

CHANGING ROLE OF WORDS IN THEATRE : MOHAN RAKESH

Mohan Maharishi

Before we finally settled down for the interview session, Mr. Rakesh read out a short experimental script of his, which he calls '*Mad Delight*'. Four different versions of this script were subsequently produced at a ten-day Theatre Workshop session at Simla. The script was an outline and was to be treated by the producers merely as a suggestion in the matter of juxtaposing sound, words and visuals.

Mohan Rakesh's dissatisfaction with the present situation in the Theatre is deep and he, like many of us today, feels a strong urge to get back to the fundamentals of Theatre. The script *Mad Delight* was his first practical experiment in a certain direction to understand his own thinking, as he puts it.

Mohan Maharishi: What have you tried to achieve in this script?

Mohan Rakesh: This is an initial step that may lead me to fragment sound and words later. I have been thinking about such fragmentation for a long time. I feel there has been a lot of experimentation in Theatre, where people have tried to achieve certain fragmentation of the visual. It is mainly because of a sense of competition with Cinema. It is felt by some people that Theatre is handicapped because it cannot achieve the sort of quick succession of visuals as is possible in cinema. Therefore, bringing in more and more technical devices they unsuccessfully try to import the sort of illusion in Theatre as is possible only in Cinema. It is this that has led some people to the logic of 'Theatre of Mixed Means', i.e. achieving visual fragmentation by amalgamating various media. I do not challenge the validity of such experiments. But if we understand the physical limitations of space in Theatre we know we cannot really go beyond a certain point in fragmenting the visual. Therefore, the entire emphasis is likely to be misplaced. It is time we thought of shifting it to something exclusive to theatre.

Maharishi: And that is .. ?

Rakesh: During the course of my writing and thinking I have been struck by the possibilities of fragmenting words and sound. This short script of mine you have just referred to, is only the very first step. It only isolates to a certain extent the words and sound from the visual. The only thing that I have tried to suggest is that it is possible to break the logical continuity of words and sounds to arrive at a different type of language in theatre capable of imparting a more contemporary, if not a deeper human experience to our audiences. You have noticed that in this script *Mad Delight* there is very little change in the visual. There is a Man and a Mushroom and nothing much happens except that the man plucks the mushroom and goes through certain movements indicative of his changing relationship with the mushroom. On the other hand quite a lot happens on the sound-track. It is the sound-track that reveals and highlights the dilemma of this man. The arrangement of sounds and words in this case does not adhere to any apparent logic. In fact there are only two characters in this script — the sound and the visual. The theatricality of the piece lies in their dramatic juxtaposition. Out of these two characters, the visual and the sound, the fragmentation is only in the sound, in a limited way. Developing on these lines one may be able to evolve a form where such fragmentation may become an integral part of the dramatic texture. *Mad Delight* is merely a very preliminary stage towards understanding my own thinking.

Maharishi: Why have you chosen to investigate the area of words and sounds? How does it relate to what you would eventually like to say through your plays?

Rakesh: I think that the life we are living has developed a different kind of tempo, it is also a life which is mostly lived in fragments. That sustained emotion which must have once been a part of people's being does not hold the same character any longer. It is in the matter of suggesting the above fragmentation that cinema has been able to take such big strides in the last few years. The life that we live today, I mean all that is happening around us in Science and Technology and other allied fields, has created a different sense of being and has also sharpened our responses in such a manner that we cannot get adjusted to a leisurely and sustained pace either in fiction or in theatre. The contemporary cinema has acquired the pace of time through fragmentation of the visual. This question of pace is equally important in theatre, if the needs of today's mind is to be satisfied. And my feeling is that instead of looking for that pace in the visual, we can try to find it in sound and words.

Maharishi: I notice that the sounds in *Mad Delight* are used from off-stage and this places an extra emphasis on the sound track. Will it not affect the performer on the stage in an adverse manner?

Rakesh: No. He has and will always have an important role to play. What I am trying to say is that the pace which is demanded by today's sensibility is impossible to achieve in Theatre through any exercise, technical or otherwise, on the visual side. This present experiment may or may not succeed, but what I imply is that it is possible to create a succession of sounds and words which can, theatrically, reveal the pace of today's life and mind. The actor remains important because it is through him, his movements and gesticulations, alone that the meaning of words and sounds can be revealed to us. The Director also has a prime function for it is he who

establishes the relationship between the two — the sound and the visual. The Words, the Actor and the Director — beyond these three any emphasis on anything else is irrelevant in Theatre. While in cinema the fundamental thing is the image, in theatre it is the word. It is the constancy of words that is the basic characteristic of Theatre and the visual is the agency through which the this constancy is realised.

Maharishi: The nature of the visual in Theatre is different from the nature of the visual in cinema. In the Theatre the visual essentially means the living actor, on the other hand, cinema has a tremendous capacity of animating inanimate objects. In some cases no living being ever appears on the screen, yet the film provides an intense human experience, while I have never heard of a stage performance without an actor. Therefore the conclusions based on the comparison of the visual as in theatre and as in cinema, may be misleading. The actor is important in Theatre.

Rakesh: Let us not confuse the issue. It will be wrong to think that my investigation is directed against the actor. If my thinking is in any way interpreted as a negation of the actor's role in theatre, it would be entirely a misjudgement. In the sort of theatre I have in mind the actor will retain all his present importance and acquire some more, although he may be called upon to assume a responsibility different from what he is supposed to discharge now. I have a strong feeling that the actor needs to be liberated in Theatre. He is denied the freedom of his own expression and this freedom will have to be restored to him. I look upon the experiments like Happenings! As a revolt of the performer against the rigidity imposed on him by the conventional theatre. This rigidity has to go.

Maharishi: Rejection of the convention implies that the actor will have to seek something new. Do you think that to be able to put across your plays to the audience the actor will have to undergo a different kind of training and how do you think he will achieve this 'liberation'?

Rakesh: The word and the sound should have the power to charge the actor and consequently liberate him. It happens in our folk plays. I feel one can draw a lot from the directness of approach of some of our folk forms. The actor there appears released. I think a good play of today should be able to give the actor the same feeling of release and personal realisation which a folk actor abundantly has. It seems quite ridiculous to me today to give those specific stage directions like 'He moves to the curtain on the window, uplift on the stage, which has Yellow stripes'. No. I think the actor has to be lead to a zone of awareness where he feels free to follow the dictates of his mind and soul. Let him not feel cramped by unnecessarily rigid instructions. I know talking about the liberation of the actor today is a little premature. First of all we have to have the script which demands a change in the actor's discipline.

Maharishi: In *Mad Delight* I noticed that the sounds are kept off-stage while on-stage you see the man and the mushroom and the growing relationship between the two; while the actor has something to do with his body, he has nothing to create from his voice apparatus!

Rakesh: Yes, it is so in this case, because I have attempted to isolate the identity of the sound from that of the visual. The sound has been isolated and kept off-stage because I wanted to see for myself if off-stage sound could be elevated to the role of a principle entity. I do not mean that it should always be this way. I do believe that in the process of evol-

ing this style of writing one will arrive at a point where most of the words and sounds will belong to the actors on the stage.

Maharishi: But that may seriously limit the scope of abstraction you are seeking because the actor's physical and vocal apparatus has human limitations.

Rakesh: I am afraid your thinking is still governed by the limitations of the present script. This script may demand a particular stylised behaviour from the actor, but I do not think it will always be like that. Even ordinary action and entirely realistic movement of an actor can acquire a non-realistic or ultrarealistic connotation by being juxtaposed in certain sounds and words. And since we have concentrated too long on this point let us pass from here by saying that it is only an exploration in one direction and it is too early to say how far it would really help in drastically changing the concept of play-writing for me. But somewhere I feel like making a beginning and I do mean to follow it up by further work.

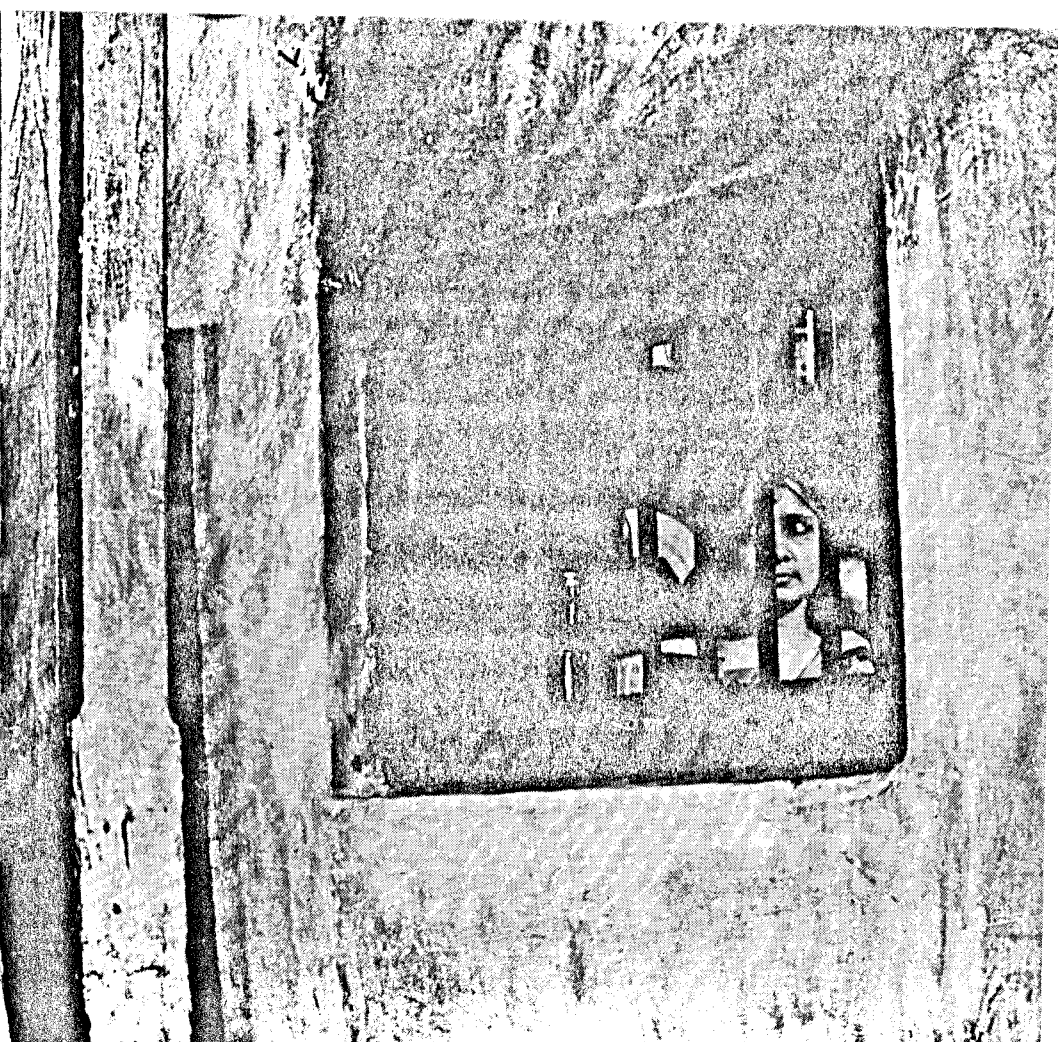
Maharishi: What do you think of the present situation in the Indian Theatre?

Rakesh: We cannot deny that there is a crisis. The Theatre here has not yet struck a real relationship with our times. Not that the Western Theatre has much succeeded in doing so. Recently I saw a production of Pinter's *Old Times*, in London. A good play, very well acted, well produced. But a British playwright who had come to India a few weeks back was startled when I remarked that it was a good example of conventional theatre, "Conventional theatre?" He exclaimed, "You call Pinter conventional?" I said, "Yes. I call myself conventional too. I call most of the theatre around me, conventional."

Most of today's theatre is either a good play or a good production and at times both. But it is not really a revelation of what we are today. For this reason the revolt of the young directors and actors in the West today is quite valid, while some of their experiments may not be. One can not blame them, for I think it is the playwright who has failed them. In some of the countries one came across various new things happening in the field of production, but what excited me most was the Theatre of young people with its political contents. In a certain sense these people did succeed in projecting the discontent of their time. But there were very few such efforts which could also be called real theatre. Unfortunately all such theatre has evolved its own gimmickry. In certain cases the fad of direct audience participation has been used to very odd results. How can any sort of real audience participation be achieved by planting a few actors in the auditorium? Talking of theatre back at home, I would like to mention some of Utpal Dutt's productions I saw recently. Enjoyable — theatre of words, but only there were too many words. The words were used by the playwright for their own sake. The unending conversation was enjoyed by the audience; because there were some good actors on the stage. But the verbosity of it all was tiring. This is the malady with most of us. We have been writing words mostly for the sake of their literary effect. The playwright upto now has remained basically the man of literature and as

Illustrations: P. 23 *Two Scenes from the experimental script, "Mad Delight", performed at the Simla Theatre Workshop.* P. 24 *Om Shivpuri and Sudha in a scene from the film "Aadhe Adhure".*





such he has been too fond of literary connotation of words. More often than not, many more words are written in a play than are necessary; still some drama comes across because of certain words which have a true dramatic texture. Again, even when used uneconomically, the words that are conceived dramatically, do create a dramatic impact. Talking of my own plays, the first two plays I wrote were liked primarily for their literary refinement. But I felt that because of that very reason, they failed to capture the mood and rhythm of life around me. Though I used characters from history to project a contemporary meaning, yet it seemed to me that both the meaning as well as its theatrical projection was compromised somewhere due to excessive literariness of my words. In the third play I struggled to find the way by coming to grips directly with the realities of life around me and exploring a language which was direct and more addressed to people. But that was again just a stage. For the last three years I have been more acutely concerned with the problem of finding a truly contemporary idiom of words that should belong exclusively to theatre. Long passages uttered by the central characters towards the end of the play, to convey the playwright's meaning somewhere I abhor. This weakness is discernible not only in my plays but also in the plays of almost all my contemporaries. In Badal's *Baqui Itihas* it is the ghost Sitaram who speaks out the long emotionally charged passages towards the end to bring out the playwright's intent. In Tendulkar's *Shantata* it is Miss Benare. In *Adhe Adhure* it is Savitri as well as Juneja. One has to rely on these long discourses at the end as one has failed to say the same thing dramatically through the main body of the play. All such oratory is not only an overplay of words, but is also to a great extent responsible for creating a prejudice against words in theatre.

My contact with theatre during the last three or four years has turned me into something of a cynic. I feel quite unhappy both with myself as well as with others. In my fourth play that is still to be written, I am already rejecting a lot that comes easy to me because of my erstwhile association with words. I want to travel more and more towards the language of being rather than the language of knowing. This may appear quite anti-modern to some, but I strongly feel that those well thought out passages or the pieces of knowledgeable prose are literary invaders who do not really belong to theatre. If these excellent, pieces with very good meaning are found theatrically effective by some people it is because of the sheer personal dynamism of the actor who delivers them. They are as effective and as fake as some of the political speeches one hears from public platforms much too often.

Maharishi: Do you rule out the intellectual element in your future plays?

Rakesh: It is not ruling out the intellectual element. There is a lot of fragmentation in contemporary poetry and that has not resulted in diminishing its intellectual content. On the contrary it reveals the intellectual content with greater intensity, of course by using a different idiom. Similarly the fragmented language of theatre has to be the language of our being which will also reveal by inference the intellectual motivations of our times. No doubt our language has been travelling towards that end. Our language today is considerably different from what our predecessors were writing. Yet the change is not absolute, and we are still using a half-bred literary language which is not the exclusive language of theatre and is incapable of

imparting a complete theatrical experience. Moreover this is not the language that meets the demand of today's mood of life.

Maharishi: What do you exactly mean by the phrase 'today's mood of life'? In other words how do you look at today's reality?

Rakesh: Today's reality is something that is becoming increasingly complex. Something is constantly happening to us and in our desperate effort to strike an equilibrium with the surroundings, we are making constant adjustments. Everyone of us is living a life in fragments. During the course of one single day one is forced to play ten different parts and some times more than one version of each part. What remains constant is one's sense of being; the idea of a crisis. It is this that I call today's mood of life. And it is in this sense that one feels fragmented. Something keeps happening to one, a phenomenon — quite difficult to explain; something like an atomic fission keeps taking place in the landscape of one's mind. One senses it but cannot fully articulate the experience. I think what is occurring in man's mind must find a recurrence in the language of Theatre so as to achieve a deep and instantaneous rapport between the words and the audiences.

Maharishi: What do you think of Brechtian theatre where the process of objective thinking and learning becomes theatrical?

Rakesh: The charm of theatre like everything else around us is in its keeping growing. So far as Brecht is concerned, he considerably departed from the theatre which preceded him. This he did to relate his theatre to the forces which stimulated and stirred the lives of people around him. It is not very relevant to talk of his form and approaches today though it may have been very effective at one time, that is the post-war period in particular. It was the way he understood and intellectualised the relationship between man and man and man and his surroundings. He made his spectator a detached viewer of a reality which he considered significant at that time. It was effective theatre of that time; it is still effective; because some of those things are still relevant for us. But during the last few years things have changed at an unimaginable pace. Every morning you get the horrible feeling of being left behind. And it is this change and hastened pace of life which has brought about a revolution not only in our surroundings, but also in our relationship with them. A lot has happened in just one decade. What is of prime concern to me today is my constantly breaking and re-establishing relationship with this fast-changing reality.

Maharishi: I think the pace, the fast changing quality of today's life is meaningful in relation to something which is static, which refuses to change. This pull and the tension between the two, to me, is theatrical.

Rakesh: I do not disagree. I know human beings basically remain human beings, but their attempt to seek adjustment with their surroundings has become a painful experience today. Since there is constant pull and tension, hence the need to find an expression for it. The language which reveals this state of conflict has itself to be related to it as its counterpart.

Maharishi: How far do you think this awareness can change the theatre? Will it merely change its form or will it alter the function of the theatre?

Rakesh: Well, the form has to change, but I do not think the function of theatre will change fundamentally, though it is likely to become more demarcated and distinct. Theatre has to discover its own exclusive identity and this may to a certain extent effect its function also.

Maharishi: What is the function of theatre?

Rakesh: To my mind the function of theatre today is not just to entertain, nor just to reveal certain ironies and contradictions of human mind and behaviour, nor just to philosophise or sermonise over certain socio-political issues. For me the major function of theatre today is to help man to know and discover himself in relation to his environment. This may not be the exclusive function of theatre, or the function of theatre alone, but indeed it is one of the major functions that theatre has always performed and has to perform more effectively today. And theatre can perform this function much more effectively than literature can.

Maharishi: One thing which has always bothered me in the context of Indian Theatre is that its appeal is extremely limited. There are any number of disparities in Indian society as for example of caste, religion, language, intellectual levels and not to mention the economic disparities. Can there be a theatre form which can appeal to the national conscience, transcending these obvious barriers?

Rakesh: That will be a great moment of achievement if this state can be obtained. I strongly feel that this can be done. The playwright's words have to operate at a level where the spectator's senses are attacked in a manner that he suddenly starts confronting himself, in relation to the faces around him. This is essentially an attempt to cross these obvious barriers. When I speak of the language of being, I mean a language that can reach across to the mind which otherwise may not have much analytical awareness of the pressures casting their weight on it. I think the sort of function that religion at one time performed, theatre may be able to perform today. But how and when it is too premature to say. One does not really know.