

# HINDI DRAMA COMPETITION

*The following two articles carry the respective opinions of the writers, who were appointed to act as judges for the Hindi Play Production Competition, organised by the Sangeet Natak Akademi at New Delhi.*

## I

### Hindi Play Production Competition

By

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**D**ISAPPOINTING—shall I be ungracious enough to say so? But my disappointment with the *Hindi-Play Production competition* begins not so much with the unimaginative devices of production e.g., commentary through the loud-speaker, the disembodied voice in the theatre, the wailing of the violin to heighten melodramatic effects, and the other paraphernalia of the film art as with the material that was not normally conceived as a drama. The production methods might have made certain plays perfunctory efforts, tired and tiring. They might have been distractions. But the real trouble lay in the confusion in the minds of most of our playwrights between a series of episodes acted on the stage and a dramatic action that seeks its potential form on the boards of the theatre.

I do not know why our playwrights do not often realise that a drama is not a literary exercise, not an essay for illustration, not even a vehicle for social, moral or political debate. A drama is a coherent, singularly disciplined and evocative image of a conflict or a tension whose destiny is beyond the present, beyond the moment acted. Therein lies its unique form as distinct from its structure. And in the creation of that form is the meaning of the play.

#### Drama

I, therefore, do not think that a narrative of events, however skilfully chosen can ever make a drama. A drama is a mode of communication through intelligible devices of character, clearly defined action arising out of the vitality of those characters involved as they are in a process of living, and adequate

speech-structures. They all create the sensuous and palpable image of the playwright's experience. Every movement, every gesture, and every word contribute to illuminate the sensuous equivalent of the experience. Anything else is irrelevant and does not really belong to the theatre art. What cannot be an integral part of the dramatic conception, what cannot be organically related to the central image will always remain irrelevant molly-coddle. I want my play to be a *play* for I know that its created form will knock at my conscience to make me realise the playwright's vision of life.

My complaint about the present series of play is that most of them lacked a clearly comprehended dramatic image. The result was that I watched a series of dubious and uncertain episodes stubbornly refusing to be relevant theatre. And, if along with this defect, you imagine your playwright righteously uneasy to deliver innumerable precepts to evoke my noble self, there will be nothing left of either dramatic consistency or dramatic certainty of tone. The plays often did not *move*. They pottered about. The material was never assimilated into the dramatic structure. Whatever else they might be they were not plays that could have had a living quality on the stage. Their form was episodic. Their material however basically true to fact, was irrelevantly exaggerated and sentimentalised. And as such the speech-gesture relationships were awkward, and consequently irritating.

#### Patthar ka Devata

Perhaps, what I have said is much too general to be wholly valid. I shall take each play as it was performed. *Patthar Ka Devata*

(Kamalakar Date, Indian National Theatre, Bombay) was an unevenly constructed play. It opened too leisurely and then either lapsed into low comedy or unmotivated melodrama. There was an apparent, and I must add, naive ambivalence in the mind of the playwright: he could not make up his mind as to whether he wanted to create an image of the suffering of millions of people in the rural areas or that of the liquidation of the old gods who controlled the destiny of those people. At any rate, it was ostensibly spun round the twilight of the dying gods and was a fitful attempt to portray Raghuraj Singh divested of his old power as a zamindar magically changing to accept the socio-political revolution taking place in the country. The old abstractions and superstitions to which he had clung and the memories of which had always given him refuge from the changing patterns of life, were shown to melt into the inevitability of the historical necessity. His bitterness, his chicanery, his rough and ready justice were changed, without sufficient dramatic relevance, into joyous acceptance, a willingness to participate in the new social process and a worship of the new gods carving a new destiny. The triumphant humanism of the end was contrived by endless melodramatic devices. The play did not begin where it ought to because the play had no coherent central image. A variety of episodes, each pulling the characters to its own specific direction, not only created an unmanageable chaos of irrelevant conversation but also an irritating uncertainty of tone. An absence of dramatic centre cannot be compensated by fluency of conversation or by over-elaborate stagecraft. The play hovered between the ludicrous and the sentimental, the melodramatic and the comic, the gruesome and the vainly pleasant.

To present a material with no inherent dramatic development is in itself a difficult responsibility for any producer but when you further impose upon it the film technique, the results are bound to be disastrous. I fail to understand the use of the film apparatus on the stage: the background voices and songs, the speaking of the photographers to communicate inner conflicts and the striking of the musical notes to heighten passion. I believe that a play cannot be adequately presented if jacketed in the film technique. The two modes are so different from each other.

## Zamana

*Zamana* (Romesh Mehta, Three Arts Club, Delhi) clustered together a motley crowd of types no thicker than a penny and no wiser than an adolescent. I have no objection to type characters. They are easily recognizable and immediately comprehensible. But the types in *Zamana* were pathetically unrealistic (drawn from the films in India) and idiosyncratically isolated from each other except for the fact of space. They had no life. They were not dramatically articulated to create a legitimate action, spacious enough to allow them to grow, chiselled enough to control their unnecessary exuberance. Types like Bhola Ram, old, poor, uncertain of aim and direction in life; Parvati, devout, poor, scared, with a faith amounting to credulity; Chamba, a vaguely resentful daughter; Sunder, young, aspiring to be a painter but inordinately rebellious; Jaggu, a vagabondish friend, cynical, light-hearted, superciliously bumptious; Seth Radha Charan, sly and portentous, Malti, the rich man's romantic daughter looking for aesthetic-cum-emotional satisfaction (a wax-like angel); Nain Sukh, the wicked servant; Seth Kirori Mal, a lecherous money-lender; the police-inspector, might appear as workable characters when the intention was merely to foist some enjoyable dialogue; but, if the playwright wished to create a drama that was significant and satisfying, he ought to have added an extra dimension to them. In the adequate articulation of the characters lies the soul of any play. *Zamana* wrecked itself on the fundamentals of playwriting. The characters could not live because they were given no life to live. This was made worse when the producer shifted the emphasis to the externals: tortured intonations, violent gesticulations, maudlin theatricality, chopping of the speech rhythms, nervous twichings by the actors (Seth Radha Charan particularly) and overstatement. The production aggravated the lack of direction in the play itself.

## Konarak

When *Konarka* (J.C. Mathur, Arts Theatres, Eluru, Andhra, and Maharashtra Kalopasak, Poona) was performed, I was convinced that a significant play cannot live on the boards of a theatre if the linguistic structures are isolated from the spoken structures. Too literary a language, a commendable quality in itself and in other forms of writing, produces emotional barrier, a sort of an impregnable Chinese

Wall, and however much the actors and the producer may devise subterfuges to circumvent it, they will face deplorable failures. No playwright can afford to remove his diction and the rhythms from the spoken diction and his spoken rhythms. It is by thinking and living in the language of the people that a drama affects imaginative responses. Divest language from its living vitality, you suck the life of the drama and produce irritating apathy in the audience. What a pity that our playwrights rarely realise the necessity of creating their significances from the language that has the vitality of our spoken speech. Of all forms of literature the drama is the only one that breathes the richer the more its structures of language are rooted in the structures that are spoken round the corner of my street. Only the playwright can reveal to me the nuances I never comprehended before. *Konarka* was too far removed to be of significance on the stage. Another consequence of the literariness of the linguistic structures was that the playwright devoted his energy to the lines rather than to his characters and form. I do not think a literary language is enough compensation for the sacrifice of characters and form. Given such a play the producers and the actors could have done anything better than throw out words like cornered pebbles. Rhetoric, that was inevitable, could hardly give any breathing time to the actor to concentrate his attention to the portrayal of character and significance.

#### Sarhad

*Sarhad* (K. B. Chandra, Allahabad Artists' Association, Allahabad) opened on a propitious note. It raised certain hopes. The stage was naturalistically designed and delicately conceived, though the sides tended to be unnecessarily over-burdened. The two huts and the convoluted hills struck a note of authenticity, except that the flight of pigeons was an attempt to carry naturalism beyond the dramatically relevant. Even the stars contributed to the atmosphere and added to the depth of the cyclorama. The morning dawned smoothly. But then the trouble began. The external props could not save the playwright from the slow movement of the dramatic action. Minutes passed and you discovered yourself where you were when you started. The build-up of the theme was tantalising. Every minute brought hope and yet you were where you were. Wherein lay the fault? Was it in the theme where the walls of hatred were

to be shown slowly rising and equally slowly disappearing? Or did it lie in the lack of dramatic veracity of the playwright who confused diffuseness with communicability? I think it was the latter. Having begun with the building up of Sharafat Hussain, the playwright was coerced to emphasise repeatedly Sharafat Hussain's pride and his apprehensive hope of redemption. Repetitive emphasis is explicable when the character is either complex or has the possibilities of assuming complexity, but Sharafat Hussain was a flat character and refused to be amenable to that treatment except by being dull and monotonous. The whole centre began to evaporate into thin air leaving us with nothing but frowzy melodrama. After Act I the play crawled occasionally even became static.

Another trouble with this play was that the characters were not well differentiated from each other. I maintain that a good play always differentiates its characters through appropriate language structures rather than through oddities. Oddity, the most obvious device to distinguish a character, does not make a character live on the stage. Linguistic structures, concrete images and metaphors, idiosyncratic turn of expression give to the character his distinctive place in the play. *Sarhad* unashamedly confused character and diction. The emphasis shifted to exterior devices. And exterior devices do not produce conviction. The faults of production aggravated the faults of the play. The actors were not properly trained. Except Sharafat Hussain and the Pathan, no other actor had either a sense of dramatic pauses or of dramatic speech.

#### Sanjh Savera

*Sanjh Savera* (D. P. Sinha, Allahabad University Delegacy Cultural Association, Allahabad) was an inanity perpetrated on an audience that could legitimately hope to be treated better. I wondered if playwright could afford to be so foolish and yet be not ashamed of his foolishness. It was an irritating evening when nothing happened to relieve the unending tears of Walrus. The whole affair was ridiculous, unworthy of any stage anywhere. Of course, the hand-out was pretentious. It claimed, *Sanjh Savera* is a story of the conflicting ideals of eternal values and the values of the moment, symbolised in honest, god-fearing and idealistic Shital Prasad and his cynical artist son Nikhil, respectively". These eternal values were supposed to survive the

rebellion and the cynicism of Nikhil, the young artist, who palely loitered on the stage to speak in a more pale manner. The play was moved with side comments, occasional trickle of despair, indirect argument and narrative with nothing to relieve the monotony except the surety of an interval for fresh air.

### Nyaya Ki Rat

*Nyaya Ki Rat* (Chandra Gupta Vidyalankar, Little Theatre Group, New Delhi) was neither a 'play' nor a significant social document. I do not suggest that a play cannot absorb ideas. I am only suggesting that when a playwright imposes his social consciousness on an undramatically conceived action, then he eliminates the play to prove his social thesis through artificially devised series of episodes. The process is irksome unless you have the genius of a Shaw. As it was *Nyaya Ki Rat* began to show its flaws towards the end of the First Act. No patterns in terms of characters were unfolded either for the relevance of the situation or for further dramatic development. Like the oil-presser bull you moved round the same point. The characters wavered between caricatures and social symbols. What was left was nothing more than the usual sentimental stuff to be eked out in Act II and Act III. The properly motivated drama unfolding a pattern was obviously lacking. By the middle of the Second Act even the social documentation began to appear irrelevant and the Third Act became unnecessary in the growth of Hemant and Sadanand. The whole thing was no better than a pigmy tucker's tale. The playwright never realised the possible existence of a central conflict and possibly could not conceive it in terms of developing characters. Of all the characters only Hemant had the semblance of a realised image, but what a pity that all opportunities of his growth were spurned aside by the playwright in the illusory hope of communicating his social thesis. You saw, therefore, only a cheap villain waiting to be redeemed by the bullet. In the final scene Hemant loses all the overtones of his character to become a pale shadow of a possible dramatic character. Sadanand, who began as a rake had a sudden spiritual transformation, psychologically unconvincing, dramatically frowsty and aesthetically unsatisfying. The whole episode was ludicrous. There was neither dramatic conception nor dramatic articulation. The other characters were mere shadows that could be as easily forgotten as conceived.

My complaint about *Nyaya Ki Rat* is that it had no dramatic movement, no adequate dramatic action. There were no patterns to make the characters dramatically dynamic. In fact, there was no tangible relation between characters and the devised action with the result that the gap had to be invariably filled up with the telephone. The play moved like a snail from the beginning to the end.

The production was full of inanities: Kamala didn't know typing; the England returned Jugal Kishore didn't have cultivated manners (he forgot to open the door for Kamala); Rajeew had no articulation beyond the length of his shadow; Kamala spoke in a callow voice; the movements on the stage were shuffling; and the diction uneven. The whole production was flat, colourless and monotonous.

### Naye Hath

*Naye Hath* (Vinod Rastogi, Anamika, Calcutta) was a mediocre play. The theme was slight, a plea for the freedom of choice particularly when traditions have become petrified. An excellent material which could have been built into a delightful comedy had the playwright not neglected the development of character and situation to over-chisel his lines for ironic, witty and humorous conversation. This fault was more apparent in the serious moments of the play: Vijay's return in the First Act, Mala's disclosure of evil in the Third Act and the final denouement. In such moments one realised the dichotomy existing between the wit and sparkle and the situation and the characters. The situation remained flat, rigid and limited in its space. The characters remained predetermined in their simple dimensions. There was no scope for any spontaneous revelation that constitutes the soul of a comedy. A feeling of artifice persisted and might have been oppressive but for the well trained actors who rendered their lines with ease and confidence. Shayanand Jalan, Anju Devi and Sunita Relin had mobility, refreshing articulation and understanding of the wit behind the words and they saved a mediocre play from remaining an inanity. They even absorbed the theatricality of Ajay Pratap (Bhanwar Mal Singhi) and the clipped mannerism of Vijay Pratap (Badri Prasad Tewari).