has to draw with his body the portrait and the action of the hero. My attempt has been to use all their skills as raw material for exploring something fresh, and new. This is a dying tradition and has completely stopped somewhere, but a tradition which dies can give birth to something fresh and innovative. When I started working with them in 1984, the *naqqal* tradition had been hollowed out and emptied of meaning. I made an attempt to understand the impulses that created the tradition, and tradition that is associated with the performing arts does not mean something that is ‘old’ or irrelevant to the contemporary artist. It was my desire to learn about ‘the other’ in order to enrich my own work that led me to work with the *Naqqals*. It is not so much the purloining of a tradition but to create a contemporary motif of work. As most contemporary actors are seeped in naturalism, working with traditional forms helps in breaking away from those constrictions and moving towards a more theatrical form of presentation. I also understood that one cannot separate performance from the social context that generates it. Folk forms in Punjab were changing; some were dying, and others were renewing themselves, just as society was going through its transformation. Along with a change in content, there was also a change in presentation. Melodies from Bollywood films had crept into their singing, along with the movements of their favourite dancing divas from the filmy world combined with political and social propaganda.

“But one should not underestimate people inventiveness, especially in the power of popular culture. Even as advanced economies preserve some traditional arts in their traditional forms, and other arts which are not protected vanish, a new category of continuous creation, of tradition through fusion and hybridity emerges. Over the past
several centuries, immigration and displacement has created the greatest movement in the world that peoples have ever experienced. From assailed or displaced fragments, cultural practices are transformed into new wholes. And soon enough, formerly ‘artificial’ or ‘synthetic’ practices are transformed into new whole. We live in a period where older traditions exist side by side with new traditional arts, the fruits of both consciously ‘invented traditions’ and less thought-out but very robust hybrids. Furthermore, and very importantly, many theatre experiments have been in collaboration with, and/or deeply affected by, traditional performing arts and rituals.

I created a theatre that encountered tradition- energised by the past but breathing in the present. The Naqqal tradition provided a fund of stage conventions, concepts and technique. The beating of a metal kettle with a spoon to suggest war, the smearing of flour on the face to suggest fear; simple techniques, but powerful in their impact and loaded with suggestiveness. The Naqqals have never heard of Bertold Brecht’s alienation theory, but their efforts to constantly urge the audience not to be a passive spectator but to participate in developing the action of the play reeks of Brechtian concepts and attitudes. After playing a part, the actors silently retires to the corner of a stage to smoke a cigarette or can join a singer. Their capacity to become ‘invisible’ once the performance is over is the hallmark of a very sophisticated dramaturgy.

When actors are trained for contemporary theatre, the operative signals are ‘modern’ against traditional, and ‘Indian’ against ‘Western.’ Again this can seem very arbitrary and can seem like one is moving towards a sanitized version of training, cutting off histories, cauterizing experiences. Modern theatre has been enriched not only by its encounter with theatre training philosophies that travelled from the west during the British Raj, but also transformed itself during its interaction with the traditional, regional and local forms.

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474 Schechner, R. Over, Under and Around. PP11
475 Brecht, Bertold (1898-1956) German poet theorist, stage manager, playwright.
476 Brechtian concepts is the alienation effect. Also called the “V-Effekt” in acting and it may well be that the most radical change he demanded in the theatre, other than in his writing, were in the acting. “Three devices,” he wrote, can contribute to the alienation effect of the words and the actions of the person presenting them. 1) The adoption of the past tense 2) the adoption of the third person 3) the speaking of the stage directions and comments.”

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The basic question is- what shapes an artist? How is their world shaped? How does an artist take plots, narratives, and stories and transform them in his/her own particular way of telling a story. How does the actor enter the sub-text, how is it revealed through the *mise-en-scène*? How is the meaning locked in the text and how does the actor reveal it. How does the text transform into an image? How does an actor explore space? What nourishes an actors’ imagination?

Most research about trends and methodologies in theatre in India has to be done in loops and swirls as information gets fractured. Theatre is a transient art, built on sand. It takes birth in the evening and dies after the show is over. There is nothing concrete that you can grasp on to, no record to cling on to. This elusiveness is what gives power to the dreams that become the substance of art. All that one can call tangible in the theatre are a few reviews and some moments of memory or an image that an audience takes back after a performance.

When I first set up my theatre company my head was filled with stereotypical images of ‘Punjabi theatre’. The representation of what constitutes Punjabi culture had become fixed and ossified, with attributes of it being loud, frivolous, comic and crass. The cliché that reiterates, ‘Punjab has agriculture, but no culture’, was to me a strange and alienating statement that was constantly being brandished around in a manner that was dismissive and almost racist. I have never been able to separate culture from the earth. To till the land and see the tree you plant 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, culture is nourished by agriculture. There is an extricable link between the two, intertwined, tangled and fertilised by layers of acculturation, if one is the root, the other the fruit. The Punjabi language, with its tradition of dance and music is replete with images from the earth and the joys of procreation, growth and renewal, in fact, most languages get their power and muscle from the ‘dough’ of their regional languages. BV Karanth’s words of advice on leaving Bhopal and Bharat Bhavan resonated within me, “whatever work you do must be done in the language of the state with local people and regional energies. You must regionalise the national and nationalise the regional”

477 Ariane Mnouchkine Colloboraive Theatre ;page 145 ‘I was missing the dough of the language’
Being a Punjabi, I had a natural affinity with the language and it was the language in which I could best express myself imaginatively. I recall very vividly that when ever I mentioned that I was doing Punjabi theatre the funds, the sponsors, the audience, shied away from giving me any support. The myth of Punjab having no culture was a reality in the minds of the potential patrons. But today the scenario has changed due to the relentless work my group ‘The Company’ has done to reverse this stereotype. It is truly odd, that even today there is a section of people living in Punjab who constantly request me to do a play in Hindi or English. A question that ironically has never been asked in any part of the country or world that I have performed in.

When plays from different parts of the world perform in regions and countries that do not understand their language, customs or sensibilities, how are these performances received? Is there a framed way of seeing, and is there a way that this seeing can be translated into another cultural context?

My experience of traveling and performing at national/ International festivals has shown the willingness of a national/regional/ international audiences to enter into new and unfamiliar emotional, political, social and therefore, aesthetic experiences.

Where do the audience and the performers meet? How do they separate? What are the areas of connection? Are questions one asks continuously? Resonance is the greatest quality of this invisible thread that binds an actor and audience together. By this I do not suggest a universalism of experience regardless of cultural location, but a universality of difference. An awareness that difference resonates strongly, in fact sometimes more strongly, than the sameness. In addition how does one parry the apprehensions of an audience which is witnessing a work in a unfamiliar language and an unfamiliar syntax? Nevertheless, during my travels with my theatre group the Company, I have encountered the attraction of a large number of people, who are increasingly excited by the possibility of experiencing a theatre different from their own. This interaction helps people to communicate beyond boundaries, to cross over to an aesthetic and social context far removed from their lives. To trace that intangible filament that binds people, shedding the skin of separateness discovering hidden commonality, by
revealing the unexpected. Art seek to provide entertainment, enlightenment and joy. But their main reason, I believe, is to transform an experience of life, to displace the ordered regularity within us and plant a seed that helps us to unframe and challenge old perceptions and test out new ideas. Unless they do that, they simply remain mere tokens of entertainment or cultural artifacts, written on the wind.

Reading of a play reframes ones own impulses from a direction that may be alien but also illuminating. To illustrate this point I would like to refer to the last scene in the play *Yerma*. As it is a scene where *Yerma* murders her husband, I wanted to show the killing metaphorically rather than real. *Yerma*, hurls a pot of red colour onto a white sheet to suggest murder. To show how the institution of marriage had been metastasized into something dangerous by her husband and the only way to cleanse herself and her life was through the act of elimination. After seeing the play, Trader Faulkner, a critic with the English newspaper ‘The Guardian’ referring to the blood splattered sheet “I saw the blood in the last scene of *Yerma* as the blood of Christ and the stilling of the menstrual cycle.”

I think the audience outside your region or country, in the absence of any fixity through which to begin reading a work, finds gestures, images and beats that resonate with their own history. Yes, they unearth a shared narrative, but this narrative does not dislocate mine, but rather illuminates it. Who can say that an audience’s experience of a play is not the play as well?

So what is the big lesson here in the history of Modernism and creation? That you don’t need an institution or a contract to create a long term relationship, that you don’t need blood or kinship ties to have parallel lives. And even much more beyond this analysis of the creation of meaning, the radical freedoms of existing beyond the confines of gender, the transformation of the audiences to see identity beyond sex and as something that plays in the shadows of the narratives of our plays and our lives is another theme worth considering.

As theatrical practitioners, women cannot ideologically be motivated by mutation and the creation of the uncanny. As we have possibly seen, this often dissolves into

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flaccid and irritating creations where audiences, disgusted by sensationalism or mystified by self indulgence, reject the energy the performance could possibly unleash. As women, and perhaps as those working under the shadow of charismatic teachers and national institutions, we need to investigate the future keeping in mind that – the relationship between audience and text, between creator and producer, between audience and stage, between men and women, between explicit light and subtle shadow, is not forever. It is like mercury, and we need to appreciate its nature and try to not make it into a formula – this will keep the future full of surprise, and hopefully make us look at our own creations and feel, with a sense of freedom beyond fear – the uncanny.