Chapter - IV

Bringing it Alive

The Discursive Shift From “bringing” to “alive” - The Transformation of Formal Modernism to Live Modernism

“As long as I am alive, I will make theatre. And as long as I keep on doing theatre, I will be alive. (BV Karanth)\textsuperscript{171}

When we speak the word "life," it must be understood we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating centre which forms never reach. (Antonin Artaud)\textsuperscript{172} (1896-1948)

Karanth’s impact on Indian modernism cannot be seen independently of his relationship to musical composition. For Karanth, modernity is almost like what is called [171] Babukodi Venkataramana Karanth (1928 -2002) 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 new wave cinema. 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.

[172] Antonin Artaud (September 4, 1896, in Marseille – March 4, 1948 in Paris) was a French playwright, poet, actor and theatre director. Artaud spoke of theatre of cruelty (French: cruauté) not in the sense of being violent, but the cruelty it takes for actors to completely strip away their masks and show an audience a truth that they do not want to see. He believed that text had been a tyrant over meaning, and advocated, instead, for a theatre made up of a unique language that lay halfway between thought and gesture. Artaud described the spiritual in physical terms, and believed that all expression is physical expression in space.

In the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud was attempting a few things: he had believed that the world, including the society, and the world of theatre had become an empty shell of itself. In the theatre of cruelty, he was trying partly to revolutionize theatre - figuratively burn it to the ground so that it can start again. On another level he was trying to connect people with something more primal, honest and true within themselves, that had been lost for most people. This, it is believed, partly stemmed from Artaud's mental instability - he was attempting to purge himself through expression.
“white noise” – a random signal with a flat spectral density. In other words, white noise, much like the static on television screens, is made up of completely random and contingent inputs, yet nevertheless creates flat visual and aural effects. Much like the modernity and conformity he saw around him, which was contingent, yet unexciting and ultimately a “flat force” that levelled all real differences into sanitized urban environments, “white noise” is a deafening and crippling force. For Karanth, there was a pulsating core of life beyond and behind this conventional representation. For Karanth, music, especially in its traditional form, had to become that force that pierced through this veil. Rather than seeing traditional music as a “historical” and “pure form” of Indian cultural heritage (which was a regressive and ultimately creatively conservative thought for him), Karanth used it as an aesthetic weapon.

“Never before, when it is life that is in question, has there been so much talk of civilization and culture. And there is a curious parallel between this generalized collapse of life at the root of our present demoralization and our concern for a culture which has never been coincident with life, which in fact has been devised to tyrannize life”.174

Life is what the theatre can reach through music. And life is that which is free from tyranny. This was the ideological stand of B.V. Karanth, and the fight against tyranny – whether it was a cliché or empty ritual – was at the heart of Karanth’s theatrical politics.

173 White noise is a term used for sounds with flat spectral densities. These sounds do not emit a specific noise, but are a combination of all sounds put together (which create the flat white noise structure). White noise often acts as a noise blocker, and is commonly used in working environments, interrogative situations and during sleep exercises to filter out excess noise. The term “white noise” was coined because of the spectral color of all the different tones combined is white. This is a term from Physics and is used as a metaphor.

174 The Theater and its Double Antonin Artaud."We must believe in a sense of life renewed by the theater, a sense of life in which man makes himself master of what does not yet exist, and brings it into being. And everything that has not been born can still be brought to life if we are not satisfied to remain mere recording organisms. Furthermore, when we speak the word "life", it must be understood we are not referring to life as we know it from the surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating center which forms never reach. And if there is one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames"
"The theatre, which is a no thing, but makes use of everything -- gestures, sounds, words, screams, light, darkness -- rediscovers itself at precisely the point where the mind requires a language to express its manifestations. To break through language in order to touch life is to create or recreate the theatre”. (Antonin Artaud)\(^7\)

These quotes above are not there to draw together some sort of parallel between Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) and BV Karanth,\(^{176}\) (1929-2002) and should not be read in that light. Rather, the purpose of the quotes is to illustrate the thematic energies operating in the experience and impact of Karanth. The pulsating core of a life beyond the comfort of urbanity, a memory of something beyond and behind conventional representation, a sense that any knowledge or pompous ideological movement is ultimately fragile, and that performance requires sounds and sensations beyond the obvious Modern expressions, which our traditional forms and music can communicate well beyond formality.

**Formalised Modernism versus Live Modernism**

Ebrahim Alkazi’s (1925- ) name is synonymous with forming a modern theatre sensibility in India, this even his harshest critics cannot dismiss or ignore. Even though it could be put down to the fact that it was easy to build an institution with governmental support, yet we all know how difficult it is to get the bureaucracy to be imaginative and pro-active. He combined the roles of teacher, of director and of head of an institution effortlessly and became one of its most celebrated directors, indeed mythologized. In the course of its ongoing determination to privilege innovation, theatricality and a notion of theatre as a social practice, he reassessed the legacies of, not only European theatrical practices, but also explored Asian traditions and regional forms, in his production work.

But for his detractors, he was the dominating banyan tree that did not allow the rest of his faculty to either grow or assert itself. It was said that Alkazi was not running a


\(^{176}\) BV Karanth(1929-2002) : One of the most eminent theatre personality of contemporary Indian theatre.
training school where actors were being taught, but a production house where actors were
being used to build up Alkazi’s reputation nationally and internationally. These frictions
had surfaced on a number of occasions, engendering departures and arrivals. Akazi had
resigned in 1974, but was persuaded to come back. He again resigned in 1977 and despite
persuasion from many quarters both governmental, administrative and artistic, he was
determined to stick by his decision.

Alkazi understood that to confront institutional ossification required a constant
battle on a number of levels. The paradoxical nature of change is an imperative in a
training and production institution and vilification and praise are both an inevitable
consequence of initiating change. Being implicated in rifts, collisions and ruptures are
part and parcel of any institution that had reached the height, scale, intensity and impact
of the National School of Drama, in such a remarkably short span. Battle lines were
drawn and there was a distinct cleavage in the opinion that were brandished— for or
against Alkazi. It was really unfortunate that a man, who gave his sweat and blood to
nurture and create an institution, had to be embroiled in such a messy business. To try and
go on a fact finding mission, is an exercise of hopeless futility. What he did, why he did
it, did he or did he not, become completely irrelevant, when even today after so many
years of his leaving the NSD(1977) the school resonates with stories about his passionate
articulation, his work ethics, commitment and aesthetics.

This is not to make a comparison between two stalwarts and neither is it in any
way to create a hierarchy of appreciation for one over the other, but to understand two
distinct personalities, working within the impulses of their individual temperament and
the times in which they were working, exercising their own compulsions towards the
choices that they made. On the obvious level it would seem that one was subscribing to a
theatre that was based on the principals of realism, and the other was working in a theatre
of counter-realism. Yet I do feel that both were searching for a vocabulary of training that
was based on the principals of truth.
BV Karanth succeeded Alkazi as the director of The National School of Drama (1977-1981). I can say that even though these two directors, ostensibly, seem to belong to diametrically opposite systems of working, and one director’s way of working may seem to destabilize the other’s perspective, but an analysis of their work allowed not one viewpoint to emerge, but many. These viewpoints then provided a latticework of thoughts, practices and ideas that interweave and complement each other, even when they may seem to be coming from different trajectories. They are certainly not rigid or opposing positions, but more in the nature of dissimilar ways of working. These differences are not from any entrenched or loaded position, as both these directors believed that change and transformation is the very essence of any undertaking. Whatever their dissimilarity may have been, there is no question about their honesty; indeed wholly confirmed by their incessant artistic research, their commitment to artistic values and their rejecting to any moralizing inquisition. Both occupied their own valid space, and negotiated through it, their artistic pursuits. Both of them asserted their heritage – Alkazi with his urban, and sophisticated ways, juxtaposed against Karanth’s lack of conversational proficiency, and rags-to-riches story.

Karanth’s way of working was in direct contrast to Alkazi’s ordered regularity. Karanth thrived in chaos, while Alkazi had a Zen-like precision. But Karanth’s significance comes from the number of questions that he posed about the very nature of theatre – what it is, what does it mean, where do we do it, how can we do it, and why and to what end ... a series of questions that perhaps every performer poses to themselves. However, Karanth’s goal was not to create a manifesto by answering such questions. Karanth’s force lay in the very impulses behind those questions. The question was not asked to reach an answer, for Karanth, the question is something that acknowledges an uncertainty, and we must not rush to fill that up with clean answers. The power is to dwell in that uncertainty, as this is the force that allows us to continue to create.

“I must remark that the world is hungry and not concerned with culture, and that the attempt to orient toward culture thoughts turned only toward hunger is a purely
artificial expedient. What is more important, it seems to me, is not so much to defend a culture whose existence has never kept a man from going hungry, as to extract, from what is called culture, ideas whose compelling force is identical with that of hunger.”

Hunger, in the quote above, is an analogy that describes the uncertainty that must always be kept alive. For a man born in Manchi, a small village in the Dakshin Kannad district of Karnataka, who left home at the age of 14 to join Gubbi Veeranna’s (1890-1972) company in 1944, it was an imminent reality: “I got food twice a day and that itself was a great thing for a person like me. They gave me two annas for breakfast. And because I was a Brahmin, I used to get dakshina (money to propitiate the Gods through a Brahmin) every Friday and Saturday after pooja (prayers).” Working for six years there, he developed an interest in theatre, music and literature and also specialized in female roles. When he could no longer do female roles, because his voice had begun to crack, he requested Gubbi Veeranna to sponsor his education. Gubbi Veeranna sent him to Benaras for higher studies, and there he completed his MA in Hindi at the Benaras Hindu University. He also received training in music from Pandit Omkarnath Thakur, and later in 1960 he joined the National School of Drama, as a student.

177 Theatre and Its Double: Antonin Artaud; page 10.
178 Veeranna Gubbi(1890-1972) was an Indian theatre director, one of the pioneers and most prolific contributors to Kannada theatre. He established the drama company, Gubbi Veeranna Nataka Company that played a crucial role in promoting the Kannada theatre. Some of the stalwarts that have emerged out of this company include Dr. Rajkumar, BV Karanth and G. V. Shivananda. He is conferred the title Nataka Ratna meaning jewel in the theatre world. Gubbi Veeranna Nataka Company is the first theatre company in Karnataka to employ female artists to portray female characters on the stage. There is a popular saying that the story of Gubbi Veeranna’s company is the story of the Kannada theatre which indicates the standing of this company in the theatre world. Apart from theatre, Gubbi Veeranna has also produced films and acted in them as well.

179 Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi / BHU Promotes the study of the Hindu shastras and Sanskrit literature, with learning and research in arts and science.
180 Pandit Omkar Nath Thakur (1897-1967): One of the greatest classical singers of his time. He was Dean of music at the Benaras Hindu University.

“Those were turbulent times. The entire nation was up against the British. Most of us wanted to serve the country, and we had three missions in life: go to jail, spin the wheel and learn the national language: since my Company did not allow us to take part in the freedom struggles, I though the least I could do was to learn Hindi. I, a Kannadiga learnt Hindi.
He told fascinating stories about his early childhood and his days with the *Gubbi Veeranna* Company. “Ours was a very poor family from Babukodi village in south Canara. My parents did not have the means to educate me beyond the eighth class. I ran away from home to meet Gubbi Veeranna, whose company was performing in Mysore, and thought of asking him for a job. When they learnt I could sing, they auditioned me and gave me the job straightaway. I was slightly built with soft eyes and a gentle voice and I either played the role of a young Krishna or a bashful nubile lady. The biggest tragedy of my life was the onset of puberty, when I lost my delicate voice and along with it my livelihood” (in conversation in 1984 in Chandigarh with me).

After graduating from the NSD, he worked at Sardar Patel Vidyalaya school in Delhi for several years and got involved in children’s theatre which saw him teaching children the tables, reciting folk tales, singing and dancing with them. But at the same time Karanth's entry into the Kannada theatre scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s (after his graduation from the NSD) turned the world of conventional theatre in Karnataka upside down. Kannada theatre, at that time, was seeped in the proscenium style of performance and was speech oriented. Karanth reversed all that by dissolving the boundaries between actor and audience and by making the actors speak directly to the audience, and engage with them in a way that had not happened before. The significance of his work in Kannada theatre is revealed in three distinct innovations that acquired great importance during that time.

Karanth infused fresh energy and experimentation in a dull theatre scenario that had been suffocated by an excess of realism. His plays had a sense of celebration, improvisation and theatricality. Due to his experience of working with the *Gubbi Veeranna* company, he managed to intuitively fuse the high theatricality of the company theatre with the folk form, Yakshagana, along with a sense of modernity. The third

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181 I make it a point to do at least two plays for children every year and that is because I was once a child artist.

182 Company drama: a popular term referring to two entries of ‘Kannada theatre’: the commercial movement that was hugely popular in the first half of the twentieth century, and the genre that was created and refined during the same movement. Generically The Company theatre is a hybrid version of the Parsi theatre, and several local traditions of Karnataka.

183 Yakshagana (Yaksha song): generic term referring to the traditional form of Kannada theatre.
most significant contribution was in theatre music, were he combined an incredible relationship between sound and words, between melody and speech and between composition and meaning. The stage was mobilized by set, costumes, music, lights, movements and gestures of the actors- not for delineating an action or highlighting the text, but more to make the stage into a site to unearth the buried text. He also explored alternative theatre spaces, trying to take the actors away from conventional auditoriums. “not ‘minars but maidans” became his new call. (Not formal structures, but open grounds).

I remember the sense of excitement and exhilaration when I first saw his productions of Chandrasekhar Kambar’s Jokumaraswami, Siri Sampige and Girish Karnad’s Hayavadana in Bombay in 1976 at the National centre for Performing Arts. These three plays are examples of two different ways of using folk themes and folk stories in a modern play. The literary qualities of the play got translated into theatrical action, and each of the three plays had a theatricality in its theatre language as well as in its verbal language, is what Karanth discovered while working on the play. “What I mean by theatricality is in fact the theatre language which is not verbal language. Literary images can embellish the dramatic speech, but they are not translated into the theatre language. Literary images we must go back to Bharata’s Natyasstra for further clarification. Bharata gives us certain technical terms like parvesha or triskarini. Parvesha means entrance. But who enters? It is the actor and not the character. We call them stage directions, but all theses directions are a part of theatre language. The new literary drama which are amateur theatre used was concerned only with social problems like revolution and change, etc. And forgot to create this theatre language. There is never a dull moment in Karanth’s plays, the action spills all over the stage, along with a flood of images, raw and sumptuous in bearing. His actors move in groups, while singing and dancing- and his work could be

184 Chandrasekhar Kambar (1938-): Kannada playwright, poet, novelist, folklorist, an actor. His breakthrough play Jokumaraswami(1972) is a folk- mythical ritualistic play about fertility and impotence, and their implications extended to agricultural, as well as failure of revolution in India. Just as the tenant and not the landlord is the real owner of land, the potent Basanna happens to own, sexually’ the wife of the impotent village chief. Sri Sampige (1986) deals with the dichotomies between mind and body, man and woman. Based on a Kannada folk tale about a prince who has human and serpentine forms.

185 Girsh Karnad(1938-) Hayavadana(1971) is about the dichotomy between mind and body, and the problems of completeness, using folk elements such as masks and the supernatural.

186 Contemporary Indian Theatre . BV Karanth an interview by Kirtinath Kurtkoti.(1989)
referred to as ‘total’ theatre, where language, music, song, stylization, coalesce to create an ensemble, often through folk forms. His use of the chorus, created a sort of ‘Karanth way of working’ it became his signature tune and many of his acolytes, imitated his use of chorus mindlessly.

“The chorus is the key to achieving a historical perspective, of distancing what is near and recalling the past to life”

**Professional Theatre and Amateur Theatre**

Karanth, was responsible for bridging the gap between professional and amateur theatre, and he used to say “that I was first a professional actor (referring to his days with the Gubbi company)- then I became an amateur and now I am hovering between the two”. He strongly felt that it is the amateur theatre movement that exists in the country, in every region, in every village that is responsible for the survival of theatre. “The amateur theatre feeds the professional theatre- the amateur theatre takes risks, experiments with form and is innovative in spirit, filled with energy and optimism, despite financial and functional constraints – but it carries on, despite enormous difficulties as it has nothing to lose. It is the amateur theatre that has kept the theatre movement alive and lively in India”. In a way his work presents a complete theatrical experience - colour, music, movement, chorus, text and visual all merged in a burst of energy and verve. This was a theatre that attracted both the cognoscenti and the general public, catering to a vast range of taste and sensibility. People started coming to his plays in droves

Regarded as a one-man institution — he was a director of theatre and films, music composer, actor and writer — Karanth is credited with having given Kannada and Indian theatre a vibrant new idiom that derived much creative inspiration from vernacular expressions of art, drama and music. Karanth is regarded as a genius of theatre by the

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187 - Ariane Mnouchkine – ([Collaborative theatre :The Theatre du Soleil Sourcebook- Ariane Mnouchkine Page 180-181) Since the past thirty years The Theatre du Soleil has become on of the most celebrated theatre companies in Europe, and Ariane Mnouchkine one of Europe’s most celebrated directors

188 Karanth in a private conversation in Bhopal in 1981.
legion of friends, co-workers and students he leaves behind in the theatre world, including in remote towns and villages of the country, where he took theatre.

“We must insist upon the idea of culture-in-action, of culture growing within us like a new organ, a sort of second breath: and on civilization as an applied culture controlling even our subtlest actions, a presence of mind; the distinction between culture and civilization is an artificial one, providing two words to signify an identical function”.

Karanth and The National School of Drama. (NSD)

But at the same time, Karanth, has often been accused of disturbing the ‘order of things’. His tenure at the NSD was marked by a way of working that bordered on the ‘frenzic’. A man in a hurry, he expanded the institutions in ways that became unruly and uncontained. Karanth was brimming with ideas, concepts, independent thought, and vision, but his nomadic spirit and love for change, kept him constantly in motion, that for him was creativity. ‘BV Karanth, has led an almost aimless yet eventful life’

‘a peripatetic character, whose real love was traveling rather than theatre’, are some of the opinions thrown around by his friends and detractors. He is a man always searching for change and adventure, with a naivety and boyishness that age and time could not diminish. Fundamentally he was a rootless man, a gypsy, a citizen of many worlds, with a restless sense of chaos around him.

BV Karanth had strong conviction and creative fervour, a genius that recognized no boundaries, favouring collectivism and situational ethics that never reached actuality, as he did not have the discipline and meticulousness of Alkazi. With BV Karanth, man, milieu and moment coalesced to enable the entry of regional voices, genres, and local impulses. The training in most drama schools in the late sixties and early seventies had been persuasively derivative of Western sources, forms and traditions. But the situation changed in the late seventies and eighties. Suddenly folk forms and traditions started being explored and valorised, on the assumption that there existed in these forms a

189 Antonin Artaud: Theatre And Its Double; page 12.
190 This remark is attributed to Kirtinath Kurtkoti (an eminent drama critic from Karnatika)
theatrical vocabulary that would enable urban theatre to establish links with their forgotten, invisible past.

When he took over as the director of the National School of Drama (1977) he turned things around in a way that were so radical and unexpected, that it took a while for the NSD to recover its breath again. He opened up the gates for fresh winds to blow. Somewhere in that blast a lot of good things flew out, leaving some debris behind. He worked towards demolishing the myth that Indian culture was a monolith by establishing that it was a conglomerate of cultures, varied, layered and belonging to many sources. Establishing that it was an ancient culture, that had developed through many races and people, and to differentiate what was local and what, was 'foreign,' what had been assimilated out of 'love' and what had been 'forced,' was an impossible thing to untangle. But through a period of time, it had been claimed fully by the genius of the Indian people, and was enriched by this encounter "Indian realism has to be redefined and to achieve this there must be a dialogue between contemporary theatre practitioners, folk artists and traditional practices”191

Taking that concept to a practical level, he wanted to remove the 'preciousness' of working only within the confines of the school and made the students travel to the remotest parts of India, to savour the sounds and smells of other ways of living and other ways of being trained as an actor. The students fanned out to various parts of the country, learning at the feet of traditional gurus and gathered experiences that were not always structured, but definitely altered the way theatre was viewed.

A Culture of Links (Retooling)

Acting systems at the NSD were never homogeneous and defied simplistic categorisation. The diatribe against both Alkazi and Karanth was rampant, as is the case with most institutional heads. “It was said that Alkazi taught an oriental RADA192 course. Karanth could not see beyond the headgear of a Yakshghana demigod”193. Karanth

191 Karanth in a private conversation in Bhopal in 1982
192 RADA- Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London
193 Enact a special issue on the National school of Drama 1980. ( a theatre journal)
insisted that he had not replaced western classicism or contemporary drama with Indian folk or traditional drama in the school’s training schedule, at the cost of neglecting world theatre trends. Alkazi straddled the world of Sanskrit theatre with the same enthusiasm and creativity as his reinterpretation of world theatre. The stereotypical accusation towards them and their way of functioning, suffered from a vertiginous dis-location generated by what McKenzie Wark has called telesthesia: mediated perception from a distance, constructing an illusion of proximity. Yet both have worked with text from world literature, Indian as well as western. Alkazi, in his production of Mricchakatika, had a stage setting that was composed of a series of arches, curtained with enlarged paintings from the Chaurapanchashikha, from the Malwa school of miniature paintings. When the actors playing the minor roles, entered the stage, to visit Vasantsena or Charudutta in a manner that was casual, Alkazi, would shout across, ‘watch the bolster’, watch the ‘dakht’ does it not speak? This production had an assimilation of varied influences, from western concepts of internalisation, to filmy duets, to stylised postures, with a ‘modernistic exactitude’.

When B.V. Karanth directed Malavikagnimitra by Kalidasa, a rarely performed Sanskrit play, the stage was peopled with court dancers in elaborate costumes. When Dharini discovered that her husband was taking abnormal interest in her beautiful protege, she

194 From the telescope to the telegraph and telephone, from television to telecommunication, the development of telesthesia means the creation of, literally, dislocated perception and action. Dislocating the action from the site via the vector allows the use of power over the other while implicating the power in the scene of the other; McKenzie Wark, Virtual Geography: Living with Global Media Events, Bloomington: University Press, 1994, Page. 43.

195 Mricchakatika written by the celebrated author Sudraka.

196 MALWA An example from a series of the Ragamala of 1680 A.D. represents the Megha Raga. The miniature shows the blue-complexioned Raga dancing with a lady to the accompaniment of music played by three female musicians. The scene is laid against a blue background. The sky is overcast with dark clouds with a streak of lightening and rain is indicated by white dotted lines. Four swans flying in a row, against a dark background of clouds, enhance the pictorial effect to the miniature. The typical characteristics of the painting are the use of contrasting colours, refinement of drawing due to the influence of the Mughal painting and ornaments and costumes consisting of black tassels and striped skirts.


198 Malavikagnimitra is a Sanskrit play by Kalidasa. It is known to be his first play. The principal characters of Malavikagnimitra include Malavika and Agnimitra. The play is a five-act drama based on king Agnimitra’s love for a beautiful girl Malavika. One day, Agnimitra visited Dharini his wife and he came across a freshly painted picture which portrayed the queen surrounded by her attendants and maids, with Malavika sitting close to her. Smitten by her beauty, he falls in love with her. When Dharini discovered that her husband was taking abnormal interest in her beautiful protégé, she
costumes, kathakali half curtains, with the action quivering on the edge of the stage, and the role of the vidushaka\textsuperscript{200} (jester) split between two actors, to show the angik (the body of the actor) and vachik (the voice of the actor). It was a startling departure from the conventional staging of a Sanskrit play.

The physical presence of a chorus of ten accompanied by musicians electrified the stage. It was crucial for Karanth that the audience understood the words of the song. ‘We must sing as we are speaking and speak as we are singing’ was an oft repeated instruction that he gave to his cast. This production became a performance in which the actors wrote with their bodies, and certain signs and symbols appear throughout the play not just delineating a style or a tradition, or illustrating the text, but created an innovative and unusual ‘take’ on the text that stood outside the ‘set’ understanding of the conventions of Sanskrit theatre. Karanth, through his production, in no ways reduces the text that emerged from the great pen of Kalidasa, but illuminates the text by walking with an old story into a new terrain to rewrite it for a fresh interpretation.

“The classical Sanskrit theatre is severely handicapped by receiving orthodox treatment, as it is nowhere independent of traditional literary norms. It is also never free as a theatre of imagination, from realistic ineptitude. This congealing of its native passion is very much like Shakespeare when taught as read as part of English literature! Which leads to obfuscation, and with an unkindly push into the doldrums of inaction, it proves fatal to the sense of theatre. It indeed becomes a perversion of the arts. Its passionate

\textsuperscript{199} Kalidasa was a renowned Classical Sanskrit writer, widely regarded as the greatest poet and dramatist in the Sanskrit language. His birth cannot be dated with precision, but most likely falls within the Gupta period, probably in the 4th or 5th century or 6th century. His place in Sanskrit literature is akin to that of Shakespeare in English. His plays and poetry are primarily based on Hindu mythology and philosophy.

\textsuperscript{200} In Sanskrit drama, a vidushaka, like his kinsman the court jester of European tradition, was both a clown and a commentator on passing events. Of unserious mien, he carried with him a bagful of frivolity, sarcasm, wit and wisdom.
rhetoric becomes a historic alienation. Pedagogy, which insist on us knowing our heritage succeed only on the foisting the dead upon the dead”

Karanth’s main thrust was to enable students to understand and draw from indigenous traditional forms, folk and classical. His *Branam Vana* (1979, directed for the NSD repertory) transformed *Macbeth*, astonishing in a audio-visual atmosphere, where the primeval images of painted face, masks and elaborate costumes evoked the mysterious unknown. In this production, he created a theatre language with a rich metaphorical dimension, uniting the actors and the audience in this unusual adventure. In relation to the theatre work itself, it may seem from the two examples quoted above, that the way the performances were done may endanger our reading of Sanskrit Drama and Shakespeare, but it became less a question of *mise en scène* and more an adventure. And what is theatre without this spirit of adventure! For Alakzi and Karanth theatre was an adventure and it was the unexpectedness of this medium that held them in thrall. To combine elements of popular filmy culture in *Mrichchakatika* and Yakshaghana form in *Macbeth*, was not to create a new genre, but to allow the story to create or even choose its own form. Combining elements from the popular culture and the Yakshaghana with modern dramaturgical tools, sharp and incisive interventions were made that made us re-see the classic in a fresh and stimulating light.

“Even the Yakshagana gestures can be used to mean something else. I have used many such gestures in *Macbeth*. This play by Shakespeare cannot be completely transformed into a Yakshagana because it is not Yakshagana. But I used the Yakshagana mode to suggest some other meaning”

201 Nibha Joshi- a scholar of Sanskrit drama. ‘A Theatre of Passion’. *Enact* Special number on National School of drama page 206.

Karanth had his moments of uncertainty as the director of the NSD, and in that confusion he made some disastrous errors at the administrative level. He felt that the only way to leave his mark on the school was to reverse the policies of Alkazi, rather than build on them. He scrapped the structure of specialisation, and moved towards a consolidated three year course, with a syllabus that sounded pompous and rhetorical, using a language and expression that was most unsuitable for an impersonal document as a syllabus.

"having discarded the system of specialisation for its own intrinsic defects, a system of integrated course was planned........" And the following arrangements have been made in the process of reformation"

Words like reformation in a school syllabus sounded not only ludicrous, but also pretensions and hollow (one wonders who helped Karanth in drafting such an absurd document, as he was not comfortable with the English language and certainly required help). He erroneously felt that specialisation was an ‘isolationist’ policy, which would be an impediment for the students to have an integrated view of theatre.

In his desperate desire to be seen as ‘different’ from Alkazi, he replaced what he perceived as Alkazi’s authoritarianism with a spurious sense of democratisation. The school suddenly descended into chaos, students absented themselves from class-room work in their new found sense of freedom. Discipline went for a toss, and strident voices of dissent were heard on every issue- from the quality of food served in the school canteen to the long working hours. Anarchy reigned, and with Karanth’s frequent disappearances from the school, led to a solid edifice crumbling. But one must say to Karanth’s credit and humility, that he realised his mistake and error of judgement, and in his third year in office, he reverted back to the system of specialisation and understood that he had confused discipline with despotism.

Tradition and Transformation

Karanth’s background of folk and traditional theatre, made him seek connections between the varied forms and genres that existed in theatre and try to find out their
underlying connections. The emphasis being that a theatre performance should not be beholden to one culture, or one particular way of working, and the identification of a work should not stem from regional or linguistic consideration. Karanth’s perceptions and experiences were not mediated through a distance, but had been thought-through experientially. Karanth had travelled the length and breath, of India, working with various groups, from college students, to amateur theatre groups, to professional companies. His capacity to embrace both the indigenous and the contemporary and pool together the resources made him remark humorously “be Indian buy Indian, as if the criteria of Indianness is that which is not foreign”.

He bunked the myth of authenticity in performance, not through any theoretical interjection, but through unique collaborations - *Bhañam Vana* done in the Yakshagana style, with actors trained in the realistic style of acting, transformed *Macbeth* into a performance of mixed cultures where the imagination is not colonised, but retrieved, recovered and reclaimed. He did not capitalize on the characteristics of the varied genres, but on their differences, discrepancies, without any need to figure out the motivations and cultural differences. The emphases being that art is a reflection of its times, it cannot be identified with one stratified iconography, and the rich multilayered buzz that surrounds us in our lives and hits the eye and the mind, constantly needs to be reflected and redefined in artistic practice. He wanted to create a theatre training that manifested this plurality - plurality of voices, plurality of tasks, plurality of training, - and create a theatre that was radical, interactive and dialogic. He felt that many of our cultural forms have become ossified and can no longer be recognised as being part of something ‘alive’ ‘living’ ‘pulsating’. He felt that training of an actor had to combine a consolidated approach to dance, music and the martial arts, and for that Karanth invited traditional gurus to work regularly with students. The focus was less on classroom academics and more on voice/body training, and the artisan chiselling of technique and craft. In a way BV Karanth wanted to go back to the master performer and master practitioners of different cultures, and see what inspiration can be drawn from their tools and techniques.

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203 *BaVa Karanth (Hindi)* Jaidev Taneja, National School of Drama, publication New – A biography. Page 206.
that can create a fresh vocabulary for training a modern actor. Not to imitate the
traditional forms, but to attempt a hybridization between two ways of working.

“I see tradition as having the capacity to transform our ways of working, by
reinventing and adjusting to contemporary needs. We have to see tradition as a
metamorphosing force. In states where the folk and tribal traditions have a strong base for
professional theatre, it is unfortunate that contemporary practitioners have not taken
cognition of this rich history as a reference for training contemporary actors. These forms
have not been planted but are rooted and connected to the energies of the state. It is
through our working with them, that we can give a distinct identity to our work. Theatre
should be practice oriented, and where do we find the framework of exercise that would
enable practice oriented training? Each state has a legacy of rich folk traditions that can be
used as training tools for an urban actor. Why should we, as modern theatre practitioners,
severe our ties with them? This is our inheritance and we need to explore it and draw from
it a training program for modern actors. The actors need to be trained in body, mind,
movement and spirit- the folk tradition offer all of that for our modern actors. Theatre
must be regional, vernacular and local- it is when it contains these three qualities that we
can call ourselves contemporary” (BV Karanth delivering a lecture at Kala Bhavan in

His long engagement with anti-realistic, non-urban forms had, in a distinct way,
reoriented contemporary thinking about theatre, producing revised conceptions of the
dramatic text, performance space, text-performance, actor-audience relationship, staging
conventions. The mythic and ritualistic narratives of folk culture offered a counter
narrative to urban stories, and infused the production with a fresh and vital energy. Also it
has made one re-examine the different political and social sites that divided the urban and
rural theatre and discover ways of encountering and dissolving this divide.

“The stage in order to represent the world must not become the world itself.
Shakespeare was aware of the limitation of the stage. But he created great drama out of
these very limitations. In King Lear, he uses the fool as a counterpart of the king.
Commenting on, criticizing and yet sympathizing with the king. In our folk drama the
stock character of a messenger can approach the king, the queen and even the gods and enjoy the liberty of negotiating between the characters and weaving the dramatic plot. The theatre language is as persuasive as verbal language itself. When *Shakuntalam* is scared of the bee, you need not actually introduce a real or a mechanical bee on the stage. It is enough for the actor to suggest the bee through some mode of *abhinaya*. The initial action of *Shakuntalam*, you know, is *Dushyanta*, chasing the deer. If I were to direct the play I would expect the actor not only to become *Dushyanta* but also the chariot, the bow and also the deer.

Karanth always wanted to differentiate between acting and a performance. “Performance is concerned only with the communication of drama. The spectator understands the play through the performance of the actor. Most of the actors stop at this stage because their purpose is to satisfy the spectator. But the actor should be able to adjust his personality to the needs of the character that he is to play. The same actor may take several roles like *Arjuna*, *Hamlet* or *Oedipus*. The actor must know that these characters are different from one another and change his speech, behaviour and gestures depending upon the needs of the character. ……".

Karanth felt that the modern actor was not a performer and the folk/traditional performer was not an actor. He defined an actor as someone who had the skills to understand characterization, inner truth, but did not always possess the qualities of reaching out and connecting with an audience in a way that was immediate and real. The folk/traditional performer had the tools to connect and be immediate with an audience, but did not have qualities of being able to internalize a role. His training process was in a way to find out a way to coalesce the actor and the performers into one sort of acting school.

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204 *Shakuntalam* - a play from Sanskrit theatre written by Kalidasa
206 An Interview with Playwrights and Directors. A Sangeet Natak Akademi publication: BV Karanth- an interview with Kirtinath Kurtkoti (Contemporary Indian theatre Interviews with Playwrights and Directors: page 86)
“When you speak it must seem as though you are singing, and when you sing it must appear as though you are speaking.”

“I have come to a conclusion that there is no difference between music and language. Music is a vital part of language. Sound is as important as visuals. When you speak it must seem as though you are singing, and when you sing it must appear as though you are speaking.” (this was something that was told to me by an old musician in the Gubbi company. These words became my ‘mantra’) Said Karanth to a journalist who was interviewing him for the Sunday Tribune in November 2000.

For him theatre music had no separate entity, it flows into dialogue and is an idiom by itself. He started calling himself a ‘musical director’ and then shifted it to ‘sound director’, finding it a more appropriate. With an unusual penchant for directing each play as a musical, and with an unusual gift for transforming the most somber subjects into delightful musical patterns, he admits with disarming candor, ‘Music, my greatest strength, could well be my Achilles heel’. I would often joke with Karanth, that he could even convert a Chekov207 play into a musical bouquet.

Karanth looks at a text musically, and for him, music was an integral part of his creative identity and an inextricable part of his inspiration. His creative strength was nourished by music and it was inconceivable for him to think of a play any other way than musically. He used regular instruments and also used anything that made sound. From marbles, to sticks, stones, crumpled paper, coconut shells, to glasses, the list is endless. For him music on stage was dissimilar to the way music was used in films. ‘Even though I have been inspired by film music, but in Indian cinema sound is used to create a sense of journey and also a feeling of time space perspective, but when I use music in theatre, I see

207Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860 – 1904) One of greatest short-story writers in world literature. Chekhov denounced the theatre after the disastrous reception of The Seagull in 1896, but the play was revived to acclaim in 1898 by Constantin Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre, which subsequently also produced Uncle Vanya and premiered Chekhov’s last two plays, Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard. These four works present a special challenge to the acting ensemble as well as to audiences, because in place of conventional action Chekhov offers a “theatre of mood” and a “submerged life in the text”. Chekhov practiced as a doctor throughout most of his literary career. “Medicine is my lawful wife,” he once said, “and literature is my mistress.”
it as an important aspect of language. All sounds go to create this language and the finest use of sound is in music.

He called his music sound tracks or sound plans. He loved sound, from the chirping of the birds, to the human voice, to the sneeze, the burp, the gurgle of a laugh, the whisper, the shout, the sound of pain, gibberish - every sound had music, rhythm, tenor, silence and that was fodder for his musical imagination. Even in the sound of mourning and in chanting there is rhythm and meter- for him hawkers selling vegetables and other wares, commentary on radio and television, all this became inspirational tools to be transformed into a theatrical moment. He did not hear music only in the classical notes or more formalised forms of music, but in all the sounds that emanate from life and living. Though trained in Hindustani classical and Carnatic music-a training that helped him grasp the fundamentals of sur sargam (notations) - he asserted, "classical music doesn't, gel with theatre, for raga have their own grammar, and vocabulary." Karanth, when asked where his music patterns came from, replied 'that even though it did not come from any one particular source it was an aggregate of sounds and music that he had learnt and heard since he was born, from the classical to the folk, from Vedic chants to rap music, from popular film music to street fights, that would then be reassembled, reconstituted and be presented afresh. Theatre has never been an ethnological tool, ".......it constitutes a genre that is hybrid by its very nature, within which its origins and perspectives of adapters are assumed rather then denied".

Musical Links

Many people ask me that how Karanthji, who does not understand a word of Punjabi, design music for your plays. But we had evolved a method of working together. Before he started to compose I would recite the lyrics like a nursery rhyme, and through that Karanthji would understand the metrics of the song, the distribution of the weight of the words in the lyrics, that enabled him to understand where to put the emphasis while

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208 Patrice Pavis is professor at the University of Paris. The Intercultural Performance, Patrice Pavis has brought together key artist and scholars from around the world to provide for the first time, a truly international viewpoint. Reader: Marvin Carlson: page-79
composing the song so as not to obfuscate the content. But in reality, it was much more 
then rhythm and weight, it had to do with his search for sounds and notes that touched on 
myths and archetypes with the simplicity and directness of a child.

The first play for which Karanth designed the music for my group, after I 
shifted to Chandigarh, was *Naga Mandala* in 1989. During a tour of *Naga-Mandala* in 
Karnataka, one of the reviewers said that it seemed as if Girish Karnad was a Punjabi 
playwright and Karanth, a Punjabi composer.209

The traditional music that the *Naqqlas* play has a restrictive range. Karanthji, 
made them use their traditional instruments in a non-traditional manner and brought to 
their work unexpected possibilities and renewal of faith. Karanth had taken their native 
talent and skills into a richer direction, which helped in transforming their music and 
made them realise that there were many ways in which their musical instruments could be 
used. Instead of playing the drums conventionally, they could also create sound and 
rhythm from the wooden walls of the drum. Karanth interpreted a play musically, and his 
use of music was never decorative nor was an aspect of the narrative but connected with 
the dialogue which became an extension of the speech. He called his musical scores 
‘sound plan’ that became a leitmotif for the performative content, an adjunct to the 
spoken word. He also felt that language is not a sovereign means to organise and 
represent text, it is an object of history and culture which has to be investigated, in the 
same way as politics and myth. To use sound not only rhythmically, but also a-

209 *Naga Mandala* in Punjabi? For those who have seen the late Shankar Nag bring life into Girish 
Karnad’s vibrant play, talk of a Punjabi version of it would have amounted to some kind of culture shock. 
Add to this is the fact that it is being staged in cities that are important centres of Kannada theatre- 
Dharwad, Mysore, Udupi, and Heggodu, apart from Bangalore, and it turns blasphemous. It simply lent 
itself to challenging interpretations and what lay below the narrative-the subtle, allegoric layers examining 
man- woman relationships-had their own parallels across the country. And with the Punjabi poet, Surjit 
Patar, who has earned renown as ‘the voice of Punjab’ in those troubled days, agreeing to translate the play, 
adding his own songs and poetry to it, there was no looking back. Neelam, dismisses all myths about the 
essence of literature, being lost in translation, with a wave of her expressive, red-tipped hands. “When you 
translate it, you get the energy and texture of the language into it. The play spreads itself and is no longer 
confined. The chauvinism of language ceases to exist. The play has not been merely translated, but has 
been created all over again, with the basic narrative remaining unchanged”. The story could belong to any 
place in the country- after watching the play in Bangalore, it seemed as if Girish Karnad could very well 
have been a Punjabi playwright and B.V. Karanth a Punjabi musicians”. (Deccan Herald: 6th December, 
1991)
rhythmically (what he called *arha – tal*) to use off-beat sounds and atonal sounds is an endeavour to make the protagonist sing his dialogues and speak his songs, in the grand traditions of the strolling minstrel.

Karanth used to say ‘theatre music is neither folk nor classical, but belongs to the genre of theatre’. The traditional folk songs and routine tunes, were injected with experimental notes that enhances the levels of communication. For my production of *Kitchen Katha* directed in 2000, a play about a kitchen and the joys of cooking got translated into a Punjabi kitchen, with the cooks making *jalebis* and *pakoras*, and cooking huge batches of *rotis* on an iron skittle. B.V Karanth, composed the music for the play, using the sound patterns of cutting, chopping, hissing, pounding, with the narrative being strung together by recipes that were sung to a musical orchestration being provided by the mortar and pestle, the chopping board, the scrapping of a wok with a ladle – all implements from the kitchen were used as musical instruments.

**I Never Compose Music, I Design Sound.**

“I never compose music, I design sound, and it is my training in music that helped me to understand speech. All the sounds that are created are impossible to separate from my childhood memories. My training in the Yakshaghana was the sounds related to the changing seasons. They are cold sounds, warm sounds, hot sounds, happy sounds, soulful sounds.” Music is another important aspect of theatre language. All go to create this language and the finest use of sound is in music. Music was formerly used in our theatre to create a proper atmosphere for action and also for the creation of a particular mood and for decoration. When I did music for *Hayavadana* I discovered another use of music and that is of interpretation. Music can interpret and sometimes it can do it more effectively then verbal language. Karanth’s eclectic musical sensibility and inventiveness had assumed a central role both in elaborating the production and in the performance itself.

When one looked at the choice of instruments that Karanth collected around him while creating a composition, one felt very amused at his ingenuity. From

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bottles to bamboo sticks to a metal bowl, any contraption that makes a sound was considered a valid musical instrument. When he composed music for my play, all I had to tell him was that this is the way I see the character, this is the way the character enters, this is the sort of atmosphere that I will create, this is the mood. and the musical scores that poured out was multilayered — at times music performed the role of speech, sometimes it acted as a punctuation of the text. In effect, the music acted like the commas, the full-stops, the question marks, the exclamations marks, in fact Karanth music was never sung by a soloist, it was always group singing, full of melody, counter-melody, sounds, pauses, sudden silences, picking up of musical notes, dropping notes, anything that created sound, even noise got remoulded and transformed. For him the voice was also a musical instrument, and served as the ultimate reference point for the actor. His music was never compartmentalised, and neither did he subscribe to any musical genre. Theatre provided him the space to create a music that was at once simple and very complicated.

The Reinvention of Theatrical Tradition: Bharat Bhavan and BV Karanth

The National School of Drama was inconceivable without Ebrahim Alkazi (1963-1977), an articulate, passionate and demanding man and his presence in the entire body of work that was done at the NSD represents one of the most dynamic and resilient periods of theatre training in India. To say that during Alkazi’s tenure the tilt in teaching was on western theatre while Karanth’s orientation was more towards folk theatre is to tell half the tale. However over the years Alkazi’s work reversed itself. A new line of purpose came into his being and he spiralled himself into another direction. He directed plays that were seeped in the ethos, history and aesthetics of Indian theatre. From the magnificent Andha Yug by Dharam Vir Bharati,211 to the historical scale of Tughlaq by Girish Karnad212 to the feminist slant of Razia Sultan by Balwant Gargi,213 and the Sanskrit love story of Mricchakatika by Sudraka. When Karanth took over, he understood

211 DharamVir 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)
212 GirishKarnad (1938-) Kannada actor and playwright.
213 Balwant Gargi (1916-2003) First Punjabi playwright to open up Punjabi theatre to varied influences.
that change and transformations are inevitable, and each change could pose fresh challenges and expectations. He also realised that this could not happen without pain or without difficulties, but Karanth’s installation at the NSD tore the fabric of the institution apart. The students, at the slightest provocation, would openly threaten to go on strike, as if all that the students wanted were privileges without accountability, and soon a solid institution, representing the best values of theatre training suddenly seemed as if it was made of sand. It took a long time for Karanth to understand the intricacies of institution building, and by the time he understood its functioning and politics, he called it quits.

Disenchanted with Delhi and the elitist pressures that it asserted on him, he accepted an invitation from the Madhya Pradesh Government to head a new theatre repertory in the Multi Arts complex Bharat Bhavan (1981) while he was still the director of the National School of Drama. Setting up the first Hindi repertory in the country was a challenge and that too in the Hindi belt. This was before the National School of Drama repertory had expanded to its present status.

Karanth’s views about theatre got crystallized in the Rang Mandal, where he was given the space and the funds to experiment, explore, and innovate. Beginning with a clean slate, with full support from the government of Madhya Pradesh, he established the first Hindi repertory in the country. The National School of Drama, which was the lodestone of training for students of drama was based, to a great extent, on Western systems of training at that time. Karanth felt that acting should be based on regional impulses, local tradition, with the text located within that context. The rich local folk forms of Madhya Pradesh were encouraged as training process, in terms of movement, speech patterns and sometimes just for loosening up. The body as a site to express issues

Rangmandal (A theatre repertory) – Rangmandal was a professional repertory to create a sustained theatre movement that becomes a way of life rather than spasmodic activity. Numerous plays were staged. Rangmandal had at its disposal an indoor theatre called Antrang and an outdoor theatre called Bahirang. It also has a rich library and a theatre museum of musical instruments, posters, manuscripts, costumes and properties.

214 Rangmandal (A theatre repertory) – Rangmandal was a professional repertory to create a sustained theatre movement that becomes a way of life rather than spasmodic activity. Numerous plays were staged. Rangmandal had at its disposal an indoor theatre called Antrang and an outdoor theatre called Bahirang. It also has a rich library and a theatre museum of musical instruments, posters, manuscripts, costumes and properties.
both personal and political was what he was aiming for. Accepting the invitation to start a new repertory was, for him, a golden opportunity to concretise all his thoughts and ideas about theatre, and also exorcise the ghost of Alkazi that always pursued him at the NSD.

One of the most unique national institutes in India, Bharat Bhavan was a centre for the performing and visual arts. Designed by the renowned architect Charles Correa, the contours of Bharat Bhavan merge in exquisite harmony with the landscape, creating a visual impact of spacious and natural beauty. The centre houses a museum of arts, an art gallery, a workshop for fine arts, a repertory theatre, indoor and outdoor auditoria, rehearsal room, and libraries of Indian poetry, classical and folk music. Bharat Bhavan is a multi-arts complex without parallel in India providing an interactive proximity to the verbal, the visual and the performing arts. It is a place for contemporary articulation, exploration, reflection and innovation. Located near the picturesque bada talaab (The big pond) of Bhopal, Bharat Bhavan soon became a centre for innovative creativity, pursuit of classical, traditional and contemporary art, with a wide participation in a new cultural upsurge.

Dissemination and Exchange. BV Karanth and Bharat Bhavan

This rhythm of fragmentation, dispersal and renewal continued to be present in Karanth’s life and his departure from the NSD provided him a rare opportunity in building an institution from scratch. His energy and articulation of the evolving role as a director of actors in a collective form a central component of his search to produce a theatre that could express the complexities of contemporary realities, taking into consideration training tools that had local origins, vernacular moorings and regional sensibilities. It was this possibility that made him accept the directorship of the repertory in Bharat Bhavan. Thousands of applications had been received for the entrance exam for the Rang-Mandal repertory and as I was living in Bhopal at that time, I was given a job in this multi arts complex, much to my surprise.

My job had no definition and percolated many layers of activity. From directing plays, to teaching dramatic text, designing costumes for plays, drafting letters, designing
brochures, interviewing artists, buying curtains, tables, chairs and also providing food during its various functions, was all in a days work. As an extension to that I was entrusted with the task of carrying all the application forms for admission to the repertory to Delhi and having them sussed out by Karanth, who was still the director of the NSD in Delhi. I put the applications in a suitcase and reached Delhi to meet Karanth. Ashok Vajpeyi the secretary of Culture Government of Madhya Pradesh and the artistic force behind Bharat Bhavan, had convinced him to join the Rang Mandal, and work with a clean slate, without constraints, and with a completely free hand.

A three-day workshop was planned with the potential applicants. The actors were asked to do improvisation, group exercises and creatively work with properties and speech. The finale was envisaged as a picnic where participants had to invite the selection team to an outdoor adventure. It was going to be like a” happening,” were the actors were going to cook, organize and manage the whole show but in a theatrical manner. Driving out of the main city centre, in a bus the participants stopped near a hilly terrain with a running brook, were they spread durries and a makeshift tent came up. A few guidelines had been given, that the space must not be desecrated by garbage and other effluent and the planning must be meticulous, as there was no way that the actors could go back into town to retrieve a forgotten spice or a mosquito repellent as Bhopal is swamped with mosquitoes. This was to make them aware that in theatre, management is an equally essential tool as the performance.

The group of aspiring actors prepared a sumptuous meal, and we ate al fresco. After the meal, the actors cleaned up the space and got down to the improvisations that they were going to perform as part of their test, keeping in mind the space in which they were performing. Happenings are always in the present tense, and these involve the actors’ immediate response to a situation without artifice. The three hillocks divided the

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215 Ashok Vajpeyi – Presently Chairperson Lalit Kala Akademi. A bureaucrat with the Madhya Pradesh government, he was responsible for establishing Bharat-Bhavan, a multi arts complex in Bhopal. Poet, critic and cultural impresario.
group into three sections, and like a performance in the round, they presented incidents that moved from the witty to the violent, from the collective to the esoteric. A battleground was suggested with the beating of a spoon on a huge empty vessel, blowing flour that had been placed on the palm of their hand depicted a sandstorm. Shrubs, trees, rocks were used as levels and to create vignettes that became epic and theatrical. It was really tough deciding whom to select and whom to reject and the selection committee had a hard time in making that decision. Every actor was not only impulsive but also highly imaginative, and it taught me a wonderful lesson that day - put a group of people in an environment that they can trust and see the locked up talent spill out. It was theatre at its most spontaneous and direct and sometimes these wonderful accidents of creativity can never be repeated on to the stage.

Karanth in Bharat Bhavan was a man in a hurry and the instructions he gave to his actors were as whimsical and eclectic as the man himself. And yet his primary concern was to find an appropriate cultural environment for each new production, so that the performance does not float in a vacuum. What Karanth wanted to do was to work with the actors who came from different cities and villages of Madhya Pradesh to, confront their own local culture, with the tensions and anxieties of their own immediate reality and history. The encounter with the strong tribal and folk traditions in Madhya Pradesh became the training material for the actors. Master performers were invited, and made to interact with the actors of the repertory and through the text (no matter what the source), were to search for the universal leitmotif and connect it with the body memory, the regional etiquettes of the actors, irrespective of diversity or individuality. “Mid-Summer Night’s Dream” by Shakespeare was done in the Chattisgarh dialect with J Swaminathan.

216 Jagdish Swaminathan (1928-1994). His education in art consisted of short spells at the Delhi Polytechnic and later, in Poland. It was only in the late 50’s that he started devoting his time completely to art. The vivid imagery and bright colours were a celebration of the rise of the inner being over the common place. Later on, the well ordered colour geometry and brush painting, gave way to the use of symbols. The latter was a distinct influence of the tribal arts and he began to use his fingers to apply the pigment in order to achieve the desired effect.
painting the canopy for the set. “King Lear” done in Bundelkhundi dialect and “The Chalk Circle” by Bertold Brecht done in the Naccha tradition, infused fresh blood and new interpretation in these classical works.

Karanth felt that theatre has its own language, and that language was not only verbal but a language of gestures, postures, make-up, costumes- a language that had its own code of communication. For example in most folk theatre, the death of a character is conveyed through a particular form of dance. Once the dance is over, the actor falls on stage and the audience immediately understands that the character has died. A minute later, he gets up and walks towards the wings. This does not in any way evoke laughter or amazement. Most of the audience is familiar with this code and grammar of acting and accept it as part of the language of theatre. Each play creates its own language and each director creates a performance language for a particular play. This theatre language becomes as persuasive as the verbal language itself. It was all part of the search for a ‘jue de theater’ that would invigorate the acting style and allow fresh impulses to emerge.  

Karanth had no conventional working tools at his disposal. He was always a little off-centre, a little off-position. He did not have a prescriptive way of working, and no defined methodology to refer to, he was always exploring, always searching with the actors to renew himself and his actors. He felt that an actor does not join the theatre without bringing in certain cultural memories and influences. The strength lies in an actor knowing how to use them.

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217 Govind Despande’s argument that contemporaneity implies a break with pre-modern theatre traditions, and that ‘our theatre is now irreversibly urban and modern’, is a refreshing change from the conceptual confusion that usually attends the discussion of ‘rural urban’ relations in the context of theatre. Since urban theatre does not necessarily mean the proscenium stage, Despande’s assertion allows for the assimilation of ‘traditional’ forms into urban performances, but separates this very ‘modern’ (even post-colonial) phenomena from traditional and folk performances in rural locations. (Theatre India: Aparna Dharwadker page; 114)
In the Rang-Mandal, Karanth was like a human dynamo and he coerced us into cooking up a storm of activities that included demonstrations, performances, workshops and exhibitions. His plays, though full of ideas could never really leave much of an impact as he did not spend enough time working on the details and nuances of his productions. That is because he put too much on the platter, and never gave it the required time for it to come to fruition. But despite the fact that the plays may not have worked as a finished or a well packaged production, one could not escape the lavish imagination the spontaneous outburst of creativity and the unbridled joy of his productions. But when it came to composing music, it was as if Karanth had all the time to detail it, to pull it out, to nuance every sound, every silence. Besides using conventional musical patterns in an unconventional manner, he also used anything that made sound as part of the musical score- pebbles, stones, crumpled pieces of paper, spoons, tins, marbles, all became part of his musical imagination. In the play *King Lear* to depict the sound of a storm, he took a huge plywood board and moved it backward and forward to produce the sound of thunder.

Karanth came to Bhopal at a momentous time in the history of theatre. Things were changing, certain values were dying, and new ones were struggling to take birth. Even though Karanth’s style of working was haphazard and his spirit restless, but his knowledge and skill in traditional theatre, had given him the capacity to scoop up ideas, and stage them instantly. Because of his confidence in traditional techniques, he could resolve the odd contradictions of culture by locating himself within the indigenous without ignoring the process of modernization.

For Karanth the Repertory was not only going to be performance-oriented but also a laboratory, where time tested ideas were going to be reassembled and reconstituted. Karanth wanted to evolve a methodology which would be based on regional impulses and local tradition. The Gurus of the folk forms of Madhya Pradesh were invited to conduct workshops with the actors of the Rang Mandal. This encounter led to some surprising discoveries that were then incorporated into the teaching system, giving the repertory and
its work a distinctive style. He invited master performers to come and work with the actors of the Rang Mandal, in an endeavour to discover what shapes imagination? How is a gesture developed? What are the impulses that make the body move? How do histories of performance collide, how can it be reworked and assembled in the performance of an actor and the production? How do all these sediments accumulate and enter into the performers body?

" .... As if the skin was a palimpsest upon which, over and over again, cultural differences as well as similarities were inscribed. Actors simultaneously reveal the cultures of the community where they have trained and where they live, and the bodily techniques they have acquired, be this rigorously formalized by an established traditions'.

Plays and Performances

An ambitious plan was chalked out for its inauguration in 1981, and Indira Gandhi the Prime Minister of the country was going to be the chief guest. Karanth decided that the Rang Mandal would produce five full-fledged plays in one month. His scale was impractical and it was mind boggling and I discovered that Karanth only functions effectively in such super grand exercises” He creates illogical and absurd deadlines for himself, and for those who work for him.

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218 Patrice Pavis is professor at the university of Paris In his book The intercultural performance reader Patrice Pavis has brought together key artist and scholars from around the world to provide for the first time a truly international overview. Page-3


220 I was given the responsibility of designing, conceptualizing and physically making costumes for the five productions. ( almost a thousand costumes). My home had been converted into a tailoring unit, with tailors and sewing machine, with bales and bales of cloth being cut and stitched and the sound of the tailor’s machine moved like the wheels of a tired truck, while the Ghagra’s, Angarakha’s, Chogha’s and Jumao, ( different kind skirts, tunics and coats ) spilled out from the mouth of the machine, with a monotony more in tune with an assembly line factory rather then a creative venture. It was strange for me to be designing costumes for shows when I had not even seen the rehearsals. This was due to time constraints and
Work at the Rang Mandal, with Karanth at the helm, produced a way of working that was eclectic; using a variety of devices - the chorus, the rangpatti (a hand held curtain, dance, music and the sutradhar\textsuperscript{221}). His approach was not only playful but also impervious to the discourse of authenticity. He understood that art had to be localized as it addressed a very specific audience. His play Malvikagnimitram\textsuperscript{222}, which he directed for the Rang Mandal repertory in Bhopal done in the Bundeli dialect, saw a mixture of farce and parody with an equal dose of romantic eroticism. He treated the play as a farce, because he felt that the central situation of the play required this sort of treatment. A king who already has two queens falls in love with his maidservant. The erotic mingles with the comic and an unusual \textit{rasa}\textsuperscript{223} is created. Karanth felt that when he works on a Sanskrit play he will do it in his own way and explore forms and content from other times and places and allow for spontaneous ideas to come from the performance, rather than from conventional habits of staging. This became a way for Sanskrit theatre to connect with the common man, and that could only be possible if the text could be demystified from the reverence that inevitably gets attached to an ancient text and allow for new connections and a fresh context to be made manifest.

I remember the opening night of the play ‘\textit{Mrichakatika}’ by the Sanskrit playwright King Shudraka\textsuperscript{224}. Nerves were fraught, high tension was in evidence and there were many fault lines in the atmosphere backstage. The audience had arrived, the first bell had been rung, but the last scene was still not composed. Karanth gathered the impossible deadlines. How do you rush from one rehearsal to another when time had become difficult to juggle.

\textsuperscript{221} Sutradhar (literally ‘thread-holder’): a central character in Sanskrit theatre and head of the troupe, analogous to the modern director, stage manager, and producer. Although entomology suggest that he held the metaphorical thread that holds the play together.

\textsuperscript{222} Malvikagnimitra written by Kalidasa – The most eminent Sanskrit poet ad playwright. The most plausible time-frame in which to situate him would be fourth century AD.

\textsuperscript{223} Rasa (literally ‘juice’ ‘flavour’): in traditional Indian aesthetic theory the creative process emerges from the \textit{rasa} experience of the poet/artist and is concretized in the retelling of \textit{bhava} (emotive states) in the dramatic text or the work of art.

\textsuperscript{224} Sudraka: According to tradition, author of the celebrated play Mrichakatika. The prologue of is play contains a verse stating that he was a kshatriya king (without mentioning the country). Legend has it, that he died at the age of 100 years and ten days, voluntarily entering his own pyre.
cast together and in a voice reminiscent of a general inspiring his soldiers who are going to war, he said in the best Slavonic tradition, “In the Gubbi Veeramma’ Company where I worked, we believed a lot in improvisation, today I want you to demonstrate your ability to be able to let an idea and a scene grow in front of an audience, work on your ability to improvise and don’t let me down”. The don’t let me down worked as a catalyst, and the actors reacted as if God had given his oracle and pushed themselves to the limits of their imagination and produced a scene of such startling beauty and complex choreography, that it stood out as the highlight of the play.

A brief about the scene, it is a multilayered scene that leads to the denouement of the play. The chariots crisscrossing the stage, with the beautiful courtesan Vasantasena in one of them, being pursued by the King’s brother and his minions in the other chariots runs parallel to a grouping of a crowd witnessing the public hanging of Charudatta, the beloved of Vasantasena, who is presumed dead. This particular scene is like a cinematic shot, best suited for a revolving stage. And there was Karanth urging his actors to manage the scene unrehearsed. Such was his magic that the actors stood up to the challenge and created one theatrical moment after the other like a series of climaxes, investing the mise en scene with the force of their own personal story, using their own testimonies to make the play work in a way that was spontaneous, immediate and magical.

Conclusion

So beyond the institution of the NSD, Karanth intervened in the pulse and direction of the country in a way that only the most dynamic and powerful magician can. We must not read the history so far, as a history of discursive conflict, as it might have seemed. We must see the definition of (Pre) Modern theatre as following a trajectory – the Modernism of Alkazi, the reactivation of reminder of the (Pre) by Karanth – the
transformation of the culture of theatre by two Jungian\textsuperscript{225} archetypes – For Alkazi’s ‘Sage’, there was Karanth’s ‘Magician’. And it is in between knowledge and transformation, revolution and re-examination, a perception of a new future and a discovery of the future through the past, in between books and bodies, and bodies as books, in between reality and fantasy, that Indian (Pre) Modernism discovers itself. Karanth was activating, in his recourse to traditionalist, regional and mythic forms, not as “cultural” or “authentic” but as profound truths embedded in the body, journeying to a centre of real and authentic Modernism – Alkazi taught us the truth of Modernism and created an institution. Karanth, in his own way, went to the core that would activate the essence of Modernism in a culturally potent way. Formalized Modernism versus Live Modernism.

To conclude, every student of Modernism knows the following line from TS Eliot’s poem “the Hollow Men”:
\begin{quote}
Between the conception / And the creation / Between the emotion / And the response / Falls the Shadow / Between the desire / And the spasm / Between the potency / And the existence / Between the essence / And the descent / Falls the Shadow.
\end{quote}

However, what we must not forget is that the truth of this poem could only be brought alive in our beloved NSD, in our new national institution, through both – B.V.

\textsuperscript{225} Carl Gustav Jung (26 July 1875 – 6 June 1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist, an influential thinker and the founder of Analytical psychology. Jung’s approach to psychology has been influential in the field of depth psychology and in countercultural movements across the globe. Jung is considered as the first modern psychologist to state that the human psyche is “by nature religious” and to explore it in depth. He emphasized understanding the psyche through exploring the worlds of dreams, art, mythology, religion and philosophy. Although he was a theoretical psychologist and practicing clinician, much of his life’s work was spent exploring other areas, including Eastern and Western philosophy, alchemy, astrology, sociology, as well as literature and the arts. His most notable ideas include the concept of psychological archetypes, the collective unconscious and synchronicity. Jung emphasized the importance of balance and harmony. He cautioned that modern people rely too heavily on science and logic and would benefit from integrating spirituality and appreciation of unconscious realms. He considered the process of individuation necessary for a person to become whole. This is a psychological process of integrating the conscious with the unconscious while still maintaining conscious autonomy.
Karanth and Ebrahim Alkazi. Together, they laid out our Modernism for us, and could never have done it alone.