

The Critic's Calling: An Interview with Rajinder Paul*

PRATIBHA AGRAWAL

Pratibha Agrawal : Rajinder, I am happy that you are here with us today. As you know, Natya Shodh Sansthan is trying to do some work in documentation not only with artists and directors and dramatists but also with critics, set designers, light designers and others who have been active in theatre in one way or other. We know that you have had a long association with the theatre, for the last . . .

Rajinder Paul : Sixteen Years.

P.A. : Yes. You have been bringing out the magazine *Enact* and at one point of time you were also an active member of the Abhiyan theatre group. So far as I remember, I first met you when you visited Calcutta with *Hatya ek Akaar ki*. Therefore it's not only as a critic or the editor of an important theatre magazine that you have been connected with theatre, but also as a theatre worker. First of all, I would like to know a bit about your background—when and where you were born and how you got interested in theatre.

R.P. : I was born in what is now known as Pakistan we migrated to Delhi after the partition. I studied in municipal schools because my father could not afford to pay for a public school education. I started learning the English alphabet when I was twelve and when I was eighteen—I don't know how I managed it—but I was reading *Cats* by Emile Zola and *Ulyses* and so on during my summer vacations in school. Why I got interested in English literature I can't exactly say except that the language did appeal to me. I did try to learn Hindi because that was, to begin with, the medium of instruction, but I never really picked it up and I read very little literature in Hindi. I read what was popularly known as the pop writers. I read them perhaps out of curiosity, to know about the kind of life they depicted, but serious Hindi literature I have very little acquaintance with. But I did read English literature then onwards, though I was a science student and later did my specialization in mathematics. I had absolutely no interest in mathematics. What my parents wanted me to be was an engineer which I could never be because I was very bad at mathematics. But at the same time I started working in a printing press owned by my brothers. Since my father was ill I had to make some kind of living for my family and I started working in my brothers' press as a proof-reader. Then I went on to do my postgraduation, attending a morning college in Ghaziabad, and as soon as I had finished my M.A. I was asked to do a piece by the literary editor of a magazine called *Century*, brought out by

* This interview with Rajinder Paul (1940-1991), editor of *Enact*, and Vice-Chairman of Sangeet Natak Akademi from 1988 to 1991, was recorded (in Delhi) by Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta, on 5 October 1983. The transcription has been slightly edited for publication. Copyright: Natya Shodh Sansthan.

Krishna Menon, with an accent on the arts. In those days the magazine was in fact mentioned as India's own *New Statesman*. Since we were printing the magazine at our press and I was taking an interest in its literary pages the literary editor asked me if I would review a play.

P.A. : And what would have been your age at that time?

R.P. : Twenty-one. I am forty now.

P.A. : That means 1940-born.

R.P. : Yes. Twenty-one I was. It was an Ibsen play translated into Hindi as *Ek Gudia ek Aurat*. It was a very bad production. I had absolutely no knowledge of theatre. I'd never been to the theatre but I had read Ibsen. It was very easy to 'damn' the production because it was such a bad production and I did not have to be careful about anything. I think I wrote a harsh piece but it was not a bad piece and the literary editor jumped and said "That's the sort of thing we have been waiting for" and he asked me to become the theatre critic of *Century*.

P.A. : How did you feel at that time?

R.P. : I don't know . . . at that age you do think a lot of yourself when you've written your first piece and somebody has liked it. I had no experience of journalism though I had written several articles on politics in another magazine which used to be brought out by a Ceylonese editor who has now migrated to Ceylon . . . Hector Abhyawardene. He was a socialist. He said you give up whatever you are doing and join journalism but . . . I don't know . . . I worked on the *Century* for something like three or four years till it folded up. Even when I was writing for *Century* the kind of reviewing that was being done in Delhi with its accent on the English-language theatre which got the most publicity from the Delhi critics was what we call avuncular criticism: somebody was patting somebody's back — 'What a nice role you did' and that sort of thing. Somehow, without having any kind of grounding in the Hindi theatre or thinking about what Hindi theatre should be like, I knew what they were doing was wrong — it had to be an indigenous kind of theatre if it was to make any sense. So, dissatisfied with the criticism that was being done and knowing a little about bringing out a magazine working in a press, I thought why not bring out a theatre magazine, a modest one of eight pages, with about twenty people from the theatre? Since I was reviewing for the *Century* I did have a lot of friends in the theatre. Twenty of us got together and we thought if we just pooled in a hundred rupees each we'd be able to run the magazine for the first six months and then we'll see. Well, when I brought the dummy to them and discussed what would be the nuts and bolts of the situation, nineteen backed out and I was the only one left.

P.A. : And that was in the year . . . ?

R.P. : That was in October 1966. But I was so taken up with the idea—one doesn't know what one is wanting to be at that age — that I just went ahead with it. No planning was done, nothing whatsoever. One just had a few friends who said they'll contribute and would not charge and I worked out a budget of about five thousand a year and I could

afford to lose about two thousand on it so I just went ahead and brought out the first issue of the magazine in 1967 Jan. And I should say that by the time two or three issues were published, theatre people like Girish Karnad and others said this was the sort of magazine they had been waiting for. Because of my age and perhaps my upbringing I was not trying to accommodate personalities. We were ruthless sometimes . . .

P.A. : What do you mean by that?

R.P. : Well, the kind of criticism that we had seen in the daily press was, as I said, avuncular — as though the critic was an uncle of the players and was patting everybody's back: 'Oh, that's a nice role you played' and 'Well I know you have a job and still find the time to do rehearsals' and so on. They were tolerating shoddiness in theatre. They had absolutely no vision of what Indian theatre should be like and the accent that we tried to put through the magazine was on the indigenous theatre. And fortunately at about the same time an indigenous Indian theatre was emerging. People like Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh and others were writing very good plays and I think it was just the right time for *Enact* to come out. I leave it to other people to judge what the magazine has done. This is how it began.

P.A. : Very interesting, very interesting . . . What have you been trying to project all these years through *Enact*?

R.P. : Well . . . I reread the first editorial that one wrote which said that we would like to bring out serious criticism of the plays produced, we would like to project Indian playwrights, we would also like to print English translations of Indian plays written in various Indian languages so that English becomes the medium through which a particular script is translated into other Indian languages and also people who read only English have at least some acquaintance with playwrights who later become known nationally. So this is what one was wanting to do but it took us about two years to bring out the first full-length play because, as I told you, to begin with *Enact* was only eight pages and you can't bring out a full-length play in eight pages and I did not want to serialize the play. So in 1969, I think, the first play, *Ashadh ka ek Din*, translated into English by Sarah Ensley, appeared in *Enact*. The translation was lying around with Rakesh. We thought if we put it into small print we could squeeze it into sixteen pages and we just went ahead. By that time some of the special issues of the magazine were thirty-two pages. It had grown four times its original size. By that time one had become emboldened and the response that the magazine was evoking both in India and abroad, where people were wanting to get acquainted with the Indian theatre, was encouraging. We thought we were representing the Indian theatre.

P.A. : How were you managing your finances at that time?

R.P. : Well, we were not managing them, I was just sinking money into the magazine. We never became self-sufficient, so to say, but there is an interesting aside. You see, I was working with my brothers at the printing press and I was drawing seven hundred and fifty rupees for my expenses at that time. If I had married at that time as my family wanted me to I would have drawn at least another five hundred rupees. I thought if I gave another five years to *Enact* and didn't marry for the next five years it might be a good thing. So I did not marry, I kept my promise, and so did my brothers I suppose.

P.A. : Quite interesting! Postponing your marriage for the sake of a magazine!

R.P. : Well, I don't know . . . but maybe that is what seemed more important at that time and that's how one managed. I was losing on an average about five thousand a year. Up to 1970. Then we got some advertisements in '71 and '72, in which year's we brought out some of the best-known plays by the best-known playwrights. For instance in 1971 we brought out Badal Sircar's *Shesh Nei*, we brought out Utpal Dutt's *Hunting the Sun*, we brought out *Hayavadana*, we brought out the Mohan Rakesh play and several short plays including one by Balwant Gargi. Then we became ambitious but later one got tired of asking P.R.Os and other people for advertisements. I gave up hunting for advertising revenue and now for the last six years, more or less, *Enact* has been brought out without any advertising revenue. Now the loss is something like ten to fifteen thousand a year and I suppose one has been able to afford it.

P.A. : I don't know whether one should say it's a luxury to afford it. Useful luxury!

R.P. : I don't know if it's a luxury but a lot of people buy paintings and a lot of people buy other things and do other things and I suppose since one did not have any other indulgences I opted for this one.

P.A. : Very good. Thanks to you from the theatre world. I do not know if there is any other theatre magazine . . .

R.P. : There used to be one when *Enact* started, *Natya*, but by the time the first issue of *Enact* came out it had folded up. Then there is one in Hindi of course, *Natrang*. Nemiji has been bringing it out as a quarterly for the last twelve or thirteen years. There might be some in the regional languages, certainly in Bengali. There is one in Marathi. *Enact* began as a monthly. We have not been able to keep our promise. We used to bring out about ten issues a year till 1977. We now bring out six but the size of the magazine has grown. . .

P.A. : . . . five or six times, it's quite a thick issue now.

R.P. : On an average, we now bring out about three hundred pages a year divided into six issues of about fifty-two pages each, which is something like six to seven times the original plan. I had been warned by other people though, people like the *Theatre Arts* editor Robert McGregor, who, when he received the eighth issue of *Enact*, wrote back to say it's beautifully laid out but don't become ambitious because you'll fold up. He said that's what happened to *Theatre Arts*. But I think ambition to them and ambition to us had different meanings. We were being really modest so far as international standards are concerned. Expanding from sixteen to twenty-four pages when one is not really bothered about the finances is not such a big thing. Well, somehow one had managed.

P.A. : I will agree that it is a modest magazine considering the way theatre magazines are brought out nowadays, with very fine paper etc. To bring out a magazine nowadays one thinks that it must be very good to look at and then, I suppose, it becomes very difficult to manage the finances.

R.P. : Look, from the very beginning we have sacrificed one thing. We have not tried to print photographs, except in some special numbers, and there too we have rarely used

coated paper or art paper which is normally used for halftones. It's a compromise. A lot of people have complained that they would like to see good photographs of actors and sets but we have done without them. *After all, there are some serious magazines without photographs.* Maybe not so many in theatre. But that's what one opted for.

P.A. : Now I'd like to hear from you what you think the role of the critic should be in Indian theatre. Of course the critics are always there to criticize. But criticism of any other art—leave aside literature—and criticism of theatre have different effects. Theatre criticism affects the theatre movement in a special way. The performers have generally always complained about the critics and it always seems as though the two belong to opposite camps, fighting and criticizing one another. *Normally, as you will agree, we have seen that critics can play an important role so far as a theatre movement is concerned. Especially in India, where in a number of cities and in a number of languages we are still groping for expression, where the theatre groups are trying very hard to somehow present certain things to achieve something. What should be the role of the critic in this context, and are critics in India, in general, fulfilling that role and to what extent?*

R.P. : Well, I don't know about what the other critics think but so far as I'm concerned if you are interested in theatre and you are interested in writing about it and you are not taken in by personalities and you do not accept any kind of pressures except the theatrical, then you can become a critic. One assumes that the critic also has some sort of grounding in the literature of the region where he is working or the language with which he is dealing. A critic in India, I must tell you, has a lot more to understand than a critic anywhere else in the world. We deal with sixteen languages. Theatre in at least five or six major languages takes place in Delhi. We are expected to know something about the American theatre, something about the English theatre, something about the Marathi, Bengali, Kannada and Hindi theatres. Now is there any other critic in the world who has to know so much to write about theatre? One would be appalled at the knowledge displayed by some of the British critics or some of the American critics when they come to review Indian plays, if they ever do that, and even by the insularity of the British in not wanting to know about the European tradition. A critic has a tremendous education to go through before he can actually become a critic. Even then, to review a play whose language you do not understand is, I think, doing something with a disregard for propriety, because you really can't do it but still you do it. Secondly, I would like to say that only if you can withstand all the pressures — pressures of friendship, pressures of personalities, pressures of P.R.Os or whatever — and are willing to lose friends, only then should you do criticism. A critic is a lonely person. If he is not then I do not think he is a critic. He will have to live a lonely life because the moment he praises someone people will come over and try to socialize with him; and if he criticizes the same people another time, they will throw stones at him. So a critic has to know that he will never be befriended by anyone. Nobody, no actor or director in the world, has ever liked criticism. No critic has ever been able to drive sense into a performer, no critic has ever instilled humility in an actor, an actress or a director, because if you praise them they like you otherwise they find fault

with you. I think a good critic is one who goes by his own judgement. Of course the objective standards are there and you have to learn them.

P.A. : Subjective standards are also there.

R.P. : Subjective standards are also there and you have to learn those too. It's either that you can do it or you can't do it. I don't know of an ideal critic and I suppose we are all fumbling around . . . While I would like to be humble in my criticism I don't find humbleness on the part of the performer, so how do you expect me to be humble?

P.A. : I don't think you have lost many friends in Delhi or that you do not have friends because of your criticism! So what has been your way of handling this very sensitive . . .

R.P. : No, no. One certainly has lost friends and I have no regrets about that because if a friend can't take criticism he is not a friend worth having. Going back to your comment on my involvement with theatre, I should clarify that I have not really been involved in theatre. I was friends with Rajinder Nath and used to go backstage and into the green-room just to understand the mechanics of theatre — how the rehearsals are conducted, how a director directs a play. I spent quite some time with Utpal Dutt when I was in Calcutta. I was fascinated by the idea of rehearsals and it was just to give myself some kind of education in the mechanics of theatre that I became friends with some people. And of course you go to people who are in the same town and who accommodate you and that's how I travelled with Abhiyan. I was never part of Abhiyan, I never worked in the theatre in any capacity. I just lent my voice when Gandhiji says 'He Ram' when he is dying and that was my sole contribution to theatre!

P.A. : Do you think watching a play in the making is important for a critic and all critics of theatre should have some practical knowledge?

R.P. : Well I think it is important in the same way as reading scripts is important. One of the tools but not the only kind of tool because, well, directors do criticize critics for not knowing the troubles they've been through in chasing an actress or an actor to come on time and the trouble the actors go through . . . you know, going to their offices and then rushing off to the rehearsals and all that. But a critic is not like a midwife. A midwife can probably sympathize with a mother when she is delivering a baby. A critic is more detached. A critic sees a lot of plays and he is concerned with the finished product and not necessarily with the rehearsals. Suppose he has been attending the rehearsals and knows the problems the group has had, he will write such and such actor was not available and so we have this last-minute replacement—some actor coming on the stage holding script in hand. I mean ultimately one is something like a demigod sitting in the theatre and waiting for the performance to be laid out and one should not be overly concerned with the mechanics of the operation. It is just to know for oneself.

P.A. : What I feel is that some knowledge of these things is necessary. I do not say that a critic should write about a particular production only if he has been involved in it. But we often find critics writing about plays without referring to things like the lighting or the sets or the choreography. Quite a number of critics seem to be novices in the field. If they have some practical knowledge of theatre, it would make their job easier for them and . . .

R.P. : Well, may be. It differs from critic to critic. My approach to a new play is quite literary, frankly speaking. It is not theatrical. For instance, OK, it has to be good theatre, but I see the script first so far as a new play is concerned. Then of course I can accept variations on the script if there is a directorial scheme carried through properly.

P.A. : Then should we call you a critic conservative who gives importance to the script?

R.P. : May be. I don't mind being called a conservative critic. I think I am quite conservative.

P.A. : Because nowadays the kind of attitude the directors have towards the script and the playwright . . . at times I feel very annoyed and hurt by that. But somehow . . . today the stage is the director's stage. It was a playwright's stage at one time, then it became an actor's stage, and now it is a director's stage.

R.P. : It became a director's stage because the playwrights are not writing much. You see, there are not many new playwrights coming up.

P.A. : And good plays are not coming up. Perhaps some playwrights are coming up but good plays, worthwhile plays, are not being written, so the playwrights don't have a commanding position, so to say.

R.P. : It is also that a new director or a rising director or even a known director would like to try his hand at interpreting a play in a different way. I have nothing against it except that I would still go by what the playwright wanted to achieve in a particular play.

P.A. : Do you give that the main importance in your criticism?

R.P. : Well, for me the script is the most important thing, and while I can accept a lot of new approaches to theatre, new approaches in production, etc., I still give a lot of emphasis to the play. Maybe because I am old-fashioned.

P.A. : Though this is a rather direct question I am asking, whom would you rate as the good theatre critics in our country? Or critics for whom you have respect.

R.P. : You see, I don't know about the regional-language critics, but none writing in English.

P.A. : That's a very serious remark that you have made.

R.P. : It's not serious. It's just because maybe I have set too high a standard for criticism.

P.A. : Do you think something should be done, something can be done, because if criticism . . .

R.P. : You see criticism is parasitic on art and if there is excellent art there will be excellent critics. It's not the other way round. A critic can help in evolving or giving a particular direction . . . but even that is asking too much of a critic. In a theatre movement, a critic can establish certain values which are half formed or unformed and help in disseminating minority values but ultimately I suppose he is parasitic on the art. He is reviewing what is happening and when there is excellent theatre, more of theatre, the critic also gives of his best. The more the merrier always holds good in the arts. In such a situation I suppose you'll find critics rising to the occasion and they'll put in a lot of hard work before they actually do their writing. Now they are doing only a part-time job.

P.A. : Do you think some sort of training for critics, some sort of education . . .

R.P. : I . . . I don't think so. If people can write and write well I suppose that's all that matters. For the rest the critic trains himself as he sees theatre. There is nothing that he can learn by formal training. Maybe there are some schools that train you in objective reviewing and objective criticism and where you read a lot of criticism written by other people but then the productions are not there before you and you cannot actually know what is being talked about, unlike in courses in cinema criticism where you actually see a film. In theatre criticism you can only see the video recordings of some of the recent productions. So how do you train yourself? You train yourself in literature and you learn literary criticism and then you train yourself by seeing theatre and learning as you write.

P.A. : The question of subjectivity and objectivity. How far can a critic be subjective and how far can he be objective and how far is he actually subjective and objective in the process of criticism of literature or of any art, especially drama?

R.P. : Well, the earlier critics were very . . . at least they tried to be very very objective. But I think the best criticism is subjective. A critic can have his prejudices — let him voice them and give a by-line to his piece and accept the responsibility for it. I would still prefer a subjective critic, who of course has trained himself in literature in his particular language. Why should we presume that objectivity will not come to him as subjectivity comes to him? If he is interested in himself and his writing, it would always be a mixture of subjectivity and objectivity.

P.A. : But if we have a book, say, on *Aadhey Adhurey* in which various critics have expressed their views on some productions of the play, and if the views are subjective, how are we going to judge any theatrical production afterwards or to know about the production after some time?

R.P. : As I said it would be a mixture of objectivity and subjectivity. For instance when Laurence Olivier's *Othello* was produced I think everybody uniformly praised the production and the effort Sir Laurence had put in preparing for his role. Everybody cried for God's sake tape it, video-tape it, because he is not going to perform for many more years; he was sixty at that time. They made a film of it and a video-recording was done. But, if I remember correctly, Bernard Levin said that whether Sir Laurence Olivier shakes his lips or hips he does not impress me. And when Time brought out that book on Olivier's production of *Othello* for the National Theatre, all the criticism including Bernard Levin's was included. Now that kind of democratic tradition just does not exist here and people quote whatever suits the blurbs of their books. When we printed Mrinal Pandey's *Jo Ram Rachi Raakha* I insisted that Mrinal Pandey send me all the reviews including the . . .

P.A. : Ones which go against . . .

R.P. : Yeah, against the play. And I think it was the review by Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena, who unfortunately died recently, which was not at all complimentary either to Mrinal or to the script. We insisted that it should be included. I think it is disseminating criticism...or accepting a kind of critical climate or critical culture that one can hope for as an ideal situation, not necessarily criticism conforming to the general opinion about a particular play.

But when you see reviews in the national dailies and others . . . I mean if it's a good play it is bound to get some good reviews. If it's a bad play some people may write prejudiced reviews in its favour but if you get criticized, I think, it's more or less a fair representation. Though one may not be satisfied by the quality of writing or about the critic's understanding or knowledge of a particular subject because I think critics don't get paid well and they don't work very hard.

P.A. : And what are the performers and groups to do in the circumstances? How seriously should they take criticism?

R.P. : Well, it's up to them, you see, it's up to any particular person. Suppose he thinks that he should get praise and he does get praised he is moved and calls up the critic and probably has a drink with him. But suppose he is criticized and he is the sort of person who thinks the critic could be right—if he gives another person the right to be right and not only himself — he might benefit from the review. That sort of culture or cultivation comes from hard labour. And that's what I call cultivated culture. It doesn't come naturally . . . humankind does not take criticism easily, one has to train oneself. The way an actor trains himself in acting, why doesn't he train his intellect in accepting views which are opposed to his own?

P.A. : There has been a very sad incident in the recent past in Calcutta where two very senior critics were debarred from entering a theatre. It was specially printed on the cards that the right of entrance was reserved and it was decided at a meeting that these two people would not be allowed to be present in the auditorium.

R.P. : Well this is abominable because if the performance is for the public the critic too is part of the public. How do you expect a critic to take it? You have done something which you want to show others because you think you have more talent than the ordinary man. After all who is a performer? A performer is one who has more talent than an ordinary human being and he takes the plunge to go on stage for public viewing — to show that he has mastered his art like a juggler or a circuswala or whatever. If he is not willing to take criticism of his art I think the man has put shutters on his intellect. Well, I'm not shocked because this is the kind of attitude we have towards criticism. I don't think *Enact* has received more than five per cent invitations to the performances that have been staged in town and from the very beginning one has been used to it. I don't take it as an insult. I think that they are so concerned that we may give them a bad review that they don't tell us. Which means that they read us.

P.A. : What we felt about this incident was that it was all right if you felt that a critic had been hostile to you and you didn't invite him to your show. But passing a decision in a meeting that if he came he would not be allowed to enter the auditorium — that was very unfortunate.

R.P. : It's ridiculous! In a country where you say you want freedom of speech you do this! It's like the press censorship bill. How can one accept a situation like that?

P.A. : How are you trying to cover the regional theatre in *Enact*?

R.P. : Well, to start with we brought out our first special number in which we took stock of the important aspects of Indian theatre as a whole: 'Indian Theatre since Independence'. *Enact* has been mostly concerned with contemporary theatre because firstly I know very little of theatre that is not contemporary, and also because I concern myself with contemporary problems, though that may be a prejudice in favour of contemporary problems. But one has been trying to educate oneself about Sanskrit theatre, folk theatre and other things. Then later we thought of covering the regions. So far we have brought out special numbers on Marathi theatre, Punjabi theatre, Oriya theatre, Assamese theatre, Gujarati theatre, and under preparation are two issues on the Bengali theatre, two on Kannada theatre, two on the Sanskrit theatre and one or two others. Now the reason why we first went in for the lesser known languages and theatres is that one felt diffident about approaching the better-known languages like Bengali and Hindi and Kannada at the start. There was a variety of opinions on these language theatres. In the case of Kannada theatre, on which we thought of bringing out an issue five or six years ago, we found that there was so much infighting and quarelling in the set-up that one could only send out a war correspondent and not a literary critic. We gave up the idea. Also Bengali theatre because it's so widely known and the Bengalis are rather touchy about any non-Bengali approaching their theatre with any kind of confidence. We have now been able to approach Samik and Kironmoy Raha to do the issues. I don't know when they will come out. But it's only the better known theatres that we felt diffident about. Our resources were such that we could not possibly tackle the subjects in a big way and not representing some of the important people would have been suicidal both for the magazine and for me as a person. So we are taking the step now and whenever these issues are available I think they would help at least some of the people who know nothing or very little about these theatres gain an idea about what theatre people are trying to do in these regions.

P.A. : How have these issues been taken by the readers and people of the different language regions?

R.P. : Well, frankly, the response has been good but some people are always unrepresented or misrepresented and that risk a magazine has to take. Over the last couple of years this has been the only contribution *Enact* has made which could be considered of some lasting value. Because we have made the lesser known theatres better known and tried to show the aspirations of the playwrights in those regions, how they are placed vis-a-vis the nationally known playwrights, what particular influences they are working under and how they are trying to emulate or go beyond the nationally known playwrights. I think it has been a good education.

P.A. : In this connexion please tell me how you assess development of theatre in the different regions, say, during the last two decades?

R.P. : I think there is certainly this feeling that something indigenous has to be done. Even if our playwrights are struggling with form or presentation or language their plays need to

be performed. Less and less people are dependent on frothy comedies from abroad, less and less people are dependent on just the entertainment value of theatre, and maybe as a reaction against the entertainment values in the other arts, let's say cinema or cable T.V. or video or things like that, people now have a more serious approach to theatre and they want to tackle some of the themes which probably cannot be tackled by the popular medium of cinema. That way theatre has always exerted and will keep on exerting a seminal influence on the social set-up and the value system of this country. I think generally even in the smaller regions people are very serious in their approach.

P.A. : Somehow we are feeling that the theatre movement, compared to the way it was developing in the 1960s, has become stagnant for the last ten or twelve years — let's say in the 1970s. What do you feel about it? Because you get information from all the regions.

R.P. : I think there are always ups and downs in any kind of movement. Maybe the momentum generated in the late '60s and the early '70s is not there because in those years five or six playwrights suddenly became known all over the place and then they drifted to the other media or became less involved in the theatre or were not writing exclusively for theatre. That also shows that you cannot sustain a movement just by good luck or good wishes, you need to do certainly more so far as the infrastructure goes. And living is an expensive business and you can't really have part-time playwrights and part-time producers and part-time theatre workers. You have to have more subsidy going into theatre, you have to have more permanent homes for theatre where people do theatre as a profession. Suddenly in 1967 or '70 we thought this was just possible without realizing that there was no long-term plan by the State governments or the Centre to give theatre a boost. That's why one finds that there is less enthusiasm or you feel that there is less enthusiasm in theatre.

P.A. : Would you like to say something about the playwrights who seem to be important to you or the directors who you feel have done a really good job and promoted modern Indian theatre?

R.P. : Well, yes. I first give preference to people who do plays in a minority language — for instance I would consider Satyadev Dubey's work in Bombay very important though I do not agree with most of his work. I have not seen his work in the last three years but I have seen his earlier work. The kind of energy that he puts into his work — I have not seen anybody else doing it. He thinks and lives by theatre. That I think is a very important aspect. Similarly the contribution of Anamika, the group you run, and Shyamanand Jalan's contribution when he was with Anamika, was tremendous in Calcutta. In Delhi the National School of Drama has played a very important role by training graduates who wanted to do theatre and whether they took up jobs related to theatre or teaching jobs they have been very active and wanting to do only theatre. They have gone out to moffussil towns — people like Raina and Bansi Kaul and others, and have taken the message of theatre to the smaller towns and that way trained talent has been available to these small towns. It must have enthused the local talent, though also generating a lot of hostility against the visitor from the Centre or the other States, but it must have generated a lot of

enthusiasm which will ultimately help whenever the theatre movement picks up or becomes momentous. Who are the playwrights and producers . . . ? It would be very difficult for me to say that. I have enjoyed a lot of people's work. I have enjoyed Jabbar Patel, Rajinder Nath, Shyamanand Jalan, Om Shivpuri, Dubey, Vijaya Mehta, but it would be very difficult to . . .

P.A. : Why are you leaving out the Bengali theatre workers here?

R.P. : Because firstly I feel diffident in approaching Bengali theatre. I have really not enjoyed Sombhu Mitra's work. Maybe I started seeing it at a stage when he was on his way out from the theatre and also because — though I say I have been a conventional critic — I have really not enjoyed the excessiveness of acting of Tripti Mitra and Sombhu Mitra. I thought they were always overdoing it. Maybe because I was not following the language. I saw his *Oedipus*, I saw his *Raja*, his *Raktakarabi*, I saw Utpal Dutt's plays — all his earlier plays like *Ferari Fauj*, *Teer* and others. I've seen a lot of Bengali theatre. I have not enjoyed Tarun Roy's work though I liked one or two plays. I have enjoyed Utpal Dutt because he is so erratic. I like him as an actor, only in theatre, not in films. He is so erratic in his writing, in his acting, in his shoddiness . . . but he is live wire. He is like a live wire. I've not liked the perfection attained by Sombhu Mitra. I'd heard about it. Frankly I would not like to say more about this.

P.A. : And what about Badal Sircar's contribution to literature, dramatic literature?

R.P. : Badal Sircar's contribution, I think, has also been very very seminal and it's unfortunate he's directing his own plays because I think he is a better playwright than director. But after all it's an individual's salvation that one ultimately seeks, so if he is doing his plays in a particular manner he is welcome to it. I've seen some of his later plays. Now and then I've been excited about a particular scene or a particular way he has held them. Now this kind of theatre you just cannot do without professional actors. Actors who live and think acting all the time. I mean I cannot — if it is physical theatre where the body is used — I will not accept shoddiness.

P.A. : Speaking of professional and amateur, how do you see the future of our Indian theatre? It has become a much debated issue nowadays whether good theatre can be done by amateurs or if amateurs can do it only at an amateur level. We all know that everywhere in the world amateur theatre is being subsidized mostly by government and in our country it is being subsidized by the industrialists, by moneyed people who give advertisements and so on.

R.P. : Yes.

P.A. : How do you see the whole thing? Everywhere in the world professional theatre and amateur theatre have grown together. And always amateur theatre somehow has taken a more respectable place than the professional. I don't know how you...

R.P. : If you look at the situation abroad, there are the big companies which are totally subsidized . . .

P.A. : National Theatre of London . . .

R.P. : The National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and five or six other major companies are subsidized.

P.A. : But they are also professional . . .

R.P. : They are professional, and then there is the amateur theatre which is subsidized, but there are also a lot of other people who don't get subsidy. So even if you start giving subsidy to the professional theatre and also to the known amateur theatre there would still be a lot of people who would not get subsidy. They'll have to prove themselves before they qualify for subsidy. You know, it's like a bank. The government is like a bank. You have to prove your antecedents before you take a loan. So there would be a lot of people who would still be left out and that situation is always lively. When . . . if I go abroad I'll look for the small theatres, not the big theatres.

P.A. : Do you think good theatre can be done only by professionals or whole-timers?

R.P. : Well, I think so. Amateur theatre may come up with a brilliant playwright or a brilliant actor or a playwright-in-residence who writes exclusively for a well-knit group. But there is no continuity. Groups are formed and groups are broken because of personal problems, bickering, jealousy or financial troubles. If only one person runs the group he becomes too much of an egoist and gets too much publicity which I don't think is good for him. He does not pass on the mantle to the next person. But in a professional company where the best directing talent or the best playwriting talent or the best acting talent can come together . . . Well, what more can you ask for? There would be people who don't like that kind of theatre—I mean the best kind of plays are not done by the National Theatre. But certainly you need money. Somebody with a little sense as a director in charge of the company or as a literary adviser can generate a lot of pace in the movement.

P.A. : What do you think about the future of English theatre in India?

R.P. : What future?

P.A. : It would be just like English in India.

R.P. : Yes. I am personally fond of the English language but I don't think English theatre has any future. Either it becomes part of the mainstream and voices the concerns of the mainstream . . . and that cannot happen without people making themselves laughable on stage. I don't know. I mean, unless one comes across a play which passes muster with the audience or leaves a . . . you know, makes a dent in the mainstream. English-language theatre is concerned with minor social norms or minor social values. It is not concerned with the main stream of thinking.

P.A. : Just recently some good plays have been done in English in Calcutta.

R.P. : Yes, I saw Kamal Kapur's *The Curlew's Cry* in which she used Hindi extensively. She also got the Padamsee Award. But frankly I think the English-language theatre has yet to become part of the mainstream.

P.A. : You mean to say that if plays in English are written by Indians taking up Indian situations, or if English translations of plays in Indian languages are performed they'll be

more acceptable to the audience and become more popular than foreign plays?

R.P. : Perhaps. But I don't think there is any clientele for English plays written by Indians. There may be a clientele wanting to see plays in English but I don't think there is a clientele which accepts a lot of shoddiness in production or in language or is interested in the peculiar social systems or issues that the English-language theatre is raising. I don't really know.

P.A. : I think if the plays are effective and good they will do well, whether in English or any other Indian language.

R.P. : Well, yes. I mean there is a playwright four or five of whose plays *Enact* has published, Prithipal Vasudev, and I think he has touched a lot of themes which are relevant. He has written a play on Wajid Ali Shah, he has written one on Ravana of Sri Lanka, one on the opium war, the Chinese Opium War. He has written a morality play recently but he remains unperformed. So obviously there is no clientele or important directors who are interested . . .

P.A. : In plays with an Indian theme in the English language.

R.P. : He may be translated in one of the Indian languages and then performed because he is trying to touch some themes which have some value, but in English he may not find an audience at all. Maybe if he is translated into some of the regional languages.

P.A. : What do you think of the plays being written recently in the regional languages?

R.P. : Well, frankly, I can't read any of the regional languages. I read some scripts in Hindi but mostly I am dependent upon the productions of these plays. Offhand I would not be able to say anything about regional playwriting because I do not know much about it. Except that *Mahabhoj* did excite me recently but it was not originally written as a play. The combination of Amal and Mannu Bhandari made it a very successful production. I don't remember any play written in the last three or four years that has really moved me.

P.A. : And yet there was a time, in the '60s, when quite a number of new Indian plays were being staged all over India—they were being translated and staged. In the '80s we are again facing this problem of plays and in none of the Indian languages good plays are coming up. On the other hand quite a number of groups have come up.

R.P. : Yes.

P.A. : The need for many more plays has emerged but the plays are not there so again people are looking towards French plays, Russian plays, English plays . . . It's a pity but I don't know what can be done about it, what should be done about it.

R.P. : Well, it depends on a particular person's background. There are people who think that theatre, any kind of theatre, is good and there are people who think only a certain kind of theatre should be done, relevant theatre should be done. I am not saying serious plays from abroad should not be done because they are not relevant to us. But I would much rather like our directors to try to develop a play with a fledgling playwright or an upcoming playwright. Even if a playwright is able to write two good lines I think he is worth trying. I think it is unfortunate that either the time or the energy or the inclination is not there

because I think I would ultimately judge a director by the number of new playwrights he has introduced.

P.A. : Would you like to say something about this concept of national theatre which we have been talking about for the last few years?

R.P. : I don't know who has been talking about it because I think it was in 1977 that Shri Ram Centre organized a seminar on the concept of national theatre and I was asked to read the keynote paper. I think I was being too optimistic about the proposition then, saying why shouldn't the concept of one big theatre where regional groups are invited to perform in their own languages and there is one touring company and there is interchange between languages and translations and actors — why shouldn't it be accepted by everybody? There was a lot of hostility generated, they thought we were wanting Hindi to be the national language. Actually, whether you accept it or not, Hindi *is* the national language. I can't think of a national theatre except in Hindi. There was a lot of representation from Bengal, even from Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka. They were just not wanting to consider Hindi as the link language, saying that it does not have a sufficient body of literature or literary talent to be the national language, and the whole idea came down. It's true these States have been drawing upon regional talent and the regional companies are invited to perform there. There are two other States like that but who else? That way you will only be giving in to insularity and not exchange.

P.A. : Well, I think it's quite a complicated issue. We can't have a national theatre without incorporating all the regional theatres. Unless and until you do that . . . if a play is translated and performed only in Hindi . . . I don't think that will be giving . . .

R.P. : You see the point is not that it is done in Hindi. The point is that . . . Suppose there are three theatres at the Centre, say Delhi. Now people are not willing even to accept this concept: Why should the national theatre be in Delhi? Because it's the national capital . . . either they accept that Delhi is the national capital and Hindi is the national language or they don't. After all, when somebody from Gujarat comes to Delhi or a Kannadiga comes here or a Tamilian comes here he tries to pick up Hindi. He does not pick up Bengali, he doesn't pick up Gujarati. Whether it is the Hindi cinema which has contributed it . . .

P.A. : Quite a lot I feel.

R.P. : Quite a lot. I thought theatre would be devoid of politics but obviously it cannot be because of a lot of reasons . . . 'Why should the national theatre be in Delhi?' Where else could it be? Now the point is that if you have the national theatre in Delhi where regional talent is invited, regional playwrights are invited, plays in regional languages are performed — which in any case is happening in Delhi — it doesn't mean that a particular State, let's say West Bengal or Maharashtra, cannot have their own subsidized theatres. Let them do their own theatre exclusively in their own language. And Hindi plays can go from the national theatre to the regional national theatres or whatever you call them.

P.A. : What I think should be done . . . whether in Delhi or anywhere else or in every State capital there should perhaps be an organization through which plays in different languages are produced, and that would give it a national look or national . . .

R.P. : No, I would not just go by a collection of plays in regional languages to represent this country as a national theatre. I would like the best of talent from the regional languages of the nation to be represented in the national theatre.

P.A. : How can that be possible?

R.P. : That is possible if there is money. The only thing is that people are not willing to accept it. This is how I look at it: There is a national theatre here and there are regional national theatres or whatever you call them in all the State capitals of the country where plays are performed in the predominant languages of those States or some of the minority languages. If the play is good it is invited to the centre, the centre even takes it up and takes it around the other parts of the country where people would like to see it. The centre has to be the link for all these activities, otherwise how would we ever present a unified front?

P.A. : Nothing has been done till now . . .

R.P. : Probably it may take another hundred years.

P.A. : We have talked a lot, but would you like to say something about N.S.D.? The contribution of N.S.D. to theatre activities?

R.P. : Well I suppose it is the premier training institute for theatre people. When it started rolling out graduates the indigenous theatre was picking up and now a lot more trained talent is working in the theatre and I suppose it's good for the theatre because it's not just a hobby but a profession for people who are trained for three to four years. Theatre people have been trained to take up their profession and that way they have been able to break a lot of barriers and have been able to disseminate theatre culture in the smaller towns and I suppose that is tremendous. One is not talking of quality just now because I think that aspect is not important just now.

P.A. : Is there anything that you would like to say about the work the Natya Shodh Sansthan has taken up? It's not appreciation that I want from you.

R.P. : No, no . . . it's unfortunate that in this country no documentation of theatre is done and no importance is given to documentation because theatre is an evanescent art, it is not passed on to the next generation, and documentation can be one means by which one would know the history of Indian theatre. How else? I think that's the most important thing. It's unfortunate that people in this country don't give it much thought, and since there are not many government-subsidized institutions doing this kind of work I suppose if individuals do it, as you people are doing it, it will be of tremendous value even if it is on a modest scale. That is how good ideas emerge. They always come from individuals and then the Government takes up.

P.A. : A few years back when we were planning to prepare a history of the Hindi stage, I collected a lot of material, about four or five hundred pages from magazines and other sources. But I found it very difficult — how much could I rely on this material, because except for the press reviews nothing else, or very little else, is available. I wonder if you'll suggest something because this material is still lying with us. Some kind of history of the Hindi stage has been written, but one or two histories are not enough.

R.P. : The point is to do whatever one can under the circumstances, taking financial and physical resources into account, as well as people's willingness or otherwise to cooperate. Putting all the material together, I suppose at least an outline history or whatever should be written. Later there would be other researchers who find the material on certain individuals which they would incorporate. Imagine what sort of dictionary the first dictionary would have been like, or a dictionary of quotations. I mean they are always incomplete. When the *Oxford Companion to Theatre* was published people tore it to pieces — this is not represented, that is not represented — but still if you want to refer to something, know about a particular movement, you still refer to it. So I suppose one should not mind too much if certain names are missed out or incomplete information is given. It still serves a purpose.

P.A. : Maybe. Your saying all this gives some confidence. Maybe one can say: That is the material available till date and I am putting it before you, the rest will be added in future when more material is available. Thank you very much Rajinder.

R.P. : You're welcome. □