Chapter - III
From Historical Discursive Forms to Institutionalized Discursive Forms: Alkazi and The National School of Drama

The formalization of a National Identity requires both an Institution as well as a philosophy, but it also requires an interpellation. The philosopher Louis Pierre Althusser\(^\text{128}\) spoke about interpellation\(^\text{129}\) as a process whereby ideological formations discover and absorb subjects, and also convinces people of its validity and existence. This requires, in a discipline as “soft” as theatre a particular/different set of drivers. For instance, to interpellate a pre-modern traditionalist into the validity of the Law as an institution needs the drivers of police, armies, legality and prisons. In the history of Indian theatre, the transitional moment from multiple and distributed identities without communication and consistency, to one where at least there is a touch point/lighthouse from which to define themselves takes place when an institution comes alive with a charisma – such is the beauty and freedom of theatre. We do not, as practitioners, believe in a law or an institution, but a good performance. So the performance, coupled with the

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\(^{128}\) Louis Pierre Althusser (16 October 1918 – 22 October 1990) was a Marxist philosopher. He was born in Algeria and studied at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he eventually became Professor of Philosophy. Althusser was a lifelong member and sometimes strong critic of the French Communist Party. His arguments and theses were set against the threats that he saw attacking the theoretical foundations of Marxism. These included both the influence of empiricism on Marxist theory, and humanist and reformist socialist orientations which manifested as divisions in the European Communist Parties, as well as the problem of the “cult of personality” and of ideology itself. Althusser is commonly referred to as a Structural Marxist, although his relationship to other schools of French structuralism is not a simple affiliation and he is critical of many aspects of structuralism.

\(^{129}\) Interpellation is a concept first coined by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser to describe the process by which ideology addresses the (abstract) pre-ideological individual thus effectively producing him or her as subject proper. Henceforth, Althusser goes against the classical definition of the subject as cause and substance: in other words, the situation always precedes the (individual or collective) subject, which precisely as subject is “always-already interpellated.” Althusser's argument here strongly draws from Jacques Lacan's concept of the Mirror stage and reveals obvious parallels with the work of his former student Michel Foucault in its antihumanist insistence on the secondary status of the subject as mere effect of social relations and not vice versa. Interpellation specifically involves the moment and process of recognition of interaction with the ideology at hand.
institution, made some sort of transition. This is the only way we can truly understand the impact of Ebrahim Alkazi\textsuperscript{30}(1925-) – it was the magic that happens when three factors come together.

A cultural landscape that is suffering as audiences are not connecting with the power and passion that the practitioners, as creators, put into their performances. There is a desire to evolve the audience’s respect beyond the frameworks of “entertainment” or “political” or “interesting”. There is a desire for audiences and creations to communicate through the distinctly modern, and non-profit driven, aesthetic of creation.

A historical environment that evaluates success and achievement through the framework of the Nation, and creates a space for an identity politics driven by a relationship to a “national” perspective and an acknowledgement by a national institution

A psychological population segment, ranging from small towns to urban centres, that truly believed that they could understand themselves and express themselves only through a combination of their bodies, voices and minds, and did not want to get absorbed into the dominant cultural vacuum of imagination and institutionalized conformity. In Lacanian\textsuperscript{31} psychoanalytical terms, it would be termed as hysteria – defined by the constant quest of self understanding through the following framework – what am I for the Other (the nation, history, society)? It is a powerful question, because it is a question asked through desire, not through rationality. A question asked through desire does not

\textsuperscript{30}Ebrahim Alkazi is a famous Indian theatre director, who was the founding head of the India's premier theatre training institute, National School of Drama, New Delhi. As the director of the National School of Drama (NSD), Alkazi revolutionized Hindi theatre by the magnificence of his vision, and the meticulousness of his technical discipline. He is the recipient of the Padma Shree, Padma Bhushan, Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship for his contribution to theatre.

\textsuperscript{31}Jacques-Marie-Émile Lacan (April 13, 1901 – September 9, 1981) was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who made prominent contributions to psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literary theory. He gave yearly seminars, in Paris, from 1953 to 1981, mostly influencing France's intellectuals in the 1960s and the 1970s, especially the post-structuralist philosophers. His interdisciplinary work is Freudian, featuring the unconscious, the castration complex, the ego; identification; and language as subjective perception, and thus he figures in critical theory, literary studies, twentieth-century French philosophy, and clinical psychoanalysis.
find answers in “jobs” or “institutions”, but in recognition. The other will recognize me, and through this recognition I will be complete. As Lacan said of the student revolutionaries in Paris in May ’68 – “you are hysterics in search of a new Master … you shall find one”

It is in this zone of potential and desire, that Alkazi arrived to take over an institution in 1962. By successfully addressing these questions, he did not “change the national consensus” or “revolutionize the creativity of the country”. Rather, he created a new planet, where humans could come and discover their own beings in a mixture of rational, creative, historical and traditional ways. He created not so much a revolution, as much as he put stakes in the ground, drew a boundary, created an inside and an outside, and then, demonstrated to all his students that the success of creative man lies in communicating and evolving with this outside. The following chapter is a history and ethnography of this unique institution and this man.

Performances, Training, Ideologies and Charisma: Untangling the Confluence between Man and Institution.

The National School of Drama came into existence when the Asian Theatre Institute in New Delhi, founded on the visions of Pan-Asian collaboration and exchange, was converted into a drama school in 1958. At the invitation of the then, Secretary of Education Ashfaque Hussain, Ebrahim Alkazi was invited to draft out a scheme for a National School of Drama in 1954, and also be its first director. Alkazi felt that it would not be prudent to take over an institution for which he had drawn out the blueprint. Also part of his diffidence came from his lack of experience and youth.

The scheme came to fruition in 1958 and was initially affiliated to the Sangeet Natak Akademi, one of the three apex cultural bodies mooted by Jawaharlal Nehru to

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1 Sangeet Natak Akademi: Apex autonomous academy to promote Indian music, dance and theatre, established in 1953 and funded by The Department of Culture Government of India. Its registered office is in Rabindra Bhavan in New Delhi, which also houses the other autonomous art bodies, Sahitya Akademi (for literature) and Lalit Kala Akademi (for fine arts). With the objective of furthering the performing arts. Sangeet Natak Akademi aims at preserving the various classical and folk forms, both rural and urban, old and new. Detailed documents through interviews, recordings photographs constitute a regular form of activity. It arranges festivals, exhibitions, seminars and workshops to provide people an opportunity to

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promote art and literature, before it became an autonomous institution. The new institution was headed by lighting expert Satu Sen, and assisted by theatre scholar Nemichandra Jain, who was to play a significant role in the campaign to “Indianise” Indian theatre in the years to come.

Training Tools

The training of actors in most drama schools, (whether the National School of Drama, or Drama Departments attached to universities) became standardized by using the acting tools of the Constantin Stanislavski system. Through this system the National School of Drama laid the foundation for all theatre training in contemporary India. The students of the school, after receiving their training from the school, went back to their regions and shared the training systems with the groups that they worked with in their regions. In this way, the training process, and methods of working inculcated by the National School of Drama, percolated to varied parts of the country, taking on certain regional characteristics, along with individual proclivities, and interpretations. In Punjab, these methods of training spread from Chandigarh, to Amritsar, including various cities, and villages, where the students had fanned out and trained actors, for community theatre, youth festivals, street theatre, proscenium theatre, through workshops, giving them a certain basic craft and tools for building a production. This was then shared with local groups, who than become repositories of this system of training actors. In a way multiple practices existed simultaneously and created a training philosophy for actors that

experience the range of India’s cultural heritage and to exchange views. It also provides financial assistance for projects and for groups to help them pursue their area of research and specialization; it publishes an important journal called Sangeet Natak Journal. Awards presented annually to exceptional artist are regarded as India’s most prestigious awards in the performing arts.

Nemichandra Jain-(1919-2006) distinguished Hindi poet, literary and theatre critic, translator, editor, and teacher. Associated with the national school of drama as a professor of Indian dramatic literature, he is also the founder member of Natrang Pratishthan, a charitable trust devoted to promotion, preservation and research in performing arts and literature.

Constantin Stanislavski (Russian :) (1863 -, 1938), was a Russian actor and theatre director. His innovative contribution to modern European and American realistic acting has remained at the core of mainstream western performance training for much of the last century. Stanislavski organized his realistic techniques into a coherent and usable ‘system’. Thanks to its promotion and development by acting teachers who were former students and the many translations of his theoretical writings, Stanislavski’s system acquired an unprecedented ability to cross cultural boundaries and developed an international reach, dominating debates about acting in the West. That many of the precepts of his ‘system’ seem to be common sense and self-evident testifies to its hegemonic success. Actors frequently employ his basic concepts without knowing they do so.
had been developed by the National School of Drama, and in travel and dissemination outside the school system, transformed through interactions, and then distilled through encounters with regional impulses, into individual methodologies. This training over the years has been through several changes, in form, structure, relationship between the actor and his body. Conventional systems have been replaced by more radical training process. But ultimately the knowledge and information that is passed, depends a lot on the experience and expertise of the facilitator or trainer. Most times huge lacuna are traced between what has been taught by experts, and how it was actualized by the receiver.

In July 1963, when Ebrahim Alkazi took charge as the first director, he extended the course to three years by introducing specialization in acting, stagecraft and direction. The school became an autonomous registered society in 1975, funded by the Government of India as ‘Asian Theatre Institute’ a name which was later dropped. Meanwhile the idea of an in-house professional repertory had taken shape in 1968, with the recruitment of four members, and it became a full-fledged repertory in 1976.

The primary objective of the NSD charter was to impart training to theatre practitioners from all over the country; create a sound theoretical and practical base for the potential actors and directors and set the standards for theatrical performances in the country. Over the years the goals and aims kept on shifting as theatre itself was undergoing changes. In the absence of any formulated training process in urban Indian theatre, the role model on which blueprints were structured were based on Western systems of theatre training. This model existed for over eighteen years and became the training tool for teaching acting as well as for production work. It is only in 1977, when B.V. Karanth became the director of the school, that there was a seismic shift, where the emphasis shifted to a more indigenous and traditional training methodology. He also

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135 Babukodi Venkataramana Karanth (1928 - 2002) was a much decorated film and theatre personality from India. Throughout his life he was director, actor and musician of modern Indian theatre and one of the pioneers of Kannada and Hindi theatre. He was an alumnus of the National School of Drama (1962) and later, its director. He has directed many successful plays and has directed award winning Kannada movies. The Government of India honoured him with the Padma Shri.
stretched the training process, by inviting experts from the folk narrative tradition as well as traditional guru’s to work with the actors of the school.

“The tool- kit of Stanislavski became popular and then standard through the pedagogical intervention of drama schools (for instance, the National School Of Drama, Delhi) and through the drama taught at universities- in short, modern institutions which are distinct from pre-modern teaching systems such as the guru-shishya tradition in India. This retooling began to take hold in the late 1950’s and grew very rapidly through the 1960’s, critically influenced by the National School of Drama (NSD) under E. Alkazi. Before I come to the insertion of the Stanislavskian method into modern acting in India, I should like to synoptically position the decisive effect of Ebrahim Alkazi in almost single-handedly shaping a modernistic-realistic lexicon for Indian theatre. This was achieved by two moves: first, his authorial mediations, his personal reading of modern Indian text and their consequent staging; second his overhauling of theatre training at the NSD, titling it towards a realistic discourse. This produced actors, directors, and designers who have since hugely influenced theatre, films and television. Both these moves created that rupture with the past which is often seen as the defining characteristic of modernity”.

Despite this overwhelming arch, it had some inherent weakness. Situated in Delhi, with Hindi as the language of teaching and performing, definitely creates a sense of alienation for the actors and directors from regions were Hindi is not spoken or even understood. Rooting itself in the cultural ethos of the Hindi belt, isolated a huge section of the student body, making them feel marginalized and inadequate due to their lack of exposure to the language and its impulses. As each person from his/ her region brought a sensibility, a cultural essence, a history and an acting protocol from their specific region-the pooling of experience in a cultural caldron was, in the earlier days, to some extend missing. Despite these obvious lacunae, the most outstanding aspect is the rigorous training, both physical and intellectual, that was part of the curriculum that helped an actor/director discover his or her own native skill.

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Anuradha Kapur: Theatre India: ‘An actor Prepares’ Page-16-17
But since the last few years there has been a definitive shift from this kind of insular and exclusivist thinking. Today under the directorship of Anuradha Kapur, the recognition of the many linguistic diversities that the school students bring with them have all been very effectively incorporated in the production grammar. The actors are encouraged to bring in the productions, their regional way of speaking Hindi, without trying to self-consciously change their regional phonetics into a more cosmetic rendering of Hindi. In this way the actors are asked to concentrate more on the meaning and feeling of what they are speaking, rather than be trapped by trying to speak Hindi ‘correctly.’ This regional flavour certainly brings in a far more coherent sense to the school catering to students from all over the country, rather than arbitrarily fixing a way of speaking that is far removed from their phonetic context, making the student more confident and region specific.

To go back to the history of the school, I would like to state that the school might have stuck to the beaten path but for a lucky accident in 1962. A man of extraordinary talent and artistic focus, Ebrahim Alkazi, was appointed its Director, and under his direction the scope and vision of the NSD were transposed to another plane altogether. The most far-reaching impact that Alkazi wrought during his tenure as director was to increase the existing training program from two years to three years, and to introduce a specialization after a one-year consolidated course, by having the student specialize in

138 Ebrahim Alkazi: Born in 1925, and tracing his roots from Saudi Arabia, he spent his early childhood in Poona (now called Pune), where he was born and raised. His father, an orphan was the first member of the family to have left Saudi Arabia and make a place for himself in the world. His father came to Poona as a trader, as for centuries Saudi Arabia had been trading in Iraqi horses that were used for the Poona races. Although his father’s business was in Bombay, the family preferred to live in Poona, due to its quiet and salubrious environment. Alkazi attended St. Vincent High School in Poona, and at home he received training in the Arabic language as well as studied the Koran. He did his college from, St Xavier’s in Bombay in 1945; and joined the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) in 1950, he returned to Bombay after completely his training in 1953.

In 1962, at the age of 37, he joined as the Director of the National School of Drama and The Asian Theatre Institute, as it was then called. Between finishing his training and before joining the National School of Drama, he had acquired a reputation of being a dynamic and imaginative director and administrator. Before leaving for London, he had worked as an actor with a performing society that was called Theatre Group, and had in his functioning set high standards of professionalism and work ethics - right from theatre managements, to accounts, to marketing as well as all the creative and aesthetic challenges required for theatre. He then later set up his own theatre group, called ‘Theatre Unit’ which raised the bar not only in terms of its technical skills but also in terms of production values and aesthetic content. This gave a huge impetus to the state of theatre in Bombay, and people flocked to see his plays on an informal terrace theatre that he devised in his own home.
either acting, stage-craft or direction. He was hoping to create a theatre professional who could reach the level of any competent professional in any other field. This led to a sense of seriousness about every dimension of play production, and helped in giving theatre the much needed professional edge that was required for theatre at that time. The single most far reaching impact that Ebrahim Alkazi, made on the consciousness of the Hindi theatre fraternity, was to make them realize that working in the theatre was not like joining a hobby class, but entering a profession, which required a similar degree of seriousness, commitment and dedication as being a doctor or a lawyer.

The reason why Alkazi readily took up the job as the director of the National School of Drama was his desire to work on the national level, in the national language, and create an impact through his work nationally. And he felt that his experience of running his group ‘Theatre Unit’ in Bombay (1954-1962), before shifting to Delhi had given him sufficient experience in being able to administer an institution of the scale and size of the National School of Drama. As far as precedents go, most jobs of responsibility are given on the bases of age, as it is assumed that age brings experience. This far-sighted decision by the government, to offer a job of significance to a young man of 37 years, was indeed unusual. This single decision shaped the formation of a modern theatre sensibility in India, with Alkazi determining its contours. His role in defining a theatre aesthetics, grammar, work-culture, and institution building is something that even his most acrimonious critics will not disagree with. The other significant contribution that he made was to shift training concepts in the performing arts from the entrenched systems of the guru-shishya parampara to a formal training system. This became a crucial moment in the history of modern training in India, as it created a definite rupture from systems of training that existed in the transference of knowledge and expertise in the past.

Most of the training of the students was done during the course of production work, and this led to a slew of accusations, of the school being more a theatre repertory that had been set up to build the reputation of its director nationally and internationally, rather than being a training institution were raw talent could be nurtured and chiselled. This certainly did lead to a certain degree of frustration amongst the less experienced students. The students who had come with a certain degree of exposure in the theatre arts
were favoured and projected as actors and directors more sharply then the ones who were still floundering in their understanding of the craft. The other problematic area was that as most of the production work was done in Hindi, the students who came from a non Hindi speaking background felt disadvantaged.

“In the early years, we had to live down the poor reputation the school had somehow acquired, and replace it with an image of seriousness and professional competence.... For years, we had a running battle with the department of Culture which refused to recognise this ‘national’ institute as being anything more than a ‘technical’ institute..... and that is why I fought..... to make this school truly a place for higher learning, rather than one which offered a non-descript general course, with no specialised training and of questionable academic and professional quality. And to put ourselves to the test, and to prove our worth, I put all aspects of training and performance to the public view.... All the more so, as we were in a profession which could only gauge its achievements through live performance before the public”139.

When Alkazi joined the school as its director in 1962, at the age of 37, classes were held in a ramshackle home, overgrown with weeds in Kailash Colony. When the school shifted to Rabindra Bhavan140, it had no theatre of its own, and the students were motivated to make their own performance space, by digging a pit in the back lawns of the Rabindra Bhavan. Platforms, levels, mounds of earth were carved out, by scooping out the earth to create a magical open air theatre, with tiered seating and a huge banyan tree that provided a canopy over the acting space. This theatre was christened as ‘Meghdoot’ Open air theatre. Along with this, another studio theatre was created from one of the offices in the Rabindra Bhavan, which was transformed into an auditorium, with a seating capacity of eighty, and most of the school’s productions were performed in these two spaces. Alkazi was a hands-on person and that was the training that he imparted to his students. He preferred to teach them through practical lessons rather then be trapped by theoretical

140 Rabindra Bhavan: registered office of the three Akademi’s. It also housed the National School of Drama until 1974. In 1974, the school shifted its premises to Bhavalpur House on Bhagwan Das road, New-Delhi.
or academic lectures. It was an exhilarating time for the school, as every night a ‘house-full’ sign board gave a huge impetus to the theatre situation in Delhi. Alkazi understood that for a nascent theatre movement, a big auditorium would be difficult to fill up, and for an audience to see a ‘house-full’ sign would psychologically excite, and motivate them to see the production. Alkazi explains, “Since we built it ourselves, there was a greater involvement that the students had with the performance space”. It was simply amazing, that with limited funds, he created two theatre spaces, that were not only technically sound but also became an example of what can be achieved if there is will and inclination, within the most prosaic circumstances.

Before Alkazi joined the NSD, the students were exposed to one-act plays which were more in the nature of class-room productions, than having any viable professional status. Even though sometimes full length plays were done, but they were never public performances. Alkazi reversed that trend, by linking production work as a training process for the students. This connecting of professional training with production work, becomes significant, as the actor participated in all aspects of a theatre performance, from acting, to costumes, to set designing, to management to handling the box office. I clearly remember Alkazi, informing the students that after the show is over, the actors must disappear in their own respective work, not hang around the audience, hoping for compliments. I also recall that curtain-calls were not part of the culture of Alkazi’s theatre. In a certain way the actors were not allowed to get egoistic, or think of themselves as public figures, or luxuriate in the indulgence of the self.

The scale of the work that has taken place since its inception has been truly mind boggling. The students have been exposed to a cross section of directors, both from India and from across the globe. Covering a spectrum of experience that ranges from the classical to the western, from the experimental to the conventional, from the indigenous to contemporary- traversing this range in an attempt to expose the students to world theatre.
Productions

Alkazi during my days at the National School of Drama directed three plays that are often hailed as his definitive work, *Andha Yug* by Dharam Vir Bharati\(^{141}\), *Tughlaq* by Girish Karnad\(^{142}\) and *Razia Sultan* by Balwant Gargi,\(^{143}\) which were staged at the Purana Qila in 1974. It was a coup for the institution to have managed permission to perform against such a majestic backdrop. But one could never imagine the difficulties involved in making the space feasible for the performances. The depth of the stage was raised up to 35 feet, on top of a chasm, connected by seven different levels. The challenge was to organically connect it with the tiered seating arrangement that had been made in wood for the audience. Beside the stage, green rooms, toilets and lighting booths had to be constructed in a way that blended with the environment. The scale and sweep required to perform in such awesome surroundings needed not only imagination and guts, but was also an engineering feat. The brooding stone edifice, obscured by the mists of time, resonated with history. Monolithic arches, columns and slippery stone plinths required tremendous reworking to make them safe. A wooden palladium had the chorus of *Andha Yug* chanting to the musical composition that had been composed by Vanraj Bhatia\(^{144}\).

The wooden levels and platforms, that had been added, on had a massive sweep of steps where all the mythic characters came alive in this drama of destiny and death. This impressive space was riddled with problems which at times tottered on the edge of danger.

I remember one of the actors, who was playing the role of a soldier in *Tughlaq*, attentive and erect he moved up and down the narrow parapet of the Purana Kila with his bayonet poised to attack. Suddenly in the middle of *Tughlaq*’s soliloquy we heard a bloodcurdling sound and saw the actor hurtle down into the abyss of the dark night. A broken leg cut short his career as a solider, but it did not in any way interrupt the work in

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\(^{141}\) Dharam Vir Bharati (1926-1997): Hindi author born in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. He studied there and participated in the quit India Movement. In 1960-1987, he became the editor of Dharmayug (a leading Hindi magazine) he wrote only one full length play *Andha Yug* (blind age 1954)

\(^{142}\) Girish Karnad (1938-) Kannada actor and playwright.

\(^{143}\) Balwant Gargi (1916-2003) First Punjabi playwright to open up Punjabi theatre to varied influences.

\(^{144}\) Vanraj Bhatia (1927-) Lives in Mumbai. One of the most versatile music composers. Has also composed music for films, especially for Shyam Benegal.
progress. The rehearsals continued without any commiseration, "As no one is dead, we continue," said Alkazi with a deadpan voice. (Shocking at that time, but this one incident helped me, in understanding the values of theatre- I repeat this all the time to my students, in an endeavour to explain to them the unflinching discipline that was inculcated within us).

Alkazi had spent time in Japan and had been influenced by Noh and Kabuki Theatre, and he wanted to test the values of the characters of Andha Yug on the touchstone of a Kabuki setting. It was not that he wanted to paste the Kabuki form on the production of Andha Yug, but wanted to see a resonance between the underlying principals of Kabuki in a play with characters from the epic Mahabharata. Too trace the impulses that could bind an epic text with an epic form and to explore its cultural connotations through dislocation. It was an attempt to free actors working on a text, located and situated in a time, far removed from their world, and to confront concerns which could have been cramped by a superficial theatrical style. Most of the mythic/historical characters of these three productions could easily lend themselves to explicit stereotyping, Krishna, (the charioteer) Gandhari, (the devote wife, who blindfolds

145 Noh- The most important form of Japanese drama. The Noh Drama started in the fourteenth century, present a perfect harmony of dance, music, poetry, mime and acting. Its roots are obscure, but its clear that several branches of Japanese performing arts entered into its creation.
146 Kabuki. From the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth, the Kabuki has been one of the most popular forms of theatrical entertainment in Japan and remains the most typical of the theatrical arts in the country.
147 Andha Yug focuses on the last day of the Mahabharata war. The ramparts are in ruins, the city is burning and Kurukshetra is covered with corpses and vultures. The few bewildered survivors of the Kaurava clan are overcome by grief and rage. Longing for one last act of revenge, they refuse to condemn Ashwatthama when he releases the ultimate weapon, the brahmastra, which threatens to annihilate the world. Instead, they blame Krishna for having caused the war, and curse him. The moral centre of the play lies in Krishna. He is the voice of compassion, an embodiment of all that is good and just in the world. Despite his failure to ensure peace, it is his presence throughout the play which reveals to us that the ethical and the sacred are always available to human beings even in the worst of times. Andha Yug is one of the most significant plays of modern India. Written immediately after the partition of the Indian subcontinent, the play is a profound meditation on the politics of violence and aggressive selfhood. The moral burden of the play is that every act of violence inevitably debases society as a whole. The action of the play takes place on the last day of the Mahabharata war and is centered on a few bewildered survivors of the Kaurava clan. The figure of Krishna is central to the narrative. He represents the infinite variety of ways in which the good manifests itself in the ordinary world. He is the man of justice and truth. The Kauravas, however, are unable to imagine the truth about Krishna. This failure of imagination becomes the cause of their final undoing.
herself in empathy with her blind husband) *Tughlag*, (the eccentric and visionary king) *Razia Sultan* (The brave queen, sacrificing her personal life for governance). In all three production, against the haunting setting of the Purana Kila, a mythic world emerged, almost as from the womb of the rocks, with a desired combination of theatricality, spectacle and a metaphorical distance from the everyday world.

It was initially disorienting to see *Gandhari* dressed as a Kabuki actor, with a winged jacket worn over her Kimono descending the steps of the ramparts, with her long gown trailing behind her. This production, done in the Kabuki style, led to a host of criticism, but Alkazi was clear that an epic tale like *Andha Yug*, peopled with stories of warriors, nobles, kings and princes, required a form that would to some extend impose rules for working: a precision of gesture, an exactitude of movement, a sort of performance that would be based on hyper reality, a sort of larger then life performance. It is fairly evident that a text like *Andha Yug*, could not be done in a realistic way, and Alkazi’s search for a form capable of showing both the sacred and ritualistic aspect of the story could only happen through a traditional form, even if ostensibly far removed from the context of the text. The other question that could be raised here, that why did he not use a traditional form from India? Each artist is like an explorer, and each choice that is made is like a voyage of research and discovery. It was not a question of lifting a form from Japan and meaninglessly transplanting it on Indian bodies, but trying to research the raw material, in an endeavour to establish subtle links between the form, the text and the characters and to show history through theatre.

148 Jotting from my Diary (1974) As each step had to be carefully manoeuvred, I (a second year student) was given the task of shadowing the actor playing *Gandhari* and manipulating the Kimono that could come up against unexpected obstructions that lurked at every corner. From the jagged recesses a boulder could get entangled with the heavy fabric, or the sudden appearance of a snake would frighten the wits out of you. In one of the dress rehearsals a company of bees was caught in the fibrous platinum wig worn by one of the actors. It was the timely intervention of another actor carrying a *mashal* (lighted flame) that saved the poor man from being badly stung.

I had a minuscule role in the play and after my role was over I would quickly get out of my mauve and black tunic and rush into the audience to see the play. In the vast empty space behind the seated audience, I would find Alkazi pacing up and down and on seeing me he would remark, “You have also come to see my monumental blunder.” This was said in a partly sardonic manner, that revealed his vulnerability. The iconic Alkazi became terribly human in moments like this.
“When I visited Japan, seeing the theatre there, I thought to myself, this is like our epics, even though I understood nothing of the themes or their language, but like our traditional theatre, Kathakali\textsuperscript{149}, here also the actors transform themselves into signs, form, movement, metaphors. To study the Japanese’s forms Noh and Kabuki has been very enriching, as they allowed an actor to fashion a theatre tool with great discipline and for me what was important- the narration of the interiority of the human being. For me this was theatre\textsuperscript{150}.”

Soon the NSD became synonymous with Alkazi, and with his cosmopolitan background and expertise in the visual arts, he gave his students an exposure not only to theatrical arts but also to the world of poetry, painting, literature and cinema. Alkazi, and the history of the National school of Drama merged, and even after so many years, his impact is visible in the corridors of the school, even though he ceased being the director in 1977. The narrative of the school and Alkazi contribution become inseparable, and his personality looms large both for his admires and detractors, and is analyzed threadbare as if it were an episode from some soap opera.

During his tenure, he taught and directed a range of plays from Sophocles to Ibsen and discovered and directed some major Indian plays. Each production of his was meticulously planned and detailed, giving Indian theatre an international standard that made a radical departure from the existing theatre productions that had made tackiness a virtue. Initially most of the plays produced at the National School of Drama were directed by him- from set designing, to costumes, to lights, to training of the actors, all these reins were in Alkazi hands, which he manipulated with dexterity- this became a

\textsuperscript{149} Kathakali is a highly stylized classical Indian dance-drama noted for its attractive make-up of characters, their elaborate costumes, detailed gestures and well-defined body movements presented in tune with the playback music and complementary percussion. It originated in the country's present day state of Kerala during the 16th century AD, approximately between 1555 and 1605, and has been updated over the years with improved looks, refined gestures and added themes besides more ornate singing and precise drumming.

\textsuperscript{150} Ebrahim Alkazi, responding to a question asked by a student, during rehearsals in 1974, on why he was using the kabuki form in play \textit{Andha Yug}. 
necessity for institution building, and to create a reputation of excellence for the school, especially in the face of its past performance. But his inability to delegate work, was an oft repeated accusation, which lead to a great amount of criticism, especially when the faculty comprised of eminent theatre personalities like Nemichandra Jain\textsuperscript{151}, Sheila Bhatia\textsuperscript{152} and Shanta Gandhi\textsuperscript{153}.

“What does a teacher need to be delegated to him, before he can fulfil his duties as a teacher? And more so, in an institution of not more than 75 students and a staff of 12. The maximum number of students in my class are 25; and in the courses of specialisation 3-12 students in a class. Would you not consider this an ideal situation to provide intensive, personalised teaching? Nobody can possibly interfere with the class-room performance of a teacher. There he is faced with a small group of young students, whose eagerness, idealism, and respect will slowly turn to boredom, cynicism and contempt, depending solely on the teachers’ performance and his attitude to them and to his own work. This final judgement passed on a teacher is by his students and no one else……a bad teacher will always have someone or something else to blame for his own inadequate performance”.

Work Ethics

Alkazi was a hands on person and did not categorise work as ‘his work’ or ‘their work’. If he saw a cigarettes stub, or a soiled paper napkin lying in the corridors of the school, it did not take him a moment to scoop down and pick up the garbage. This set a marvellous example for the students to do the same, thus instilling a dignity of labour. This aspect of training was a necessary corollary for the students to understand that in theatre no work is big or small. From making tea, to swabbing and cleaning the stage, ironing costumes, arranging the green-room, cleaning the toilets, before and after the show, were some of the activities assigned to the students, even when they were playing a major role in the production. All work connected with the stage, both front-of stage to

\textsuperscript{151} Nemichandra Jain (1919-2006) distinguished Hindi poet and theatre critic.
\textsuperscript{152} Sheila Bhatia (1916-2008) Creator of Punjabi musicals and director of Delhi arts theatre.
\textsuperscript{153} Shanta Gandhi (1917-2002) trained as a dancer, was founder member of IPTA. She joined the National School of Drama in 1960-1972
back-stage, needed to be handled by the actors. He set an example by sweeping the stage and cleaning the toilets in the theatre and hence, motivated the students to do the same.

Alkazi also emphasized the importance of the printed word and encouraged the students to visit the school’s well-stocked library that helped in opening an artery into the rich world of literature, philosophy, poetry and plays. Books would also be presented to the students by Alkazi, and then Alkazi would check if they had been read or not. In a way this encouraged most of us, who were recipients of his ‘gifts,’ to read the books. At times, he would check the library records and shame us, by saying that he was surprised that not a single book had been issued in our name for that particular month. This definitely became the impetus for his students to go scurrying to the library.

Alkazi was also interested in creating a contemporary sensibility through the selection of his plays. The cinematic way in which he directed the production of ‘Look Back In Anger’ by John Osborne was a departure, in terms of the scale, from his previous productions, with its elaborate ensemble work and dramatic exits and entrances.

I remember almost every detail of the play. The sets, the lights, the choreography. In one scene Uttara Boaker playing the role of Helena Charles, while ironing clothes, takes the iron and uses it like a mike, ironically mocking at Jimmy Porter’s excoriating humour and seething dissatisfaction, which was played with volatile perfection by Manohar Singh. In the climax scene, Surekh’a’s as Alison Porter, emits dry cracked cries that resounded in the small studio theatre. Even though I was highly involved in the play, I would be fascinated by a parallel show that was going on in the auditorium. Odd sounds would well up in the darkened theatre and looking around I saw the audience sniffing into their handkerchiefs while some openly cried. It seemed two plays were being performed simultaneously.

Surekha Sikri: (1945 - ) Actress in Hindi theatre. On receiving her diploma from the National school of Drama in 1968, she was immediately absorbed into its repertory company, where she performed for the next twenty years.

Manohar Singh: (1942-2002) actor in Hindi theatre. Got his diploma from the National School of Drama in 1968. He joined the repertory in 1971. His impressive personality, rich voice made him the most suitable for classical roles.

Uttara Boaker: (1944-) an actress from the National school of Drama, after graduation in 1964 she joined the repertory in 1968, playing the lead in most of the production. She had a distinctive edge as she was a trained vocal classical singer.
‘Look Back In Anger’ was performed in the tight environs of the studio theatre, and in this intimate space every breath and sigh of the actors was palpably felt and experienced by the audience. Through this production, students of directions and acting were given long and extensive lectures on how the compositions were choreographed on the bases of the characters motivation. The rigors of the minute details were laid bare to be dissected and analysed. There was nothing left to chance, or improvisations. It was all structured and choreographed like a well constructed symphony. The rhythm of the scene, the pace and the silences were dotted and planned, and integral to his way of working. He held the spoken text and the visual qualities of the play in equal balance. This information was communicated through dissecting the play- almost like a surgeon’s scalpel he deconstructed the performance and the directorial details for the student, providing them with invaluable lessons in direction.

Alkazī’s involvement with the students extended to all the small details of their existence. He did not feel as if ‘life was out there’ and art somewhere else. He believed that all aspects of living and art had to coalesce for the work of an actor to have any integrity. He was like ‘The big daddy’ always watchful, ubiquitous, with nothing escaping his keen eye. In our minds he had assumed a larger than life persona, though his physical appearance is fairly diminutive. Alkazi, with his short and stocky frame, shock of wavy hair, impeccable white kurta pajamas, gesturing with his hands, almost as if he was plucking ideas from the sky, showed a verve and energy that was truly infectious.

155 “Sunday’s in the hostel meant that you washed your clothes as well as your hair. It was also the day that most of us sprawled on the lawns of the Vakil Lane hostel, or lounged in our rooms. The assortment of attires ranged from the Lungi to the Mundu to the stripped pyjamas of the boys while most of the girls wore either kaftans or frilly nighties. Often in the mornings, Alkazi would arrive at the hostel and enter our rooms. (Sometimes as early as six in the morning- make us lug out of bed, and go to the field of Rabindra Bhavan and run around to get rid off our ‘middle aged flab’ as he called it. Most of us were not more than twenty or so at that time.) Sometimes he would enter quietly, look around, notice our strewn clothes, dust covered bookshelves and then walk out as unobtrusively as if he had never entered. The mess, so natural to our habitat was now seen through Alkazi’s eyes. His visits always sent us into a apoplexy of cleaning. I would scoop my clothes from the floor and stuff them in my cupboard. Put a block printed sheet over my scattered books, throw a shawl over my torn nightdress, stuff pins in my uncombed hair and keep my mouth shut as I had not yet brushed my teeth. Even though this inspection was done on a routine basis, it never made any of us sufficiently alert to keep our rooms clean. Alkazi used to periodically examine the underwear of the actors to stress the importance of hygiene in theatre. Even though this embarrassed us, its significance was not lost. Nothing is more foul than to do a scene with a co-actor who has a bad case of halitosis along with smelly underarms.
I could never figure out why Alkazi was called *chacha*, or uncle by his students. A fairly colloquial endearment for a man who represented the highest standards of urbanity. Alkazi was always a topic of conversation, and his students discussed his likes and dislikes, with the same passion as a Chekhov or an Ibsen play. “Alkazi wore this today, he said hello to me”, were discussed like cabinet meetings in the dark of the night in the school hostel. The moment his car drove into the precincts of the school, a strange sort of discipline and rigor came into everybody’s body language- from the watchman, to the clerk, to the students and the teachers. Even the plants and flowers looked more alert.

Although most of Alkazi productions in Bombay were performed in English, yet he had had a long term commitment to himself to shift his theatre work in Hindi/Hindustani (he had already started a program in Bombay to teach his English speaking actors, from Theatre Unit, how to speak and act in Hindi), Alkazi had, by now, also learnt Sanskrit, in order to understand the Sanskrit theatre. In a letter that he wrote to the poet Nissim Ezekiel. (1924 – 2004) while on a boat to London is fairly revealing “if theatre has to amount to anything significant it had to be performed in Hindi/Hindustani. This letter becomes revealing, especially in the context of the raging and unending debate about Alkazi not being native enough, or being too westernized, or the training in the school subscribing too western models of training, rather then being rooted in its own cultural context.

“It has to be said though that Alkazi did not seem sufficiently alert to the possibility of traditional forms being yoked to, or encountered through, filters of contemporary expression. His characterisation of ‘tradition’ and ‘modern’ as mutually exclusive polarities has not been borne out by later inter-cultural work in the theatre. On the other hand, one must remember that Alkazi’s response to the value of tradition was shaped by the ‘traditionalist’ argument. In Alkazi – i.e. this was usually articulated in

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Nissim Ezekiel (1924 – 2004) was a poet, playwright, editor and art critic. He was a foundational figure in postcolonial India’s literary history, specifically for Indian writing in English. This letter was written by Alkazi from a ship on his way to England in 1947, for training at RADA, to Nissim Ezekiel.
In view of the above perception, it is important to note that Alkazi as the newly appointed director of the National School of Drama, produced Mohan Rakesh’s *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* (1962-1963), a play that was written by a playwright, who had still not attained national recognition. His capacity to discern talent was remarkable, and the collaboration between Mohan Rakesh and Alkazi exerted a magical influence on the theatre going public, and helped in laying the foundations of Mohan Rakesh’s reputation as a major playwright in Hindi drama. His production of Dharamvir Bharati’s *Andha Yug* (1963) gave a permanent position to this play in the pantheon of Indian playwriting.

Even though some of the scripts that Alkazi chose for performance were from the West, they were translated and adapted for the local audience, yet all the plays were performed in Hindi/Hindustani/Urdu. Through the translations of world classics into Hindi/Hindustani/or Urdu he was adding to the literary bank of playwriting in India; and through translations making the work accessible to a large majority of theatre directors/actors, who may not have been able to read it in the original. Most of the productions done in the school were for public performances, and could be compared to the best in world theatre. And the training of an actor would be during the course of the rehearsal processes. The actor got to learn various dimensions of working on a production- from stage lighting to characterisation, to costumes, to chorography, use of space, set designing and dealing with large group scenes.

“During Alkazi’s tenure everything was uncomfortably westernised……. The emphasis was on English as a medium of instruction. One was groomed into western...
mannerism...one was falling into the lure of western culture. Indian traditions, and plays were slipping out of our hands.\(^{161}\)

“...My formative years were spent in the Mohallas of Bombay, in the labyrinth back lanes of Bhendi bazaar, Kalbadevi, and Kholsa Mohalla, among Bohras, Banias, Mehmans, Khojas, Marwaris, Sindhis, Bengalis, Bhayyas, Parsis, Goans, Pathans, Konkanis, and Moplas. So I found it amusing when some self-appointed custodian of Indian identity, mostly from some backwater in U.P, presumes to tell me what India is. We are, all of us, of one bastard stock or another.\(^{162}\)

The syllabus that he framed for the school is revealing: “To establish links between traditional forms of Indian theatre and ‘modern’ expression; to encourage playwrights to respond to the challenges of the contemporary Indian situations, and at the same time to be aware of the developments in other parts of the world”.

He elucidated that: “The systematic study and practical performing experience of Sanskrit drama, modern Indian drama, traditional Indian forms, Asian drama and Western drama gives the students such a solid grounding and such a wide perspective that he cannot possibly pursue erratic course later in his professional career. It enables him to search each form of dramatic expression as part of a historical process, in relation to his own time and period, and as one element in a continuing universal movement.\(^{163}\)

Alkazi constantly spoke of establishing a connection between the forms and impulses of the past and modern expression. But he did not wish to treat ancestral material as a ‘holy cow’ to be venerated, but to view it as ‘an expression of its own time’ and to appreciate it on the basis of its relationship with the contemporary.

I remember as a student , we were exposed to the best of the traditional forms, along with Western classics. It was important that an actor should foster a contemporary

\(^{161}\) Bhanu Bharati (1948-) actor director in Hindi and Rajasthan theatre (A View From the wings) Enact 1981

\(^{162}\) Alkazi Speaks (In an interview in Enact – A special issue on the National School of Drama page 107)

sensibility, which was both rooted and modern. For a performing artist, traditional forms cannot be archival material, as the repository of the form is the living performer, and when he communicates his form, he does it through the body. Actors can master forms that are not their own well enough to perform them, as most forms are also cultural languages. When a student of drama learns a form from another regional context, then the consequences of such a training is a knowledge that learning the form gave him/her, not the form itself.

“One can certainly resurrect various forms of art from the past, but only as historical research. This may enrich and deepen our understanding of art, but it cannot be a substitute for contemporary expression. As far as I am concerned, it does not matter a damn what the shape of Sanskrit theatre was. What matters is the shape and structure of the performance”164.

Alkazi had no patience with intellectuals who created watertight categories of tradition versus modernity. He found this sort of argument arcane and pedantic, which did not take into consideration the dynamics of the artist, responding to the times that he was living in. He also reiterated that most of this clamour was coming from the academic scholars who had no experience of translating a text into a performance. For him modern consciousness meant a rejection of the caste system, of dissolving religious and class discrimination; being imaginative and open, were the values of a contemporary artistic mind.

It was during my days as a student at the National School of Drama in 1975, that BV Karanth, an alumnus of the school, was invited to work with the students along with Mr. Shivarama Kota Karanth165. B.V Karanth walked down the echoing corridors of Rabindra Bhavan, with a shy, hesitant and unsure air. He was assisting Shivarama Kota Karanth and played that part conscientiously, but was too diffident to enjoy the fruits of authority that came with the position. Shivarama Kota Karanth had a strong resonating

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voice that could only belong to a man used to speaking in public and commanding attention. He had large piercing eyes, and a shock of dishevelled white hair which during dance classes would spray a shower of perspiration when he pirouetted with feline abandon. Shivaram Kota Karanth was a complete extrovert and his language was laced with juicy colloquialisms and swear words. On the other hand B.V.Karanth was a minimalist who spoke a distinctive patois of Hindi with a Kannada accent.

The one-month workshop culminated in a Yakshagana\textsuperscript{166} play, \textit{Bhishma Vijaya} based on an episode from the Mahabharata. Early morning ‘movement classes’ would have us sway to the beat of ‘\textit{taki tahi taki dhumi}’, with the hands moving like elephants ears, backward and forward, flapping hypnotically. I loved the rigorous and robust movements devoid of prettification. In these classes, I found that my body ‘blocks’ were melting and I could actually dance.

The fabrics for the costumes had come from Karnataka. I loved the feeling and stiffness of new fabrics with star spangled mica flecks that smelled of starch and sandalwood. Surrounded by bales and bales of cloth of varying hues and textures, I would spend hours making colour combinations, matching textures and sorting out material into hot and cold tones\textsuperscript{86}.

While working in the production, I was far removed from Yakshagana, and had never, until then, visited Karnataka yet through the process of rehearsals the traditional form became mine too, I felt myself owning it and it became an epic way of relating to the material world. To travel from the traditional form (which is not always yours) needs imagination and a spirit of adventure. To try and find ways in which you can connect with the form by not seeking a context outside itself, but to seek out the universal and the connecting points in culture, to see the way cultures collide, and how they can be renewed through encounters. The performance of Yakshagana was not imitated by the actors in terms of its outer shell, its formal form, neither was it seen as a form that had been sealed off from time, or geography but to strip it away from the layers of time and convention and let it speak to the actors afresh. That was the approach used by both the Karanth\textsuperscript{66},

\textsuperscript{166} Yakshagana (‘yaksha songs’): generic term referring mainly to a traditional form of Kannada theatre.
and this was also Alkazi’s intention - to expose the students to the rich and varied forms that existed in India and which could form part of the training for an actor.

The show, performed at the Kamani theatre, began with the sound of a kettle drum piercing the darkness of the stage. After the music reached a pitch, dozens of dancers rushed on to the stage with a blaze of red, yellow, and black costumes, bringing alive a tale of valour and love, jealousy and betrayal, revenge and reconciliation. The stage filling energy of the dancers, and musicians, with their rich and elaborate costumes, with faces painted white, green and blue, with black-lined eyes, and red curved mouths, was a startling departure from the realistic plays that the school had performed earlier. The play was not reconstructed from iconic or textural reference, but from a living tradition, that was imbued with living energy, with the past entering the present through a dynamic interaction between an old form, being transformed by new bodies, generating a hybrid energy, that gave it an extra edge.

“Our present predicament has nothing to do with what we consider to be ‘Indian’ and what ‘Western’, though we seem to be obsessed with problems of cultural identity. We should essentially be concerned by what is feudalistic, backward looking, reactionary, on the one hand, and that which is rational, egalitarian, looking out to the future on the other. We should be much more exercised over our basic humanity than over the questions of Indianness. When we are in the midst of these horrible caste, communal and regional wars, should we accept the prejudices out of which these arise as being outmoded, regressive and inhuman? Do we not see signs of the sickening ‘Aryan’ myth being raised? In a whipped-up frenzy of this kind, do we not see the dangers of cultural fascism? (Alkazi in conversation 1981, in Enact)

I wonder if Alkazi ever realised how prophetic his words would be twenty years later, when racism, communalism, regionalism has raised its ugly head, stalking all that is decent and civilised in our society?
The Actor Today Has To Be An Interpreter Of The History Of Mankind

A similar approach was envisaged when the school did a Kabuki play\(^{167}\), in 1973. An onnagata\(^ {168}\) Sosho Sato\(^ {169}\), had come from Tokyo to work with the students on the production of *Ibaragi*, a text based on two Zen stories, which is typical of all kabuki plays. For three months, the students were exposed to the Japanese sensibility through Japanese films, the Ikebana, (Japanese system of flower arrangement) haiku poetry, (a four line poem) the Japanese’s Tea ceremony, Sumi Ink drawing—Zen Buddhism— in fact all aspects of Japanese culture and aesthetics were in evidence for the actors to respond, internalize and be exposed to before working on the production. The attempt was to involve the students in the rhythm of another world, another impulse, far removed from theirs, and to search for ways of connecting with the form, its movements, expression and stories from another cultural milieu and history. Alkazi, aim was to fuse Indian and Japanese theatre while retaining the essence of both. A theatre artist is not a anthropologist consumed with guilt, and worried with issues like appropriation, but an artist who is constantly exploring and involved in an incessant search for the hidden notes that can make cultural borders, porous enough for an actor to enter and discover new performance techniques.

Alkazi was the master of spectacle and crowd scenes, and his choreography created visual and kinetic patterns, that showed his deep understanding of how to position actors in a performance space, that treated the space at both the fictional and physical level, where the actors react and interact with each other, within the grammar of a realistic protocol. In the crowd scenes the actors did not move in unison as a collective blob, as his aim was to present each character in the crowd as an individual with specific feelings and context with detailed characterisation. But despite realism being the framing

\(^{167}\) Kabuki- from the mid seventeenth century to the twentieth century the kabuki has been the most popular form of theatrical entertainment in Japan, and remains the most typical of the theatrical arts of that country.

\(^{168}\) Onnagata- female impersonator from the kabuki tradition.

\(^{169}\) Sosho Soto: kabuki performer from Japan, who had come to the National School of Drama to direct a kabuki play in 1973.
tool, a psychological sub-text was also palpable. This was in evidence due to his emphasis on the minutes of details, regarding characterization, inner motivation of the character, expressed through highly thought-through movements and gestures. According to Alkazi - the actor’s job is to show what situation and what state the character who utters the words is in. “Everything comes from the word, but the words should come from, that which the actor has produced as performance”.

In 1974 Alkazi directed Danton’s Death, a play written by the German playwright Georg Buchner. I could not really understand, why we were doing a play based on the French revolution, a story which could never become mine. It was essential for me to have acquired some notion of history. Alkazi did make us go through a political apprenticeship of that period of French politics, the storming of the Bastille, the people’s uprising- and it was due to my closures, that I thought that France was not my business. It was only later that I realized that you can understand history from many viewpoints, invent many levels, create characters, since half the characters were anyway fictitious. I realized, later, that my political education was insufficient. And because of that, I made hasty assessments of the experience, and just saw it as a chronicle of a time past, and nothing else. Yet theatre always exists in the present, there is no future or past in theatre. The actor performs in the ‘now’.

170 (the above quote is attributed to Alkazi during the rehearsal of Danton Death) I recall the time when Alkazi was directing Danton’s Death, a play written by the German playwright Georg Buchner. This four-act play, with scenes which are spasmodic in nature, is written in language that is terse, sarcastic, vulgar and rhapsodic. I remember him giving entry points into the characters to the actors - ‘you must see yourself as a dove’ ‘you are a snake’ ‘another actor a lion’ the actors must not feel the part, they must show their feelings, were the instructions given to the actors, For days a team of carpenters had been hammering away inside the Kamani auditorium trying to replicate the interiors of a French courtroom, boudoir, guillotine and boulevard that were essential to the play. The debate of the play hinges on the aesthete Danton, played by Naseeruddin Shah and the puritanical and righteous Robespierre acted by Om Puri. The play was not only about a clash of values but also a magnificent duel between two of the most charismatic actors of the National School of Drama. The heavy wooden sets polished to a cinnamon mahogany against which the Indian actors were positioned in elaborate French costumes and French wigs made me feel as if brown people had walked into a white history book and were clearly lost. It was like eating a parantha with a knife and fork. The climax was the singing of the French national anthem ‘La Marseille’, by the entire group of fifty actors, waving the French flags that were strung on long poles, with a patriotic passion that they normally reserved for Jana Gana Mana. (excerpts from my diary as a student).
The shows was a grand success, but generated a debate about tradition and roots. Many felt that urban theatre in India had to return to the use of the indigenous in an endeavor to find its own identity, which was distinctly different from the theatre of representation introduced by colonialism. A theatre that had become dependant on the proscenium arch, naturalistic narratives and an ordered sense of performance. Ebrahim Alkazi had, with single-minded determination drawn the contours of Modern Indian drama by shaping its lexicon, through a training system based on the Stanislavaski method. He was the singular most formidable name in the crucial moment of the formation of the modern theatre sensibility in the country. Most of his students viewed him as their guru, but Alkazi did not allow anyone to put that mantel on him. He abhorred anyone touching his feet before a show, a tradition that is still rampant in most theatre groups, whether amateur, professional, commercial, urban or rural. Alkazi’s distaste for becoming a modern guru had to do with the fact that he modified theatre training in such a way that he broke with traditional structures by making his actors learn with a hands-on work-culture that was both practical and experiential. His days at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London, his work in Bombay and his vision as the director of The National School of Drama has found him a permanent place in the history of modern Indian theatre. Even though all his productions were in Hindi/Hindustani/Urdu yet he was always the subject of heated discourse about him not being Indian enough, or not sufficiently ‘nativised’ in the aesthetics and temperament of the nation.

His role in theatre aesthetics and institutional building is something that even his detractors cannot ignore. His role as a teacher, director and administrator coalesce into one seamless whole, without any disruptions. During his tenure as director of the National School of Drama, he took the challenge of creating a work system, a training program with research oriented productions that established the reputation of the school as a premier training centre both nationally and internationally. As a teacher he was charismatic and gave his students not only an insight into the world of acting and direction, but also was involved in chiselling their characters, teaching them about
aesthetics, making them mentally alert and exposing them to the best in world literature, painting and poetry. Through his impassioned and eloquent elucidation of text, he made alive the Greece of Oedipus, the Russia of Chekhov, and the Spain of Lorca.

Conclusion

To leave this chapter with one thought, so that we can move into the next section, is critical. Ebrahim Alkazi, for whatever we might say about him and his impact, fundamentally created a new discursive object. As discussed, a discursive object is a new space of enquiry. To give an example from Michel Foucault, the human body as an object of medical enquiry and fundamentally auto contained, which is the primary object of medical enquiry, knowledge, institutions (hospitals, pharmacological companies) and interventions (treatment, profit) only emerged in the late 18th Century in Europe. Similarly, the idea that man is no longer master in his own home, and triggered an entire wave of non-theistic studies into what makes us human, were triggered by Sigmund Freud’s creation of the new discursive object of consciousness. In his own way Alkazi also made a new discursive object that transformed the way we saw and studied and created theatre. He taught us that “bringing alive” was the key purpose of theatre. Bring something alive for the audience, bringing a world alive for yourself, bringing alive a character, bringing alive a history, bringing alive a conceptual thought – but he also taught us that “bringing alive” was something that required instinct, patience, creativity, knowledge and effort. It was not flimsy, whimsical nonsense, the theatre – now the theatre had been elevated to the dignity of labour.

In the history of institutions, transformations are never so elegant and immediate. The next conversation takes place over the notion of “bringing alive”, and as a result, Alkazi’s discipline, like in all good stories, required an anarchy. The conflict that moved the narrative from Pre Modern to (Pre) Modern, was often represented as “chaotic” and
“anti-institutional”. But BV Karanth who succeeded Alkazi was not engaging in rabble rousing or chaos – Karanth was engaging in a new debate, made possible only by Alkazi’s creation of a new discursive object – what does it mean to “bring alive”, and how does it resonate with something deeper and more primal than ordinary Modernism?