

# AN INTRODUCTION TO INDIAN THEATRE

By Priyal Sanghavi



*Chha Choku Chauvees (Six fours are Twenty-Four)*, March 2009, produced by Manhar Gadhia

**Orient stereotypes distort the realities of the arts world, but now globalisation has prompted the West to delve further into India and its hitherto unexplored aspect - Indian Theatre.**

## ANCIENT HISTORY

**Theatre is very much a part of India's ancient history.** It was earlier believed to have Greek influences but this notion is today dismissed. Early Indian theatre was indigenous with ancient texts like *Rigveda*, *Atharvaveda* and the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* providing material for playwrights. A fifth Veda concerned with a religiously correct form of drama was later added and it became known as '*Bharata's Natyashastra*'. This text, originally written in Sanskrit, is particularly striking due to its detailed directives on how theatre ought to be performed. India had its own bards - Kalidas, Bhavabuti and Bhrata. The first famous play for Europeans was *Kalidasa's Shakuntala* which was translated by Sir William Jones in 1789.

## BRITISH RULE

**Modern Indian theatre emerged during British rule.** It began as an outlet to vent frustration against the rulers. Soon enough it became the medium through which various socio-economic issues like secularism, nationalism and casteism were highlighted.

This was the only time the concept of 'national theatre' came up, according to theatre critic and playwright Ramu Ramanathan: "Arts and creatives became absorbed in the larger movement aiding political parties. However, after Independence, regionalism took over and Indian theatre was no longer national."

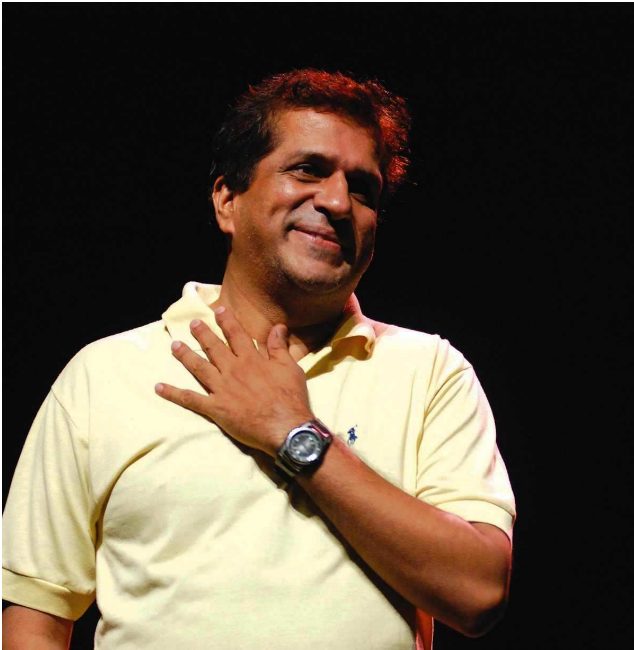


Actress Krutika Desai

## REGIONALISM

**Regionalism is the most striking feature of modern Indian theatre.** In a country with 29 states and 114 identified languages the formation of regional theatre was inevitable. Bhavai from Gujarat, Nautanki from Uttar Pradesh, Tamasha from Maharashtra etc were all highly popular in amongst their individual linguistic audiences. Hindi theatre and the newly formed English theatre became part of the urban landscape.

The 80s were one of the golden decades of theatre with the emergence of playwrights such as Girish Kamad, Vijay Tendulkar and Sarkar, who apart from writing their own plays took interest in their contemporaries and translated their works. This brought a sense of unification again but it was short-lived.



Actor Darshan Jariwala

According to Mr Ramanathan, English theatre in India has taken a few baby steps. "It is not as big as regional theatre but things have tremendously improved in the last 10-15 years. However Indian-English plays are yet to acquire the same popularity as an Indian-English novel or film."

This does not imply the absence of native Indian languages in cities. Gujarati theatre today remains highly popular, producing about 40 plays a year with some productions even staging shows abroad. Theatre veteran Darshan Jariwala thinks it is possible to live full-time off Gujarati theatre as they are popular and many plays are formulaic. He says, "Gujarati and Marathi mainstreams are not attuned to welcoming substantial experimentations; they do have a 'parallel' theatre movement, which is heartening."

## MONEY

**This highlights an important factor instrumental in Indian theatre today - finance.** Manhar Gadhia, a theatre producer with over three decades of experience, suggests choosing between experimental and commercial theatre has been an issue since day one. He says: "Experimental plays can hardly see profits in terms of money. One can expect a acknowledgment, goodwill, a wariness about one's group and sometimes minimal profit or break-even cost. It's a different scene in commercial theatre. Either you make profits or losses; it's simple business like any other."

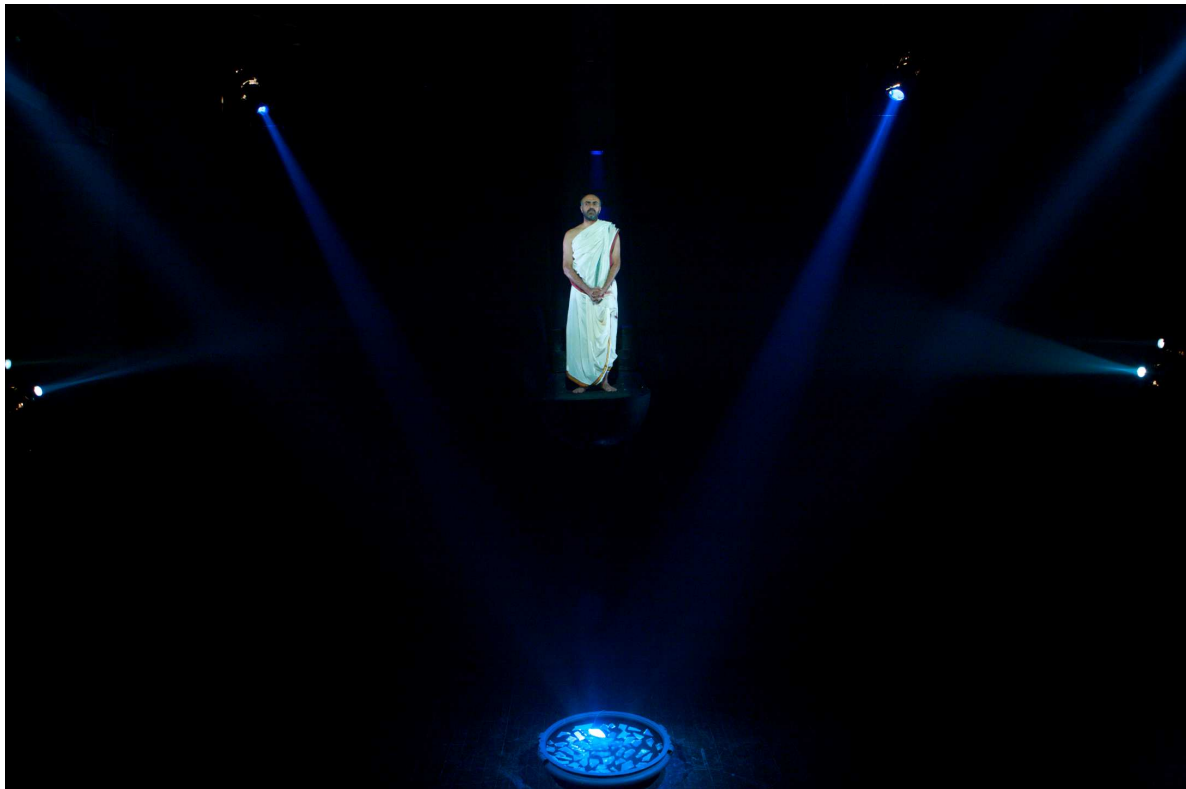


Producer Manhar Gadhia

## AN INDIAN WEST END?

**India has no counterpart to Broadway or the West End.** Theatre venues are scarce and other options such as colleges and historical sites provide more space. However, theatre experts unanimously believe such a set-up is unnecessary for India. Mr Jariwala says, "India is a vast hinterland of many languages, dialects, myths and cultures, defying the straight-jacketed view of a tourist-friendly destination."

A lack of venues is a grave issue facing Indian theatre. Apart from the expense of creating an Indian West End, the cost of each production would likely lead to increased ticket prices. For Mr. Gadhia, script is king with sound, music and lights coming second only to support the script. He says, "An average Indian theatre-goer will not pay a lot to watch an Indian play. Hence it's difficult to sustain such large-scale productions."



*Flowers* by Girish Karnad, director Roysten Abel (photograph © Kavi Bhansali)

However, what Indians do spend lavishly on is the Indian Film Industry or Bollywood. Millions are spent and made on more than 500 movies a year. It is very closely linked with the theatre, with many theatre artists crossing over to work for films, for the glitz and the glamour. Some stay with theatre full-time and many actors still prefer to be in theatre and seek livelihoods by other means.

There are a few successful actors like Naseeruddin Shah, Paresh Rawal and Mr Jariwala who went on to work across both platforms. Mr Jariwala says: "There are others, mostly working for TV soaps, who feel adding theatre to their resumes will give them an aura of 'serious actors'."

There are mixed predictions as to the future of Indian theatre. A shortage of funds and venues threatens to constrict the growth of Indian theatre but many artists continue to work in this field. Mr. Gadhia believes this is the main requirement of any theatre. He says, "I see a lot of talent pouring in each day. The youth of today does possess the talent and passion, both of which are the utmost necessity of the hour for theatre."



*Saat Tari Ekvees (Seven Threes are Twenty-One)* July 2008, produced by Manhar Gadhia

Regional theatre continues to enjoy the patronage of its selected audiences. Mr Ramanathan considers them to be 'rockstars'. "The target audience is dear, tradition is rooted and there is a desire to preserve one's own culture," he says.

Artists have been looking toward international audiences but English theatre is yet to take the plunge. Collaborations with English artists include Tim Supple's production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, which included an all-Indian star cast.

However these moves can be tricky, with Indians being particular about their depiction. Ramanathan warns foreigners not to indulge in certain stereotypes of the past. "Many previous collaborations consisted of cultural window shopping and smacked of colonial Imperialism. It's easy to show India as exotic with all colours."

## CONCLUSION

**The motives of theatre artists differ.** Sometimes it is about keeping a traditional art alive, spinning original content or even making a commercially successful script with tried and tested formulae. Few have succeeded abroad. Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* – an internationally acclaimed award-winning play is a notable exception. Gujarati plays have also travelled world-wide with some success

As Mr. Ramanathan says, "The West is keen on listening to a billion people. The question is who gets the message across."

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