

Performing, Teaching and Writing Theatre

Performing, Teaching and Writing Theatre:

Exploring Play

By

Sanjay Kumar

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



Performing, Teaching and Writing Theatre: Exploring Play

By Sanjay Kumar

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2023 by Sanjay Kumar

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-9116-6

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-9116-5

For all the pandies

For my students

And for Anuradha, my partner in process

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	ix
Introduction	x
Where I Am Stood	
Chapter One.....	1
Defining Incomplete	
Chapter Two	11
The Mighty Proscenium	
Chapter Three	31
Theatre and the Rise of the Right State	
Chapter Four	47
The History of Theatre is the History of Social Change	
Chapter Five	63
Scripting to Perform: Saadat Hasan Manto: <i>Pagaleyan da Sardar</i> (<i>The Chief of the Lunatics</i>)	
Chapter Six	109
More about Negotiating the Filthy Lucre - Theatre Towards Alterity, Theatre as Community	
Chapter Seven.....	120
Workshop Theatre	
Chapter Eight.....	162
Let's go <i>Offtrack</i> (2012)	
Chapter Nine.....	205
Theatre in Conflict/Theatre and Conflict: The Case of Kashmir	
A Summing up/An Opening Out	237

Appendix 1	241
Pandies' Theatre	
Bibliography	245
Index	250

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig 0-1: The question/answer session with the pandies’	
<i>Crooked Kalaam</i> , 2016	xiv
Fig 0-2: Trial Scene, <i>Machinal</i> , 2020	xxv
Fig 0-3: Afghan story tellers 2020.....	xxvi
Fig 1-1: <i>Veils</i> marketplace 1998.....	10
Fig 2-1: Hoarding for <i>Ghosts</i> (1995).....	15
Fig 2-2: <i>Veils</i> (1998).....	22
Fig 2-3: Pandies’ in the proscenium, Manto (2019)	30
Fig 3-1: Cleansing in Manchester.....	39
Fig 3-2: Danger zones, 2007.....	46
Fig 3-3: Sarkari feminism, 2010.....	46
Fig 4-1: <i>The Balcony</i> (Genet), 2014	60
Fig 4-2: <i>The Balcony</i> (Genet), 2014	61
Fig 4-3: <i>The Good Person of Setzuan</i> (2019)	61
Fig 4-4: <i>The Good Person of Setzuan</i> (2019)	62
Fig 5-1: <i>Crooked Kalaam</i> , 2016	65
Fig 5-2: Saadat Hasan Manto: <i>Pagaleyan Da Sardar</i> , 2018.....	99
Fig 5-3: Saadat Hasan Manto: <i>Pagaleyan Da Sardar</i> , 2018.....	107
Fig 6-1: Workshopping in Delhi’s Tihar Jail.....	118
Fig 7-1: Workshop in Saksham, Nithari	131
Fig 7-2: 1st public performance, India Habitat Center, Delhi 2007.....	136
Fig 7-3: Rehearsing, 2009	142
Fig 7-4: Performing before peers.....	145
Fig 7-5: Train to the platform, workshop Ajmer	148
Fig 7-6: Kota workshop.....	155
Fig 7-7: Alipur workshop	157
Fig 8-1: <i>Offtrack</i> , Delhi (2012).....	162
Fig 8-2: <i>Offtrack</i> , Delhi (2012).....	174
Fig 8-3: <i>Offtrack</i> , Delhi (2012).....	192
Fig 8-4: <i>Offtrack</i> , dance at the end, Delhi (2012).....	203
Fig 8-5: <i>Offtrack</i> in New York	204
Fig 9-1: Srinagar, Images	215
Fig 9-2: Sharing stories, Srinagar	216
Fig 9-3: Jammu – enactments.....	219
Fig 9-4: Sonamarg, theatre games	233

INTRODUCTION

WHERE I AM STOOD

Definitions of theatre and narratives of its performance are as old as theatre performance itself. Speaking from a specific position, this book is an attempt to share one understanding of theatre. This is a sharing of decades of theatre work in diverse capacities; as practitioner and performer, teacher and researcher, and playwright and collator of stories, each spanning at least thirty years. The view is through the prism of the pandies' theatre group,¹ which was registered in Delhi in September 1993, and of which this writer is a founding member.

Theatre is an intensely political and communicative genre which, both as text and performance, remains incomplete and open to constant re-appropriation of meaning and understanding. This process of sharing is located in the evolving history and politics of contemporary India. Consequently, like most middle class sensibilities in India and other post-colonial countries, it also has a bias through being trained in, and reaching its 'theatre' via western paradigms of practice and theory, tracing its history more through British traditions than its own.

The perception and articulation of this sharing is at times somewhat stable and organic, and often vulnerable and disparate. The articulating voice, the 'I' is plural, and derives its ownership from multiple capacities. First, it is pandies' theatre 'I'. In the understanding of theatre, the priority is the practitioner/performer. Pandies' theatre has been functional since 1987 though it was formally registered in 1993. I direct the plays and I am the chief facilitator of its workshops. I am also a script writer for the group.

Identified among the few activist theatre groups in the country, pandies' challenges existing norms, pushing and redefining them, in theatre, and equally, in the realm of living and social values. Representing the plurality of its society, and having members from a social cross section (from a variety of religions, classes, regions, castes, and sexual preferences) at any given time, the group has an agenda of working from, and for, the margins. It gets stories from those margins. Self-reflexivity negotiates the ownership of the stories as a group of people (pandies' representatives conscious of their socio-economic identity) and works with other groups (often from the

social margins) to find stories. The stories often become material in the creation of performances (by pandies', by the facilitated group, and/or by an intersection of the two). Performances that explore, challenge, subvert the existing norm, and also at a sharper, though narrower level, seek to direct policy and influence change makers of the future. These stories and performances also constitute an experiential core that contributes towards an exploration and tentative understanding of theatre. Pandies' uses many different, though malleable and usually over-lapping, theatrical modes: proscenium theatre (and that includes many performances that are not strictly in the proscenium but do involve a formal presentation before an assembled audience); protest theatre for both awareness and arousal (which includes theatre on controversial issues in villages and slums, schools, colleges and marketplaces, and guerrilla theatre¹ in malls, public parks and other public spaces); and what pandies' has made its own through decades of focused practice, workshop theatre. The group works with the youth of marginalized, underserved communities in their locales, for instance, with the socially 'unstable' young in juvenile jails and shelter homes, to jointly create their stories. The group's work with young boys - drug peddlers and sex workers 'rescued' from railway platforms by NGOs and government agencies, and with a community of cannibalized young in a village adjoining the city of Delhi have earned international recognition. All the modes above are penetrative tools that pierce and open up the social rubric, exhibiting its rot and seeking ways of change. Therefore, as a practitioner, for me, theatre is not a form or a genre. It is a dynamic part of lived experience, and ideally a process of social change. And it doesn't seek to provide answers to already existing questions, rather it is a reframing of questions and issues from the perspective of the marginalized other. These 'reframed questions' seek redressal of the iniquities of living, and build constructs that negotiate social mechanisms of authority and repression, such as the state and its allied institutions. As the examples here will show, theatre also questions, and takes on the hegemony of, the market, and faces off with the corpus of decadent right-wing thought and toxic values which vitiate contemporary living in India and across the globe. At its working best, theatre constitutes an act that inspires, and seeks to enable us to constantly out-perform ourselves.

The pedagogical 'I' is not lagging far behind in its contribution to the understanding of theatre. The performing 'I' and the teaching 'I' are symbiotically connected, as a section of the pandies' emerges from my

¹ Guerrilla Theatre: A surprise, at times spontaneous, performance in an unlikely public space to an unsuspecting audience. Typically, these performances intend to draw attention to a political/social issue through satire and protest.

classroom.² My (usually middle-class) students seek to ‘radicalize’ themselves via theatre, and in due course, get along with their friends and acquaintances (these often outnumber the students themselves) to become performers - facilitators and actors alike, at pandies’. This middle-class section derives its activist strength through interacting with other older members, and with those from lower working classes who have joined pandies’ through workshops in the social margins.

In the pedagogical avatar, along with colleagues and peers during my 35 year career as a teacher of ‘English literature’ in a leading college of the University of Delhi, I have been teaching ‘drama’ to 18 to 21 year-olds. In spaces like ours, exclusive schools for theatre and performance are still few and far between. What do we do, if we are passionate about theatre? Theatre is still seen as ‘extra-curricular’ with most colleges having dramatic societies or clubs, and many of us involve ourselves there, but these are seen more and more as exclusive student zones, and their work single-mindedly targets prize money in ‘festivals’ for colleges. What we certainly do, within the larger set of English literature, is opt to teach more dramatic texts in the curriculum.

Carrying the post-colonial burden, the teaching of theatre under the rubric of English literature takes us through the canonical gamut with the usual highlights, starting from the Greeks through the Elizabethans and then the modernists and the contemporaries (the last alone having some texts of non-western origin). The performative, both in history and practice, is peripheralized, and in many of our spaces, theatre is still understood as an intern to fiction, with the same tools of plot and character used as a way of making sense, as New Critical hegemony still persists.³ Leaving aside the stark politics, even the teaching of drama as performance does not happen, or happens as a lesser adjunct to the teaching of dramatic texts. For those who prioritize teaching theatre, apart from insistent references to the performative in the pedagogic act itself, there is a constant seepage of our context, and of the play’s context. At least two related kinds of context -

² The other significant source is young people from the underserved sections, who join pandies’ after a workshop.

³ New Critical Theory: The early 20th century theoretical frame with its attempt to see the text as autonomous, divorced from history and the author, with its obsessive focus on form, had T S Eliot, I A Richards, and John Crowe Ransom as its pioneer exponents. Hailing notions of objectivity and universality, it emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature functions as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. The approach dominated, and in many colleges in India continues to dominate, the study of all texts, including dramatic texts.

oriented activisms - emerge and contribute to an understanding of theatre; First, a searching of alternate traditions of writing and performing coming from the underbelly of the canon and feeding into a questioning of the means of locating the canon itself, and second, and more directly, grounded around the specific text, an exploring of the purposes of theatre, and making the act of teaching the text relevant as a critique of our lives and the status quo.

The playwright 'I' explores the space connecting the dramatic text and the dramatic performance to underscore the importance of this connection in the making and understanding of theatre. Writing theatre is a different, and also an allied, tradition of dramatic performance. The need for a 'good' script is often felt. But what is a good script? Delving into the relationship of text and performance invariably makes one conscious of the vulnerability and incompleteness of theatre. Every dramatic text is an invitation to perform, and every performance in turn is an interpretation and an appropriation of the written text. The playwright tries her/his best to manoeuvre, to get his meaning across through the performance, and the performing unit seeks and adapts scripts most conducive to their politics and what they have to say. Where is the real 'play'? Is it in the text, the performance, or in the interplay between them? I have written, collaborated and adapted, and then directed, close to 40 scripts. This book reproduces and investigates two full scripts and many segments from my writing for 'pandies' to delve into the experience of the performer as playwright and see the importance of this relationship in the task of understanding theatre.

At the heart of this book lies probably the only certitude that, regardless of the age, or the place in which it is created, theatre defines itself in terms of resistance and dissent, and as standing against authority and fascist tendencies of its space and time.



Fig 0-1: The Question/Answer session with the pandies'. *Crooked Kalaam*, 2016.

A note on pandies' theatre.

Incipience

Pandies' theatre, though registered formally in 1993, traces its origins to 1987 when some students and teachers of an undergraduate college in Delhi University decided to move away from the flippant, meaningless plays put on in the name of competitions and festivals by theatre societies of various colleges, and instead, take up more meaningful, full-length plays staged at commercial auditoriums in a more-or-less commercial manner. The society performed Lorca, Ngugi, Strindberg, Vicente Leñero, Genet and Brecht,⁴ in that order. Surviving under the rubric of a college was becoming difficult. Students who had completed their studies wanted to be with us, students from other colleges wanted to join, and there was consistent opposition from college authorities regarding the 'wasted' time of the students and the unconventional themes of the performances. Pandies' theatre was born in 1993. Moving away from a college and a university, it comprised four

⁴ Federico García Lorca, *Blood Wedding* (1932); Ngugi Wa Thiongo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976); August Strindberg, *A Dream Play* (1901); Vicente Leñero, *The Bricklayers* (1976); Jean Genet, *The Balcony* (1957); Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944).

teachers - including the author - as the office bearers, and an executive committee consisting of ex-students. The initial strength of the group was around thirty members, and the active component per project/play continues to be so, though the total number has grown beyond 150. Begun with a simple agenda of staging plays relevant to our ethos and time, it has evolved as an activist group – left, feminist, and atheistic. It started as a proscenium-oriented English theatre group, but from 1996 turned increasingly activist, taking on projects rather than plays. The dominant number of women among the younger members assured a feminist beginning for the group. The group has penetrated further and further into the margins, working especially with under-privileged children from diverse areas. Our work, which is now almost totally activist, can be put into three divisions: first, scripting and directing performances (largely adaptations and original scripts) for the proscenium, and staged initially in a commercial theatre before being used for awareness programs; second, using theatre as a means of generating awareness on diverse issues ranging from feminist theatre to gay rights, child rights, and the rights of religious minorities (this attempt includes legal and legislative intervention). Third, the most focused area, and also one where pandies’ contribution to the idea of theatre lies, is in using the workshop mode to create performances with young people articulating trauma, containing conflict, and finding space for marginalized voices in policy formulation.

The Name

The decision to call the group pandies’ theatre (including the use of the lower case) was taken collectively in 1993, and was in keeping with the playfulness of the group in all its senses. ‘Pandies’ derives from Pandey, a British mispronunciation, or an arrogant inability to reproduce Indian pronunciation, reducing ‘the Pandey’ to ‘pandy’. The name goes back to the 1857 War of Indian Independence. Mangal Pandey was the first Indian soldier in the British army to fire a shot at a British officer and raise the banner of revolt while posted at the military garrison at Barrackpore. The gesture is seen in India as the beginning of the Revolt. For the British, a ‘pandy’ was not simply a mutineer, or even a traitor, but an expletive uttered with spitting at the end, a lowly worm to be crushed at the earliest opportunity. The word continued in British generals’ correspondence for over 50 years after the defeat of the rebels, as the generals exhorted each other to never let any ‘pandy’ raise its head. The ‘pandy’ was not an enemy outside the structure, but a subversive subordinate who dared to act against the system. We are the ‘pandies’ of modern India - part of the mainstream

in being English speakers and of the upper middle-class, but opposed to practically the entire value scheme of this structure; the veritable termite seeking to destroy it from within.

The Collaborative

Pandies' has about 40 plays in the proscenium to its credit, with about 25 of these being original scripts. The work is essentially collaborative, and detailed discussions and collective workshopping form the basis of these scripts. The group has had more than 150 members associated with it, with around 25 forming the core for each project. Each member contributes to the production in several ways. Artwork, costumes, sets, and lights are all worked on by members of the group itself. Along with the writer of this book, two other members have been regularly writing for the group and contributing to all aspects of the production process: Anand Prakash, a founding member of the group, and Anuradha Marwah who joined the group two decades ago. Apart from the writer of this book, Anuradha Marwah is the only one to have directed a project, Euripides' *Medea* in 2019, which had 16 highly successful performances.⁵

Cyber performing in a collapsing world

I work on this book in the midst of a raging pandemic that is hitting humanity globally and threatening the very foundations of my country, killing countless people and destroying families all over the world. What we see around us is numbing, and can take away the capacity to feel. There are unprecedented numbers of infected people, and the deadener is the number of people who have died. These deaths are not just of Covid, but of lack of medical oxygen, and galling incompetence in the realm of medical health; shortages of medicines, lack of places in hospitals, and a painfully slow vaccination process. Then there are the super spreader events: various religious festivals, the ignoring of Covid SOPs in the state elections, and the massive crowds at India's premier sporting event, the Indian Premier League cricket festival, which was stopped midway because of the massive second wave of COVID. The bizarre and heart-wrenching scenes included pyres burning on the roadside, overflowing crematoria, and bodies floating

⁵ In recent years, many of the younger members, achievers in theatre and other allied worlds, have begun to contribute to direction, including directing five short 10-minute plays in The Red Eye 10s International Play Festival, India section (2019) at the American Center, Delhi.

in the rivers. Facts worse than the worst nightmares see the surreal become the norm.

As 2019 neared its end, in a world soon to be hit by this plague, I had no idea what was going to hit us. In India, democracy has often been shown to be a thin facade over tyranny and authoritarianism. The '70s saw the infamous Emergency, and the mid-'80s featured the anti-Sikh pogrom centered around Delhi,⁶ all under the centrist regime of the Congress party. But the series of salvos fired by the right-wing government (the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) with the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP)), with its new-found machismo after the land-slide victory in the 2019 national general elections, left the country stunned. This was its second term, and it had a more than crippling effect on most institutions of democracy. This began with the abrogation of Article 370⁷ which gave special status to Kashmir, and the implications of this are still manifesting themselves. That was followed by the relentless invoking of the National Population

⁶ Emergency: A state of emergency was implemented in India by the Prime Minister, Ms. Indira Gandhi (technically by the President, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed) on 25 June 1975 after she lost a case in which her opponent Raj Narain accused her of malpractice in the General Elections of 1971. Opposition leaders protested against her continuing as PM in spite of losing the case. Their statements were construed as amounting to inciting rebellion, and emergency was declared for 21 months, during which time draconian laws were passed and all opposition was jailed or driven underground. India's tryst with fascism and genocide is long and undeniable. The anti-Sikh riots in 1984 were possibly the first indubitable case of the state not just encouraging, but participating in, violence against a particular community. This was a vendetta for the killing of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. The centrist Indian National Congress, not only indulged in fascism and genocide of a minority, but also opened the gates for right-wing formations to take such exercises further - to our detriment.

⁷ Article 370 gave a special status to Jammu and Kashmir after its Hindu ruler agreed to embrace India at the time of Independence, in spite of the bulk of the population being Muslim. This article specifies that except for Defence, Foreign Affairs, and Finance and Communications, (matters specified in the instrument of accession) the Indian Parliament needs the State Government's concurrence for applying all other laws. The article, along with the special status, was abrogated by the BJP-led NDA government on 31 October 2019.

Register,⁸ and the much-derided CAA came just afterwards.⁹ ‘Capitalize and hegemonize’ seemed to be the motto. The trend, not really new, became sharper and more fearsome in our polity; steamrolling by our rulers towards religious supremacism, establishing the hegemony of a particular kind of religion, Hindutva,¹⁰ accompanying Islamophobia, and a general disregard of minorities. As many lawyers have pointed out, the invocation of the CAA and NPR together threatens not just minorities, but anybody who does not fall in line with the regime.

The agitation continues as detentions abound and the dreaded UAPA¹¹ is repeatedly invoked. Resistance has come from many quarters, but the strongest is from two unlikely and unconnected sources; the students and the farmers. The students have been the strongest agitators, and the suppression of their associations has been brutal; their fight has been against the imposition of the CAA.¹² The farmers have risen against new laws¹³

⁸ The NPR is a register of the usual residents of the country. It is mandatory for every resident of India to register in the NPR. It includes both Indian citizens and foreign citizens. The objective of the NPR is to create a comprehensive identity database. It is the juxtaposition with the CAA (below) that increases the possibility of discrimination against those of other faiths.

⁹ The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA): The CAA was passed without discussion in the Indian Parliament in December 2019. Amending the Citizenship Act of 1955, it is widely seen to be discriminatory against Muslims and other minorities, as it permits Hindus and people of allied faiths to seek Indian citizenship if they arrived in India before the end of 2014. The same permission is not accorded to minorities. This is the first time that such discrimination has been legitimized by law.

¹⁰ Hindutva is an extreme manifestation of the Hindu religion, Abjuring the tolerance and inclusiveness usually associated with Hinduism, Hindutva veers towards a religious supremacist assertion in the nation, and would make India a Hindu nation.

¹¹ UAPA: The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, is the dreaded Anti-terrorist law meant to be used against activities threatening the sovereignty and integrity of India, but which is being abused to put away political enemies and dissenters. In the past too, draconian modes have been used against dissent.

¹² Starting from Hyderabad University and then JNU (seen as the left bastion for decades even by the centrist government earlier), Jamia and then DU have become target points under the new dispensation. The use of Lathi charges, water cannons, and then bullets, demonstrate that the hatred for inquiring, questioning minds has reached another level.

¹³ Farm laws: Since November 2020, lakhs of farmers in north India have been protesting, demanding a repeal of the three Farm Laws passed in 2020 (again the suppression has been awful leading to mass injuries and deaths). The three laws are: Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; the Farmers Empowerment and Protection Agreement on Price Assurance and farm Services Act 2020; and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020. The

(passed by sheer force of brute majority in the parliament) which take away their rights and put them at the mercy of corporates. The wellbeing of the corporates is widely seen as the focal point of the powers that be. It is not that crony capitalism did not exist in India before, in fact, it is the characteristic feature, but the extent now is stunning. After a point, it is the lack of consultation and paternalistic chauvinism that galls. People have been arrested for ‘sedition’ for showing dissent, hounded by economic investigative agencies, and pursued through all kinds of vendetta.

Then the Covid pandemic struck. As expected, it struck the margins harder than the mainstream, and the impact was ruinous, especially among the families of the poor and the migrant labor force. Domestic violence scaled new peaks (there were no deterrents, as the police and the women’s organizations were both absent for a while, and even later, the police were available only for their political masters). The emergent times gave those in power extra space and time for the exercise of their authority. And the pandemic got worse.

Now the question that haunts us is, what should we do when all this happens? How do we, as theatre people, cope with this phenomenon? The need of the time becomes established as subterfuge, leading us towards radical works and the writers of the past, and also using historical allegorical modes. It’s a long fight, and so self-preservation becomes imperative for naysaying practitioners like me and for theatre groups like the one I belong to, pandies’ theatre.

A play based on the subversive writings and stories of the famous short story writer, Saadat Hasan Manto,¹⁴ together with a Brecht revival - *The Good Person of Setzuan*,¹⁵ produced just before the pandemic and staged just two weeks before the lockdown, provided a mode.

Yes, theatre had to continue in the face of the pandemic, and the lockdowns. After a depressing hibernation of a couple of months, the modes used for working from home, cyber technology (the Zoom platform in this case) came to the rescue. We were doing it live. Technical glitches would

farmers also demanded a legal guarantee on Minimum Support Prices (MSP) for their crops. The feeling has been that big corporate houses will dictate terms and farmers will end up getting less for their crops.

¹⁴ Manto: Among the famous writers of the Indian sub-continent, Manto belonged equally to India and Pakistan, and at the time of Independence and the Partition he wrote some of the most stirring short stories condemning bigotry. A detailed analysis of the play created from his short stories by pandies’ features later.

¹⁵ Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). The German practitioner, playwright, and theorist is an influential source for this writer, and references to him and his plays, including *The Good Person of Setzuan* recur repeatedly here.

occur, but we would not display a recording, as the live essence of performance had to be achieved even on screen. So there we were, twenty of us, each in our homes, in our ‘cocoons’, mastering the Zoom form in terms of positions, turning of heads, and looking upwards to make it appear as though we were looking at each other.

What plays do we enact? We looked into the past, into the very belly of the tiger, to pick up two plays from the radical, less-known American tradition of the 1920s and 30s. First we selected Clifford Odets’ *Till the Day I Die* (1935)¹⁶ and then Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* (1938).¹⁷

We started with the group trying to recreate its old form of meeting every Sunday, this time on Zoom. Pent-up energies and desires came flowing out. We started finding our juices as performers by turning to the mode of storytelling. Engaging stories began to emerge in the pandies’ meetings. And soon, another advantage manifested itself which helped the theatre connect with like-minded theatre people, and friends and comrades all over the world. In this phase, pandies’ was able to show live performances to people in the US, in the UK, and in diverse places like the Philippines. More importantly, group members who were not in Delhi were able to join the cast and perform from their part of the world. We had people from all the above countries in the cast of the two plays, and that international aspect of theatre, towards which all performers and activists strive, came alive as live theatre on Zoom in a way that was truly enthralling.

The choice of the plays was difficult, as usual. Some felt that we should create a new script, others that we should revive one of our old ones. In repressive times, the direct voice can be troublesome to say the least, so the exercise was activist in a primary, primordial, sense. Going back to the roots of 20th century American theatre was reassuring, and a learning process. Theatre enables us to learn, and also to re-experience and re-learn a lot of what we know. To begin with, many practitioners on this side of the world do not know that America has an anti-capitalistic, anti-fascist, anti-masculinist tradition that goes back to the early 20th century. Looking at Odets from a current perspective, we see the imperviousness of the thought process of votaries of the right wing, their belief in the infallibility of their position, and the propensity to put not just democracy, but everything worthwhile in our world, on the guillotine. The important lesson, that going back in history teaches us, is that the historical record is invariably a record

¹⁶ Clifford Odets (1906-1963), American playwright, actor, director, later screenwriter. His early plays, including *Till the Day I Die* (1935) and *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), present critiques of fascism and capitalism.

¹⁷ Sophie Treadwell (1885-1970), a pioneer American feminist playwright and journalist, remembered most for *Machinal* (1938).

of change, that things have to change for the better. Specifically, the history of theatre shows us that ‘they’ stood up, and performed in the face of all threats.

As a group, we were familiar with Odets’ work, having incorporated an adaptation of parts of his *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) about 20 years ago. We kept our first offering free, and while putting it on Zoom, simultaneously broadcast it on Facebook (where each of the two versions garnered many thousand engagements). The decision was to present it originally written, without any adaptation, and familiarize not just ourselves, but also our audience, with the darkness of, and the possibilities against, right-wing takeovers. *Till the Day I Die* is among the earliest known anti-fascist plays, as it confronts the emerging Nazi Germany.

The play itself is a narrative of the underground resistance movement, and the difficulty of keeping that movement alive in the face of fascist torture. The deft handling of the ‘snitch’ story took members of the group back to the Kashmir narrative, where being seen as a snitch is an invitation to death. In the midst of the fascist state, a citizen lives in constant fear, fear of both sides, fear of being labelled a snitch by either. The play’s script, beginning with the cramping of the activist space and ending in Ernst’s suicide, does not provide any hope within the plot itself. But the writing and performing of such a play, at the time of an escalating Nazi threat, is in itself a definitive act of hope and resistance. The play opens a corridor to resistance art of the time; art as a mode of resistance to fascist assertions of the time, certainly against the German Nazis, but also against the likes of McCarthy, and against the fascism emanating from contemporary capitalism, directed against theatre and cinema practitioners with a view to muzzling dissent in the US and ferreting out resistance. That Odets himself had a brush with the McCarthy regime opens up the theatrical road that connects Agit prop¹⁸ to Brecht and later to Dario Fo.¹⁹ Staging/or rather Zooming that play live, and the fabulous response it got, evidenced that it had struck a chord somewhere, in a collectivity that wanted to believe, and to hope. As we bemoan the lack of internationalism, and the fact that bourgeois art connects globally and dominates theory because of its financial resource, cyber options enabled us to strive towards that radical internationalism. Many friends from all over the globe saw *Till the Day I Die*. The ability and desire to make connections between activist art and the

¹⁸ A mobile form of outdoor revolutionary theatre. A detailed discussion of the form follows in Chapter 4.

¹⁹ Dario Fo (1926-2016), Italian playwright. Practitioner, performer, and theorist, and a doyen of anti-capitalist theatre. His plays and theories are discussed in a detailed manner in Chapter 6.

act of building bridges across nations had been struck. Dissensions within, betrayals and sell outs, make fighting a difficult task, but regardless, the dark play shows the will to fight. In portraying domination, surveillance, and inhuman brutality, the resonances with contemporary India were hard to not hear.

Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* presented another equation. It's a difficult play. The protagonist, Helen, is problematic within any kind of a social (read patriarchal) framing. The first reading of the play left a lot of people in the group cold; the opening office scene seemed rather obscure with its staccato, incomplete sentences.

Slowly the play grew on the group. In keeping with better theatre forays, the play raises a lot more questions than it attempts to answer. People in the group, men in particular, like many in the audience, asked: "It's she who is unfaithful, has an affair and kills her husband, how does one empathize?" But it's a play that transcends the mere need for empathy (Do we see a touch of Brecht here? Was Treadwell familiar with Brecht, and with Piscator? Brecht was beginning to sort his distancing devices, working with Erwin Piscator²⁰ and starting with Kurt Weill²¹). Its success lies in making us see beyond Helen, see the decadence of contemporary society (read nexus of capitalism and patriarchy). Within our existing frameworks of patriarchal - capitalist understanding, we may begin by seeing her as a fool to have done what she did, and trusted whom she trusted. Then we realize the inadequacies of our understanding processes and the limitations of our theoretical frames of theatre. The systemic critique is big, enabling us to focus most on the politics of the play; the marginalized position of the woman in contemporary society. At a point, we are pushed to ask, does her husband in the section entitled 'Honeymoon' subject her to a violent rape, or within a more sympathetic paternalistic discourse, does the scene take the play into a very dark area where her sexual consent is being violated? Her lover sweeps her off her feet. What are his modes of seduction? On his first meeting, he confesses to having killed two people - Mexican bandits - with a bottle filled with pebbles, for 'freedom'. The glorification of masculine violence, and in masculine discourses, violence being seen as a never-failing

²⁰ Erwin Piscator (1893-1966), German theatre director producer. Along with Brecht, the pioneer who sorted the nuances of the politically charged, critical Epic Theatre. More about Brecht and Epic theatre appears intermittently in this book.

²¹ Kurt Weill (1900-1950), Jewish-German composer, persecuted by German Nazis, who fled to the US in 1935. He became a US citizen in 1943. While in Germany, he composed music for Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (1928). In the US, they tried to tie up a musical adaptation of *The Good Person of Setzuan* (1944) but that did not happen, for reasons explained later.

tool to seduce a woman, is obvious. Even if he is lying, the two friends are proud of their narrative, and see it as a turn-on for Helen.

The love scene is enthralling and gives us a glimpse into Helen, but only a glimpse. The larger part of our protagonist remains opaque. She is trusting. But he betrays Helen. It is his testimony (possibly to save himself from extradition?) that finally nails her. His act smacks of some sort of a 'men only' morality, an abstract masculine bonding, a loyalty to the man whose wife he has had an affair with, rather than loyalty to the woman he was involved with. Called out for her violence and sentenced to the electric chair, to a gory, violent death, the play retains the mystique around its protagonist as she confronts religion (a priest) and goes to her death with a resolve as hard as the system that kills her.

So, socially, some betrayals are 'good' and some forms of violence are valorized; man on woman and men on racially 'inferior' men. And women?

The questions remain pertinent. They contribute to an understanding of theatre where difficult issues from, and of, the margins, are brought forth to the main stage. Theatre as a site for the solving of issues remains incomplete and unresolved. This Zoom production was better, the gait was redefined as head space, moving in and out, using the space covered by the laptop camera became important, and music and light - as usual - enhanced meaning. The performance stuck to the bare bones of the performative; the idea was not to let anything come in the way of the questions explored. Again, a dark play, striking chords with the victims of domestic violence, took us to the very roots of feminine resistance, showing again that the radical too exists as an alternate and vital tradition to be tapped into in mainstreaming times like these.

In the time of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns, cyber theatre made enabling additions to the definitions of theatre. Pandies' has a vital outreach that feeds into its understanding of theatre. Before the pandemic hit, probing workshop theatre was being done in at least three places in Delhi itself: the Shaktishalini²² shelter home for women; Saksham School²³ in Nithari village; and with Afghan refugees. The pandemic reduced them to being merely narratives in the media: sagas of unprecedented domestic violence, of unimaginable migrant labor stress and the hardships of people

²² A grassroots women's organization, Shaktishalini has been in existence from 1987. Pandies' has been very closely associated with it, being a part of its outreach programs, as well as training the residents of its shelter in theatre. Many women-oriented stories in pandies' plays have been researched from its case studies.

²³ A charity school in Noida, close to Delhi. This school is a site where pandies' has been conducting workshop theatre since 2006. It is a focus of detailed analysis later in the book.

who seek refuge from different countries, supported by the UNHCR²⁴ alone without any legal or financial support from the government here. How does one negotiate with a theatre activity that had been so much ‘out there’? In the third cyber performance, the storytelling mode brought that alive. Three underserved outreach sectors and the digital divide showed. The internet failed, and often we had to reach out and make an effort to procure a single phone/laptop that could be used by many participants in each zone.

Shaktishalini shelter residents have always stood out in terms of their performances, putting up many deep disturbing plays in the pandies’ studio. This was a different challenge. The group was comprised of some residents who had worked with pandies’ before, and some who had joined the shelter subsequently. There were also those who had left the shelter and were living outside now, but were still very much a part of the Shaktishalini support structure, seeking ongoing help and counselling from the organization. Some were now even working there. What was the experience of these women - some of whom had escaped domestic violence by turning to the shelter, and those who had been there earlier - of the numbing effects of the lockdown shut away in a shelter? We got four stories and one set of loosely-strung narrative poems.

One story came in the form of a letter from a young girl who had left home to get to the shelter, to her father. It was a powerful recounting of the problems faced by this parentally-proclaimed ‘crazy’ girl. Another story was of a girl with an orthopaedic disability, who felt a lack of adequate parental support and an excess of social hostility, where everything in her life was measured in terms of her disability. A third story was a harrowing tale of domestic violence, where the male partner habitually beat the girl, convincing her that she was so bad that she was forcing him to do it. In the climax, he broke her teeth with a rolling pin. When one tooth stuck in her mouth, he forced her to pull it out with her bare hands. In the fourth story, in today’s charged communal ambience, a Muslim girl elopes with a Hindu young man and both face threats.

Young people from our beloved terrain, Nithari, young people who are sacked and turned away from their meagre employments contributing to house chores, felt disturbed and disillusioned. Measured and experienced actors that they are, the stories from this sector were truly amazing. There were historical allegories, such as placing Covid alongside the Spanish flu, and stories of people trying to sustain themselves and help others, succeeding and failing, as well as heart-rending stories about efforts in the

²⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the agency that assists refugees across the world.

pandemic. And there were stories of what the pandemic and its consequences did to the Afghan refugees in India, a country which has no legal status for them, even though UNHCR, perceiving the nation's centrality, gets them to India via Pakistan and then tries to emigrate them to western countries.

The performance, in its entirety, formed theatre with diverse episodes, revealing the underbelly of the pandemic. Revelations abounded about escalating domestic violence and the general 'looking away' from it, of the strengthening of authoritarian aspects of governance, and of religious supremacism. And while the privileged complain about the boredom, and the resultant angst of the lockdown, we were ready for a direct confrontation with those who bore the brunt, who came from their villages to the city in search of work and money, and, divested of both, found nothing but misery. Cyber theatre, in this activist mode, emerges as theatre which has an enviable range, and the ability to confront social apathy and bare the state's attempt use the pandemic to further its authoritarianism.



Fig 0-2: Trial Scene, *Machinal*, 2020

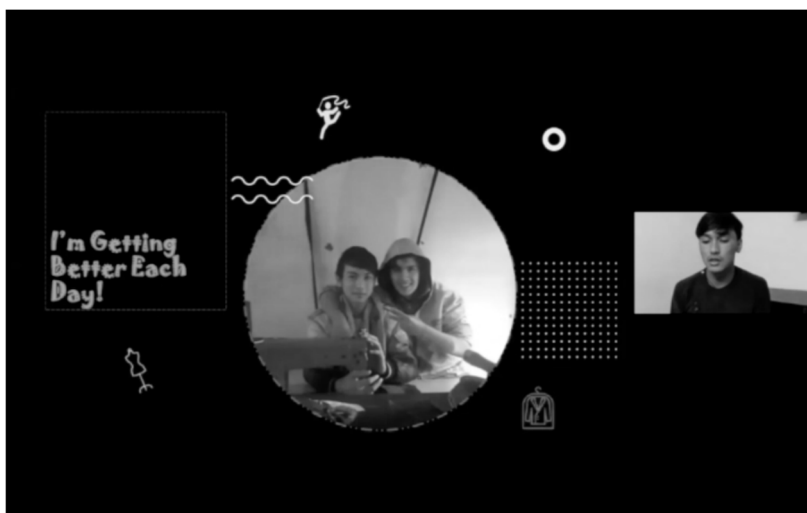


Fig 0-3: Afghan story tellers 2020

CHAPTER ONE

DEFINING INCOMPLETE

*He was...
(She touches him on the shoulder)
Not inside me
We met in the corridors
Held hands in the canteen
He wooed me all over
In the backseat of the car
In the corner seat of the cinema hall
He kissed me*

Not inside me

*Flowers and stars later
Wines and dines behind
Venus would have descended to penis
if I was in the mind*

Not inside me

*There beside me
He talked
Of undying love and happiness ever after*

Not inside me

*His love grew
Spread its tentacles
End to end
Kashmir to Kanyakumari*

Not inside me

*He said
Money was easy to get
Laptops and stratagem
Just get it right and you win the fight*

*Our world was divided into us and them
 You could be paid to just kill them
 Embezzlement belongs to the past
 No need to think of forgery
 Chopping a neck, pull out the innards and carve the body
 Perfect the art of butchery
 An assertion of identity
 And it has to be done as a feeling of majority*

*Not inside me
 His love grew
 Ayodhya, Benaras¹ and holy cities few
 Roaming and necking
 Ruins of desecrated mosques*

*It grew
 embracing the smell
 of the charred bodies of holy fathers
 It grew
 forcing its way through
 the unwilling thighs of nuns
 It grew*

Not inside me

*It grew
 Along with heaving, smelling male bodies
 Over prepubescent girls of other faiths
 It grew
 With the force of the spikes
 That penetrate the bodies of their children*

Not inside me

*His love came back to me and said
 We are made for each other – consummate fast
 You and I both are upper caste
 We are in danger of decimation,
 We may actually be reduced to 80.5%
 The greatest yet will be our progeny
 Forging the country's destiny
 Strong, united, mainstream
 Disempowering the naysayers
 Wiping out the margins.*

¹ Two cities in India regarded as holy among Hindus.

*Not inside me.
And if it took root
I would bury it there
Converting my womb to its tomb.*

*(to her husband)
mediocrity, misery maybe
but never cruelty in the name of majority*

*the right position is not right
there's a battle ahead, prepare to fight*

*be steadfast, be true
and you will be there beside me
with all my strength and all my love
inside me.²*

This is an excerpt from a pandies' play (usually put to music or recited in the hip hop/slam traditions), *Not Inside Us* (2004), written and then performed as the last in a series of three consecutive attacks on the emergent (though growing and consolidating) right-wing domination of Indian politics. Stating a politics of change rather than an endorsement of the system, the anti-majority sentiment comes, as is often the case with theatre practice in pandies', from a woman's voice, and her economic marginalization deliberately enables her as much as her gender. Calling out the bigotry of the times, the section is a war cry that moves to a battle against the state, against the social status quo that a right-wing dispensation demands. The passage is a promise that holds just that - a promise, not a completion, not even an assurance of a possible victory, and it is shot through with a certain kind of sexual humour that provokes a smile, though not laughter. As script and performance it delivers a vulnerable political incompleteness. But how do we get here?

"Let us play",
"No more work. Take a break. Tell me a story. Come let's play".

² Regarding the scripts, many have been written by one author and some by multiple writers. At the end of each chapter the writer(s) and the year of the first performance of each play is cited.

For purposes of analysis, all the scripts used in the book have been written by Sanjay Kumar. Originally, many of them are multi-lingual (English, Hindi and Punjabi) and they have been translated by the author himself for the purpose of this book.

The attractive world of ‘play’ takes us beyond our routine life. The play hour and its attraction are manifest from childhood itself, from “let’s play” to “let’s do a play”. ‘Play’ - a word with a thousand meanings, has at least one meaning that links to theatre, emphasizing the ever-present ludic in theatre. Speaking from a perspective of four decades of performing and acting, of playing, ‘theatre’ as its more versatile synonym ‘play’ is seductive, and also stands in violation of the ‘rules’ that bind us in our lives.

“What purpose does this acting, this theatre serve? What do you do here?” I am asked often, especially by fathers and older brothers. How can we explain that theatre is the purpose itself? This book is an attempt to answer this. Theatre is its own answer, as we, among many things, underscore the limitations of the world around us, play to outperform ourselves, look inwards developmentally, and seek collective visions of better futures.

What do we do here? We ‘act’ and we ‘perform.’ The spectrum of binary meanings inherent in both words points towards theatre as the reconciling ground of opposite meanings. Both words have an ‘as if’ and an ‘actually’ aspect which gets reconciled on the theatrical stage. To ‘act’ is to proactively do something, and it is also, therefore, to play out the mimic of doing something. The word combines the binary of real doing with the performance of it. Similarly, ‘performance,’ as we all know, from the verb ‘perform’, encapsulates a binary - to pretend, play act, and also to do, and importantly to achieve, something. Participating in a theatrical performance is the coming together of these opposites, as the pretending becomes the ‘act’ itself, and performing is the performance. The playful ‘as if’ repeatedly shows the limitation of the actual, prompting us to constantly qualify, even negate, the actual, with inputs of dreamy ideals and aspirations, inputs that prompt us to be developmental and create collective visualizations of a better world for more people.

The teacher contributes with his research. Fluid though its form is, theatre creates a binary with authority, with orthodoxy. Standing in the historical corridors of theatre as we proceed to look backwards into time immemorial, theatre is a naysaying form, perennially in an inimical relationship with authority, with discourses of hegemony and the attempts to contain us. Authority is definitive, it acts without that awareness of the duality enshrined in acting. To be told that it is only play acting - mimicking - is an insult to authority. Theatre on the other hand, wallows in taking the multiplicity of the act together, subverts showing that the acts of authority are actually mere acts. And how do these theoretical opposites deal with theatre? The history of theatre is also a history of attempts to ban, control, and buy out its activism. Let’s delve into this history.