

**BOUNDARIES OF PERFORMANCE : RITUAL AND  
AGIT-PROP THEATRE**  
**A case study of Safdar Hashmi's Samrath Ko Nahi Dosh Gosai  
and Howard Brenton's Hitler Dances**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled  
BOUNDARIES OF PERFORMANCE : RITUAL AND AGIT - PROP THEATRE.  
A case study of Safdar Hashmi's Samrath Ko Nahi Dosh Gosai  
and Howard Brenton's Hitler Dances submitted by SWATI PAL  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of  
degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY of this University is her  
original work and may be placed before the examiners for  
evaluation.

This dissertation has not been submitted for the award  
of any other degree of this University or any other Univer-  
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— Swati Pal — \*\*  
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## PREFACE

Proceeding from the view that theatrical space is the 'qualitative ensemble' whose different dimensions signify various ideological ways of perceiving possible societal relations, agit-prop plays and their playwrights declare their own intent. This is the creation of a radical and progressive politics of theatre (in/as action).

In spite of the rather unhappy reception that agit-prop theatre receives from literary critics, it continues to be a popular mode of entertainment, a platform for expressing the angst of various sections of society and a force behind mobilising masses to demand their own rights from the Establishment. It is thus, appropriate to analyse HOW such theatre establishes its power.

In analysing a few of the agit-prop dramatic texts and their performance, we observe certain patterns emerging from them. These are ritualis-ing/tic by nature in as much as they break up theatrical space into interrelated, sacred zones which in turn help to build up an integrated and collective theatrical experience.

The scope of this dissertation will be to analyse the nature of these ritual patterns and the extent to which they are responsible for making the agit prop plays a means to an effective political and social theatre.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

"The question is", said Alice, "Whether  
You can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is", said Humpty Dumpty,  
"Which is to be master-that's all."

(Through the Looking Glass: Lewis Carroll)

When one talks about 'Agit-Prop Theatre', what comes immediately to the mind are masses of people indulging in an exercise of violent lung power, generally in the public square, armed with many pamphlets, sticks and stones and vicious slogans, and inciting spectators to behave in like manner. This vision of agit-prop theatre is not untrue. Nor are the accusations that usually follow such performances—that they are often cliché ridden with re-hashed plots, weak story lines and unskilled acting<sup>1</sup>; especially when we recall that agit-prop playwrights set up as their guru, Erwin Piscator, whose tablets of law still exercise much influence over agit-prop theater and in whose own words

...theatre must be run on these lines: simplicity of expression and construction, with a clear and unambiguous impact on the emotions of the working-class audience; **any artistic intention must be subordinated to the revolutionary purpose of the whole**—the conscious emphasis and propagation of the concept of the class struggle...[my emphasis].<sup>2</sup>

A major reason for discrediting such theatre arises from the term 'propaganda' itself. This word, as used in recent centuries, apparently derives from the title and work of the Congregatio de propaganda Fide (Congregation for Propagation of Faith)<sup>3</sup>, an organization of Roman Catholic cardinals founded in 1622 to carry on missionary work. To many Roman Catholics, the word may therefore have, at least in missionary or ecclesiastical terms, a highly respectable connotation. But even to these persons and certainly to many others, the term is often a pejorative one tending to connote such (mis)deeds as the atrocity stories and deceptively stated war aims of World Wars I and II, the operations of the Nazis' Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda and the broken campaign promises of a thousand politicians. Also, it is reminiscent of countless instances of false and misleading advertising (especially in countries using Latin languages in which 'propaganda commerciale' or some equivalent is a common term for commercial advertising).

If, however, we trace the history of the theory of propaganda, we find that it has ancient but firm roots. In the East, towards 400 B.C. in India, Kautilya, a Brahmin believed to have been the chief advisor to the Emperor



Chandragupta Maurya, reputedly wrote the Arthashastra (Principles of Politics), a book of advice for rulers that has often been compared with Plato's Republic and Machiavelli's much later work The Prince. Kautilya discussed, in some detail, psychological warfare, both overt and clandestine to disrupt an enemy's army and capture his capital. Overtly, he said, the propagandists of a king should proclaim that he can do magic, that God and the wisest men are on his side, and that all who support his war aims will reap benefits. Covertly, his agents should infiltrate his enemies' and potential enemies kingdoms, spreading defeatism and misleading news among their people, especially in capital cities, among leaders, and among the armed forces.

In the west the theory of propaganda began in Athens, in about 500B.C. as the study of rhetoric (in Greek: 'the technique of orators'). Teachers such as Isocrates, Plato and Aristotle compiled rules of rhetoric (i) to make their own arguments and those of their students more persuasive (ii) to design counterpropaganda against opponents and also (iii) to teach their students how to detect the logical fallacies and emotional appeals of demagogues. These measures proved so successful that they were further developed in Rome by such figures as Cicero and Quintilian.

In early twentieth century, the word 'propaganda' had a new term conjugated to it to give it further substance-this was the word 'agitational'. The two terms arose in Russia where they were first used by the Marxist Georgy Plekhanov and later elaborated upon by Lenin in a pamphlet What is to be done? (1902). In this he defined 'propaganda' as the reasoned use of historical and scientific arguments to indoctrinate the educated and enlightened; he defined 'agitation' as the use of slogans, parables and half truths to exploit the grievances of the uneducated and the unreasonable. Since he regarded both strategies as absolutely essential to political victory, he twinned them in the term 'agit-prop'. Until the recent events in Russia, every unit of a communist party used to have an agit-prop section, and to the communist the use of agit-prop in Lenin's sense is commendable and honest. Therefore, a standard soviet manual for teachers of social sciences was entitled 'Propagandistic Politekonomii' (For the Propagandist of Political Economy) and a pocket sized booklet which used to be issued weekly to suggest timely slogans and brief arguments to be used in speeches and conversations among the masses was called 'Bloknot Agitatora' (The Agitator's Notebook).

Briefly then, agit-prop is the more or less systematic effort to manipulate other people's beliefs, attitudes or actions by means of symbols-words, gestures, banners, movement, music, insignia, hairstyles and so on. Theatre is one of the vehicles of the agit-prop. The emphasis placed on the deliberateness and manipulativeness distinguishes the agit-prop theatre from casual conversation.

This agit-prop theatre is not a new product of the twentieth century and in England, for example, it can be traced back to as early as the tenth century when the Church in the form of simple narrative plays designed to bring to life the basic legends of Christianity; they were in fact political propaganda on behalf of an organization in hot pursuit of temporal as well as spiritual power<sup>4</sup>. Closer to our times, we observe the role played by agit-prop theatre in almost every continent/country. To mention a few-the tremendous power of street theatre in the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines<sup>5</sup>; the resistance theatre in South Korea called 'madang' which is the south Korean version of agitational street theatre based on traditional folk drama and western agit-prop:

... The word agitational should be taken quite literally in this context: many madang performances succeed in getting the audience in such a state of ecstatic frenzy

that they are spontaneously transformed from spectators into slogan chanting political demonstrators. Many mass demonstrations were initiated or animated by Madang Performances...<sup>6</sup>

Again, the activists of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia<sup>7</sup> found agit-prop theatre a useful tool in mobilising the people into action. In Australia,<sup>8</sup> street performances in the mid seventies with a strongly political content that usually voiced the despair of tribal cultures found an emotionally charged audience. And Black Theatre, in America and Africa<sup>9</sup> relies largely on agit-prop means in theatre to arouse the sympathy of the spectators. So, it cannot be denied that much of theatre that has stood in the vanguard of political and social change has been the agit-prop with its predominant tone of provocative confrontation aimed as much at the values of the 'alternative' society as of the Establishment it opposed.<sup>10</sup>

It would be pertinent at this juncture to point out the often mistaken notion that agit-prop theatre is synonymous with street and/or fringe theatre. True that most agit-prop plays belong to one or either of the two categories but it is also true that many mainstream plays performed still in proscenium arch theatre, also belong to the realm of the agit-prop. It would also be useful to remember that in talking about agit-prop and thus the 'political'

domain, we need not look upon 'political' as being necessarily homologous with say, the 'government' or the 'Establishment' but rather, may be extended to include any institution (be it religious, educational, cultural and so on) which questions/problematises/ debates any body of power and the surrounding power relations. In fact, politics is intrinsic to every domain, even to the writers who pretend to disregard political thinking and devote themselves entirely to art alone; 'conscious avoidance of becoming implicated shows that in such a writers' mind politics has a place, even if an unpleasant one. The ivory tower is as much a symptom of inescapable social problems as the raid shelter is of the inescapable evils of the war'.<sup>11</sup>

Having said all this, the need now arises to answer the question: what is the purpose of this dissertation in the light of the facts given? In what manner is it related to the already existing vast body of literature on propaganda? Critical studies on the theory of propaganda began in the 1920s with the publication of Ivan Pavlov's experiments on conditioned reflexes and of analyses of human motivations by various psychoanalysts. 1922 saw the publication of Freud's Group Psychology and the Analysis of Ego. It also saw the publication of Public Opinion by Lipmann who also published

in 1925 The Phantom Public. But the major breakthrough came in 1927 when Harold D. Lasswell published a now famous book Propaganda Techniques in the World War,<sup>12</sup> a dispassionate description and analysis of the massive propaganda campaigns conducted by all the major belligerents in World War I. This he followed with studies of Communist propaganda and of many other forms of communism. Within a few years, a great many other social scientists along with historians, journalists and psychologists, were producing a wide variety of publications purporting to analyse military, political and commercial propaganda of many types. In the course of this theory building and research, the study of propaganda advanced a long way on the road from lore to science. Today, several hundred more or less scholarly books and thousands of articles shed substantial light on the psychology, techniques and effect of propaganda campaigns, major and minor.

Similarly, political theatre of the agit-prop kind has also been the subject of much critical analysis. Most of the analyses which I have read, devote at least a section on agit-prop theatre but these generally give a brief account of the agit-prop playwrights, their ideological leanings, their status vis-a-vis mainstream theatre, a brief idea about the central themes of the plays and how these plays have been received by the public.<sup>13</sup> No real in depth analysis of

the plays to discover the reasons for their success and failure have made their way into theatrical criticism so that the little idea that one gets of such theatre is at best a superficial one; to my understanding, such theatre still remains rather neglected and deserving of more attention. Where I would like to contribute through my dissertation is to study the nature of the dramaturgic space of the agit-prop theatre which, with its special characteristic appears to me to be the most important reason for the success of this theatre: this special feature being its 'ritual' quality. Again, while it is true that ritual studies on theatre abound,<sup>14</sup> I would like to enhance these studies by analysing the dimension of agit-prop theatre: having watched, performed and read a number of agit-prop plays (as also their criticism) and in realizing the power that such theatre wields-which I have already exemplified-I found certain patterns emerging from such plays and these patterns proved ritualis-ing/tic by nature.

But like the term 'agit-prop', the word 'ritual' too has been subjected to much critical study so that scholars belonging to such different fields as cultural anthropology, sociological thought and religious philosophy have interpreted this term in the light of their own theoretical

understanding.<sup>15</sup> In fact at this point, I would like to mention the constraints within which I will be conducting this study. Two of these I have already mentioned, with reference to the notion of agit-prop: one in the vastness of the scope of the literature available on such concepts; the other is the negative connotations picked up by such categories. And the third is the difficulty in separating the equation that crops up, between agit-prop and ritual i.e. are rituals propagandist or is propaganda ritualistic? Like the old question as to which comes first; the chicken or the egg, one is curious to discover whether propaganda is first or ritual. It shall be my endeavor, through the course of this dissertation, to prove that neither precedes the other and that they are an intrinsic part of each other.

While critical approaches to the study of ritual are diverse and many, there are certain points at which these approaches converge. These and some other elements are the parameters within which I will be using the term 'ritual' While it is not possible to describe these parameters in their entire limits, it is important to provide the reader with a perspective on ritual with which to understand my analysis.



Ritual can be considered as a symbolic action which, while on the one hand is temporarily discontinuous with routine activities (especially considering that not only the time and space but even the physical implements employed by ritual are prescribed in advance), on the other hand, by enforcing itself spontaneously reveals a tremendous capacity for routinization. As Eugenio Barba says:

It is the performance, not the theatre, which lasts only a short time. The theatre is made up of traditions, of conventions, of institutions, of habits which endure throughout time. The weight of this endurance is so heavy that it often prevents life from emerging and replaces it with routine. Routine is another of theatre's natural boundaries.<sup>16</sup>

This ushers in notions of the 'sacred' and the 'profane': while 'profane' embraces the routine aspect of man's activities, the 'sacred' is that aspect of a community's beliefs, myths and sacred objects that is set apart and sacrosanct. The function of ritual in the community is that of providing the proper rules for action in the realm of the sacred as well as of supplying a bridge for passing on into the realm of the profane. Now here it is useful to refer to Van Gennep who in his Les Rites de Passage<sup>17</sup> speaks of the 'pivoting of the sacred', i.e., he says the nothing is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive

categories but rather, situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed. There is nothing that is in itself sacred, only things sacred in relation to.

Ritual can be studied as non verbal communication disclosing its own structure and semantics.<sup>18</sup> The space, spatial orientation and location of the ritual setting are essential features of the semantics of ritual action. Examples of ritual time and ritual space orientation can be found in the rituals for building the sacrifice in Brahmanic Indian ritual texts; for the building of a Hindu temple or a Christian cathedral; and for consecrating those structures that symbolize a definite space-time orientation in which rituals are enacted.

While there are many conflicting views about whether ritual is prior to explanatory belief, a view propagated primarily by Robertson Smith, or whether there is a priority of belief over ritual as Taylor believed; there can be no doubt that ritual can be seen as an expression of the urge for integration with the whole that transcends it and transfigures it. This 'integration' (read variously as allegiance, binding, affiliation and affinity) however, seeks not just to reinforce notions of the collectivity but also

serves to impart a sense of belief in individual identity to all the members within the collectivity because within it, the members have their own status and role. Ritual is thus oriented to the need dispositions of a collectivity and has a binding influence on and requires the participation of a community. As Kertzer says, 'Ritual is a means by which we express our social dependence; what is important in ritual is our common participation and emotional involvement, not the specific rationalization by which we account for the rites.'<sup>19</sup> Ritual then, has both a hierarchical as well as an egalitarian structure. It is hierarchical when the sacred is outside the person of the communicants who reach out to it as individuals approaching factual objects. And it is egalitarian when the sacred is inside the person of the individual communicants who listen within and join together in a group.

Ritual has a many layered or tiered structure, each level having many sectors so that it becomes an instrument of carrying out and communicating many messages at once, even of subverting at one level what it appears to be saying in other. The full meaning of the ritual emerges from the union of the text of ritual with the performers at a given moment in a group's ongoing social process.

And finally, repetition, emotionality, drama and symbolism are the principle features that most rituals have in common as also the process of order-disorder-re-order which is embedded within rituals.

It has already been stated that the main purpose of this dissertation will be analyse the ritual nature of agit-prop theatre. To be more specific, it is the element of 'protest' in such theatre that emerges in ritual form. That the performative genre does not merely 'reflect' or express the social system or the cultural configuration or their key relationships but has a reciprocal relationship i.e. it is either a critique (direct or veiled) of the social life that it grows out of and an evaluation of the way society handles history, is a known fact. This critiquing and evaluating has been and is a need disposition of most collectivities. Agit-prop theatre carries this a bit further and uses the register of active protest in its performative process. In this context, I would like to mention that two broad formations of protest occur: one in which the propagandists speak FOR the ruling opinion (or dominant power structure of the times) and treats the audience as a passive existent; the other speaks AGAINST the ruling opinion, FOR the people as individuals or grouped into associations and in which the audience is (apparently) regarded as a subject or co-crea-

tor. In the former, the propagandist will seek to pacify, exhort or correct his listeners so that they will move perfectly according to the ruling opinion. In the latter, the propagandist will seek to realise in the listener a consciousness, latent until then, of necessary change which will be done by exciting the imagination of the listeners to conceive of difference; once difference (disharmony, division) is recognized and the idea of belonging to two 'opposite' factions becomes clear, a successful reducing of accord between the listener and the ruling opinion will have been achieved.<sup>20</sup>

The question now arises as to how will it be possible for us to realize this protest without the actual performance before us. This will involve a semiotic study of the plays in such a way that it serves the dual purpose of discovering not just the protest but the ritual nature of the protest engrained within the plays used here as case studies. While these case studies will illustrate the finer details, I would at the outset like to state the major aspects that will be receiving fuller treatment. Of these, two of the most important aspects are, in Roman Ingraden's<sup>21</sup> terms, the 'Haupttext' (main text) which comprises of the words that are actually spoken on the stage by the actors and the 'Neben-

text' (subsidiary text) consisting of the stage directions. While the importance of analysing the words needs no explanations, the significance of the Nebentext can hardly be overstated for it decides the infrastructure of spaces which 'determines the pattern of the actors' movement': how they 'enter and exit; 'approach and recede from the audience in highly meaningful directions (diagonal, full face, profile) and thus express a multitude of moods and meanings.'<sup>22</sup>

Apart from the Haupttext and Nebentext, the two other features that will be examined are the themes of the plays and to some extent, the views of the playwrights themselves. The latter has been included to provide the reader with possible interpretations of the play: to this reader at least, they provided an invaluable insight into the plays. All these aspects will be studied according to what, semiotically speaking, can be called the 'denotation-connotation dialect'. The mechanism of connotation in language and other sign systems has been much discussed, but the most satisfactory formulation remains that provided by the Danish linguist Hjelmslev, who defines a 'connotative semiotic' as one 'whose expression plane is a semiotic. Connotation is a parasitic semantic function, therefore, whereby the sign vehicle for one sign-relationship provides the basis for a

second-order sign-relationship (the sign-vehicle of the stage sign 'crown' acquires the secondary meanings 'majority', 'usurpation', etc.)'.<sup>23</sup>

This 'denotation -connotation' dialect will be further developed into proxemics for the study of the theatrical space in which these plays are performed. Man's use of space in his architectural, domestic, urban, workplace and aesthetic activities is neither casual nor merely functional but represents a semiotically loaded choice, subject to powerful rules which generate a range of connotative cultural units. The three principal 'syntactic' systems distinguished by the American anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, and which will be forming an important basis of our study are the 'fixed-feature', the 'semi-fixed-feature' and the 'informal'.<sup>24</sup> To define these categories along Hall's own terms, the fixed feature space involves 'static architectural configurations' which relates to the playhouse itself, be it the opera house, the proscenium-arch theatre, the open square or the street-the shapes and dimensions of stage and auditorium. The semi fixed feature space involves such movable but rather static subjects such as furniture or the 'set' and other auxiliary factors like the lighting. Finally, the informal space (and perhaps the one on which, for

the purposes of this dissertation, the most emphasis will be laid) which is concerned with the every-shifting relations of proximity and distance between individuals in the theatre viz. actor-actor, actor-spectator and spectator-spectator. Such proxemic study as also the overriding analysis will show us an important effect of agit-prop theatre i.e. how it affects theatrical space and transforms it.

It remains at this point only to mention that I have chosen as my case study, a very popular street play performed by Jan Natya Manch (or JANAM), a leftist street theatre group based at Delhi and founded by the late Safdar Hashmi, called Samrath Ko Nahi Dosh Gosai (translated literally as Blame Not the Mighty that They are Powerful); and a play entitled Hitler Dances by the British playwright, Howard Brenton, who having started his career as a playwright with the fringe, moved on to the Establishment (proscenium arch) theatre thus providing a good contrast to JANAM who still remain largely faithful to the street. To queries regarding the motivation for such a selection, I could answer that I was guided first by my aesthetic judgment. Besides, I wished to prove that separated as the two plays are by distance and cultures, they yet belong to the same genre and to that end, are closely interrelated and could be read in terms of the ritual process.



NOTES

1 To quote as an example :

... Nathaniel Buchwald, the director of the Yiddish Artef group, reviewed the winning entry, John Bonn's Red Revue, in Worker's Theatre. His criticism is applicable to most of the work of the period.

In general, the work of the Prolet Buehne, though outstanding in the field of Agit-Prop theatre, leans too heavily on direction and delivery of lines and too little on the dramaturgical shaping of its plays. The Prolet Buehne players speak their lines with a ringing galvanic forcefulness, and the director marshals them up on the stage in perfect rhythm and in a variety of group patterns, with changing tempi building up to a spectacular climax. But the plays themselves are frequently devoid of effective theatrical form and the vocabulary leans to the conventional propagandist, jargon.

From Stuart Cosgroves 'Prolet Buehne : agit Prop in America' in David Bradby, Louis James and Bernard Sharratt ed., Performance and Politics in popular drama (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 209-210).

2 Quoted by J.W. Lambert in 'Politics and the Theatre' in Drama : The Quarterly Theatre Review, Spring 77, No. 124, p.18.

3 The New Encyclopedia Britannica : Macropedia, Vol 15, 1768, p.36.

4 J.W. Lambert, 'Politics and the Theatre', p. 6.

5 See Eugene Van Erven's 'Resistance Theatre in South Korea : Above and Underground' in The Drama Review, Vol. 32, No. 3, (T 119), Fall 1988, p. 158.

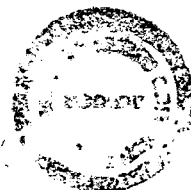
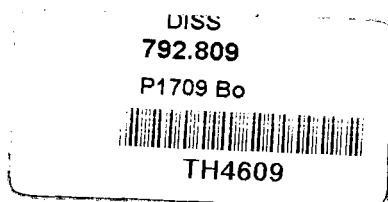
6 Ibid., p. 158.

7 See Drama Review 1990, Nos. 125-128, section entitled 'On Stage with the Velvet Revolution.'

8 See Theatre Quarterly Vol 7, 1977, section on 'Theatre in Australia', pp. 47-70.

9 See The Drama Review Vol 30, Nos. 2-4, 1986, section on 'Black Protest Theatre'.

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- 10 John Bull, New British Political Dramatists (London and Basingtoke : Mac Millan Publishers Ltd., 1984, p.1).
- 11 J.A. Morris, writers and Politics in Modern Britain (1880-1950). (Hodder and Stoughton, 1977, p. ).
- 12 The New Encyclopedia Britannica : Macropedia, Vol 15, p. 39.
- 13 This is the case of the British theatre criticism, for example. This includes the works of John Russell Brown, John Russell Taylor, John Elsom, Ronald Hayman and even Catherine Itzin (see Bibliography for further details), among other well known writers, all of whom have provided, though an invaluable, but only a broad overview of political theatre in Britain without probing into the plays and their reasons for effectiveness.
- 14 See Bibliography for further details.
- 15 Among the cultural anthropologists, Victor Turner and Richard Schechner are important while Durkheim, Radcliffe Browne and Malinowski are significant sociological thinkers on the subject of ritual.
- 16 Eugenio Barba, 'Four Spectators' in The Drama Review Vol 34, No1 (T 125) Spring 1990, p. 96.
- 17 Jonathan Z Smith, 'Bare Facts of Ritual', History of Religions, Vol 20, 1980-81.
- 18 The New Encyclopedia Britannica : Macropedia, Vol. 15, p. 866.
- 19 David I. Kertzer, Ritual, Politics and Power (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1988, p. 67).
- 20 See Roger Howard's 'Propaganda in the Early Soviet and Contemporary Chinese Theatre' in Theatre Quarterly Vol. VII, No. 27, Autumn 1977, p. 59.
- 21 Quoted by Martin Esslin in The Field of Drama (London : Methuen, 1987, p. 80).
- 22 Keir Elam, The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama (London & New York : Methuen, 1980).
- 23 *ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
- 24 *ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

And you will ask: why doesn't his poetry  
speak of dreams and leaves.  
and the great volcanoes of his native land?

Come and see the blood in the streets

Come and see

the blood in the streets.

Come and see the blood

in the streets!

-Pablo Neruda-

## CHAPTER 2

### 'Now Start the PLAY': a case study of Safdar Hashmi's Samrath Ko Nahi Dosh Gosai

Open space theater, a name often given to street theatre is not a new phenomenon in India as traditionally, theatrical performances used to take place in the open space. Amrtamanthana and Tripurdaha, the two plays staged by Bharata were presented in the open, amongst the natural surrounding of the Himalayas. The idea of having a building for presentation of dramatic shows came later on. But even after the inception of the play-house, there were troupes of artists giving performance in the open; for various types of uparupakas for example, regular theatre was not required. Preksanaka type of the uparupaka is said to be performed on the street, before a crowd, on the cross-road or even inside a pub.<sup>1</sup> Hence, performing plays on the street is not something new - that factor has remained unchanged. What has changed, however, is the nature of the texts being performed so that the street has become, from just a 'locale' or 'site' of performance, a politically charged signifier. Street theatre as it is known today, is a twentieth century phenomenon born out of the specific needs of the working people living under capitalist and feudal

exploitation and it is basically a militant political theatre of protest. Its function is to agitate the people and to mobilise them behind fighting organizations.

Such a theatre became inevitable when the workers began organizing themselves into unions in the nineteenth century and with the emergence of political demonstrations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the arrival of this theatre was imminent. Besides this historical reason, theatre politics too helped to strengthen the street theatre movement, in that mainstream (or proscenium) theatre has been and is, by and large, out of tune with the masses of people to whom it remains unavailable so that the street theatre activists have found the conditions most suitable to seriously develop street theatre. This has unfortunately led to the tendency to project street theatre as rebelling against or standing in opposition to proscenium theatre: a notion created by both kinds of theatre adherents. The exponents of street theatre have concluded that a genuine people's theatre is impossible on the proscenium theatre since they condemn such theatre as that of irrelevance, of airy-fairy philosophy and of frivolity. On the other hand, many proscenium faithfuls have consistently refused to even accept street theatre as a valid form of art.

Whatever be the debate, it cannot be denied that much of vibrant theatre in India (as indeed in most parts of the world) is street theatre whether it be called variously as 'third world theatre' or 'poor theatre' or 'fringe'. And that it is doing something of singular importance is proved by one such street theatre group called Jan Natya March or JAMAM. Today, this theatre group is a part (perhaps the most significant) of a larger organization called SAHMAT or Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust which is regarded more in the light of a platform or forum<sup>2</sup> through which people can defend their right to express themselves and where all the creative people can seek shelter from suppression of performance. Having been one of the founder members of JANAM in 1973 (as an offshoot of the then almost defunct Delhi centre of the IPTA or Indian People's Theatre Association) and later its live force, Safdar Hashmi (1954-89), was murdered on 1 January 1989 while JANAM was staging a street play called Halla Bole at Sahibabad on the outskirts of Delhi - a play which supported a wage increase for industrial workers. There was a deliberate attack upon the group and Safdar Hashmi fell prey to this, his only fault being that he was expressing his faith in the communist movement through a play performed by a group that was largely leftist in its ideological leanings. That merely performing a

street play needs to be met by such violent resistance unwittingly serves to bolster the role that such theatre can play in a developing social milieu and in the evolution of theatre itself.

Yet though the theatrical performances of JANAM have received much recognition in the Indian subcontinent and (at least) in journal records in the west, yet unfortunately critics have failed to do full justice to this group. The Press as well as the political parties have tended towards sensationalising this group by either lauding the 'martyrdom' of Safdar Hashmi or by enumerating the many beneficial programmes conducted by SAHMAT. There has been, so far, no known analysis of the plays of JANAM which have stolen the hearts of many, both in terms of providing entertainment as well as in having articulated the needs and grievances of the people. It is my attempt to fill this gap with a particular analysis of one of the most popular plays of JANAM called Samrath Ko Nahi Dosh Gosai (variously known as Mehengai Ki Mar, Madari Jamura and so on) which was first performed in March 1980. (See Appendix for plot)

What does JANAM as an agit-prop theatre group wish to propagate? Apart from the leftist ideology with which it is concerned the group claims to propagate a certain methodolo-

gy of performance which is meant to change the nature of the performance space. Traditionally, the dominant ideology has sought to institutionalise theatre and has also held the performance space as sacred to the performing unit and disallowed entry of the spectator - listener into this space; it is also one that dismisses any theatrical activity outside the mainstream as second rate and views it almost as an illegitimate guerrilla style activity. That theatrical space has been and can be the catalysing agent of revolution has sought to be suppressed by the dominant ideology. JANAM wishes to break this stranglehold and its purpose is broadly two pronged : a desacralisation of the performance space and a demystification of the actor-spectator relationship. As Safdar himself said in his The Right to Perform 'If we wish to confront traditional form with modern content we will first have to relieve the form of the burden of ritualism .. which ... appropriated it'.<sup>3</sup> Thus the methodology of performance which this group wishes to propagate can be called, roughly speaking, 'antiritualism' wherein the group wishes to break the rituals of theatre in terms of the performance space and in terms of the audience - performer relationship which mainstream (or the more 'legitimate', 'acceptable') theatre practices. How far is the group successful in the



achievement of its goals? It is here that a study of both the form and the content of Samrath Ko Nahi Dosh Gosai<sup>4</sup> will serve to illustrate my evaluation.

## II

The play begins with two actors entering the circular performance area and entertaining the spectators with a couple of somersaults and other such antics. After a while, one actor stops and addresses the other:

ACTOR 1 : Enough, Enough, 'nough, 'nough, 'nough. We've shown plenty of antics and quite a few spectators have gathered. Now start the play.

ACTOR 2 : Right then, here goes.  
[Suddenly outside the boundaries of the performance area, there is a sound of a damru]

ACTOR 1 : What kind of misbehaviour is this. Even this madari had to show up now! Hey you, get lost, there's going to be a play over here right now.  
[The damru continues to be played. Actors I and II strain their necks towards the sound. A third actor wearing a police cap and wielding a stick comes up from behind the two actors. Both of them receive a hard kick each from the policeman. Unnerved, they scamper off. Just then, cutting his way through the crowd comes the madari]

Such a beginning to a street play is not uncommon.<sup>5</sup> Most of JANAM's plays begin with either the performance of antics or the sound of a percussion instrument or a brief 'demo' style speech by the sutradhar. Travelling back to the

Natyasastra, we find that most performances in the theatre began with songs or music and then followed an elaborate ceremony in which the performance area was sanctified and thus carefully delineated. Here too we can see that the ritual of initiation has begun where the members of the audience are obviously the initiates who have to be prepared for the role that is expected of them by the performers: they are a special audience who have to be aware right from the start that state control over theatrical activity (represented symbolically by the policeman's behaviour) needs to be broken into by the very activities which the state regards as innocent or passive - the audience must have a dual awareness of the traditional significance of the performing unit as well as its immediate social context. So, the manipulation becomes clear; now it is not the performance space that needs to be sanctified but rather, there is an inversion and the audience instead is being prepared for sanctification. This preparation is strengthened when the text moves on later to focus upon the games of the madari - jamura:

MADARI : So the play can be begun.

JAMURA : Can be begun.

MADARI : So then benefactors and patronisers, before we begin today's play, please clap loudly : yes, now Jamura let us proceed with the play.

JAMURA : Boss, we can start now if you wish. But it seems that the spectators present here have an empty stomach.

MADARI : Benefactors and patronisers, my Jamura has this one bad habit. Unless and until the public claps loudly, this bloody man refuses to start; yes, so please clap loudly - why brother Jamure, are you happy now ?

The madari has a 'sutradhar' like role and at this moment, I would like to pause awhile upon this common agency of the 'sutradhar' employed by many street plays to assist recharacterisation of the audience.

Originally, the sutradhar had the function of measuring the land of the construction of the Mandapa and in architectural literature, is regarded as the master builder or teacher but in a text on dramaturgy like the Natyasastra, the sutradhar becomes the master builder of theatrical performance. In street theatre, the sutradhar while often linking the plot together, usually provides a commentary (he has some resemblance to the choric figures of Greek theatre), the intention of which is to tutor the mind of the audience along the lines with which the play is concerned. This commentary may bluntly direct the audience, as the madaris' words do-but then the madari is only LIKE a sutradhar. In other plays, the sutradhar has a special role and

his commentary provokes the audience in a more insidious manner. If we look at Hatyare (see section (i) of the last chapter) we can observe the veiled incitement of the audience to protest through the sutradhar's words, for eg.:

So friends, this is Aligarh-the city of locks. I guess you don't need me to introduce you to locks, 'cause nowadays almost every gentleman has had to lock his tongue.

And again,

...What does the police have to do? Find out who was the man killed, where, by whom, why and when? Go to the scene of crime and carry out legal proceedings, conduct or not conduct the post mortem of the dead bodies, count and identify them, tell or not tell the press? All this work is just that of the police. And Sir, to interfere in government work is legally a crime. So all you upright gentlemen are requested to become ignorant [blind yourself and forget] what you have just seen and heard.

Obviously the sutradhar is ridiculing the government officials and is being sarcastic about the common man's submission to bureaucracy.

To return to our study of Samrath, the very act of clapping at a performance which adheres to the stimulus - response code of Mounin in which it is conceived that one way signals provoke a number of more or less automatic

reflexes which cannot in turn communicate along the same axes, is being held up for questioning. This can easily be read as a debunking of the actor-audience relationship but I think that this would be an oversimplification. Rather, it is a specific demarcation of the role that the audience has to enact-but then, one must not overlook that this in turn is delimiting the role/s to be enacted by the performers as well. What must be kept in mind is that both the demarcations are being done simultaneously and it is this that brings about an apparent generation of an interactive relationship: this is a characteristic feature of ritual which can be seen as an expression of the urge for integration with the collectivity that transcends it and transfigures it. This integration does not merely reinforce notions of the collectivity but also imparts a sense of individual identity to each of its members, for within the collectivity, the individuals have their own status and role. By taking recourse to this fundamental feature of ritual, street theatre and here, JANAM, is only demystifying the performer-spectator relationship in so far as it is spelling out clearly the role of each: that they are inter dependent is true but they are not the **same**, not **one**. Thus there is a recognition that theatre is a complex phenomenon composed of two units: the stage/sending/performing unit and the

public/receiving/observing unit, which inter react and should not be confused as a homogeneous mass.

That this process of sanctification is unnecessary is one of the first thoughts that may cross the mind of the reader. But I believe that while on a proscenium stage, the curtain and the seating arrangement and the upraised stage are enough to decide boundaries, in street theatre it becomes important to show that nothing is inherently sacred or profane; things are sacred only in relation to, and these are mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed. When the madari first appears, he is, semiotically speaking, loaded with a web of signifiers which establish in the course of the two circulations that his role is that of a magician: thus he wears large sunglasses with frames, a bright and colourful headband with a marwari turban above it and a three metre long black sheet trails from his shoulders in the attitude of a historical figure. But within minutes the costume is dismantled before our own eyes and discarded. Still, we continue to regard the actor concerned as a magician. Again,

MADARI : Boy, narrate the conditions of the past, future and present

JAMURE : All at once?

MADARI : No, slowly or else the game will be over in a minute. Now see what I have here. [a white' kerchief is used by the madari to cover the damru, and lift it up]

JAMURA : I've seen  
MADARI : Seen what?  
JAMURE : A pigeon in the hand of the magician  
MADARI : Alive or dead?  
JAMURA : Absolutely alive but scared.

The reason why the audience co-operates in the game of continuing to recognize the magician as one even after he has shed his garb or in playing along with the Jamura that the damru covered with a white handkerchief is a pigeon is because the text is at the one and the same time creating certain variables (i.e. accidents) of ordinary life which are felt to be overwhelmingly present and powerful and then removing them precisely because the audience must be made aware of this power of the 'sacra'. By being used within the cut out space for performance, these signifiers must be seen not just as agents of utility but also of meaning. As Victor Turner says :

Performative reflexivity is not mere reflex, a quick, automatic, or habitual response to some stimulus. It is highly contrived, artificial, of culture not nature, a deliberate and voluntary work of art. A 'reflex' would presuppose 'realism', a picturing of people and things as it is thought in that culture they 'really' are, without idealization or fantasization. But, of course, in art and literature even realism is a matter of artifice and what is real is ultimately a matter of cultural definition.<sup>6</sup>



Before we proceed further with the text, let us pause for a moment to see what is happening to the performance space in this use of ritual devices and in this knowledge of the process of ritualization. The theatrical group is trying to show that while theatrical performances are transient by nature, they resist time by transforming the performance space into an intermediary stage where an action (being enacted) is begun-but not complete when one leaves the theatre. The performance is merely the beginning of a longer experience: it is an initiation into a large system "It is the scorpion's bite which makes one dance. The dance does not stop when one leaves the theatre. The aesthetic value and the cultural originality of the performance are what make the sting sharp. But its precious poison comes from somewhere else" (Eugenio Barba).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the performance space is being converted more into a site of a demonstration; so at two points of the text:

MADARI : why am I a magician?

JAMURA : For the sake of the stomach.

MADARI : Why are you a jamura?

JAMURA : For the sake of the stomach.

MADARI : What have we eaten?

Jamura : Air.

MADARI : And <sup>P</sup>drunk ?

JAMURA : Water, From MCD's public pump

MADARI : Boy, inspite of inflation, we ate and drank. Now do think of the rest of the public.

JAMURA : I've thought

MADARI : What ?

JAMURA : These folks are all standing here for wheat, rice, and sugar.

MADARI : Yes, that's why they're standing in a line. Will you help the people standing in this line ?

JAMURA : Will do.

Again,

JAMURA (whispering) : Boss there's a policeman around. I'll tell you everything later.

MADARI : So where's the sack of rations?

JAMURA : Behind you.  
[The madari whips around to spot the sack. He goes and clutches it]

MADARI : Oh dear, to hell with the passing time. The magic practised by seven generations has not worked with a master veteran like me, yet this chit of a boy has done the same work [without the magic]...

In both these instances, what is being attempted to be demonstrated is the fact that previously the performance was looked upon as a work of art but now the concept of performance is that it is an artistic process as in keeping with

the Nietzschean notions of the Apollonian and Dionysian modes of performance.<sup>8</sup> The Dionysian principle receives a direct impetus at the conclusion of the play when the demoralized madari wants to pack his bags and retire to Haridwar (the abode of the God-fearing) and renounce the world by taking up sanyas. At this, in an obvious provocation of the audience, the Jamure points out :

'Take up sanyas ?' Boss, if you take up sanyas, what will happen to these wooden owls ?! They will continue to stand and watch spectacles, laugh and clap even if prices rise and even if they are further exploited-they will not raise even a tiny voice of protest against it. And if the Believers of honesty like yourself take up sanyas, then all that remains to happen is that the nation will fall apart.

So, the performative space, through revelation of the 'artistic process' is a site of confrontation of both, performers and spectators, of the unfinished nature of performance in a 'given' space and its spilling over or extension.

Again, this very act of confrontation often takes place within a liminal space which is created by '(1) breach of regular norm-governed social relations made publicly visible by the infraction of a rule ordinarily held to be

binding ... [and] (2).. crisis, when people take sides, or rather are in the process of being induced, seduced, cajoled, nudged, or threatened to take sides by those who confront one another across the revealed breach as prime antagonists '(Turner).<sup>9</sup>

In Samrath Ko Nahī Dosh Gosai, we see that for the major part of the play, the madari uses his magical powers only to show quite literally how the body assumes a certain position or forms a particular configuration in order to become a conductor of magical power; hence the madari keeps asking the jamura to lie down, covers him completely with a cloth and through a hypnotic process directs the jamura towards such actions as bringing all the rations hoarded by the businessmen for profit making or bringing all the ministers from their ministerial homes. What happens, however, when the mantri enters the liminal space and becomes a liminal subject? With the mantri, the madari's magical powers are being used differently. The mantri, on being hypnotised is not made to move over land area but rather, inwards, into his own psyche. On becoming a subject of the madaris' magic, the mantri is asked the same set of questions as the jamura was once asked such as 'Why are you a mantri?' and 'who are your employers?' The mantri answers

in much the same vein as the jamura, saying (and in fact, insisting) that he has become a minister for the sake of the stomach and that his employers are the rich businessmen and feudal landlords. But these answers are not what we expect of the mantri - we expect him to continue along the same fraudulent lines as before entering the liminal state, where he pretends devotion to the task of uplifting the 'toiling masses'. However, the mantri has been forced into stock taking and self scrutiny and his answers reflect his self critiquing for when the madari tries to help him to retain his 'normal' self by prompting him to say that his employers were all the citizens of India, the mantri denies and resists this prompting. At this the madari allows the rare revelation of truth to continue and the mantri obliges:

MADARI : Mantri, before the elections you could be seen following people about with folded hands. Whatever for ?

MANTRI : For the sake of votes, Boss ! When the time comes, one can accept even a donkey for a father.

MADARI : Mantri, how did you win the elections ?

MANTRI : With the strength of my money

MADARI : From where did the money come ?

MANTRI : My employers gave me

MADARI : What for ? Mantri, speak the truth

MANTRI : To rule the country. To increase prices,  
to repress the labouring farmers.

This is indeed being honest but this honesty trips when he is questioned as to whether he can make a speech to which he replies, 'Of course, that is all I know. It's my family business.' So the madari asks him to start upon which the mantri (remember, he is still a liminal subject and within a liminal space) responds, standing up and saying :

Brothers and sisters, all my sympathies are  
with you. I will take strict action  
against hoarders and collectors.

What is being demonstrated here is that the political rhetoric with which the mantri carries on his own propaganda has become routinized (in this context, one may mention the madaris effective description of the mantris' speeches as : everyday, learnt by rote, battered, written by someone else, corroded with overuse) but this routinization/ritualization of his political rhetoric exerts such immense influence over the mantris psyche, that it trespasses even into the liminal state of the mantris' subjectivity so that even while, transcending this routinization, he unwittingly falls prey to it and it takes over his transcendence. This is further supplemented by the immediate change when the madari stops him from continuing and asks him not to quote his everyday

well learnt speech but to speak the truth since the spectators were intelligent and could understand the difference between the truth and falsity. At this, the mantri, turning his cap in a metaphoric gesture of playing a double role, says,

Brothers and sisters, I don't give a damn if you go to hell. I wanted my seat and I've got that. If you think that I will go to the Lalaji's shop, take out all the stock and sell it among you all at the correct prices, then you are bloody f...ers.

We observe that while pointing out to the spectators this ritual element of the mantri's political rhetoric, a rhetoric that serves as an instrument of empowerment, the text too has ritualized its own rhetoric of social activation. Thus we have the common use of repetition in the interrogative modus operandi where, to quote an earlier example, even the mantri is asked the same set of questions as the jamura was, and the answers too remain the same. This is quite similar to the chanting of prayers en masse, in response to the priest while a religious ceremony is in progress, in an effort to build up a collective spirit of religiosity and of the slogans shouted during processions which effectively generate forms of hysteria. But this is a

`religiosity' of a different/alternative kind and serves to highlight the `hysteria' of accumulation. When the mantri is asked the same questions, it is a process of interrogation which abolishes his privileged status as one belonging to the dominant order. Once this abolishing is achieved, the minister's `hunger' can be compared to the Jamura's `hunger' in order to show the coercion involved in the satisfaction of the former. The same questions can be asked because both are now at the same level of existence, where the minister is not protected by the institutionalised `rituals' of power. Those rituals are challenged and destroyed within another mode which thus empowers itself in order to put certain `radical' questions to this `representative' of the world of power. The text then is ritualizing the dramatic language for its own ends : that of social interrogation and regeneration. What has been the process of this ritualization? The text has (a) selected certain ideas as representative of the social being of the people (b) after identifying/locating this selection, has solidified it into a totality (therefore the madari, the jamura and the mantri though occupying totally different positions in society are all liable to `hungers',) (c) but the text plays upon `hunger' as `coercive ambition' and as `real need' serving to highlight the fact that the totality which it has created is one



with contradiction and difference written into it, a process where power and influence are distributed in specific ways, where domination and subordination must be recognized (d) in staging this version of a social totality the text has begun to speak to the people but in accordance with its new social function. At this moment of its performance, the text is exercising its influence over the people and is in a position of power. It has accorded itself a certain hortatory function crystallised in the rituals of empowerment by which it comes to 'give itself' this moment of power. But this mode of empowerment is not the same as that by which a dominant order reproduces itself. At this moment, the text appropriates for itself the garb of a 'dominant order' (in so far as it is as powerful as the dominant order). But just as we seem to move towards the logical conclusion that it is replicating a certain 'fantasy' of dominance (thereby identifying itself longingly with the dominant order), that it becomes yet another coercive form of dominance, the text distances itself from such a conclusion by filling the social totality it has created with an alternative set of values, where power belongs to the people.

In so far as the theatricality of this moment is made possible by ritual, the text's empowerment of itself is one which dangerously come close to those modes/ intitutions/

practices of power against which it is deployed. But it is precisely because these rituals form an alternative combinatory (a matrix of conventions/signifiers) that the text is able, simultaneously, to present itself as an alternative to the extra-textual in a spectacular moment of revelation. If biologically, both madari and mantri are human beings, then, within the scheme of the plan, the punning on hunger is precisely the spectacular moment of the staging of dominance and its immediate abolition.

### III

PERFORMERS : AUDIENCE

DEMONSTRATORS : POTENTIAL DEMONSTRATORS

PERFORMANCE SPACE => PERFORMATIVE SPACE

A glance at the categories given above tells us that in spelling out the role of the performers (as demonstrators) and the spectators (as potential demonstrators) which we have observed the text to be doing, the performance space is being transformed into a performative space (since the spectators too can become performers). What is significant here is that performance space is not being done away with- there is only an extension of this space and its boundaries being made. So, 'desacralisation' which was one of the two major aims that the group was attempting to reach is taking place only to the extent that the inherency of sacredness of the performance space is being replaced by the mobility of the same.

Again, it appears that the spectators are apparently being privileged in an attempt to demystify audience-performer relationship but simply put, what the audience is being told is: 'Look, you too can become a demonstrator-and in fact you must-if you step out of your role as the subject of the demonstration' So, the very terms in which the audi-

ence is being roused into action is actually strengthening the traditionally dominant role of the performing unit. There is however a recognition of the sacredness of the role of the spectators. It is the openness of the spectators to the ideas being presented to them in the spectacle and the vibrancy of their imagination which makes performance fruitful, that is relied upon by the performers. The performers admit to this openly but emphasize that the spectators, while no doubt wielding immense power as a collective body called the audience, should maintain this collectivity but join the ranks of the performing unit, who at that time are occupying a more dominant role. Here of course, another aspect which we noticed in this chapter was that the performative space is a liminal space but often the power of ones' role and especially one's language outside the performative space is quite strong and can trespass into the performative space. In such a case, one needs to break into one's extra-performative role, beginning from the liminal space, and this is where the success of the performing units propaganda of its ideology lies.

And finally we observed that the text being performed is now the new ruling opinion, so the audience is not escap-

ing from the notion of ruling opinion, but is passing into a new subjection - the difference is that this 'subjection' calls upon the audience to be part of a radical politics.

In this chapter I have tried to problematise the notion of antiritualism and its place in defining the nature of JANAM's practice of theatre. JANAM has sought to present antiritualism as an inherent principle in their theory of drama. It is the basis on which their radical cultural politics is clarified. It is at the centre of the strategies of demystification and desacralisation by which they seek to transmit certain messages of their political choice.

But antiritualism can be seen more as a basis which allows JANAM to carve out its own unique space. Antiritualism thus can be seen more as a strategy of differentiation rather than as one intrinsic to their practice. It is how JANAM seeks to project its own practice but this projection masks the fact that certain rituals intimately linked to theatre and theatricality are instinctively wedded to their style or mode of enactment; indeed to their entire theatrical experience. These rituals, I have tried to show, exist in their practice over and beyond their avowed intentions.

This leads to a logical question. We have seen that

antiritualism is presented as the basis of JANAM's radical practice. It is also what allows an effective transmission of their message. Given my problematisation of antiritualism, the question may be asked : Do the entry of rituals dilute the nature of the message sought to be disseminated in JANAM's kind of agit prop theatre?

I suggest that the effectivity of JANAM's message is in no way marred within the terms of my reading of Samrath. In fact their effectivity is dependent upon those very rituals of theatre and theatricality from which JANAM (in constructivist fashion, I have suggested) has sought to distance itself.

## NOTES

- 1 Radha Vallabh Tripathi, Lectures on Natyasastra (Pune : Centre of Advanced Study in Sanskrit, University of Pune, 1991, pp.116-117.
- 2 See Magazine Edn. of 'The Hindustan Times', June 19, 1993 p.7.
- 3 From The Right to Perform Selected writings of Safdar Hashmi, SAHMAT, New Delhi, 1989 p.50
- 4 Text used is Chowk Chowk Pur Gali Gali Mein, Part 2, First Edn., SAHMAT, New Delhi, 1991 pp. 23-44 See Appendix I for the outline of the plot. The quotations from the text used in the paper have been translated by me.
- 5 We can perceive this mode in the resistance theatres of other countries. One such example is the Madang theatre movement of South Korea. To quote Eugene Van Erven in his article entitled 'Resistance Theatre in South Korea Above and Underground' in the journal 'Drama Review' Vol. 32, No.3(T119), Fall 1988:  
  
During my 1986 visit to South Korea, I observed two Madang performances, one in an auditorium of a Catholic college in Chonju and one in a small farmer's village an hour's bus ride further inland. All Madang performances invariably start with an ecstatic drum and dance session often with the audience actively participating. Drumming is still very much part of traditional Korean village culture. In the Chonju (indoor) performances, the drummers come in from outside, beating drums of all sizes, cymbals and gongs. In the village (outdoor) performances the next day, the drummers walked through the entire community enticing the inhabitants from their homes to follow them to the main square where the performance was to take place. Many of the villagers joined in the drumming and dancing.
- 6 From The Anthropology of Performance by Victor Turner PAJ Publications, New York, 1986 p.24

7 From 'Four Spectators', a paper by Eugenio Barba in the journal 'Drama Review', Vol.34, No.1(T125) Spring 1990

8 From 'My Long Journey into the American Theatre' by Kazimierz Braun which appeared in the journal, 'Drama Review', Vol.34, No. 1(t125), Spring 1990, saying,

... the concept of performance as a work of art is situated in what Nietzsche called the Apollonian; the concept of performance as artistic process in what he called the Dionysian. In the Apollonian mode people made art, in the Dionysian, they became art. The first great reform of theatre starting in the nineteenth century followed Apollonian principles. The second reform originated by Artaud returned to the Dionysian tradition. Who doesn't recall all those communal celebrations, collective works, workshops, and projects of the second reform of the '60's and '70's? The actors were one with the public, the public was active and so many barriers were broken.

9 From Victor Turner as in 4 above, p.34



## APPENDIX

A brief outline of the plot of Samrath Ko Nahi Dosh Gosai (the title is a phrase of Goswami Tulsidas which quite literally translates as : the powerful can never be faulted) A magician (madari) performs a number of tricks upon his agent (jamura), sending the jamura to finally try and procure rations from the Lalaji who has locked them in his go down and is selling them at a higher price. This the madari does only after he himself is unable to obtain the rations himself through the magical powers that have served him so well, so far; he has finally been forced to relinquish his authority to the jamura. The jamura forcibly carries away a sack of rations from the Lalaji's house where the lalaji is found ingratiating himself on the phone to various important people-offering them handsome bribes in return for services rendered to him. However, the sack of rations stays only briefly with the madari and jamura since the Lalaji with the help of a policeman (whom he later bribes) retrieves the sack. The madari and jamura go in person to plead with the sethji but he turns them away, paying no heed to either their pleas or their threats. Now, the madari again makes use of his magical powers and sends the jamura to catch hold of one of the ministers, having decided to make use of ministerial help to solve this problem of food shortage and escalating prices. At first, the hapless jamura returns to report that all the ministers are away either on a holiday to some hi-fi hotel or on some innocuous visit somewhere. The relentless madari sends the jamura again to the hi-fi hotel and the jamura returns bringing with him the minister (mantri). Through the madari's hypnosis, the mantri reveals his true colours to the public shattering the mask of virtue that he dons in the beginning. The disillusioned madari wishes to renounce the world but his jamura reminds him that he must continue his work of building awareness and inciting protest.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **'Look at the world differently' : a case study of Howard Brenton's Hitler Dances**

Since ritual has almost always been identified with religion and since modern Western societies presume that they have separated political affairs from religious life, there is an assumption that ritual remains politically significant in 'less advanced' societies. It is precisely to disprove such a notion and prove instead that, as everywhere else in the world, ritual has entered every sphere (including the kind of political theatre that we're talking about) of even the 'advanced' (or is that 'First World'?) societies, that I have found it essential to include a case study of the British play, Hitler Dances<sup>1</sup> by Howard Brenton. (See Appendix for plot)

Howard Brenton, while belonging to a group of writers such as, for example, David Hare, Trevor Griffiths and David Edgar who learned almost their entire craft from the fringe theatre of the 1960's : on stages in colleges, art centres and village halls - was one who was welcomed into the Establishment or mainstream theatre as well. This however did not soften the political nature of Brenton's plays so that the plays written and staged for the Establishment continue to

be as agitationalist by nature as those for the Fringe. This playwright is particularly interesting because of his developing and contradictory attitudes towards the fringe which inadvertently provide us with an only too true assessment of the Fringe theatre (also called 'poor theater' or 'open space theatre'). Till about 1973, like the other playwrights of his kind, Brenton made fervent claims for the fringe as a weapon in a repressive society :

It could be the one surviving democratic means of communication. That could well happen. If the political surveillance and interference became very heavy and the Arts Council was nobbled - and there are signs of that happening already, that kind of thing - then the back street activity, almost on the level of being an abortionist, an illegal doctoring service, could be one of the few surviving possible means of communication with people. And the fringe should never forget that. That's the underground philosophy and it may become very pertinent before we know where we are. Seeing the pressure on the BBC now - the burden they have to bear to get even my couple of TV plays through. Theatre people know almost nothing of this reign of terror. The poverty of means and the idea of underground theatre, which is habitually underground shouldn't be forgotten.<sup>2</sup>

Soon after, in having taken that gigantic leap and crossed the great divide separating the combination in Brighton and the Portable theatre from the National theatre, Brenton began to talk about the failures of the fringe :

I think the fringe has failed. Its failure was that of the whole dream of an 'alternative culture' - the notion that within society as it exists you can grow another

way of life, which, like a beneficent and desirable cancer, will in the end grow throughout the Western World, and change it. What happens is that the 'alternative society' gets hermetically sealed ... a ghetto-like mentality develops. It is surrounded, and, in the end, strangled to death. Utopian generosity becomes paranoia as the world closes in. Naive gentleness goes to the wall, and Manson's murderousness replaces it. The drift from the loving drug scene in Amsterdam in the late sixties to the speed and wretchedness five years later illustrates the process. The truth is that there is only one society - that you can't escape the world you're living in. Reality is remorseless. No one can leave. If you're going to change the world, well, there's only one set of tools, and they're bloody and stained but realistic. I mean communist tools.....<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the implicit ambivalence of Brenton's attraction to fringe/ alternative/ underground theatre and also to the large public stage, the other important aspect of his plays is that they arise from a broadly socialist perspective. However, as with the other playwrights of his generation, there has never been enough confidence about the capacity of theatre to make a significant contribution to radical social change. Thus Brenton says :

Theatre doesn't argue politically, this is done in meetings and parties and unions. But the theatre can illuminate what matters in those political meetings. So they go hand in hand. But theatre itself is not a political act - the political act is voting.<sup>4</sup>

With such widely differing attitudes towards theatre and its nexus with politics, it is only natural that while being one of the most successful of the dramatists of his generation,

certainly in terms of the box office, Brenton's work has stimulated much public controversy. This has only served to make him one of the most consistently progressive of writers and we can divide Brenton's dramatic career into three broad phases. The first phase, occupying the period from the late sixties upto 1973 is his apprenticeship on the Fringe wherein all the work is small scale 'poor theatre' and violently conflicting by nature. The second phase consists of the plays of the later 1970's upto and including The Romans in Britain (1980) where he moved on to the bigger public stages and 'epic' theatre dealing with complex political issues, many of which even questioned the left wing activism to which he was a party. The third phase is that of the 80's where the strength of the prevailing right wing government forced him into reassessing his work.<sup>5</sup>

## II

Written to be performed by the Traverse Theatre Workshop Company and first staged at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, on 20th January, 1972, Hitler Dances stands almost at the threshold of Brentons shift to the Establishment. Choosing to demonstrate the futility of war, this play which is based upon the 1958 Rank film, Carve her Name with Pride<sup>6</sup>, deals with anti-war propaganda. And curiously enough, Brenton demonstrates this by showing the various ways in which we identify with/participate in - war. For it is through such participation that the citizen of the modern state identifies with larger political forces that can only be seen in symbolic form, and is given a way to understand what is going on in the world since we live in a world that must be drastically simplified if it is to be understood at all. Thus we have the play (game) of 'enemies' and 'war' of the children which is their way of participating in a reality which is still contemporary; we have the 'play' of Hans (and Linda) who quite literally rises from the dead and brings the immediate past into the present to create an atmosphere suitable for the war games of the children; and we have the 'play' of Violette who thinks that she is participating in all the heroism of war while actually partici-

pating in a personal game of revenge. Of course all these 'plays' are being enacted within the larger play called Hitler Dances.

Appropriately enough, the play begins with a death - "Death of a German Soldier (Hans) on the last day of the Second World War." The actor playing the role of Hans is made to don the Hans mask and uniform and his transformation into Hans is accompanied with insults and catcalls. These symbolic vehicles (the masks, the uniforms, the insults and catcalls) are what Blumer refers to as the 'paraphernalia of ritual'<sup>7</sup> by which he means such vehicles as slogans, songs, cheers, expressive gestures and uniforms which foster feelings of common identity and sympathy. Within a ritual activity, such paraphernalia "acquires a sentimental significance symbolizing the common feelings about the movement, their use serves as a constant reliving and re-enforcement of these mutual feelings."<sup>8</sup> Such paraphrenalia generates a sense of self-importance and provides one of the means by which people who participate in such dramas see themselves as playing certain roles, and more than defining roles, an emotional response too, is provoked. This is best illustrated when Kevin (as Hans) remembers at the end of scene one :

You see, really I had a very good time when I was a kid. Sewed my uniform myself, wouldn't let my mother do it. And my badges, I was so proud I'd sleep with my badges on my pyjamas, and with a little torch look at them, under the sheets, when all the rest of the house was asleep. And in the long mirror, I'd stand in my uniforms. And in my fantasy, whisper shouts to the Führer.

Just a little earlier, he had said,

Hobnail boots to the twisted face of the  
Jewish Bourgeoisie ! All was honourable !  
Horst Wessel We sang, growing strong and golden.  
We were golden in the firelight, golden  
Golden.  
We were golden in the firelight, golden  
German boy. Eyes wet with tears, strong  
bare arms, warm to each others' side.

And yet earlier,

Flags, banners and flags...

Our flag touched by the Fuhrer's flag of  
honour torn and covered with blood from  
the Munich days.

Through the symbols that we can locate in the above examples (the Nazi uniform, the song Horst Wessel and the flag), it is easy to understand how the recreation of these symbols—both, inanimate objects as the once just given as also individuals, such as Hitler who symbolize the political unit—manipulate the emotions of the receiving subjects and this in turn reinforces the authority of the powerful. Although all political movements become known through their rituals, the identification of politics with rituals is



perhaps nowhere more graphic than in the case of Nazism. Hitler himself became an icon, the embodiment of two of the primary symbols of the Nazi movement; the swastika armband and the Nazi salute. Even though the power of Nazism was ultimately the power of an army, the creation of that power was accomplished in no small measure by the use of ritual.

Hitler devoted much attention to the creation of the national socialist symbols. He chose red for the Nazi flag because it was the "most inciting colour" - and later the red of the flag came to represent the sacrificial blood of the martyrs of the movement and was called "Blood flag". Mass rallies were crucial for Hitler, both in attracting followers during the struggle for power and, later, in reinforcing his hold on power. This stemmed from the facts of mass psychology.

"The individual", he wrote, "who in becoming an adherent of a new movement feels lonely... receives [in the mass meeting] for the first time the pictures of a greater community, something that has a strengthening and encouraging effect on most people."<sup>9</sup> In voicing his obsession with all that was associated with Hitler through such symbols, 'Hans' is representative of a whole generation of young German boys who fell prey to the power and the glory that participating

in the ritual activities of the Nazi party meant. And this representativeness gathers greater force when we consider that all the male actors of the cast dressed in the Hans regalia, proving that "Hans" is not a unique individual but a sort of an Every man and a role which all those who wish to come together under the same flag have to adopt. As a matter of fact, almost all the roles in the play are performed through constant interchange by all the members of the cast to demonstrate that whether they believe in the ritual or not, almost all people tend to participate in it. To extend this issue further, it must be pointed at, that Brenton is at the same time, also trying not to allow the audience to build up a consistent, fluid psychological interpretation of the characters especially of Hans who is actually a projection of many perspectives : to Linda's friends he is a grotesque but fascinating 'dirty old man'; to her parents, 'a funny old man' in the words of the kind 'who are wrong in the head. Who do things.' He is also a story teller, a ventriloquist's dummy, and, in the resurrection scene, a Frankenstein's monster. Often, these roles undercut each other so that the terrible vision of the Nazi rising from the grave is immediately deflated by the bewildered and rather sheepish Hans who is bullied by Linda into playing with her yo-yo. Thus Hans is as he is seen through

different eyes : the eyes of other characters, the eyes of individual actors and the eyes of the audience. By showing how 'Hans' is actually and deliberately constructed, Brenton unmasks and unpeels all the hidden layers of meanings behind the symbols of ritual activities that we do not bother to question.

To examine now all the plays within the play Hitler Dances. Apart from Brenton's fascination with Hitler (he even wrote a play based on the life of Hitler at the age of seventeen which he subsequently burned), the direct source of inspiration for this play came when

I saw children at Eindhoven, which was flattened twice during the war, first by the Germans and then by the Allies, and is now the home of the world Headquarters of the Phillips Electrical Company. And at night in Eindhoven the huge Phillips sign, like a weird emblem, flashes everywhere in the sky. I saw a bomb-site there with children playing on it ... and there the idea was lodged in my mind, because it was like children playing on this heap of rubble-history. And the idea of a German soldier coming out of the ground became meaningful.<sup>10</sup>

Brenton's children are not 'embryonically rational creatures in an innocent world, but... disturbingly frank examples of the aggressive animality that surrounds them in the grown-up society. Their playgrounds are urban battle-

fields of blood and sex, and their behaviour denies the premises of all liberal educational theory.<sup>11</sup> Children occur in many of Brenton's plays such as The Education of Skinny Spew and Epsom Downs but in Hitler Dances, they're used with powerful effect to show how childrens' ritual game playing often subconsciously reinforce the status quo of the existing body of politics and how the manipulation of a person's psychology by political units begins at childhood. This transforms the innocent 'play' of the children into a harsher 'play' or enactment of power relations/political negotiations existing in the larger world. When the children begin to 'play', it is important to note that there is a voice of dissent: not everyone wants to play 'war'-

Linda : I don't wanna play war, I wanna play nurses

Tony : Na, War's the only game. Nu'clear o'course.  
Boom !

Linda : Nurses is a nice game. You can'av a hospital  
an' a patient, an' visitin' hours... An  
children an' dads bringing grapes...

And Linda continues to voice her anger against games such as 'war' and 'enemies' but though she finds it 'horrid' and though Tony cannot defend the case for the playing of such games, as when confronted with-

Linda : Yeh but with war you get dead an' that's jus'  
stupid.

Tony : Yeh but gettin' deads' what it's all about. In'  
it?

Linda : Yeh but you get dead, an' what's the game in that?

Tony : Yeh but you don't not get dead in War.

Linda : Yeh but you get dead an you can't play. If you're dead, can't play at all! Can you so there.  
Linda pokes her tongue out at Tony

Tony : Yeh but

Linda : Yeh but what ?!

Tony : Yeh but!  
Tony's non plussed.

Yet, everyone finally does join in and the game of 'enemies' is played. Hence ritual, far from always creating solidarity by reinforcing shared values, often produces solidarity in the absence of any commonality of beliefs<sup>12</sup>. It is this particular feature of ritual that has far reaching political effects in that it legitimises the existing system as well as the power holders within it.

The fascination that children have for the pictures of horror painted before their minds eye by their elders is vividly brought out by Brenton firstly through the preparation of the game to be played and secondly, during the stylisation of the game. Tony attracts the children towards playing at nuclear war with such 'enticing' prospects as

Tony : My brother says a nuclear bomb explosion is so bright, you all go blind.  
An' my brother says all the metals get melted, even your watch an' your glasses. An' your hair-Falls out, an' babies get born freaks. Fantastic!

With such gory events to enact, it's small wonder that 'nurses' should be considered as a game that's 'soppy, wet an' shitty'. Such gory details are personalised during the stylisation of 'enemies' when each child narrates an incident from his/her family's experience in the Second World War: Amaryllis describes the death of her mother's first husband who died of shrapnel in his stomach; Angie talks about how one of her mom's relations had his head cut/severed right off from his neck; David describes his great uncle's death-he was hit literally below the belt and bled for three days, crawling before he died; a distant cousin of Tony's had the track of a German troop carrier going over his spine while a distant cousin of Kevins' was burnt alive in a tank; one of Lindas' aunts 'sort of died of fear' when the woman next to her in the air raid shelter burst open with blood, upon the air shelter being hit; Sabin has a chilling story of a man his father saw in the North African desert, eating his own hand-and when this man died, Sabin's father ate the entrails of the corpse; and finally Carole tells us of the terror that drove her parents to gas themselves during the war. All these stories have obviously been narrated to the children, probably during Remembrance Day-this clue is provided by the song sung at the end of scene Three, by their parents/elders of the family. And

this bring us to the importance of such earmarked days as the Remembrance Day-and later of Bastille Day as celebrated by Violette's family.

During its formative years the Nazi movement used a variety of pre-existing ritual elements to lend legitimacy to its organization as well as to build loyalties. This was especially noticeable in the constant use of commemorations of the war dead : March 16th, Remembrance Day for mourning the dead of the First World War was transformed into Heroes' Remembrance Day associated with the rebirth of the German army and the glorification of the military. Similarly, the celebration of the Bastille day was one of the ways in which different governments and various opposition groups in France defined themselves proving that the rituals generated during the decades of the French revolution continued to play a role in French politics and were not so fleeting after all. It is through the celebration of such days that power holders or aspiring power holders seek to promulgate the view of the political situation they would like the general population to hold. The drama not only constructs a certain view of the situation, but it also engenders an emotional response that associates notions of right and wrong with the elements in this view.<sup>13</sup> Thus the children

have a glorified view of the war-each death takes on heroic proportions and it is to identify with as well as participate in, even in a secondary way in this 'heroism' -in this 'loving memory of a war', that they wish to enact all that they have heard in their games. To repeat, this not only generates solidarity among them but it also helps to keep alive certain myths (in this case-the power and the glory in war).

But what kind of propaganda is Brenton himself undertaking by unlayering whatever goes on in war (notice how in the game of enemies he brings out the futility and meaninglessness of choosing sides, deciding upon the enemy etc)? Brenton is trying to show how consistency comes through common action-the fact that solidarity is produced by people ACTING together. He is thus privileging common action above common thought and showing up an asset of ritual - that it does not need to engender common thought for it binds people together by common action. But by illustrating the creation of solidarity for one kind of ritual activity, Brenton is by implication making us aware that this kind of solidarity can be created for an alternative ritual activity-that of a rebellion against the dictates of an existing political elite. While the political elite employ ritual to legitimate their authority, the



rebels battle back with rites of delegitimation for while Kings use rituals to shore up their authority, revolutionaries use ritual to overthrow monarchs... ritual may be vital to reaction, but it is also the life blood of revolution.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Brenton is arguing against the common view that political ritual merely serves to bolster the existing political status quo.

We have observed the different paraphernalia of ritual attracts Hans towards the Nazi army. If we extend Blumer's category a bit further to include emotional paraphernalia, we see that Violette is motivated by a spirit of revenge that drives her to be recruited in the secret parachute services. Tortured by thoughts of the kind of agony that her husband might have faced in his last hours and unable to accept her widowhood, Violette embarks upon a quest to kill the Germans who are responsible for her own personal tragedy:

Burn! And Germany will be a desert. And all the Germans will crawl in the desert, that once was their Hitler Reich. And these were the thoughts of Violette and she became a heroine.

But Potter, whose experiences in war have disillusioned him so that he realises that the notion of individual intellectual superiority in war is all a myth,

As the war went on, it became very clear me.  
That I was just one more nasty young man, drinking his  
own piss and calling it wine.

is not at all overjoyed that Violette is so anxious to  
become one of the star turns. For he realise only too well,  
that like others before her she would end up a bloody  
heroine'-his emphasis is on the bloody rather than on hero-  
ine and certainly an ironic comment upon the whole notion of  
heroism in war. So Violette's recruitment is just another  
routine affair of fulfilling a desire for revenge rather  
than a brave martyrdom.

And what happens during the recruitment process? We  
are shown how Violette and the others are initiated into  
recognizing a whole new set of symbols. They have to work  
without weapons and this immediately reduces their power but  
the training officer attempts to show them that just as the  
powerful reinforce their authority by manipulating symbols,  
so too the weak can try to put on new clothes and to strip  
the clothes from the mighty. He(Badge) encourages the women  
to assert themselves. This is done, first, by singing a  
rousing song which calls upon the usual notions of fighting  
for peace and love and earning honour:

I want to learn to love and kill  
Before I kiss my cyanide  
To handle butcherment with ease  
And carve my name in flesh and pride

I want to kill a German  
I want to do my bit  
I want to fight for peace and love  
And I am fighting fit.

and then he goes on to demonstrate all the means by which  
the powerless can empower themselves.

You have to look at the world differently. For you the  
hidden enemy in their midst, the whole world is your  
armoury.

...X...

look for the sharp, hard edges of every day objects.  
Wherever you are, look around and arm yourself  
[He taps his head]

In your mind.  
Stair rods  
Candle sticks  
And the edge of a saucer can be quite nasty in the  
teeth.

Badge is slowly building up the aggression that is  
expected of the women and he even asks them to put forward  
their own ideas of violence. This kind of a ritual evoca-  
tion of an emotional response is a common practise in any  
political organization that seeks to have an effective means  
of communication and socialize new members to the values and  
expectations that make up its culture. In most cases, this  
successfully brings about a sense of allegiance but in a few

cases, these rituals can be crippling if an individual wishes to resist them when they come to conflict with personal principles held for many years. One instance of this can be observed when we perceive that Potter simply refuses to kill the birds that his superior, Badge, insists upon his shooting. But Potter has to surrender to the rules of hierarchy in the army where a subordinate must follow orders unquestioningly, so that all Potter's objections:

Regimentation of the beast. that's what it's all about.

-x-

Our family never liked killing birds Sir.

-x-

What if you here a little bird Sir, would you like to be short at by officers in uniform?

come to nothing. This can well be understood as a comment on commonly held views on theatre which regard any new experimental form as upstart, fake and in need of repression.

The kind of emotional and physical provocations that we have been noting at different moments of the play - at the time of Violette's recruitment when aggression is built up within the recruits to generate new ideas of savagery, at the 'game playing' of the children when an atmosphere

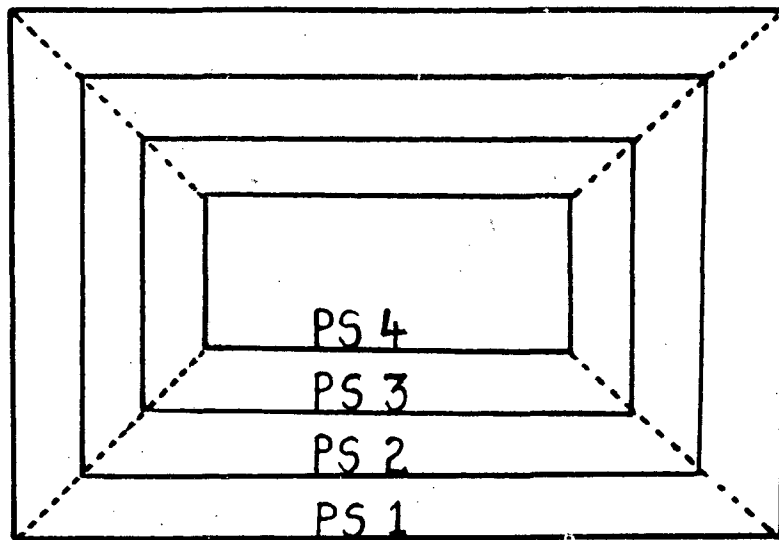
suitable for the enactment of war is created; and also, we may mention here, in the songs of the play which recreate the horror of war- are also needed, as Brenton vividly illustrates, in the making of a play itself. The play that a certain set of spectators, on a particular day, view as a 'finished product'-is actually part of an ongoing performance process which can and must be repeated/ rehearsed from time to time i.e. from one show to the next. This performance process is comprised of a ritual performance sequence where we discover that just as an audience needs a stimulus to respond, so too the performers need an ongoing provocation to draw out the best from them - this is the 'warming up' of the performer to his performance from one show to the next. Let us look briefly into scene one with best exemplifies this concept.

Kevin is made to put on the Hans mask and uniform and then, the entire company literally converges upon Kevin to prompt him into behaving according to his new guise at Hans. They provoke him at every turn beginning with initial cat-calls of 'You, Hans, you'; 'Hey you, Bosch'; 'German soldier boy'; moving on to 'whatsa matter German soldier, wan' your mummy, big-big Frau Titty? Kiss kiss come to mummy' and 'Oy Bosch boy, whatsa matter, got worms in yer little Bosch sausage?' building it up finally to, 'Food food, Hans. Think

of it all the time. Hot, black sausage' and 'suck stones, Hans'. Kevin as Hans finally bursts out with "Sauerkraut! Black coffee! Beer! Hot black blood sausage! Sauerkraut, steaming! Black coffee boiling! Beer all frothy'. But the company does not rest and keep reminding him of his disreputable condition with, 'keep walking Hans; 'Your shoes are pretty ropey Hans; 'And your foot. You got bit by a dog!', 'Two hundred miles to home Hans. you know you're not going to get there'. This is followed by a burst of eloquence from Hans who unfolds his tale there after. Thus, not only within a play and its performance, but also in the preparation of a performance, ritual elements emerge; and of these, one is the agitating of the performer. This kind of a preparation creates a sense of reality that transforms that 'profane' self into a 'sacred' self - 'a self that transcends the loneliness of being human.' More than once this sacred self falls flat. 'Yet, ... so strong is the urge to transcend, to break through the barriers of solitude, that the... actors, gather for another effort, an effort seemingly futile, but genuinely heroic.'<sup>15</sup>

### III

We have been observing the good use to which Brenton puts the link between ritual and theatre, showing us, both, rituals OF theatre as also rituals IN theatre. What has been happening to the performance space in which such a play is staged?



If we glance at the diagram, we observe that within PS(Performance Space)1 which is equivalent to the proscenium stage itself, we have the setting up of PS 2,3,and 4. PS 2 is constituted at the moment when Hans comes into being; PS 3 is the space where the children play their war games and PS4 (actually a re-emergence of PS2) is the story of Violette. All these other spaces within the initial space of PS1 are created, with PS2, through a ritual of enactment

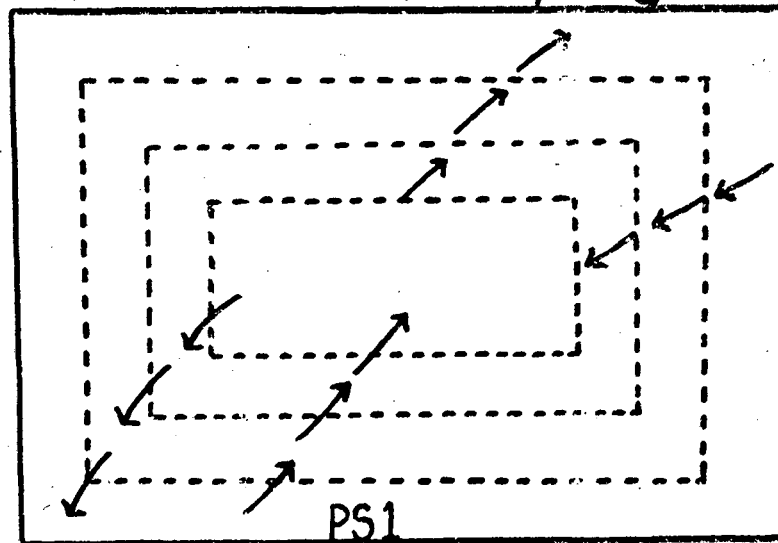
where catcalls etc are the narrative (here narrative itself becomes enactment)/dialogic means of invoking and then creating this space, in much the same way as the performance space in Hashmis' play is created. The questions that arise in this context are that if within the proscenium stage or PS1, we need to create other spaces in the manner of those employed by the fringe or street theatre, then what is the status of this PS1? Is it necessary to use fringe methods because PS1 may not be the 'correct' space (i.e., it has its own generic determinants of performance)? How are all these different spaces related to each other?

In attempting to answer these questions, I would like to refer to (a) the Brechtian notion of Alienation or *verfremdung* and (b) what in the studies of narrative technique, has been called, the *mise-en-abyme*. The former methodology of performance fits in with the fact that as one moves from PS1 to PS4, one gets further alienated (or conversely, gains greater freedom) from the bourgeois constraints of the proscenium. It is however, the application of the latter methodology of *mise-en-abyme* to this play which interests me. This is the process of the setting up of a mirror within a mirror or reflexive mirrors where a hierarchy of reflections/refractions are set up. In this play, the



reflexivity resides in the fact that one can move from one level to another and the way in which the actors move from role to role within one space to the role within another. Because of this movement, the three inner spaces become perforated as we see:

→ denote movement of actors/change of roles



Now, while it is true that perforation does take place, one must not forget the fact that this perforation takes place WITHIN the initial space of the PS1 (the proscenium stage). Hence, the implication is that to break up a certain space, you have to enter within it: this space, or more correctly, the boundaries of this initial space, endure. In other words, this initial creation of a performance space is a ritual one that maintains its sanctity/power/individuality. This is in keeping with the message that has emerged from the play: that you can overthrow a set of rituals but to do so, you must be a collectivity that is bound together

by a certain ideological framework and creates its own set of rituals. This ideological framework of the collectivity is equivalent to that initial space PS1 created at the site of performance. While both are necessary, it is finally the symbols emerging from each that provide higher meaning.

## NOTES

- 1 Text used : Howard Brenton, Hitler Dances (London : Methuen, 1980)
  - 2 Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution : Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968 (London : Eyre Methuen, 1980, p.188)
  - 3 *ibid.*, p.188
  - 4 *ibid.*, p.197
  - 5 See Richard Boon, Brenton : The Playwright (London : Methuen Drama, 1991, p.3)
  - 6 *ibid.*, p.66.
  - 7 See David I. Kertzer, Ritual, Politics and Power (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1988, p.72).
  - 8 *ibid.*, p72.
  - 9 *ibid.*, p.165.
- In fact the entire chapter 8 from which these lines have been quoted, entitled 'Rituals of Revolution' was, as the name itself suggests, very useful.
- 10 Richard Boon, Brenton : The Playwright, p.65.
  - 11 John Bull, New British Political Dramatists (London and Basingtone : MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 1984, p.30)
  - 12 David I. Kertzer, Ritual, Politics, and Power, p.66.
  - 13 *ibid.*, Chap.8.
  - 14 *ibid.*, p.2.
  - 15 Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, ed., By Means of performance : Intercultural studies of theatre and ritual (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.234).

## APPENDIX

A brief outline of Hitler Dances :

There are two stories around which Hitler Dances is built. The first which is set in 1972 deals with the child Linda who, with her friends, accidentally 'resurrects' a dead German soldier, Hans, by playing a game of war on his grave. He drags her with him in his futile attempt to return to Germany, and, eventually, kills her. The second story is that of the real-life war-heroine Violette that is told to Linda by Hans as a bribe to enlist her help, where we are shown how Violette's training as an agent for a mission to occupied France (to avenge the death of her husband) is a pointless one, because her apparently 'heroic' death is the result of administrative inefficiency.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

In having made a case study of the dramatic texts of Samrath Ko Nahi Dosh Gosai and Hitler Dances, it would be pertinent at this juncture to enumerate the various ways in which an effective actualization of the ritual experience takes place in them. There are primarily three interrelated zones of ritual realization :-

- (i) the content of the plays: it would seem to appear that ritual is a predominant concern and indeed the intrinsic theme of the play;
- (ii) the role of the audience : within a theatrical event, the audience, due to the particular rituals that it follows remains clearly demarcated from the performers even if attempts are made to break down these barriers;
- (iii) the matrix of theatrical space (within which the performance process takes place) : which includes not just the dramaturgic space (i.e. topographical site) where the narrative unfolds itself but also embraces the space (physical and mental) occupied by the audience; this space too gets ritualised and it is its openness to ritualisation that serves as a catalyst in fulfill-

ing the aims of the plays.

Before analysing these categories in further detail, it is relevant to point out that all through this dissertation, the 'ritual' aspect has been regarded as an asset to such theatre (and indeed, to all theatres) and ritualising/ation has been considered as inevitable towards building a positive and dynamic theatre of social change. While in the case of Samrath Ko Nahi Dosh Gosai, we observed through the analysis of the play, how JANAM inspite of attempting to be anti-ritualistic, inadvertently also uses ritual - but differently : ritual now becomes a vehicle for transmitting a radical political message. So, even though the group resorts to ritual measures, these do not in any way dilute the message of their plays. In Hitler Dances, Brenton uses ritual in quite another way. He acknowledges the power of rituals by presenting vividly the rituals that we participate in which results in the contemporary social order. However, while maintaining that rituals are powerful, Brenton is also at the same time, showing us the flexible nature of rituals in that we can use the power of rituals to create a new social order : according to him, the ball is solely in our own courts.

When Polonius in Hamlet announces that the players who had come to court could perform anything : 'tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral,' he is actually making fun of peoples attempts to pigeonhole or label every play that comes along. Now while the attempt to assign plays to given categories can be a misleading pursuit because (a) more often than not, plays do not fit neatly into categories as different dramas intersect and overlap, combining elements of different kinds and (b) dramatists do not write categories or types of dramas - they write individual plays, yet, the fact is that we do classify plays into different genres. This is because almost every theatrical event, either deliberately or unwittingly serves some purpose. For example, the purpose may be religious as in the medieval period when theatre performances were employed to teach people stories from the Bible, to instruct them in religious precepts and so forth. Again, at times theatre serves a civic function as exemplified by the plays performed on the anniversary of a town. In 1976, when the US celebrated its Bicentennial many plays depicting the events

surrounding the founding of the nation were presented.<sup>1</sup> Thus classifications of plays, generic or otherwise, are generally made according to the specific motivation of a play which can be understood from the emergent rituals.

In the same way, as we have already discussed at length in the Introduction to this dissertation, the motivation behind the performance of agit-prop plays is that they seek to activate an atmosphere of political debate and to remind the audience that the dynamic process of change lies in their hands - and that they must act together. These plays demonstrate the kind of rituals into which the audience members must enter in order to make their protest a strong and viable one. Thus both, the madari and his jamura (the latter, only at some moments) act as 'sutradhars' and it is their words in the Haupttext of Samrath Ko Nahi Dosh Gosai which demonstrate the purpose of the play, of driving home upon the audience that it is high time they stop being 'wooden owls' who only 'stand and watch spectacles, laugh and clap,' regardless of the exploitation being meted out to them; that it is high time they raise their voices in protest against prevailing injustice. To this extent, the play first reveals the kind of rituals that the spectators are participating in at that given moment of performance : their



sitting/standing around the circular performance area, their concentration of attention upon the narrative of the play and their response (in the form of clapping) to the play. Having once made the audience aware of their performance potential (after all, the spectators are 'performing' their role for the completion of the theatrical event) which is depicted through the rituals they follow, the play goes on to show how the spectators can perform in yet another way by entering a new set of rituals, the rituals of protest against oppression. For it is only by a participation in a common ritual that all the members of the audience, with their differing thoughts and actions can be bound together.

This theme is repeated in almost all the major plays of JANAM, for example : Machine (November 1978) which depicted the machinations of the establishment in collusion with the police and security forces against industrial dissent, coincident with the first ever all-India all trade union rally against the Industrial Relations Bill, helped to rejuvenate the morale of a working class audience of about one lakh at the joint rally. Again, in December 1978 Hatyare (meaning Killers) coincided with the second phase of communal violence let loose in Aligarh and analysed the political and economic factors which antagonise the traditionally harmonious co-existence of two communities. Then DTC Ki

Dhandli in February 1979 was against the state owned Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) which had at that time, without any warning burdened the common commuter by suddenly raising its fares sky high. The play explored the political economy of the fare hike including mismanagement, corruption and rackets of the top bureaucracy. The instant success of the play was evident from the mass appeal and participation it received along with the conversion of each show into a street corner meeting where actors and spectators met jointly to protest against the fare-hike. Even the many lathi-charges of the police failed to suppress the people (so that ultimately, the corporation had to partially withdraw the raised fares and even rationalise the fare structures being followed prior to the hike).<sup>2</sup>

While street plays can and must put forward their themes rather directly because they must be easily understood and registered by the common man on the street, the proscenium arch plays can, in the fulfillment of the same aims as street plays, afford to be more covert in presenting the themes. The audience for such plays is a more select one which (apparently) can enjoy greater reflection upon the ideas that are generated through the performances. In the performance of street plays, there is an element of urgency

and immediacy for action (from the spectators); in proscenium arch plays too, there is a call upon action from the spectators but the urgency is not essential so that such spectators have more time to comprehend the plays. Keeping this in mind, we observe that Brenton in his desire for 'forging a brand new public theatre out of what had been learnt in the small theatre'<sup>3</sup> tries to evolve 'a new theatricality from the immediacy, the intimacy and the fierceness of the Fringe.'<sup>4</sup> The 'new theatricality' can also be seen in terms of the content of his plays, the purpose of which (like the JANAM plays) is to deliberately provoke the audience to protest against the injustices of society. But Brenton does this a little differently. In his plays, he attempts to give a realistic picture of the rituals to which the spectators are a prey and the alternative rituals which they can adopt are not directly suggested in the play : the audience is expected to realise the alternate possibilities on their own. There is a turning inwards of the characters of his plays and this is what Brenton wishes to do - he wishes the spectators to question themselves. In his own words :

As I see it, people are more volatile than Freudian psychology, Ibsenite plays, the medical and cultural models we have of the human mind would allow. Our resources are enormous and unpredictable. Consciousness is protean, chaotic ... the

chaos of our true nature is kept at bay for social reasons. That the world as it is can run, we have to enter into a collective conspiracy . . . . The volatility must be suppressed. History, politics, opinions, even what we tell ourselves we are, are perverted by what's demanded of us to get through the days, to get money, shelter, warmth, a bit of peace. There's a war between what people know they have to be and what they experience they really are. The war is the stuff of characterisation in my plays . . . . [My characters'] complexity is one of a process of struggle, against what's demanded of them in a maze of incidents and predicaments. In trying to understand what's happening to them moment by moment, the only constant is the ferocity of their existence.<sup>5</sup>

So, the protagonists of Hitler Dances unlike those in Samrath do not directly tell the audience what kind of rituals they must participate in, they are more interested in showing the audience the exact nature of the rituals that the spectators are already caught up in. The focus of Hitler Dances is upon revealing to the audience the sense of cruel discrepancy between the conventional, public face of 'heroism' and the pointless, brutal, historical reality. That Violette's death in the end is not martyrdom but actually the result of failure in the administrative machinery, is what this play leads to (beginning with Violette's desire to fight the Germans, which we realise is not so much patriotism as a desire for personal revenge). Yet, characters like Violette are generally lauded by the public who idolise them as heroic and the characters themselves believe in their own

heroism. The question that we must ask is, why? To answer, this is because of what I would like to call, certain rituals of interpretation of an event that most people follow quite blindly and unquestioningly. One such ritual of interpretation is the glamorising of war which is generally aided by films. The film, Carve Her Name with Pride upon which this play is based 'perpetuates the myths surrounding the war; it is a successful commercial mixture of light comedy, romance, character lionisation and glamorised violence.'<sup>6</sup> What Brenton would like to tell his audience is that by accepting such myths, we build up rituals of interpretation that can be quite misleading for a little research into such myths will prove them to be inaccurate presentations of existing facts. In other words, the implication is that before we submit to a certain mode of thinking or ritual thought, we should question its efficacy. This is the dominating theme of Hitler Dances.

In many of Brenton's plays, we observe this concern with showing to the audience, the gaps between the ritual thought that they accept and reality as it is. Take for example The Churchill Play (1974) in which a group of internees in a British concentration camp present a play about Winston Churchill to a visiting Parliamentary delegation.

Harold Hobson said of it in 'The Sunday Times' : 'one of the few matters on which it is still generally assumed that there is a consensus of opinion is that in May 1940, England found a man who could and did save her. The haunting and alarming suggestion made in Mr. Brenton's powerful play .... is that the man England found was the wrong man.'<sup>7</sup> This comment only supports the point that I have been trying to make, that Brenton is interested in breaking the rituals of interpreting history that we have inherited. That this task is not an easy one is something that Brenton realises and which is well brought out in the play Bloody Poetry (1984) which is about the lives of Shelley and Byron. At the end of this play, when Byron attends the cremation on the Viareggio Beach, he delivers an oration : 'Burn him. Burn us all. A great big bloody beautiful fire.' Radicalism, artistic defiance, intellectual rage and the idea of the committed artist who seeks to stir and provoke sullen, defeated, bourgeois England, are the aspects that are celebrated in this play, which at the same time shows how difficult it is to upset the moral order.

Thus we see that an actualization of the ritual experience takes place in the thematic content of the plays of both, Howard Brenton and JANAM, although in different ways.

## II

In both plays we have the rites of initiation of the actors into their roles. In Samrath we have the madari entering the performance space, wearing with deliberate intent, large sunglasses with frames, a bright and colourful headband with a marwari turban above it and a three metre long black sheet trailing from his shoulders. In the other play, Hitler Dances, Kevin is made to put on the Hans mask and slowly provoked into obtaining an apparently life like entry into the role of Hans by a verbal building up of the situation. In the first, the paraphernalia adopted by the madari is discarded within minutes and in the latter, the Hans garb is passed from one actors to another.

Although all this is very useful in reminding the audience of the temporary and shifting nature of a role, what is more important is to note that the various symbols that go into the making of a role are not quite so temporary however for even though these symbols are adopted briefly their 'sacredness' in the performance process is established. This ushers in the significance of imagination on the part of the audience and their 'willing suspension of disbelief'. Audiences bring more to a performance than their

mere presence. They bring a background of personal knowledge and experience which helps to form the impressions they receive from a production of which the three primary factors are : their knowledge about the social, political and philosophical world in which the play was written or produced; their specific information about the play and the playwright; and their personal memories and experiences. So members of the audience are already conditioned when they arrive at the site of performance. Once they do so, however, their imagination allows them to conceive of people and of events that they have never seen or experienced and to transcend their physical circumstances to the point where they forget who or what they are. At some level of course, they are aware that they're watching a theatrical event but having separated at the outset, the reality of art from the reality of everyday life, their minds are prepared to go along with the former without reservations.<sup>8</sup>

The audience of these two plays, in being shown the power of their imagination in continuing to recognize the madari as one inspite of his having shed the external symbols of his role or in accepting the everyman like quality of Hans, are being told that it is their imagination that is imperative. It is the participation of the audience through



their imagination, a ritual instinctively followed by any audience in any theatrical event which is essential for the success of a theatrical production and the fulfillment of its aims. Hence there is a sacredness in the rituals pursued by spectators in this special role that they have cast themselves in.

This sacredness of the role of the audience is further substantiated when we observe how in Samrath, the audience is asked to clap so that the 'show' may begin. In Hitler Dances, we see how the conversion of Kevin into Hans is accompanied by hoots and catcalls and so on by the remaining members of the cast who are acting as audience (to Hans) at this juncture. Both plays then, while revealing the interaction that is necessary if a performance must succeed are also revealing that two entities - one, the audience watching the play and two, the performers enacting the narrative, do exist as separate bodies. These separate bodies may come together for a performance but that does not mean that one becomes the other. Rather, that one is dependent upon the other. Drama critic Walter Kerr has aptly designated this relationship as that of 'contenders' and of 'playmates building a structure.'<sup>9</sup> And Bernard Beckerman made the following observations on the question of separation between actors and audience :

.... Recently, in drama, we have had instances in productions such as The Connection and The Blacks, in the works of Jerry Grotowski, and in novelties such as Happenings, where a breakdown of isolation is sought. Frequently, roles are reversed, and the spectator, instead of being god, becomes scapegoat. Such attempts to erase the line between presenter and presentee only define it more sharply. The auditor becomes acutely aware that he has been cast in the role of a particular kind of spectator. Isolation is not eliminated, merely recharacterized .....<sup>10</sup>

It is this process of recharacterization of audience which is at work in the two agit-prop plays in our scope of study. In Samrath we saw that while an attempt was made at 'demystifying' the actor-audience relationship, this was achieved only partially, to the extent that the audience was made aware of its performance potential (for they were 'performing' their 'role' but as spectators). This recharacterization of the audience takes place primarily because the madari (appealed to by the Jamura) constantly reminds the audience of their role - initially, at the start of the play, as spectators and later in the play, as would be propagators of social action.

In Hitler Dances too, Brenton quite literally 'puts' the audience upon the stage during the creation of Hans but

this only serves to show the audience, the dependence of the actors upon the spectators response for their continuing performance, as also the dependence on the power of the Haupttext upon the audience to stimulate response. In other words the ratio of actor : demonstrator and audience : subject is only a relative one for at certain moments, the actor too is a subject.

Hence, the rituals followed by the audience in a theatrical event clearly differentiate them from the performers and agit prop plays use this aspect to their own advantage. They make the audience aware of (a) this differentiation and (b) the power that the audience wields in its sanctified position ; by doing this, by implication, they also propagate the fact that the audience can use the power of its position towards more constructive and progressive ends.

### III

Having considered how the content of the plays concern ritual and having established the nexus between ritual and the audience, it remains now to study how the performance space gets ritualised.

Once spectators arrive at the site where the performance is going to take place, they immediately take in the environment. The physical environment creates definite expectations of the event to come and conditions the experience once it gets under way. The atmosphere has a great deal to do with the audience's mood in approaching a performance. Spectators have one feeling if they come into a formal setting - a picture-frame stage surrounded by carved gold figures with red plush seats in the auditorium - and quite another if they come into an old warehouse converted into a theatre, with bare brick walls, and a stage in the middle of the floor surrounded by folding chairs. If the environment of a theatre is consistent with the kind of production to be presented, the total experience will be enhanced. If the environment runs counter to the production, it will be confusing and detract from the overall effect.<sup>11</sup>

Keeping agit prop aims in mind, street theatre then has a distinctive advantage in its choice of performance space for it can immediately create a direct contract between its actors and the audience. Brenton, realising the assets of street (fringe) theatre said during the production of his play Magnificence :

..... Because of the fierce nature of the writing... a neutral space was not going to work for us .... that is, the kind of stage evolved by Bill Gaskill and the designers he has worked with, which is a very cool neutral area which says 'stage' and really doesn't change .... That degree of coolness doesn't really follow the nature of the writing. You need the stage to be expressive on your behalf.... we're talking about a hot, expressive [stage].<sup>12</sup>

In order to create this 'expressive' stage in Hitler Dances, Brenton in this first serious full scale attempt to involve the audience directly in the argument of a Brenton play and to make the stage a public forum for a debate in which even the audience could take part, evolved a structure formed by the interplay of two stories which can stand apart but which 'smashed together' as Brenton says, fit into an overall structure of mutual commentary and argument. The story of the child and the dead soldier, cross-referring with the story of Violette Szabo, provides the framework for an act of interpretation by the audience whereby it re-

examines the nature of its preoccupations and assumptions about its own past. To this end, there is a setting up of various performance spaces within that initial one of the proscenium stage. This initial space, as we have observed is the only one that remains constant. This could then be read as connoting (i) the power and sanctity of creating a performance space and (ii) that it is the nature of what is being performed in the performance space that needs to be changed - for the status of the performance space is fixed and inviolate.

The permanence of the performance space remains unquestionably so in street theatre too for as we have analysed in Samrath Ko Nahī Dosh Gosai, the circular acting space does remain sacred. Its boundaries may get extended but it is never really done away with. What does happen is that the performance space no longer remains a domain that coincides with its actual physical limits i.e., it becomes a 'found' space consisting of an impromptu performance area which questions the virtuality of performance.

Thus, performance space in having become a sacred or ritualised space enables agit-prop plays to seek the fulfillment of their motivation.

In the final analysis, 'meaning' is the sum total of the theatre experience which includes the emotional and sensory data, the intellectual content and in fact everything that helps create the theatrical event. Any attempt to summarize the meaning of a play in a few words or reduce it to a formula, robs it of its full meaning, for in the theatre, human beings can merge all the images and stimuli they receive into a single experience.

In the two agit prop plays that have served as case studies, it is the ritual quality that colours almost every aspect of the plays and it is our recognition of these ritual characteristics, which enhances our comprehension of such theatre. It is, also, this very quality that helps to make agit prop the creator of an effective social theatre. Any assessment of agit prop plays needs to realise the importance of ritual theory as a determinant of their effectiveness.

## NOTES

- 1 Edwin Wilson, The Theatre Experience (North Carolina : McGraw Hill Book Co., 1980, p.293).
- 2 Safdar Hashmi, The Right to Perform (Delhi : SAHMAT, 1989, p.18).
- 3 Richard Boon, Brenton : The Playwright (London : Methuen Drama, 1991, p.91).
- 4 *ibid.*, p.91.
- 5 *ibid.*, p.72.
- 6 *ibid.*, p.67.
- 7 From the jacket of a copy of Howard Brenton's The Churchill Play (London : Methuen Drama, 1979).
- 8 Edwin Wilson, The Theatre Experience, p.36.
- 9 *ibid.*, p.16.
- 10 *ibid.*, p.20.
- 11 *ibid.*, p.128.
- 12 Richard Boon, Brenton : The Playwright, p. 90.



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