Week 7: Mahesh Dattani and Badal Sircar

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Dance Like A Man

- The play questions the equation between gender and performance. Ratna and Jairaj Parekh are dancers in their sixties. They have a daughter, Lata, who is also an upcoming dancer, who wants their permission to get married to Vishwas, the son of a sweet storeowner, provided he allows Lata to continue dancing after their marriage.

- Through a series of flashbacks, we discover that Jairaj's father Amritlal disapproves of his passion for dancing and berates him for growing his hair long. He thinks dancing is meant for women. Although Amritlal was a freedom fighter who fought against dowry and child marriage, he regrets consenting to Jairaj's marriage to a woman from a devadasi community.

- Ratna and Jairaj's guru would visit Amritlal's home to teach them dancing. When Amritlal tries to stop them from dancing, they go to Ratna's uncle's home but return when the uncle makes sexual advances to Ratna. Ratna insists on learning dance from an old devadasi woman much against her father-in-law who bribes the devadasi to not teach Ratna.

- Amritlal tries to use Ratna to prevent Jairaj from dancing, but later is forced to relent; he allows Ratna to dance.

- Jairaj feels insecure because of Ratna's greater success as a dancer. He feels eclipsed by her and is reluctant to dance with her. He has to face stiff competition as a male dancer. He becomes a regular drinker to lighten his sense of insecurity. Ratna blames him for not accepting invitations to dance and for not working hard on his own dance.

- They had a son named Shankar, who died in his sleep on one of Ratna's performance nights, because the nanny had fed him with an overdose of opium. Jairaj tries to make Ratna feel guilty for being a negligent mother.

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Prof. Kiran Keshavamurthy
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
IIT Guwahati

- Ratna wants Lata to become a famous dancer and get selected in the foreign dance festival in Canada for which she is willing to compromise her own principles. She is unable to find a mridangam player to replace theirs who had an accident. She has no choice but to ask Sheshadri, a lecherous man, who is having an affair with Chandra Kala, another dancer, who is on the selection committee. Ratna has to flatter and win the favour of the various patrons of the performance competition.

- Later Jairaj and Vishwas have an argument on Lata's performance, that got rave reviews in the papers. Vishwas is uncomfortable with some of her overtly erotic performances that Jairaj had once performed himself before the army.

- By the end of the play, there is a vision of Jairaj and Ratna rising to heaven, having learnt from their past mistakes, and Lata becoming a rising star, who now has a child of her own.

Badal Sircar

- Born in 1925 in a Christian family in Calcutta, he studied in a Bengali medium school in Scottish Church Collegiate School.

- Read Bengali playwrights in his youth, studied to become an engineer.

- He later got a diploma in town planning in London, where he watched many important European and American plays.

- His work took him to Nigeria, where he wrote some of his best plays.

- Known for his play *Ebong Indrajit*, Sircar initially wrote comedies, and plays that had to do with the alienation of the middle-class individual.

- His earlier plays were staged on the proscenium stage. He later abandoned the proscenium theatre because he felt restricted by the stage, makeup, lighting, backdrop etc.

- He formed something called Third Theatre, which was free of what was necessary for proscenium theatre, engaged in free and direct communication with the audience in an intimate setting and was free to watch. The audience could, if they wish, donate money.

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- His theatre moved from the proscenium to the aanganmanch (theatre-all-around, where the audience sat around the room or courtyard and the actor interacted with the audience) to the mukta manch or open area and to the street.
- He believed the function of the theatre is to bring about social and political transformation.

Procession

- The play uses the idea of Calcutta as a city of processions to describe the apparent success of many political and religious processions in the city that are supposed to unite people.
- The play, was the first play by Sircar to be performed in an open area. There are six anonymous characters who assume different voices in the play.
- It describes the suffering and exploitation of the anonymous rural peasantry and farmers. Khoka, the missing boy in the play becomes an allegory of the deprived and marginalized.
- The old man is an older version of Khoka who is in search of him. Nothing much has changed over the generations, as people are in search of their own sense of self.
- There are many issues covered in the play, from caste violence, poverty, the nuclear bomb, starvation
- Ends on a note of hope, at the possibility of finally finding a procession that would truly unite people irrespective of their differences.

Bhoma

- Bhoma, like Khoka, is an allegory of the nameless exploited and suffering rural peasantry. There are six anonymous actors who assume different voices.
- A common refrain is the blood of the peasantry and farmers who have soaked the soil they cultivate with their own blood.
- There is an ironic contrast between voices that praise the glorious history of the nation, and its unity and technological advancements, and the plight of the peasantry.

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- The state has money to spend on roads and bridges, trains, but there is no water for cultivation. The farmer is caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and debt.. Without money there can be no capital, no diesel pumps to pump water.

- The play covers the problems of seasonal employment for some farmers who don't have enough water to cultivate in the dry season and work as hired labourers for big farmers.

- The stark differences between the urban youth, who aspire to get admitted to prestigious educational institutions and go abroad at the cost of others' tax money.

- The lasting casualties of nuclear power and the atom bomb and the impact radioactivity has on generations of deformed children and on environment even if it is being used for peaceful purposes.

- The ecological and human habitat Sunderban is threatened by the demands of urban expansionism, and cultivation, and wild life, like crocodiles and tigers that have been preying on indigenous communities.

- Even the official language of conservation does not ensure the sustainable survival and livelihood of the communities and wild life.

- The play ends on a note of hope that there was an equal access and distribution of resources there would be greater harmony and not inequality. One has to clear the poisonous trees of individualism and private property, greed for that.

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