



ASOKA THEATRE PUBLICATIONS

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**INDIC THEATRE MONOGRAPH SERIES**

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No.2

**IN THE SHADOW OF  
THE SHAH**

*The Indic contribution to our  
developing South African culture*

by

**Professor Dennis Schaffer**

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UNIVERSITY OF DURBAN-WESTVILLE

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**ASOKA THEATRE PUBLICATIONS**

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The INDIC THEATRE MONOGRAPH SERIES is an attempt to publish material on theatre performances and related areas that have their roots in the South African Indian experience. To distinguish performances from the Indian subcontinent, the term 'Indic' is being used, while 'theatre' is used in its widest sense, encompassing performance acts from rituals to variety concerts.

This apparent ethnic focus is the direct result of South Africa's apartheid legacy, where, as a result of imposed racial segregation, an important area of cultural experience has been sorely neglected by scholars of South African theatre, mainly through a lack of any tangible exposure. This neglect, however, is not only a consequence of the forces of apartheid keeping cultural activity, to a large extent, within the narrow confines of race, but also the result of an academic tradition with a Western cultural bias. This oversight is also compounded by the fact that Indic theatre is mainly confined to the Natal geographic region, the original area of settlement of the Indian people.

More difficult to prove, but nevertheless sensed, is the suspicion that Indic theatre is also perceived to be irrelevant to our evolving cultural identity, and that its main expressions are its exotic, but culture-specific, dances with overt religious themes that are perhaps not consonant with a materialist ethos.

Research will show, however, that Indic theatre spans many decades of vibrant activity in the various Indian languages and in English, with forms of presentation not limited to what originally came with the Indian settlers, but showing the influences of other cultures in a way that makes Indic theatre a unique contribution to the changing South African cultural experience.

This monograph series seeks to redress the current imbalance in research undertaken in the field by providing students of theatre with a springboard for a more in-depth investigation into this neglected area.

Kriben Pillay  
*General Editor*

## FOREWORD

22 February 1994

May I congratulate your department on the launch of the *Indic Theatre Monograph Series*. I am sure that it will fill a gap in the field of performance studies and make a much needed contribution to the historical and contemporary vision of theatre in South Africa.

Dr Muthal Naidoo's *The Search for Cultural Identity* both informed me of theatrical events of which I had no knowledge and reminded me of historical occasions such as Krishna Shah's production of *King of the Dark Chamber*, which I was privileged to see at the M L Sultan. Bashkar's performance and his opening dance are still vivid memories.

Muthal's closing remarks of 'rejecting the notion of a fixed culture and identity' and yet being caught in 'the contradiction of having to assert an ethnicity' are germane, not only to an apartheid history, but are also the issues that face all of us as we forge new identities under a democratic constitution.

Once again congratulations and I look forward to future issues.

Yours truly



Fred Hageman  
School of Dramatic Art  
Wits University

# **In the Shadow of the Shah**

## *The Indic Contribution to Our Developing South African Culture*

**PROFESSOR DENNIS SCHAUFFER**

It was Steve Biko who described the culture of the dominant order in the South African society of the day as 'Anglo-Boer'. This conjunction of forces achieved its unity only in its joint domination of the black majority. The battle for national hegemony was fiercely fought between the two white groups but the nature of their domination was quite different in each case. On the one hand, a white Afrikaans-speaking Calvinist cultural force sought to establish itself as dominant within the concept of an all-white social order. All other races were only to be permitted to function within this society as a source of labour. In time the classical Apartheid vision was transformed into one of Separate Development with slogans such as 'separate but equal', used in answer to mounting criticism, ostracism and boycott activities from abroad. On the other hand, the white English-speaking community, operating from within the tradition of Liberal Humanism, sought to open the doors of its own institutions and groupings to incorporate all those of other races who were prepared to identify with and accept the dominance of the Liberal Humanist and Capitalist social theories.

Of the two forms of cultural dominance it is the English liberal tradition that must be regarded as most inimicable to the establishment of a 'people's culture' in South Africa. Despite its obvious iniquities, the Afrikaner Nationalist vision, by placing the emphasis upon the 'separateness' of peoples, did encourage the

preservation and development of non-Eurocentric cultural expression. This, of course, was done as part of a deliberate attempt to separate and alienate groups. Naturally also, only such material as did not reflect critically upon the *status quo* within society or did not present an alternative political vision was tolerated. Ultimately, both white groups failed to recognise a vision of an independent and unique single nation with a single culture that could develop out of the fusion of the powerful 'separate' forces within our society. Although the purpose of this paper is not to examine this complex history, any evaluation of the importance of the visit of Krishna Shah to Durban in 1961 is impossible outside of a consideration of the sociopolitical context of the times.

The year before this visit had been a significant one indeed in our national history, for it was in this year that the Sharpeville incident that shook the world occurred, and with this came the banning of the ANC and the PAC. But while the economy of the country reacted negatively, South Africa still maintained its position as a major trading nation in the world, and if there were an equivalent in this country of the 'American Dream', white South Africans were living it in 1960. The English liberal tradition had, however, been dealt a severe blow with the promulgation of the Extension of University Education Act. 'Black' students could no longer attend 'white' universities. With a nil growth rate in the economy and with mounting pressure from trading partners abroad, the Anglo-American Corporation and other products of the liberal, English-speaking, capitalist tradition sought other ways of preserving their privileged position by validating their role in society through programmes of what has latterly become known as 'affirmative action'.

One such act was to provide financial support for black cultural activities which, when translated into effect, meant that the money went to those organisations whose ethos was perceived to fall within the Eurocentric paradigm. A notable example of such patronage was the support given to the Union of South African Artists with premises at Dorkey House, Johannesburg. Originally instituted by black artists as a body with the objective of protecting its members from exploitation by the white-dominated entertainment industry, it soon became a white management organisation itself, using black artists in performances of works by Beckett, Pinter, Sartre and Steinbeck.

The South African theatre in the sixties operated under conditions that were as difficult to comprehend as they were entirely unique to this country. No other nation before or since has required theatre practitioners to apply to four different government departments for four different permits to allow a performance to play legally to a racially unsegregated audience. No other nation before or since has been so obsessed with the provision of separate toilet facilities for whites, coloureds, Indians and Bantu in theatre venues, along with other places of public recreation and entertainment. Separate residential areas, which still exist as I speak, were serviced by separate, segregated systems of public transport. Not only schools but the entire education system within the country was and still remains divided into a bewildering array of separate authorities. In addition to this, government buildings in those years had separate lifts and separate counters for different races. Taxis served separate communities; public toilets were for separate races; beaches, parks, hotels and other amenities were still segregated for various race groups; and cinemas that had been granted special permits to screen films to mixed audiences had to provide separate entrances to separate areas within the auditorium, while the films screened had a separate set of requirements imposed upon them by the Publications Control Board.

As for Union Artists as a body, its potential to be the start of an important movement for black rights within the theatrical world was effectively neutralised not only because of its domination by white management and white financial backing, but also by its programme of activities. Included in this programme was the invitation to Krishna Shah to visit this country under its auspices – a safe choice as he came not from India, the motherland, but from an American University noted for its adherence to the Stanislavskian Method school of training which, with its emphasis upon both individual motivation and environmental factors, could be seen to be supportive of the liberal humanist tradition itself, as it was understood and applied in social action at that time. It was not until more than a decade later that this concept was led towards an entirely different level of appreciation through the writings of Paulo Freire. 'A real humanist', he wrote in 1972, 'can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favour without that trust'.

The visit to Durban by Krishna Shah in 1961 had, then, a complex and highly suspect set of motivations as its backdrop. Although one could now set about substantiating this allegation and making this the primary point of focus of this paper, I intend to shift to a personal and individual viewpoint. I am aware that in doing so I must now move from the relative safety of facts, figures and quotable quotes from respectable sources to considerably more dubious anecdotal accounts and personal reminiscences. But as personal experience was my road into this subject, I must now trust it to lead me outwards towards a more comprehensive view of the significance of Shah's visit.

In this I am assisted by a particularly vivid memory of my attendance at a performance of Tagore's *King of the Dark Chamber* in Durban, directed by Krishna Shah and presented under the banner of Union Artists. I can still recall the very physical presence of Bhaskar on that stage, together with the general excitement one felt when witnessing any work of significant theatrical impact.

But far more vivid is my remembrance of the discomfort I experienced on being one of the very few white members of the audience on that particular occasion. Never, until that night, had I felt the intensity of being so racially and culturally separated from my fellow South Africans in the audience. I sat as a lone white in a row of curious Indian strangers. My every reaction to the work was, I believed, being observed and I felt as uncomfortable as one of my present Indian drama students confessed to feeling recently when for the first and I suspect the last time ever, she attended an opera at NAPAC. Our respective attendances at these events was prompted, I think, by much the same motive – the belief that as drama students we owe it to ourselves to expose ourselves to as many different dramatic and performance experiences as possible.

In my case I continued to be part of the creative output of the Department of Speech and Drama at the University of Natal, under the professorship of Elizabeth Sneddon, but I also realised that I needed to go beyond this. I began to attend Classical Indian Music recitals in the Durban City Hall, and shows at the Orient Islamic Hall. It was at one or other performance there that a

programme insert invited membership of the Theatre Council of Natal (TECON). I joined. The fact that I was TECON'S only white member caused both myself and the organisation many problems. I well remember standing with my wife on the pavement in Grey Street outside the main entrance to the Himalaya Hotel while a meeting took place between a much-troubled hotel manager and the chairman of TECON. The letter of apartheid legislation at that time was as viciously enforced as it was complex in interpretation and the manager had good cause to be concerned. In the eyes of the law the situation was that an Indian theatre group had hired an area in an Indian hotel in an Indian Group Area for an Indian cultural event. There was no room anywhere in this concept for the possibility of white membership of such a group. That night I experienced in mild form something of the indignity and humiliation that the majority of South Africans have had to live with all their lives. The experience was salutary. When the manager, with obvious misgivings, finally decided to let us in on sufferance we were personally escorted via an unobtrusive outer stairway to the upstairs venue. A small table for two was produced and placed in front of all the others in such a way that as we sat there we were caught in the general stage lighting. We knew then that, whether by design or by accident, we had become part of the show that night.

After a speech by the chairman the audience was requested to stand in silence as a token of respect for and in solidarity with a list of detainees that was read out. Then a musical item was presented followed by an Indian auction, the first I had ever experienced. This constituted the first half of the evening's fare and by that time a family had taken pity on us and invited us to join them at their table. We accepted with gratitude and the table for two disappeared. The second half consisted of short sketches, protest poetry and dance performed by members of TECON all dressed in movement blacks, as we call them in drama departments, that is, black skirts or leotards and black trousers or tights. The setting consisted of black blocks, which was very much the sort of setting used in drama departments at universities then and now. But, while the style of presentation displayed the influence of the training most of the performers had received at the University College for Indians on Salisbury Island, the material and ethos of the work presented was clearly not what could even vaguely be described as derived from that source. It was strong, pertinent,

politically dedicated fare, and thoroughly effective theatre. However uncomfortable I might have felt, I believed that, like spinach, this was good for me and I was shattered when my membership could not be renewed the following year because of the particular BC stance adopted by the organisation. I wrote what I considered at the time to be a reasoned appeal to the organisation to judge membership eligibility on the basis of the member's declared political stance rather than upon the colour of the member's skin, a determination which I regarded as inverted racism practised by a group that so eloquently denounced such a phenomenon. I did not receive a reply but this in itself was a clear message to me: 'You're white, so you're out'.

As I disagree fundamentally with censorship, and in the Arts the denial of the right to see, participate in, or research any aspect of the theatre constitutes blatant censorship, I must admit that my exclusion from TECON membership on racial grounds threw me completely and it has taken me years to come to terms with it.

Interestingly enough I recently sought an interview with Bengi Francis and Sats Cooper in order to gain insight into the development of TECON beyond the movement that I considered myself to have been an early witness to, but my request was refused. The reason given was that in their view 'one of them' should research this. I had a distinct feeling of *deja vu*. My present research into the sociopolitical context of the times has, however, helped me to understand better the dynamics of the situation, an insight I could never have enjoyed had I not been forced by personal circumstances to return to this country after a period abroad. I lost contact with Natal and South Africa for a couple of years when I emigrated to the UK, but I soon found my way home.

Lack of insight into the complexities of the local scene landed me in hot water in 1981 when I came back from England, innocent and unsuspecting as a lamb to the slaughter, to manage the Little Abbey Theatre at a time when the use of the premises by the Durban Theatre Foundation was, for various reasons, bitterly resented by persons such as Ketan Lakhani of Communikon, Saira Essa of the Upstairs Theatre, and others in the Indian community. The Little Abbey was set up ostensibly as a 'Community Theatre', but the Durban Theatre Foundation's definition of this term was challenged by many.

In the view of many, too, it was a question of out of the frying pan and into the fire when I left the Little Abbey to enter municipal service as Durban's first full-time Director of Arts. The previous year a black boycott of Durban Arts funding had started. Despite going independent in 1983, funding still came from the City Council, although Durban Arts was now administered by an entirely open and independently constituted body. These developments brought me face to face with the harsh realities of cultural boycotts and non-participation as political strategy. It also provided me with the opportunity of gaining a valuable insight into these issues through my discussions at that time with Alan Joseph, Ketan Lakhani, Dr Muthal Naidoo, Ronnie Govender, Sonny Clothier, Kessie Govender, Faruk Hoosain, David Bhengu and many, many more. Phrases such as 'cultural hegemony', 'Eurocentric paradigm', and 'dominant ideology' started to enter into my stock of everyday expressions.

When the professorship in drama was advertised at the University of Durban-Westville I did not at first consider the prospect of applying seriously. 'Twice bitten, doubly shy', I thought. The progression from management of the Little Abbey via the Directorship of Durban Arts to Head of the Drama Department at a Broederbond-dominated Tribal College did not appear to place me on an altogether healthy personal trajectory! But further enquiries led me to believe that my initial impressions of this University were possibly outdated and ill-informed. Having ultimately accepted the Professorship of Drama, I can now say that this was one of the best moves I have ever made in my life – not that I regret for one moment any of my previous moves, as each has provided me with experiences of value. The reason for such a positive response is that the post has brought me into contact with a staff and student body that has with patience and care helped me to form a better understanding of those troublesome incidents in my life, such as my being debarred from membership of TECON.

As far as the University work itself was concerned I felt totally at home, apart from Bharatha Natyam in the Movement Course. The syllabus and approach were the same as that which I had encountered both as a student and lecturer at the University of Natal and essentially the same ground was covered, though not in the same way, at Bretton Hall in England where I enjoyed two happy years as Senior Lecturer; but whereas I could lecture to

students at Natal University and in England assuming a certain background of contact with live theatre in the Eurocentric tradition, I found that this was not an assumption I could make at the University of Durban-Westville. I soon discovered that my students had had very little, or indeed no exposure whatsoever, to the formal theatre in my understanding of the term. The closest many had come to this was in the form of a school play, rehearsed in a classroom during lunch hours and presented at a community hall using microphones.

Recently our growing intake of Black African students has increased the need to provide our drama students with exposure to the technically sophisticated theatre. This is necessary not as an end in itself, I hasten to add, but as part of the required general knowledge that drama students need in order to appreciate much of the world's theatre. It is not at all difficult, of course, to account for this difference in the backgrounds of the various student populations: Group Areas; racial segregation in education and in all other areas of social life; disproportionate state funding of so-called 'white' cultural amenities in 'white' areas; etc. The list is long and the results appeared to be self-evident, but I had the niggling feeling that I was missing out on some key insight. I recalled the visit of Krishna Shah and the lively theatre of the sixties. Was that just a passing phase? How could I determine this?

It was at that point that I realised how ignorant I was of the ongoing contribution of Indian South Africans to the theatre in this country, and although I had seen the odd production of significance here and there, I had fallen right into the trap of assuming very arrogantly that whatever theatrical developments had occurred since 1860 in the Indian Community, these would simply have been gauche or brave attempts to follow the Eurocentric tradition of theatre. As a drama student I had of course learned that the very first important theatrical treatise in World Drama was the *Natya Sastra*, but this had never given me pause to consider the possibility of there being an Indian theatre tradition *per se* in South Africa. I was also having great difficulty in coming to terms with the concept 'Indian South African'. I know how my hackles rise when people refer to 'the whites of South Africa' as though every person with a white skin in South Africa thinks and acts alike, but here was I, glibly referring to 'Indian South Africans' without further qualification.

It was clearly time for me to do some homework on this subject. Of course Krishna Shah's visit, if this was a starting point for me, could not stand alone. A great deal of theatrical development had occurred before this date. A significant period of study for this purpose, of course, would be that from 1860 to 1900. Here the foundations would have been laid for all future development. There appears, however, to be very little theatrical primary or secondary source material that one can turn to for a history of this early period. I must consequently confine myself for the moment to the present century, as at least some information can be gleaned from the personal testimony of individuals who are still alive today and who played a role in this development, and from newspaper and other written reports of such theatrical activity.

The earliest visual evidence I have so far discovered dates from 1908. This is a faded photograph in the possession of Ms Sylvia Lawrence who, when four-and-a-half years old, took part in a production of *The Caliph of Baghdad*. The photograph also shows her father as the Grand Vizier. He came from India on a holiday visit, met Ghandi and was persuaded to stay on, and worked for Ghandi for six years as a secretary. Lawrence was from a very old Catholic family in Madras. Sylvia's mother was the first Indian woman in South Africa to study Western music. Naturally the mother gave all the children their first lessons in music. Sylvia Lawrence is currently the organist at St Anthony's Church in town, while her sister was, until her recent death, the organist at St Paul's in Reservoir Hills. Sylvia was educated at St Philomena's School in Chelmsford Road, and she and her sisters formed the first Indian trio playing classical Western music. She and her family attended recitals at the City Hall and went to plays at the Theatre Royal in West Street, and they lived in Gale Street even after it had been declared a 'white' area. She and her father were members of the Durban International Club in Plowright Lane and her one brother married an English girl from an aristocratic family. The ties between the Indian settlers and the white community seem to have been reasonably close in the early days. The photograph also shows a white woman who took the part in the play as Esmiralda the fairy. She was a Mrs Paruk. All this goes to substantiate Ms Lawrence's own claim that they as a family were totally 'Western'. But of course this claim has something of an ironic ring to it when one considers the South African social context within which it is made.

The plain truth is that apartheid philosophy did not include the concept of Westernised, Christian Indians in its grand master plan. The contribution to the Arts by people like Sylvia Lawrence must in consequence have been severely curtailed by social circumstances and her family's many achievements are the greater because of it. The Lawrence family was very involved in the presentation of musical variety shows in aid of funds for the St Anthony's Church. The Lawrence trio played at functions all over Durban and after one performance at a City Hall function, Dennis Shepstone was particularly complimentary on their playing. They were involved with the Natal Indian Teachers' Association productions of *The Mikado* and *Chu Chin Chow*, presented in conjunction with the Durban Philharmonic Society, and Sylvia Lawrence has taught classical Western music for many years. Recently she wrote and directed a play for the St Anthony's Church group.

Undoubtedly all of this amounts to a contribution by an Indian Natalian to the local theatre tradition, but how does one go about assessing this kind of contribution? This example merely illustrates the myopia of attempting to reduce a phrase such as 'the Indian in Natal' to some kind of stereotype. The contributions by Indian Natalians to the local theatre scene have been on many different levels and not one, but many traditions of such contributions can be traced. So, just how many different kinds of 'Indian' contribution are there? 'Western' Indians made their difficult contribution despite the system, but unconsciously they did so in a way that was in total support of the dominant system by reflecting the values of the system in the form and structure of the works produced. The audiences were not challenged, social inequalities were not questioned, and alternatives to the dominant cultural forms were not sought by this group.

The same is true, though in a different sense, for the various community theatre groups that presented work in the vernacular languages, almost invariably on an amateur basis and for philanthropic, fund-raising motives. The earliest record of work of this nature that I have thus far managed to trace is a reference to Tommy Lalbahadur – affectionately known as Tommy Nanoo – in the Souvenir Brochure of the Aryan Benevolent Home and the Arya Yuvuk Sabha. Here it is recorded (p 96) that on 23 November 1916 an enthusiastic group under the chairmanship of Mr Tommy Lalbahadur and supported by Messrs G. Sohawan, K. Ramsaroop,

J. Mahabeer, Bahadur Sing and F. Satyapal (then F. Gareeb) constituted themselves into a Mandal which they named the *Arya Yuvuk Bhajan Mandal*. Their plans were simple and positive – to produce a play with the sole object of raising money for the Sabha.

At a later stage the name of the group changed to the more appropriate *Arya Woonathee Natak Mandal*. After considering a Hindi translation of one of Shakespeare's plays, and then a play based on Rajah Harrishchandra, it was finally decided to present *Shakuntala* by Kalidas. Lalbahadur directed and performed in the piece. An important note in the Souvenir Brochure reminds the reader that all of the performers were essentially working class people without college education, fine homes or social position. I am indebted to Mr Rhamboros of the Aryan Benevolent Home for details of the practical staging of these productions which were put on at the Royal Picture Palace in Victoria Street (Rawat's Bioscope). At that time there were no halls available for Indian theatrical presentations, so when the film show ended on Saturday nights the cinema became a theatre with shows starting at around 10.30 pm. What is astonishing is to discover that seat prices varied from 7/6 (seven shillings and sixpence) reserved to 2/- (two shillings) for ladies and children in the top gallery. These prices are taken from a handbill of 1920 and in those years 7/6 must have been a princely sum to pay for a stage show. Admittedly the money was all donated to the Benevolent Home so that we cannot judge this entirely by commercial theatre standards, but effectively this meant that, judged as community theatre, one has to assume that it catered predominantly for the developing middle class in local Indian society.

The physical conditions of presentation produced two curious phenomena:

1. The street scene.
2. The use of microphones.

In order to facilitate scene changes on the shallow stage behind the curtains in this cinema, street scenes were introduced to serve much the same sort of function as did the curtain speeches, stand-up comics, and solo items of the vaudeville stage in Western theatre. According to Mr Rhamboros, it was here that some local references crept in.

The use of microphones on stage is perhaps not as peculiar as it may at first sound. Firstly, possibly the most important factor in this regard was the lack of any formal voice training available for members of the cast. Secondly, there was the size of the audience. The record of returns for *Manorama Madanjith* and *Kalank*, presented in 1919, showed £202.8.6 (two hundred and two pounds, eight shillings and sixpence). At an average seat price of around 4/- (four shillings), this implies an audience of about a thousand people. Thirdly, by this time the cinema venue would already have had a sound system to which microphones could be connected.

The use of microphones is still current in Indian school productions to this day and possibly for much the same reasons. But one has to note the severe limitation this imposes upon the movement potential of the performers. We encounter the use of microphones even among the first professional theatre groups. One such entrepreneur was Matiemugan Pillay, who presented professional shows at the Durban City Hall, Bolton Hall, Clairwood Tamil Institute Hall, Andhra Hall, Clairwood, and at other community venues during the fifties and early sixties. Production photographs still exist clearly showing the use of microphones on stage. This phenomenon is unique to the Indian community and I have had first-year drama students here at UDW who, when they are taken around the complex for the first time, ask me where the microphones are in our tiny Asoka Theatre (maximum seating 200)!

The Mandal thrived under Lalbahadur, but in 1930 he resigned and this effectively was the end of the *Natak Mandal*. The use of theatrical presentations of one kind or another for the purpose of fund-raising for cultural organisations, schools, societies, clubs, homes and religious organisations has been a constant factor in the tradition and still continues today

Two distinct traditions of theatrical development have now been mentioned and I could go on to consider others, but what is needed is a suitable research methodology for the theatre in order to assess the significance of all this activity. Traditional recording of theatre history has viewed development in the field in terms of discrete countries, periods and cultures. Rarely is the interrelatedness or the interdependence of such records the core of concern. Richard Southern's *The Seven Ages of the Theatre* is a brave exception and is consequently, in my view, a work of primary

importance. What he achieved is the conversion of a vast body of separate, international, traditional theatre research material into an eclectic account of the development of the common forms theatre has taken in various cultures at various points in their several histories. This then provides us with a model for accessing the interrelatedness of the progress of theatrical forms both historically and interculturally.

On this campus at the University of Durban-Westville we are fortunate to be faced daily with a rich multicultural diversity and this constant, living reminder of the realities of our national social circumstance should, in an art which holds up a mirror to society, logically be reflected in our teaching and research methodologies. The slogan *One Nation One Culture*, much bandied about in these days and much misunderstood, does not imply a denial of cultural diversity nor of the value of discrete systems as such, but rather it suggests an holistic approach which is, I suggest, in search of the very interrelatedness and interdependence of systems that the Southern model exemplifies. In practical terms then, while it is important to note that vernacular drama has been presented to Indian audiences in Natal since the latter part of the last century, it is far more important to note that the street scenes that developed as an endemic part of Tommy Nanoo's productions between 1917 and 1924 can arguably be seen as springing from the same theatrical necessity that informed the interludes in Tibetan festival drama, the Basque Pastorales, the performance techniques of Elizabethan players and many other theatrical forms that developed at various times all over the world. The necessity common to all was the need for continuous performance. The common features were the use of local dialect and settings, and comedy as a vehicle for implied social commentary.

On the one hand then, theatrical development can be demonstrated to display both unique and common elements coexistent in its natural development. On the other hand, however, native theatrical ceremonies can and have been arrogated for the furthering of different ends. The Chistianisation of pagan rituals can be quoted as an example and the process could be regarded as reactionary and antithetical to the growth of naturally-evolved, indigenous cultural expression.

We hear much currently of the hegemonic, Eurocentric, reactionary forces within our society, but we are on dangerous ground here for, if applied evenhandedly, the conclusion must be that important local movements such as TECON were thoroughly reactionary, having arrogated a theatrical form derived largely from a Eurocentric model for self-declared political purposes. Far from being a people's theatre movement, their venues, price of membership, initial choice of Eurocentric-theatrical fare, production style, education and background training of the principal directors and performers, all testify to their being a bourgeois group, however politically enlightened, performing to the educated middle class Indian urban élite. Their audiences were not drawn from Magazine Barracks or May Street. Yet my initial research has led me to the understanding that while middle and upper classes in Durban Indian society in the sixties dabbled with reactionary and counterreactionary movements such as DATA, the Shah Theatre Company, MAD, WIP, and TECON, the mainstream of theatre flowed richly on in the form of Therukoothu, Bharatha Natyam and other dance forms, the vernacular plays, Quawali, Nagaras, Bhajans, Geets, Gazzals, Natchanniyas, Nagaswaram, in the richly dramatic rituals such as the Kavady and in the visual splendour of the Morum, all of which were an endemic part of social life in the Indian community and existed as such as part of the primary cultural inheritance.

The shadow Krishna Shah cast over the subsequent development must therefore be seen in the context of the conflict existing between indigenous developing forms of popular culture and those that were colonised by Eurocentric forces. The irony was that many movements that could formally be defined as falling within the latter category were at the same time employing this form to express an anti-Eurocentric political stance. A similar ironic dichotomy emerged recently when members of the People's Liberation movement celebrated Comrade Mandela's release in Trafalgar Square by drinking champagne – the drink associated with the aristocracy. In this regard the final chapter of *Animal Farm* springs to mind. I also find a wry irony in the fact that when the workers themselves sought to honour Mandela and in a very genuine gesture of esteem donated their labour to the exercise of providing him with a car, it happened to be a top of the range Mercedes Benz, which also happens to be the ultimate success symbol in a bourgeois capitalist business world. Compare this

with the equally genuine and touching gesture of respect and honour accorded Mandela by a rural group that he paused to talk to at the roadside. They presented him with a sheep. Neither he nor any of his party quite knew what to do with it and it was last seen being bundled into the boot of one of the cars in the entourage.

The argument also frequently advanced against support for true, popular culture is that such culture-specific fare plays into the hands of the apartheid authorities in its attempt to entrench racial, cultural, language and religious differences for its own ends. The implication here is clear. Attend a D Mothie type extravaganza in the City Hall, Durban, or Ajay Hurban's *Blast No Bang* and you have sold out to the system, but it's safe enough to laugh your way through Ronnie Govender's thoroughly enjoyable *Lahnee's Pleasure* because it contains a politically halal message.

This is no idle issue, for when a dramatist like Ronnie Govender seeks to develop his dramaturgical skills by experimenting with poetic language or tragic form, his works fail to draw his usual crowds because his avid local followers enter the theatre in expectation of a giggle at a politically charged satire or locally relevant domestic comedy. It is an old argument that the script of *Lahnee's Pleasure* would suggest that the stranger's exit line 'One day, white man, one day' is chilling, whereas in actual performance locally the focus remains on the comic character of Mothie whose final dance totally upstages any political message. So a play designed to deliver a telling political statement achieves popularity for precisely the same reasons as a D Mothie extravaganza. The printed text reads out as 'significant, pertinent political theatre'; the real, local audience reads the live performance of it as 'entertainment'.

In *King of the Dark Chamber*, Krishna Shah used players drawn from the local Indian community, a couple of imported artistes, and one black African. He also ran workshops which led to the writing and presentation of indigenous works that reflected the sociopolitical realities of this society. It would be tempting, then, to conclude that relevant local theatre was introduced to the Indian community for the first time by Krishna Shah. But I am indebted to Dr Muthal Naidoo for information that a group was forming just prior to 1961 and that discussion had already taken place between

herself and Ronnie Govender mooted the creation of politically relevant plays with indigenous settings. What suggests itself, then, is that Krishna Shah did not initiate this movement but facilitated forces already present in the consciousness of local theatrical artists in what was a timeous visit.

Four distinct models have thus far emerged from this brief survey. Labels are always dangerous and misleading but for want of a better way of providing succinct descriptions of these phenomena I will refer to them as having been derived from the Classical Vernacular, the Popular Vernacular, the Eurocentric, and the Sociopolitically Pertinent Consciousness. In recognition of the multifaceted nature of the contribution to theatre being examined, it is perhaps useful to play semantic games and to refer to the 'Indic' contribution as an all-embracing term, as distinct from 'Indian' which would imply a more traditional 'motherland' influence. What is perhaps a curious, though I believe illuminating exercise, is to relate these movements to the phases of development outlined by Richard Southern. Southern's phases can be listed side by side with those of the movements briefly alluded to in this survey.

- |                      |   |  |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Costumed Player      | - | <i>Classical Dance Drama</i><br>Therukoothu, Bharatha Natyam, and other dance-drama forms.                     |
| Religious Festival   | - | Kavady, Morum, etc.  |
|                      |   | <i>Popular Vernacular</i>  |
| The Roofed Playhouse | - | From Tommy Nanoo's performances onwards.   |
| Illusion             | - | Eurocentric material undertaken by 'Indian' groups.  |
| Anti-Illusion        | - | As there has not been a pukka phase of Illusion for Indian Theatre, this phase is indefinable in this context. |

What emerges most clearly from this analysis is that only movements deriving from a Eurocentric tradition can thus far be classified in terms of the last two categories. With the notable exception of the use of microphones on stage, mentioned above,

theatrical developments in the Indian community have remained, in theatrical terms, 'low-tec': performances do not require sophisticated mechanical, electrical or electronic stage devices such as flying mechanisms, revolves, trucks, trap doors, lifts, projections, gauzes, sophisticated theatre lighting and sound equipment that constitute 'high-tec' theatre. I might add that while there is a long tradition of the use of amplified sound in community and temple halls and the like, amplified performance to an 'Indian' target audience is, within my experience, characterised by the worst microphone technique imaginable, coupled with amplification systems that are totally unsuited to the acoustic environments in which they are used. Bharatha Natyam performances are, sadly, rarely performed nowadays to live music and are instead backed by unequalled, unattenuated, fifth generation pirate tapes from surfaced, scratched records, poorly timed and badly amplified through tired auditorium speakers ineptly positioned with no fold-back facilities, at volume levels that vary from the barely audible to the ear drum bursting. By no stretch of the imagination does this enter the categories of either the age of illusion or anti-illusion. It remains firmly in the category of low-tec theatre.

The theatrical school of Realism arose in the West as a result of a confluence of forces. The interest in behaviourism as a psychological discipline placed peculiar emphasis on the individual as being, in significant measure, a product of a particular environment. In consequence, the setting or decor assumed a more significant role in an art which sought to examine and portray the human condition. Technical advances in stage lighting had seen a rapid movement from candle and oil fired sources to that of gas and then electricity. With each advance there was a commensurate increase in the efficiency factor. This meant that the lighting on the performance area grew progressively brighter and audiences were made more and more aware of the detailed and careful representation. Public fascination with first photography, and then with the moving picture images created in early cinematography, also tended to echo the 'slice of life' approach to theatre.

However, the mainstream local theatre produced by those of Indian derivation went through no such phase. So, while Kessie Govender brings real bricks and real mortar onto the stage to build a real wall in *Working Class Hero*, there is still no painted

backdrop of an unfinished building and the environs, no complicated lighting plot underscores the expression, and so on. When Ronnie Govender revived his well known work *The Lahnee's Pleasure* in the Asoka Theatre he designed his own set, but while the images in the play suggest a seedy, second-rate bar facility, there were no ashtrays clogged with cigarette butts, no ringstains on the wood veneer, no attempt at floor grime, and although the play is set in an age of segregated bars, a bottle of Frizzante was used as one of the tipples. (Frizzante has only been on the market for the last two years.)

It is important to realise that this does not amount to negligence but genuinely reflects an approach which simply does not recognise the primacy of Realist Principles. A clear example of this can be seen in Indian films. In *Swami Ayyappan* we find scenes of an actual pilgrimage with footage of actual, real-life pilgrims advancing to a particular shrine and in the next scene we are presented with a highly coloured representation of Gods standing on rather obvious cut-out polystyrene clouds and wearing very obvious headdresses. But no one in the particular target audience that the film appeals to questions this clash of artistic styles for one moment. There is also the true account of one 'auntie' who, when she came into the lounge during the screening of Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, wanted them to turn off the home video and to change to Eastnet. She refused to accept that what was on the screen had anything to do with the East because, as she pointed out, this was all brown and dark and, as any fool knew, the Gods were 'all light and bright colours'.

In recent years, with the subtle changes in the political climate, township drama generated by Black African groups has come more and more into contact with high-tec theatre and has weathered the encounter with this Eurocentric force with remarkable resilience. It has for the most part survived what could have been a formidable hegemony. At an earlier point in our theatrical history this force, as Kavanah (1985) has pointed out, could already be seen to be in operation in works such as Sinxo's *Debeza's Baboons* (1925), the sketches in Zulu performed by the Metetwa Lucky Stars in 1927, the Bantu Dramatic Society's performance in 1933 of *She Stoops to Conquer*, Herbert Dhlomo's *The Girl Who Killed to Save*, which was the first play in English by a black playwright,

published in 1935, *King Kong* in 1959, and many others. Set against this tradition, however, we can now list works such as *Woza Albert*, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, and others which demonstrate an equitable fusion between indigenous form and sophisticated presentational technique.

I think that artists in the theatre must come to terms with the fact that so long as TV exists, audience expectations of performance in terms of sophisticated live theatre technical presentation will grow. In latter works, the indigenous Black African tradition has triumphantly assimilated the advantages of Eurocentric high-tec theatre without compromising its cultural integrity. Interestingly enough, the form of theatre that emerges is one that is metaphoric rather than realist. A pair of glasses with a white nose attached, a white wig, or a coat transforms a Black African performer into the image of a white boss or foreman. Mime sequences of bus or train rides or journeys in police vans are all part of the stock-in-trade of this theatre, but more and more the calculated use of stage lighting is making itself manifest in an expressive rather than a realist usage which sees experimentation with top, side and rim lighting. I would suggest that so-called 'Indian' theatre traditions in this country could profitably learn from this example. For without confronting and coming to terms with the 'high-tec' expectations of the 'non-Indian' audience this theatre will remain culture-specific in a way in which the Black African township musical has not. At this point in our national development it is time for 'Indian' theatre to play a more generous and accommodating role in our joint artistic futures, to have faith in the strength of a rich and ancient past tradition and to incorporate such a strength into the generation of a new form.

So, while the shadow of Krishna Shah stretches over the last uneven and volatile thirty-odd years, what is required now is some other impetus that can carry the development forward into the next century. In the search for a truly indigenous South African form the 'Indian' tradition does have a major role to play; however, its strength lies not in the latter-day works of social realism which, while making a valid contribution to our theatre in general, still derive from a Eurocentric model, but rather in the stable traditions of forms still closely linked to ritual. Therukoothu, Bharatha Natyam, etc., have survived unaltered for centuries and will hopefully continue as stable elements in the culture. If the theatre

of a new South Africa can use the technical expertise of the Western Eurocentric tradition, the vitality and guts of the Afrocentric paradigm, and the stability of the traditional Oriental contribution, we could develop a unique and powerful form indeed: an articulate, lively theatre with a sense of stability and permanence within our developing new South African culture.

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