

Mahesh Dattani as a Playwright or the Autobiographical Note in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

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Abstract: Mahesh Dattani, when he was child used to watch Kannada plays with his parents and these plays made a lasting impression on his psyche - then he formed his own theatrical play group 'Playpen' in 1984. He believed in acting, playwrighting and directing his own plays and believes that family is the unit of the global society is very own thespian arena of action. Dattani ascribes a part of his success as a playwright to Playpen where he had the freedom to execute his creative ideas.

Keywords: thespian, indigenous, snob, elan and finesse, psyche, playwright, Playpen, facilitate

1. Introduction

Mahesh Dattani was born on August 7th, 1958, in Bangalore, Karnataka. His parents were originally from Porbandar in Gujarat. He went to Baldwin High School where "Snob Culture" prevailed. Proficiency in English and a westernized lifestyle were considered to hoist one head and shoulders above one's countrymen not similarly endowed. All communication happened in English, and the use of vernacular was looked at with disdain. The contempt of indigenous languages and mores foisted on by the school, however, could not dampen Mahesh's ardour to watch Gujarati, Marathi and Kannada plays with his parents and sisters. These plays were to make a lasting impression on his psyche, kindling his inherent propensity for theatrical art. Being a son of soil, he would channelize his thespian energy to portray the variegated flavour and sensibility of Indian life through a stage plays, radio plays (for BBC Radio 4) and screen plays (films).

Dattani explains that he had to unlearn a lot learnt at school to have the practical knowledge of theatre that has made him so successful. The plays in the vernacular which he had watched with his family help him in this unlearning process. In this sense, the playwright follows the zen way of learning which is engendered by unbiased observation and experimentation and not from imitating a set of handed out beliefs and practices. Right from his school days when he participated in or was the usual students' cultural performances, he yearned to direct plays. It occurred to him that there must obviously be a script from which the plays were made, and hence he begins writing scripts.

Formation of his on - theatre group: To have a total command on what he wanted to portray and how he wanted to portray it, he topped off his intensive efforts by setting up his own theatre group, 'Playpen' in Bangalore in 1984. Here, he tested the dialogues and stage techniques as per the first draft of his plays in rehearsals, and made changes when something did not sound right or effective enough. He fully involved himself in the entire production process, occasionally even pleading with the director to allow him to act in the place of an actor absent for rehearsal, and often performed the role in different or finer fashion, revealing some subtle nuance or facet of the character's disposition.

He also directed plays of other dramatists for Playpen, ranging from classical Greek to contemporary works. He

wrote his first full length play "Where there's a will" in 1986. The play was first performed by Playpen at Chawdish Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on 23rd September 1998 as part of Deccan Herald Theatre festival. It was directed by Sita Raina, a Delhi based actress and theatre director. It was subsequently translated into Hindi by Rajendra Mohun and staged in Tanzil Theatres, Mumbai, on 25th December 1992, under the direction of Jaspaul Sendhu. The Gujarati version of the play was directed by Suresh Rajda in 1998.

To further explore theatre, Dattani began teaching the summer sessions program of Portland State University, Oregon, USA back home, he organised theatre workshops and a host of other theatrical activities at playpen so that he could interact with people involved with the myriad aspects of theatre and thus unleash more of his creative potential and the zeal to channelize it. The playwright also acted in plays with elan and finesse.

Mahesh Dattani's works: Mahesh Dattani believes that the actor playwright and director are all complimentary to each other. Just like the many conditions that can contribute to the lushness and beauty of a garden, everyone and everything in the production process of a play must be unitedly geared towards rasa for captivating performance. That is why he always directs the first production of any play he writes. The playwright's intense involvement at every step of production and hence the facility of retracting to redo areas or dialogues that do not click empowers him to create such meticulous and immaculate stage instructions that they become the master blueprint for other directors to emulate.

Dattani has written 11 stage plays, 7 radio plays and 3 screen plays. The list of his complete works follows which can be divided into 9 board categories:

- 1) Crime and suspense (Seven Steps Around The Fire, The Swami and Winston, Uma and fairy Queen and Final Solutions)
- 2) Gay and lesbian relationship (On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Mango Souffle and Do the Needful)
- 3) Subaltern concerns (Seven Steps Around the Fire)
- 4) Natural Calamities (Clearing the Rubble and The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child)
- 5) Family Plays (Thirty Days in September, Bravely Fought the Queen, Where there's a Will and Do the Needful)
- 6) Music and Dance (Morning Raga and Dance Like a Man)
- 7) Disease and Disabled (Ek Alag Mausam and Tara)

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- 8) City (The Big Fat City)
9) Theatre (Where did I leave my Purdah?)

Alyque Padmasee was a great help in honing Dattani's theatrical skill. He assisted the upcoming playwright in presenting his plays at leading Indian theatres in Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta and abroad in London, amidst public appreciation and critical acclaim. Several cities came forward to enable stage productions of Dattani's plays making him world famous. Padmasee is thus correct in believing that the play wright has Pioneered to give sixty million English Speaking Indians a global identity. Similarly, actor Lillette Dubey painstakingly helped facilitate the staging of plays like 'Dance like a man', 'A Muggy Night in Mumbai' and 'Thirty Days in September'. In fact, the stage performance of Dattani's plays is still either done by Dubey or Dattani himself. Thus Alyque Padmasee and Lillette Dubey can be considered facilitators and managers of Dattani's plays.

The Influence of Dattani's Family: Family for Dattani holds a very special place. He believes that family is the unit of the global society - his thespian arena of action - of which every enlightened individual of the world is a member. He further believes that all individual problems basically stem from conspiracy, intrigue and domination within the family. For example the performance for the male child destroys the peace of Tara's family, crippling the intelligent Tara, making her mother guilt - ridden and sick, and ruining her relationship with her husband in Tara; forced incest holds Shanta and mala prisoners of their guilty, traumatized and helpless selves in their own family in 'Thirty Days in September', the familial imposition of choosing a profession as per the social expectation of gender roles in the cause of the stifled and oppressed Jairaj's family in 'Dance like a Man' and Hasmukh Mehta holds his family to ransom with his hypocritical and domineering ways in 'Where there's a will'. Disgruntled by the unfairness in the family the unhappy and holistically undeveloped members become dissatisfied denizens of society, & thus, sometimes create trouble for others out of frustration and hypocrisy: for example, Ramnik and Javed in 'Final Solutions'.

Mahesh Dattani's dramatic proficiency: Just as problems originate from the family, Dattani, the dramatist, believes that they can be resolved at the familial level alone. Even if the person who provides the solution is an outsider he or she becomes a part of the family. For example, Chandan, in his new avatar, Dan, can ecstatically unite with his sister Tara in consciousness resolving the agony of their incomplete union as Siamese twins in 'Tara', Deepak, Mala's suitor, helps mala and Shanta get over there trauma and its binding influence on their psyches and becomes a part of the family by marrying Mala; Jairaj and Ratna can have a surrealist fruition of their desire of dancing together in the ecstasy of perfection with their dead son resurrected and their prospective grandson in 'Dance like a Man', Hasmukh's death dissolves the oppression in his family and his mistress Kiran Jhaveri moves in with Hasmukh's widow and his son and his wife, getting her due rights, with everyone adjusting to live together happily as a family in 'Where there's a will? Ramnik's altercation with Javed in 'Final Solution' jolts him into awareness of his double standards when the fact of his

benevolence and secularism being just a facade to extenuate his past crime against a Muslim is revealed and Javed makes up to his self - dignity. Stephen Bruckner of the New York Times finds the stating and resolution of problems by Mahesh Dattani in this fashion rather too simplistic and hence calls him a "Canny and facile writer", though he admits that the dramatist is "powerful and disturbing at the same time".

That different themes of Dattani's plays: Though Mahesh Dattani may be accused of catering only for the urban class, as he himself would readily admit, he has, nonetheless, powerful dramatized the concerns of the underprivileged, the suffers of social hierarchy, the subalterns, the diseased, the homosexuals and the lesbians, victims of child abuse, and the oppressed women in his plays. He has also portrayed the apathy of the government machinery in times of crisis as he has the evils of fundamentalism that religion can sometimes be turned into. Thus, he or less, represents the entire problems of modern India. He would seem to like a society which lives in harmony respecting the inevitable differences in thought, religion, sexual orientation and profession ability of its members, and is compassionately oriented on taboos like affliction with AIDS and physical challenges, and works in togetherness for creative and productive ends without gender discrimination.

2. Conclusion

Indeed, as a playwright, Dattani has the extraordinary ability to transform his plays into living performance. He can easily perceive the chemistry of the stage and relate his plays to the audience - though, of course, the audience needs to reciprocate the effort. This talent of motivating the audience to participate in the performance at once distinguishes Dattani as a playwright par excellence. He ascribes a part of his success as a playwright to Playpen where he had the freedom to execute his creative ideas. The other factors which he believes make him successful are his theatre background and the writing of scripts as a theatre person, not a literary artist. He considers himself as the "change element" of the present - day theatre. He considers man an integral part of society, and societal influences invariably influence his plays. But they are always treated with a new perspective that carries within it the perspective that carries within it the prospect of an implicit solution.

Thus, the multi - faceted Dattani - scriptwriter, director, actor, dancer and choreographer (not to mention the audience and commentator, too) rolled into one has pioneered to crystallize Indian drama in English, giving its stature a giant boost and winning it a formidable place in the scenario of the contemporary global theatre. As Vibhuti Patel of the Newsweek International observes, "Since Salman Rushdie swung open the door to the West, English language Indian novelists have wowed the world. Indian playwrights have been less conspicuous except for Mahesh Dattani".

References

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