

Theatre is at an all-time low in Delhi: Barry John

Veteran theatre personality Barry John has uprooted himself and his school from Delhi and moved to Mumbai, the heart of the Hindi film industry, because the capital doesn't offer enough opportunities to do well.

'Theatre activity has sunk to an all-time low; television offers few and uninspiring opportunities; and film is virtually non-existent. So, just as my students have little option but to migrate to [Mumbai](#) to improve their prospects, the same now applies to me,' John told IANS in an interview.

Since his arrival from Britain in the late sixties, John has thrived on challenges, on pioneering into new territory and encouraging others to join him on the journey.

Superstar Shah Rukh Khan is also a product of his training school but John refuses to take the credit for the actor's delivering skills.

'On the basis of my own education and experience, I do not believe that anyone - teacher or mentor - can be credited with delivering every skill or quality that an actor possesses. Acting is a complex alchemy of inner and outer experiences, awareness and skills that are drawn from many sources, and then filtered through the unique persona of the actor. And the learning never stops.

'The credit for the phenomenally successful development and management of Shah Rukh's career goes to the superstar himself.'

Excerpts from the interview:

Q: After 36 years in Delhi you are relocating to Mumbai. What prompted you to move?

A: Delhi has become a haven for corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and property speculators. Culturally, it is a virtual desert. Theatre activity has sunk to an all-time low; television offers few and uninspiring opportunities; and film is virtually non-existent. So, just as my students have little option but to migrate to Mumbai to improve their prospects, the same now applies to me.

Q: Shah Rukh has credited you with teaching him all he knows about acting. Do you agree?

A: On the basis of my own education and experience, I do not believe that any one - teacher or mentor - can be credited with delivering every skill or quality that an actor possesses. Acting is a complex alchemy of inner and outer experiences, awareness and skills that are drawn from many sources, and then filtered through the unique persona of the actor. And the learning never stops.

I imagine that I had a profound impact on SRK's formative years as an actor, which are vital in laying positive foundations, fostering aptitude and self-confidence. His training was more of a traditional apprenticeship than a formal schooling, and he brought to it his trademark energy, hard work, intelligence and humour. The credit for the phenomenally successful development and management of his career goes to the superstar himself.

Q: More recently, Kunal Kapoor, Shiney Ahuja, amongst others, passed through your doors. Did they have star potential from the beginning?

A: In the light of Shiney Ahuja's and Kunal Kapoor's more recent achievements, I might be tempted to say, in retrospect, that they had star potential that was evident during their training. But the fact is I was not aware of it. Both were good students to work with: committed, involved, questioning and responsive.

Q: Private acting schools are not cheap. Is economic status a factor in the success of an actor in India?

A: Considering my own career options when I was leaving school in the early 1960s, teachers told me I didn't have a hope in hell of being accepted into an acting school in London (viz, my working class roots, my 'Midlands' dialect, my ignorance of dramatic literature and the ways of the West End). So I decided to be a teacher of drama instead.

Traditionally, as in the West, acting is a low-status profession for all manner of vagabonds and layabouts with loose morals.

The typical Indian actor, rural or urban, is poor; a bohemian who sacrifices material prosperity for the freedom, passion and transcendence gained through his art. If he attracts 'royal', private or state sponsorship, he is further blessed. As with most things in India, film is a family business. Economic status is definitely a factor in the success of an actor, but the door is always open for exceptional talent too, and rags-to-riches stories are still a possibility.

Q: What are your thoughts on the portrayal of 'goras' in Hindi films?

A: The portrayal of westerners in Indian cinema varies between the authentic and sublimely ridiculous. Traditionally, the 'goras' are the villains and they have been licensed to play fiendish, arrogant and dehumanised characters, as any in a Victorian melodrama.

I have played colonial Brits, who are typically stiff upper lips, callous and calculating. In 'Massey Sahib' my character was warm and friendly, torn between the ways of the natives and the British rulers. The more recent films 'Kisna' and 'Rang De Basanti' have a reasonably fair and truthful portrayal of westerners.

Q: Will your new courses in Mumbai have a greater focus on film rather than stage?

A: Yes, the courses have been redesigned for Mumbai, and now accommodate modules on acting for the camera and the experience of shooting a short film. Beyond the technical and aesthetic aspects, there are further modules on the launching and building of careers for actors.

Q: Are you nervous about your move to Mumbai?

A: It's a move to 'The Big Apple', with a lot at risk financially. There's lots of competition, and I am the new boy on the block. Of course I'm nervous!

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