

## Reality plays making a comeback on Indian stage

Socially relevant theatre of the 1970s and 80s is making a comeback on the national stage, courtesy a handful of committed groups.

The Actor Factor Theatre Company is one such. Part of a non-profit organisation, the Actor Factor Theatre Society comprises nine actors who work by the day and act by night. The group believes in theatre with a message.

'We are serious about three core values - doing plays which reflect contemporary social realities, inviting change and promoting histrionic talent without props,' Sunit Sinha, president of the theatre company, told IANS.

On Sunday, the group staged the play 'Aakaar' at the LTG auditorium here. The 60-minute play, the company's flagship production, is a complex one.

On the surface, it is the story of a schizophrenic, Prakaar, who commits a murder in his imagination. The victim of his rage is nobody but himself. The play is a journey of the tragic character, who aspires to break free of the fetters or 'Aakaar', the established notions we live our lives by. It dares us to challenge our mundane existence to enjoy freedom.

' 'Aakaar' presents three realities - that there are people in society who are aware of the shackles and try very hard to break free, people who are aware of the fetters but are not doing much about them, and those who are oblivious of it. It is contemporary reality. Look around us and you will find so many people who fit the genres,' he says.

Originally a 15-minute platform performance for young actors in Mumbai's Prithvi Theatre written by Bollywood director Anurag Kashyap, Sinha added form and substance to 'Aakaar' to make an hour-long script.

'All our productions, 'The Indian Wants the Bronx', 'The Red Corridor' and 'Circus 2007' are reflections of everyday life and its complexities,' says Sinha, the creative director of an advertising firm who has worked with heavyweights like M.K. Raina, Joy Micheal and Habib Tanvir.

The group prepared for its act in a ramshackle loft in a rather decrepit village off Mehrauli.

Reality plays with strong messages also feed the regional stage, especially in Maharashtra and Gujarat, which have vibrant theatre cultures. 'I can't say for other states, but in Maharashtra and Gujarat most of the plays deal with contemporary themes that people can connect to. The plays are all people-oriented,' Bollywood actor Harsh Chhaya told IANS from Mumbai.

The actor was recently in the capital to stage a play at the India Habitat Centre, 'Kachche Lamhe', based on a short story by Gulzar.

'I have been doing 'Kachche Lamhe' for the past one-and-a-half years. It is a social drama, rather a relationship story about a husband and wife,' says the actor. Chhaya likes good plays with relevance and substance, even if it's a comedy. 'Plays with cheap one-liners do not appeal to me,' he says.

Concurs Sinha of Actor Factor. 'The Indian stage is in a state of confusion. Fifty different people are trying 50 different things,' he says.

'They are doing real crazy stuff and spreading poison. And we are all in the same pool. Most of the commercial plays being staged are like C-grade Bollywood movies. Someone should talk to these directors,' says Sinha.

The art of creativity, says the writer-actor, is to make complex realities simple and treat it with compassion and understanding.

Plays with strong social themes were first made popular by journalist-turned-writer Vijay Tendulkar, who died this month, in the 1950s and 60s. He captured the nation's attention with his intuitive understanding of human complexities, social hypocrisy and the hopes of the weak, particularly women.

Some of his best plays with cutting insights into realities include 'Shantata Court Chalu Ahe', 'Shakaram Binder' and 'Ghasiram Kotwal'.

In West Bengal, reality plays took off in a big way in the early 1960s, when the Left movement was striking roots. Actor-director Utpal Dutt (also of Bollywood fame) stormed the [Kolkata](#) stage with his hard-hitting socio-historical plays staged by the People's Little Theatre.

Writer of new wave plays Badal Sircar ripped apart forms with 'abstract and experimental street plays that portrayed socio-political realities'.

Reality plays trace their origin to social upheavals all over the country, be it the struggle for freedom in the 1930s and the peasants' revolt and the Communist movement of the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

Most of the theatre groups dabbling in contemporary realities are slightly radical in nature. Like the Kolkata-based Spandan, a wing of the Indian People's Theatre Association, and Nandikar, which has featured some of Bengal's best stage actors in its productions. In the capital, groups like Abhimanch led by Rajindernath, Players, the theatre group of Kirori Mal College, and the Jan Natya Manch, the theatre arm of Sahmat, still stick to their social reality roots.

'But then, creating a reality play successfully in the modern materialistic world has its share of challenges. The content may be strong, the packaging and the characterisation good, but the success of a play depends on the number of people you bring in to watch the plays,' says Sinha.

In Mumbai, such plays on weekdays at 11 a.m., as Chhaya says, may draw a packed house, but in Delhi and elsewhere in the country, the reality stage still lags way behind films in terms of popularity. As a result, amateur theatre still drives the movement.

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