

CLARIFYING NEW TRAJECTORY

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BACKGROUND

I found myself inhibited to the academic and intellectual system of theatre making. Secondly, I became unfamiliar to the urban and reductive culture. No other option for me as I had to accept the termination imposed on me from the National School Drama of New Delhi after three months of training in 1969. Hope gone, frustration took over. Psychologically I broke down. However, it was not long. I could heal the injured psychology soon when I became aware of my educational, socio-cultural background, and personal temperament. I had only a clerk's education. My life was wildly shaped by the instinctive and intuitive psyche as inherited from my native life.

I transformed this situation of failure into a real challenge of self-learning. I began to look back afresh at my own Meitei ethnic past the ancestral past of nature lore and native lore. Bewildered, I wandered into the ethnic jungle of impulse in order to explore the wild sources of the primeval human nature.

The word wild here is not used in its modern pejorative sense, meaning out of the control, but in its original sense, that means to live a natural life-elemental, pristine or vital life. It comes out as our wild teacher, wild mentor, wild mother that gives birth to the lightening sources of creativity and supports their inner and outer lives of the 'doers' who risk cultural expedition in the wild space of theatre.

Why I was shadowing Nongthang Leima, the lightning lady, of the Meitei creation myth in her home of dark woods was to explore an original alternative for an instinctive and subtle form of awareness in reacting to the dominate tension of our time in our localized context. My theatre appeared in its autonomy that the body speaks and vindicates in solidifying the form of social experience with a haunting effect in its bear sense.

In the very beginning, we felt the need of developing our group, Kalakshetra Manipur (KKM), as a workshop rather than a production company. Meanwhile we met Badal Sircar. Because of his excitement in our performance of physical language we became closer. We learnt psychophysical exercises, play making and other games of trust almost in the context of deurbanization, main focus of the actor training of the West in the last century, besides his philosophy of theatre as social action. Later on we realized the unequilibrium between his system and our vision of a new aesthetic. What we could really benefit from our contact with Badal is the clues that guide us towards objective research and history of oppression and resistance.

Sabitri's presence in our group necessarily renewed our process of the relationship between the two didn't help our work process grow. Her way of practice very personal could spring a surprise by making director's dream come true. Encountering between the two on their own personal levels leads towards a harmonious relationship that becomes dynamic in transforming the vision of the director into a concrete form which ever remain personal of the actor. This is how we know an ideal collaboration that could evolve a 'unified language'. In this context, the presence of dictatorial auteur disappears. However, his shadow cannot be blotted out. In the environment of sociological structure of a family rooted in love and cooperation the work is performed through 'do it' from the elder to 'yes' by the apprentice. We conceive this nature of work as formidable as shaped by traditional value and modern temperament of a group life.

What KKM could accomplish artistically was that of a kind of ethno-oratorio of modern native theatre while making evolution of a language physical rather than psychological. The language, as solidified by social experience in the renewal process of ancestral tradition and retelling the folk tales, was a highly physical and visceral response to the bitter political conditions. The language is shaped by a trusted body, the only human resource of the actor that resonates as the vital source of the performance text in opposition to the convention of written text. The body lives in and out of the tale and its images, and leaps towards creative freedom capturing the ritual spirit in order to empower the performer and the audience alike. The most productive period was the early seventies to the early eighties of the last century. Five major productions ranging from 25 to 45 minutes were created besides short improvisations and other works with non-actors.

Unfortunately, I face a situation after a decade along continuity of practice. The core group of five actors could not involve themselves in the regular practice as they had to secure their own economic jobs. Theatre in India has no other way than working as amateur. In my case too, economic insecurity disturbed the process for a long time. It seemed that creative blood got frozen.

Meanwhile, I faced another artistic problem too. I felt the urgency to look back to whatever artistically accomplished in order to analyze and formulate into a system for the fine delivery and communication. Simply because our work negated the conventional practice and its own system of training. With the help of fellowship from Ford Foundation and Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Trust I could take up a new challenge. For me it was too burdensome as I lacked the necessary academic background. Any way I confronted with all my limitation in order to see that I could get my system easily accessible, practical and objective.

In the long span of two decades from nineties of the last century till now I created only three major performances of Karna, Draupadi and Dakghar. These were all text-based. Some of my sympathetic critics wondered in the beginning. I took up the texts in response to the complexity of my social experience, and experimented in a way of destruction and reconstruction of the text sustaining the body of the actor in its supremacy. Artistically it was justified in a process of reality and transcendence.

THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

In an intellectual exercise for the analysis and formulation into a system our own practice we face certain conflicts, doubts, similarities when we locate this into the world theatre context.

In the strict sense of the actor training we can find this tradition in the East. Systematic traditions of actor training are integral to the performances of Nat Sankirtana and Ras in our home of Manipur, Kathakali of Kerala all the traditional dance-theatre forms of India. Let us look at the Noh theatre of Japan and Balinese and Javanese dance-theatre forms. In the West there is a long history of actor apprenticeship, but not as systematic as in the case of the East.

When these two influences work in us we could logically extricate two main values: rigorous training (disciplined 'rigour' in Grotowski's phrase) from the East, and objective scientific research from the West.

These two values need to be merged into a single vital force, into a concrete form of system for modern actor training. This has already been conceived, processed and tested the validity in different personal contexts of creativity in the practice of theatre making in the West throughout the last century.

Therefore, systems personally valued and practicable for their own choice of or explored aesthetic are possible. This is the historical evidence of the Methodist trend of the West in the last century right from Stanislavsky through Staniewski.

How the evolution of these personal systems take place can be traced back through mutual cross fertilization. Finding similar interests, rejecting the previous ideas, assimilating new ideas, re-interpreting for new elements and so on have given the space to clarify new trajectories.

It becomes a universal phenomenon which we have no reason to deny, but open ourselves in search of our own direction. It may concur with Chaikin's point of view "inspiration and urgent sincerity have affected me and many other.....still, we are on different journeys".

JUGGLERY OF JARGON

Right from the very beginning in the history of theatre word became medium of communication between the director and actor. Words were employed experientially in order to suit their nature of work process. In the beginning of twentieth century, when the scholars jumped on to ridicule their words, Stanislavsky sharply reacted while admitting the use of scholarly words to mean "our own actors' jargon, which life itself created.....not in a philosophical....." and continued, "It is not our fault that the domain of stage art is disdained by scholars, that it has remained unexplored and that we have not been given the words for practical work. We had to do what we could, so to speak, with home-made means".

Sometimes, on the contrary of the western tradition, I found curious and afresh when I worked with the traditional artist/masters who used metaphor, 'moon on the water', 'the floating body', 'sensory rhythm', 'throat does not sing', 'transform your trunk into waves' and so on. Sometimes with very little words, through silence, the matter created a body-in-life of the student as a sculptor does, not in drilling system but in a process of self-discovery, the personal. If the student is not intelligent enough and sensitive, he thinks that the master does not teach him.

Now, words and terms get validated with scholarly roots by academic interaction and objective scientific research. These spread throughout the world as standard working language acceptable without any inhibition. More appropriate words will be invented when we could transform traditional metaphors and our homemade means into its exact position as necessitated by the work process for an objective impact.

In our case we are bound to depend on the words I already invented and tested by our predecessors and contemporaries. It does not seem borrowing at all. However, these words and terms are all of approximation that cannot really decide in its literal sense the true identity of the work. The same words employed by more artists may not be reasoned of a work that is similar to each other. The same word carries different connotations and practical sense when applied to different contexts. Word is multi-faceted by nature of its application. As instance, popular word 'sub-text', how Stanislavsky applied in what context of non-verbal means. Grotowski and Barba in their own processes of association and point of mental support, whilst our concept of it does work in our sense of personal mythology. Every case is always 'personal', but the point is how far this 'personal' simultaneously connotes 'universal'.

METHODOLOGY

The western debate which is precipitated around two key questions can reflect to all of us who engaged in modern theatre making. First is it possible of a single, universal system which would contain a complete

method of actor training? Second, are fundamental techniques of one acting system be applicable in the creation of any other form?

The first is just for a guide, a handbook or manual and certainly not a philosophy according to Stanislavsky. The second is the tested conclusion that the given system has its limitations that do not free to move away from it.

In India, we are facing two opposing systems. One is the institutionalized system of National School of Drama that is influenced by the European convention (mostly RADA model) of a theatre of 'actor-text-character'. It prevails upon the academic and intellectual exercise in analysis of the text, and psychological and behavioural motivation in characterization. It teaches how to work within the text and interpret the character within the representational framework. The training is set for three years. On the contrary, obliging the ethics of shradha (faith), sadhna (will) and abhyas (practice), one needs a long span of time (10to15years) to accomplish the codified language under the personal guidance of a guru (teacher). The mastery of this codified language gives nuances to, through operating the presence of the performer in a de-humanized form, aesthetic perception. This is the system that binds the practitioner within 'actor-character-text'.

We deny both the systems on the grounds that the illusionistic vision of the former, and cult atmosphere of the latter work against our doing and creating out of ourselves in a process from 'otherness to self-discovery'. Both the systems are meant for finished product. We believe in the work-in-progress shows as it concerns and stimulates progression and exploration. Our ancestral performance tradition inspires fundamentally in renewing our work process of 'do it' from the elders and 'yes' by the apprentices in learning the craft in a private and inner process isolated from the public. Move out to the public, and perform from village to village. Come back to their private space of guru and begin to learn afresh. It gives a sense of 'learning how to learn' that motivates us to remain always a learner of the holistic repetition of theatre. What is most exciting is their inner process of 'self-discovery' in their performative structure. Our learning is to elicit the essence of art from any system inspite of our denial of the canon of the system.

For us, we have our own experience that resists the notion of anything as absolute as an applied method. We are very much with Chaikin's belief that systems are recorded as ground plans. What is more important is to get clues from other. We do not need to imitate other's process and findings. Our own cultures, sensibility and aesthetic will instil in us for a new kind of expression.

We need a kind of territory to give concrete example how each practitioner can cover the territory in demonstrating the physical realization of the core principles in self-discovery at the practitioners' personal level, but Methodology is no longer a dynamic force. It tends to be dogmatic at the end. Ours is the process which is more dynamic and evolutionary in order to justify our sense of aesthetic into a concrete form.

THE PERFORMER'S PRESENCE

Truly speaking, I have no practical knowledge at all since no physical contact with Western practice is yet established. Whatever accumulated is due to the overflow of literary information or knowledge to me through books. Logically my analysis would be, I believe, speculative and academic. Any way, by compulsion, I need to be informed of the Western analysis as the intellectual basis so as to enable me to communicate my own concept and process. In regard to performer's presence I am solely making the basis on the analysis done by Alison Hodge (who is a professional director, co-founder and Artistic Director of

Theatre Alibi (1982-9), and Assistant Director of Staniweski's Gardzienice (1990-91). Currently free lance director and Lecturer in Drama, Royal Holloway College, University of London. Edited Twentieth Century Actor Training published by Routledge-2000).

Beginning with Barba, he is well versed in Oriental Theatre. He concluded: two basic elements contribute 'the use of learned body techniques to break the performer's daily responses, and codification of principles which dictate the use of energy during performance. According to him these are the essential components in the actor's arsenal of extra daily techniques. His main focus is the immediacy which owes something to concentration and control of the actor's 'energy'. Within Gardzienice's performances it is to achieve a heightened state of presence, beyond the dualistic performance paradigm as identified by Diderot that makes the actor operate on several levels of consciousness simultaneously.

Presence is manifested through sound and movement in Chaikin's process. 'Self' does not work but being of the actor operates with imagery. The perceptible quality of 'presence' is imminently emerged through the energy-line in shifting balance, or dialogue, between body and mind, listening, watching, and in confronting the emerging image a force which comes into alignment with it.

To understand it intellectually is easy, but the most risky is to be conscious of the practical process of 'presence' that needs to be controlled by the actor in performance. On the other hand, we, the insiders of Asia, should take this risk responsibly in renewing the concept and practical impact of the 'presence' in our context of Asian contemporary cultural expression, because it originates from our ancestral tradition, which our modern and sophisticated minds are not aware of it.

We continue from the traditional concept of our ancestors who ask us to "live alive bodily and mentally in projection of your 'soul' in tune with the inner (organic) rhythm. Unless you control this state of being whatever you do appear weak and dead. You should learn yourself how the seven elements should organically work in your body. According to our ethnic knowledge system of Meitei, human body is primarily composed of five elements – fire, water, air, earth and ether (as in Ayurvedic system too) of which 'life' is perceived through sixth element of 'mi' (literally association, but the personal self). The iconic representation of human profile is reduced to '8' figure – that of a snake motif-the spineless spine. The organism composed of these seven elements reflects both wisdom and temptation. It leads to introspection and indicative of dealing with people on sensorial mutuality escaping from conditioned habits, daily life behaviour and unfair criticism". The advice furthers with great emphasis on ethics and self practice to be followed strictly. This is what we know by discipline that makes you 'know' yourself. Our martial ancestors advise us "try to see through your ears, hear through eyes" furthering "keep yours eyes on your back head and put your soul at your finger point".

These are the basic ideas that make us understand the meaning of 'presence' of performer. In our practice, our philosophy of aesthetic necessarily demands an inner process how the performer's presence 'alerts' the spectators in provoking their soul. Hence, a performer's body needs to be rigorously disciplined for a live and trusted body that can create organic fluidity as driven by 'spontaneity'. Besides, the performer must have the capacity to control the emotion in entering and transcending its most turbulent states, and also to interplay between the physical and the psychical through manifestation and evocation. This interplay is the inner journey of an acting psychic process in uncovering layer towards self-discovery. The true power of acting lies in this inner process. Only then the presence is alive, energetic and vibrative.

HOME RETURN:

We make a conscious return to our human habitat of wild sanctuary which humans share the life with animals and nature. This is what we know by natural life, the human ecology that produce inexhaustible wisdom of life – powerlessness and, at the same time, consciousness of power. Our ancestors became “natural with the nature and human with the human society” though it might be of perfectionist view. They created original and powerful social relationships through the practice of ritual that was the beginning of our theatre autonomous in itself. The ritual is being renewed in its pristine process of repeated operation and inner dialogue between the performers and spectators on the sensory and spiritual levels in order to ‘alert’ the body of the spectators to the spirit of human resilience. This is the way how we address eco-political concerns in theatre.

Thus we jump out of our hard cell of ethnic identity that is always overpowered by egocentrism – the logical corollary of ethnocentrism. Transcending this hard cell of identity we find the possibility of exploring a view of human nature indigenous to all human being irrespective of different background. We begin to learn afresh our body vocabulary from the ecological system by way of absorbing rhythm and sensibility of natural environment and cultural expedition that leads to unfold ancestral, hidden and forbidden lores. Before we create the processes of naturalization and ritualization we are compelled to concentrate on certain prerequisites for our learning:

- Creating theatre’s symbiotic relationship with nature and native lore in rural context by leaving the conventional scale of assessment of city theatre.
- Entering a space where the senses are at work in evoking instinct and intuition, that plays the original human resources in creating spatial forms and cultural conditions ecologically conducive for transformation and abstraction.
- Appreciating a sense of aesthetic of live theatre in contact with the roots that serves in teaching theatre and art, not academically, but teaches.
- Addressing the rural-based audience.

LIVE THEATRE

Aesthetic redefined:

The efficacy of art is justified by the inner encounter between the performer and the spectator on the sensory and emotional levels. This energetically charged encounter creates ‘alert’, or disturbs the body of the spectator striking at the core of the spirit of human resilience. On the other hand, it is an inner process to create haunting effect in its good sense of provocation leading towards perceptions of the spectator by way of experience and reflection or between the two.

Performance problematized:

The body dynamics, that has attained something malleable and capable to control and transmutation, creates threads into a spatial web against the conventional symmetry of dramaturgy. A web-logical, sensuous and lyrical is vitally and subtly created by the bodily configuration of sound, gesture and movement, the specific powers of live theatre as charged by its inner process. There we have a network of ebb and rhythm of energy (feeling or emotional state or state of the soul) while creating sense-impression of the fluidity in organicity. A flow of energy progresses implicitly in its undercurrent to face the unfamiliar, the paradox.

The song so used is both training and performance has its great value in opening the door of the heart whilst its rhythm and lyricism help in re-shaping the persona and seeking the hidden images. For the song we have to go back to its original sense of musicality of which the role is so vibrant and ritualistically tempered. We use song as the source of inspiration and perception and also for shaping the rhythm of energy.

When we work on a text we use to destroy it and reconstruct in resonance with our performance state of 'pretending' and 'doing', rejecting 'behaving' motivated by psychology. Here we approach towards reality and transcendence.

Acting in an Integrated Process

Breathing makes the body alive. When the breathing stops the body becomes dead. This is the truth what even an animal knows. In our case too, we are aware of the fact that we control inhaling and exhaling the air, we feel the flow of blood and the movement of muscles. Our awareness is at the intellectual level, because it is easily comprehended. What we need is to create a practical objective impact of live body. When the body comes into a life force it turns to be its dynamic. A conscious body dynamics should transform the concept into a concrete form. So the main focus goes to the role of body dynamics that needs to be used and transcended in the course of design and execution.

Through the process of naturalization it is

- To re-build the body in dominating various stages of rigorous training for identifying with a natural human being for the awareness of life flow in the body and consequently for authentic natural reaction.
- To control how the sense work for a sense perception,
- To exercise mutuality among the fellow partners,
- To explore specific powers of live theatre through sound, gesture and movement and so on.

The process is to make aware of the 'vitality' that becomes a natural life flow in the being of the actor in the course of using body dynamics. Through the process of ritualization (operating repetitive mechanism in the ritual context of theatre) the 'vitality' needs to be transformed into 'subtlety'. The being of the actor operates repeatedly the 'presence' in practically answering to

- How the gentle rhythm of emotion is explored in entering and transcending the most turbulent states of emotion,
- How to uncover the instinctive and intuitive psyche,
- How the physical manifests the psychical and psychical evokes the physical, and so on.

The whole process comes forth into a single vital force as 'integrated process of acting' in 'pretending and doing'.

This integrated process leads the actor

- To enter the practice of transforming the 'natural' into 'artificial' in justification of art,
- To confront all stages of performance states in designing and executing the role in and out of the character, ultimately to see that the self privileges over the character,
- To identify with a village conjuror who abandons trick and creates something of socially free gift.

Instinct and Intuition

Our modern culture makes us deprived of the natural gift of instinct and intuition and thus starved of the soul's attributes: creativity, sensory awareness and other instinctual gifts. We are facing the loss of originality in expression. We feel the inner vacuum. It then creates awareness in us how to compensate for the loss of regular cycles of self-expression, soul-expression, and soul-satiation in the process of acting.

What KKM accomplished-

Art is created naturally by instinct and intuition. The problem we are facing is how to deliver the practice in a conscious process of fine communication and practicability. We have easily comprehended intellectually what the instinct and intuition are. However, we are in wilderness when we take it into practice. It is very difficult to teach objectively as we find the same problem in teaching emotion.

For the theoretical perception of instinct here I quote Clarissa Pinkola Estes, a follower of Jungian psychology- "instinct is a difficult thing to define, for its configurations are invisible and though we sense they have been part of human nature since the beginning of time, no one knows quite where they might be housed neurologically or precisely how they act upon us. Psychologically Jung speculated that instincts derived from the psychoid unconscious, that layer of psyche where biology and spirit might touch. I am of a considered same mind and would go further to venture that the creative instinct in a particular is as much the lyrical language of the self as is the symbology of dreams.

"Etymologically, the word instinct derives from the Latin *instinguere*: meaning "impulse", also instinct us, meaning 'instigation', to incite or impel via an innate prompting. The idea of instinct can be valued positively as an inner something that when blended with forethought and consciousness guides humans to integral behaviour.....".

The intuition we are speaking of is not the same as the typological functions. What Jung delineates of intuition are: feeling, thinking, intuition and sensation. In our psyche, intuition is more than typology. It is of the instinctive psyche of the soul act it appears to be innate, having a maturation process, having perceiving, conceptualizing and symbolizing abilities. It is a function belonging to all of us regardless of typology. Both instinct and intuition are of the most ancient source. We can contact 'them through our dreams. So we feel if we could create dream-like-state-of-consciousness in a playful state there is a way to evoke them through our psychic layers. Uncovering layer upon layer in a way of de-conditioning we can touch the hidden soul that ultimately privileges over the persona so far we have graphed behaviourally on the stage. We have been relying on the songs in its right rhythm, resonance and melody in its original musicality in order to evoke the dance of senses as tuned by the drum of heart.

ON KANHAILAL-SABITRI'S EXPOSITION

A speech by Richard Gough

Having been here the last few days I feel very humble, having spent this with you and I'm so grateful for the invitation to Kanhailal and to Sukra.

This is an enchanted place and I want to talk a little bit about the possibilities about enchainment and bewilderment and power of theatre I have seen of Kanhailal and Sukra's. I didn't come here prepared for camping and I have had some very sleepless nights because of the cold and I didn't realize just how much the dogs have to bark about, they have much to say at night and I listened to most of the dogs and tried to hear what they were barking at. And so you try to hear under this level, the superficial level and this is going to be the theme of my talk, what was stirring their barks? And I dreamt of elephants because on the ride here Sukra had told me about the elephant path and I have never seen a wild elephant and I wanted to see a wild elephant but I did see wild elephants in my dreams.

I would like to do as improvisation around five words: Disorientation, Bewilderment, Interruption, Turbulence and Contagion or Infection. These might all seem rather negative concepts but I want to think through the positive implication and provocations that lie behind these words. But I would actually like to begin with three image, so you all see I'm following a sort of classical structure of three acts and five acts structure but that actually make sit eight which is not a good number in some cultures, too symmetrical, too balanced and so to follow the Japanese aesthetic I must add one, another one which will operate as a sort of sub-Terrance theme and that is transformation, not just as a theoretical aspiration but practical realisation with an apparatus to affect change which I am feeling seeing here.

Of the many images that I will return to Wales from Assam I choose three that are specially resonant and with resonant being the operative word here resounding in sound but also reverberating on my retina on my mind's eye. Image one-the theatre in the jungle, the Macbeth jungle, a magical place. When I visited there I thought immediately of Shakespeare, I thought of all those moments in the woods when identities are lost and change, when malicious spirits haunt, when the possibility to affect change takes over. I was amazed that it was called Macbeth jungle. I didn't know why until this morning. I remember a story that a colleague had told me from Eban, Nigeria, when they had been in a theatre company, the common people or the folk, in this case the folk people of Nigeria when the woods came, the woods of Birnam moved in, the entire village got up and ran. So it was the reality of the woods appearing. This clearing in the woods (is) a natural environment and I think this notion of a natural environment we've been working in during these three days is very important and significant. There the sky and the earth connected by the elegant Sal trees, in a way it wasn't so much a jungle. I wrote this morning 'Falling Leaves' watching the performance, which I think is all part of the element of what we have been watching here, the natural environment and its play in the performance as well.

Falling leaves

flying butterflies

wind in the sal trees

growling dogs

the silence of the children enchanted mesmerized.

That was my first image. My second image is of here, of this place (the Mandap), of seeing Tomba and Sabitri singing and improvising across this space yesterday afternoon. Sabitri on that side and Tomba over here, I found that an incredibly moving, touching experience with Kanhailal standing here, centerstage in the middle and in my mind – I know they are not and you are not- I imagined almost the grand children in a line, in the back. The sense of legacy was so profound in that moment with the bell ringing, the voices coming across this room. I was thinking I haven't actually seen, I don't think, I might have but I don't think, I'm not very well aware of a mother and son work together. I have seen a father and son work together in Japanese theatre. I have seen Kasavona dance in his nineties dance with his sixty five years old son, I have seen in Bali, mother teach their daughters to dance but its very rare, I think its very rare and it was a very beautiful moment, very beautiful moment particularly coming after the sustained exercise that we had seen that the four young members of the company had done. That will stay with me and as I said it really resonates issues to do with legacy and tradition of passing on, passing down, passing through and passing across. I am well aware of the Guru-Shishya parampara tradition in India but I was seeing it in a different way here I felt and I found that the power of transformation of a performance, of technique and the transmission of the technique happening there and seeing it through father, mother, son and young members of the company was a very beautiful image.

Image three – not seeing river dolphins on the Brahmaputra river. Is that a contradiction? Can not see dolphins be an image? Yes, because I saw the ripples in the still water the dolphins supposedly made. Yesterday afternoon some of us escaped camp and went shopping for silk but the most wonderful part of it was the drive along the river, the Brahmaputra river and Torali was saying sometimes you see river dolphins and then we stopped the car and she was saying there, there, thats the river dolphin. I didn't see it but I did see the ripples, I saw the ripples several times and I struggled to apprehend, I wonder if there was a parallel here with what my expectations were before arriving to the workshop – exposition here thinking perhaps that the tribal element might be more explicit, might be obvious, that should appear rather than function as the turbulence of the dramaturgy and the way in which the actors harness the energy and presence. I think I might have looked too hard for the dolphins, there appearance was transitory and ephemeral. It was almost as if, if you can see that I'm trying to make some co-relation in trying to see the work of Kanhailal in trying to see the dolphins. But did see the ripples, and I did see in the works her some ripples, something half revealed, in part obscure, purposefully and beguilingly so. Let me reflect on ripples for one moment. I think, I may misquote this but Eugenio Barbo quoted Einstein saying that he told the story of a little boy that threw stones into a pond and the boy wanted to make square ripples and not round ones. Einstein said that the important thing is to think the thought.

So let me thy and talk now about my five words. Disorientation: it begins in a very literal way. Until two days before I left to fly to Delhi I thought I was going to Manipur. I spoke to a colleague and she said, Have you got all your permit papers, in place?" and I had a horror because I didn't have any permit papers and didn't know I had to have permit papers and she said, "Richard where are you flying to?" And I said, "Guwahati" and she said, "You are not going to Manipur, you are going to Assam", which was a delight also but it was a start for a kind of disorientation that where I was going was somewhere else. And then I ended up here and I got off the plane and had this crazy drive which for me was very, very frightening I have to say. How you drive here is a mystery. Its like the best ride in a fair ground. Its like something in imaginable. It was a total disorientation – this thrilling journey, a race as if we were late. I thought we were trying to get here for something, we were having to drive so fast – but there was also a purpose in disorientation. I would like to

think of a dramaturgy of disorientation. In some ways I think some of the best theatre is where you are, the audience is disoriented, initially confused, not sure where this is going but it can be extremely efficacious, and that leads me to Bewilderment. So in my crazed arrival we were all given this beautiful text, I have to say. I read this within a few moments of it being given. This need to be get out to the world, it need a little bit of work which I will be very happy as with my other hat on as an editor to work. I found it such a honest, such a personal, such a heartfelt account of Kanhailal's world. I read, when he was talking about his failure in the real challenge of self learning, he writes, "Bewildered I wandered into the ethnic journey of impulses in order to explore the wild sources of the primeval human nature," 'Bewildered' is the key word for me, and of course in the middle of bewildered there is 'wild' and wild comes through in Kanhailal's text later and this connection that we spoke about the other day of the wild in the sense of vitality. Interestingly, 'wandered' is misprinted as 'wondered'. It adds to wander is to journey and to wonder is to open up one's mind. So the connection with bewilderment. With bewildered often is in English the word 'bewilderment'. With bewildered often is in English the word 'bewitched'. And you probably remember the song 'Bewitched bothered and bewildered'. This connection of this three terms really came home to me in this three days and this question of vitality that Kanhailal talks about.

So then Interruption, it again might seem like a strange word to wish to bring in but I experienced here, what I think is happening in this work is a profound interruption into the projection, the trajectory of theatre, that there is an intervention, it is causing an interruption. It is rupture that breaks and through a rupture something new emerges. He is touching you and through your work and your team working Kanhailal and Sukra are touching into something different. In my mind it connects very much to a company whom I am very close to and have brought to UK many times Gardzienice Theatre Association Kanhailal mentioned the works of Staniweski talks about a new environment of theatre and he works not in a dissimilar place. Gardzienice is a tiny village on the outskirts of Lublin. Staniweski worked with Grotowski but in a way then became the second generation, and through his in-depth work in this very remote village in what he called 'peasant cultures'. And you have to remember that in communist, former communist Poland folk culture was a sort of national culture of communism. Raymond Williams once said every time I hear the word 'national culture' I put on my fancy dress; there is this sense of this folk culture that is created. What Staniweski was interested was to tap into this sort of raw, dynamic as you are talking about here tribal in eastern Europe they were talking about a nature folk culture. This interruption is purposeful, dangerous, this interruption can stimulate new directions. What is very fascinating about Gardzienice I think this is what I am seeing here, is the second, third, generation then began to appear from gathering like this. Staniweski brought groups together and now there many other companies. These are all companies that grew out of his work and took the work, nuanced it in different ways, took in different direction. So interruption I used purposely and creatively.

Turbulence: Turbulence, of course we are more familiar with at that moment in the aeroplane when it suddenly hits a pocket of air or when the air stream moves and creates turbulence. Again I feel what is happening here and what is happening in your (Kanhailal) work and it connects to me with the political that has been spoken about which surprised me. And I think I have found the most arresting in my imagination, I haven't realised that this new direction in your work obviously still call upon and drew upon some great political activism in theatre. So the integration of tribal and ritual practice can create this sort of turbulence and instability troubling to performance. But again troubling is a positive, de-stabilizing notion that nothing is fixed anymore, that we can trouble performance in this way and through a natural, new environment.

The word is Contagion or Infection. Again might seem a strange negative word. I like the sense that what is happening here is that we have all been infected, that we have all been contaminated and that we take this disease, so much like an Auto's vision of theatre, that we now take this disease this viral infection with us to other parts of India and as for me I will take it back to the UK. But through that it begins to spread and I think that is what I am seeing, I think that what I am seeing in the political-with a small 'p' – project that is happening here. Your work needs to be distributed and diffuse and to find other emanations, other forms of it. It will be different. I very much enjoyed the production of Sukra. It was very different from your work but with clearly taking the inspiration (from you), in an inspirational way. So I think this notion of contagion and infection is quite important.

What was very interesting was, again it was part of the disorientation, that the day began with the performance and then we saw the demonstration. I'm so used to seeing the training and then the performance. I just want to talk about four moments from the workshop, we saw what I felt was a beautiful exposition by the four young members of Kanhailal's group. It reminded me of a piece of work that Grotowski did, the last piece of work. It was not a piece for presentation. It was purely process and it was called "Actions" and it was led by Thomas Richards. It was a sustained piece of working with the breath. And I thought it was beautifully and eloquently shown to us yesterday. As I have already mentioned the way it caused the moments through the body was truly inspirational.

And then after that there was this exercise which I think was a sort of group chorus. And I was very fascinated by this because I knew that exercise from Joseph Chaikin's work, the open theatre the living theatre, of the American theatre of the 1970's. And at a certain point you mentioned working with Badal Sircar and he having worked with (Richard) Schechner. So again I became fascinated by this sort of viral transmission, the way that exercise move through and across through bodies through people, through time. We are talking about an exercise that we being done 40 years ago and here there is a new version of it.

And today I was absolutely bowled over by Sabitri's improvisation. This was a 'carving' in space and time. It was such a beautiful action I completely understand from work that I have done what was happening internally, as we had in the discussion, this sense of a series, a sort of necklace of associations one proposed by the other in that way. But what was so 'fabulous' – was the execution, the precision and clarity of execution that I saw. It reminded me of Kasobono, it reminded me of seeing, as you said, a truly great world artiste in action, on the stage working with her internal energy but making these images that was so eloquent. It was a continuous poem in movement, in motion. It also reminded me of how some of the great directors of the 20th century had a truly great actor-performer. I only need to mention Helene Weigel of Brecht, Thomas Richard of Grotowski or even Nigel Rasmussen for Eugenio Barba. So I felt I was witnessing here the embodiment of a vision. But that is both a strength and a weakness, I feel if I may be so bold enough to say, in a way, how is one going to train the next generation? If the vision is embodied in a great performer then can it also be almost 'undermining' for those who follow? It's such a great embodiment of this work.

And then the fourth moment is the demonstration from 1972 (of TamnaLai/Haunting Spirit). I thought this was extraordinary that a piece that was thirty-eight years old, almost forty years old was being re-enacted in this way. In terms of the discussion about body memory and the possibility to simply take a fragment, to start from stillness and to be immediately in the character in the performance that was many many years ago. I thought that was a magical, magical moment. In Japan, Sabitri you would be a 'living national treasure'. I hope in our own little council here we can declare that.

And so just to say a few concluding words that about the performances I saw. I am going to be honest about this, I mean this constructively and critically and it may be more of a comment about my own self, I am well aware. In many ways I'm finding more and more that I enjoy the training and the exposition than the performance. In Kathakali I enjoy watching the cholliyatam, in some sense, more than the performances. And I have been thinking a lot, was that the case here? No, not entirely. But there were some beautiful diamond moments in the training we saw here and in the performances I sometimes found that in the integration of the technique there was some sort of hybridity at work.

What I did see, and I'm sorry boys and men, what I did see some brilliant performances by women across all of the production. And I did see in, pretty well, all the productions is almost as if there was at the centre stage a female figure. A female figure who went through a process of rage, anger, fury, this sense of her being at the centre of the stage. I also felt that this was because the matrilineal lineage that has come from Sabitri is really flowering in extraordinary way. I felt in the four pieces that I saw over these three days, it was wonderful to see, must say, the power of women combined with a political edge. And then finally, this morning again, being back again in the magical space of enchantment I very much enjoyed the fragment, at last 20 minutes of Sukra's production. I felt there was great clarity, great precision, there was pauses, still moments. It reminded me sometimes of Japanese theatre, it reminded me of Wagner and Barong in Balinese where the men become and in that moment the men did become entranced. I felt that here was student who was excellent, and I mean that in the most positive sense and I hope in India its understood. As a student of the master. That the student also excels and takes the work forward, in perhaps a slightly different way from your (kan) aesthetic and with the combination of the playwright in this case. And for the future, what you have begun here now moves through the bodies and minds of other people because the two are connected. On a more practical level I also hope and I promise and I will do whatever I can that your own writing, your own thinking and your own practice can be widely, 'widely' known around the world.

Transcribed by

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WHAT THE CRITICS SAID.....

The other presentation of the festival was RASHOMAN of H.Kanhailal a combination of thangka, sankirtana, several tantric forms and spiritual symbols, done in an absolutely new idiom and language. Obviously Kanhailal has reached a revolutionary point of his creative journey. RASHOMAN was simply amazing for the audience. About his work he says: I have not been able to give a name to this style, I may take some more time. According to Dr. Philip Zarilli, the American theatre scholar "the day Kanhailal succeeds in completion of his discovery of the new language, the present form of theatre would crash."

Sisir Gupta

(Translated from Hindi as quoted from the DHARMA YUG of 31st January, 1988 issue – page 45)

Of the six plays presented at the Shri Ram Centre in connection with a theatre week on Experiments with Tradition, jointly sponsored by the Shri Ram Centre for Art and Culture and the Ford Foundation, the most gripping dramatic piece belonged to Kanhailal. The theme was MEMOIRS OF AFRICA based on a modern Manipuri poem about suffering of black Africans. But the style, the mood, the movement and the cathartic acting by his wife, Sabitri, as the symbol of victimisation, were superbly fashioned, the breath gasping to rhythm, the shuddering horror which finds expression in Sabitri's amazing fluidity of movement, the soft wail rising to a crescendo like an inner scream and no dialogues at all made this evening riveting a 45 minutes of sheer theatre.

Uma Vasudev, Times of India, New Delhi.

The woman, the victim of the oriental society dominated by the man, tries to express her resistance to the deeply rooted social humiliation through "Innocent Silence" as H. Kanhailal, the director of the Indian play "THE HUMAN CAGE" case it.

To affirm the emotional character, the director created a dreamy atmosphere, freeing his actors from daily life imitation. The play is not simple story of love and revenge, it focussed on the inner experience and feelings of a woman's suffering, struggle and revenge by her deep silence. The director uses silence, body movement, human sound and music as the main language of the play. Words were merged into an "integrated" language through body-soul interactions as a single vital force developed from "tribalism" for the theatre of transcendence.

Manal Abdul Azir

(An extract from "Experimental Theatre" Friday 6 September 1991 Ministry of Culture, The 3rd Cairo International Festival.)

Kanhailal-Sabitri combination is a new phenomenon in Manipuri theatre. This eminent theatre personality of India, Kanhailal, since his early association with Badal Sircar of Calcutta, goes on evolving with his new theatrical language from "physical theatre" to "intimate theatre" and now to "theatre of transcendence". Indian critics call it "alternate theatre". This is a new theatre language with an accent on silence and gesture and integrated expression of dance, music and body expression.

Sabitri's performance-amazingly energetic, brilliantly precise and moving. She hardly speaks, but looks, shouts, groans and moans and keeps the audience spell bound. Her acting is a complete language as

expressed in her body and voice, her gestures, tones, looks of the eye, tilts of the head, music and emotion of vocal levels. This is great acting by any standard.

E. Nilakanta Singh, Manipur Mail, Imphal

Here was a theatre of imagery, both fluid and powerful. Words were redundant, used much as the wind and percussion instruments (ranged with the audience in front). The rise and fall of voices and music, along with the perfectly orchestrated circling movements on stage bound performers and viewers into an engrossed ritual. Suggestive visuals maximised the magic. As when Karna's corpse was "carried" away by the simple means of four persons picking up the cloth which covered him, and making it into a canopied pall, bearing the hero off the stage.

Even in death he is claimed by the Aryan masters, leaving his foster parents destitute, along with their lower class clan. Suddenly their meek acceptance flares into a wail of protest as the tribe closed ranks and turned inward into an eerie colloquy with the spirit of the tragic warrior. He answers from beyond death as a mother (played brilliantly by H. Sabitri Devi) is lost in a trance, and the maibee Priestess appears in a drawn-sword frenzy. Those were moments beyond drama and even representation, where the soul and the sense vibrated to a chord deeper than reason.

The Hindu, Mumbai.

The vision of this theatre has been nurtured by the most gifted and creative director, H. Kanhailal, who has evolved one of the most subtle training systems for the contemporary Indian actors. In this regard, his chief collaborator has been his wife, Smt. Sabitri, an actress of extraordinary power, whose capacity to enter and transcend the most turbulent state of emotions is a rarity in the contemporary theatre world. Rooted as she is in deeply indigenous modes of traditional and folk performances, she has ability to surrender to the most profound dimensions of a melodramatic experience where the emotions are larger than life, yet real. Together, Kanhailal and Sabitri form a "unified language in theatre", a communion that is extended to the other actors who celebrate the joy and terror of life with a deeply affecting honesty and sense of play.

Rustom Bharucha, Kolkata.

Karna is more experimental in the sense that it shuns the direct narration, and makes the hero a vehicle of a message with post-modernist undertones. It focuses on Brahmanic control and imposition of a mythological discourse on the Sudras, a discourse that was to serve the interests of the Brahmin elite. In the play, Karna's death takes place quite early. It is only after that, with the hero's body in the foreground, that most of action takes place. This often demands the participation of the spirit of Karna.

.....Tomba makes a powerful Karna in his dance-like movements as in the baring of his suffering soul. The best performance, however, comes from Sabitri, who as Radha cries her heart out for a son who is now claimed by a royal mother and whose body is snatched for a royal funeral. Sabitri's grief is accentuated by a highly theatrical Kunti (Sanjukta) who, in contrast with Radha, grabs every opportunity to advertise her bereavement. All the cast brings out tellingly all the points the director was trying to make.....The play has a Noh-like simplicity.

Kanhailal is one of the best theatre directors in the country and Tomba, his son, does not lag far behind. Sabitri (Mrs Kanhailal) is a powerful actress and they have groomed a young team. It is a pity that one does not get them more often.

Pabitra Sircar, Statesman, Kolkata

One of our foremost but shiest directors, Kanhailal has the rare and uncanny ability to transform existing material into stunning political theatre. He dramatises Mahasweta Devi's short story of the same title, about a brutalised Santal Naxalite named (ironically) after the Pandava's wife, into unexpectedly immediate relevance not only for Manipur but many men in camouflage fatigues and black bandanas apparently enjoying their "job" and the intensification of the terrible climax, raise basic human rights issues of which not enough Indians are aware.

Kanhailal takes just an hour to drive, with utmost sensitivity and stylized artistry, what others labour over for twice the time yet fail to convey. Every member of Kalakshetra is excellent, as is Tomba Heisnam's eerie music. Amubi Akham and Sabitri, daughter and mother in real life, share the lead: The former's youthful energy counterpoints the latter's minimalism, which expresses a whole life's agony with a faint smile. Silence would have spoken louder than our applause.

Anand Lal, Telegraph, Kolkata

The origin of Imphal's naked protest lies in Manipuri theatre,..... With the sledgehammer slogan 'Indian Army, Rape us', were merely repeating what one of Manipur's (and India's) greatest actresses, Sabitri Heisnam, had done on stage a couple years ago, in the play (Draupadi) directed by her gifted husband, Kanhailal. It was clear even as one watched the play in the comfort of the theatre space that space that Sabitri's out-rage and passion in her ultimate act of resistance, was not merely 'drama'.....evident that there was a social energy and force behind it..... if the Mumbai press didn't get it, the Manipuri women were sure to take the cue. And the results have been electrifying. After all, it is not often that life imitates art.

Sadanad Menon, Tehelka.com

Draupadi, adapted from Bengali writer about the oppression of marginalised ethnic minorities in India featuring the brilliant actress Sabitri, bore the unmistakable stamp of director Kanhailal Heisnam's genius.

Mounted on an almost bare stage with only a gnarled tree in the background, the enactment had the quality of a Dhrupad- languorous and saturated, minimal images thick with meaning, earth embracing movements, soul piercing notes. Silence spoke more than words. Bodies moved like being controlled by deeply felt inner emotions. The eternal game of hide and seek between hunted and the hunter appeared before the eye. Sabitri came on for just twenty minutes of the play. She electrified the evening as only a superlative performance presence can do: it was a benediction.

Kavita Nagpal, Indian Express, New Delhi

In order to evolve a new ideological basis for social, economic and political living, Kanhailal does not fight shy of harsh reality. Draupadi, a reincarnated Droupdi, stands nude in full view of the audience, stunned by the horror of the situation when neither Krishna nor his miracle appear on the scene. This is how the pain of the oppressed is conveyed and spontaneous emergence of the female leadership, in countering dominant tensions of the time, is established. This daring is what makes Kanhailal different from Ratan Thiyam. The later is radical only in form.

Shahid Anwar, Express Newline, New Delhi

Amal in Heisnam Kanhailal's interpretation of Dakghar.....represented this liberated spirit captured in all its primordial human self. The character is conceived through the evocation of dream and takes off from a point where discourse fails. Amal reacts through the basic five elements – sound, sight, touch, feel and smell. This has given shape through flowing dance movements capturing joy, fear or bewilderment. All his reactions are instinctive and intuitive.

.....The 63 year old Sabitri as Amal is a marvel to look at on stage. Her flowing movement, her precision in encapsulating unbounded joy..... and her stifling fear percolates to the senses.....

Satarupa Basu, Hindustan Times, Kolkata

Dakghar, directed by H. Kanhailal was the best presentation of the festival. This was a smooth transition from physical theatre to the spiritual. He blended the entire North-East using dialects, song, the various musical instruments into the fabric of the play.

.....The end is an exhilarating expression of freedom beautifully enacted by Sabitri,..... Lighting, costumes, music met the highest theatrical standard. Sixty-three-year old Sabitri's depiction of young Amal is authentic. One was reminded of the praise heaped on dancer Dame Margot Fontyn for her depiction of 14-year-old Juliet at the age of 55.

Maitreyi Chatterjee, The Statesman, Kolkata

Amidst all these movements in search of an alternative theatre, the work of Heisnam Kanhailal of Manipur is entirely different and remarkable. Different in the sense that he has created an entirely new, non-western, highly localized form of theatre solely based on local performing traditions using indigenous ritual forms and devices. Kanhailal's invaluable contribution to Manipuri theatre is the creation of a different form of theatre by diving deep into our indigenous cultural roots and using experimental acting styles in his venture. He is not simply a director but also a profound thinker and theorist. Someday, his theories of theatre may lead us to a brighter future. Such a man of remarkable thought and theatrical talent is born seldom in a century in our world.

Budha Chingtham, The Sangai Express, Imphal