# Interview

## Drama in the Classroom

*Promodini Varma & Gitanjali Chawla in Conversation with Keval Arora*

*Keval Arora taught drama and theatre at the Department of English, Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi for over four decades. As the Faculty Advisor of THE PLAYERS, the college theatre society, his work involved sensitising students towards the interrogative and performative potential of theatre and mentoring their creations. He has also curated the Old World Collegiate Theatre Festival since 2003 and has been a jury member for the National Film Awards, Hindu Metroplus Original Script Awards, Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards, Sanhita Manch Script Awards, amongst others. As a freelance theatre commentator, his articles have appeared in several newspapers and magazines.*

**Promodini Varma (PV):** Thank you for agreeing to come on board for this interview with *Fortell*! You have been both a teacher and a theatre activist as well as a trend-setter, well known and a respected one at that! How did these two roles coalesce? And how do you understand your theatre practice? Tell us something about how it began.

**Keval Arora (KA):** In school, I was petrified of the stage. Several students who do theatre in college come with some experience from their schooldays. That wasn't the case with me. Yes, sometimes as a class monitor, one was made to get up on stage in school assembly, but I hated it. The turning point came in my second year of college. At that time, Frank Thakurdas, our staff advisor, had had a stroke, so he was on leave. The Hindi section of the Drama Society at Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi, was doing very well while the English one had fallen quiet. We had a new teacher who had just joined the department. Ganesh Bagchi, an English language teacher from a school in Uganda and then the British Council, Calcutta. He wrote plays, and one day, he

just put it to the class, asking if anyone was interested in theatre. And almost everybody I was friendly with, said yes. I didn't have a mind to go into theatre. But all my friends went and there I was alone, so I also joined them, saying I'd work backstage. And then, with maybe about a month to go for the first show, one of the actors developed laryngitis and lost his voice entirely. I was the only spare person available, and I was told by Bagchi to step in. I said No! I can't. But there were all these friends looking at me accusingly, like, how can you let us down? There is no escaping friends when you are in the hostel, right? So, very reluctantly, I got dragged into doing theatre. Once in there, I found it wasn't as scary and slowly, pleasure overtook the pain. That was in my second year. It was in the third year that I came to enjoy and understand it much more. It was also the year of the Emergency, it was the year when Bagchi wrote a script, which emerged out of two plays, Sophocles's *Antigone* and Rabindranath Thakur's *Raktakarabi.*

**Gitanjali Chawla (GC):** Interesting! A play of protest of the individual conscience against the state during the Emergency?

**KA:** Yes. I didn't have any idea then that we were doing anything particularly bold or brave, but when teachers and senior students from other colleges started dropping in to watch rehearsals, one got a sense, even at that time, that this was something big happening. And there were endless debates on what shape the scene should take. Should it move in this direction or that; the play was being constructed even as we were working on it. It was not a received script, and because it wasn't, the scope of the adaptability of theatre became very evident. You can, on a certain day, respond to what you have read in the newspaper, or heard from someone, and you think that maybe this needs to be incorporated into the text. That was quite special. I was of course on the periphery, listening in to a lot of stuff that I must confess was going over my head.

**GC:** How did the Emergency impact your understanding of the power of theatre?

**KA:** Well! I have memories of many rehearsals that always ended in long discussions within the cast, and meetings with people who would just drop in to watch what was being rehearsed that day. It felt like I was part of a larger space where things bigger than theatre were being undertaken, but I'm never too sure if at that time I understood much of what was being said. But yes, the responsibility and adaptability of

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

theatre became evident then, the fact that it responds to the contemporary environment. Also, the fact that you have to think about what you're doing, know why you're doing it, that is a critical component of the work of theatre. This particular play that I'm talking about was titled 'Yaksha Town', it is about an apocryphal country which has a YAS as the Yaksha Administrative Service, the YPS as the Yaksha Police Service. It was a thinly veiled commentary on India under Indira Gandhi during the Emergency. That was the year when I began to see theatre as not just fun but also as deeply engaged. It's also the year I began watching a lot of plays. So, Mandi House and NSD became places to hang around, because you also learn so much from watching. It's not as if all the plays one saw were great plays. I think some of the plays we were most 'inspired' by were the ones we hated, saying to ourselves, we're not going to make this mistake. And maybe that's how one kind of just got better, learning what not to do.

**PV:** As a student, and a student doing theatre, how does one balance studies, exams, parents and rehearsals, etc.?

**KA:** It's not easy but it's been done! Of the lot, parents are the most difficult to deal with. Not just one's own but also those of the students. So, you have to advise your students that if you feel your father or mother are not going to let you come into theatre, try these arguments, these strategies, etc. I've often had to meet with parents. I remember one instance where I can sense the father hating me. He's hating me for whatever he sees as representing a threat to his child who was obedient till just the other day. But you also have to tell students, 'Quite apart from the fact that your parents want what is best for you, please also remember that your parents are so much older than you. They come from a different time, a different set-up. And perhaps this is the time for them to get an education as well'. One of the theatre exercises we do, the improvisation exercises in the theatre group, is—here's your story. This is what happened. Play it. You're in your room with your school friend. Play it now. Then I say, same scene, same story, but now you're with an older cousin. Now you're with your mother. Play it again. How is the narrative going to change? They're not allowed to change the facts, but they have to explore how the negotiation is going to shift. And then, in a role reversal, one gets the actor to play her mother. In the same situation and handling the same crisis. That's actually a training for life. I mean, whether you go into theatre or not is not the issue. You will be a survivor if you just absorb lessons from your training in theatre.

**PV:** Interesting! How did you deal with the financial constraints of running a theatre society? I mean, there is never any money for this. And also, the ideological constraints!

**KA:** As far as financial constraints are concerned, I must say I've worked in a place of considerable privilege like Kirori Mal College, in a theatre society that now is 68 years old, nourished by the likes of Frank Thakurdas who was in a position to be heard and to do a lot. But yes, one of the challenges of running a theatre society has always been to try and organise a budget to do plays in the way in which one would want to do them. I don't think there is ever going to be a time when we will have the money we need, but in a way that's not a bad thing because often when there is not enough, we learn to improvise and manage. It's nice that students training at professional places such as the National School of Drama get good budgets to work with, but then they get comfortable with it and once they leave the NSD, the difficulty of working in a tight squeeze hits them hard. One thing students need to have is a crash course in poverty design; working cheaply with materials that don't cost much. So, yes, finance is an issue, but I prefer to think of finance as a challenge rather than a constraint. The main challenge has really been in access to infrastructure. Rehearsals carry on for long hours, and college administrations want to close college buildings early, for security reasons, etc.

**GC**: And how do you negotiate with censorship, sometimes self-censorship, keeping in mind the sensitivities of the audience?

**KA:** In the 1990s, a production was on the verge of being shut down because a senior teacher thought our poster advertising a play we were doing was obscene. It was a play by Dario Fo and Franca Rame, and the image that we'd chosen was a silhouette of a woman sitting on the ground with one leg down on the ground and the other upraised, with her wrist resting on the bent knee, a woman confident, an image of power. The objection was to her posture and the fact that she was sitting with her legs parted! How do you deal with that? We've had problems with audiences, especially teachers in institutions where we have played, objecting to the indecorous language used on stage, even when it is natural to the setting. And of course, we've had to be careful when we've played violence on stage—communal, sexual, social violence. I've preferred doing plays whose narratives have alternate textures and

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

trajectories, and we take a call on how we're going to play the show depending on how we've sussed out the audience before the show. I think it's important to dial things down keeping in mind the nature of the audience, no matter whether our preferred take on things is justified or not within the context of the play. Walking the line between dialing things down and self-censorship is not easy because that is a line you don't want to cross. But I do want students to never forget that a play is a collaborative transaction between performers and spectators. If you're so over the top that spectators shut down and stop listening, then you've thrown away the opportunity to get your point across. That's not bravery, that's recklessness. Not to mention, irresponsibility.

One has to also be careful, not just with keeping hostile spectators in mind, but also with creating a safe space in which such representations are created. One has to be careful about how the representation is made to work, and if the rehearsal is a safe space for all players. For instance, there are theatre exercises which hinge upon making you 'comfortable' with your body, and students coming out of a variety of environments into college theatre often need to go through such exercises before work begins. But these can become coercive and exploitative if not done carefully. So, as a faculty advisor, one is always monitoring these exploratory exercises.

**GC:** How do you teach drama as a printed text in class?

**KA:** There is continuity in the work I do in the classroom with what I do in theatre. I suppose it is assumed that I'd bring my experience of working in the theatre into the classroom, and to some extent that's true. But I often find myself saying to students in class, that as a teacher of the text this is what I have to say but if I were directing this section on the stage, my position would be something else. However, on the whole, I'd say I that it is the experience of the classroom that I take onto the theatre floor.

**GC:** That's interesting because I thought it would be the other way round.

**KA:** What I have quite consciously avoided is performing in the classroom. Frankly, I sometimes think most teachers who read Shakespeare aloud in class are closet actors. And that's why they inflict themselves on students, the most captive audience one is likely to get. Teaching a drama text in a classroom is, for me, no different from teaching poetry.

The novel requires a different, more expansive approach altogether, and students have to read the novel before lectures begin. But for drama, I often tell students to read just slightly ahead of what is being done in my class. Because we will discover the text together in class. I don't want students to be over-reading. I want them to be prepared to be surprised.

*Waiting for Godot*, however, was a text where I have brought performance into the classroom, I wanted my class to learn how to measure Beckett's frequent use of 'pause'. And what his stage direction 'silence' means. What the 'silence of Lucky' means so, in class I'd read out the text and then fall silent not saying anything and I could see them wait for me to start reading again. Imagine if you're watching a performance and the whole performance just goes dead and lingers on in a stillness of sound and gesture. That is what Beckett does, so to understand his text, one often needs to recover the performative text rather than simply the printed one, because so much of its power depends on the pace at which it unfolds.

**PV:** Yes, if you don't make the connection instantly in theatre, it's lost. And there's no going back.

**KA:** Well, if you lose the connection, it's gone. Which is why we make this big thing about the seats being oiled so that there's no creaking and reminding spectators to put their cell phones in silent mode. We have to be carefully attentive when watching a performance because you can't go back to catch something you've missed. Which is why I say that you can make out which dramatists have experience of the theatre from how they repeat critical information. Look at the opening of Shaw's *Major Barbara*. Several pages of the opening stage directions are given to the description of Lady Britomart's study. The detailing is almost as if you're reading a novel. But there's something else that Shaw does at the beginning. Lady Britomart is in her study, writing. There's a knock on the door. Her son Stephen enters and says, 'You called, Mother?' By the way, I love such opening lines, which are so economical. 'You called, Mother' and you know the relationship right away. She says 'Yes'. And he sits down. She continues writing. So, he picks up a newspaper. And she gets him to put it down. 'You're disturbing me', she says. And the dynamic of their relationship is crystallised. She's a bully and this man who is in his 20s can't speak up for himself. So, he then just waits, doing nothing until she's ready to talk. He can't read, so he starts looking around the room, and as he looks around the room, I too get time to

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

look around the room with him. What has Shaw done? He's carved out time for late comers to come in and settle down. The story hasn't really begun. You're obviously going to miss something when you arrive late, but you've not missed anything crucially significant because, let alone the story, even the conversation hasn't really started. Shaw starts his plays with a low heartbeat. Clearly, here's a man who has spent a long time watching other people's plays and then written his plays on the basis of what he's learnt along the way.

**GC:** How do you perceive your creative process?

**KA:** I am somewhat sceptical, maybe even impatient, with the idea of creativity being a mystical, mysterious process. Sure, we can't always harness creativity. We don't know when ideas come, or don't come, for that matter. Nor do we really know where they come from, or how. That old idea of the Muse is not a bad one, actually. Because you're not really in control of when words or ideas will flow. But I always say, you can only be alert to an idea when it comes, alert to whether it's worth following or whether it should be discarded. Sometimes, in the plays that I've done, accidents have actually produced what later come to be spoken of as moments of brilliance, and my only contribution has been of being alert, and recognising that the accident has a value which can be furthered explored, invested in, and so on. Yes, at that point all one can say is that there is something unknowable about the process. But to turn the creative process into a moment that is semi-transcendent, to regard it as a place of intuition that is non-logical and beyond analysis—that valuation is the enemy of creativity. Especially in a collaborative medium as the theatre. It's something which is emphasised in a lot of actor training. I keep saying that to not overthink is good, but the injunction to not overthink doesn't mean to not think at all!

**PV:** There has been a lot of improvisation with digital technology and the virtual medium, particularly post-Covid. What do you think about it?

**KA:** Digital technology was already being used in the theatre before the onset of Covid. What changed with the pandemic was that the theatres closed down, and rehearsal and performance practices had to adapt to this fact. It was great the way technology allowed musicians and actors to create pieces together from the isolation of their homes. But complicated as it was to create recorded pieces, performing live in online modes

posed a completely different order of challenge. These new modes of transmission and reception obviously did fit some themes better than others, and several projects came through as rather precious. For instance, Mallika Taneja's 'Allegedly' and Amitesh Grover's 'The Last Poet' (the latter working on an interactive template) were memorable for the way they reshaped our sense of what it means to be a spectator. There has been one critical loss though. Online projects just haven't been able to provide that vital experience which underpins the act of watching theatre—the sense of collective viewing. That seems to be an irretrievable loss in theatre which is conducted through virtual modes.

**PV:** Thank you Keval! Talking to you has been immensely enjoyable and insightful and we are sure our readers will find it as interesting as we did.

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 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244