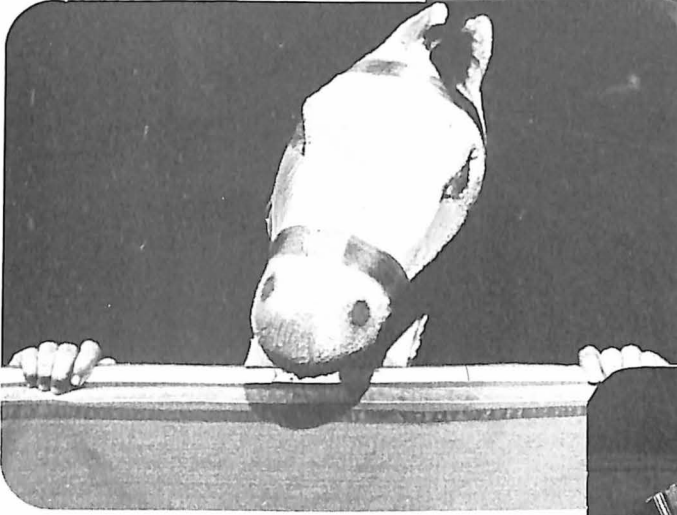
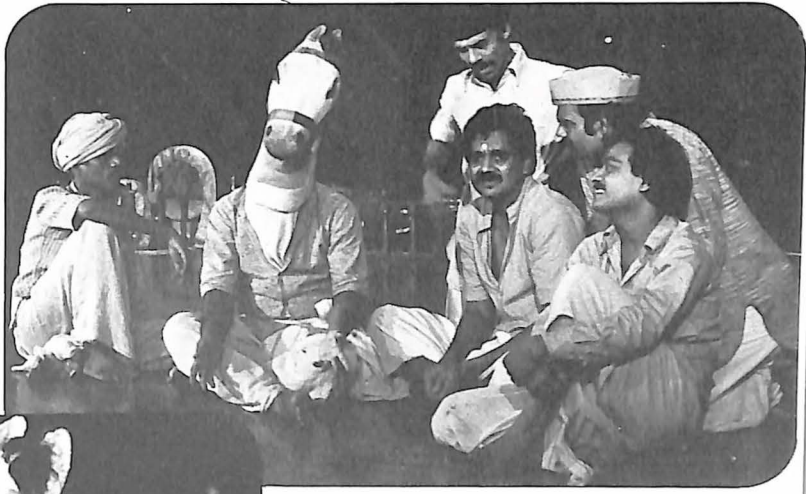


# HAYAVADANA





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Kumud Mehta

*Hayavadana* had its premiere on May 20, 1983 at the Tata Theatre. Shri Vasant Rao Patil, Chief Minister of Maharashtra, was the Chief Guest. Sponsored by the National Centre for the Performing Arts and the Goa Hindu Association, the first five shows scheduled at the Tata Theatre received an enthusiastic response from theatre-lovers and connoisseurs. *Hayavadana* was written by Girish Karnad during his tenure as a Homi Bhabha Fellow, and designed by the same creative team (Vijaya Mehta and Bhaskar Chandavarkar) which had successfully produced *Shakuntala* during the inaugural week of the Tata Theatre.

Why did Vijaya Mehta and Bhaskar Chandavarkar, who had just recently concentrated their energies on a burning contemporary theme, the psyche of the *dalit* (Vijaya Mehta while directing *Purusha* and Bhaskar Chandavarkar in his film *Atyachara*) turn now to this play based on the *Vetalpanchavimshati*, the cycle of twenty-five tales related by a demon, from one of the oldest collection of stories in Sanskrit literature? It is not difficult to surmise the reasons for the choice. For *Hayavadana*, as conceived by Girish Karnad, focusses on a crucial aspect of any kind of modern self-enquiry. Wherein lies an individual's identity? In mental equipment, knowledge as embodied in Devadatta's personality? Or, in the sheer evidence of the world known to Kapil through the sensations of his body? Or, perhaps, in Padmini's subconscious yearning for a perfect partner embracing both these attributes? Besides, even as a modern seeks to understand the meaning of selfhood, does he not, with equal anguish, long to be unfragmented, integrated, whole? It is this philosophical undercurrent that runs through *The Transposed Heads*, Thomas Mann's renowned version of this story.

As this ancient tale unfolds, the playwright, the lyricist, the director, the music director, the actors and the spectators all seem, at some point or the other, asking and seeking answers to these questions.

But for all its thematic 'content', the tale had to have the stamp of *theatre*. It could have been conceived as an intense psychological drama (not unlike *Adhe Adhure*) with the woman desperately in search of an 'ideal' companion. Or, it could have been moulded in the strict format of a single, recognisably folk style. This tale and its dramatized version had touches of the bizarre, the humorous, the romantic and yet within it lay a philosophical kernel. So Vijaya Mehta and Bhaskar Chandavarkar chose to draw from several elements of folk theatre they had assimilated during their collaboration for similar projects in the course of the last few years.

These elements include fluid flow of narrative, scope for spontaneous, even improvised, speech and gesture, and mainly, of course, the sheer energy, bold outlines, the reinforcement to words offered by music, rhythmic movement, and percussion. And Vijaya Mehta exercised the choice to use a folk convention but only to the extent it strengthened the impact of a situation. For instance, she follows tradition in using a half curtain before revealing in full the form of Ganesha, or the figure of Devadatta, or the half-horse, half-man Hayavadana or the

magic of Padmini's beauty. But would the curtain not become a hindrance for Kapil, the locksmith's son, who must enter unbridled and dauntless like the onrush of 'windy weather'?

In *Hayavadana*, we recognise the devices of folk theatre—not as fossils for preservation, but as imaginatively integrated elements designed to capture the attention of today's theatre-goer, and create a live theatre event. The Bhagavatha (here called Buwa) links the episodes in speech or songs; he is at times a commentator and occasionally a sympathetic participant in the action. While his diction is chaste, and Devadatta's is 'correct' in line with his scholarly inclinations, the villagers betray, through their dialect, a typically rural curiosity (insatiable but not unfriendly), about the strange story of Hayavadana. Kapil's words bear the rough imprint of his rugged body. The jingling couplets of the puppets have a touch of baby-talk, bordering on the comic. These spoken words are forged for Marathi audiences who can instinctively identify the speech with the traits of a character. The costumes, too, are woven out of a similar indigenous fabric: neutral and drab for the villagers, of a black and coarse texture for the sturdy Kapil. There is the traditional Brahmin's attire for Devadatta and an auspiciously-coloured green sari and yellow *choli* of ordinary cotton for Padmini. The presentation does not seek to dazzle through gloss or glitter. Its visual beauty stems more from gait, grace or even awkwardness of movement and the composition and flow of every single sequence to match the mood of that moment.

The palanquin that sets the play in motion is part of the ritual of a village procession, where the deity is carried and worshipped at various points on important occasions. It marks the beginning of an enactment. All the props are displayed at the start, the masks of the slashed heads, the puppets, the dolls. Thus, the audience knows right at the start that it is a play based on an ancient tale, that disbelief will have to be suspended and what meaning they will absorb from it will be communicated through the enactment. This may well be called Brechtian 'alienation' but we recognise it as integral to our folk tradition—where the narrator relates, warns, comments, where the story may be known but the enactment itself will demand alert participation.

The play is made of the stuff of legend and myth. The celebration of a marriage, the ritual of the beheading, the transposition of the heads, the final fight to death, a rite designed to reveal the reality of a dilemma which since it cannot be solved has, once and for all, to be ended. (Whose is the breast that is pierced? Whose the head that is slashed?) What course then is left for Padmini (who loved both equally) except the act of entering the pyre which will consume her body, uniting it with those of the men she loved? To be a *Sati* is her own firm resolve, not foisted on her by a cruel social order. In the words of Thomas Mann, "For where the single essence has fallen into such conflict, it were best it melt in the flame of life as an offering of butter in the sacrificial fire." Here is the logical end of the passions she unleashed. Is Padmini perhaps a frailer, human version of the Kali who answered her prayer and restored the lives of the men? An annihilator, in one sense? But also a procreator, for had not the sleep-soaked Kali prevented Padmini from killing herself to save the seed which Padmini carried in her womb? Now the act

of procreation is over. The child is handed over to be reared initially by the Bhils among whom Kapil had lived and then sent to Devadatta's family to carry on its scholarly inheritance. The rite of *Sati* is described in song, without any aura of glorification; and even as those few seconds, which suggest the rising red flames enveloping her body and those of the slain men, come to an end, the frame-story takes over, with the entry of Hayavadana.

The half-horse half-man, who had sought to be a 'complete' man, is now a 'complete' horse, still cursed by human speech. The frame-story concept is integral to India's traditional mode of narrative and, in this particular case, expresses an essential component of our world-view. Humans do not hold a monopoly over 'feelings' or 'yearnings'. All sentient beings share them and the frame-story complements the dilemma of the three humans, gives it the universal touch of the ever-recurring cycle of life. Here, embodied in Padmini's son, silent, serious, clutching at the dolls as he walks towards Hayavadana. The narrator gently draws him out, through the lullaby that Padmini used to sing for him. Innocent laughter restores to the boy his childhood. Hayavadana, now complete, neighing as he would like to, brings at least one tale of the *Vetalapanchavimshati* to its close, but it was just one of the many dilemmas that the *vetala* had posed to King Vikrama. Vikrama had decreed that the mind was the seat of a man's personality. But the simple answer did not solve the problem. How could it, for in the words of one of the hymns of the *Rigveda* the mystery of the universe and the stirrings of the mind are unfathomable.

This complex tale unfolded itself smoothly but with a precision achieved through an arduous schedule of rehearsals. Nobody was a 'star' but every single artiste enacted his or her role with the exactitude demanded by Vijaya's directorial interpretation: Devadatta, romantic and moody in turns; Kapil, simple, direct, but proud and fiery in defeat and evoking sympathy. Naturally, for he is the loser, a loner, dispossessed. And Padmini, graceful, flirtatious, perplexed by the anguish she had caused. The duo of comics doubling as actors, villagers, puppet-dolls, establishing immediate rapport with the spectators. Kali, at once sleepy and yet alert, as petty as a human in her envy of Rudra but, at the same time, the all-knowing one, vibrant and awesome like any village deity. The pathetic Hayavadana, Padmini's little boy (with an inborn stage presence). It was a triumph of ensemble work, with nobody upstaging the other.

Bhaskar Chandavarkar's musical score enhanced the vibrancy of the production and the poignant lyrics of the late C. T. Khanolkar (also a Homi Bhabha Fellow) and the eminent Marathi poetess Shanta Shelke. In composing the music for *Hayavadana*, he sought inspiration from folk melodies but did not transplant them mechanically into a contemporary theatre event. The tunes and rhythms are here revitalised, and transformed (as they should be and always have been) through the very freedom latent in their spirit. A freedom which has kept them alive and their appeal abiding. In tune with the theme of the play, the music echoes the idea of incompleteness, even severance. For instance, the invocation fulfils for a moment the expectations of the audience since its *mukhada* bears the stamp of the evening *raga* Nanda but almost immediately the *antara* takes a different, a vigorous turn in the *tamasha-gan* style. The force of the *dhangari* (herdsman) tune as Kapila axes a tree is interrupted when he says, "And now

this mortal agony." The wounds inflicted on the tree are no different from the hurt afflicting him.

Sometimes the music reinforces the meaning of a scene. Solemn is the chant when Devadatta takes his pledge. Exuberant when the two young men roam hand-in-hand, bound in ties of friendship. It exudes a sense of foreboding the moment Kapil touches Padmini's feet. The erotic strains of the *lavani* form give verbal and aural shape to Padmini's fascination for Kapil's irresistible body. The perplexity when the heads are transposed is expressed in the question-answer rhythms so typical of folk styles.

But there are occasions when the music works at a different level, in a direction contrary to the action. The song accompanying Padmini's abandon as she introduces her child to the magic of the forest has a touch of yearning, the suggestion of a resolute intention that prompted the journey. When Padmini is waiting for Kapil to accept her, and he is almost ready, the near-devotional strain of the melody is offset by a fast rhythmic pace which accentuates an attraction difficult to control.

Listening to the melodies towards the close of the play, one was reminded of the old Marathi musicals, moving from the late evening *raga*-s to the plaintive notes of the Kalingda-Jogia *raga*-s of dawn which used to bring a performance to an end. But here again the frame-story took over. The 'ordinary' passage of time from night to day, from childhood, manhood to old age was replaced, in the true folk spirit, by a celebration of the Cycle of Life in the song of the gallant rider who wafted merrily through the thrusts of Time.

The music is thus as much a part of the play as the actors' interpretation of their roles. The musicians move freely from the area of the 'orchestra' to the actors' arena and this physical fluidity runs parallel to the flexibility of the music. The stringed instruments (*dotara* and *ektara*), are used very sparingly to denote Kapil's desolate spirit. Six kinds of percussion instruments (*duff*, *halgi*, *pakhawaj*, *dholki*, *samel*, and *ghumat*), a large metal bell and cymbals of various sizes, aided by the tuneful rendering of the lyrics by the narrator (Sharad Jambhekar) provide the tonal colour needed to express the import of a scene or a character's feelings.

Thus Vijaya Mehta and Bhaskar Chandavarkar together brought all the verve of a folk enactment to a play staged in the elegant setting of the Tata Theatre. The pillar at the centre (which so many directors have described as a bane) was turned to advantage. It became Padmini's resort when she mused over the inner stirrings of her heart. The semi-circular edge of the stage-area was used as a seat where the puppets could confide their feelings to the spectators. It was turned into a narrow path where Padmini, walking precariously, could playfully ridicule Devadatta's inability to control the direction of a cart. Every action, every step was carefully orchestrated but it held the spectator transfixed in his seat at the very thought of the risk if the artiste were but to miss her footing! It was something Peter Brook had spoken of in his workshop at Bhopal: the spectator will take in the words even as he watches with bated breath the artiste's physical daring.

The polished wood of the walls and flooring added a glow to the performance. All the doors (usually hermetically sealed) were open but the projection of the voices was so clear that not a line uttered by the actors was missed. (A structural engineer had once woefully remarked, "Damn it! The acoustics are not just excellent, but perfect. You can hear the breathing of the man next to you.") The acoustics did give the aural dimension so essential to convey the timbre of every artiste's voice, the quality of the music and the beat of the percussion.

The lighting helped to heighten the visual effects. In the Tata Theatre, almost all the spectators watch the happenings on the stage from a higher level. The area of the lighted space is seen clearly demarcated—the shaft of light, as each of the three main characters nears the Kali Temple, suddenly appears to be an entrance door. Padmini, suffused in a red glow, leaning against the pillar, communicates a physical ardour to match her inner needs so vividly communicated by the lyrics and the melody . . . And so on. What were described as hindrances in the effective staging of plays at the Tata Theatre were transformed by Vijaya Mehta's inventive directorial talent into positive advantages.

In the foyer, in the lobby, backstage, the end of every performance was marked by a mood of exhilaration which invariably indicates that everyone has participated in a wonderful theatre event.

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