The Urge to be Someone Else: An Interview with Naseeruddin Shah*

SUNITA PAUL

Sunita Paul: Would you care to comment on the initial necessity of learning the various methodologies of acting, whether it is Stanislavski or Grotowski or our very own *Natyashastra*?

Naseeruddin Shah: Well, there is a saying I read somewhere, I have forgotten where, according to which acting is not taught but learnt—whether it be the acting methodology of the *Natyashastra* or of Stanislavski. First, I am sure Stanislavski studied the *Natyashastra* and his system which was evolved in the Moscow Art Theatre was definitely the result of his research in the *Natya shastra*, because the two are not at variance with one another. And the acting method of Brecht was certainly an evolution of the Stanislavski principle. And as far as Grotowski is concerned, his so-called acting method is a search into psychic phenomena more than anything else, because it has very little to do with the art of acting as such.

I feel that all these systems took birth because of certain necessities, certain social necessities at the time these people developed them. For example, at the time of Stanislavski, the kind of theatre which was prevalent was, let us say, somewhat like the Hindi films of today. And he found it necessary to break this mould of fantasy and introduce an element of realism so that what was happening on stage would look as though it was happening right then and there ; that was the dramatic necessity at that time. And it helped to evolve an entire school of acting, writing, as well as theatre direction. Similarly, the system which was geared to rousing the conscience of the audience rather than merely entertaining them was the result of the conditions prevalent in his country at that time. Now, whichever system it may be, it is a fact that it has to spring from something traditional, and from the existing circumstances.

There is no question about the fact that training is essential, but one must never

* Naseeruddin Shah received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for acting in 1990. This is the transcript, edited for the purpose of publication, of an interview conducted for the Akademi by Sunita Paul on 19 April 1991—Ed.

forget to whom the training is imparted. It is up to them to gain whatever they can from it. It is somewhat unfortunate that we in India have not been able to evolve a modern system of teaching the art despite the existence of a *Natyashastra* in our country.

S.P.: For example speech which, you would agree, is central in an actor's bag of tricks, just as the actor is central to any kind of theatre . . . unfortunately, here we have more of a drum-oriented theatre than a theatre oriented to the speech of the actor.

N.S.: Well, among the bag of tricks, as you call it, there must also be the actor's consciousness of the situation. What I consider more important than good speech is emotional resilience. I don't think it is true to say that our traditional theatre is drum-oriented, though I think you do need the kind of charge that the sound of the drum can create to grab the attention of the hundreds of people in the audience who watch traditional performances in conditions which are hardly the kind of conditions which we city people like to perform in. Perhaps the tradition of great speeches is dying out. I think it is a pity, because the spoken word, like the sound of the drum, is one of the media used to convey the idea of the playwright. The coming of more and more technology and the constant attempts of the theatre people to make a play look as much like a film as possible—these have caused the tendency to make spectacular productions which could pass off as film. Thus, I would say, the essence of the spoken word does get reduced. Or it may be a reflection of the quality of writing today.

S.P.: Laurence Olivier in his book *Confessions of An Actor* talks about three important attributes of a successful actor. Primarily talent, but not just talent, he says, but talent perfected to the point of skill. Then he talks of luck in the life of an actor, to get the right breaks at the right moments. And thirdly, stamina, the sheer endurance of an actor, whether it is health or mental fitness. Would you agree or would you like to add to that?

N.S.: Sure, I will agree. There is no question of disagreeing with Laurence Olivier on the subject of acting. Though I wish he had defined the term talent a little more clearly. it is a very nebulous term. I prefer the definition given by Grotowski which is that there is no such thing as talent, but there is such a thing as lack of talent and lack of talent occurs when a person is not in his right place. On the face of it, it sounds like one of those mystical statements, but it makes a lot of sense to me. I think what Sir Laurence did not mention was a burning desire to act, which is quite different from luck, talent and conditions favouring you and so on. Just this absolutely killing urge to be someone else; that is the best way I could sum up an actor's life—that we spend all our lives being other people. I suppose the roots of that are somewhere in our childhoods, somewhere in the dreams we had as children. And luck certainly plays a very important part because the development of an actor's confidence goes hand in hand with the kind of opportunities he

is given; and the kind of opportunities he is given certainly contribute to the development of his abilities and his confidence. As far as stamina is concerned there is no doubt about the need for both types of stamina: the physical stamina of going through a performance without the audience getting to know the kind of strain you are undergoing, and the stamina to last out for a long time, by which I mean the ability to stay fresh as an actor even though you may continue till the age of eighty, to somehow find the emotional resources within you to be able to create newer human beings, and the stamina to continue to be the kind of actor the audience finds interesting to watch, the kind of actor who does things which they find themselves incapable of doing. I supppose that is what makes an audience look at an actor and say 'Hey, I could not have done that'. I suppose that makes for an interesting performance and I don't mean only acrobatics. I mean the actor's way of dealing with his job.

S.P.: Would you also subscribe to the view of Simon Callows, the British actor, who talks about the actor and the writer directly interfacing without, what he calls, the superfluous director. The actor and the writer, he says, talk the same language; it is a kind of a holy union and the director is a nuisance who should be avoided.

N.S.: It is definitely true that there must be a closer relationship between the writer and the actor. I would agree to a large extent with Simon Callows that the director is often a hindrance; it would be best for the writer himself to direct an actor with whom he has collaborated on the material. But this is easier said than done; because by the nature of their work the actors have, particularly in this country, a number of assignments and they don' t have the inclination to work on a script and they don't have the time either. It is difficult to generalize on this because if the director is a superfluous factor, then surely someone would have discovered that fact years ago. It is Simon Callows' own identity, which is that of an actor-writer, which makes him synthesize these two aspects of his personality and become one. The ideal thing would be the writer-director and an actor to work in collaboration.

S.P.: When you first went to Bombay and worked with Satya Dev Dubey, in my opinion you did some excellent work with him, especially in Girish Karnad's *Bali*. I think your role in that play was a singular achievement, firstly because it is not an easy role at the best of times and, secondly, you were pitted against a very charming vivacious wife-protagonist. Simon once noted of Olivier that the slightly feminine quality in Olivier's acting made him stand apart from the other so-called macho actors of his time. I mean this synthesis, the extra-sensitivity that a male actor can take on at times, is so much more difficult than the straight strong roles. And I think your role in *Bali* comes nearest to that. You handled that performance with rare sensitivity. Will you agree?

N.S.: It is difficult for me to say that and it is terribly embarrassing to be compared to Sir Laurence Olivier. But there is definitely in Olivier this quality of

more-than-male. I suppose the fact that I achieved this quality to a certain degree in my performance in *Bali* could be called a tribute to Olivier. I was aware that these elements must merge in this character, and I would say it was a conscious effort on the part of the director to convey this. I suppose when Simon speaks of Olivier doing this he is trying to pin down the essential enigma of the man. And well, whether I have it or not, it's very difficult for me to say.

S.P.: Well, *Bali* is a satisfying experience, even if it was a disturbing experience. Would you consider it as one of your better roles?

N.S.: I consider it as one of the very difficult parts that I have tackled and it was emotionally draining, and thus I would say very satisfying.

S.P.: Good. Would you like to comment on your very physical Ashwatthama, which showed altogether another aspect of your style of acting?

N.S.: I don't think I could really come to grips with Ashwatthama. I don't know where the fault lay. Perhaps the fault lay in the style that was imparted to the acting in that production. I personally do not consider it a very successful production or a very successful performance. I felt that the whole play should have stayed much smaller, on a much more intimate level. I think Dubey should have resisted the tendency to make a spectacle out of that production, because I don't think spectacle heightens it. We are dealing with an unknown, practically unknown aspect of the Mahabharata character about whom very little is known, a character with whom grandeur is not associated. I wish we had played it more personal and smaller.

S.P.: All right. Now about your own group Motley. That, I think, was more than ten years ago.

N.S.: Yes.

S.P.: And you have done serious work there. What is the nature of plays chosen—are they mostly English and, if so, why? We really do not know much about the group.

N.S.: Motley was formed by Benjamin Gilani, Tom Alter and myself in the year 1979, with the intention of doing the sort of plays that we loved. We restricted it to a small number of people because it had been my experience that it is utterly impossible to keep together a large group, if you are not an organization like the Drama School or unless you are a very established organization like what Alyque Padamsee has. We started with a play called *The Zoo Story* because it had only two characters and we did this play because Tom and I felt like doing it. There was no other reason. There were a number of plays, other plays which involved just the three of us or on occasion just one of us. Then we did *Waiting for Godot* which Benjamin and I had been dreaming of doing for many, many years. And we felt content keeping the number of people in our group down because it was very manageable. We thought we would let the group evolve on its own; gradually it included Ratna, my wife, and then a couple of other actors. So the plays we did

subsequently involved larger and larger number of people. *Donawan in Hell* with Dubey, *Arms and the Man* we did. By then we had a group of about eight or ten people whom we could call the core group. Our purpose in running this group is to stage plays which we have always loved, plays which, we feel, say something. We don't necessarily have a burning desire to change the world or to show our commitment. We don't have, I would say, a commitment of any kind except to be doing theatre of aesthetic order. We do not ourselves have a message. We do not have anything to convey to the world. We are content to convey the ideas of the great playwrights whom we have a chance to encounter.

S.P.: Surely the choice of plays itself is self-explanatory; they are all intellectually very stimulating, the scripts that you have chosen.

N.S.: Apart from that, they are also very volatile and interesting staging experiences, which to me is more important. They give tremendous meat to the actors and the directors; and they also provide a stimulus to the audience, apart from providing entertainment—though there are those who could argue against this statement, considering we have done plays of Samuel Becket which are considered to be very unentertaining.

S.P.: He is supposed to be a great comedy playwright.

N.S.: That's what I think too. I think he is incredibly funny. We try and bring out the fun of these plays and we get flak for not taking Becket seriously. Or we are told we are doing these plays which no one can understand.

Anyway, to answer another part of your question: why English? And why not Hindi? It is not that we have a bias or that we have made a decision of this sort. Not at all. But I do feel that if there is a pan-Indian language it is English. And thus I do not think we are being colonial or that we are being un-Indian by performing in English. I think we do get across to a large number of people, Besides there is the fact that the quality of plays we find in English is just not there in the Indian languages. The great plays which have been written in the Indian languages over the past twenty or twenty-five years have been done so very often—they have been done to death—that at we just don't feel like . . . though I admire those plays greatly. I would love to do *Hayavadan*, I would love to do *Adhe Adhure*, but they have been done so often and they have been done definitively. So, it is just that the plays we would like to do happen to be in English.

S.P.: Now, if we could shift to films temporarily. Many awards have come your way, Nasir: the National Award for the Best Actor, 1985, for your part in *Sparsh*. Now, with the quality of acting that you come up with, the standard of criticism will automatically become harsh. I am sure you have already realized that because you are at a different level altogether it is by very stringent standards that your performance is judged. Taking two films, *Par* and *Sparsh*, personally I feel that your role in *Par* was excellent and in *Sparsh* I felt that it was just a little bit overdone. Because someone who had been blind for so long should have adjusted to

blindness. I mean the upheaval was in terms of the woman in this man's life. The upheaval had to show, the tensions had to show; but one felt that maybe, you know, the groping could have been . . . Do you think you would do it differently today or do you think . . .

N.S.: I would do it differently and you could be right about the physical aspect of it. All I can say is that it was the best I could do then. Probably I would do it differently now, whether it is better or not is a different matter. But I don't subscribe to the concept of ovedoing and underplaying. I think these are faulty terms to use because either a performance is true or it is false. Perhaps what you are saying is that it is not as true as you would like it to be.

In reply to that I would say that I would naturally feel disappointed at that remark. But I would give it its due. Because I think each individual relates to a performance depending upon his or her own experience. If certain elements of it struck you as false, then they probably were so because your life experience taught you differently. But I tried to do it with as much truth as my age and experience allowed and my interaction with blind people taught me. Maybe it was not true at places. But I know that I did strive for the inner quality. I did try very hard to believe in myself as a blind person and I think to a large extent I did succeed because I was with these people all the time, though of course it is not possible to empathize truly with someone who has lost his sight, no matter how hard we try. I doubt if I was able to feel even one-thousandth of the kind of turmoil that a person who does not have sight would feel. There would constantly be this question of: why me? Of course this is something that occurred to me later. All I can say is that perhaps in my anxiety and also in my great desire to play a blind man truthfully which I think has seldom been done on the Indian screen—there is a certain manner of playing a blind man as there is a certain manner of playing a villain, or a certain manner of playing a strict father or kindly uncle, these are all conventional ways of acting that we have in Hindi films and I suppose I was reacting against that—perhaps the performance went the other way to the limits of the grotesque.

S.P.: Now, there is an otherwise very ordinary film, a film called *Pestonji*, in which I think you have excelled. The way you have detailed the business of an actor minutely, it is easily a lesson for most actors.

N.S.: Well, for one thing I was eight years older when I did *Pestonji* than when I did *Sparsh*. I am quite proud of that, my performance in *Pestonji*. I love that character very much. And a lot of people from my family have told me that I remind them of various uncles, aunts . . . One person actually said that I reminded him of my mother when I was doing the role in *Pestonji*. I guess all these are influences that one has in mind—all the granduncles and grandfathers, country cousins whom one has met and responded to, and definitely one's own parents if one has seen them old. I think they all contribute and I think all these personalities are

within the actor all the time. It is not a question of—as I look at it—assuming an external personality, but of recognizing this personality within yourself.

S.P.: But no effort showed. I mean, you seemed to be enjoying . . .

N.S.: I was. Yes, strangely, once I got the mechanics of Pestonji's physical behaviour right, it wasn't much of a strain. Those twitches and the walk, everything came, though initially I had to practise it. What I am talking about is, where did it all come from? I believe it is all within us. The potential of being an eccentric old man or a blind principal or idealistic lawyer or a disease-ridden slumdweller. I believe I have the potential within me to have been all these things.

S.P.: Would you like to talk about the New Wave films, with Benegal and Karnad. Have they been rewarding in any way?

N.S.: Oh yes, even though I have gone on record innumerable times criticizing the New Wave cinema, I can never be grateful enough to Shyam and Girish for giving me those opportunities. As I said earlier, an actor's confidence grows along with the kind of trust that is placed in him and I will forever be grateful to Shyam for having trusted me enough to cast me in four films one after the other when no one else was giving me work, and for having had that kind of faith in me. I think that it was the most important part of my career. When I felt that now finally I have been given responsibility by someone who trusts me and someone who really cares about my performance, I worked at those films very, very hard. I do think that the kind of acclaim that came my way was a bit overblown. It is just that our critics are so used to seeing rubbish that anything that is a little better than rubbish is immediately acclaimed as great.

S.P.: You cannot blame them for that.

N.S.: I do blame them for that. I know this from my own experience, and Mr Alkazi will testify that it was the kind of praise that I received as an actor at NSD which hindered my growth as an actor. It was unreasonable and it was undeserved. But it may be just that it was a kind of electricity that I managed to create, an excitement that I managed to create every time I went on stage. I have been called a great actor from the time I was in my first year at NSD, and I believed it then. But looking back now, I know that it was not true and I can see the kind of harm that was done to my development by the showering of praise. Anyway, the point is that Shyam's films gave me an awareness of real cinema—the fact that in order to be real in a characterization one must cast away one's adolescent dreams about oneself being larger than life and so on. I had to work hard to rid myself of all the tendencies that in a twenty-year-old had accumulated in the course of dreaming of being an actor—to be a Gary Cooper, to be a Dilip Kumar and so on. I had to squeeze all that, all those tendencies, out of my system in order to play those roles.

And ironically some six or seven years after, I had to work equally hard and try to reintroduce those tendencies in my acting, because I was doing the kind of

films which demanded larger-than-life performances. And so I had to work equally hard to gain that adolescent mad confidnece I had in myself when I was eighteen or nineteen.

S.P.: Would you like to mention some of the films where you had to regain . . .

N.S.: Well, I can mention the films in which I have tried and failed. Notable among them was a thing called *Sunaina* which was shamelessly copied from Charlie Chaplin's *City Life*, in which I was playing the role Chaplin played. It is a thorough embarrassment, that film. I was nowhere, at no stage, capable of it. Over the years, through films like *Hum Paanch*, *Karma* and *Jalwa* I have been gradually coming to grips with this. And I think I am getting the hang of it, now that I am actually able to sing a song with some confidence.

S.P.: I have personally enjoyed *Tridev* very much, and Topiwale . . .

N.S.: Yes, I loved doing that. I think by that time I had come to grips with it. But now the question that arises is: if Shyam Benegal wants me to give the kind of performance that I gave him in *Nishant* and in *Manthan*, would I be capable of giving it? That is the question mark hanging over there. I hope so, but I am not at all sure, because the way I have geared myself to acting these days is for the larger-than-life cinema. It may be very difficult for me to play a real character. It is strange.

S.P.: Not in terms of real but maybe something like the excellent comedy you did in *Jaane bhi Do Yaron* . . .

N.S.: Yes. I hope I am able to retain the feel of the earth in my performances, because what happens to film stars as distinguished from actors is that the richer they get, the more famous they get, the remoter they become, the lesser the contact they have with the world.

S.P.: Surely you have been putting in that extra effort, with your theatre and other things.

N.S.: Yes, that's what I am trying to do. Because I have been conscious of this danger for a very long time. I have seen this happen to many famous Hindi stars some of whom have been very good actors. I have seen their performances deteriorating and the manner becoming a caricature of themselves, and it has always been simultaneous with the rise of their fame and fortune. I always wanted this not to happen to me, and I hope that it does not. But I cannot say.

S.P.: Surely, you have a lot of acting life ahead of you and I don't think this should worry you at this point at all.

N.S.: I think that since it worries me, I will find a way to deal with it.

S.P.: Are there are any other pressures in the life of an actor, the extreme kind of pressures . . .

N.S.: Are you talking of the pressures on an actor or of the pressures on a commodity? Because that is what an actor becomes in films. Film stars are commodi-

ties and thus they have to take in their stride all the pressures that come with being a commodity. But if you are talking of an actor who is searching, to him acting is not a means to fame and fortune but an end in itself, as I think it is for me. I think that just to act is sufficient for me; the fact that I have also become rich with acting, that I look upon as a coincidence. Not that I mind being rich, of course ...

S.P.: Why shouldn't one do well, as in any other profession . . .

N.S.: Exactly, why should not one make progress in one's profession in every way? The pressures are really in terms of losing your own personality to the whims of the audience. I think it is the most extreme pressure which acts most on an actor trying to continue to be creative.

S.P.: Thank you, Nasir, for having talked to us about your work; thank you very much. □