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"Braids" and Theatre Practice

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Braids and I have had a seesaw affair. They were a part of my life when I was growing up in a different world, in Africa. They disappeared from my life when I came here in 1968, and have been reclaimed when I began working in theatre in 1976. Braids gave me my first hint of otherness: watching women, mainly my sisters, sitting for what seemed like hours while their long hair was parted into strands and then braided by my mother under the African sun. It was a journey into an incredibly foreign land. I thought, why didn't *I* have such delicious long hair? Why doesn't someone have to part *my* hair and braid it? For me the most astonishing thing was to go from a moment of extreme ugliness with hair all over the place and gradually, over the course of maybe an hour, this completely unruly hair had been woven together and interweaved, and it was a beautiful pattern in front of me. And I just started to think, why am I denied this? What's wrong with me? You must remember that from my backgr

was a Geography class, I would be the expert on Gandhi, being a kind of Indian. The fact that I had never been to India was immaterial. However, I took up the challenge. I like a challenge. But I thought how do I call him? I'd grown up with the idea of Gandhiji, with the honorific, the kind of suffix attached. And of course if it was in Hindi I would never say "you," I would say "aap" as opposed to "tum." In English, of course, there isn't that kind of equivalent—and then I thought, no, there is. I'll say "thee." I won't say "he." So this speech began, and of course there were giggles all over the place. Very kindly the teacher came up to me and said, drop the thee-s. And I felt terrible.

But another reason why I was mortified is that my father had not come along with us and I had to write to him. The thing that I was stuck with was this. The first line was fine: "Dear Papaji" —not a problem. The second line is a huge problem. The second line was, "How are you?" It's the obvious one. How do I say "you" to him? The moment I say "you" I reduce

started Tara Arts in 1976, to begin to realise that there is a space to somehow reclaim some of this. There is a level to which the loss is beyond, now, it cannot be recovered, it can't be brought back, just as we can't return to our childhood. However, I am involved in an area of work where there might just be the possibilities of some kinds of reclamation. But even there one had to make some major moves.

When we began in 1976 we began with a very simple impulse, which is to give voice to ourselves—and I'll quote the title of a book that was written by Amrit Wilson in 1976 called, *Finding Your Voice*. And I think we were very much part of that process of finding a voice. There *were* no Asians out on the public stage doing what they wanted to do. That was our kind of impulse, to take the public space and to do whatever we wanted, to tell the story that we had to tell. That was a great impu

"darling" to each other. But the reality of multiculturalism is that my neighbour doesn't like my smell. That's the reality. But equally the reality of multiculturalism is that despite not liking, or rather *through*

make a choice, rather like making a choice about which political party you want to join. Are we with the Trevor Nunns and the Richard Eyres or are we with the Peter Brooks? That's a matter of choice. Those are your tastes. That doesn't mean that you don't like Ibsen. No, it's nothing to do with that. Those are fantastic plays. But how *you* approach a theatre has got to be to do with what meaning it has to your own kind of art.

In a way it was through that kind of discovery that we came to see that what

places where they dovetail into each other, where you have no idea which text you're following, and that happens completely naturally. But there clearly are moments when the texts do not dovetail into each other—when Penelope stares head on at Sita and you think, what on earth is going on? How can this person think in this way or act in this way?

That's a little example of the work which is continuing, to effect bridges across the imagination. And that is the project for all theatre in the twenty-first century and particularly in spaces like this: that we have to effect those bridges, if only because the audience around us is so incredibly mixed, in terms of its background.

Q.

has taken on, I would say, more meaning, more relevance, in places like Spilsby than it has in places like London or Birmingham. There is where we have a genuine encounter. One of the most profound experiences I ever had was at the Opera House—the only thing I knew about Buxton was that it was a spa watering place, but it has this opera house in the middle of the Derbyshire Dales—in Buxton. Some venue manage had booked us in. This was when we were doing a play called *Heer Ranja*, a Punjabi story which is the equivalent of Romeo and Juliet. The thing with *Heer Ranja* was that for the first time I'd also

that kind of fright of saying, “Actually, I don’t really want to know.” Here they were willing to say, “Well actually, I *don’t* know, but I’ll come along with you.” And that made me realise that that’s something that is too precious, and you cannot really engineer it—the gift of an audience that just *gives* you, wants to be with you.

To return to your question, to some extent I do accept the fact that theatre in this country is to an extent an exclusive activity. There are certain types of people who do go to the theatre. Recently for example at the National [Theatre] they’d got a production of the *Ramayan* and they thought, “We’ll do the *Ramayan* and every Asian in the country will turn up.” Well they haven’t, because one thing is that, generally speaking, Asians—a

And then along with other kinds of texts, like the *Ramayan* and the *Odyssey*, to have a kind of poetic sense of that story. What that did for us was that it got people involved, as—to use the language of business—they had made an investment: it's *their* story. One of the journeys that they took, along with ourselves, was to ask how these very private stories, which are really confined to families, translate into a kind of public text which people who may not have had that kind of experience can also share. That was a kind of journey that they took, and that we took with them. Progressively now this process is becoming much more refined, so that the focus becomes much more on how theatre can be a tool for one's own story, and it needn't be reduced in value as a result. If you like, the greatest theatrical texts of today are the texts of people themselves. But we have to be extremely careful that they don't become simply documentary texts. So there's another kind of transformation occurring: how do they become poetic texts? That's just been a way to broaden that class, if you like, that comes to theatre.

Equally we've had to say to ourselves, at times, that the kind of spaces we play conditions a certain kind of poetry. So do not confine yourself only to theatres but go into a school, go into a community centre, but then when you go into a school or a community centre, make damn sure that the value, the production value, is not reduced—so they must experience the same kind of thing: you know, the panache of lights, the seating is good, the catering is good. All that, because they deserve it: so that they can have the kind of magical transformation that occurs

J. V. I increasingly say that I'm no longer involved in English theatre but in Binglish

extremely careful with our texts, which is partly the voice—what you say—but partly also how you construct the sequence, so that it's open to the variety of sensibilities that are there, that could be there any time, looking at them. And that means that you're forced into a kind of…style, if you like, in the theatre, for want of a better word, which is direct, which is absolutely against the idea of the fourth wall. One of the things I find time and time again in auditions is that the actor will never look at me. I think, well, who are you addressing? But this is something drummed into every drama student, that the audience are actually privileged to have an insight into your life. But the reality is that we *need* them. I need your love, I need your reaction, because that's how my story's going to progress. And so that's been something that we've had to take on board—that we can't work with the concept of the fourth wall. It's detrimental to the idea of an open text, a text which tries to open out to people.

Q. *There was some definition you gave that production was not reality, and I thought stage was reality put on stage. Am I wrong in that concept?*

J. V. I do think that stage is the realm of a kind of poetic reality, the reality of the human heart, which is different from the Kodak reality. That's the only point I was trying to make, that there's a kind of Kodak reality which tries to convince us all that Q.