

The NCPA's Cherished Bonds



SHABANA AZMI

"When I first performed at the NCPA, I understood why space is very important for an actor"



NASEERUDDIN SHAH

"When the Experimental Theatre came along, it was a great boon"



KUNAL KAPOOR

"I consider our relationship with the NCPA with great respect and appreciation"

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Cover Credit
Jeff Spicer/Getty Images (Azmi);
Sarang Sena/The India Today Group via
Getty Images (Shah)

Produced by
MW
Editorial Office
4th Floor, Todi Building,
Mathuradas Mills Compound,
Senapati Bapat Marg,
Lower Parel,
Mumbai - 400013

Printer
Spenta Multimedia, Peninsula Spenta,
Mathuradas Mill Compound,
N. M. Joshi Marg, Lower Parel,
Mumbai - 400013

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NCPA Booking Office
2282 4567/6654 8135/6622 3724
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ENDURING BONDS

The arts fraternity is called so because its strength lies in cohesiveness, a fact that has only become more palpable during the lockdown. The NCPA has cherished a long-standing relationship with personalities and organisations that share one thing in common – an undying love of the performing arts. Some of their reflections on the pandemic, and this bond through the decades.

The very first time that I became aware of the existence of the NCPA was not long after it was founded. It was 1970 and I was a first-year student at the National School of Drama. The NSD was on a tour and the first stop was Bombay, at the Bhulabhai Desai Institute which was the first base of the NCPA.

After coming to Bombay in 1975 and founding my own company in 1979, there was the Little Theatre where we performed. The Tata Theatre had already been completed but we didn't dare perform there because it was too large for us and we used to get scanty audiences. This is when Kumud Mehta was the Director of the NCPA and she was greatly encouraging of us. It wasn't very often that we performed; all of us were busy trying to establish ourselves in the movie world. But whenever we did ask to be accommodated, we always were. Gradually, we gained enough confidence to perform in the Tata where [Satyadev] Dubey did a production of *Don Juan in Hell* in 1981-82. Performing at the Tata when it was new was truly a magical thing because the acoustics were so good you did not need amplification of any kind.

Then the Experimental Theatre came along and I felt that was a great boon. Performing in a proscenium is something which is outdated in most parts of the world and I was happy to see a theatre without a proscenium and the flexibility it offered. I felt this was a haven for us; another Prithvi on this side of town, which also has a very encouraging approach towards young theatre workers. However, it was a while before I started experimenting in the Experimental.

NASEERUDDIN SHAH, ACTOR



With Ratna Pathak Shah in a scene from *Dear Liar*

Jamshed Bhabha sahab, who liked my work very much, called me one day to discuss if I would like to collaborate on a project in which the NCPA would share the burden of producing something spectacular. While I don't do spectacular stuff, I said to him if there is anything close to spectacular that I would like to do, it is *Julius Caesar*, a play that had been on my to-do list for a long time. He consented and so Motley and the NCPA went into a joint production with a cast of 70 people. It was an overambitious production.

But I must say that we were not obstructed in any way, were given a free hand and the Tata Theatre for five days to rehearse in and then a run of four or five shows. Even though the play was criticised, I still feel it was a play worth doing – Shakespeare otherwise is not something you can do in the original language in India. I got the opportunity to try my hand at a kind of theatre that I realised was not my cup of tea.

It's been a long-standing relationship with the NCPA and my hope and prayer for it is that it does not forget to fulfil the altruistic motives with which it was built. It's a question of passing on encouragement to the next generation – the kind that I received as a young man. The NCPA also has a great responsibility towards educating the audience. We don't need a Broadway here – we have enough meaningless cinema. What we need are plays with content, not glitter; the kind of theatre which immediately connects with audiences.

With *The Father*, the moment I read the play I decided to do it and the only choice was the Experimental Theatre. Having the audience on all four sides was the only way I wanted to do the play. I also always wanted to do a month-long run. I had worked in plays in England and Paris and found it very enjoyable. I wanted my team to have that

WITH THE FATHER, THE MOMENT I READ THE PLAY I DECIDED TO DO IT AND THE ONLY CHOICE WAS THE EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE

experience of performing the same play for a month every night and again, nowhere else would I be able to get the theatre for a month. The NCPA was generous enough to give it to me and have faith that I could fill it for a month, though that to me was the less important thing. We didn't do a realistic presentation. [But that people could connect with it] proves you don't need the realistic clutter to get across if your content is strong enough.

The pandemic has led some to retreat into their shells and the rate

of mental illness has multiplied manifold, but the creative burst of energy that has resulted from the lockdown and mostly from young people is fantastic. Some wonderful work has been produced, shot by these youngsters in their homes, with their own families at times and the subjects they are coming up with! You can't do a song and dance thing in the pandemic, so you are compelled to think of something else. The way a lot of theatre companies like Akvarious or QTP are using the social media space is great. Sheena Khalid and Puja Sarup are doing terrific work. There are people like Makarand Deshpande conducting workshops online and there have been any number of people doing storytelling. I don't think there has been so much theatrical activity by so many people at the same time. It's ironic that it is the pandemic that has driven us to it. The whole of Europe went through a massive trauma in World War II and look at the amount of writing that came out from it after that. The agony of Partition created great literature. After that, not much. This is our first national trauma after independence. It might just set right our film industry and cure it of making those monstrous blockbusters that make no sense but which get the audience's adrenaline flowing.

SHABANA AZMI, ACTOR



WHEN WE WERE CELEBRATING MY FATHER KAIFI AZMI'S BIRTH CENTENARY WITH A UNIQUE SHOW CALLED RAAG SHAYARI, I HAD NO DOUBT THAT THE PREMIERE SHOW COULD ONLY BE PERFORMED AT THE TATA THEATRE

When we were celebrating my father Kaifi Azmi's birth centenary with a unique show called Raag Shayari written by Javed Akhtar and performed by him, Zakir Hussain, Shankar Mahadevan and me, I had no doubt that the premiere show could only be performed at the Tata Theatre. The thunderous standing ovation we received vindicated my faith in it being the best venue for this show.

There is another memory I cherish from a performance of *Tumhari Amrita*. Just before the 6 pm show was to commence in a packed Tata Theatre, I was arrested for being involved in a demonstration in support of the rights of slum dwellers. My parents, Feroz and my co-actor Farooque Shaikh rushed to the Colaba Police Station where I had been detained. My mother tried to reason with the cops to let me go because for people from theatre, it was sacrosanct that the show must go on. She assured them that she was willing to stand guarantee to bring me back to the police station right after the performance.

In the meantime, the audience had been apprised of the situation and informed that they were free to leave and that their tickets would be duly refunded. I reached the theatre at 8 pm and when I made my entry at around 8.10, I was amazed to see not one member of the audience had moved from his or her seat. The play received a standing ovation while we put our hands together for an audience sensitised over the years to the joys and travails of a live performance.

I was six months old when my mother Shaukat Kaifi would strap me on her back and take me with her for rehearsals of plays she was doing for Prithvi Theatre, so I imbibed a love for theatre almost by osmosis.

I would often hear her say that space is very important for an actor. It was when I first performed *Tumhari Amrita* directed by Feroz Abbas Khan in the early nineties at the NCPA that I understood what she had meant. Whether it's the Tata, Experimental, Jamshed Bhabha or Little Theatre, it is the space that gives both freedom and a challenge to the actor.

Tata is a far cry from the regular boxed proscenium stages. At first, you feel intimidated and a little lost as a performer but then you begin to explore and adjust to its demands and reach out to the audience in different ways.

With Javed Akhtar, Zakir Hussain and Shankar Mahadevan during Raag Shayari

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آن کی رات بہت کرم ہو، وہی ہے



KUNAL KAPOOR, DIRECTOR, PRITHVI THEATRE



Shakespeare's company, The King's Men, and his theatre, The Globe, were beneficiaries of royal patronage. In India too, Tansen and Ghalib received royal patronage. The arts have always been greatly supported by the royalty and governments world over.

As Winston Churchill said on cutting the arts subsidies - "The arts are essential to any complete national life. The State owes it to itself to sustain and encourage them." However, unfortunately, in India, post-independence, this support has continuously reduced with each decade.

With virtually no grants and subsidies, the few theatres we have in Mumbai struggle to survive. Most do so by lending themselves to sangeets, social club evenings, religious discourses, political and corporate functions. I prefer to call such venues auditoriums - a hall with seats in which sometimes a live dance, music or play performance may take place - as opposed to theatres.

London alone has more than 260 theatres which in 2017 hosted almost 19,000 performances to 15.5 million ticket-paying audiences - and they still struggle to survive. (New York has over 400 theatres.)

I do not see how and why theatres in Mumbai should be perceived as "competitors" - we need more, more and many more theatres. And partnering with each other is extremely important and can only have a positive result.

In this light, Prithvi Theatre and the NCPA have supported each other continuously over the last four decades. Prithvi has held festivals at the NCPA, hosted Literature Live! at Prithvi and partnered

PRITHVI THEATRE AND THE NCPA HAVE SUPPORTED EACH OTHER CONTINUOUSLY OVER THE LAST FOUR DECADES

The Symphony Orchestra of India performs at the Prithvi Theatre under the monthly SOI@Prithvi concert series



with the Symphony Orchestra of India in monthly performances of Western classical music at Prithvi - bringing the SOI to a north Mumbai audience with much success.

Both of us have a common aim - to promote and develop the performing arts. I consider Prithvi Theatre's relationship with the NCPA with great respect and appreciation. I wish this relationship could be the same across all theatres in Mumbai. ■