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ASOKA THEATRE PUBLICATIONS

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**INDIC THEATRE MONOGRAPH SERIES**

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No.1

**THE SEARCH  
FOR A  
CULTURAL IDENTITY**

*A personal odyssey*

by

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UNIVERSITY OF DURBAN-WESTVILLE

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ISBN 0-620-18154-0

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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*

# THE SEARCH FOR A CULTURAL IDENTITY

## *A personal odyssey*

The topic of this article sums up the direction which my personal exploration into theatre has taken. Even though I come from a very small community, the so-called Indian community in South Africa, the background that this community has provided is rich and diverse.

Because it is a tiny community, it is seen from without to be a homogeneous group. Meanwhile, it is an extremely diverse group with different religions, languages, customs, class and political affiliations leading to all kinds of internal tensions. This group, very conscious of its minority position in the country, is also subject to a vast amount of external pressure. As a result, there are two main modes of interaction within and beyond the community; the consolidation and assertion of an Indian identity and culture on the one hand, and the desire to cut across ethnic boundaries and form alliances with other population groups.

The first effort – the consolidation of an Indian identity and culture – is fraught with problems because of the diversity within the community itself. Each separate group seeks to preserve customs and traditions which it perceives to be unique to its own grouping. There are three main religious groupings – Hindus, Muslims and Christians – and within each of these, there are splits along language, custom and class lines. There are several language groups; Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Gujarati, and Urdu among others. Different religious and language groups tend to develop along separate communal lines. In addition, class and political groupings cut across these boundaries and create further divisions.

The second effort – the desire to extend oneself beyond the 'Indian' community – creates bonds across language and religion within the community and further alliances are made outside the community, with Whites or Blacks on a social level, and with progressives or conservatives on a political level. As a result, there are many 'Indians' who are trying to find identities which reach beyond the 'Indian'

community. Because the Western culture is dominant, some 'Indians' have sought to emulate White norms, values and customs and deny their origins. Others have acknowledged the strong influence of the West on their socialization but do not deny their origins. Still others, who also do not deny their origins, have asserted their right to be called African.

Though origins have influenced the perceptions of 'Indians', I believe material conditions in South Africa have been the major factor in influencing cultural patterns. What 'Indians' have in common with all other groups is the culture of apartheid. Being Black people (though apartheid consciousness does not include Indians among Black people), we have been subjected to a dominant culture, and like other groups have had to adopt customs and behaviours of the dominant culture and have developed an ambivalence towards our origins. What some of us have preserved of our original traditions are those elements that are acceptable to the dominant group. These elements are generally superficial and are regarded as exotic.

What we have gained from the apartheid culture is a sense of inferiority, disempowerment and a concern for self preservation at the expense of human rights. In other words, many 'Indians', I believe, have accepted the status of victim. Those who repudiate the role of victim have developed a fighting spirit which takes them outside the community and into alliances across ethnic barriers.

In the 'Indian' community, therefore, the search for identity is an ongoing process and it is an unspoken element in all cultural, social and political activities. Indic theatre reflects various unconscious and conscious assertions of identity on the part of theatre workers.

In my own attempt to reconcile the diversity of factors which influence the way I behave, I have rejected the term 'Indian' for myself. I was born and raised in South Africa and my life has been influenced by material conditions here and not in India. I have a residual culture that originated in India but that is where my 'Indianness' begins and ends.

I am a South African. My position is one of many positions adopted by South Africans of Indian origin. Some of us clearly regard ourselves as Indian and have kept strong ties with the mother country. Others have repudiated Indian customs and have adopted Western values and

traditions, preserving only those superficial aspects, such as clothes and food, which have gained the approval of the dominant culture.

I fall somewhere between these two extremes. I am proud of my origins, but what I try to express in my work is my South African heritage, a mixture of Western, African and Indian influences, and I hope that my artistic creativity reflects the uniqueness of my background.

My earliest recollections of theatrical performance are of plays in Tamil. I am from the Tamil / Telugu-speaking section of the community, and as I have indicated before, each language group forms a separate entity, so I have very little knowledge of what went on in the other language sectors.

Tamil plays reflected Indian mythology and history; plays about great heroes, *Kavalan* and *Galaver*, tragic stories, *Nullathungal* and *Sathiavan-Savathrie*, and dramatizations from the great epics *The Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*. The acting troupes were at first all-male companies. In vernacular schools, however, both girls and boys took part in plays. As a child, I took part in a production in Telegu of *Shakunthala*, the classic play by Kalidasa. By the late forties and early fifties women were performing in Tamil plays. In those years, the Indian films to which I was exposed were based on the same myths and history as the plays being produced. It is not clear to me, therefore, whether the performances that I saw were part of an old tradition, or whether they were part of a burgeoning tradition influenced by Indian films. Even today, there are those theatre workers who are strongly influenced by Indian films.

A factor that also influenced the development of the vernacular theatre was the segregation laws which restricted access to theatres and did not allow mixed audiences. (It was only in the eighties that mixed audiences came to be fully accepted.)

We had no access to the productions of African or White companies. We had no theatre venues either. We were allowed to use the Durban City Hall where a number of plays, especially by N.C. Naidoo, were staged, but cinemas, schools and community halls were the most often used venues. Segregation, which pre-dates the formal introduction of Apartheid, helped to confine early 'Indian' theatre ventures to more or less conventional lines.

At first, I believe, vernacular theatre was simply a continuation of Indian traditions and formed part of the artistic expression of the community. Once the influence of Western education began to be felt, and this was probably in the forties, there was concern to preserve and propagate Indian languages and cultural values. Vernacular drama was supported in the following ways: there were vernacular schools at which some form of dramatic activity, including music and dance, was practised; there were eisteddfods encouraging competition in music, drama and dance. This avenue of development continues into the present and increasing cultural exchange programmes with India give new strength to vernacular theatrical expression.

The vernacular drama, in my opinion, has been easy prey for assimilation into an apartheid culture. Because of the determination to preserve Indian traditions, culture took on the meaning that it has under apartheid – that it is unchanging and fixed. As a result, other developments which are expressions of a South African social, economic and political reality were not regarded as authentic for a long time.

In the fifties, the political climate in the country changed. There was a militant move towards desegregation with the defiance campaigns, the drawing up of the Freedom Charter, protest marches and boycotts. This had an influence on theatre activities. The Brian Brooke Theatre Company began to play to Black audiences, and in Durban the company performed at the Bolton Hall. In this way, 'Indians' began to be exposed to Western theatre. Performances of the company included *The Kimberley Train*, a play about a 'Coloured' woman passing for White. This development continued into the sixties when the 'Adam's' revues, such as *Adam's Apple*, came to the M.L. Sultan Technical College Hall and were followed by *Wait a Minim*, which featured the Tracy Brothers and African music. Politically aware White people became involved with 'Indian' people. They were mainly in education, and through school and other productions influenced the direction of Indic theatre. These people were interested in Indian cultural traditions, and began to produce Indian plays in English. The directors of these plays were friends of the community, people like Pauline Morel who was principal of Dartnell Crescent Primary School, a prestigious primary school for girls, and Charlie Shields who taught at Sastri College and then later at the Springfield College of Education.

Pauline Morel was particularly fascinated by the work of Rabindranath Tagore and produced several of his plays. Among her productions were *Sacrifice*, *Muktha Dhara* and Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. She had drawn together a group of theatre enthusiasts who formed her company of actors. They included Ansuyah Singh, Devi Bughwan (who later became professor of drama at the University of Durban-Westville), A.N. Naidoo and Hassan Mall. As a result of her influence, Ansuyah Singh was inspired to write *Cobwebs in the Garden* in emulation of Tagore. Charlie Shields directed James Elroy Flecker's play *Hassan* at the Springfield College of Education.

In addition to educators, education itself was another factor which influenced Indic theatre. As education was Eurocentric, we were exposed to Western literature and began to develop an interest in Shakespeare, as well as T.S. Eliot, J.M. Barrie, Terrence Rattigan and other British playwrights of the early twentieth century. Under the guidance of English teachers, schools began to produce these plays which were prescribed for study. Sastri College, a reputed high school for boys, became well known for its productions of Shakespeare under the direction of a Mr. Warriner and Charlie Shields.

This trend was reinforced when the Speech and Drama Department at Natal University in Durban opened its doors to Blacks and a number of people including Devi Bughwan, Guru Pillay, Gowrie Pather and myself, studied Speech and Drama. Our exposure to Western Drama now included, amongst others, the Greeks, Anouilh, Sartre and Lorca - the traditional Speech and Drama menu of the day. The fifties marked a departure from the earlier theatrical ventures. Indic theatre was moving in several directions. We now had productions in English as well as in the vernacular, and not only of Indian plays. Through the influence of Western education and White educators, 'Indian' theatre workers were also beginning to take an interest in Western drama. (I remember a production that toured the community called *The Money Box*, which was a translation into the vernacular of a Molière play, *The Miser*.)

These trends – vernacular theatre, Indian plays translated into English, Western plays translated into the vernacular, and performances of the works of European playwrights – continued into the sixties. The next step was to be the development of an indigenous drama. Some of us tried to get together at the beginning of the sixties to develop theatre

companies which would explore all the different avenues along which theatre was developing. These were tenuous efforts but they all came together after our involvement with Union Artists and Krishna Shah.

In 1962, Union Artists, which had promoted shows like *King Kong*, brought Krishna Shah out to South Africa to repeat his successful Off-Broadway production of *King of the Dark Chamber* by Tagore. A company, which was formed in South Africa with two Indian stars Surya Kumari and Bashkar in the leading roles, toured the country with the play. In 1963, Shah returned to South Africa to conduct a six-week workshop at which he encouraged the development of original work. At the workshop, which was held at the old St Aidan's Hall, he gave crash courses in directing, acting and playwriting. At the end of the six weeks, Ronnie Govender had written *Beyond Calvary*, Benny Bunsee had written a farce, and Benjy Persadh had written a social drama. These three plays made up a triple bill *Trio against Trains* (we had to contend with passing trains as St Aidan's Hall was right next to the railway line).

The group that had been involved in the workshop decided to form a theatre company: Durban Academy of Theatre Arts (DATA). The company included, amongst many others, Ronnie Govender, Welcome Msomi, Devi Bughwan, Pauline Morel, Fatima Meer and me. The company began immediately to look for plays to perform. The first play that it staged was Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, and then it produced *Cobwebs in the Garden*.

DATA was also involved in working with Union Artists in helping to promote productions sponsored by them in Durban. The venue that was used for these performances was the hall at the M.L. Sultan Technical College. A production that had its première at the M.L. Sultan Technical College was *Sponono*, written by Alan Paton and directed by Krishna Shah. This attempt to promote theatre in Durban ended when the Government banned the performance of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*. The controversy surrounding this production brought attention to the fact that plays were being presented to multi-racial audiences and thereafter there was stricter enforcement of the segregation laws and DATA was adversely affected.

While I was with DATA, I was teaching at the M.L. Sultan Technical College and had produced, with students from the College, *Le*

*Bourgeois Gentleman* by Molière. When that play had completed its run, the cast decided to join DATA and we began to work on a revue which we called *Christmas Nuts*. It consisted of songs and dances and many skits sending up various conventions and institutions in the 'Indian' community. It was not well received by the few people who saw it. It was regarded as vulgar because of the lampooning of traditions and a skit which included a strip tease.

At any rate, it indirectly led to a split in DATA ranks. Ronnie Govender, the students from M.L. Sultan Technical College, and I left DATA and formed a new theatre company to work on modern material and do original work. We called ourselves the Shah Theatre Academy, in honour of Krishna Shah. Though we adopted distinct roles – Ronnie was the playwright, I was a director, and everyone else was an actress or actor – we all aspired to all the various aspects of theatre and knew that we could develop our talents along whatever lines we chose. Our actors included Mohammed Alli, who had been a student at the M.L. Sultan Technical College, Kessie Govender, Guru Pillay, Babs Pillay and Benjy Francis, all of whom were to later make significant contributions to Indic theatre.

While we were waiting for Ronnie to write his play *Nineboy*, the rest of the group was involved in acting workshops over the weekends, and rehearsals for plays during the week. Between January 1964 and June 1965, we produced Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, Clifford Odet's *Golden Boy*, an evening of poems, mime and original one-act plays, and Molière's *School for Wives* (in an Indian setting), and took part in a National Drama Festival in Orlando with a performance of *Riders to the Sea*, in which Welcome Msomi played the role of the son.

Then I applied for a Fulbright Scholarship as I felt the need for more training. I left South Africa in 1965 and returned only in 1976.

When I returned to Durban in July 1976, I found that Indic theatre had moved beyond the rudimentary stage it had been in when I left in 1965. A corps of theatre workers had been built up through hard work and perseverance in national drama festivals in the late sixties and early seventies, in the work of the Black Consciousness theatre workers, the work of Guru Pillay, Maynard Peters, Benjy Francis and the Shah Theatre Academy.

I found that Kessie Govender had established his own group and Ronnie Govender was running the Shah Theatre Academy. I was invited by Kessie Govender to accompany his group of actors who were on tour with *Stablexpense*, a play which was enjoying a major success in Durban. For the next year or two I watched as Kessie's company put on several plays at 'The Stable' a theatre which Kessie opened in Queen Street. Among his productions were *Working Class Hero* and *Kagoose*.

Thereafter, I worked with the Shah Theatre Academy which was now under Ronnie Govender's control. While Ronnie was writing *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, the Shah Theatre Academy put on three one-act plays called *Three for Tea*, which included Ronnie's *Beyond Calvary*, and two farces written by me, *Having Tea and Go* and *Black Magic*. At this time the company included Mohammed Alli, Babs Pillay, Essop Khan and Manu Padayachee. Then *The Lahnee's Pleasure* was produced and the company went on tour with the production.

In addition to the work of these dedicated, part-time theatre workers, I became aware of a new development which was producing a new kind of theatre person and activity. The Drama Department at the University of Durban-Westville was training people in theatre. Saira Essa and Ketan Lakhani, from that department, established speech and drama centres for children and promoted productions of indigenous plays from the Market Theatre and some plays by local playwrights as well. Saira Essa's establishment was called 'Upstairs Theatre' and Lakhani's 'Communikon'.

At the end of 1981, after having acted in a *Chip of Glass Ruby*, one of the *Six Feet of the Country* films, I produced my first full-length play, *Of No Account* at the Communikon Theatre. In this play, I reacted against what I saw in other Black playwrights works; namely an appeal to authority without showing a will to create their own reality. The character, Stanley Twala, in *Of No Account* is a man who, though he has not yet taken control of his situation, is in complete control of himself and is definitely not a victim.

The play was nominated for a Critics Circle Award in Durban, so I decided to quit teaching and try my hand at working full-time in theatre. I formed the Work-in-Progress Theatre Company (WIP) with the cast of the play and took the production to the Laager at the Market where it was a

dismal failure. Nevertheless, I had embarked upon a road in search of an identity that would carry me beyond the confines of the Indian Community. WIP was a non-racial company and the plays that we performed examined interaction between Blacks and Whites. In 1982, I worked for a little while with the Upstairs Company which produced my second play *We 3 Kings*. I left the Upstairs Theatre at the end of the run. Then I wrote *Coming Home* which was produced at the Hermit Theatre in Hermitage Street. The cast included Hamilton Ncayiyana, Etienne Essery and Pippa Dyer. The play, A WIP production, was nominated for a Critics Circle Award and Hamilton for best newcomer. Hamilton played the role of S'hlobo, a Black man with a vision of the future and the willingness and ability to make it a reality.

Thereafter, WIP, comprising the cast of *We 3 Kings*, toured with the play. The company included Babs Pillay, Mohammed Alli, Essop Khan, Etienne Essery and Nasreen Moosa.

At the beginning of 1983, I put on *Outside-In*, a play about a mixed marriage with Essop Khan and Pippa Dyer. (In 1985, this play was produced by Michael Stainbank with William Abdul as director, as a fringe production at the Grahamstown Festival.) In April 1983, WIP revived *Three for Tea*, this time all the plays were written by me; they included the two earlier farces and a new play, *It's Mine*, about a woman who decides to raise her unborn child without the aid of its father whom she refuses to marry. The plays were directed by Babs Pillay, Mohammed Alli and Essop Khan.

While this production was running at The Hermit, another play, *Masks*, which I wrote at the request of Suria Naidoo of the Drama Department at the University of Durban-Westville and which she directed, was playing at the Asoka Theatre. In addition, the revue *Masterplan*, which I had written at the request of the United Democratic Front (UDF) was featured at UDF meetings at which information about the new tricameral system was being disseminated. This revue was banned in September 1983.

WIP continued to be involved in working with the UDF and I wrote three more revues, *Chicken Licken*, which took the place of *Masterplan*, *Allan's Coon Carnival* for the so-called 'Coloured' community's attempts to conscientize people about the tricameral system and, with a group from

Lamontville, *The Freedom Train*, which was an attempt to depict the struggle for liberation focusing on the history of 'The Freedom Charter' and fusing relevant events from the lives of Nelson Mandela and Albert Luthuli.

In addition to productions at The Hermit and revues for the UDF, WIP also embarked on a theatre-in-education programme. We put together a dramatisation of *The Return of the Native*, which toured the schools in Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

The company disbanded at the end of 1983 because of a lack of funds. I left Durban to make a new beginning in the Transvaal but I was forced to return to teaching. Since I left Durban I have written only one play, at the request of the Detainees Parents Support Committee. The play, *Nobody's Hero*, together with *Ikhaya lethu* (formerly *Coming Home*), was performed at the Laager at The Market in September 1987. *Nobody's Hero* deals with a detainee in solitary confinement whom we find dead at the beginning of the play and whose soul goes through a kind of purgatory in the cell. He is a man who has been through the Soweto Uprising of 1976 and is in detention again in the middle eighties.

Of all the plays I have written, the play that most overtly represents the search for identity is *Masks*. The play takes place in the mind of a woman who is of 'Indian' and 'Coloured' parentage and all the characters who appear on stage are various manifestations of her split personality. Her psychosis is born out of racism and it is only when she can acknowledge all elements of her heritage and accept them as valid within herself that she becomes a whole human being again.

Now I work in a homeland with African students and with them am exploring the potential for drama inherent in their experience. My goal here in the Far Northern Transvaal is to enable students, who are preparing to become teachers, to create their own plays and not rely heavily on ready-made scripts which often have little relevance to their lives.

In my search over the years, I have moved completely away from Indic theatre, unless one regards my efforts as part of Indic theatre simply because I am of Indian origin. Then the attempt to define the contribution of people like me challenges the notion of Indic theatre. Still, I realise that in order to be recognised, someone like me who not only rejects the

notion of fixed culture but also the notion of fixed identity, is caught in the contradiction of having to assert an ethnicity because race is still a major factor in our thinking in South Africa.

September 1992

### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Muthal Naidoo obtained a PhD in Theatre and Drama from Indiana University in the U.S.A. in 1972. She was a lecturer at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri, until 1976. She returned to South Africa in August 1976. Her play *We 3 Kings* was published in 1992 in the Asoka Theatre Publications Playscript Series. Muthal Naidoo is at present Head of Department, Drama, at the Giyani College of Education.