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## In pursuit of a research methodology for documenting an ephemeral art – its inherent dilemmas and propositions

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### Introduction

Decades ago, as performance is ephemeral, writings on plays were invariably on the literary aspects of the text rather than the particularities of staging. There were also very less treatise on the research methodology to document performance. Even in libraries we can locate books on the staging of Shakespeare and other western dramatist's but writings on Indian English plays in performance and books on the methodological base for such an analysis is a rarity. This paper has sprouted out of an urge to elicit a fitting research methodology to document the theatrical journey of Gurcharan Das' 'Three English Plays' – 'Larins Sahib', 'Mira', and '9 Jakhoo Hill', which have been repeatedly revived since the 1960's.

However, it is not an effortless task to accomplish, as the live and transient art has to be documented before they enter the mnemonic field of embodied memory. Getting lost, facing disagreements, choosing the right method from the methodological maze are some of the inevitable struggles that come with this research territory. Besides, it has its inherent evidentiary limitations as well. Postlewait observes:

“...theatre companies... often fail to maintain sufficient records. Even when records are saved, and make their way to the archive, they often remain un-catalogued, buried away in boxes... and in the cases of those theatre events that have been documented, the records, with rare exceptions, are a piecemeal... Much has been lost, destroyed, buried away, and misplaced... We must make do with the few traces that we have.”<sup>1</sup>

### Methodology for documenting Theatrical Performances

It is a demanding endeavor of creative possibilities to arrive at an appropriate methodology to document performances. Old research methods have to be readopted and fresh ones needs to be invented. After a bumpy ride with positivist, scientific, objective and relativist procedures, the search for a proper methodology for documenting theatre, finally knocked at the doors of historiography and realized its destination. Postlewait asserts, “All kinds of theatrical activities in the past- no matter what their mode of delivery...may require historical investigation and understanding. This

is the case for events that occurred three millennia ago, three centuries ago, or three days ago.”<sup>2</sup>

Historiography, is

“the kind of historical report that not only places events in a descriptive sequence but also explains and interprets them; that is besides providing *who, what, where, and when*, the report covers *how, why...*”<sup>3</sup>

Besides these factuality’s about historiography, Robert .D. Hume insisted that a theatre historian need to commit to an ‘*integrative*’ rather than a ‘*separatist*’ model of scholarship. This has led to yet another analytical component, ‘*dramaturgy*’ which is the viewing of the performance as an organic whole. Marianne Van Kerkhoven writes that:

“dramaturgy involves everything...Is it only possible to think of dramaturgy in terms of spoken theatre, or is there a dramaturgy for movement, sound, light, and so on, as well? Is dramaturgy the thing that connects all the various elements of a play together? Or is it about the soul, the internal structure, of a production? Or does dramaturgy determine the way space and time are handled in a performance and so the context and the audience too? We can probably answer all these questions with ‘yes’”<sup>4</sup>

A Theatre historian hence, has to act like a dramaturg, and reconstruct the dramaturgy of the plays that happened in the past. In addition to these, Patrice Pavis ‘Questionnaire’ also aids theatre research and has been adopted as a charter for the analysis of live performance. It is structured into fourteen Main pointers with subsidiary questions to answer. The main pointers include, general discussion of

performance, scenography, lighting system, stage properties, costumes, actors performances, function of music and sound effects, pace of performance, interpretation of storyline in the performance, text in performance, audience, how to notate this performance, what cannot be put into signs, and the fourteenth is a ‘metaquestion’ about the questionnaire itself.

A detailed look at the methodologies of Postlewait and Pavis has led to an inference that the former’s is an all-inclusive treatise on historical analysis of theatre whereas the latter’s offer a clear framework for the analysis of live performance and it drives us towards classification rather than explanation. But documenting a past performance requires a comprehensive methodology. We should collect the evidences on whatever main pointers Pavis mentions in his Questionnaire, proceed to explore them in the way charted out by Postlewait, like a dramaturg, interpret and narrate the event with the ‘whole’ in the mind on the basis of the contexts. It is a qualitative research which is both field and desk based.

### **The Process**

The process of documentation has four major steps to cross:

- 1) Deciding on the theatrical event for study
- 2) Gathering evidences
- 3) Exploring the authenticity of evidences
- 4) Interpreting ,narrating and documenting

### **Theatrical event for study**

To live our present effectually, an understanding of the social, political, cultural and economic milieu of the past is required. Since theatre is a

way of life, by revisiting the past performances and tracing the knowledge it transmits, we can understand the traditions and influences of the past and improvise our present. With 'Larins Sahib' being a history play, 'Mira' forming a part of Bakhti Tradition and '9 Jakhoo Hill' relating to the grave partition episode of India, productions of these works are important to archive given how they constitute an important cultural legacy concerned with India's past.

### **Evidence**

Evidence gathering often lies at the root of a theatre researcher's work after deciding on the theatrical event to document. Tiffany Stern states,

"The collection of pieces of evidence must always be one of the fundamental purposes of theatre history. Therefore; thinking out new ways to get at evidence..., for instance- is of primary importance."<sup>5</sup>

Evidences can be gathered using Pavis guidelines. Nonverbal evidence includes manuscripts, diary notes, letters, pay bill, script marked by the director, brochure, invite, theatre review in newspapers and magazines. Live recordings of the plays, photographs, paintings and interviews by the producers, performers and technicians mark verbal and visual evidence. Evidence of the secondary nature can be retained from stories, jokes, travel journals, novels, poems etc.

### **Exploration of evidence**

The next crucial step after the collection of evidences is the exploration of the evidence collected. Zemon Davis confirms that

researchers, "like detectives, need an obsessional drive to puzzle over minutiae, to make tangential connections, to remember obscure and seemingly unimportant facts and bring to the fore and into focus, to problem solve and to question the story as it has been handed down to them"<sup>6</sup>

A theatre historian should also be a cunning interpreter to identify the causes, ideologies and intentions of those who produced the data in the first place. Sources needs to be verified against other sources, to determine the factual basis of documents.

### **Documenting Gurcharan Das' 'Three English Plays'**

Documenting Indian English plays produced since the 1960's is not an easy endeavor. Newspaper reviews, brochures, photographs and interviews with the playwright, performers and directors were the few sources. Amal Allana, former NSD director and the editor of, *The Act of Becoming: Actors Talk*, states,

"In a rather bleak archival scenario where no substantial and organized national or private holdings on theatre are currently available, the process of documenting any aspect of performance is a Herculean task."<sup>7</sup>

### **Larins Sahib**

'Larins Sahib' is a story set in British days, around the historical figures of Henry Lawrence and the Sikh kingdom that fell into dismay in spite of Rani Jindan and Sher Singh's intrepid resistance after the death of the great Ranjit Singh in 1839.

The play won the Sultan Padamsee Prize offered by The Theatre Group Bombay in 1968. It was

first produced by Deryck Jefferies at Bhulabhai Theatre, Bombay on July 1969. Zul Vellani played the complex character of Lawrence more with his own artistry [fig.1]. Roger Pereira as Sher Singh imparted a sense of histrionic maturity from the beginning till his last outburst against Lawrence. Farida Sonavala as Rani Jindan had a strong stage presence and made clever use of her attractive low-pitched voice to express her varied emotions [fig.2]. Antony Dayle as Lord Hardinge and Bomi Kapadia as British agent created vignettes of character that were little classic of good acting. Ranjit Chowdhry played competently as Dalip. Shiraz Jefferis used gorgeous, colorful, period costumes. The production, with an appropriate musical score, largely Indian and the sets, lent an added aura of India under the British Raj.



Figure 1: The Theatre Group Bombay's *Larins Sahib*, Zul Vellani as Lawrence (Courtsey Gurcharan Das' photo collection)



Figure 2: The Theatre Group Bombay's *Larins Sahib*, Dalip and Rani Jindan (Courtsey Gurcharan Das' photo collection)

Gurcharan Das' favorite production is Rahul Da Cunha's. On October 7, 1990, the Asiatic Society, Town Hall, Bombay was transformed by the set designers into the Residency, Durbar Hall, Shah Alami Gate and Viceroy's camp. Planes and arches were used to create the period. Batliboi designed the lighting for the production, which aimed at a chiaroscuro effect. Kamala Ramachandani reported that,

“One striking image was the sight of a carved wooden chair silhouetted in front of the arch by the deep blue light from behind; another was the focusing of a bright white spot on Lawrence face, creating a play of shadow and light that represented the state of his mind as the charges were read out against him.”<sup>8</sup>

Tarn Tahiliani's costumes beautifully captured the dash and color of the age, and the regal splendor of the durbar. Taufiq Qureshi and Piyush Kanojia composed the music for the two hour production. Using violins, heavy drums, organ, tambura and tabla they composed '*Lawrence's Theme*', to evoke the transition in Lawrence. The director Rahul indianised the



production by altering literal translations to the more earthy Punjabi epithets.

All these technical expertise would be nothing without subtle acting. Tom Alter played Lawrence, which suited his physical attributes and linguistic talents. He gave a balanced performance portraying the different facets of Lawrence. But the star of the show was Rajit Kapur as Sher Singh [fig.3]. From his boisterous yell-“Angreza” to his last bitter outburst, he dominated the stage. Nisha Singh was authentic as Rani Jindan. Rex Baker of the British Council as Lord Hardinge, among others.



Figure 3: Rage’s *Larins Sahib*, Tom Alter as Lawrence and Rajit Kapur as Sher Singh  
 <<https://www.facebook.com/rageproductions1/photos/pb.317022861786365.-2207520000.1453212174./397772060378111/?type=3&theater>>

Rage’s production of *‘Larins Sahib’* also takes the pride of being the first Indian English play to have gone to Edinburgh Fringe festival. For the show there, they had cut down twenty minutes from the original to fit into the new time slot. They ordered new stage set made of aluminum, which was easy to carry and put up. The play was well received by the appreciable number of audience who were instantly reminded of their life and times in India. Advertisements for the

play in India as well as abroad, used an unusually designed cap [fig.4], Indian on one side and British on the other. It symbolically revealed Lawrence’s internal struggle.



Figure 4: Rage’s *‘Larins Sahib’* team with their banner at Edinburgh Festival. <<http://www.mid-day.com/articles/arts-mumbais-art-scene-then-and-now/231528#sthash.0onxfCWG.dpuf>>

### Mira

Gurcharan Das’ *‘Mira’* is about the life of the Bhakti saint, Mirabai. Married to Rana of Mewar, she gradually turned away from worldly pleasures to the devotion of Krishna. In the introduction to his play, Gurcharan Das’ attributes the *‘bhakti –filled’* growing-up years and secular education in his youth to his writing *‘Mira’*. He wrote the play with a twentieth century look at her transition.

The most memorable production of *‘Mira’* is the one by LaMaMa on 20 May 1970. Sri Lankan artist Yolande Bavan acted as Mira, Patricia Conway as Uda, Farid Farrah as Jai, Gretchen Oehler as Jhali, and Erik Robinson as Rana.



Figure 5: LaMaMa's 'Mira', Yolande Bavan at the bottom left corner (Courtesy: Gurcharan Das' Personal Collection of books and photos)

The play opened with the balletic chanting of voices and the sounds of percussion, harp, harmonium and flute. In 90 minutes, the story was unfolded through the movements and different shape formations of the actors [fig.5]. When Mira Said, "I am Mira-I am an ant on a matchstick lit at both ends,"<sup>9</sup> two actors and three actresses made a picture with their bodies of such an ant. There were no sets and the cast wore ordinary jumpsuits. Original music, neither Indian nor western, yet evocative was by David Walker. Canadian director Martin Brenzell followed the convention of total theatre with dance, music and drama and made excellent use of auditory and visual effects. Joyce Tretick in his review praised the exceptional and inventive lighting of Roxamme Kadishov that complemented the production. New York audience were thrilled by the spectacle on the Indian bhakti saint.

In India, it was produced by Theatre Group and directed by Alyque Padamsee. It was advertised as a 'Visual Enactment' and was played at Bhulabbai Theatre on 7<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> March and 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> April, 1972. The cast included, Nirmala Mathan as Mira [fig.6], Diana Pathak as Jhali, Dolly Thakore as Uda, Zafar Hai as Rana, and Homi Daruvala as Jai. Songs were by Meenakshi, with Prem Gupt as flutist, and Rij Ram as percussionist. Deryck Jeffereis was the technical manager. The costume were not in period but were in symbolical saffron saris and flame guru shirts. The slow paced performance used lot of symbols, and abstract paintings of Prabhakar Barve. The three large translucent screens were the only properties on stage. It was the lighting effect designed by Deryck Jeffereis that evoked such a powerful visual impact. Leslie De Noronha asserts, "Deryck Jeffereis, deserved equal billing with the director and the cast as he gave the production an almost enigmatic, dream-like fluidity, as they weaved their lighting effects, colors, bringing out the saffron and flame costumes in superb color-washed compositions and strengthening, fading out, or superimposing the slide projections to catch every nuance of the mood and every development of the conflict. The darkened stage with stark black drop became in effect a vast retina that received the images conjured up by the spoken words in the mind's eye of the spectator."<sup>10</sup>



Figure 6: Theatre group Bombay's 1972 'Mira' with Nirmala Mathan as Mira (Courtesy: Gurcharan Das' Personal Collection of books and photos)

Alyque handled the problem of costumes and English language on the Indian Stage for a Bhakti script by following an unconventional style of theatre and the use of other media to communicate the message. Grandeur is his style. Alyque says:

“Whether it's Gurcharan Das' 'Mira' or Girish Karnard's 'Tughlaq'...I like to give an off-spin to these characters. Scratch below the surface, and see what you find. Try and discover an insight that was relevant then and is relevant even today...I was in a very creative phase of my life...that I had done 'Mira', which was a great artistic success. Besides the play itself, people who saw it were struck by the way it was produced.”<sup>11</sup>

The Madras Players production of 'Mira' at the British Council courtyard on June 30 and July 1, directed by Bhagirathi Narayan lasted for 80

minutes. Nirupama Nityanandan read Mira, Vimal Bhagat for Rana, Eapen Thomas for Jai, Preminda Jacob for Uda, and Vishalam Ekambaram for Jhali. Devika's choreography with dancers Radhika, Gayatri, Shobana, RajKumar and Pradeep Kumar was woven to perfection with the fabric of the play [fig.7].



Figure 7: Madras Players' 'Mira' at the British Council, Chennai. (Courtesy: Gurcharan Das' Personal Collection of books and photos)

They brought the images into visual focus like the triad as Kali. Lighting was done by Mithran Devanesan. Mira Bajans were set to music by B.K. Misra and sung by Sowmiya, with Nityanandan on the flute. Aditi De states,

“ It was a theatre in totality...The mingling of interpretive reading, muted transpositions in dance postures and perfectly cued bhajans in the background blurred the line between legend and history into an experience in which beauty teases thought”<sup>12</sup>



## 9 Jakhoo Hill

The play was set in the Diwali of 1962 around the family of Amrita, Ansuya and Karan, sheltered in the memories of lost glory uprooted by Partition. The changing social order was represented by the family of Chitra and Deepak. When the two parted families meet again in Shimla, a series of events instigated by ICS Rai Saheb divide them far apart. It is about the growing middle class and the struggling upper class trying to find a way out of hard times.

This play was first produced by Yatrik in 1996. Bhaskar Ghose acted as Karan, Kusum Haidar as Amrita, Sunit Tandon as Deepak, Shyama Haldar as Ansuya, Ajay Balram as Rai Saheb and Sinia Jain as Chitra. Childhood experiences of Sunit and Gurcharan in Shimla, helped them to evoke the atmosphere of that society.

The slow paced first half was interrupted by the appearance of Chitra who prompted laughs each time. Audience enjoyed her loud bilingualism. But the second half had the very prevailing 'truth or dare' game [fig.8] and the scene where Chitra overpowers Deepak. Karan played multiple roles. As a sutradhar, he mirrored the intentions of the characters and the political scene in 1962. He discussed the plans of Nehru, and Krishna Menon, Generals Thaper, and Tawang, when Chinese invasion was on India. As one of the main protagonist, he strikingly brought out the varied emotions of longing, love and jealousy.



Figure 8: Yatrik's '9 Jakhoo Hill'-Truth or Dare game scene (Courtesy-Bhaskar Ghose and Sunit Tandon)

Costume designer Sabina Mehta Sood assigned Kurtha payjamas and shawl for Karan, salwar kameez or saree for Ansuya, formal outfits for Deepak and Rai Saheb. The elegant silk sarees of Amrita contrasted the flashy, brightly colored synthetic sarees of Chitra.

Anjolie Ela Menon's portable set design [fig.9] was modified as and when the performance space changed. Vinay Capila took change of furniture and properties that included old fashioned furniture, carpets, book self, chess table, old radio, high stool, gilt edged picture frame, fire place, chess set, gauze curtains, mountain cut outs, and arched windows. These were central to the way of life of the occupants conveying the impression that they had seen better times and belonged to a high society.



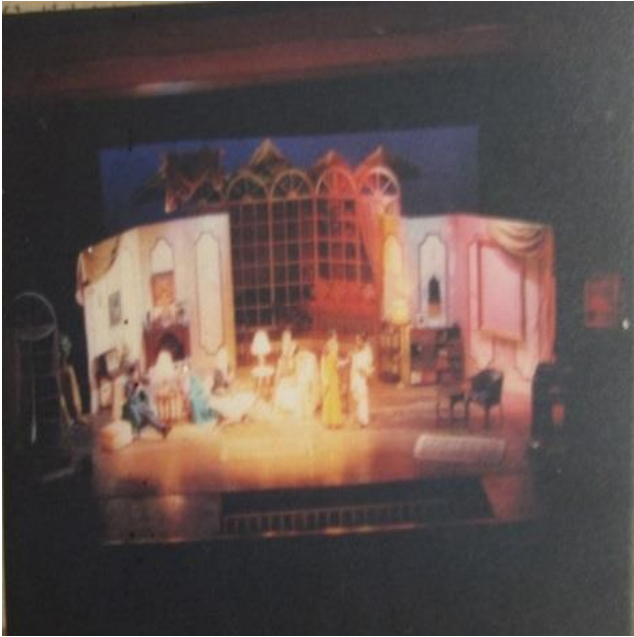


Figure 9: Yatrik's set design for '9 Jakhoo Hill' (Courtesy- Bhaskar Ghose and Sunit Tandon)

Lighting was done by Ashish Paliwal. Sunit's sound design was an intelligent piece of work as he made use of old Hindi songs like *Na tum hamein jaano, na hum tumhe jaane...*, *jalte hain jiske liye...and babuji dheere chalna...*

International Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown, South Africa in 2004, named Yatrik's performance as the Pick of the Season and received rave reviews. Sunit attributed the success of the play to the sessions of rewriting with Gurcharan Das to make the characters speak like the way Indians speak English. He also took workshop for the actors to make it more authentic and the actors became their parts to such perfection that the audience could not help feeling a tugging sympathy for them.

It was also played in Bangalore on February, 23, and 24, 2005 at Rangashankara, by Maayaavan theatre group formed by the wards of Mahesh Dattani. They first wanted to do a socially relevant play and hence chose '9 Jakhoo Hill'. The cast included Abhishek Majumdar, Sheila Govindaraj, Spatica Ramanujam, Suhas Chalke,

Trupti Vijay, Sunil Bannur, Naveen Rao and Nishant Bali. Sunil Bannur directed it and original music was composed and performed by Bruce Lee Mani of 'Thermal and a Quarter'.

### Conclusion

Researching and documenting the performance of Gurcharan's plays was not unassuming because of the lack of different kinds of evidences. Even reception study became rudimentary. Documentation of a theatrical event depends heavily upon the statements made by those who created and attended the performances. Fortunately, to this research the support offered by the playwright and the production crew was immeasurable. They supported in all means possible to realize the desired outcome. What is presented here is only a part, the whole is yet to be realized. This research could just be a drop in the vast ocean of hidden treasures which still needs to be unearthed, preserved and archived for the future to assimilate and marvel at. With the methodology proposed by Postlewait and Pavis along with more material availability, theatre history will become increasingly filled with new evidence and all the new possibilities that it implies.

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