

# Drama in Indian Writing in English Tradition and Modernity

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Dr. (Mrs.) N. Velmani

*Drama in Indian Writing in English - Tradition and Modernity*

## Foreword

*Drama in Indian Writing in English - Tradition and Modernity* by Dr. Velmani is an excellent and insightful analysis of the trends in modern Indian drama. Indian drama is an ancient art and has its roots in folk drama performed and enjoyed in all Indian languages and dialects. Classical and Traditional Indian Drama is truly an epic theatre with dialogues, songs, dance and music interspersed throughout the play. Characters came from a variety of classes of people and the story content was also of various kinds: mythological, social, ethical, absorbing human stories and all-embracing rituals and traditions, etc. Likewise, Indian drama entertained all sections of the society.

Plays in Indian Writing in English have adopted the influential trends and innovations of the European and British epic theatre adumbrated in the plays of Brecht and others. Plays in Indian Writing in English reveal a meaningful and enjoyable merger of the themes, strategies and stories of traditional Indian Drama with the modern trends in the plays of Brecht. A blend of tradition and modernity has enriched the literary content and mode of presentation. The audience relishes the innovation and gains insights into the present social values, themes and issues even as the external form and the story narrated may be in traditional clothing! Signs and symbols abound in such plays and the dialogues are crisp and reveal the inner thoughts and life of the characters vis-à-vis the society in which they live.

Dr. Velmani presents the analysis of plays of some of the leading playwrights whose plays have been translated/recreated in Indian Writing English – Girish Karnard, Mahesh Dattani, et al. The analysis presented in every chapter of this significant book brings out the trends noticed in the Epic Theatre of Indian Writing in English. In addition, Dr. Velmani also gives us excellent insights into Brecht's theory and practice as well as an excellent analysis of a British playwright, Howard Brenton. There is comparison and contrast between the British/European Epic Theatre and Modern Indian Epic Theatre.

Students and scholars who focus on Modern Indian Drama will learn a lot from the analysis presented by Dr. Velmani. Students of Indian Writing in English, in particular, will be encouraged to create innovations and to experiment with various forms of Drama, making a blend of tradition and modernity without losing the central focus of any serious Drama – Entertainment as well as Instruction.

Congratulations to Dr. Velmani. I look forward to reading more such works from her and her students.

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## Preface

This book *Drama in Indian Writing in English - Tradition and Modernity* is part of my ongoing reading and research focusing on the plays presented through Indian Writing in English.

Theatre has proved to be a creative and effective instrument of protest and social change all over the world. In India too, drama has been effectively used during the Freedom Struggle to reach out to the masses with the message of *satyagraha* – non-violent struggle for freedom from the British yoke and also for social and economic changes.

After independence, drama focuses on many issues that confront us as a nation. Among these, search for identity in a modern world occupies an important place in Indian Writing in English. Plays communicated through the medium of Indian Writing in English, thus, find Indian tradition as a strong foundation to launch and spread modernity and modern values. In this pursuit, the native form of Indian Epic Theatre finds a very valuable companion in the modern Epic Theatre of the Western nations, especially in the plays of Brecht and others.

In this book, I attempt to present a study of the engagement between tradition and modernity in terms of form, function and meaning of the modern plays of Indian Epic Theatre vis-à-vis the works of the Western Epic Theatre, especially focusing on the impact of Brecht's Epic Theatre on the works of leading Indian playwrights, namely, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, Badal Sarcar and others.

The Brechtian Epic form has several parallels in native Indian theatrical modes. The modern Indian Epic form is 'Western' but the content is 'Indian,' critiquing the social and cultural values of the society. Tradition and Modernity find cohesion and together such innovations attract large audience and receive wide acclaim both in India and abroad. Future is, indeed, bright for the Indian Epic Theatre.

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## INDIAN THEATRICAL TRADITION

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Courtesy: [www.demotix.com](http://www.demotix.com)

### **Drama in Indian Languages**

Drama in Indian languages has a very long history. Tamil literature was seen as constituting three major parts or divisions: Prose and Poetry, Music and Drama. *Tolkappiyam*, written in pre-Christian era, provides guidelines for writing and acting out plays. Character delineation was presented along with the setting of the seasons and the land closely associated with the social conventions of the day.

*Natya Sastra* in Sanskrit is perhaps the most elaborate treatise on ancient plays in the world. As Thirumalai (2001) points out, “this work is of great significance for Indian poetics, drama, and fine arts. Generations of Indians have been influenced by the thoughts adumbrated in this treatise. Even our movies follow the same aesthetics suggested as appropriate to the Indian nation in this excellent treatise! Certain stereotype notions that an average Indian now has about his and other ethnolinguistic communities are found discussed and used in this interesting work on drama. The work is a mine of sociolinguistic information of the past and the present”

(<http://www.languageinindia.com/oct2001/natyasastra1.html>)

### **Folk Theatre in All Communities**

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In every Indian language community we have folk-theatre practiced, which transmits, often through mythology, social values. If fiction is called ‘dramatic poem’, the true theatre is the ‘Theatre of the Mind’ and the stage is an aid to mental performance. While the Greek drama had its genesis in the ritual workshop of Dionysus, Indian drama is kept alive in Therukkuuthu, Yakshagana, Bhajans, Krishnattam, Jatra, Tirugata, Harikatha, Koodiyattam, and recitations from our epics which are all an eloquent testimony to the undying culture of the Indian masses.

### **Impact of British Contact**

Following the British legacy, theatre as a modern form of storytelling and entertainment was well established in major cities like Calcutta (East), Madras (South), Bombay (West), Varanasi (North) and this paved the way for modern Indian drama. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century theatre companies from England visited India to entertain the white Sahibs and they made an impression on the brown elite here. The Parsi community saw the potential of this profitable industry and thus they created local troupes producing plays similar to the visiting English companies. Meanwhile Yakshagana performances with folk elements like the clown, the sutradhar, the songs and dances were taking form in Maharashtra and it later developed into the famous ‘Sangeet Natak’. In the South, many “drama companies” flourished in the major South Indian languages. These newly born companies must have influenced each other in turn, and they all had one basic trait Sangeet Natak adopted from classical works already referred to. They also absorbed the Parsi scenery and the Parsi theatre making use of the songs of Sangeet Natak.

### **Changes in Indian Theatre**

In his Introduction to Three Plays: *The Plays of Girish Karnad*, Girish Karnad reports his childhood experience which have been shared by masses all over in India:

In my childhood in a small town in Karnataka, I was exposed to irreconcilably different worlds. Father took the entire family to see plays staged by troops of professional actors called Natak companies which toured the countryside throughout the year. The plays were staged in semi-permanent structures on proscenium stages, with wings

and drop curtains and were illuminated by petromax lamps. I found the stage, a platform with a black curtain, erected in the open air and lit by torches. (21)

The Indian theatre changed its mode in some respects in due course. One was the separation of the audience from the stage by the proscenium, underscoring the fact that what was being presented was a spectacle free of any ritualistic associations and which expected no direct participation by the audience in it. The other was the idea of pure entertainment in terms of immediate financial returns and the run of the play.

Until the nineteenth century, the audience had never been expected to pay to see a show. The success of a performance depended on how the actors improvised with the given narrative material, and they had no rehearsal for particular kinds of roles. With the new theatre and the company's investment policy, the audience's payment for the show, the Muslim writers were employed by the Parsi theatre and they wrote largely for the Hindu audience. Despite its enormous success over nearly seventy years, the Parsi theatre produced no drama of any consequence. Anyhow, the Parsi theatre had absorbed several features of traditional or folk performing arts such as music, dance, mime and comic interludes. When law, education, healthcare, communication and all such systems came to be based upon western models, Indian drama had finally embarked on a well-defined modern role.

### **Popular Theatre**

As already pointed out, the Indian Folk theatre, distinct from the elite theatre, has been popular in India; performances such as Therukkuthu plays in Tamil, 'Dasarata', 'Parijatha' and 'Yakshagana' of Karnataka, 'Lokanatya', or 'Thamasha' of Maharashtra, 'Jathra' of Bengal, different forms of 'Chhau' of the eastern belt of India. The folk plays are structured loosely in the sense that their plots are episodic – each episode not necessarily following or leading to the earlier or later episode. The frame of the folk plays consists of two or three members of the chorus and their leader, drawn from everyday life and the inset play, depending on the occasion, depicts the exploits of mythological and legendary heroes. Consequently, folk plays always create two worlds, the world of dramatic illusion and the inner play. The Folk

Theatre is a 'total theatre' in the sense that, in it, the components of music and dance signify community – oriented rather than an individual – oriented consciousness.

Raymond Williams, in his *Politics of Modernism*, argues in a different context, “exaggerated make – up to emphasise theatricality, break down of barriers between audience and actors, open – air performance – all can be viewed as symbolic gestures of protest, of rejection of authority”(78).

### **Forms and Themes of Folk Theatre in India**



Courtesy: [www.zeably.com](http://www.zeably.com)

There are many forms of folk theatre in India. Each region had developed its folk theatre and tradition in their vernacular languages, the major language theatres are those of Bengali, Hindi, Marathi, Kannada and Malayalam. In the theatre experimentation movement in Kerala, there is the Brechtian theatre of G. Sankara Pillai, and the Theatre of Transformation of Kavalam Narayana Panicker using folk forms such as Teyyam, Mutiyethu classical forms such as Kutiyattam and Kathakali. These dramas have a deep ritualistic base with religious significance and have a strong hold over people's minds. Apart from using Brechtian or Sanskrit drama techniques, they have integrated the ethos of local folk elements and breathed in new life to the old form of theatre. They turned to their roots in traditional, classical, ritual and folk performance for the creation of modern Indian Theatre.

### **Free Narrative Styles**

During the 70's, the exploration in Kannada theatre has been in the direction of folklore especially Yakshagana and the free narrative form of 'Bayalata', a stylized form of folk theatre complete with songs, dances, stylized gestures, stock characters and some vestiges of fertility cult like the worship of Ganesha. They are centred

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around the myths/legends and explore the problems of the contemporary world in terms of world views that inform the myths themselves. The modes of perception are relevant today because they are primal.



Courtesy: [www.shutterpoint.com](http://www.shutterpoint.com)

Both in Bayalata and Yakshagana Bhagavatas (narrator – singers) are external to the action of the play in that they initiate and introduce occasionally, interrupt the play, and most often, they are found singing for the characters. The transformation of narrator – singers themselves is an innovative aspect. Another element is the use of masks – full mask for Ganesha, half mask for the monks. The play introduces a series of the miracles which are not literally true but they are beautiful metaphors and therefore not altogether false. The use of openly non – realistic forms which make no pretence of theatrical illusion enable the director to present on stage that inter-space between fact and fiction.

### **Classical and Folk Relationship**

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The growth of modern Punjabi drama owes little to the classical Indian drama or folk forms. The essential temper of Punjabi drama was from the beginning, realistic rather than romantic, because the playwrights dealt with contemporary social problems. They responded to the reformist movements launched by various socio – religious organizations. As Sanskrit drama was too commercial to deal with the burning social questions, western realistic drama provided models for treating social problems. Hence Punjabi playwrights came to be exposed to major trends in modern western drama. They looked towards Ibsen and Shaw for a critical treatment of social questions, towards Chekhov and Galsworthy for a naturalistic portrayal of life, towards Gorky and Odets for a socialistic representation of social conflicts, towards Lorca and Eliot for a symbolic and poetic expression of the inner world, towards **Stindber** and O’Neill for a psychological insight into characters, and towards Brecht and Beckett for a theatrical presentation of complex modern reality. The dominant concern of Punjabi playwrights has always been real life – the life of man confronted with socio-economic, socio-cultural, socio-political and psychological problems. The influence of modern western dramatic movements – realism, naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, theatre of the absurd, theatre of cruelty, the epic theatre – is visible in a number of plays in Punjabi. The modern Punjabi playwrights like Ishwar Chander Nanda Harcharan Singh, Sant Singh Sekhon, Balwant Gargim, Ajmer Singh Aulakh, C.D.Sidhu, Gurcharan Singh Sethim absorbed all the major trends of modern western drama. They try to present their perceptions of reality through expressionistic techniques, elaborate stage effects, symbolic action and psychological realism.

### **Artistic and Ritualistic Elements in Regional Theatre**

The artistic and ritualistic elements in Malayalam Theatre can be traced back to three sources – to the Sanskrit Theatre, to the Sangeetha Nataka of Tamil Tradition and to the western influence. In setting the sequence of the play, in rendering the dramatic gestures, dialogue, make-up, costume, ritualistic ceremonies, the influence of the ancient ritual arts like that of ‘Koothu’, ‘Koodiyattom’ and ‘Kathakali’ are clearly perceivable. In the later development of the Malayalam theatre, there is a total invasion of the new western ideas in tradition of the theatre of cruelty.

C.N. Sreekantan Nair and G.Sankara Pillai wrote their plays based on the ritual arts of Kerala. Kavalam Narayana Panicker, Narendra Prasad, Vayala Vasudevanpillai and P.Balachandran wrap their mythological plays with the elements of traditional art forms.

The Bengali Theatre owed its birth entirely to the British in India. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, only a few notable efforts were made by Michael Madhusudan Dutt who translated his three Bengali plays –*Ratnavali* (1858), *Semista* (1859) and *Is this called civilization?* (1871) into English and by Ram Kinoo Dutt who wrote *Manipur Tragedy* in 1893. Tagore made a substantial contribution to the growth of Indian English drama. Through Tagore kept himself alienated from the professional theatre of Bengal and had hardly any association with the Calcutta stage, he assimilated in his plays several features of Bengali folk drama and Sanskrit drama along with the Western theatrical devices. Through deeply rooted in Indian ethos, he deviated from the classical Indian tradition and moved towards the Western models. His plays are basically expressions of the soul's quest for beauty and truth.

The Maharashtra Theatre developed against the backdrop of Karnataka in the early stages and was later influenced by the Parsi companies. The Marathi Theatre came into existence in 1850 by Vishupant Bhawe of Sangli **court**. After the death of Bhawe, the troupe, called itself 'Sanglikar Sangeetha Nataka Mandali'. They became professional and they started touring Karnataka and Maharashtra after 1851. When they went to Bombay, they were thrilled by the Parsi and English shows and copied many of their techniques and showmanship and introduced them in their productions. The Marathi plays attracted the Kannada audience. The Kannada audience drew from Yakshagana, though they did not follow Marathi tradition. Shathakavi produced a play 'Ushanarana' under the banner of Karnataka Nataka Company. This was called Kruthhapura Nataka Mandali in Kannada and it marks the birth of the Kannada theatre in 1874. In 1903 Shiraharty Venkoba Rao formed the Sree Mahalakshmi Prasadika Nataka Mandali and in 1914, Vamana Rao Master started a company 'Vishwagundarsha Nataka Mandali and proved that kannadigas did not lag behind the Maharastrians in stagecraft.

Recent development in Kannada theatre shows that theatre has definite advantage over cinema and television; that it is a live show in which performers and spectators come in direct contact with each other at a particular time and place. As it is a direct two-way communication, it is a team effort, the total experience due to the combined efforts of the author, the director, artists, technician and even the audience. Hence the audience have to finish in their heads what the playwrights began writing. They actively participate in the process of producing their plays on stage, rewrite lines during rehearsals and publish only after they have gone on stage. The discussions with the audience after the show have led to modifications in the script.

### **Response to Television**

Another important development in recent theatre is reaction to television, a movement away from realism. Theatre has broken away from realism and begun to explore non-realistic modes of communication. Since realism in Kannada theatre has largely been a western influence, this has meant a rejection of colonial modes and a journey back to the native roots of theatre. Extensive use of myths, miracles, magic and non-human characters – which may be animals, gods, spirits or lights – marks many a major production in recent days. Theatre is no longer concerned with mere surface realism, it has become more symbolic and ritualistic. Ancient myths and rituals and being explored and reinterpreted to communicate deeper truths about man's personal, social, political and economic relations. Exuberant colours, stylized acting and makeup, masks, music, dance, mime and such other elements have come back to the theatre. Instead of the recorded music there is live music in the foreground and it becomes an integral part of the drama.

### **Alienating the Audience from the Illusion of Reality**

Through Bertolt Brecht's concept of the 'epic theatre' with its emphasis on the need to alienate the audience from any illusion of reality has been an important influence on contemporary Indian playwrights, most of the alienation techniques employed in their plays have their origin in the native folk forms and have provided the modes of theatrical representation themes and plots for major plays by eminent Kannada playwrights like Chandrashekhara Kambara, H.S.Shivaprakash and Girish Karnad. Their plays use a chorus of singer-narrators who keep moving in and out of

the drama, playing a role or directing the course of action, or commenting on it, constantly breaking the illusion of the audience and reminding them that they are watching a performance. Even stage directions in some plays emphasize the non-realistic approach.

### **Preoccupation with Ordered Sequence**

Both in life and in literature ritual suggests a certain preoccupation with an ordered sequence of significant actions. It is commonly believed the drama has its origins in the ritualistic practices of primitive communities. Drama remains both in its thematic preoccupations and its theatrical representations a basic ritualistic mode in characterization, stage movement and use of language. Drama in modern times resorts to the exploration of ritual as a mode of apprehension of the meaning of life. If in the West ritual has come to the stage, it is most often identified with a quest for the self or a search for roots on the part of the playwrights. In the post-colonial phase of Indian theatre, playwrights like Girish Karnad and Badal Sircar who are bilinguals, turn to typically Indian situations, myths and legends for dramatic recreation. They make bold experiments with our ancient folklore and legends on the stage theatrically visualizing the idea of the total theatre.

### **Translations of Indian Plays in Indian Writing English**

Plays written in various Indian languages are being translated into English and other languages. Thus regional drama in India is slowly paving a way for a 'national theatre into which all streams of theatrical art seem to converge, the major language theatres being Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Kannada. By translating the plays being performed in languages other than their own, the dramatists are marching towards the possibility of building a national theater movement. One aspect common among these playwrights is that they accept the traditional set up and project the influence of Western ideas in a new challenging manner. As myth and legend have greater hold on the Indian imagination, within the framework of Indian myths and folk takes, the modern dramatists have deftly assimilated various western dramatic techniques.

### **Application of the Strategies of Brechtian Epic Theatre**

During the later part of the 70's, an attempt was made by injecting the strategies of Brechtian Epic theatre into Kannada theatre. The plays of Karnad and Kambara like *Nagamandala* or *Sirisampige* betray a very strong influence of Western ideologies like existentialism and Freudianism. The modern playwrights could take a lead out of that tradition, and develop forms in their own individual cultural set-ups that may bear the impress of all their new perceptions of sociology, politics and philosophy. Their dramatic experience is not confined to those perceptual patterns. Brecht's concept of the 'epic theatre' with the emphasis on the need to alienate the audience from any illusion of reality has been an important influence on eminent Kannada playwrights like Chandrashekhara Kambara, H.S.Shivaprakash and Girish Karnad.

Though dramatic art is absorbed into folk forms in several Indian languages coming closer to the common man and his life-the folk forms like jatra and Nautarki in Bengal, Lalita, Khele, Tamash and Dashautar in Maharashtra, Rasadhari plays in Mathura, Mohiniattam and Kathakali dance dramas in Kerala, Bhanal Jasim in Kashmir, Ramila in northern India, Bhavai in Gujarat, Yakshagna Attadate, Sonnata, Bayalate in Karnataka etc., the Indian dramatists surprisingly were influenced by English dramatists like Shakespeare, G.B.Shaw, Sartre, O'Neill than the Indian folk forms. Several Indian playwrights show their indebtedness to western thinkers like Sartre, Camus, Pinter, Beckett and recently Brecht.

Rabindranath Tagore, whose plays are compared to the plays of famous Irish playwright, W.B.Yeats introduced suggestive and meaningful symbolic techniques in his plays. Sri Aurobindo modelled his plays exclusively on late Victorian pastiches of Shakespearean drama and his characters look like Elizabethan personages in Indian garb. T.P.Kailasam, who can be compared to Ibsen or Shaw, wrote his play *Karna* on similar tradition with Sophocles' powerful tragedy *Oedipus, the King*.

In late sixties and early seventies, Indian English playwrights like Pratap Sharma, Nissim Ezekiel, Gurcharan Das, Asif Currimbhoy, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani tried to establish their relationship in the modern context by fusing the western norms and the Indian tradition. They were influenced by modern European playwrights like Shaw, Sartre, Camus, Giradoux and Brecht. They mixed

western ideas with myth or history in order to give a message to the contemporary society. In his *Author's Introduction' to Three Plays* (1994), Girish Karnad clearly stated:

To my generation a hundred crowded years of urban theatre seemed to have left almost nothing to hang on to, or take off from. And where was one to begin again? Perhaps by looking at our audience again, by trying to understand what experience the audience expected to receive from the theatre. (1)

The Indian playwrights had no established theatrical traction to begin with. They had to face a situation in which tensions between the 'cultural past of the country and its colonial past', between 'the attractions of western modes of thought and our own traditions' had to be resolved. It is at this point that the famous German playwright and drama theorist Bertolt Brecht came to their help. Like Brecht, the playwrights create a kind of distance between the audience and the happenings on the stage, so that instead of being lost in the action, the audience see it in a double light with critical minds.

### **Bold Innovations**

At this time the contemporary Indian drama has made bold innovations and experimentations. Calcutta led the way in the quest for newer forms of theatre. In the midst of political unrest and social upheaval, disillusionment with the British conventional theatre and its elitism of the proscenium stage, some radical groups started staging plays, at street corners. The Third theatre or street theatre helped to create political awareness among the common people. As a theatre of protest, this experimental form involved a minimum use of dialogue (to avoid the disturbance of street and traffic sounds) and to emphasis on dramatic, stylized movements that communicated more effectively than words, Badal Sircar, the Bengali dramatist, under the influence of Grotowski's concept of the need to renounce all outward technique, attempted to break down barriers in theatrical time and space by emphasizing the simultaneous action of the play and its non –sequential mode of narration. In his people's theatre, the spectator assumes a protagonist's role, making the theatrical incident experimental, and open-ended.

In the choreographic movement of the text, Badal Sircar makes the society feel guilty for being indifferent towards man and his problems. At the same time, Vijay Tendulkar, the avant-grade Marathi playwright, under the influence of Artaud's theme of violence and cruelty, makes a different innovation of style in presenting a large variety of themes expressive of modern man's anguish. There is a wide spectrum of life dealing with the theme of isolation of the individual and his confrontation with the hostile surroundings; his themes are taken mainly from real incidents. He says, "Every play is fit for everybody. A play is a work of art when it reveals its theme and essence exclusively through its mode attendant detailing rather than through statement and speech" ( ).

### **Modernity and Indian Drama**

When a society is moving towards modernity, there are more theatrical techniques in the experimental plays of contemporary Indian English playwrights. Mahesh Dattani, 'a playwright of world stature', India's first playwright in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for his contribution to world drama, comments on the relevance of Indian theatre.

I think there is going to be a good positive development, because as we get into the internet age which isolates human beings, the act of communication will be premium. Theatre is our cultural activity directly related to human beings' communication with each other... ( )

Dattani's plays expose the violence of our private thoughts and the hypocrisy of our public morals. They expose the dark secrets of the human consciousness that torment in the present. They reveal the physical and spatial awareness of Indian theatre on the one hand and the textual rigour of Ibsen and Tennessee Williams on the other.

Apart from the substantial contributions by the noted dramatists like Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani and Girish Karnad, some women playwrights like Mahasweta Devi, Uma Parameshwaran and Manjula Padmanabhan

shot into prominence quite recently by their new technical and thematic exploration, a new experience of the internal world of psyche.

Mahasweta Devi, basically a Bengali Writer, centers her themes on the untouchables' fight for their basic human rights. In her writings, we find the portrayal of the anguish and agony of the downtrodden, societal and legal violations of human rights towards Dalits, Tribals, women and children. Uma Parameswaran, a professor of English at the University of Winnipeg, has done commendable service to Indian drama and cultural tradition by popularizing Indian mythology through dance and music traditions among the Western countries. As an expatriate writer having settled in Canada, she draws her cultural and aesthetic sustenance and substance from her Indian past. Most of her one-act plays and her important plays like *Meera* and *Sita's Promise* celebrate the Indian past, its mythology, legend and the gods and goddesses. Manjula Padmanbhan, an artist, illustrator, cartoonist, playwright and novelist in Delhi portrays the themes of alienation and marginalization by showing a mean and moribund world where mothers sell their children for the 'price of rice'. The women playwrights offer something distinct to the audience, a new dimension by infusing new life into this genre.

### **Remarkable Growth**

Contemporary Indian English drama has come a long way, opening new vistas, both technically and thematically. The dramas written in regional Indian languages and their English translations have gained a remarkable growth in the recent decades. At present, this audio visual medium of expression has become relevant to the modern conditions of India.

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## 2

### BRECHTIAN EPIC THEATRE

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#### Essence of Brecht's Theory and Practice



**Brecht**

Courtesy: [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org)

Eugene Berthold Friedrich Brecht, the German poet and playwright, was the greatest theatrical reformer. His epic theatre departed from the conventions of

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theatrical illusion. He developed the drama as a social and ideological forum for leftist causes. As a Marxist dramatic theoretician, as an exile expelled from the German communist party, he developed his theory of 'epic' theatre. The essence of his theory of drama is revealed in his theoretical essay *A Little Organum for the Theatre* (1949) and his best plays (a nucleus of perhaps six) are acknowledged to be theatrical successful masterpieces.

1. *Mother Courage and her children* (1941), a chronicle play of the Thirty years war.
2. *The Life of Galileo* (1943), a play about a unheroic act of Galileo.
3. *The Good woman of Setzuan* (1943), a parable play of Hitler's rise to power set in pre-war China.
4. *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Vi*, (1957) a parable play of Hitler's rise to power set in pre-war Chicago,
5. *Herr Puntila and his Man Matti* (1943)
6. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948), the story of a struggle for possessions of a child between it highborn mother, who deserts it, and the servant girl who looks after it.

The essence of his theory of drama is the idea that a truly Marxist drama must avoid the Aristotelian premise that the audience should be made to believe that what they are witnessing is happening here and now. According to the Marxist idea, human nature is not constant but a result of changing historical conditions. Brecht therefore argued that the theatre should not seek to make is audience believe in the presence of the characters on the stage, should not make it identify with them, but should rather follow the method of the epic poet's art which is no make the audience realize that what it sees on the stage is merely an account of past events that should be watched with critical detachment.

### **Marxist Orientation**

Brecht, as a Marxist, repeatedly emphasized Marx's observation: "Philosophers have only interpreted the word in various ways; the point, however is to change it" ( ). Brecht insisted that entertainment in theatre would not compromise its intention to impact popular ideologies. Brecht attacked the naturalism of European

drama after Ibsen. He was critical of the naturalist thesis of the 'illusion of reality' in which presentation of an action is life-like. Brecht was opposed to an Aristotelian theatre where emotions of pity and fear are aroused and then purged off, making the spectator emotionally involved. Let us suppose that the dramatic event is a traffic accident. In 'normal Aristotelian theatre', the dramatist would encourage the audience to 'identify' with the driver who would be the 'hero' of the play. But this, according to Brecht, was far too personal an approach. It laid emphasis on one man's role in a situation which might involve many others.

'Catharsis' for Brecht, was a dirty word. Why should we wish to purge our emotions through drama? They were required for action in daily life. His type of 'epic' theatre was like the reconstruction of the accident within a court. Various witnesses would be called who would act out their versions of what has happened. Their action illustrates their views and experiences within an atmosphere of detached concern.

### **Two Levels of Audience**

'Modern theatre is epic theatre' proclaimed Brecht when he adapted the new dramatic form in German Epic theatre is practical in its concern, the drama made in the 'open air', with its swift movement, loose episodic structure, sudden cuts, compression and economy. The play plays on audience's two levels of awareness, their acceptance of the play for real and their rational consciousness that it is make-believe pretence. In 1952, Brecht wrote: "Two arts need to be developed: the art of acting and the art of watching. Only a mature audience-response makes epic theatre, in Brecht's sense, possible, the audience being the co-author". (16:710).

### **The Notion of Epic Theatre**

In speaking of an 'epic' theatre Brecht meant to imply a theatre which would not be exciting, 'dramatic', full of tensions and conflicts, but slower-paced, reflective, giving time to reflect and compare. Hence, the epic (narrative, non-dramatic) theatre is based on detachment, on the *verfremdung* effect (alienation effect) achieved through a number of devices that remind the spectator that he is being presented with

a demonstration of human behaviour in scientific spirit rather than with an illusion of reality, that the theatre is only a theatre and not the world itself.

The epic, as a genre, emphasizes the process of production rather than the finished product. The reader participates along with the author in the process of production. All epic works have to do with becoming and acting. The ancient epic poet is not single handedly responsible for his work; his public has an equal share in it. In as much as the poet is in direct contact with the public, the work is oriented towards its hearers and the poet is only the individual spokesman for a collective voice. Gray's comment on the term 'Epic Theatre' is worthy of note:

The word 'epic' here translating the German 'episch', is 'unfortunate', 'Episch' has, in this context, none of the associations with heroism and greatness that 'epic' often has, as in an 'epic tale'. It is merely a literary category and in German this category includes not only narrative poetry but also novels, and is often used to distinguish these from the lyric and the drama.

### **Against Invitation to Spectators to Identify with Characters**

Brecht criticized classical non-epic theatre for inviting spectators to identify with characters. The spectator has to remain a lucid master of his critical faculties and must not succumb to the temptation of identification. The playwright of the epic theatre practices a form of representation of the world that consists not in reproducing things but in making them strange and unfamiliar so as to disorient the audience. Brecht refers this device with the word 'Entfremdung' distancing, but also alienation, he shifts to another term 'verfremdung, apparently under the influence of the Russian Formalists and the notion of 'ostranenia' -estrangement. Under the influence of the Russian formalists, (Brecht adopted one of Tretjakov's plays into German), Brecht could use an exact translation of the Russian word. The famous verfremdung, estrangement, alienation or the 'A' effect. It means:

The A – effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and

unexpected. (*Brecht on Theatre* 355)

### **Alienation and Other Strategies**

The alienation – effect is a social device, the purpose of the effect is to enable the spectator to exercise fruitful criticism from a social point of view. The estrangement from illusion of reality is achieved by meta-theatrical elements such as stage devices like induction, the play-within-the play, direct speech and aside addressed to the audience. Everything that occupies the stage materially is addressed first of all to the senses such as music, dance, plastic art, pantomime, gesticulation, mimicry, intonation, lighting and scenery. Brecht employed “literarization” of the theatre with the help of subtitles and projection to achieve the documentary effect.

### **Historicizing**

‘Historicizing’ is another Brechtian concept, closely related to ‘distancing’. Brecht declared that the historical relativity of the events in the play had to be made comprehensible to the audience, as the means of making the present look strange and thereby suggesting the need for social change. This could be done by constructing the play, setting the dramatic incidents in the past with some significance relevant to the modern context.

### **Interest in the Elaborate Depiction of Histrionics**

Theatric action takes place through gestures supported by histrionic and mimetic action. The interest of the audience watching a play is more on the elaborate depiction of histrionic skill and not so much in the unfolding of the story which being based mostly on epics are often already familiar. The actor steps out of role to assume another role or series of roles, at the same time, has a meta-function. Indirectly, acting establishes the non-illusory nature of the play, drama is a pretense, to see it is to accept and recognize its pretensions. Music, songs, dances should function as interruptive devices so that spectators might interpose their judgment on the episodes presented dramatically.

### **Reformation Sought and Applied – The Role and Function of the Actor**

Brecht called for a major transformation in the role and function of the actor. The actor must help destroy stage illusion by putting himself at a distance, both from

the character he portrayed and the situation in which he was involved. He must try to 'play from memory' and 'demonstrate' what happened, making clear to the audience his own particular social attitude towards the events and characters. Brecht wanted to show man not as a consistent or integrated whole but as contradictory and changing as someone whose coherence was achieved through 'contradictions' and 'jumps'.

The individual character is in the process of losing his dominant role. In the place of the individual, we find environmental elements, interpersonal situations and collective interests playing the primary role; that is why the individual characters in epic theatre must be transformed into exemplary beings:

It is not the outstanding passionate individual who is the initiator and questioner in epic theatre. The questions are always raised by the situations and the individuals respond through the characteristic behaviour they adopt. (93)

In addition to modifying his relationship with the character he is playing, the actor may also relate differently to the spectator by addressing him directly in a gesture that parallels the reading of stage directions, this reminds us that the character's dialogue is embedded in the dialogue between the author and the spectator. The actor shows the non-coincidence between himself and the character and causes two voices to be heard simultaneously, this prevents the spectator in turn from identifying with the character. The actor has to keep on being a portrayer; he has to show the character he is portraying as a different person and not eradicate from his representation all traces of 'he did that, he says this'.

He must not end up wholly transforming himself into the character portrayed. He never forgets and never lets the spectators forget that he is not the person he is portraying as the portrayer. Each actor should estrange himself from himself (553)

Interested in acting out a character's words, the actor quotes them thereby, achieving the A-effect. This theatricality keeps the viewer constantly aware that he is in a theatre watching a play; the characters can be compared to orchestral instruments.

They have their own tonal colourings, their melodic lines, their own 'voices' which ought to contribute to a rich overall effect. Brecht wanted to make the spectator turn to an action which would complete the unfinished play.

### **A Theatre for the Scientific Age**

The epic theatre is fit for a scientific age, the theatre as place of entertainment and of the critical attitude both socially productive and aesthetically pleasurable. Brecht demanded a theatre which would change the social consciousness of the audience and encourage the transformation of the particular field of human relation in which the action was taking place by active intervention in social processes. Brecht wanted the theatre to make use of 'dialectical materialism' making dialects into a source of enjoyment so as to heighten both our capacity for life and our pleasure in it. When applying dialectics to drama, Brecht wanted to accentuate the 'contradictions', or the 'tussle and tension' of opposite forces in every sphere of life – the individual, family and society. The dialectical approach is the key to proper understanding and appreciation of the ambiguities, ironies and paradoxes of the plays. Characters are constructed in dialectical terms as living contradictions or as split figures, sharpening anti thesis. The course of the narrative or story is set out carefully as a chain of contradictions and pressure, so that conflicting attitudes are held together in tension, often explosively and sometimes even comically. By enhancing the awareness of opposites, Brecht's dialectical vision encourages 'complex seeing' on the part of the audience.

### **A Theatre of Heterogeneity**

Brecht's ideal is not total theatre but a theatre of heterogeneity in which plurality reigns in place of unity. Brecht picks up the Schillerian idea of scenic autonomy is epic drama: the individual episodes do not contribute to a single action, do not lead to a single culmination point; their juxtaposition (the 'montage' effect) points up their heterogeneity. The dramatist chops up a play into little autonomous pieces, so that the action advances by fits and starts. He challenges the imperceptible sliding from one scene into another. Epic theatre itself, is defined by this stress on the heterogeneous and the plural.

## **The Concept and Application of Distancing**

Historicizing is related to ‘distancing’, another Brechtian concept closely. Historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods’. Brecht declared that the historical relativity of events in the play had to be made comprehensible to the audience. This could be done by setting the dramatic incidents in the past or by constructing the play in the form of a story, which has already happened, hence ‘epic’. A play must fictionally re-present its historical subject matter; history is not the subject matter but merely the set. Historicizing is thus a means of making the present look strange and thereby suggesting the need for social change.

History is fluid, something ad hoc, something ‘in the making’, a continuous present tense or more properly, a perpetual conditional mood. This is not ‘how it had to be’. This is not even ‘how it was ‘but’ how we choose it to be’. If gaps exist and they often do, we are forced to fill them in history. (556)

## **The Effect of Historical Material in Drama**

The effect of the shaping of his historical material is to alienate the popular hero as the foreigner and to make strange and questionable his motives and behaviour. Brecht’s intention is to present a view from below, ‘the worm’s eye view’ of history wherein ‘the defeats and victories of the chaps at the top aren’t always defeats and victories for the chaps at the bottom.

It is the trend found in Shakespeare’s treatment of history. In *Henry IV*, Shakespeare includes both the court and Falstaff’s underworld, balancing the serious-heroic with the comic-anti-heroic view point. Brecht’s play consciously restores to the foreground the Falstaffian common people’s world and endorses it. In Brecht’s plays, major historical events – sieges and battles, victories and defeats – are ‘distanced’ by a mere passing mention in the synopses of scenes (displayed as placards) where the narrative voice is that of the impersonal chronicle. Against this background the repercussion of the events of the lives of the little people are fully acted out on the stage, creating a dialectical tension between reportage and dramatic action. The audience is asked to take a critical view of the way history is constructed,

inducing them to look at the present from a point of comparison located either in the past or in the future.

### **A Scientific Laboratory**

In a modern scientific society, stage should be presented as a scientific laboratory dealing with facts through various mechanical devices like placards and signboards as well as choric commentary. Brecht was much impressed by oriental theatre particularly the Japanese Noah plays with their non-naturalistic and highly stylized conventions and the techniques of actors addressing remarks directly to the audience. They have a chorus which interrupts and comments upon the action sometimes speaking on behalf of the spectators in a simple and detached manner.

Brecht employs 'literalization of the theatre' with the help of sub-titles and projections, statistics, maps, cartoons, stills to achieve the documentary effect. Literalizing entails punctuating representation with formulation, that the audience practice 'complex seeing' structurally the thrust was for a narrative form of drama, the story following a natural sequence through loose linked episodes as against the artificial plot of the 'well-made' play. Each episode should be framed and separated almost like a play-within-a play.

### **Ideological World Views Combined with Innovations**

From Marx, Brecht took the idea of superstructure to which art belongs but he avoided too simple explanations of ideological world views. He successfully achieved theatrical achievement by combining the different innovations with Marxist ideas and systematized them. He employed successfully some of the dramatic theories in his play. These are examples from Brecht's own plays – the distancing V-effect. In *Life of Galileo* a long and profound speech by the un-heroic protagonist is followed by the pathetic observation "Now I must eat" ( LG 56 ). This shows the weakness of the man against the strength of the inventor. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* when Grusche ponders whether or not to take the abandoned baby, her dilemma is voiced by the chorus while she exacts a dumb show. In *The Good Women of Setzuan* the frequent asides to the audience achieve a V-effect.

Brecht's *Life of Galileo* is written against the background of the rise of fascism and the dropping of the atom bomb. It is a good example of Brechtian epic theatre where the dramatist points out how science for its own sake is meaningless; its point is not to open the door to infinite knowledge, but to put an end to infinite errors. It is an examination of the problems that face not only the scientist but also the spirit of inquiry when brought into conflict with the requirements of governments, ideologies or the power elites of the 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism. It feeds the need of the sceptics and it will be doubt that would initiate and further the process of inquiry. 'Disbelief can move mountain' says Brecht and the pleasure and pain of doubt occur everywhere in the sub text of the play, the very attitude which is essential for the audience of the epic theatre. To develop critical insight, Brecht uses interruptive devices, presenting placards with a title. He encourages critical appreciation of the audience by presenting the contradictions of two forces working parallel to each other; science and religion, faith and doubt.

### **Impact of Brecht around the World**

Brechtian dramatic theories have spread across the globe and he left behind a group of dedicated disciples known today as Brechtians who continue to propagate his teachings. Brecht's reputation fluctuated wildly in Europe. Sartre admired him as a postman because he was always delivering messages. In *Post-war British Theatre*, John Elsom acknowledged the arrival of the Berliner Ensemble at the Palace Theatre in 1956 attracting much attention and general acclaim. In *Landmarks of Modern British Drama*, Martin Esslin pointed out that two signal theatrical events imported from the continent in the mid-fifties played a crucial role in the direction taken by the British theatre: the 1955 production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* at the Arts Theatre in London, under the direction of Peter Hall and the 1956 visit of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble to the Palace Theatre.

Brecht's Epic drama particularly affected the social documentaries in Britain. Brecht influenced many British dramatists of the 1960s: Harold Pinter, John Arden, Peter Barnes, Howard Brenton among them. His direct influence was great, in that Epic Theatre provided a constructive alternative to the well-made play. Peter Shaffer, Robert Bolt, John Whiting, learnt from him the way to overcome the old unities of

time and place. The example of the Berliner Ensemble set standards towards which the new 'permanent' companies in Britain aspired and also changed the tone within theatre buildings and auditoriums away from the formal and ornate and towards the informal, functional and austere. This change in tone, led to an avoidance of both heavily stylized acting, highly emotional acting and a preference for plain simple statement. Howard Brenton declared, "I hit a rhythm which is apparently very Brechtian" (*Plays One. vi*). Brecht is identified as Brenton's closest theatric forebear. Edward Bond, influenced in a general way by Brecht, produced *Narrow Road to the Deep North* in 1969, a parable play owing much to Brecht's *Lehrstück* and he followed the epic format in his play.

### **Popularity in India**

Brecht has acquired phenomenal popularity in our country in the last few decades. It is evident from the unprecedented success of the productions of his plays in a variety of attractive styles. The production of his play *Caucasian Chalk Circle* in Marathi by Vijay Mahta in Bundelkhandi by Fritzy Benewitz, in Punjabi by M.K.Raina and Kavitha Nagpal has been very successful. His *Three Penny Opera* has been produced in Calcutta and in Bombay it has been produced under the title *Teen Pysa Tamasa* and earned a National award to the director for his admirable efforts. His *Puntilla* has been successfully staged in Hindi by Fritz Benewitz. All these plays have been successfully presented by freely and creatively using the methods and devices of our traditional theatre. This showed Brecht's relevance for our contemporary playwrights and paved the way for successful balancing of the traditional forms and western sensibility.

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**BRECHTIAN INFLUENCE ON GIRISH KARNAD  
A STUDY OF BRECHT'S *THE LIFE OF GALILEO* AND  
KARNAD'S *THE DREAMS OF TIPU SULTAN***

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### **Contemporary Indian Theatre Modelling After Western Development**

The contemporary Indian theatre, down the ages, has modeled itself after the West, by importing Western forms of modernism, and by injecting the strategies of Brechtian Epic theatre. The Indians' theatrical experience has communicated both a direct link between the spectator and the spectacle and kind of distance between the audience and the happenings on the stage. It is true that the Brechtian form has several parallels on native Indian semi-theatrical modes.

### **Brecht's Influence**

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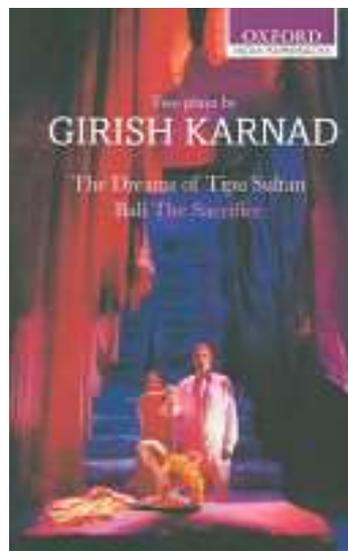
Dr. (Mrs.) N. Velmani

*Drama in Indian Writing in English - Tradition and Modernity*

Brecht, the major twentieth century theoretician of drama, evolved a major aesthetic theory for the modern theatre, the theory of Epic theatre, fit for a scientific age. He significantly pronounced: “If art reflects life, it does so with special mirrors” (13). These special mirrors are intended to produce *verfremdung* (alienation or estrangement effects). His emphasis is on the need to alienate the audience from any illusion of reality by meta-theatrical elements of stage devices like induction, prologue, play-within-the play, direct speech and aside addressed to the audience. Brecht believed that everything that occupies the stage materially is addressed first of all to the senses instead of being addressed primarily to the mind such as music, dance, plastic art, pantomime, mimicry, intonation, gesticulation, lighting and scenery. Brecht employed ‘literarization’ of the theatre with the help of sub-titles and projections, statistics, maps, cartoons, stills and films to achieve the documentary effect. Brecht used the narrative aids, such as narrator, chorus or commentator, the episodes on the principle of montage as direct addresses to the audience the process of showing is shown dramatically on the stage.

Brecht as dramatic theorist attracted much attention and general acclaim throughout the world. His Epic theatre affected the social documentaries in Britain and particularly influenced many British dramatists of the 1960s. Peter Shaffer, John Arden, Peter Barnes, Howard Brenton, Robert Bolt and John Whiting among them.

### **Situational Conflict and Adapting Brecht – Karnard’s Solution**



In India, in the late sixties and the early seventies, a group of contemporary Indian English playwrights such as Pratap Sharma, Nissim Ezekiel, Gurcharaen Das, Asif Currimbhay, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani faced a situational conflict between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past and between attractions of Western modes of thought and their own tradition. In his *Author's Introduction to Three Plays*, Girish Karnad clearly stated:

To my generation a hundred crowded years of urban theatre seemed to have left almost nothing to hang on to, take off from. And where was one to begin again? Perhaps by looking at our audience again by trying to understand what experience the audience expected to believe from the theatre. (11)

Karnad felt that in “the naturalistic form”, the play would never achieve the ‘universalization’ of the theme. It is at this point Bertolt Brecht, with his innovative and experimental theories, influenced Karnad. Admitting Brecht’s influence on his dramatic works, Karnad remarks that.

Brecht’s influence received mainly through his writings and without the benefit of his theatrical production went some way in making us realize what could be done with the design of traditional theatre. (14)

### **Merging Myth and Reality**

Like Brecht, Karnad employed non-naturalistic form the merging of myth and reality, the past and the present, legendary and historical figures. Brechtian theatrical aspects such as ‘alienation effect’, ‘interruptive devices’, ‘complex seeing’, ‘Anti-cathartic effect’ and ‘Historicizing’ crept into the plays of Karnad. ‘Historicizing’ is Brechtian concept, closely related to ‘distancing’. Brecht declared that the historical relativity of events in the play had to be made comprehensible to the audience, as a means of making the present look strange and thereby suggesting the need for social change. This could be done by setting the dramatic incidents in the past or by constructing the play in the form of a story which has already happened, hence ‘epic’.

### ***The Life of Galileo and The Dreams of Tipu Sultan***

It is interesting to note the similarities between Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* (written in 1937 – 9 and revised in 1945 – 7) and Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. Both dramatists have given an old historical tale a new meaning and significance relevant to the present context. Brecht's play is called *The Life of Galileo* and not just Galileo. The title seems to direct us to stand at some distance from Galileo as a person and to see his 'life as a unit', as a coherent autonomous sequence. In the episodic structure of the play, our attention is not

On an accurate historical rendition of the life of Galileo but on episodic exploration of possibilities open to an individual of participating in and contributing to movement and change in the large domains that surround him. (Austin E.Ounigley, 144)

Brecht has presented Galileo as an individual with two sides – the gigantic heroic figure of Galileo with his conception of a science for the people and the recanting scientist, a traitor to science and his disciples. The play insists upon the audience a 'complex seeing' whether the conception of the leading character is as a hero or a villain.



When Brecht has delineated Galileo as an under paid scientist in Venice who had to subordinate the pursuit of scientific fact to higher social purposes, Karnad depicts Tipu Sultan, known as the Tiger of Mysore, one of the few who had a sense of

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British as ‘foreigners’ as a man of vision. Colonial English historians present Tipu as a defeated native ruler vanquished by the great British Governor – General, Lord Cornwallis and as a fanatic by the right wing fundamental groups. They try to paint an 18<sup>th</sup> century man in terms of 20<sup>th</sup> century prejudices. Karnad attempts to resurrect a hero as a man with his interest in the nation – building process. One of the reasons why the British destroyed him was because he was becoming strong in terms of trade. He nationalized the sandalwood and ivory trade. He brought the silk industry from China. He looked for ports for trade. He was interested in upgrading trade, technology, agriculture and taxation on the lines of the British system. Karnad wants the audience to see in the vision of Tipu, an effort to understand what’s happening around him, to understand it, to reform it probably.

### **Expediency and Environment**

Both plays are produced at the time of expediency, while the dramatists respond to external environment. Brecht, when he was in Denmark, wrote the first draft of *The Life of Galileo* in 1937-9, when the Second World War was imminent, when scientists like Niels Bohr set out to discover the properties of the atom. After the tragic explosion in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the public opinion woke up to the dangers of science.

Looking back three centuries, Brecht saw Galileo’s action as turning point in the relation between men of science and the general public. Under threat of torture and excommunication, Galileo was compelled to recant that the Copernican hypothesis about planetary movement was wrong while the Ptolemaic hypothesis in accordance with the doctrine of the church was right. Brecht makes his audience agree with his reading of history, the struggle between the scientist’s passion for research and his need to live.

*The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, commissioned by the BBC, was written as a radio play to celebrate 50 years of Indian Independence in 1996. In the Foreword Girish Karnad writes: “The plot obviously had to deal with some aspect of Indo-British relations and I immediately thought of Tipu Sultan, one of the most politically perceptive and the tragic figures in modern history” (*Plays. Foreword*).

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Karnad's admiration for the king blazes through the text, despite the fact that he plundered temples and forced conversions, and he was not really a model of tolerance. Karnad was fascinated by the fact that a man who practically spent 49 (1750-1799) years of his life on horseback recorded his dreams and kept them under his pillows. His last dream was on the day when he was killed in battle. In this dream, he gains a surprise victory over the British, aided by the unexpected support from the Nizams and the Marathas. Though pictured as a "Monster" by the British, deprived of half of his kingdom, he retained his patriotism and courage of conviction even in the face of adversity, particularly, the agonizing experience of sending his small sons, aged seven and nine being held as hostages by the British:

They'll not harm my children ... The danger is: they'll teach my children their language, English. The language in which it is possible to think of children as hostages. All I can try to do is to agree to their terms and conclude the treaty in a hurry – before my children have learnt that language. (43)

### **Going Beyond Dates and Events**

Karnad makes the audience go beyond dates and historical events and explore patriotism without selfish and self-seeking motives and create awareness with the past and the present history of the country to build up a better future.

Both men of the theatre have presented their heroes with un-heroic qualities. Galileo's passion for research makes him an egoist. He enjoys life with all his senses, his love of good food and wine, of poetry and music and beauty. He says: "I Love wine.... I enjoy the consolations of the flesh. I have no patience with cowardly souls who call them little weakness. I say: enjoyment is an accomplishment". (65)

Galileo wrecks his daughter's marriage for the sake of science without showing much feeling. He is a craftsman himself, with a kind of cunning nature when he hears about the telescope, he plans to make money by palming the telescope off as his own invention. He sees in a flash both the mathematical principle of the

pendulum and the practical application of it. He is also the man who took the practical way to save himself. The play does not compel the audience either to praise or condemn Galileo but regarding the action of Galileo, the audience sees it in double light with critical minds.

Karnad juxtaposes the dreams of the visionary ruler Tipu Sultan with the reality of British domination and success over the disunited rulers of India. Though Tipu fought like ‘a man possessed’, he was ‘hunted down’ and he died of the wound on his temple. “And the first salutation he received from the hunters was to have his whiskers chopped off” (15). Because his ‘act of vandalism’ was not forgotten by the British soldiers, the defeat of Tipu was not only a personal triumph for Lord Cornwallis but also failure of a ruler trying to gain popularity and acceptance. The fate of the fallen ruler could show the Indian princes the danger of disunity.

### **A Non-Aristotelian Theatre**

Both the dramatists support a ‘non-Aristotelian’ theatre, characterized not by cathartic emotional effect, but by protest and persuasion. Both are absorbed in the materialistic motives behind higher ideals. Both stress the concept that man’s instincts are generally healthy, compassionate, kindly and courteous but in a competitive society he must suppress these natural feelings, exercising selfish reasons for his survival. Both present the leading characters Galileo, the well known Italian astronomer and physicist and Tipu Sultan, the monarch - plausibly without falsifying the main events in their lives, revealing the human nature, so that the audience will feel “yes, that is just now these people would have thought and acted”. Both reconstruct history making it relevant to the modern context.

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**THE NEW VISIONARY HEROES:  
AURANGZEB AND TIPU SULTAN**

**A Study of Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* and  
Indira Parthasarathy's *Aurangzeb***

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**Historical Plays as Complex Seeing**

Plays concerning events from history or stories of historical personages are normally classified as historicals. A dramatist who chooses his theme from history usually does so because he sees meaning in it for his own time. The dramatist does not merely portray struggles of the contradictory dispositions of the visionary heroes or dictators in the double light, thereby enabling the 'complex seeing' (in Brecht's term) of the audience. This paper presents the parallel reading of Indira Parthasarathy's historical play *Aurangzeb* and Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*.

**Some Common Features**

Both dramatists share common features in their dramatic career and dramatic output. Indira Parthasarathy won the Sahitya Academy Award for his novel *Kurithi-p-punal* (1977) and Girish Karnad won the prestigious Gnanapeeth Award in 1999 for his contribution to the field of drama. Indira Parthasarathy, pseudonym of Ranganathan Parthasarathy, (b.1930 in Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu), has revolutionized modern Tamil Drama and he has so far authored ten plays – the best known among these are *Aurangzeb* (1976), *Pasi* (1977) *Nandan Kathai* (1978), and *Ramanujar* 1996.

Girish Karnad has been long in the realm of electronic media. He has produced ten plays over a span of four decades. The recipient of the Padma Vibushan, Karnad regards playwriting as his home and his plays of acclaim are: *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1970), *Nagamandala* (1988), *Tale Danda* (1990), *The Fire and the Rain* (1995), *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, *Bali: the Sacrifice* (2004), and *The Flower* (2005). *Aurangzeb* was written in 1974 and published in 1976, a few months before the declaration of National Emergency. *The*

*Dreams of Tipu Sultan* was commissioned by the BBC and broadcast in Britain on the fiftieth anniversary of Indian Independence.

### **Contemporary Relevance of the Historical Plays**

What is interesting about the historical material in these two plays is that both the plays with their central characters highlight the contemporary relevance. A comparative study of the historical sources and dramatic design gives a new perspective to the changed context of post independent India. Both dramatists distort the portrayal of historical personae as monster and dictator and draw the audience to their own side as visionary heroes.

Indian history as written by the British perhaps offers one side of it, offering a partial view. The Marxist approach offers an attractive alternative, but the Marxist interpretation is lost when confronted with native categories like caste. Reconciliation between facts and possible interpretations is usually called for in the writings of playwrights. And this is largely achieved in the two plays under consideration here.

### **Selective Views and Approaches of Karnad and Parthasarathy**

Girish Karnad presents Tipu Sultan, the warrior monarch, as a great man who hated and fought the British all his life, but also admired them for their administrative methodology and trading skills. Similarly, Aurangzeb, in history, was a dictator who succeeded Shahjahan as emperor on the throne of the Mughal Empire by executing his family members. But Indira Parthasarathy presents Aurangzeb's superiority in military ability and administration.

### **Parthasarathy's Aurangzeb**



Indira Parthasarathy's vision of history is partly Marxist in the sense that he sees a lot of the people at large in a feudal, absolutist state as helpless, shaped by forces beyond their control. The playwright explores the interplay of historical forces with the psyche of characters. The titular hero, Aurangzeb, felt orphaned by his parents and longed for their love and attention. The alienation began when Shahjahan sent him away, an unwanted eight – year – old child to Jahangir as a 'surety of good faith', when Shahjahan expressed a preference for Dara, his eldest son, Aurangzeb felt 'the creation of this mutual hate' between him and his father, ending in war of succession in September 1657, between Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb. Due to Aurangzeb's superior military tactics, Aurangzeb entered the Agra Fort defeating Dara and arrested and confined Shahjahan to the Fort with only Jahanara for company. The captive Dara was shown off through the streets of Delhi and beheaded on 30 August 1639 and his corpse displayed through the city. Dara's son was killed by slow poisoning on the orders of Aurangzeb.

Aurangzeb's suspicious nature made him spy others and keep the country in his control. He conceived of religion as a code rather than as a philosophy or a state of mind and since he passionately believed in the 'one nation, one religion' creed, he wanted one singular code which all Indians would strictly follow. In his opinion, the commoners were no better than sheep, they had to be guided firmly by a shepherd.

This was only possible in a political system based on one religion that laid down right and wrong, resulting in a cultured policing system all over the country.

Aurangzeb fiercely fought to establish an Islamic fundamentalist state. Being a puritanical ascetic, he enforced on the people strict asceticism.

There is no place any more in Hindustan for music and dance .... it is better they are destroyed and buried deep down into the earth.(52)

His homogenizing fundamentalism proves disastrous for the people resulting not in mere exploitation, but in gruesome massacres.

In the last days of Aurangzeb's life, despite all his hard-headed, anti-aesthetics stance, music and poetry continue to haunt him. He is made to feel that, in some mysterious way, the lack of love in his life is related to the absence of music and poetry. The Omkaranada tells him, it was unnatural for him to "sever that rhythm, the music of his soul from his life" (61), and he realizes that "I have run my course. I am a tried old man who has played his part. I become history" (63). If only there had been more music in his life, there would have been less blood on his hands and less guilt on his conscience. The playwright parallels the reign of Aurangzeb with the current political scenario, where one country after another is being drawn into a strange liminal existence oscillating between the consumerist westernized commercialism and ruthless life-denying fundamentalism.

### **Karnad's Tipu Sultan**



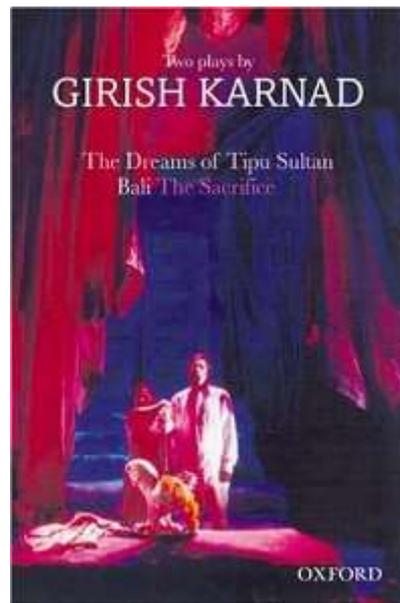
Courtesy: www. <http://jagrititheatre.com/event/the-dreams-of-tipu-sultan/>

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Colonial English historians present Tipu Sultan as a defeated native ruler vanquished by the great British Governor-General Lord Cornwallis and a fanatic by the right wing fundamental groups. Girish Karnad depicts Tipu Sultan, known as the Tiger of Mysore, as a man of vision, a hero with his interest in the nation – building process. One of the reasons why the British destroyed him was because he was becoming strong in terms of trade. He nationalized the sandalwood and ivory trade. He brought the silk industry from China. He looked for ports for trade. He was interested in upgrading trade, technology, agriculture and taxation on the lines of the British system.



Though pictured as a ‘monster’ by the British, deprived half of his kingdom he had patriotism and courage of conviction even in the face of adversity, the agonizing experience of sending his small sons, aged seven and nine being held hostages by the British: “They won’t harm my children.... The danger is they’ll teach my children their language, English” (43).

Karnad makes the audience go beyond dates and historical events and explore patriotism without selfish and self seeking motives and create awareness with the past history of the country to build up a better future. Karnad wants the audience, to see in the vision of Tipu’s effort, to understand what is happening around him, to reform it probably, to respond to external environment.

### **Both Dramatists At Work**

Both dramatists present the leading historical figures plausibly, without falsifying the main events in their lives, revealing the human nature, so that the audience will feel, “yes that is just how these people would have thought and acted”.)

Both reconstruct history, making it relevant to the modern context. Both juxtapose the personal triumph and failure of the rulers pictured as ‘monsters’ in history. The objective of their plays is to see how someone who lived hundreds of years ago is still our contemporary.

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## **PASSIVITY OF THE PASSIONATE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN THE PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD**

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### **Impact of Patriarchy**

Since patriarchal times, women have, in general, been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to man – the secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural ‘feminine’ characteristics, but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the deliberate control of men. In Genesis, God said to Eve: “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow... and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee”. (2: 6)

The subservient role of the female gender is set against the divergent cross-currents in society and culture. Women, trapped in a self-destructive gender, become images of suffocation, dwarfed, condemned, deprived, isolated in the family and social and political venues.

### **A New Popular Stereotype**

Women are usually cast into a new popular stereotype of a narrow range of characterization. There are two basic types of images – positive roles which depict women as independent and intelligent and the surplus of misogynistic roles commonly identified as the bitch, the witch and the vamp. Irrespective of the economic, political and social progress taking place invariably in all countries, literature projects women subject to gender discrimination, exploitation in an atmosphere of religious – cultural and political violence.

Indian English Drama, in the last decade of the millennium is notable for the use of modern themes and techniques, fruitful experiment and innovation in the hands of a group of dramatists – Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Mahesh Dattani, Mahesweta Devi and Girish Karnad. Due to globalization, these dramatists made use of techniques which introduced a break from mimetic representation and new ideas which were instrumental in implementing feminist issues on the stage.

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## **Karnad's Plays**

Girish Karnad is India's leading playwright and one of the most outstanding practitioners of performing arts. Karnad is a man of many achievements as an actor, director, art critic and film star. Karnad's plays, though counted on fingertips, nearly ten plays over a span of four decades, have proved to be milestones in the history of Indian theatre. He has drawn his themes largely from mythology, history, folklore and legends combining western dramatic modes and native tradition. Whether history is presented in mythical garb, or an ancient myth is presented in terms of social history, Karnad's plays resort to the exploration of myth and history as 'real heroes' and his characters in unrealistic and improbable incidents and situations become rather 'secondary'.

Against this backdrop, Karnad's women characters – all married women – involve and manifest a problematic ambiguity. Chitrlekha (*Yayati*), Padmini (*Hayavadana*) Rani (*Nagamandala*) Queen Rambhavati (*Tale Danda*), Nittilai and Vishaka. (*The Fire and the Rain*), the Queen (*Bali: The sacrifice*) may appear rather passive and stereotyped females destined to make the best of a bad job by loving two males, or two differently programmed men.

## **Portraying Typical Indian Female Ruled by Patriarchal Order**

Karnad very dexterously pictures the condition of a typical Indian female ruled by the patriarchal order bound by tradition, but whose spirit remains unbound. Though not a feminist, but a humanist with his profound concern for the 'oppressed' and the 'downtrodden', he depicts women enthused with feminism, fighting the unjust norms of the patriarchal order. In their direct encounter with patriarchy, his women characters end up in death or disaster. Karnad's use of myth, folklore and history as a metaphor for the contemporary situation does not allow Karnad to see women characters from their perspective, but in his later plays, he has tried to rid the image of women from the stereotyped roles.

Karnad's women characters are the products of the post- colonial, post-modern world that desire to gain what they lack. They revolt against the patriarchy and male dominance, conquer male ego, and demolish culture and tradition,

anticipating transformation in the attitude of the male dominated society. In their struggles, they think, act and if they fail to obtain their objective they commit suicide. They are passionate, lustrous, philosophical and take hold of emotional intelligence in their striving for survival and demolition of the traditional concepts. At an interaction with the reporters arranged by the Mysore district working Journalists' Associations, Karnad admits for the first time he has made an effort to highlight the women characters and their rebellious attitude in his plays.

“I have the satisfaction of bringing out the turmoil among the women of feudal family/class and this has not been done by anyone so far” ( ), Karnad claimed.

### **Married Women Caught Up in the Psychological Split-Up and Existential Angst**

In the post modern world, in the wake of colonial hangover, Karnad's women characters are all married women caught up in the psychological split-up and existential angst as well as freedom of choice in man-woman relationship. His *Tughlaq* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* are concerned with the significant Indian historical personalities, the patriotic monarchs and idealistic reformers known for their revolutionary zeal to challenge the British expansion. In the political plays women just remain the pawns and puppets in politics. They are compared to a scepter, simply carried by a monarch on ceremonial occasions; only the men are active participants and decision makers.

### **No Woman Character in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan***

There is no woman character introduced in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. In the play of power – politics, Tughlaq, the crafty megalomaniac ruler of the fourteen century, the power-monger commits heinous crimes of patricide and fratricide. The stepmother, in her own selfish pursuit of power, wants to control Mohammad. Not just satisfied with the incestuous relationship with him, she has the vizier Najib poisoned. But Mohammad's mad lust for power which he wouldn't allow anyone to share, makes him sentence her to death by stoning in public.

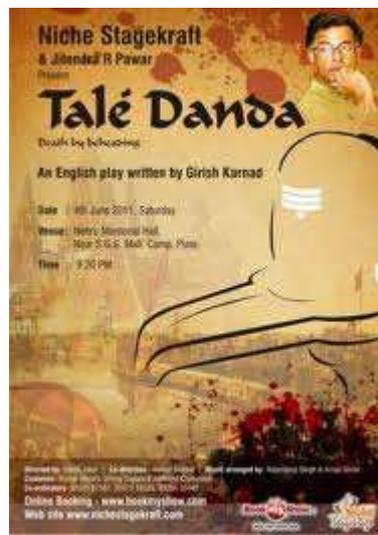
### ***Tale Danda***

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In *Tale Danda*, in Kalyan, the power politics involves a group of people - the upper-caste Brahmins with King Bijjala who himself is a 'Kalchoori – a Barber'. But he has married a bride from a Kshatriya Royal family of Hoysalas, Queen Rambhavati and has a son, Sovideva. He loves Sovideva, but detests his un-princely behaviour. So he does not favour him while he makes the sons of the other wives local lords. Basavanna, the King's poet-philosopher is the leader of Sharanas, the devotees of Lord Siva. The noble movement believed in social and gender equality. But his wife Gangambika who has powerless, objects to his male chauvinism: "Women and cattle they are all the same to you, aren't they?" (42). She performs her work within the four walls of the house. It is not for her to cross the threshold, and go out to lead the Sharanas. Attainment of sainthood, the power to lead people and the capacity to perform are supposed to be vested in the male, Basavanna. In the end, when Basavanna leaves home and goes in search of God, ignoring Gangambika, Gangambika suffers like all other women.



Queen Rambhavati, King Bijjala's wife remains passive and her two statements made to her son Sovideva bring out her stand that there is hardly a hint of equality in the husband-wife relationship. When Sovideva is raging against the Sharanas, who have made a fool of him in the treasury episode, Queen Rambhavati meekly tells him, "Do as you wish. Just don't upset your father, that's all. He turns his bad temper on me and I can't take it any longer" (8).

When Sovideva accuses her of being in thrall to the Sharana's mystic-saint leader, Basavanna, she says, "What am I to do? Do you think your father ever listens to me?" (8). Rambhavati seems to be devoid of her 'self' or a 'will of her own'. Her very existence is defined and concretized with reference to her husband. Her inferior position is the outcome of centuries of internalization of the patriarchal postulates by women in society. She represents traditional woman with her unflinching allegiance to her husband through thick and thin. She proves the dictum of the feminists who rightly believe that

The binary opposition has been skewed and the dichotomy between men and women has become not an equalized difference but a hierarchal one in which one member of the part is superior, in the centre, in control while the other is subordinate on the margin, invisible, inarticulate and ineffective .(298)

#### **No Difference of Class or Caste - Curbing the Desires of Women**

The desires of a woman are always curbed in a patriarchal order and it makes little difference whether she belongs to a high or low class / caste. Chitrlekha in *Yayati* is an Aryan princess and the Queen in *Bali: The Sacrifice* and Vishakha, a Brahmin in *The Fire and the Rain*, all these women belong to a higher social order. Women are compelled to surrender to the will of the male decision makers without protest, Chitrlekha in *Yayati* suffers at the hands of her husband Puru, who does not think of his wife even once before acceding to the supreme sacrifice of giving up his youth and vitality to serve his father's idiosyncrasies which serve no purpose. When the maid confidant Swarnalata informs Chitrlekha that Puru has accepted his father's curse of old age, she can courageously say, "Do you know I have greatly wronged the Aryan Prince. I thought of him as a coward and cursed my fate being his wife. But I am indeed very lucky" (73).

Though born into a royal family and coming from a privileged clan, she has to undergo oppression and suppression at the hands of the men. She finally commits suicide, for she sees no other escape from the unjust patriarchal order where she has to

unduly repress her feelings and desires in the name of *pativrata* as a dutiful and dedicated wife.

### **Pervasive Gender Discrimination**

We notice the pervasive gender discrimination, the marginalization and making women to turn them into the shadows of their male prototypes. It is quite natural that growing criminalization of politics and the threat of character assassination have made it increasingly difficult for women to be a part of the political framework. They remain committed, passive, servile and silent, bearing and rearing children and gratifying the needs of their husbands.

### **Marriage**

Marriage is an inter-personal relationship with social and/or religious recognition and a glorified traditional institution. Some are happy with marriage, but the price of that joy is to be questioned; for those who are unhappy in marriage, it seems more like slavery. Marriage is not an option, but tends to be coercive especially for women in a misogynist society. In man-woman relationship, the position and identity of a woman is always subordinate due to the impact of social and cultural modes on the feminine psyche. Woman undergoes identity dilemma, existential crisis and the primeval conflict between body and mind.

In *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* Karnad creates Padmini and Rani who are subjugated to gender discrimination. Woman has no identity of her own, a victim of male oppression, she craves for completeness in her relations, especially in love but finds none. Though traditionally the man-woman relationship is compared to the two wheels of a cart, both equally important, yet in reality, the female is always the broken, fragmented wheel clinging to the other (male) for support and survival. This inequality and imbalance is clearly visible in the relationship of Padmini-Devadatta and Kapila and Rani-Appanna.

### **Females Craving for Freedom**

Karnad's women protagonists represent the female principle craving for freedom to live with men of their choice. Padmini is the disillusioned sensitive

modern woman who wants to see the integration of intellectual eminence and physical prowess in her man – Devadatta for his intellectual traits and Kapila for his physical powers. Rani in *Nagamandala* sees her husband Appanna in two unconnected roles – as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night. In *The Fire and the Rain*, Vishaka the wife of Parvasu has sex with her lover Yavakri. Nittilai runs away from her husband to live with her lover Arvasu. Vishaka loves Yavakri's body and Nittilai loves Arvasu's company.

### **Place of Faithfulness**

The patriarchal moral code demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband, but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. Chastity is rather a one-sided affair. Rani sleeps with Naga in the guise of Appanna. The Queen in *Bali: The Sacrifice* sleeps with a singer – mahout who is loved for his melodious voice but who turns out to be ugly when she sees him. Padmini in *Hayavadana* enjoys marital life with Devadatta who gets Kapila's body after the transposition of heads, Vishaka in *The Fire and the Rain* willingly surrenders to the sexual lust of Yavakri. The women who lost their chastity by sleeping with their lovers commit suicide. Karnad not only highlights the inequality and imbalance in the man-woman relationship, but also juxtaposes questions of morality and adultery.

### **Acceptance with Grudge**

Society can never accept or come to terms with a woman strong enough to be assertive and independent; even if it does accept a woman as the leader, it does so with grudge and after much ado. A woman can either be a slave or a Goddess but never an equal. The extremes in the attitude of a patriarchal society towards a woman reveal an inherent fear of feminity which is the ultimate authority in the Indian psyche. Karnad uses his two characters, Padmini and Rani to depict an unequal and lopsided position of a woman as compared to man in our society. Padmini is independent, confident and mature whereas Rani is innocent, docile and mute.

Padmini, a daughter of the Goddess of wealth marries Devadatta, a son of the Goddess of Learning. She needs a man of steel to engage her both physically and intellectually. Padmini's prime concern is to live as much close to nature as possible

as she herself “grew up running around in heat, cold and rain as fast and sharp as lightning” (169), and she is loved by Kapila. The intelligent and self-willed Padmini decides to have the better combination – Devadatta’s head on Kapila’s body. It is beyond her capacity to combine the intellect and instinct, as they do not go hand in hand. Her life ends in tragedy as she unwittingly goes against nature’s course. She leaves her child in the care of Bhagavata with the specific instruction to infuse in him the spirit of sports and scholarly pursuit, to produce an amalgam of the two. She commits ‘Sati’ as she is not a ‘pativrata’ having compromised her chastity binding herself to intimate relations with two men.

Rani accepts her subjugation submissively and her desire for love, comfort and companionship are repressed and suppressed and she is isolated and detached from any social interactions by the dictates of her tyrant husband. She dreams of herself being locked up by a ‘demon’ in a castle, while the prince comes in the guise of the cobra and leads her to cross the line demarcated for her by her husband and society. In her dream-like state, a result of her long moments of isolation and yearning, Rani is blissfully intoxicated with the love of Naga who comes in the guise of her husband Appanna. The suspicious husband finds out about her pregnancy and beats her up accusing her of adultery. In the trial before the village elders, she speaks the truth: “Yes, my husband and this king Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex” (*Taledanda* 292).

The villagers judge her to be innocent and hail her as a Goddess. Rani’s transformation from an immature and naïve girl to the ideal ‘mother’ becomes connected through the acceptance of socially approved roles. After the test of her fidelity, a brute husband who has an illicit relationship with a concubine becomes her slave and server with a sense of metaphysical mystique. Whether it is Sita or Shakuntala, chastity tests are only for women. Rani has to prove her chastity by undergoing ‘snake ordeal’ and Padmini through ‘Sati’.

### ***Fire and the Rain***



*The Fire and the Rain* is a multilayered enigmatic play that questions the basic human relationship against an awesome backdrop of patriarchal society. In this play, man-woman relationship has two sides and they are pitted in contrast to each other, an affirmation of life as well as negation. There is an intricate weaving of a magnificent texture of love, compassion and sacrifice between Nittilai and Arvasu and passion, jealousy and betrayal between Vishakha and the three men in her life – Yavakri, her lover, Parvasu, her husband and Raibhya, her father-in-law. Sociologically, these two faceted relationships take place in two different strata of social hierarchy and uphold two different cultures, two ways of life and two value systems, the Brahmin and the Tribal.

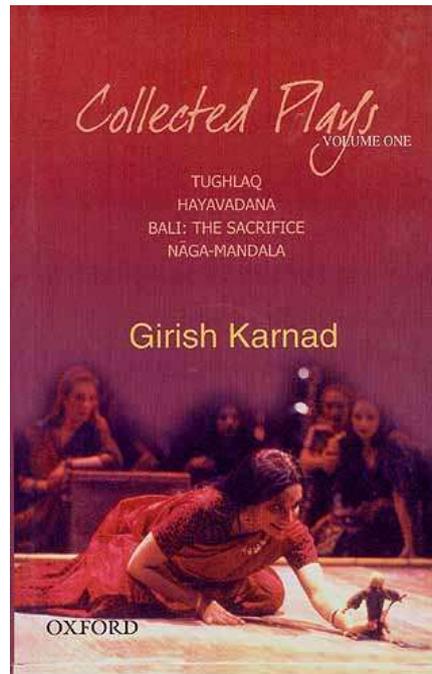
Arvasu, the Brahminic youth from the orthodox family of Raibhya deserts his own high class and imbibes the essentials of tribal culture for the sake of his lady love Nittilai, a tribal girl of considerable wit and wisdom, the guiding spirit who would show him the right path. Nittilai's marriage to another man as a result of Arvasu's failure to reach the village council on time, does not put an end to the relationship. Having buried all the memories of Arvasu, Nittilai might have been happy with her husband who is a 'nice person'. On hearing the stories of accusation of patricide by Arvasu, she runs away from home and ministers to him with emotional and psychological support. She is well aware of the transgressing against nature and the resulting viciousness of her husband. In a world ruled by the forces of jealousy, hatred and prejudice, she is brutally killed by her husband who cannot forgive her illicit relationship with Arvasu. Nittilai's death is a mark of victory, triumph of human love and kindness, bringing rain to the famine stricken country. She is innocent, but

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her society considers her abundant care and concern for Arvasu as an extra-marital indulgence and thinks her guilt is atoned through her death.



### ***Bali: The Sacrifice***

Karnad's female protagonist, the royal queen in *Bali: The Sacrifice*, seems to have marked an apogee. For the first time, the emboldened female desires seem to cut through the patriarchal order unabashed and unashamed. Femininity has become bold, assertive and blatantly selfish. The female has laid bare the inner recesses of her heart and more importantly of her body, her need for flesh her desire for sexual gratification. The Queen reveals her sexual ferocity and vibrancy of the audacious femininity. The Queen seems to testify to Karnad's statement that "If womanhood finds fulfillment in love that happens to be outside marriage, why should that be considered wrong? Radha's love for Krishna was such" (*Bali: The sacrifice* 74).

Rani and Padmini indulge in an extra-marital relationship and satiate their desire by supernatural aid. But the Queen is bold and resolute. She dares to leave the king lying next to her and slip away from the palace, past the gardens and make her way to a ruined temple to sleep with an elephant keeper in the middle of the night. She boldly confronts her husband face to face and refuses to profess guilt and to atone for it through a propitiatory ritual. Her refusal to sacrifice the **cock** stems not from the

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fact that she is a Jain and sacrifice is strictly prohibited in her religion. She does not consider sex with the Mahout as harmful or sinful. She says unyieldingly “If this rite is going to blot the moment out, that would be the real betrayal. I’ll do anything else”. (22). The better cock in the play is the symbol of the Queen’s dark yearnings and sexual pleasures. Hence she forbids him to sacrifice it.

The Queen boldly tells the king her extramarital sexual encounter. She is clever and crafty enough to manipulate the patriarchal order and win the situation to her advantage. Till that time she could not conceive and she was accused of ‘barrenness’ by her mother-in-law. When she is sure of her pregnancy by illicit sexual affair with the mahout, she uses it as a tool to win her husband onto her side to humiliate her mother-in-law. She intelligently asks him to remove the shed of animals which was the Queen-Mother’s property for the exercise of her devotional practice, from the palace precincts because she could not bear the thought of animals being taken for sacrifice. She knows how to preserve her identity converting her husband’s religion into her religion, thus threshing the norms of patriarchy.

### **Sexuality of the Barren Queen**

The communion with the Mahout stands for the creative aspect of her sexuality and the barren Queen’s endeavour for fifteen years, amidst the mock whispers and the giggling of the palace-maids, the ridicule of the Queen-Mother and the desperation of her husband, has finally ended successful with the childbirth. The barren woman is looked down upon in the Indian society; and the Queen gratifies her sexual desire with the Mahout as well. But she dies in the end. Whenever women attempt to cross their defined limits, stepping out of marital sounds – whichever the case, whatever the *caste* – *the result is always a disaster or death*.

The pessimistic message of the playwright seems to convey that it is difficult to escape the oppression of patriarchal order by exposing the foul play of male domination, caste discrimination and biological and psychological oppression of the female world.

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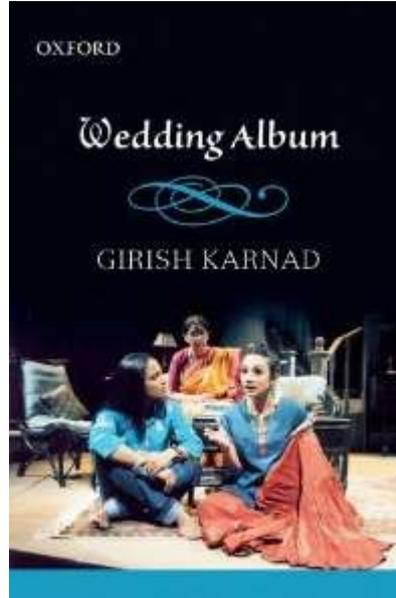
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## FROM MYTH TO MODERNITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF GIRISHKARNAD'S *WEDDING ALBUM*

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### **Fusion of History and Mythology**

Girish Karnad, the most significant playwright of the past five decades, has explored the realm of Indian drama by the new world of magical possibilities fusing historical context and the labyrinthine recesses of Indian mythology. His technical experiments with the synthesis of culture combining the Indian classical drama, the folk theatre and the western sensibility demonstrate his success as a living legend in the contemporary Indian English drama. As the modern culture hurtles forward into newer times and generations, Girish Karnad transports us into the present, the socio-economic spectrum of modernity by introducing a new visual tool – that of technology and its newfound uses in traditional situations.

### **A Konkani Play**

Girish Karnad's latest play *Wedding Album* (2009) is the first play written by him in his home language Konkani. The play deals with an event so common in the life of the urban middle class family (the Nadkarnis) getting together for the youngest daughter's wedding - the excitement and nervousness that pervade a household when getting a child married off. The advent of technology affecting the very traditional Indian marriage forms the crux of the story. By making 'distance' technology almost

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a character in the play, Karnad dexterously demonstrates its constant co-presence in the contemporary South Indian Brahmin home, street and office which marks the transnational co-existence of their lives.

While appreciating Karnad's wizardry as a playwright, Amrit.Srinivasan in his foreword comments on the play

Superficially a safe, simple, entertaining and very real account of a pending marriage in a middle-class, Karnataka-based Saraswat family- the Nadkarnis- *Wedding Album* works as modern myth whose condensed logic straddles both the real and the tech-simulated world of today, to help us confront our own mixed-up, amoral, craven, unhappy selves. In what can only be deemed a masterstroke, Karnad thus reverses the charge laid against him sometimes that his preoccupation with history and folk myth makes him evade contemporary Indian reality. Indeed by nudging at the vigilant links between the private and communal bases of Hinduism, *Wedding Album* encourages one to examine the growing fundamentalism of the Hindu middle class family, which is largely 'missing' from social science scholarship in India today. (ix)

### **A Liberal and Modern Family Portrait**

*Wedding Album* which is structured into nine scenes presents the educated, liberal and modern family with their two different worlds, i.e. traditional and modern cyber world. There is celebration and anxiety over the marriage of the younger daughter, Vidula of an urban middle class Saraswat Brahmin family of Dr. Nadkarni to the video groom, Ashwin, the stereotype of the American NRI, for whom America is both the land of opportunity and the NRI's burden.

“That whole culture is empty of values now, bereft of any living meaning. It is shallow..., glittering and shallow. The European Industrial Revolution began by rejecting religion in favour of material values. But today this legacy is strangling the west. They have no spiritual moorings left. They are adrift in godless, amoral world.”(WA 80)

The play celebrates the traditional Indian wedding in a globalised and technologically advanced India.

According to Girish Karnad, this play has been, in a sense, 30 to 40 years in the making. When his sister got married, he watched the members of his family gathering together and observed the resultant, interpersonal dynamics and tensions... he found it a combination of ‘celebration and anxiety’ and tucked it away in the mind, to emerge much later. He didn’t want to write it as a ‘story’ play though, and the form that it has taken now is satisfying to him. (Citizen Matters.in)

### **A Global Long Distance Family**

*Wedding Album* highlights global long-distance community conditions in an expat South Indian Brahmin marriage. This very arrangement of marriage- that aspect of Indian culture that western society finds repulsive in its strangeness and customariness- becomes possible through the technologies of representation, i.e., video, email and telephone ‘a self arrangement’. The play demystifies middle class South Indian Brahmin marriage showing how Ashwin Panje, the suitable Saraswat boy, selects as his choice of bride Vidula Nadkarni, the ‘small town’ Dharwal girl whom he has met through video playbacks. They have face to face pre-nuptial meeting in a local Dharwal restaurant where the suitor exorcises his identity to fit in with his spiritual role as partner to ‘woman-wife-daughter’, his partner in “a marriage as a mission, I would like you to be my partner in carrying the best of our spiritual tradition to fit in with the west and save the west” (82).

### **The Story**

The play begins with a video bio- a replacement for the written bio data that a girl must present to the prospective match in a traditional arranged marriage. The 22 year old Vidula Nadkarni is caught on camera by her brother Rohit as she introduces herself to her prospective NRI groom- a man she has yet to meet in person. Karnad introduces other members of the Saraswat Brahmin Nadkarni family as they get into the thick and thin of wedding preparations. In a display of solidarity and mutual concern, the dramatist displays the anxieties and resentments long buried within the bosom of the family. The older generation – Father and Mother- feels defunct in the

new technological turmoil. The young generation- brother Rohit and elder sister Hema- are buffeted by aspirations to easy prosperity. Hema is more a practical and at times progressive mother while Rohit, the seeming rebel with a Christian girlfriend, chooses arrangement over love for better career prospects. For Mr.Nadkarni, “A Wedding is essentially an excuse for shopping” (31) and for Mrs. Nadkarni, Vidula’s mother, a willing slave of the culinary realm, “ A Wedding means expenses – there is no getting away from that”(15). The family members are introduced through their reactions to Vidhula’s situations, voicing their opinions and prejudices, loves and hates.

### **Indian Feminine Psyche**

The play reveals a high evolution of the Indian feminine psyche. The play deals with women and their different worlds in traditional and modern cyber world. They tend to merge into each other. Even the traditional older women are fused with energy, hope and modern sensibility. Mrs.Nadkarni, the traditional wife, gets sequestered by herself in the kitchen, the private place. For her, the kitchen is a battleground for class supremacy and control over Radhabhai, the willing female shadow in the kitchen with whom she battles constantly to no conclusion. The mother enthrones herself inside the kitchen. Her cook, Radhabhai’s emotional pain and self-endurance and the tragic plight of her daughter Yamuna are juxtaposed with the portrayal of the cook’s solitary presence with surrogate memories of feeding the master’s children and the ‘kept’ daughter Yamuna who becomes the Jazebel in cyberspace at the end of the play.

### **The Non-Dual Truth**

The play provides the non-dual truth of a South Indian Brahmin marriage, equal, but not so equal as to become the same; different but not so different as to come apart. The play tries to present the problem of how the interpersonal ethic of love and desire lose out to the duty of caste and community through the magic union of marriage. Marriage within the caste chastens women and their sexuality after marriage. Vidhula, the modern, mixed up unhappy Hindu girls timid by nature, leads a secret life. Her erotic desire of being found out in a darkened cyber café and her guilt of being found out in a hysterical rage is fulfilled through the selection of a flesh

and blood stranger to help her work her way through hopeless desire. The subjugation she seeks in her secret, erotic world can be served through man and marriage to a higher purpose. Saraswat Brahmins accord high value to marriage and worldly household life. For a girl marriage constitutes entry into motherhood and for a boy, it is for public reasons of fulfilling a social obligation. For Ashwin, marriage is obligation duty even 'mission'. The modern technology and its changed circumstances might require the presentation of boy and girl through video images and they will be related to one another within the wider caste network but the process remains the same. On the eve of her departure, Vidula makes a private resolve 'I will never divorce Ashwin'. (86)

### **Humorous Insight**

*Wedding Album* is a contemporary play with "humorous insight into the country's traditions and culture....explores the traditional Indian wedding in a globalized and technologically advanced India."(Express News Service) Myth intoxicated playwright Karnad unfolds the present Indian modernity where "the Indian women are obedient Sati Savitris ever willing to follow in the husbands' footsteps". (17)

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## BRECHTIAN EPIC THEATRE AND BADAL SARCAR'S THIRD THEATRE

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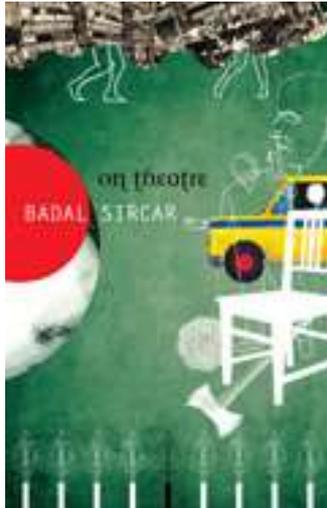


Courtesy: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Badal\\_Sarkar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Badal_Sarkar)

### **Importing Western Traditions into Contemporary Indian Theatre**

The contemporary Indian theatre has modeled itself after the Western theatre traditions by importing Western forms of modernism and by injecting the strategies of Brechtian Epic theatre. The Indian theatrical experience has communicated both a direct link between the spectator and the spectacle and a kind of distance between the audience and the happenings on the stage. It is true that the Brechtian form has several parallels on native Indian semi-theatrical modes. Brecht's relevance for our contemporary playwrights – such as Pratap Sharma, Nissim Ezekiel, Gurcharan Das, Asif Currimbhay, Badal Sarcār, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani – paved the successful balancing of the traditional forms and western sensibility.

### **Badal Sarcār**



### **The Third Theatre**

Badal Sarcar is a pioneering figure in ‘Street Theatre’ as well as in experimental and contemporary Bengali Theatre with his egalitarian ‘Third Theatre’. As a prominent playwright he formulated his theory for Third Theatre, partly influenced by folk theatre and Avant Garde theoreticians. But he unconsciously adapted Brechtian Epic Theatre to Indian conditions.

The effects of both Epic Theatre and Third Theatre are quite similar with certain differences such as no stage projections and slides. The Street Theatre is an effective medium of communication with the masses, dispensing with the use of elaborate costumes, sets and lights because it is portable, economical and flexible. There is a minimum use of dialogue to avoid the disturbance of street and traffic sounds and the emphasis is on dramatic, stylized movements, more effective than words.

The Third Theatre aims at changing the thoughts and beliefs of the spectators by direct communication with the audience making eye contact with them. Like Epic Theatre, the Third Theatre is enhanced by the introduction of Stage Managers and physical acting with minimal costume. To Sarcar, “the basic tool of trade of the art of the theatre is the human body”. (p.17). He emphasizes the attitudes, gestures and movements of the body of the performer and creates various ‘stage realities’ by the imaginative use of bodies. He reduces the use of sets, props and costumes, discarding the uses of mechanical devices like tape recorders and projectors.

Sarcar breaks up the conventional sitting arrangement and seating the audience on three sides of the acting arena. The essence of theatre is a live communication between artists and spectators. Light effects as only appendages, and not essential to theatre, he no longer needed to wait for the spectators to come to his theatre. Instead, he took his productions to where the masses were in public parks, railway platforms, fields, in front of the factory gates, offices, college premises and by the side of a busy road. Badal Sarcar in *The Changing Language of Theatre* says,

The environment of the intimate theatre ....The proximity of the spectators, the intensity of communication, the subtlety of projection – all these are not to be had in open air performance in a village or a park where sometimes thousands of people gather. But this may be more than compensated by the fact that this theatre can now reach the working people of villages and slums who would never have come to his intimate theatre in Calcutta. (30)

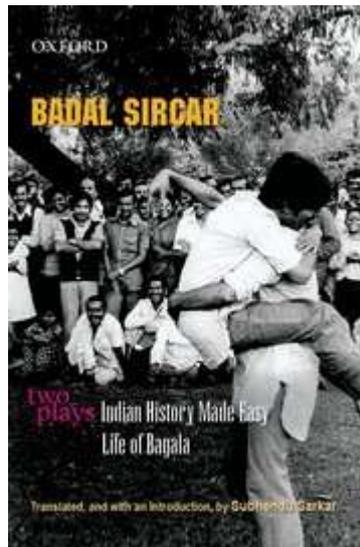
Sarcar did not formulate a theory for the sake of theory only. The aim of Third Theatre is to reach out to the masses, to make people aspire to change the prevailing socio-political conditions and create in them a sense of responsibility to bring about a revolutionary change in society. Badal Sarcar's chief concern is with the socio-political content, the form and content more forceful and effective. In *Voyages in the Theatre*, Sarcar affirms

It has never been my intention, or the intention of the group, to do a play just to prove that any play can be produced in this form ....this new theatre was not a matter of form to us, but that of a philosophy and therefore we always start from the content, from what we have to say, and not from how we say it. (40)

### **Appeal to the Conscience of the Urban Audience**

Sarcar's determination to move out of proscenium theatre is rooted in his conviction that common people, being aware of their surroundings, would bring about a radical change in society. He also appeals to the conscience of the urban audience,

creating in them an awareness of the ongoing exploitation in the country side and attempts to make the rural audience realize their power.



The Third Theatre protagonists are mostly young; because Sarcar has faith in the evolutionary potentialities of the younger generation, various issues of social and ecological concerns are voiced through the Street theatre on a plethora of social, political, religious, economic issues, communalism, caste disparities, terrorism, nuclear disasters, corruption and AIDS awareness, police brutality, alcoholism, exploitation of women and children, class hierarchies and bonded labour.

### **Distinct from Others**

Badal Sarcar established his 'Third Theatre', distinct from other Bengal playwrights like Sombhu Mitra and Utpal Dutt. Coming from a Bengal Middle class family and spending most of his time in the cities, Sarcar prefers to write plays based on his experiences, depicting the world he knows best. Unlike the playwrights of the street theatre, Badal Sarcar never assumes the role of an agitator. He is rather a propagandist who presents many ideas as an integrated whole providing a complex explanation of the contradictions found in the society. Like Brecht, he is a Marxist but not a spokesperson of any established political party.

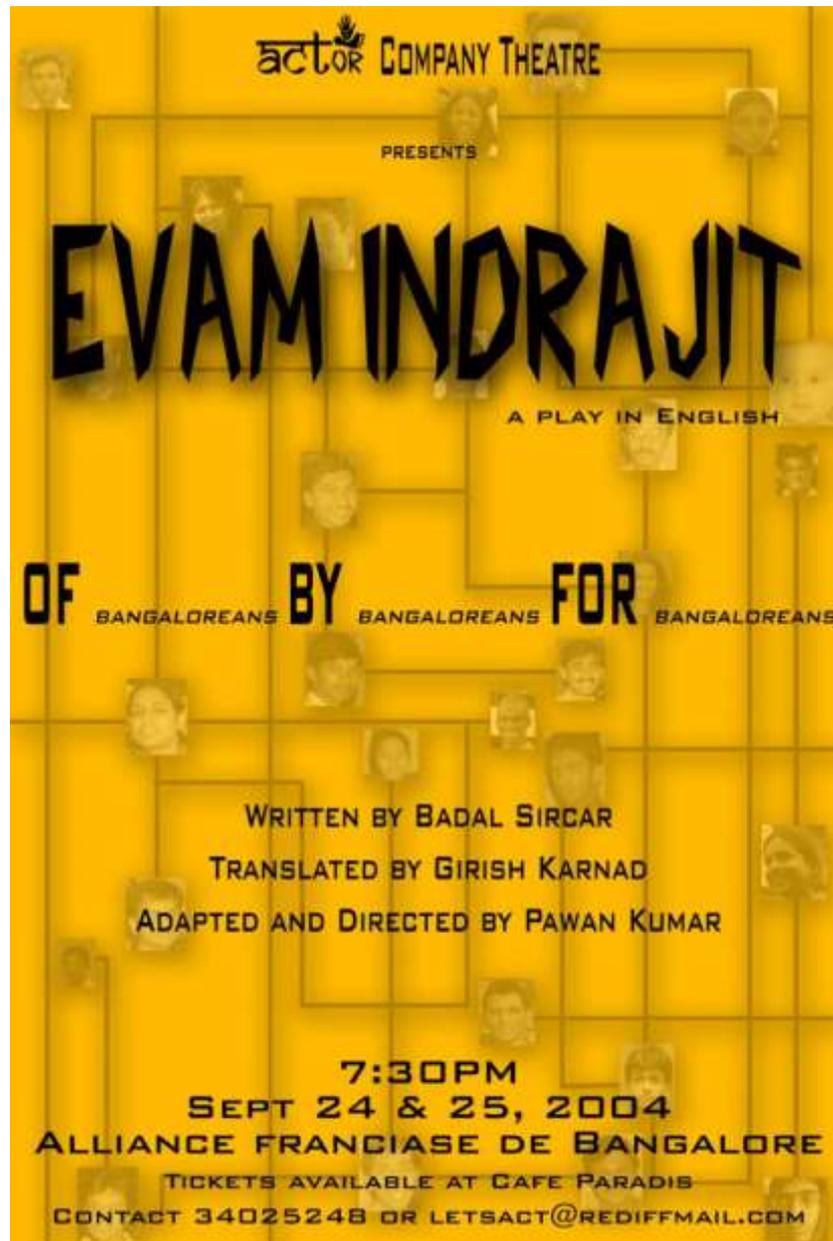
### **Three Strands**

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Three strands in Sircar's life give a striking texture to his work, adding a new value to Indian theatre. These strands are his professional career, his training as a civil engineer, his inner life as a playwright as well as his outward expression in his role as a theatre director and actor. More than writing, Sircar prefers doing theatre.



Badal Sircar was perhaps the first playwright to abandon the stage for the street theatre, a living experimental communication between the performer and the spectator where the plays become a participatory ritual. During the Naxalite movement, in the seventies, he formed the 'Satabdi' theatre group, he directed the first play *Ebang Indrajit*, a play about three people – Amal Bimal, Kamal and a loner

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Indrajit all prototypical characters. They are writers in search of an author. Caught in a meaningless self-centred and uneventful existence, they accept everything passively. Indrajit has an exceptional inclination to rebel against conformity and finally emerges as an undaunted individual. Indrajit chooses the road rather than the destination, determined to continue searching.

Indrajit: Then how shall we live?

Playwright : The road. We have only the road we'll walk. I've nothing to write, yet I'll write. You've nothing to say, yet you'll say.... We've the road, we'll walk. (45)

In the selfish bourgeois life, in the midst of social and political violence, Sarcar makes the protagonist turn away from social problems and search for the right road- Sarcar uses theatre as a medium for conveying to the people, an individual's responsibility towards society.

### ***Spartakas***

Sarcar's first play was *Spartakas* a play based on the novel by Howard Fast. Without the availability of an auditorium and the absence of a 'star' acting as a crowd puller, Sarcar created the theory of Third Theatre. The play does not have any conventional division in Acts and Scenes. It is composed of short scenes. It is about the great slave revolt in 71 BC that shook the foundation of the Roman Empire. A slave army of thousands led by a gladiator fought against slavery but was finally crushed and over six thousand slaves were crucified. The play ends with the slaves rising together after their leader, Spartakas, who has become a martyr. The locale is the same space with no theatrical property. Modern Indian costume was used by the Romans. The slaves were bare-bodied with knee long shorts of cheap coarse cloth. The only woman slave had short pants with a shapeless shirt of the same coarse material. The scenes are expressed by physical acting, only cries, shouts and noise are used, not a single sentence.

The play has five action scenes taking only ten minutes:

1. People captured to be sold as slaves

2. Slaves being sold in the market
3. Slaves toiling
4. Gladiator slaves fighting in the arena
5. A slave being crucified for an act of defiance.

The only music is a refrain without words sung by the group of slaves without any instrumental accompaniment. But the refrain is used thrice in such a manner and it can communicate more than pages of dialogue. The group did not use stage, curtains, costume or sets and the performance took place in broad daylight. When interviewed by Sadanand Menon for Indian Express, Sarcar recalled the appealing effect of the open-air production of Spartakas.

The bits of dry grass and patches of dirt on the bare bodies of the ‘slaves’ covered with sweat, accentuated by spots of blood from the scratches caused by pebbles on the ground, made it a play of blood and sweat as it was supposed to be. (8 Feb. 1986, 8)

### **Plays of Sarcar**

Based on the concept of the Third Theatre, Sarcar produced several plays; some of the prominent plays are *Procession*, *Bhoma*, *Stale News*, *Indian History Made Easy* and *Life of Bagala*. His troupe Satabdi performed at Surendranath park, Kolkata on weekends, the open-air and free performances traveling to nearby villages at weekends. It employed minimal props and improvised dialogue to involve audience into the performance.

Sarcar’s *Procession* is about the search for a ‘real home’ – a new society based on equality. It is about a new society where man does not have to live by exploiting other men and each works according to his ability and gets according to his needs. The actors are constantly on the move, walking, running, dancing and jogging through the room. The benches in the room are placed in such a way that the spectators feel that they are part of a maze. Sarcar creates a most bewildering environment with the bodies, backs, faces and profiles of the spectators. It is startling to see the actors

moving in the environment created by the spectators between and around. *Bhoma* is a dramatization of the life of the oppressed peasant in Indian rural society. The society is full of opportunists and exploiters symbolically presented as a forest of poisonous trees. *Bhoma* is pictured as an archetype of the oppressed exploited peasant, who lost in the midst of Wilderness, at long last, takes up his 'rusty axe', grinds and sharpens it to cut the poisonous trees that grow around him. *Stale News* deals with the theme of revolt. It is about a young man who is bombarded with shattering information full of contradictions and contrasts which come to him as 'stale news'. In these plays, the characters are not individualized at all.

In his *Introduction to Three Plays*, Badal Sarcar admits that the protagonists can be seen as: "It can be taken as prototype of a particular class in a society at a particular period" (v). The plays are open-ended, and the spectator assumes the protagonist's role in the revolt and determination.

### **No Technical Devices**

Badal Sarcar never uses the technical devices integral to the Epic dramaturgy like projectors, slides, masks etc. But the plot of a Badal Sarcar play is often collage of various episodes, the effect quite similar to that of Epic Theatre. Sarcar employs fantasy in three Third Theatre plays *Scandal in Fairyland*, *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* (1977), *Life of Bagala* (1988). In the play *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* (a creative adaptation of a novel, *Hattamala Deshe*, by Premendra Mitra and Lila Majumdar), two thieves Kenaram and Becharam, while escaping their pursuers, fall into a river. They find themselves in a utopia where there is no buying and selling of commodities. There is none to guard shops and houses. Food is offered free. It is a futuristic communist society. Finally the citizens come to their help and they are assigned a positive role. Though the play uses fantasy, Sarcar conveys a revolutionary moral that the play is a reminder to those party members who have forgotten and made others forget the basic principle of communism.

### **Humour as the Effective Tool**

More than satire and irony, humour is an effective tool of enforcing Badal Sarcar's ideas. Though his plays are not full-length hilarious comedies, Sarcar makes use of humour even in his serious plays.

### ***Life of Bagala***

In *Life of Bagala* he has combined pure humour with a serious message. Bagalacharan Batabyal lost his parents in a bus accident. In the wake of the untimely death of his parents, he moved to his maternal uncle's house. Though educated by his uncle, he suffers humiliation, performing domestic chores and tutoring his nephew. Besides all this, his grotesque name "Batabyal" instigates others to tease him. Honest, submissive and introverted, Bagala resolves to commit suicide to escape the insults at home. With one rupee and fifty paise in his pocket, he speculates various ways of committing suicide – hanging by the rope, swallowing potassium cyanide or sulfuric acid, jumping from a seven or ten-storeyed building or jumping into the Ganges. But he anticipates the apprehension with the sense of humour, "I don't know swimming.... Jumping would find me in knee-deep water.... Which way's the Ganges? That too is full of boats. Someone will definitely fish me out"(72).

Bagala is saved by Nilpari (a genie) who works wonder for her master, the Old Man (a modern version of Alladin) who calls her by striking a lighter, a modern lamp. Both the Old Man and Nila make Bagala bold enough to defy his uncle and aunt and the play ends with Bagala teaching Nila household duties. The play teaches the moral that no change can be brought about by magic, only through human will and action. The message is reinforced at the end through a song sung in chorus by all the actors. "Bagala-Nila : Magic doesn't help a real attempt" (110).

### ***Indian History Made Easy***

Sarcar's play *Indian History Made Easy* is significant in forging relationship between form and content. The play lays bare the most crucial period in the history of India – British colonialism in the form of classroom teaching – with teachers instructing students – The Playwright covers more than three centuries of British rule without developing 'a story'. The teachers, students, the Master and the stage Managers take up different roles making the entire period come alive before the

audience. Though the students are taught, the audience learns about the mechanism of colonial exploitation through the periods.

The First period	-	The village community of India The cottage Industry Business by foreign merchants
The Second period	-	History of British India Supply of Indian goods to England
The Third period	-	The change of Industrial capital to Finance Capital The Sepoy Mutiny The rule of Britain's Queen in England The end of the East India Company
The Fourth Period	-	British Imperialism Quit India Independence
The Fifth Period	-	Freedom, prosperity and progress

The play bears close resemblance to Brecht's *Lehrstück* (Learning Play). Sarcar used a number of dramatic and theatrical devices like the use of songs, the role of Stage Managers, the device of mime, the movements and dance steps. In another play of his, *Circle* (1978), Sarcar's adaptation of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Sarcar makes the performers create a broken bridge, mountain, river, wind with the help of their bodies.

### Sarcar's Characters

Sarcar's characters speak dialogues, seldom lengthy, so that they make much use of their bodies. The brief dialogues help the audience to concentrate on the action. A lengthy speech is often broken adding to the dramatic quality of the play, for example, from *Indian History Made Easy*,

Teacher 1	:	you!
Student 1 & 2	:	In
Teacher 2	:	you!
Student 3 & 4	:	dus

Teacher 3	:	you!
Student 5 & 6	:	tri
Teacher 1	:	you!
Student 1 & 2	:	al
Teacher 2	:	you!
Student 3 & 4	:	Re
Teacher 3	:	you!
Student 5 & 6	:	vo
Teacher 1	:	you!
Student 1 & 2	:	lu
Teacher 2	:	you!
Student 3 & 4	:	tion
Master	:	Now all together
Students	:	Industrial Revolution (18-19)

### **Revolutionary Political Content**

Badal Sarcar is the pioneer of Third Theatre movement with the semblance of Brechtian Epic Theatre. His plays are genuine works of art where there is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form the unity of revolutionary political content and perfection of artistic form. There is no government and commercial aid; no advertisements in the newspapers' no trap of money economy. But it thrives with the active support of its own audience with the objective of making them aware of their responsibilities in fighting an unjust system. He never imposes his views on spectators like the playwrights of street-corner plays. Theoretically Brechtian, politically Marxist, Badal Sarcar revolutionized Bengal Theatre by pioneering the revival of Street Theatre.

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## 8

### **Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* as an Epic Theatre**

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Mahesh Dattani

Courtesy: [www.mulledink.blogspot.com](http://www.mulledink.blogspot.com)

### **Mahesh Dattani, An Authentic Contemporary Voice**

Mahesh Dattani, an authentic contemporary voice, a director, playwright, producer, founder of a theatre group known as 'Playpen' is an intellectually stimulating Sahitya Academy winner with an excellent awareness of Indian theatre. There is a proper blending of Western intellectual consciousness and Indian theatrical techniques in his plays. He himself comments on the relevance of Indian theatre **citation**.

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There is going to be a good positive development because as we get into the internet age which isolates human beings, the act of communication will be a premium. Theatre is our cultural activity directly related to human beings' communication with each other.

Dattani uses his studio at Bangalore as a centre for creative collaboration among playwrights, directors, actors and audience.

### **Influence of Brecht**

Brecht, the major twentieth century theoretician of drama, evolved a major aesthetic theory, the theory of Epic theatre, fit for a scientific age. He significantly pronounced, "If art reflects life, it does so with special mirrors" (13).

Brecht's emphasis is on the need to alienate the audience from any illusion of reality by meta-theatrical elements of stage devices like induction, prologue, play-within the play, direct speech, aside addressed to the audience, addressed primarily to the mind through devices such as music, dance, plastic art, pantomime, mimicry, gesticulation, lighting, scenery with the help of sub-titles, projections and stills having the documentary effect. Brecht employed 'complex seeing' which, "permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem" (14).

This complex seeing interrupts the process of emotional identification or empathy on the part of the spectator and creates the proper atmosphere for intellectual stimulation which is non – Aristotelian in approach.

Brecht attracted much attention and general acclaim throughout the world. In India, his relevance paved the successful balancing of the traditional forms and western sensibility for a group of contemporary Indian playwrights such as Pratap Sharma, Asif Currimbhay, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani who faced the situational conflict between the cultural past of the country and attractions of Western modes of thought. By injecting the strategies of Brechtian Epic theatre, these dramatists have communicated both a direct link between the spectator and the spectacle and a kind of distance between the audience and the happenings on the stage.

In his interview, Mahesh Dattani stated,

The function of drama, in my opinion, is not merely to reflect the malfunction of society but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all that passes for normal in our world. It is ugly. It is funny. (Roy, 15 March 2002)

### **How to Treat a Play**

Dattani dispenses with the notion that the viewer can treat a play like a 'roller coaster ride' which even at its most terrifying moment, one knows, will rapidly and happily come to a stop on safe grounds.

It is only when you are left hanging in air, you start to question your own personality, perceptions ... the theatre is a collective experience and the audience have to finish in their own heads what the playwright began. (<http://www.anitanair.net>)

The audience must arrive at their own answers, as also together in terms of a community response, because unlike T.V. or cinema where the viewer does not have to contribute because theatre is a shared experience.

### **Mahesh Dattani's Theatre**

To Mahesh Dattani, theatre is a 'live show' which offers scope for a direct person to person communication involving four distinct forms: performers and performers, performers and spectator, spectator and performer and spectator and spectator. An important means of participation is by urging the audience to concentrate intensely on the actions of the play, mainly done in highly imaginative mimes, direct eye contact with the audience. He adapted the spatial, environmental setting of the audience. Techniques like magical sculpting in space, simultaneous action, lack of time space barriers, slow motion, freeze, choreography appealed to the aesthetic canons of his audience and evoked powerful responses to the various socio-political realities.

### **A Socially Committed Playwright**

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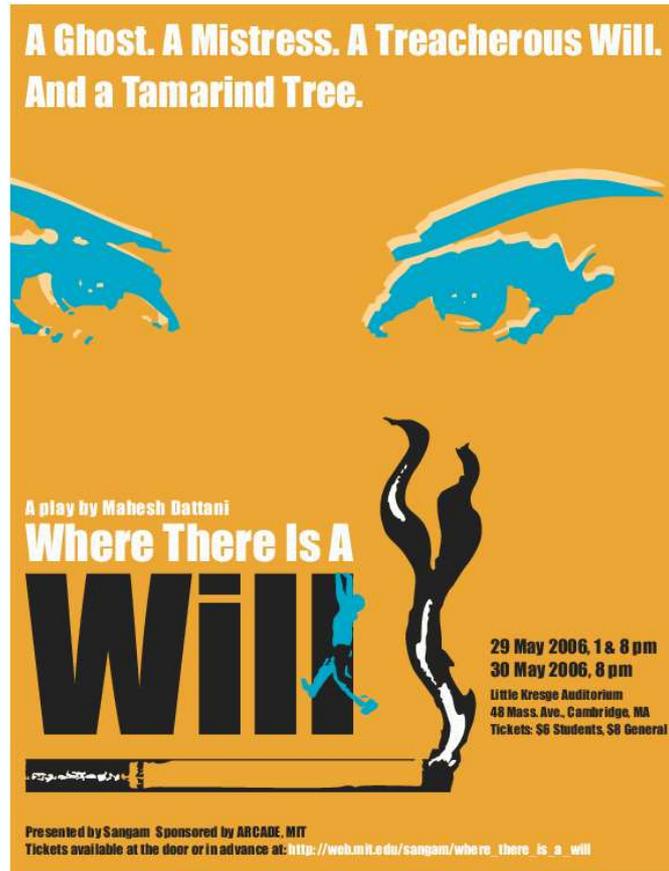
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*Drama in Indian Writing in English - Tradition and Modernity*

Like Brecht who wanted a change in the world, Dattani is a socially committed playwright who, with his sensibility and thinking, raises new vistas in the minds of the audiences through the portrayal of disintegration of social and family relationships in his plays. Dattani dramatizes the socially neglected people. Hijras (eunuchs), gays, lesbians and women are marginalized due to their sexuality. Hijras are the third gender people who are denied all rights and destined to suffer because they are biologically deprived human beings. Gays and lesbians keep their sexuality a secret for fear of ostracism. Women, irrespective of social status, suffer subjugation one way or other. Dattani is preoccupied with these 'fringe' issues which are latent, suppressed and pushed to the periphery. He describes his themes and concerns

Thematically, I talk about the areas which the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about people who are striving to expand 'this' space. They live on the fringe of the society and are not looking for acceptance, but are struggling to grab as much fringe-space for themselves as they can. (Dattani, 2000)

### **Exploration of Human Relations**



Dattani has contributed to the continued growth and renewal of his art both in terms of form and content. He explores a gamut of human relationship in his plays. From *Where There's a Will*, to the matrix of gender roles in *Dance like a Man* and *Tara* to *Bravely Fought the Queen* that explores the shams of the upper middle class joint family, to *Final Solutions* a sensitive play about the Hindu-Muslim conflict, to *Do the Needful* a comical radio play that talks about alternate sexual choices as do the plays *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Seven Steps to Thirty Days in September* which look at incest and child abuse. His latest film *Mango Souffle* (2002) questions the dominant values that construct social and gender identities.

### The Setting of Dattani's Plays

The setting for all of Dattani's plays is embedded within the mechanisms of the middle class Indian family. Dattani admits

I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background... in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially,

artistically and culturally. (Dattani.2000.xiv)

Dattani does not want to present an alien and distant westernized world with which the urban Indian audience could not easily identify. He is rather concerned with the apparatus of the family that is entrenched within the middle class milieu, the background which the playwright is a part, and would like to ‘connect’ with audience drawn from similar backgrounds.

### **Dattani’s Characters**

Dattani’s characters situate themselves within the family and the society. For that Dattani chooses the setting within dynamics of a contemporary urban Indian family. He portrays the newer realities piling on the older realities blending the given stereotypes. He makes use of the available stage space to reveal these structures in concrete terms. His characters move and speak in these spaces with voices that echo and reverberate. His issues are deep-rooted in a definite space and time and within a stimulating societal context with no message on social issues. He maintains the stance of a non-judgmental observer and he wants the audience to judge the issues.

### **Theatrical Resonance – *Dance Like a Man***



The setting coalesces with the themes and Dattani’s stage often uses the various levels to create theatrical resonance in a special way. The stage settings are contrived to amalgamate the multiple layers of the societal, the familial, the historical contours of such a location. Dattani’s *Dance like a Man* uses the family home as the setting, the existence of three generations.

The play travels back and forth between several generations, Amrit Lal, the imperious father and social reformer who is infuriated by Bharatanatyam which is usually and traditionally performed by women. He passes irreparable harm to his son Jairaj and his wife Ratna who is taught the ancient secret of the art by an old devadasi. The old man makes a pact with Ratna that he will consent to her career in dance only if she helps him pull Jairaj out of his obsession and makes him a ‘manly’ man. The two can enjoy the security of his riches. They, in their turn, try to transfer their own ambitions to Lata who is a talented dancer but is quite happy to marry Vishwas, the rich (candy shop owner) *mithaiwala*’s son who is ignorant of Bharatanatyam, the passion of the preceding generation.

The play presents Ratna and Jairaj, now past their prime, reflect on the past and the way the past affects their present and is to affect the future. Moving effortlessly between the past, the present and the future (as past), synchronically dissolving the different time shifts, Dattani, innovatively uses Lata and Vishwas to play the young Ratna and Jairaj during these shifts and the old Jairaj taking the role of his father Amritlal. Amritlal and the old Jairaj, Vishwas and young Jairaj, Lata and young Ratna are to be played by the same actor. As they put on different characters, the resonating sense of time and change are illuminated and give newer meanings.

### **Minimal Use of Characters Maximizes the Staged Impact of the Stereotypes**

The minimal use of characters maximizes the staged impact of the stereotypes. This is one of Brechtian techniques – the alienation effect, the actor must help destroy stage illusion by putting himself at a distance, by playing multi-roles the actor keeps himself from the character he portrayed and the situation in which he was involved.

Jairaj and Ratna live within the domain of the patriarch Amritlal, Jairaj’s father, His antipathy towards dance draws the boundary line for their behaviour within his sphere of influence. Dance for him is the prostitute’s profession, improper for his daughter-in-law and unimaginable for his son. He cannot tolerate the sounds of the dancing bells that ring through their practice sessions. He is aghast at the long-haired guru with an effeminate walk and cannot stomach the idea of his son, a man becoming a

professional dancer. His fear is obviously that dance would make him ‘womanly’ – an effeminate man with the subtle implication of homosexuality.

Amritlal, the frustrated patriarch, changes into equally frustrated and alcoholic Jairaj who interviews Vishwas, the prospective groom, the son of a rich mithaiwalla, an alien to the world of dance who is transformed into young Jairaj who is consumed by his love for the art form. Lata, the most pragmatic and level headed character plays the insecure, calculating and scheming young Ratna. She has to survive despite the few choices offered to her. The older Ratna will be haunted by the ghosts of her past and realize her unfulfilled ambitions through Lata, her daughter. Amritlal’s house moves through time, changes character along with the owner. The home becomes crucial to the existence of three generations of its occupants, often dictating its own terms to the inhabitants. The meaning of the space alters with each generation. Amritlal carries the baggage of his own times and tries to manipulate the next generation – Jairaj and Ratna – to carry it forward and Jairaj and Ratna in their turn try to pass on their performance to Lata.

### **Revelations and Hidden Stories**

In this handing down of cultural context, a number of revelations are made and several hidden stories are told in these spaces, and it reveals the cracks that widen enough to crumble the entire structure. The structure that Amritlal passes on conditionally to his son and Ratna is passed to Lata who is a talented dancer quite happy to marry Vishwas who wants nothing to do with the art and whose father owns half the buildings on Commercial Street. Dattani explores the human predicament - how the general inhibitions of a man towards dance affects the relationship between a husband and a wife.

The tragedy for Jairaj is that he has chosen to pursue a career that had been considered ‘right’ only for women. Amritlal is willing to have Ratna as the dancer and not Jairaj. Like in all battles, a completely innocent individual becomes the victim. Here the victim is the only son of the dancing couple. Dattani refuses to assign the blame on the status of the ‘wronged’ party to anyone. “I refuse to have protagonists in a fixed role as victim. If you have a victim, it implies that there is a persecutor and it also implies that you will eventually have a rescuer” (Qtd in Chaudri 56).

Jairaj is present in the house when the double dose of opium is administered to the baby. Jairaj shares the onus of the blame and Dattani never tries to shift it to Ratna. The death of the son binds the two together in shared tragedy. The last lines of the play reverberate: “We were only human. We lacked the grace we lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like god”(447). Jairaj and Ratna, though passionately devoted to dance, fail in translating their dreams into reality. Instead their daughter Lata becomes ‘the shining star in the sky of (the dance originally performed by *devdasis*, temple prostitutes) Bharatanatyam’.

### **Recapturing the Traditional Three-fold Art**

Dattani says of this play, “I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatanatyam in my mid-twenties.... A play about a young man wanting to be a dancer growing up in a world that believes dance is for women”. (*Foreword*) Dattani recaptures the ancient tradition of the classical dance form Bharatanatyam – the three fold art of music, dance and poetry which cohere into an artistic entity – Dattani who has imbibed Brechtian epic tradition, successfully achieves a heightened effect by employing the technique of art within art. Sumanaspati in the article ‘Leading the Charge’ comments

It is beautifully crafted. The way it moves back and forth in time, its use of one actor to play more than one role which really tests the actor’s talent, marks it as unique, as does the strong characterization and the seamless movements in time.  
(The Hindu, 12 August, 2002)

### **Alienation - Estrangement**

Brecht’s theory of alienation or estrangement induces an inquiry, critical attitude on the part of the spectator towards the events shown. A critical attitude on the part of the spectator is developed, as the actor does not identify with the character he represents, rather he could choose from any particular point of view regarding the character. This ‘complex seeing’ leads to levels of multiplicity transcending mere ‘tolerance’ to recognition and empathy. Mahesh Dattani uses the split stage where the interior movement of the plays collapses with the exterior fragmented locations.

I am not interested in characters asking existential questions in a limbo. My characters exist in a definite space and time, in a social context that's what stimulates me. I don't focus on a message but the context is important. (Santhanam, Anitha, 2001. <http://www.maheshdattani.com>)

### **Communication via Stylized Movements**

Dance inspired stylized movements convey shifts or extensions within the text and the sub-texts. The fact that Dattani is basically a theatre – person is evident in the stage mechanism. The multi-level set and multi-level characterization are the fine example of a blending of Western stage craft and the technique of Indian folk theatre. The lowest level that occupies a major portion of the stage represents the house of Amritlal. The play becomes an exemplary work on contemporary society combined with personal relevance (Dattani's career in dance). The play moves back and forth in time, spanning three generations. The important aspect of this play is the emphatic 'staginess' that is deliberately worked into the writing. As Michael Walling points out:

His plays fuse the physical and spatial awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams and Brecht. It is a potent combination which shocks and disturbs through its accuracy and ability to approach subject from multiple perspectives. (Dattani, 2000:229)

Dattani has meticulously anchored his success in *Dance Like a Man* by making his audience with such involvement that they even forget that they are watching a play in an 'alien' tongue.

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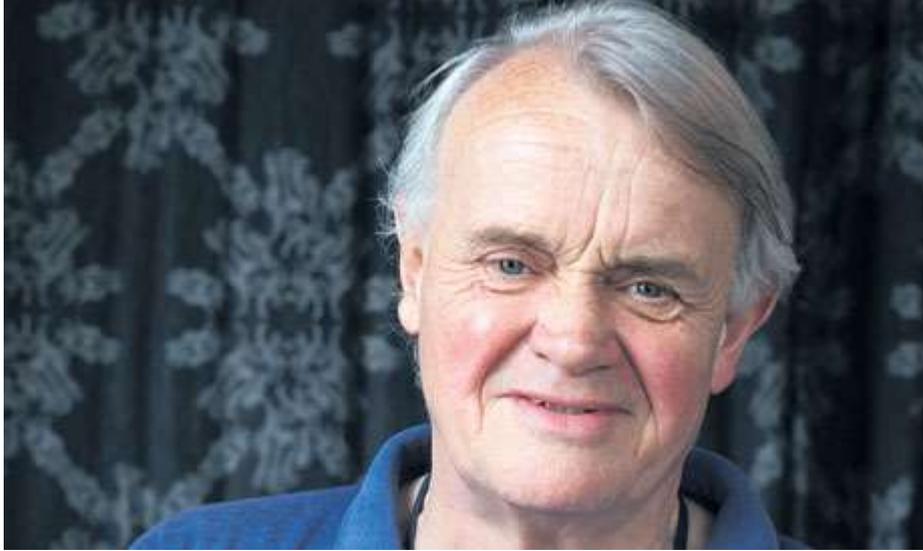
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## HOWARD BRENTON'S BRITISH EPIC THEATRE AND BERTOLT BRECHT'S EPIC THEATRE

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**Howard Brenton**

Courtesy: [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

### **Brecht's Impact on British Theatre**

Britain came under the influence of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre after the opening of Berliner Ensemble's first London season on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1956 with Helen Weigel playing the title role in Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Many British playwrights- John Osborne, John Arden, Edward Bond, David Hare, Howard Brenton, Whiting, Bolt and Shaffer- were inspired to use his dramatic techniques in varying degrees but not altogether entirely trying to connect themselves with British mainstream drama.

An innovative exemplar of epic theatre, Brecht believed in the immediacy and intimacy of the theatrical performance. He used drama as a model for producing an aesthetic distancing and de-familiarizing effect. He chose to recreate the relationship between the actor and the audience as dialectic. He made the actors 'show' their roles to the audience rather than wholly identifying with those roles. Brecht's aim was to turn his audience into social historians to see the actions as something that has happened in the past in a particular time and place and that is now being re-enacted. His epic theatre, according to Brecht:

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Turns the spectator into an observer but arouses his capacity for action, forces him to take decisions....stands outside, studies the human being as the object of enquiry, he is alterable and able to alter (37).

### **John Arden and Others**

John Arden was Britain's first Brechtian playwright. In an interview, he acknowledged Brecht's influence as a 'theatrical technician'. Like Brecht he made the technical use of ballads, parades of spectacle, projects, masks, music, dance and different kinds of language-using prose to convey plot, character and relationships and verse to comment on them and express emotional points.

Edward Bond, like Brecht, sets his plays in historical or exotic settings, strangely distanced from present day life. He wants his audience to escape from "the mythology of the past which often lives on as the culture of the present" (A Companion to the Plays, 75).

### **From Political Theatre to Epic Theatre**

Brenton's moving from political theatre to the version of the epic was the direct impact of his immediate predecessors. With the failure of the Fringe to establish a genuinely popular socialist theatre and his entry into the historical Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company, Brenton needed a type of drama with the advantage of larger auditorium and greater resources, a large-scale 'epic' theatre dealing in complex political issues, an attempt to constitute a 'British epic theatre'. In *Brenton: The Playwright* Richard Boon comments:

Clearly, the whole notion of a 'British Epic Theatre' is one which needs to be treated with some caution; taken at its broadest, the label may be useful for loose grouping together the work of a generation of writers. The more precisely one seeks to apply it, the more problematic it becomes. It is perhaps less as a general theory than as an indication of the contents of Brenton's personal tool-kit (132-33).

### **Epic Devices of Brenton**

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Following Brecht, Brenton succeeds in making ‘epic’ devices- songs, pageants, farce, the ‘high’ and ‘low’ characters; an episodic structure of scene, projected texts and captions, the brightly lit and curtain-less stage, the delivery of the dialogue in a theatrically self-conscious manner. When Brenton translated Brecht’s *Leben Des Galileo*, he understood ‘real theatrical acts’. He was able to respond to Brecht’s concise open style by including ‘every verb, every image, every metaphor’ in his own edition. He produced a very accurate translation ‘apparently very Brechtian’.

Like Brecht’s techniques of socialist realism, Brenton created a fable with characters capable of change which can ‘show the light of dawn in the darkest night’. He brought to the drama the experimental unprejudiced and precise method of the scientific laboratory by the ‘objective logic of events’. That he was under the magic spell of Brecht is evidenced through the parallel techniques of Brecht’s *Mother Courage* and Brenton’s *The Romans in Britain*, Brecht’s *Galileo* and Brenton’s *The Genius*.

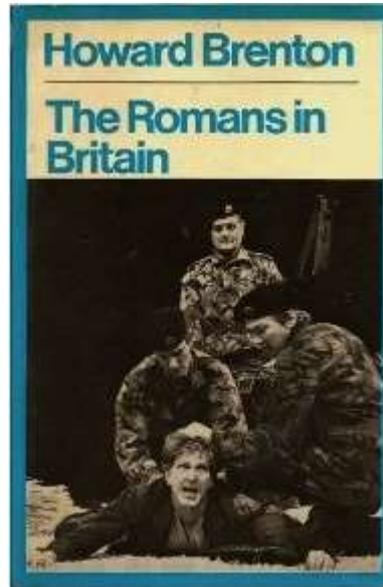
### ***Mother Courage***

Brecht’s masterpiece *Mother Courage* is set in Europe during the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), which was fought between the Protestants and the Catholics of the Holy Empire setting the scene in a remote province in Sweden. *The Thirty Years’ War* resembled the nearest thing to the First World War before 1914 and in the autumn of 1939, with Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Under the Nazi yoke, it was clear that Hitler’s foreign policy was about to plunge Europe into a war on an unprecedented scale. Brecht’s frustration as a creative artist in a ‘defeated, disturbed and disordered land’ made him dramatize and emphasize the ‘pastness’ of events in the contemporary subject matter.

### **Capture of Historical Events**

For Brenton the capture of historical events is in itself a major factor in the move toward an epic structure. As the title of the play *The Romans in Britain* suggests, Brenton does not begin in contemporary Ireland. Part I depicts England on the brink of the Roman invasion in 54 B.C, and Part II displays England on the brink

of the Saxon invasion in 515 A.D. Brenton tries to seek a degree of identification between the Roman invaders of England and the English invaders of Ireland. He stresses that the modern state labeled as 'English' is actually the product of a series of colonial occupations by offering the audience a succession of images of brutal colonization.

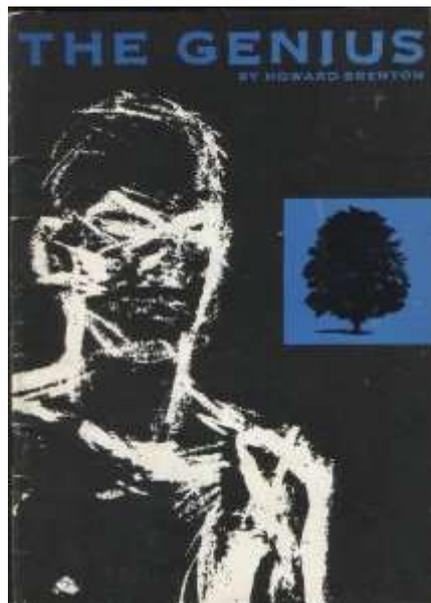


The play begins with the Belgian people advancing through south-eastern England being in a state of uneasy co-existence with the Celts, their savage behaviour in ill-treating the intruders Conlag and Dauí. Most of the characters are players in history: farmers, refugees, criminals, stragglers with the exception of Caesar. The scenes of Part II are located in England more than a century after the Roman withdrawal. Against the decaying remains of Roman culture, the Bretons sought alliance with the Saxons of northern Europe. When the Saxons turned out to be aggressors, once they settled down in eastern English, the Bretons got victory at the Battle of Moutn Badon. Michael X. Zelenak in 'The Politics of History: Howard Brenton's Adaptations Theatre (Yale) comments on *Romans*:

History is fluid, something adhoc, something 'in the making', a continuous present tense, or more properly, a perpetual conditional mood. This is not 'how it had to be'. This is not 'how it was' but 'how we choose to be'. If gaps exist, we are forced to fill them in. history is ours for the writing (55)

Brecht says that the spectators should leave the theatre with tools of heightened scientific perception. His *Life of Galileo*, portrays free national scientific thought, challenging authority, and dogmatism. It is a vehicle for the conscious harnessing of a historical character to drive home a particular contemporary moral view. When the Ptolemaic system was shaken by the theory of Nicholas Copernicus, Brecht's Denmark was shaken by the most revolutionary ideas of Quantum Theory and its application of atomic physics and the discovery of splitting the uranium atom.

### *The Genius*



In *The Genius*, Brenton picks up the same theme developed by Brecht's *Galileo*, of the responsibility of the scientist to his society. Like Brecht's *Galileo*, Brenton's American Professor Leo Lehrer accepted 'exile' in an English Midlands University, since he objects to allow his discovery of a new mathematical theorem to be used by the military authorities. *The Genius* opened at a time when the nuclear threat was very much a 'live' issue. The national campaign for nuclear Disarmament has grown enormously in Britain by its association with European Nuclear Disarmament. This affects Britain's relationship with NATO and the USA. Even for the educated, the higher reaches of science are a blocked entry.

### **Special Feature of Brenton**

Brenton's epic theatre could be seen in terms of his combination of the Osborne type of angry young men writing socially engaged drama with Bond's trend

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of writing political plays using either historical or legendary material. He is aware of the fact that his brand of epic theatre is not pure. In his interview with Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts, he admits: “I am not sure whether the big stage plays I’ve written since 1973 are pure epic. Measured against the Brechtian, I received idea of an epic, they are far from being pure epics” (*Performing Arts Journal*: 139) . In 1974, he experimented with the ‘epic’ form of playwriting, the principles of ‘epic’ theatre for narrative, structure and characterization. The examples of his works are *Magnificence* (1973), *The Churchill Play* (1974), *Brassneck* (1975), *Weapons of Happiness* (1976), *Epson Downs* (1977) , *The Romans in Britain* (1980) , *Greenland* (1988) , *Moscow Gold* (1990) and *Berlin Bertile* (1992). In a precise and controllable form of ‘epic’, Brenton tries to explore the larger issues of public life compressing a huge political and economic history.

### **British Epic Theatre Defined by Brenton**

In spite of his Brechtian impact, Brenton attempts to constitute a ‘British Epic Theatre’. In a 1979 interview in *Performing Arts Journal*, he defines the British epic as:

- 1) a play that has many scenes, the short scenes, choosing precise ‘windows’ in a story.
- 2) the ‘windows’ have to be authentic to ring true.
- 3) the ‘windows’ must be part of an argument, one illuminating the other, progressing to a conclusion that is believable, in the simple sense of men and women who would do that and also be clear in intent.
- 4) it is the ‘message’ of the play that comes first (139).

### **Principles of British Epic Theatre**

In the *Preface to Plays: One*, Howard Brenton charts down the principles for the ‘British Epic Theatre’, a kind of Jacobean play for his time.

The characters, like William Blake’s poems go from innocence to experience. The stories are journeys of discovery. The characters change radically.... The scenes of the play are ‘windows’ opened at crucial points along the journeys of the characters which show turning points in their lives and struggles. Each scene is written and shown to

be played as a little play.... The end of the play is to be 'open', a gift for the audience- something for them to fall out over and keep warm with while they're waiting for the bus home. (V)

### **Multi-Scenes**

The most important theatrical device of Epic theatre, that is multi-scened, is faithfully followed by Brenton. His *Weapon of Happiness* is an epic play with sixteen scenes. The play is about an ex-political Czech, Frank, working in a London factory who finally succumbs to torments of his communist memories with hopeless perspective of his present existence. The scenes are the 'windows' opened on the fusion of two stories- the one about Janice's progress from a state of ignorance to the beginning of a polite understanding and the other story about Frank's unwilling nostalgia into the horror of his own past. The audience is goaded into believing the similarity of the two situations: the forces of oppression in the semi-communist Government of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet regime in the last forties are the same as the scene in the Britain of the seventies. The parallels of the scenes/windows, past/present, public/private, external/internal allows the audience to fill through dislocation and irony.

### **Private Plays**

*The Romans in Britain* represents the summation of the British epic theatre 'a colossally ambitious project' in the words of Brenton. In the portrayal of Roman invasion in the past, the audience is brought to an understanding of what imperialism is. The spectator who became an actor to complete the unfinished play in Brechtian epic, became a fluid and questioning presence as virtually a sub-text of Brenton's play.

In the eighties, when British drama faced the crisis, John Peter, the theatre critic of the *Sunday Times* announced the impending death of political theatre in Britain. So, Brenton gave up the large-scale, wide ranging form and began writing 'private' plays with limited sources. His *Greenland* is an outright Utopia in which Brenton describes a new 'world culture', seven hundred years hence, free of conflict and oppression. The play is one of many scenes, the first act having eleven scenes, the

second one, fifteen scenes. As an epic theatre, the play makes interconnections between the contemporary London set on General Election Day 1987 and an imaginary world that's pictured in the mind. Through the *Greenland*, Brenton gives a message - 'history of the future', the characters living in an imaginative creation of perpetual present and technological future.

It's true the world of nature's a mirror. But it swims about in front of you. It's not fixed. It folds up, inside itself.... We are part of the mirror, part of what we're looking into. We distort it. Nature changes with the weather in your mind. (*Greenland*, 369)

Through the character of Severan- Severan, a pathetic tormented figure in the *Greenland*, Brenton reveals the message that human nature is fundamentally evil and finding utopia is no more than a living death.

In 1990, Brenton wrote *Moscow Gold* in collaboration with Tarig Ali, a huge vital wide-ranging 'epic' with the full use of technical resources available in a large public theatre. The play's narrative deals with the story of the Kremlin Cleaner Iyoo killed in Afghanistan and forces Grisha, her husband to confess to Boris, the remaining son, the real nature of his work in Dzezhirsky square. Grisha is an 'honest' secret policeman who was responsible for making the copy of the anti-Stalin poem which sent his son to his death. Boris ends by escaping in an uncertain future to be the promised land of the West. Brenton succeeds in making 'epic' devices – pageants and characters entry on stilts in half-mask or suspended in mid-air. A feeling of the circus dominates by the revolving stage bespattered with Cyrillic letters suggesting an astrological chart of the heavens.

### **Belief in the Power of the Theatre**

Brenton believes in the power of the theatre to make a significant contribution to political life, to knock on the pipes of society and culture. Like Osborne, Brenton looks closely at the actual situation that has emerged in the complete modern world. Like Arden, he does not believe in giving answers at the impossibility of giving an unambiguous answer to the problem. Like Bond, he has his conviction in humanity. Like Tom Stoppard, he analyses the problem of human personality in conflict with the

hostile and cruel world in which the individual is devalued. Like Hare and David Edgar, he handles subjects requiring large numbers of people. In general, Brenton's work is characterized by the aggravated social and political situation in present day Britain. Though political atmosphere forms the backdrop, Brenton achieved a kind of 'total British epic theatre', the interdependent fusion of content and technique.

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10  
**POLITICS AS THEATRE: A STUDY OF  
HOWARD BRENTON'S PLAYS**

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**Dominant Role of Politics in Modern Drama**

In modern drama, politics predominates, for politics is understood as a part of the social context. Unlike other forms of art, theatre is not autonomous and it depends on the topicality and the 'present' moment. A play is not written for the audience of 'now'. The future generation can find new meanings in the printed text of drama, as it happens in the case of Shakespeare's plays.

**Theatre Is Political Activity**

Theatre, by its very nature, is a political activity because of the collaborative function of several artists - actors, actresses, designers, make-up artists, costumers, lighting designers, stage managers, playwrights and director. It is a group activity, a communal experience with the participation of the audience. Every experience is political as it conjures up a single theatrical reality by fusing various issues of history.

All significant modern plays present to the world that which seemed to be 'falling apart' and becoming meaningless in the wake of the brutal advance of capitalism, rampant individualism and the consequent loss of community, large scale devastations of the two world wars, the threat of the nuclear holocaust, and the destruction of the liberal traditions of hope and faith in man's innate goodness, rationality and progress. The portrayal of the aggravated social and political situation in Britain helps the audience to get a better understanding of their problems.

**The 1970s – Drama amidst Political Turmoil**

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The 1970s produced a new crop of British dramatists with the emergence of the 'fringe' theatre and several accomplished new playwrights labelled as socialists- Peter Barnes, Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, David Hare, David Edgar, Trevor Griffiths, Jim Cartwright, Caryl Churchill, Sarah Daniels, Michael Frayn, Peter Honake, David Holman led people to consider more deeply the value of theatre. They ignored 'domestic' subjects as human suffering, the agonies of divorce, frustrations of marriage, friendship, betrayal and a sense of personal inadequacy. They rather concentrated on political problems that can be remedied by social reforms or revolution.

### **Prolific Brenton**

Of all contemporary dramatists Brenton is surely the most prolific, marked by breadth and variety. Since 1965, the year Brenton committed himself to a career as a playwright with his first play *Ladder of Fools*, he has produced over fifty pieces of work for stage and screen- fifteen full length plays, a large number of shorter plays, and eight films.

- 1) The first phase occupies the period from the late sixties upto 1973- his 'apprenticeship' on the Fringe, his plays set in small-scale 'poor theatre'.
- 2) The second phase comprises the plays of late 1970s, mainly the large scale 'epic' theatre dealing in complex political issues.
- 3) The third phase is that of the 1980s with the dominance of a strong right-wing government.

The writers of the 1956-1960 generation particularly Osborne and Webster offered their political protest contained within existing theatrical models. But the abolition of theatre censorship in 1968 helped facilitate the general shift in the cultural climate for the new political theatre in the 1970s. Sandy Craig, one of the founders of the theatre group 7:84 asserts that a political theatre is by necessity 'a theatre of socialist political change'. He distinguishes between political drama and political theatre.

Political plays seek to appeal to and influence the middle class, in particular that section of the middle class which is influential in moulding public opinion....Political theatre, on the other hand, aims to appeal to and to be an expression of the working class which is the progressive class within society. (Dreams and Deconstructions Alternative Theatre in Britain 31)

### **The Impact and Influence of Political Theatre**

Political theatre makes the audience aware of the problems and achievements of the past and increases the critical insight into the tasks of the present and future. The playwrights are of two kinds, 'conscious' and 'committed': the playwrights 'conscious' of the problems of contemporary affairs, and the playwrights 'committed' to political ideologies. The 'committed' artist creates an art form to support his political ideologies. The 'conscious' artist creates theatre to promote political creeds, the former becomes 'aesthetic; the latter becomes 'political'.

It is very difficult to form a theory of Shakespeare's politics from his historical plays. His dramatic art foreshadows his political creed. In his treatment of kings, Shakespeare's intention is merely "to bring out the burden of royalty, to point to certain contradictions, human and moral which seem to be inherent in the notion of a successful king". (Derek Traversi. *An Approach to Shakespeare*. 243).

### **Individual Conflict as the Focus**

Modern drama is mostly the study of individuals in conflict with society or their existence. Contrary to the theatrical practice which depicts material in today's pattern, Brechtian epic theatre delineates and dramatizes the 'pastness' of events by stirring up thought and inciting the spectator to implement social reform. In the 1970s with the emergence of the 'fringe' theatre, there was the rise of socialist theatre subscribing to socialist principles. Howard Brenton has consolidated his reputation as one of Britain's leading political dramatists along with Hare, Griffiths and Edgar and succeeded in forcing socialist issues into the main stream of theatrical agenda.

### **Quick Responses to Events**

Many of Brenton's plays have been turned out at speed, as quick responses to events in public life or specific responses to events in the patriarchal world. *A Part for Europe* was written with David Edgar in 1973 about the nation's entry to the common market. *A Short Sharp Knock*, with Tony Howard in 1980 is about the election in the Thatcher administration. It is a satirical attack on the new Tory government. *Iranian Nights*, written with Tariq Ali, in 1989 depicts the Rushdie affair. *Moscow Gold*, collaborated with Tariq Ali in 1990, highlights the 1917 Revolution and the history of the Gorbachav years. *Berlin Bertie* (1992) deals with the union of West and East Germany after 45 years of struggle. An attack on Edward Heath in *Fruit* (1970), Maxim Gorky in *A Sky Blue Life* (1971), Winston Churchill in *The Churchill Play* (1974), Margaret Thatcher in *A Short Sharp Shock* (1981), Gorbochev in *Moscow Gold* (1990) are the best examples of Brenton's personal target plays on particular politicians. He brought public figures to the stage because only these political leaders caused the economic expectations of the public to swing uneasily between hope and fear.

### **Public, Not Political!**

Brenton raised objection to his plays being labeled 'political'. In his Preface to plays: ONE he retorts,

Because I have a Marxist view of the world, right-wing critics are forever labeling my plays 'political' which is, for them, an euphemism for 'preaching'. Some critics on the left find the plays 'too ambiguous' which I take it to be a euphemism for 'not preaching enough'. I do not win on the middle ground either, as it is social democrats who really get riled by my plays for some reason. Perhaps the plays remind them of the allegiances they have betrayed. (7-8)

Brenton feels that a little word for 'political' is public. The portable Theatre experiments offered a sort of foundation for Brenton's collaborative work in 'public' theatre. He wrote nearly eleven plays from *Lay By* in 1972 to *Moscow Gold* in 1990 in collaborations which helped him to deal with 'public' issues. Though the collaborators may write in different styles like 'a long argument they share a common view of the theme of their place. *Lay By* is based on a newspaper report about a rape

case involving fellatio in a van on the M4. *England's Ireland* gives a brief history of British political involvement in Northern Ireland since the 1920's. *A Part for Europe* attacks the 1973 'Panfare for Europe' celebrations, a non-political event sponsored by the government. Brassneck satirizes the capitalistic policies that corrupt a town like Nottingham in England. It is interesting to note that Brenton makes use of collaboration to discuss the social issues, to explore the social injustice of the government in a mild and liberal way.

### **Seeking to Define a Freer and Just Way of Living**

In the 1980s, Brenton confronted the problem of articulating what a better, more free and just way of living might be. He has given up writing large-scale wide ranging political epics and tries his hand at smaller scale, more 'private' work, a withdrawal from the greater issues to public life. His *Three Plays for Utopia – Sore Throats, Bloody Poetry and Greenland* are plays with a sense of 'personal crisis', intended to rediscover the necessity of clear 'personal' vision in the face of right-wing government.

### ***Greenland* – Five Characters Reflecting Contemporary World**

The first half of the play *Greenland*, set on the evening of 1987 General Election, introduces five characters in a stage of despair: the labour candidate, a psychotic peer, a larger lout and a moral campaigner. With the characters jumping into the River Thames the second half of the play, set in a Utopian future, presents the utopia with incredible technology, an affirmation of the possibility of radical alternatives, psychological journey into the private inner worlds where desire is fulfilled. As Brenton sees around him the damaging and paralyzing contemporary society, he presents in the Utopia, the dehumanizing distortions and constrictions of value systems based on power fading away.

### **Change of Spirit**

Brenton who opted for the windy lift-off of the blazing play which says that socialism will return in the 20 years is now an embattled man of the left, doggedly espousing a sort of republican spirit. He who started his career with bitter satire and black comedy, changed his way of writing to plays of optimistic future. His plays are

not self-enclosed but a starting point for future activity. Brenton is quite aware that he is not writing political plays. For him the play is a game, the result of which is already known to the audience; all the pleasure is in watching the execution and not in moving towards an analysis. Brenton's theatre is political in the sense that it is a theatrical experience aimed at influencing the people politically, to promote views about racial prejudice, class war and equal rights. Specific socio-political-historical events are used as springboards to initiate the audience into political consciousness.

### **Political Manifesto versus Political Drama**

There is a great difference between the manifesto of a political party and political theatre. Theatre is a form of 'art' and through 'art', a play achieves the label 'political', it uses a code of expression which is to be decoded to get to the political nature of the play. Brenton's achievement – in his use of space, in his idea of delinking history from historical personages and in his utopian vision- amazes his audience about his concern for socio- cultural problems of the entire European civilization. Brenton's use of theatrical devices, characterization, lighting, and images clearly point to the fact that he is an artist with political consciousness.

### **Laying It Bare**

For Brenton, writing for the theatre basically means 'laying it bare' – the struggle for power and dominance in order to effect change. Like Brecht who was theatrically inspired by Shakespeare's robust realism and his disregard for the Unities, Brenton rewrote and rediscovered Shakespeare to suit the modern context. In 1965, he wrote *Revenge*, a rewrite of *King Lear* in which the criminal has two daughters, he gives up his kingdom and tries to get it back but fails. In 1972, he wrote *Measure for Measure*, a modern burlesque version of Shakespeare, satirizing Enoch Powell of contemporary Britain.

Another play *Thirteenth Night* (1984), a dream play and Shakespearean derivative, suggests the night after twelfth night when the celebrations have to stop. The content and characters are modeled on *Macbeth*, though the title resembles Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* : Macbeth becomes ' Jack Beaty', Duncan 'Bill Dunn', Macduff 'Murgatroyd'; Banquo 'Feast'; Lady Macbeth 'Jenny Gare'. In *Greenland*

(1988), he combines the content of *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to reveal people with all contemporary troubles and confusion hanging like rags, get lost in a 'magic land' and human nature gets challenged and changed in the new 'utopian' land. It is clear that he moves beyond the meaning of politics and reveals human experience. He echoes Shakespeare's imagery of the diseased nature of the human mind.

Life 's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
(Macbeth, V.v, 23-24)

In *Thirteenth Night*, Beaty uses the image of theatre before the murder of Bill Dunn: 'I can't think. There's a little theatre in my hand. Right and wrong going at each other like actors'. (*Thirteenth Night* Scene Seven, 133)

In his recent play, *Berlin Bertie* (1992), which is written after the unification of Germany, Brenton is possibly moving towards a theatre where human existence is his prime concern; human predicament is his special focus. Though political atmosphere forms the backdrop, Brenton displays the concept of the theatre of political consciousness to the acceptance of human consciousness. Like *Waiting for Godot* which reveals little of nature in the reading, *Berlin Bertie* evokes the 'absurd living', 'lives of quite desperation'. Brenton chooses Good Friday, the day of Crucifixion of Christ on April 15<sup>th</sup>, the Resurrection of Christ to portray the 'characters' dying without hope and reconciliation to life's conditions. From unified Germany, Rosa brought her sister Alice a present, a bit of all, a lump of concrete. It is not an image of unification but separation from her married life; it is a way back to cement her relations with her sister in England.

### **A Humanist**

Howard Brenton who started his dramatic career with the belief that political debate is the proper stuff of the modern British theatre and who has dealt with disturbing issues raising public controversy and a critical debate, has now become a humanist deeply perturbed over the existential situation.

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