

News and Notes

The Experimental Theatre at Chhabildas School, Bombay

Twenty small boys imagine that they are statues, made of ice, left out under the midday sun. Very slowly they go limp and shapeless and sink to the ground, arms and legs running into each other. It was the start of another session in the drama workshop for children run by Sulabha Deshpande at the Chhabildas Boys' High School in Dadar, right in the heart of Bombay.

Sulabha believes that such workshops develop more than the child's acting and speaking talents. Drama, she says, is a form of education; it encourages children to observe, to think. She is reminded of another workshop at Chhabildas. The scene the children had to play grew out of an everyday problem. With little open space in their neighbourhood, the children thought that the open *chowks* within buildings could be converted into play areas. But the *chowks*, as elsewhere in Bombay, were used as rubbish dumps. The solution was the children's own and it was acted out: they built a small *mandir* in a corner of their imaginary chowk and thus prevented people from throwing garbage there.

The early workshops had drawn children from all over the city, some from as far away as Kandivli in the northern suburbs. The present workshop, the fourth in two years at Chhabildas, gets its young actors from local schools in Dadar for reasons of convenience to the children, though Sulabha does visit other schools to conduct workshops for them. The activities of the workshop have been enlarged to include teachers and to obtain plays from contemporary writers (such as Vijay Tendulkar and C. T. Khanolkar), plays which provide for twenty-five children's parts. Some months ago, on my first visit, when I asked local residents where Chhabildas was, I was met with a few blank stares and some confused answers. This time it seemed that more people were aware of its existence: the bus conductor pointed out the general direction, a housewife loaded with shopping gave very precise instructions.

It has been Sulabha Deshpande who has been largely responsible for putting Chhabildas on the theatre map of the city. For fifteen years it had been the school where she herself had taught. In May 1974 the governing body of the school, the General Education Society, allowed her three year old dramatic group (*Awishkar*) the use of the Hall on the second floor of the school. Other dramatic groups with similar worries and hopes came along and shared the premises and *Awishkar's* lights and props. Their problems stemmed from very modest budgets, inadequate in every way to cope with the rent and pressures of air-conditioned auditoriums in Dadar and other parts of the city. The hopes centred around the kind of plays that these groups wanted to perform — plays that were meant to make contact not just with the senses of audiences, but with their minds; plays, which might have seemed 'difficult' to week-end audiences, given to demanding

and getting a theatre of ravishment, spectacle and melodrama — even to the point of distorting the playwright's intentions.

Chhabildas Hall is different in every way from all this. Up two flights of poorly lit, worn stairs, are a few wooden chairs, a threadbare *dari*, and the performers scarcely distinguishable from the spectators. But that didn't deter the audience which swelled in two years from the members of the 15 dramatic groups that used the hall regularly (and other visiting groups) to the general public from all parts of the city. Sulabha says there are so many performances now scheduled in the Hall that they had trouble finding somewhere to rehearse — until the Chhabildas Girls' School a short distance away was persuaded to let their hall as well. With this kind of response from the public a few other problems had to be resolved as well. The school itself, which is paid Rs. 3000/- a year towards rent and maintenance of the Hall by *Awishkar*, has undertaken to build a sanitary block. The group has also applied to various institutions in the city for funds to increase the seating accommodation, from the present 190 to 250, by putting in more adjustable wooden platforms of varying heights.

To an outsider it seems like an unexpected development, that Chhabildas should be not just an old school hall where you saw some experimental theatre, but almost a theatre movement. But Sulabha says this was the intention from the start, when *Awishkar* produced *Pratima* and *Changuna*, or *Roopvedha* put on *Udhvasta Dharmshala* and *Unmesh* did *Sofa-cum-Bed*, to mention only some of the 19 new plays and 13 others that have been staged at Chhabildas since May 1974. Also from the beginning there have been a cluster of theatre-related activities at the Hall. Every 'first night' runs on into the early hours of the following day with discussions about the new production in which the audience stays and questions the director and players. A 'literary tribute' was organised in memory of C. T. Khanolkar whose verse-play *Pratima* lit the first light in the Chhabildas movement, and a small collection raised for his family. Prof. Ashok Ranade, of the University Department of Music, trained 12 actors from experimental units in delivery, intonation, rhythm and *sur*, and he will hold yet another workshop later this year. Students from Sangli, Kolhapur, Nasik and Marathwada took part in an acting and direction course organised by *Awishkar* and *Yuvak Biradari*, and helped by teachers from the National School of Drama.

Chhabildas has become a catalyst not only for the new Marathi drama but it has also given a new lease of life to the Hindi theatre in the city (IPTA produced *Devyani ka Kahena* there, Theatre Unit did *Aur Ek Garbo* and *Adhe Adhure*, among other plays). Bengali and Gujarati plays are scheduled for later in the year. Sulabha described the movement started by Chhabildas briefly: a different audience comes with very different expectations; playwrights and directors, never certain that they have got the work just right, can see audience and players interact and build upon the play; and with the audience often sitting on the same level as the 'stage', barely two feet away, acting styles have shed mannerism and rhetoric to become more spontaneous and fresh.

— AMRITA ABRAHAM