

A conversation with:

Abhishek Majumdar
Gopal Datt
Steven Raider-Ginsburg

GOPAL DATT TEWARI :

As an Actor:

In a span of 15 years , have worked as an actor with noted directors such as B V Karanth, Ram Gopal Bajaj, Prasanna, Robin Das, John Russel Brown, BM Shah, Rita G Kothari , Suneel Shanbagh and many others.

As a Lyricist and Music Director:

Written songs and given music to “ Aisa Kahte Hain, Shahshah of Azeemo [an adaptation of wizard of Oz], Saiyyan Bhaye Kotwal, Shabd Sangeet, Life of Pi, Shanti Shantam, Neela Ghoda, Namak Mirch.

Also produced an audio story book in a song format titled “Tunni Ki Kahanai”

As a Director:

Saiyyan bhaye Kotwal, Shanti Shantam, Aaj Rang Hai , Do Deewaney, Sarkar Ka jadu and a childrens musical play “Tunni Ki Khanai”

Aaj Rang Hai was nominated in 9 categories at the META theatre awards in 2011 including best play and best director

Abhishek Majumdar – Indian Ensemble, Artistic Director

Abhishek Majumdar is a playwright, theatre director, teacher and actor based out of Bangalore. He holds Performing Arts Scholarships from Charles Wallace India Trust, the Inlaks Foundation and the London International School of Performing Arts. His plays have won the Hindu Metro Plus Playwright’s award and the Toto Funds the Arts award and have been produced in India and England. He is also a part of the International Playwright’s residency at the Royal Court London, 2011 with his play The Djinns of Eidgah. Rizwaan, his play in English and Urdu was part of the selection for the first festival of contemporary Indian theatre in Paris. Currently he is the artistic director of the Indian Ensemble Bangalore and also works with the HeadStart Children’s repertory. He is a member of the Young Vic Directors Network, London and the Lincoln Center Director’s Lab, New York, 2012. His latest work as a director, Gasha (Hindi/Urdu/ Kashmiri), won the best play award at the META awards in New Delhi 2013.

Steven Raider-Ginsburg HartBeat Ensemble, Co-Artistic Director

Steven Raider-Ginsburg is Co-Founding Artistic Director of HartBeat Ensemble, an award-winning theater company in Hartford, CT that generates dynamic new works based on the most pressing issues of our times. Steven began his theater career at the groundbreaking New WORLD Theater, a landmark theater dedicated to new works that tell under-heard stories from overlooked peoples. From there he went on to work with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Anna Deveare-Smith at the Institute for Arts and Civic Dialogue, Shakespeare and Company, Augusto Boal, Michael Rohd, The Civilians, Mabou Mines, Public Theater, Huntington and Woolly Mammoth Theater Companies. Steven has been a teacher, playwright, actor and director. He was honored in American Theatre's 25th anniversary issue celebrating 25 young theater artists who are most likely to influence American Theater in the next 25 years, the New Boston Fellowship as well as the National Comcast Leadership Award. He is a member of the 2012 Lincoln Center Directors Lab and also holds an MFA in Directing from Boston University.

SRG: Gopal, how did you get to where you are?

GD: I am from a very small town in North of India. I used to do hemetchal theater, and then I heard about the National School of Drama, which is a very prestigious institute, a government institute in India, it opened in 1962 and the founder was trained at Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London. The NSF only accept 20 students a year.

SRG: All just for acting?

GD: No, for theater. They select 20 students and the first year the courses are for actors and directors, designers we call that. In the second year, you have to choose whether you want to acting or designing. So I did my acting courses there.

SRG: So directors get trained in design, but actors don't?

GD: Actors also, but the main focus is on acting. But their main focus is on set design, sound design, lights, direction.

SRG: How many years is the training?

GD: It is a three-year course training.

SRG: What was your audition like?

GD: Oh it's a long process, there are two steps. First it's called prelims, in it you have to do one interview for one or two hours, they will give you some monologues or some list of plays, so they will ask you to discuss any of the plays out of the list. Then if you clear

the prelims they have a four day workshop. There they do many things. There are four centers for auditions in India. So they select 20 people in every center and that means that 80 people come to Delhi for the main exam, that 4 day workshop. Then out of that 80, they select 20.

SRG: What's the training like? Is it like studying in London or in the States?

GD: I don't know about those training programs, but at the National School of Drama you will find visiting faculty from everywhere, from the UK, from Germany, I did a workshop with John Russel Brown, he used to work with Laurence Olivier. There is also focus on the traditional plays, the folks plays, the Sanskrit plays. In the first year there is a common course, mostly the theoretical classes, the history of world theater, the history of modern theater, the history of modern England theater, classical England theater, history of make-up, mostly theoretical. When you choose in the second year acting or designing then the practical aspects of every subjects they will teach you. The second year they will do either one sanskrit play or one Greek play, I did a Sanskrit play, Kalidas's, "the story of vikram and iroshi" basically it's a love story, an epic poem.

SRG: Was the directon modern or classical?

GD: It was classical, a costume drama you could say. That acting style is also in that style.

SRG: How popular is that style today in India?

GD: I don't think it's that popular now, it's just for the course so you can understand the styles. Every kind of style.

AM: But the folk forms are very popular, yakshana like katicali, it's very very popular, much more popular than the theater we are going to later today at Ragna Shangara. The number of shows that they have is about 900 in a year.

SRG: In Katicali

AM: yagshagana and katakali. yagshagana if you want to book a company for you to perform today you will get a date in 2014 second half.

SRG: So those people are really working actors and they are working in the classical form.

AM: Becasue it's connected to many festivals. So somebody knows that their family is going to have a baby at so and so a time so they will try and book a yagshagana performance for the birth. Or if somebody knows that there is going to be a particular full moon night where there is say some kind of festival they are going to book a yagshagana. So the idea of performance, which is stand alone, which is not connected to your life, is a very new idea, comparatively. That you are going to buy a ticket and just

watching a show on a day when that play has no relevance on that day in your life, that in itself is a very new concept compared to the old Indian idea that every ritual is a performance which is part of your life.

SRG: So did you ever think about becoming one of these actors that are in one of these companies?

GD: No, because it's very family based. That one family that is doing that particular form.

SRG: So they train their children?

AM: Yeah, and their fellow villagers in their particular community.

SRG: And so families get know, like in Italy with Commedia. So is the National School of Drama a new school?

GD: It's new as compared to classical, it opened in 1962, I think. The founder is from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. An Indian who studied at RADA.

AM: When we say it's new, this form, we also mean it's 150 years old, because everything else is like 2000 years old. So it's new in the sense that it's a British import to India. The commercial theater was taken from the British system of having a theater and performing.

SRG: So when the British were running India they established their type of theater?

AM: Yeah. But only for entertainment.

GD: And it was only for themselves, for their entertainment, not for Indians. Then some Indian guys translated that and a new kind of form emerges, it's called Parsi theater.

SRG: How have things been going since you finished the NSD, auditioning and so on. How does it work here?

GD: When I came to Bombay, the economic capital of India, and the film city. If you are doing on theater, you can't survive, so you have to earn your bread and butter from somewhere. So I freelance a little bit in television and a little bit in film, but my main focus is on theater so I am doing theater continuously, but whenever I get some chance to do some television. I never take a regular job in television or film. I take a little bit come here, come there, but I never take a long commitment because my theater will suffer.

SRG: Do you have an agent or a manager?

GD: So what happens is in Mumbai, when you do theater, people know you. The people from television and film also. So the agent scene is not really working in India, it works with the bigger stars. It's very expensive to have an agent. It's all about personal contacts.

SRG: Is it extremely competitive to land a role, is it lines of people auditioning?

GD: Yeah, many. But I don't go for those. If somebody calls me for a role, then I go.

SRG: Talk to me about audiences, it's a 150-year "new" form, could you talk about popular plays and the audiences that go?

AM: The most number of registered theater companies in the world, in any country, is in India. But if you compare the size of the audience, it will be very little, compared to say London, which is a strange thing isn't it? You have so many companies, but so few people. Who are all these companies performing for? They must be performing for somebody. I think that the answer lies somewhere in the very heart of what fundamentally Indian theater is about, most of these companies are amateur companies say in railway stations and in communities, people coming together and forming a theater company coming together a couple of times a year to perform a play for their community. So again most of the theater of this country is linked to what the community does.

SRG: What do you think the programming is for those community theaters?

AM: The programming is all kinds of things, mostly, well known plays of their communities. For example Bengali's will do old Bengali plays which people will know and enjoy. You know some of them are like cultural necessities, such as, that play was watched by my grandfather and my father and me and my children will watch it.

SRG: What are some of those stories and plays?

AM: All kinds of things, it depends again on which community we are talking about. But there are some which are classical and there are some which are social Dario Fo type satires, there are lots of those.

GD: Mostly from mythology.

SRG: Are there new playwrights writing new versions of those mythological plays? Where are the texts that these theaters use?

AM: They have been there for years. Some of them have been updated in the last 30, 40, 50 years. Especially because a lot of Sanskrit plays were lost and then they were found and translated to English. But most of the community theaters are in the vernacular language, like Hindi or Bengali. There are a lot of local stories.

SRG: Local stories? Do you mean that a story about a mythological deity in our town did this?

GD: Yes, and about local folk heros.

AM: Yes, and even about the guys that fought the British.

SRG: Oh, that's newer than I thought, I thought we were talking about 1000 years ago.

AM: Yes, both. But it is one of our favorite things, stories about fighting against the white people. It keeps Indian communities a great sense of patriotism and self-belief.

SRG: Do those happen anytime of year or is it connected to say, Independence Day?

GD: Mostly it's connected to the festivals.

SRG: Is this street theater?

AM: They will put up a stage, with lights and live music?

SRG: Is it stylized acting and not realism?

GD: Yes, it is stylized with singing and dancing.

AM: Also the distinction between dance and theater doesn't exist. An actor has to train in all the things. This again is a very modern conception in India, that a play wouldn't have music. It's a very recent thing because classical plays have music, verse, movement.

SRG: So how are audiences taking to just spoken plays?

AM: That's the thing. That's another kind of theater which is really what is more recent than the other things, that this kind of theater that you go to and watch and buy a ticket, and that audience is not very big. That is generally the educated, upper middle class audience, which wants to watch a play in the evening.

GD: It's only an urban phenomenon.

AM: It's not a small town thing, it's a big town phenomenon.

GD: Bangalore, Bombay, Dheli

SRG: Do you think that the audiences who are going were exposed to this theater because they went abroad to London or New York?

AM: Some, but most people have heard of it because of their traditional and folk theater.

SRG: And then they move to the city and look for something like that?

AM: Yes and also the general exposure to this kind of work comes from your family. That is the basic unit for everything. If a family has someone, and uncle or someone who does theater in the folk tradition, then it's possible that one of the children has gotten inspired. There are people who have come back from the West and want to watch these kind of plays, but I don't think that's a large number.

SRG: In the US a show will have three to five weeks of rehearsal and then it will have a six week run and most of the time it's done, everyone involved will go off to the next project. But here it's so different, can you tell me about that?

GD: If I'm doing a play I'll rehearse for one and a half months and then we will open that play and get two or three days, then we will get some reviews and we will try for other places. So whenever we get a date we will do that show. We will rehearse for one week again and then do the show again. So I am doing a play for three years now, whenever we get an invitation, we will rehearse it again and then perform.

SRG: Abhishek was telling me that the Indian Ensemble will split the proceeds from the door and everyone in the company will get paid that way. Is that the most common way to work?

GD: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that is the most common way.

SRG: Can you make a living that way?

GD: No. It's like your passion.

AM: But it also adds up. For example a typical show in a year, especially in a small unit, in a small unit what happens you can get, if you are performing in a festival you get paid right? So you get paid more than a private show when you are relying on a box office, that kind of show if you count that sometimes for one show somebody's paid 10,000 rupees for one show, which is significant, but other shows somebody's made 1,500 rupees, which is very little. So totally in a year if you are running with one show you end up making, especially if it's a show that's doing well you end up making 40,000 - 50,000 rupees. Especially we try to have actors in the Indian Ensemble who are in more than one show. So that actually solves a lot of problems, first of all you can spend a lot of time interacting with an actor so you can develop more things to a deeper level. Secondly that actor and you are in more shows so that actor is earning more and that adds up.

SRG: Has there been a change or growth of audiences over the last number of years?

GD: Yeah, in urban cities people are coming for theater now. The thing is only in big cities and not in small towns. They will go to theater at the festivals in the small towns, but they will not buy tickets.

SRG: India is in a unique geographical position. Russia is not too far to the north, middle east to the West, Asia to the east, do they have any influence on the stories or plays that are performed here?

GD: See we have many stories and as you know we have many languages in this country, so every language has their own stories their own interpretations of their own stories. Mostly theater is based on that. Urban people, like Abhishek are exploring new ideas, otherwise the folk theater will only concentrate on mythology and stories of their own culture.

AM: So let's leave the Aristotelian structure aside, there is the whole influence in many of the, I would say the best playwrights that are known in India from our previous generation who wrote post independence there was a movement which was a "theater of the roots" movement, that was essentially a lot of these artists coming together who were saying, let's go back to pre-British times. Look at what the structures of drama was and let's write modern plays on those structures. There's a lot of plays like that, like Nagamandala. So that structure is very different from the Aristotelian structure, but it still uses the Aristotelian structure, so there is a mix of these two and that structure you will find in India, you will find in Thailand, in Malaysia, that structure has gone out of these places because of Buddhism and Hinduism. Urdu theater, which in Pakistan and in India, has a slightly different structure. It is more language based and more Aristotelian. Of course there is a huge thing of the Indian plays that were written in the mould of realism influenced by the British and the French and so forth. India has a mix of all these things. The play that I wrote for the Royal Court has followed the Dastan structure which is an Urdu storytelling structure. Nowadays there is this trend in some companies in which they are using the sit-com structure. They have these kind of plays which have four people in an apartment, this is influenced by American television. These are particularly in English, not in Hindi.

SRG: Are there Indian historical theoretical and practical structure for theater making?

AM: There is one that is very old and very good, which is called natya shastra, which is like the vedas of theater, it's almost that old, it's as old as the mahabharata at least and it lays out many things very clearly. Similar to the Japanese Noh structure; how should the stage be, which character sits where, what are you trying to do as an actor. One of the most important concepts is the concept of power and ? which is what are you doing in a scene and what is the audience supposed to receive so for example - Charlie Chaplin is a very good example of that. He is playing sorrow but you are laughing, which is different from him playing sorrow and you are crying. So that is a very big concept and there is a whole training methodology which is to do with just breath, how do you do that with just your breath and your facial expressions. People like Gopal, they train in more than one systems, that's very important. I've seen in England actors resumes who are very specialized, they've done this, this and this, stage combat, etc. In India this is not considered a virtue to be very specific, unless you are in a folk form.

SRG: How does it sound to you when I say that I don't know about the Natya Shastra, is that surprising to you?

AM: It's not surprising to me because whenever I travel abroad I sense two or three things. One is the export of media from America and England to the rest of the world is far greater than the export from India, because they have been traditionally the countries who have exported a lot more of their books and movies and thoughts than what has been translated and what they have received, but having said that at least in America I know at least two or three people like you, friends from the US who are in a world theater program. But I don't know anyone in India who are in a world theater program, you know so in that extent I think the training is useful because there is some exposure and unfortunately if you ask Indians, "What is American Theater?" it will generally be a blank slate or it will be Arthur Miller, so there is no sort of concept of the other kinds of theater like Tony Kushner and Sam Shephard and so on. That's really sad because this interaction culturally has not really happened between artists, it has happened between one Indian council of cultural relations and some American Consulate there, but between the artists they have not made it possible, so the fact that someone has not heard of the Natya Shastra is not surprising, but at the same time I think there are far more people in say France or Germany or America who have come here and learned kathakali. I have known Westerners who have stayed in Karala for seven years and learned kathakali, which Gopal and I have not done. Like Phillip Zarrilli, who is a master of using kathakali techniques to create a modern acting system. One of the things that I actually heard from Gonhaila, who is one of the major directors of India, he's in his 70's now and lives in the North East, he once told me, "we have not converted our physical forms to theater exercises. For example yoga, you can learn yoga as much as you want, but how do you convert it into theater exercises?" So what has happened is that this has gone abroad with Meyerhold, Brecht, these people have taken these systems. They have actually converted it into acting systems and then Indians have learned it from them.

SRG: Have you seen some recent Western production that have integrated Eastern theater knowledge and training?

AM: I have seen some, but I have to say that unfortunately today most people in the West are just shopping. They are not interested in learning anything. Which is very sad and it's not the case with the previous generation, the generation of Peter Brook because they were generally interested as artists. Which can really be anywhere, like I've been interested in the artform of clowning, so I've learned some clowning in England. It's not because it's Italian, or French, or English, it's because it's an artform and I want to learn. Of course if I go and I now come back and use that clowning in Indian theater it will not make sense, we have to do something appropriate with where we stand and what we are trying to do. This happens a lot, both ways, even Indians go abroad and they see something and they try to copy and paste it and they say, "this is a Commedia here!" Why is a Commedia relevant in India? Nobody knows, but yes you can use Commedia plots in the whole concept of vedushuks in classical, it is very similar, you can use that you can learn from anywhere and use that, but many western productions is happening

now, British productions they will come and shop and so they will go around and they will look for people with certain skills.

GP: They will find exotic villagers, they just take them and use them.

AM: And they are fascinated with ????? [time 50:30] for example multi-lingualism is a big thing in Europe because the French and Spanish have no common language, but in India it is such a common thing. Everybody speaks three languages. They picked this up and they put all these languages together in a play without any sense so when you are watching this as an Indian it makes no sense to you. Why is an Assamese person talking to a Tamilian in Assamese? What is going on? This would never happen? But these shows are best sellers abroad, Tim Supples Midsummer Nights Dream. They sell a LOT it was a big hit.

GP: That's what happened, he saw somebody's doing great katicali, so he took, and somebody's doing malcam.

AM: Indian who come back from the West, often like this stuff. Because for them, they want to think like the person in Trafalgar Square. It's very common to see that, but you can tell, it's like if I do an Arthur Miller and I make everything look like an American sitcom, because that's what India expects of America then it's not doing justice to Arthur Miller or America, nothing! But it will be popular! That is a problem. Also I know of certain companies who have come here, and it's so appalling, they have differential payments for Indian actors and British actors. They have differential health and safety regulations. Can you imagine? That's just crazy! To have different health and safety regulations, they will follow all the health and safety regulations for the British actor, but not for the Indian actor.

SRG: The actors union is very strong in the US and in Britain, maybe this has something to do with it. Does India have an actors union?

AM: We don't have that, we just don't have it. It's very simple, we don't have a union. See Gopal and I are going to do work together on a play this year, we are never going to sign a contract. We are sitting here eating together, I'll go to his house, he'll come to my house, we know each other's family, there is no contract which is bigger than that, there's nothing. It's very important that what you say to someone in India is more important than any paper contract. A very simple example, say we are traveling with a play and something happens to somebody, we don't need a union for that because a director will most likely be on the phone with the actor's family saying, "Is he ok?" and the director says, "he is fine, don't worry we are taking care of him," the family will be assured.

SRG: I think the union happened in the US and in Britain because commercial theater began and it wasn't a group of friends. There was a profit motive to use the actors to create profit for the producer-owners. Maybe there is not as much commercial theater in India?

AM: Even in commercial theater, in films, yes, there are contracts. But the theater doesn't operate like that. It is a bunch of people who have a relationship. Otherwise people will just not work with you, it is as simple as that. We are also a very small community of directors and actors, if the word goes around that this guy is an asshole, then you are finished.

SRG: Let's talk about the word ensemble. In the US it's fairly specific and it's a minority group in the world of American Theater. What does ensemble mean here?

AM: At the Indian Ensemble, and generally what it means, is that there is a group of people that are going to come together to make this work, who are not necessarily from the same place, who do not necessarily speak the same language and who are more or less sharing profits. That's the definition, but it's not something where we say, there are three people or five people who are the ensemble and the other thirty-five people are not anybody who comes is part of that larger group. Maybe the decision making is not open to forty or forty-five people, but the theater company is concerned about all forty-five people. So it's possible that somebody has performed in only one play, but they identify themselves as part of this ensemble. I think it's the sense of community.

SRG: Are there any expectations for people who become a part of the ensemble?

AM: Apart from rehearsals and this and that is if somebody comes in after they did, they will be able to look after that person, the way that people who have been before them looked after them. That means everything, not only theater, that means when somebody falls ill, when somebody needs an admission to a college and they don't know which form to fill, when somebody's parents are coming and they live in a small house where they are going to stay, it means all that. Like recently we had Chanakya got married, we had so many people making sure that everything was happening on time, that is the expectation. The expectation in ensemble is that they will follow fundamentally of a large joint family, which means people who are in their middle age will do a lot of work, they have to keep in mind that there are people that are younger, in their twenties and they need to be looked after. They may or may not do theater for a very long time, but one still has to look after them, one has to expose them to various things, send them to festivals, expose them to opportunities. There are people who are older and there are some performers who are with us and are very big performers in this country, like Arundati Nag, who are some of the stalwarts of acting who have also been part of Indian Ensemble. I have seen Arundati Nag sit in rehearsal with a spoon and a cough syrup to make sure that anybody who is getting a flu, so she can quickly give them that, so nobody falls ill before the show. Or we have rehearsed in her house for months and between rehearsals she and her cook make rice and dal and this and that for twelve people and we don't even know when she did it because she was in rehearsal. And she is, I don't even know who the equivalent would be in America, maybe a very, very big actor, she is one of the most awarded actors of this country, she will take care of that twenty year old or that eighteen year old who comes in.

