My Drama Education

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I did not learn drama at a school. Those days there were no drama schools. No theatre workshops either.

Reading well-known foreign plays. Watching our own productions—good, bad or indifferent. Getting involved in productions. Learning from one's mistakes. Discussing with others who shared my interests. This, in the main, was my drama education.

Fortunately, my family had a passion for the theatre. My father acted in amateur productions. He was a devoted drama practitioner at a time when people were firmly convinced that a *natakwala* was a degenerate, when no rooms could be found in respectable localities for rehearsals of even amateur productions. Rehearsals used to be held in red-light districts. My father clung with equal determination to his respectability and to his mad passion for the theatre. He refused to become a professional actor but he stayed awake nights on end for rehearsals and did a job as a clerk during the day. This was his daily grind. After I was born, he stopped acting in plays, but he continued to direct amateur productions. Holding on to his fingers, I went with him to rehearsals. I was never bored. Once rehearsals were over, I used to watch the actual performance and go backstage with my father. The atmosphere there was even more interesting than the performance, and more so because men played female roles.

My elder brother used to act in plays. I remember how fascinated I was by the similarities and contrasts—in his behaviour at home and the way he conducted himself, as a different person, on the stage. I found it altogether strange—this transformation.

Both my father and my brother used to write. My father wrote several plays, but he did not publish them. He believed them to be inferior to the creations of giants like Kirloskar, Deval, Gadkari or Warerkar. But when the mood seized him, he recited with fervour scenes from his own plays, and even sang the songs. My brother wrote a couple of plays. He, too, did not publish them or perhaps they could not be published. But he was an avid student of drama. Everyone envied his collection of dramatic literature which included criticism, biographies, plays. Whenever he read anything worthwhile, he would recommend it to me and explain why it ought to be read. He used to distil its essence so exceedingly well that I would sleep with the book by my pillow. I've read it, I would tell him.

Quite unconsciously, these influences were at work—and it was during this period (when I was about eleven or twelve) that I saw the Prabhat film *Manoos*. I can't say that I fully understood the film but I was struck by the way its characters spoke—like real people. When the actor who played the policeman

spoke, I felt that it was a policeman speaking. It was the same when the prostitute spoke. The policeman's old mother, or the prostitute's drink-soaked uncle seemed real. You didn't feel that they were mouthing words written by someone else. You thought that the words were said on the spur of the moment, that they stemmed naturally from the situation. At that point in time I found this captivating and wonderful. It was so unlike the films I had seen till then, and certainly quite different from all the plays I had witnessed. I was overwhelmed by the 'true'ness of *Manoos.* Afterwards I saw the film many times over. I learnt from it how characters ought to speak. *Manoos* taught me the art of dialogue. The dialogues for the film were by Anant Kanekar.

When I was about sixteen or seventeen, I used to while away the hours I played truant from school (because I didn't want this to be known at home) watching excellent American films, all paid for by my tuition fees. Whether I understood a film or not, I was there in the cinema house. The Second World War raged. It was a time when (among others) Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer, Greer Garson, Joan Crawford, Paul Muni, Leslie Howard, Charles Laughton, Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Robert Taylor, Eroll Flynn reigned. The American and British films of the time were informed by a kind of romantic idealism. I saw again and again *Emile Zola, Louis Pasteur, The Good Earth, How Green Was My Valley, The Citadel, Goodbye Mr. Chips, Blossoms in the Dust, Romeo and Juliet* and other well-known films. Not that I grasped all that was depicted but the films left their mark. They did not contribute directly to an understanding of drama, but I feel that there is some kind of relationship between those films and my plays. Theme, story, build-up of situations, contours of characters and, most important of all, the life-view which formed their base influenced me greatly.

Aside from excerpts in school text-books, what is called classical Marathi drama hardly left any impression on me during those intermediate years. I think that it was the films of the time which shaped me.

The magic of the stage first captured my heart during an open-air performance at Marine Lines. The Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh used to organise a festival of plays every year. Deval's *Zunjarrao* (an adaptation of *Othello*) was being staged that evening. Baburao Pendharkar (already renowned for his portrayal of the villain in films) was to make his first appearance as Zunjarrao. Desdemona was going to be played by Snehaprabha Pradhan. K. Narayan Kale, and (if I am not mistaken) Chintamanrao Kolhatkar, Raja Paranjpe and other well-known artistes formed the cast. P. L. Deshpande was on the organ. I had watched many performances in that *mandap* but the atmosphere on that particular evening was different. It was charged with the enthusiasm, the air of expectancy of thousands of spectators. A tremor passed through the crowd when the third bell rang and the curtain parted. The clear and vibrant words of Chintamanrao Kolhatkar reached us, and drew a response. But the audience was waiting for the entry of Zunjarrao. Baburao Pendharkar entered, wearing the dazzling costume of the Moor—and there was no applause! For an instant, sudden silence descended on the huge audience. Then a drawing in of breath, a sigh from the whole mass gathered there. I was way behind in a seat among the last rows. But to this day I seem to hear that drawing in of the breath. The masterful presence of the resplendent, haughty and untamed Zunjarrao, the lighted area of the stage and

the sigh emitted by thousands of spectators under an open sky. I experienced for the first time in my life a revelation of the magic of the theatre. The very core of my being awoke to the realization of what a shattering experience a play could be. Perhaps the night had something to do with my becoming a playwright.

What is a play? A text? Words, dialogue? Word delivery and the rise and fall of the voice? Hand gestures, facial expressions? All this was part of the plays I had witnessed. And, of course, there was the setting to indicate where and when the action was taking place... Around 1947 or 1948, a British troupe came to perform here. At that time such occurrences were rare. They were to do scenes from Shakespeare in the Capitol Cinema (which was once a playhouse). Those days I used to work for a newspaper and my father and I lived in a book godown. I took him with me, hoping to show him a specimen of Western theatre. Among the items we watched were one or two scenes from *Hamlet*. The show got over and for quite some time my father didn't utter a word. When I questioned him, he said "I have seen Ganpatrao Joshi's Hamlet several times over. We used to believe that Hamlet could be portrayed by Ganpatrao Joshi and him alone and without doubt he was a great actor. But what I watched then was not Hamlet, but Ganpatrao Joshi. I realised this after I saw tonight's performance. Today we saw the play *Hamlet*."

What my father gleaned through this comparison, I understood quite independently in my own way. The words in *Hamlet* have their own natural rhythm. It was effectively expressed in the performance through the movements of the characters and particularly those of the actor who played Hamlet. These movements on the stage had a sense of rhythm, a consistency and meaning, a touch of beauty. This controlled motion held the audience and indirectly helped to convey the essence of the play. The visual and the aural did not function as separate entities but merged to create the performance. This was new to me. I used to see characters on the stage enter, depart, rise or sit down — simply to serve the plot of the play or because they wanted to. This particular performance taught me that these physical actions had something to do with the latent meaning of the play and the glow in a performance.

Of course, I never saw Natvarya Nanasaheb Phatak in his prime. But I did see him act in his later years and in one performance I witnessed something that I'll never forget. A play by Kamatnurkar called 'Shree', presented by Lalitkala-darsha, with noted actors like Bhalchandra Pendharkar, Chintamanrao Kolhatkar, Master Dattaram in the cast. Nanasaheb Phatak was doing the role of the young Kusumakar, still in his twenties. He had played the part years ago when the play was first staged. He was young then; now he was an old man, and looked it. His heart was not in the performance. The other actors performed with the utmost sincerity. He, on the other hand, was listless, coming in, going out, saying his lines without a flicker of energy or interest. As the performance limped on, the veteran actor increasingly became a target of the audience's displeasure. The other artistes were seen desperately trying to hold the play together while Nanasaheb was in the process of demolishing it. Then came a scene when Kusumakar, who has left his home at a tender age, returns... He is now a criminal, and is hiding behind an almirah in his own home. He hears his father speak to someone about his misdeeds. The remarks wound Kusumakar to a point where he emerges out of his hiding place

and says, "I wasn't like that. I didn't want to be a criminal. You made me into one". It was a longish speech. . . The elderly Nanasaheb, quite unconvincing in the role of young Kusumakar, faced his father, who, in fact, looked young enough to be his son. Nanasaheb began his accusation — his words faltered at first — and suddenly they sounded true. The heavy and hoarse voice became (heaven alone knows how) tender, spontaneous. I don't recall what happened afterwards. The voice I remember — coming in waves, piercing the heart. A plaint, a bleeding wound was embodied in the voice and the words compelled us to forget the discordant and insipid spectacle on the stage. At that moment I did not see the aged Nanasaheb and the actor who played the role of his father. Before me stood a tender and sensitive youngster and his stern disciplinarian of a father. Towards the end of his speech Nanasaheb felt he had said a sentence wrong. In trying to say it right, he said it wrong and a loud *tuch . . . tuch* rose from the audience. Then derisive laughter. Nanasaheb retreated into the earlier 'detached' attitude and the play bundled to a close.

Of course, theatre is illusion. But there can be a false and a true illusion. All of a sudden an actor's voice had cast its spell on us. Right before our eyes the performance transcended all kinds of barriers to become a 'true' illusion. The voice held us for the time being, conveyed to us a real hurt. So real that the jarring and ugly spectacle on the stage disappeared and the voice created another vision — that of our imagination. The voice we heard at that moment was neither theatrical nor jaded; it was vibrant and true. I encountered here another element of the magic of theatre. False theatre, true theatre. What's real in the play. What's real in actual life. The 'real' in the theatre (for the time being) eclipsed the 'real' in actual life. The voice, and the voice alone, triumphed over what was visible to build a total illusion. Granted that theatre is a visual medium but pure sound (*nada*) or words can sometimes on their own bring life into a play and even keep it alive.

I was to learn later that a performance could speak with utter truth and exceptionally well *without* sounds or words and in total silence, literally banishing them from the theatre.

A French 'mimic' named Marcel Marceau was performing in Bombay. Today the word 'mime' is familiar enough in our theatre circles. Those days the word was not unknown but still a stranger to us. I went to the performance, curious to find out what 'mime' was all about. The final performance (in Bombay) was at the Birla Matushri Sabhagar and I managed with difficulty to get a seat in the last row. Between me and the stage was a mass of spectators. It was a full house.

The performance began with one of Marceau's associates standing silently on the stage, carrying a board on which was written a single word, conveying the theme of what was to follow. Then Marceau enacted it, without words or sound. He had no aids except his body. No sets, props or actors playing other roles. The body was clothed in tight-fitting, stretch clothes. The face was smeared with white — like a clown's.

The performance started with simple, everyday situations. Walking, walking fast, climbing. Walking in the face of a storm, with its whirl and roar, and dragging

every step. Marceau was 'walking' glued to a spot—demonstrating every manner of walk. What he expressed was the human determination—at times a mindless determination—to walk in the teeth of opposition or adversity. Then Marceau became the cyclist in love with his bicycle. Of course, there was no bicycle. He created its presence through his movements. He offered a glimpse of the small, charming details of this relationship. He got on this 'false' bicycle and rode it with fluid ease. Avoiding collisions, he cycled with skill and caution through a crowded thoroughfare. He negotiated a climb, then a steeper climb with increased dexterity, panting a little later because of the unbearable strain on his body. He was bathed in perspiration. . . At long last, relaxed and carefree, he wheeled down a slope.

The entire audience (and they were not 'experts') sat enthralled by this slim body and its movements. There were no props, the face was masked and not a sound was uttered on the stage. For an hour and a half Marceau conducted a genuine dialogue with more than a thousand spectators. He communicated experiences of life at various levels. He made us laugh, he had us stricken with fear. He made us sit up and think. He was a cyclist, a studio-photographer, a man-about-town, a submissive husband leading a dog by the leash, a sculptor. Then Chaplin, David and Goliath. All this in those same tight-fitting stretch clothes. Through the sole medium of his body. With the clown-like mask on the face and remaining practically at the same spot throughout. . .

Time, space, distances, people, things—were all absent, but made 'real' by a single touch of mime. So real that you could actually see. When Marceau became the studio-photographer he had us visualizing the presence of a whole family (with its own share of oddballs) gathered to have a picture taken. Wordlessly, he seemed engaged in tackling an irksome clan. The stage came alive with an (imaginary) group of people around whom Marceau, as photographer, fussed.

For a second, Marceau's face was human but his hands became butterflies. A hand became the butterfly, then the net, then once again the butterfly; he was the detached observer, watching the scene. In a corner his body shrunk to express David and emerged almost immediately with the giant proportions of Goliath. The fight took place with a kind of screen between and it was so real that we couldn't bring ourselves to believe that there weren't two antagonists locked in mortal combat right in front of us.

Someone has fun using a lot of masks and he gets trapped into one. He is paralysed with fear and, after a lot of effort, as he frees himself of the mask, you see the tremendous relief he experiences. Marceau presented the situation in two or three minutes but his mime had the same, if not greater impact than a full-length play. Without words, characters, props but, more importantly, without a face. Because the face was covered with a clown's make-up and could not express anything independently. Marceau's sole mode of expression was his body.

The performance astounded me. In the days that followed I felt an aversion for words. I didn't want to hold a pen in my hand, to mouth words. I felt that nothing spoken could be as effective, direct and unadulterated as Marceau's mime. This body language could vanquish words. It was universal, basic and poetic. Though it attained philosophical levels, it was accessible to all. It was so simple

to understand. So, why use words at all? Words tended to confuse: what you had to say couldn't be communicated as lucidly as Marceau could and it might even be lost in passage.

The writer in me felt deflated after Marceau's performance. I realised the limitations of my medium. This sort of realization is necessary. It's a corrective, alerting you to the euphoria created by words. You begin to use them with care and a sense of responsibility. You become aware of a meaning that lies beyond words. You think of ways of capturing it without words. In short, Marceau's performance forced me to re-examine the medium of theatre, and to pay attention to its non-verbal components.

A little before Marceau's performance, I had witnessed the staging of *Kaksha* (*Boundaries*) by Tara Vanarase. It was the story of a girl who had decided to devote her life to her parents. A young man of rather ordinary calibre, a kind of dependent in the household, loves her but she doesn't care for him. She is in love with an intelligent and handsome young man. But she doesn't have the courage to marry him and leave her home. So she is afraid to express her love for him in words. The young man senses her feelings, would like her to respond and agree to marry him. Since this has not happened, he is annoyed with her. He gets his medical degree and decides to go abroad. He comes to her house with sweets (to celebrate his passing the exam), distributes them, and, when he offers some to her, says a little bitingly, "I'm going."

The last scene was being enacted. The girl stood at the door of the kitchen. Her father and the young man (the dependent) were in the centre of the stage. The hero was on his way out, at the door.

At this point the light on the stage was extinguished. It came on again — almost at once. The heroine called out to the departing hero: "Wait." The father and the dependent stared at her in surprise. The hero stopped at the door. She began to speak, pouring out her love, her suppressed passion. She raged against her own defeatist attitude and stepped forward with stern resolution to take the hero's hand. "Take me with you. I am yours." Or something to this effect. She walked out of the house with the hero. Again the lights on the stage were extinguished.

In a few seconds, the lights came on. The heroine was standing at the door of the kitchen. Motionless like a statue. Silent. She was staring at the door through which the hero had left. Her father and the dependent were watching the scene as though nothing had happened. In any case, nothing was going to happen now.

Actually nothing happened and yet a lot did happen. Nothing happened but a lot did happen for an instant in the girl's imagination — something that the audience wanted to happen, what they actually did see happening before them — but then it never did happen — and what was communicated to me was the heart-rending chasm dividing the two. That the heroine's mental dam was breached, that she walked out with the hero towards a better future was depicted on the stage and immediately afterwards, through a change in the light arrangements,

she was shown, still in her father's house, weak and defeated. The awareness of her situation was frightening. And it had been effected by an ordinary technical device.

It's not a novel technique and it wasn't so unusual to employ it—even in those times. But the performance left an imprint on my mind. The hero left and what the girl experienced was directly communicated to me without words.

The performance set me thinking. How can one translate into another medium this 'experience' which the spectator undergoes in theatre? It can't be achieved in this living manner in a novel, a poem, or a painting. The cinema, believed to be a more potent medium than theatre, cannot evoke this 'experience' in the spectator. The experience can be 'related', 'explained' and effectively 'portrayed'. But in the medium of film, the experience cannot be simultaneously evoked on the stage and among spectators. This can only happen in theatre. The performance of *Kaksha* reinforced my faith in theatre and demonstrated this distinctive power of the medium.

The realisation dawned on me once again in yet another manner when I saw a remarkable Russian film-version of *Hamlet*. Like Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet,* it was not merely a filming of the play. It treated the play as raw material for the creation of a film called *Hamlet.* The director sought to match his cinematic technique with Shakespeare's dramatic devices and to create through the film the impact of the play.

There is a scene in Act Three. The King, in a repentant mood, is at the front of the stage. Hamlet, boiling with rage, is at the back. Each delivers his soliloquy, independently. It's an incredibly 'theatrical' situation. Shakespeare, while he carries the story forward, tells us a great deal about the relationship of the two—and in a brief and telling manner. The scene cannot be conceived with Hamlet without the King, or the King without Hamlet, or the King alone at first and Hamlet by himself later.

This 'theatrical' scene could not fit as a visual in the Russian film, where the director was determined to interpret *Hamlet* in purely cinematic language. And what 'specifically' cinematic device did he adopt to convey the rich and complex appeal of the scene? Perhaps the film maker was at a loss, and used a worn stratagem. He had the repentant King face a mirror—and in doing so accepted defeat at the hands of the theatre medium.

But what is theatre? A story told through dialogue? Ideas propounded by various characters? Is it what the playwright writes for the purposes of a performance? Or is a play something that has purely literary value? We brood over these problems. As far as I am concerned, the problem was solved, to some extent, when I saw a performance of 'Dear Liar'.

It was staged by a British troupe. 'Dear Liar' is not a play in the conventional sense of the word. The text wasn't meant to be 'played' on the stage and it contained no conscious awareness of literary values. Here were old and intimate letters written by two individuals. One was a man and the other a woman. The

theatre's connection with these letters (and it was an important one) lay in the fact that the man who wrote them was George Bernard Shaw and the woman was the famous British actress of the time — Mrs. Patrick Campbell. Their relationship could, in the normal run of things, be described as a love affair. But there was in it more of bickering than love, more verbal skirmishes than poetry. But running like a thread through all this was a strong mutual attraction.

Actually, the performance was a 'reading' of the letters by an actor and an actress. They did not supplement the text with their own words; there were no technical gimmicks. The set was an area suggesting a division into a drawing-room and a study. On one side was the actor reading Shaw's letters. On the other, an actress reading Mrs. Campbell's. Both held their scripts in their hands but they knew their lines. A short introduction by the actor doing Shaw's 'role' and the 'letter-reading' commenced. It maintained such a pace that I was hardly aware that the intermission had been announced. And the post-intermission part was even more gripping.

The performance had the glow of first-rate theatre. The audience laughed and was serious in the right places. It responded as readily to the repartees in the letters as it would have to sparkling dialogue. Something was taking shape in front of us. The characters were coming alive. Like a play, the reading blossomed, evolved, moved forward. Towards the end I felt exhilarated—I had seen an excellent (and a different kind of) play. A senior and successful dramatist-director of the time was sitting next to me, watching this 'different kind of play'. When we rose after the performance, he smiled, rather maliciously, and said "So, whatever the Sahibs do is first-rate."

The performance was not just exhilarating. It had me thinking. This wasn't a play of the usual kind. The words were not intended for the stage, not even for the ears of outsiders. Even so this letter-reading was as engrossing as a play. How did it manage to fulfil all the expectations that we harbour about a play? And if this reading could be so effective on the stage why should one regard it as 'inferior' in any way to a play? Why not stage such 'plays'? A realistic play had necessarily to be a text (meant to be staged), with two (or, if possible, three) acts, a regular story-line, and several characters. Not merely that. Its presentation had to be realistic. Such was the staunch belief of all of us—the young theatre practitioners of those days. We gave second place to Puranic, historical or verse plays. It was important that the dramatist should write a play and the director present it in a 'realistic' manner. In the advertisements and the printed versions we used to emphasize the fact that it was a realistic social play.

Around the time a Drama Festival was organised in Calcutta by its leading theatre groups, the aim being to collect funds for a playhouse. Shombu Mitra was the moving spirit behind this endeavour. Arvind Deshpande and I decided to attend the Festival in the hope that it would afford us a fairly consistent picture of the Bengali theatre scene.

Shombhu Mitra presented *Barbar Banshi,* a social play. He had had it written for the occasion and directed it himself. The play depicts the tragic plight of an ordinary middle-class individual, struggling to live according to Gandhian

ideals. He is accused of malpractice and fired from his job. Almost destitute, he shifts his family to a slum. His own values are at odds with this environment. The family faces a series of difficulties and his beliefs seem to be not just ineffectual but wrong. There is a scene where a *goonda* enters his home and kills his son in front of the family.

The performance had progressed well enough; it had begun to hold the audience. Now this particular scene was about to be enacted. In keeping with the 'realistic' theme and presentation, was a naked bulb hanging on a wire. Suddenly it was extinguished. The stage came to be bathed in red light as the murder sequence was being enacted. Then the red light was put out and the naked bulb was again lit. The play continued.

I didn't go backstage to meet Shombhu Mitra. The red light had jarred my senses. I met him on the following day and he asked me what I thought of the play. I was their guest, I fumbled a little. Then I said: "I liked it but there was one thing about which I wasn't quite convinced. It jarred somewhat. I don't see how a director like you could do such a thing." If there was a touch of impudence in my remark, Shombhu Mitra chose to ignore it. He asked me quietly, "What was it you found jarring?"

I think my reply was a little outspoken: "What place has this kind of red light in a 'realistic' play? Where did it come from? And what's more important—the naked bulb in that 'room' on the stage went out. Why? Who extinguished it? And how come it was lit again? What's the justification?"

Shombhu Mitra was silent for a moment and I thought I had put him in a spot. Then he answered me calmly. The tone was sympathetic. "I have seen many of the realistic plays on your Marathi stage. You have mikes in front of the stage or hanging down from above. What's the 'realistic' justification for these amplification arrangements? Is realism or naturalism an ism like Gandhism or Communism or Socialism? Is it an ideology? I agree that we should stand firmly by our principles. But is realism an ideology or is it a style of stage presentation? A technique? If it's a technique for staging plays, should it be considered more important than the play and its thematic content? Is the impact important or 'realistic' technique for its own sake? Is a battle important or the kind of weapon used? Weapons in the service of a battle or a battle in the service of weapons?"

I was in a quandary. Shombhu Mitra continued to speak: "In my kind of theatre, we consider the thematic content more important than the technique. The technique is significant only to the extent it helps to communicate the essence of the play to spectators. I am ready to adopt any mechanism if it helps to make the performance more effective. Do our spectators expect or prefer a particular technique? Do they insist on 'purity' of techniques? They are accustomed to the use of a whole number of techniques in a play or *khela*? Why shouldn't we take advantage of their attitude to achieve the right impact through our plays? If the performance is not likely to be 'false', or if it is not going to interfere in any way with the thrust of the theme, I will use every kind of technique to ensure the right kind of impact on the audience. I will extinguish or bring in lights in a 'realistic' play without any kind of logical explanation and, if necessary, I will even upturn the whole stage."

Shombhu Mitra spoke calmly and the expression on his face was introspective. He didn't mean for a minute to sermonise me. But I did learn a lot from what he had to tell me. He had literally dragged me out of the clutches of mistaken and obstinate beliefs.

Later I had an opportunity to go to the States. As I watched the experimental plays in the off-off Broadway playhouses, I began to shed my concepts of theatre. I learnt that there could be many, many kinds of theatre. We were used to performing plays that would satisfy our spectators. The experimental plays I watched there started off by depriving the spectator of his cover and his mask and then confronting him with a disturbing play. What we would have considered impossible was for them a casual, everyday affair. We had fixed notions of what a playhouse should be. They offered countless examples of cellars, garages, stables and dilapidated sheds serving as playhouses.

I went to the Black Theatre to watch a performance of *Ain't supposed to die a natural death.* The majority of the audience was black and the play a scathing indictment of the plight of negroes in America. The hero is, naturally enough, a young black. He pines for a good life but the situation around pushes him into becoming a criminal. Towards the end, the guardians of law and order ambush him. The young body, ridden with bullets and writhing in pain, is shown in the throes of death. It seemed to me to be an extraordinarily effective climax to the play. But the performance didn't stop there. Undeterred by the presence of the police, a wretched old hag limped to the centre of the stage and, with the corpse for testimony, bitterly cursed the blacks for putting up with their misery. Instruments produced grim and strident music to match the vehement rhythm of her speech. To me this final sequence seemed an unnecessary accretion. The story of the young black, the manner of his death—he was wiped out like a rat or a mongoose—was effective enough to communicate the point of the play.

Backstage, I was introduced to the director. He asked me my reactions. I said: "Everything was quite effective. The play had a powerful ending when your boy died. What was the point of the old woman's rhetoric at the end? The killing of the boy said everything there was to say." He smiled: "You didn't like the end. That's alright. It wasn't meant for you. It is for our black audiences. Our theatre is addressed to them and the last speech is meant for them. We feel they need to listen to those words. They are not for you."

The last sentence was like a slap in the face. But it was also an eye-opener. For whom is a play intended? For an audience? An audience rooted in the very same background from which the play stems. An audience sharing its traditions, tastes and its ambience. Stage any play you want to—but these are your audiences and your play is meant for them. They will decide its fate. It is they who will laugh or weep during its performance. It is they who may sit up and think or get plain bored. The rest of the world may applaud or discard your work—that's of secondary importance.

So I studied theatre in the theatre itself; I studied theatre in films and studied theatre even in music.

I am not very familiar with the *shastra* of music and I have never felt a strong urge to study it. But in my own way I love classical music. There was a time when I attended innumerable concerts. Now I always have records or cassettes of classical music for company. There is in the music of Ameer Khan, Bhimsen Joshi, Pandit Jasraj, Kumar Gandharva, Kishori Amonkar and Jitendra Abhisheki a genuine instinct for the dramatic. A good play has its own structure, weave, rhythm and pace. (The pace, in keeping with the play's theme, may perhaps be at times very very slow but it is always a controlled pace.) I discovered all these elements in classical music in addition, of course, to the sheer joy of listening to it. In this respect, Kishori Amonkar's music teaches me a great deal. Besides, it has one more important element: it is spontaneous, improvised 'on the spur of the moment' and yet it has an extremely assured awareness of structure. A particular recital may click or not click. But it never sprawls, is never distended, and never moves forward piecemeal, in jerks. It brings to mind the movement of the lines of an accomplished painter. The painting in itself may be perfect or not quite so, but that it is organically unified is taken for granted. I believe that a good play or performance must embody this quality.

Sometimes activities wholly unrelated to art contribute to a better awareness of its essential quality. Freestyle wrestling is one such example. Armed with a season pass (to which I was entitled, being a newsman), I regularly visited the Vallabhbhai Patel Stadium at Worli.

"These freestyle contests are not 'contests' at all. They are performances enacted for viewers with the outcome predetermined, settled in advance." This used to be the common objection raised against this kind of wrestling by ardent fans of Indian wrestling. But I never could see the point of this kind of argument. We don't hold it against good theatre or, for that matter, all theatre because it is 'theatre'. "This is happening before us"—the illusion has to be successfully maintained for an hour or so—that's all we ask. The enactment must be well-planned and well-orchestrated. Performances are not 'spur of the moment' enactments though the illusion of 'spur of the moment' is important. Quite a few of the wrestling bouts which I saw were excellent theatre. I still recall that they made me hold my breath or miss a heart beat. The wrestling arena held a hero and a villain. Maybe both were heroes in a sense. The roles played in the wrestling arena by these 'actors' were projected in the advertisements through fresh gimmicks. They were shown masked or *burkha*-clad. Their entries were 'dramatic', their dialogue with the spectators was (in its own fashion) well-rehearsed. The way they were 'presented' to the spectators had its 'theatrical' angle. The commentator raised expectations to a pitch. The rounds themselves were so 'arranged' that they had to be gripping. Thousands of spectators used to be madly involved in the contest. They were smitten when they saw their hero cornered, or in torment, lacerated by (artificial) pain. They roared and danced with joy, when he was winning. They hurled abuses at his rival. "*Maro saleko, lagao, bagal de, samhalke re*", they yelled. The whole stadium screamed advice, was on its feet dancing, roaring. I did the same. I clapped hundreds of times—unreservedly.

Those bouts were sheer melodrama. But the contest between Dara Singh and Randhava had neither the elements of deafening noise or crude drama. These two were like a pair of hissing snakes engaged in fatal combat, casting snare after

snare. The wrestler would free himself of one only to find it replaced by yet another. The rounds continued. The whole stadium held its breath, and watched them in frozen silence. Every single moment—something new, unexpected happened. The audience watched, not wanting to miss a single move. Not a howl, not a single act of frenzy. A tightly welded, sinewy performance unfolded and cast its magic spell. It was a thrilling experience. Those wrestling bouts were a kind of theatre which taught me all the distinctive elements in the construction of a play.

I think that each one has to decide for himself his own drama technique. Its general norms can at best be a guide but put together they do not add up to create a good play. And some of the world's best plays are exceptions to most of these norms. You have to have the medium of the theatre flowing in your bloodstream and stamped in your brain—then perhaps you might get to write a good play. And if you manage to write one good play in your whole life—that's some achievement. Because after my experiences with several other media, I now realise that theatre is the most difficult of all. Quite often, your play may be good but not 'theatre' or it might be 'theatre' but not so good!