

there is one passage where a man points out all her faults to her, and I wanted to bring that forward—but eventually we changed not a line in the script, we just changed the emphasis in the production, and it worked. I felt very happy—you know when what you are trying to say goes to the audience and coincides with something the audience always feels they should have seen earlier.

MAHESH DATTANI

Invisible Issues

Mahesh Dattani has his own theatre company in Bangalore, called Playpen. His plays *Where There's A Will*, *Dance Like A Man*, *Bravely Fought The Queen*, *Final Solutions*, and *Tara* have been produced in Bangalore, Bombay, and Delhi. Dattani recently co-directed *Bravely Fought the Queen* with Michael Walling for Border Crossings in London, as well as playing the title role in Terence McNally's *A Perfect Ganesh* for the Artists Repertory Theater in Portland, Oregon. Dattani is currently at work on a radio play for BBC Radio 4, and is collaborating with dancer Jonathan Hollander and a composer from Finland on a piece for The Battery Dance Company which will premiere in New York City in 1988. This interview was conducted by Erin B. Mee at The Bookery in Bangalore on August 27, 1996.



It seems to me that you're one of very few—possibly the only—playwright in India writing serious plays in English.

I wouldn't say the only one, but I would say that I have been the most successful for various reasons: I have my own theatre company [Playpen], and I have a theatre background. I'm not writing because I'm a writer [of literature], I'm writing because I have a theatre background.

Most of your plays are family dramas dealing with very serious urban issues. Can you tell me a bit about your choice of subject matter?

I think the old cliché about writing what you know best holds good for any work or for any art (drama or literature). I think one has to be true to one's own environment. Even if I attempted writing a play about the angst of rural Indian society, it wouldn't ring true, it would be an outsider's view—I could only hope to evoke sympathy, but never to really be a part of that unless I spend a lot of time there. I think there are enough issues and challenges in urban Indian society (the milieu I am a part of) and these automatically form the content of my work.

Nitin in Bravely Fought The Queen is the first homosexual character I've encountered in any modern Indian play.

I would say the only time a homosexual character has been treated with sympathy. There have been caricatures. If we look at the statistics of a gay population in any given society, even if you look at it as a conservative five per cent (people put it at ten, but even if you take five per cent), with a population of 850 million we're talking about almost 50 million people, and I think it's a real invisible issue. Almost all gay people are married in the conventional sense, so I think there are invisible issues which need to be brought out and addressed. In this case, it wasn't such a conscious attempt to say "look, here is an invisible issue, let's talk about it," I think it's there, and since it is very much a part of our society, very much a part of my society, it happens to be there.

What was the response?

Varied. Very varied. Some people said brilliant, I'm glad we're talking about this at last—the liberal section of our society—and then I got several letters saying look, we come to the theatre as part of a family, we come with our children and our spouses, and we don't want issues which are very embarrassing to talk about.

Meaning that their children had asked them questions?

Probably, yes, I'm not too sure. But from the way the letter was worded it was embarrassing even for that person to say don't talk about homosexuality—the word "homosexuality" was never mentioned. So I'm glad I did it, and in fact the new play I'm writing now, which is a radio play for BBC, is on arranged marriages, and I have interior monologues where the guy is already arranging his life with his male lover—how he can do so with this arranged marriage—so it should be interesting to see how that is received.

Did you get letters from people saying I'm grateful that you brought up the issue of homosexuality?

Yes, most of the letters were from gay people who were extremely closeted. Some of them said "I thought I was the only person in the whole world," so it was heartening to see that it evoked such a strong response, and people felt they could identify with these characters so strongly. And I got letters from women saying I think my husband is a homosexual.

Having had this experience, do you feel a need to address any other invisible issues?

What's interesting to me, and I'm sure it's true for many people, is that I was attracted to the form first, and then I discovered my content. My own political stand came because I started doing theatre, not because I had something political to say and I used theatre as the platform—just the reverse. Since I've realized the potential

of theatre as an agent, if not for social change, at least for reflection, I can't be frivolous about it any more. Unless I have something strong to present, I wouldn't write.

Have you ever written a frivolous play? None of your plays that I've read are frivolous.

I considered *Where There's A Will* frivolous in the beginning. Only later, after other people pointed out the political ideology in the play, I realized it wasn't a frivolous play.

Will you tell me about Tara, which was such a success in Bombay.

Tara is about Siamese twins who've been conjoined from the chest down, and I've taken the liberty of making them boy and girl twins. I think it's a play about the self, about the man and the woman in self, but a lot of people think of it as a play about the girl child.

In what sense?

The plot, to put it in a nutshell, is about these twins who've undergone surgical separation because they were joined at birth, and the play deals with their emotional separation when they come to know that they were born with three legs. The third leg actually belonged to the girl, but there was a good possibility that the leg would survive on the boy, so the grandparents manipulated the operation in such a way that the boy would get both legs. And the leg wasted away, it didn't survive on the boy either, so they're both with one leg, and that's a part of the revelation in the end, and how they just cannot carry on their relationship any further, because he feels far too guilty about it, and moves away from the family—he runs away to London and tries to start his own life. And Tara, the girl child, wastes away and dies after coming to know she wasn't really loved the way she thought she was.

And if you look at it in terms of the self then it becomes a play about . . .

. . . about the male denying the female, and how the cultural construct of gender favors the male. Whether it's a biological woman or biological man, the favor is to the male, so I think it has to do with coming to terms with one's own self in terms of the feminine in the self.

You have directed productions of your own plays, as well as having other people direct them—for example, Alyque Padamsee directed Tara in Bombay.

All my plays are directed by me first, because that's how I complete the script.

Can you tell me a bit more about that process?

I believe that theatre is living in the actors, and it's living in the performance, it is a shared experience, and I think it's very important for playwrights to realize you can't

write in your head. Even if you have half of a first draft, you have to do the next part of the process in space with your actors, and become a part of that rehearsal process. I think that's what makes my plays work—so much of it is really done by the actors, they may not have written the lines, but they have contributed by way of providing motivation, or providing the action in some way. Or if they don't see the point of it all, or they say why are we talking about this again, you know that it's not having the desired effect.

What happens when you hand your plays over to another director?

With Alyque Padamsee, I've had a very good director/playwright relationship, that's why his productions of my plays are so successful, it's because of the collaboration—it's not that he's a genius or I'm a genius, the fact is that we know how to collaborate, and I think that's a rarity in theatre anywhere. A lot of the theatre in urban India is based on the star, or the driving force (the tyrant director), or the prima donna, and I think that's destroying our theatre, it's preventing our contemporary theatre from really coming alive and being vital and credible.

If a director were to stage one of your plays in the U.S., what advice would you have about it crossing into another culture?

I would advise that theatre director to relate the play to their audience first, not to try and find the "authentic Indianess" in the play, not saying this is how an Indian would do it, or this is how an Indian would say it, because that's when you get very clichéd and boring, and you're not really translating to an audience. I think it should be treated the same way a translation would. I think it's very important to keep the performer-audience relationship in mind—sure it is Indian, sure the setting is Indian, you can't get away from that, because my plays are strongly rooted in India. But the audience should take a journey from the universal to the specific and not straight into something exotic, because that's a journey never taken, that's an imagined journey. It's the same with tourists in India: they're never here, because they're looking for images they've seen already, or they're there for their experiences (I want to meet Sai Baba and that's it), they get their dose of nirvana and go back, and they've never been to India. It's the same with a theatrical experience, it's very important that the intention should be to take the audience on a journey—it need not be a journey to India, it could be a journey into themselves, [from a stance] outside their cultural viewpoint, because they're interacting with a viewpoint that's outside their culture, which can have very profound effects in different ways.

Is there anything you wish I would ask you, is there anything you would like to say?

Yes. Our culture is so rich with tradition, and that's an advantage and a great disadvantage as well, because I think we're living in the present and there are so many challenges facing us—you just have to cross the road and you have an issue, and I think it is very important for our country to spawn new playwrights and new voices who reflect honestly and purely our lives, because I think that is our contribution to the world, and to our future as well.

In a country like America—you see media has its advantages and disadvantages—a strong sense of American identity is created through the media: people say “this is America and these are our values.” We don’t have that kind of projection of ourselves. If you look at our conversation here, and the conversation of maybe the gardener just down there [we were sitting at a table overlooking a garden], how disintegrated are we? We don’t know what they’re talking about, and they have no idea what we’re talking about. I think there has to be some kind of thread saying we are all Indian and this is our identity, and these are our diversities, and we acknowledge and celebrate these diversities.

When *Bravely Fought The Queen* was done in England it got a positive response from the younger lot, because they didn’t expect it (and of course the non-Indian English speaking people loved it—they were taken by surprise). It’s not that I have done something new, but I’ve done something unpredictable, and I have shattered a lot of images. People who have never been to India—second or third generation Indian-English people (I’m sure it would be true of Indian-Americans as well) have no idea what is happening, because the media doesn’t project us . . .

. . . or the media projects a certain kind of image, which is not the India you’re talking about . . .

. . . absolutely, so it doesn’t exist for them. I’ve got copies of [letters from] people who have reviewed my plays for grants [in England], and said “we don’t feel it’s Indian enough”—they’ve actually said this.

What does that mean, “not Indian enough”?

I’ve no idea.

That you’re not using Chhau movement, or Yakshagana, or Kathakali?

First of all it’s in English—they’ll accept a translation of a play if they know it was written in another Indian language first.

If you have an opportunity to write back to them, what would you say?

I would say, first of all, what in your opinion is Indian? I have lived all my life in India, I have learned the English language in India, and I have learned it from Indians, so the way I speak the English language is Indian. I am Indian: this is my time and this is my place, and I’m reflecting that in my work, and that makes it Indian. I would like to challenge the assumption of what is Indian. Does that mean traditional theatre forms? Yes, they’re wonderful, they’re very sophisticated, they’re impressive, but are they really India? That’s something I would like to question and challenge. Are they really reflecting life as it is now, that is the question I would like to ask. They’re fine, but there is the danger that if you look at them as if they’re quintessential India you’re doing those forms a great disservice, because you’re not

allowing them to change. What we need to do now is look at those forms and say we're approaching the twenty-first century, this is who we are and this is our legacy, so where do we take that. That's not happening, and that's a matter of serious concern.

It's happening in the fine arts. Why is it not happening in theatre?

Because the performing arts rely heavily on funding, and there is a form of censorship if you say we're going to fund something that's Indian. It would be very easy for me to write a play about a snake god, and I would get funding in England, they would love me. I would go there in my *kurta* and say I speak Hindi, but I'm going to speak in English for you, and tell them about this wonderful ancient Indian myth I've unearthed which existed 2,000 years ago—they would trip over one another to fund that project.

I can think of several American institutions that would trip over themselves as well, but what about the Sangeet Natak Akademi in Delhi, what do they trip over themselves to fund?

Something which they say suggests the right values, or associating with the right people.

What are the right values?

Definitely the right values are *not* anything that is confrontational. You can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted. But you can't talk about gay issues because that's not Indian, it doesn't happen here. You can't talk about a middle-class housewife fantasizing about having sex with the cook or actually having a sex life, that isn't Indian either—that's confrontational even if it is Indian.

Can we go back to the question of language for a moment? There is a story about someone having asked why you don't write in your own language, to which you replied "I do."

That's become famous: there was a symposium on Indian theatre, and someone was here on a British Council tour who had read my plays, and he said why aren't you coming to the symposium, and I said I haven't been invited, and he was shocked, so he took me there. It took an Englishman to come to India to introduce me.

A lot of the damage colonization has done is reflected in the theatre, in the English language. The way most people speak the English language, most of it is imitative, there is an embarrassment about speaking it with your own background, there is a need to sound different, to sound British. I think that's something we should have gotten rid of twenty-five years ago, it shouldn't have carried on to second and third generation post-independence Indians, but it has, so you have a reactionary trend: we do not recognize English-language theatre as Indian theatre because there is a kind of snob value attached to it. But you can't blame them because they're reacting

to a situation which is very real. I think the sooner we get out of that the better it is. If you're looking at Indian theatre, you can't say leave out the West, because India means whatever Western influences exist. We're sitting in a cafe in a bookstore, if you say leave out the West we can't sit here, so how far do you want to go. So with Indian theatre one has to look at it realistically and mirror what really exists, I think that's very important, and I don't see it happening. We're still reacting, we're still in a process of reacting to the post-colonial hangover.

So writing in English is not part of a new trend?

I think it's more of a need than a trend. It's not that I have a political motive to promote Indian English, but it is a part of Indian culture, so it has to be given its respect in India and in the world.

ERIN B. MEE has made numerous trips to India, once as a Fulbright Scholar. She has directed K. N. Panikkar's *Faust* and *Arambachakkan*, with the Sopanam company in India, as well as the American premieres of Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* and K. N. Panikkar's *Ottayan* in New York. Ms. Mee was Resident Director at the Guthrie Theater for two years, directed *The Imperialists At The Club Cave Canem* at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre, and has directed plays by Mac Wellman, Paul Schmidt, and Charles L. Mee at theatres around New York. She has taught in the drama departments at Bard, Vassar, and NYU.

PERFORMING ARTS JOURNAL, NO. 55 (1997) PP. 1-26: © 1997
The Johns Hopkins University Press