

UTPAL DUTT

Interviewed on behalf of the Quarterly Journal of the NCPA

by

Vijay Tendulkar and Kumud Mehta

Utpal Dutt, the celebrated theatre personality of West Bengal, expresses in vivid and forceful words his own commitment to the revolutionary theatre and also paints a live picture of theatre events in the State in the more recent past.



Q.J. : Can you tell us about the Bengali theatre as it is today? What's the situation like?

U.D. : That's a sad question.

Q.J. : One reason why we asked it!

U.D. : You see when I speak of the theatre, I put the political theatre first. And that has been broken up by force, by gangsterism, by those who resorted to shooting and bombs. For instance, there was the case of the play *Amar Vietnam*.

Q.J. : The play on Vietnam which you wrote?

U.D. : No, this is another play on Vietnam, produced by the *Rupantari* group. When they staged it in Uttarpara, six people lost their lives.

Q.J. : What happened?

U.D. : This was just one month after the elections. A reign of terror was unleashed on the people. Theatre groups were told not to stage certain kinds of plays. Anything which smacked even remotely of left politics was sought to be suppressed.

Q.J. : *What exactly took place at Uttarpara ?*

U.D. : A group attacked the stage with bombs. Nobody from the cast was injured. But some of the spectators in the front rows were badly hurt and six of them died. Naturally the show broke up.

Q.J. : *Were other troupes subjected to such kind of violence ?*

U.D. : Yes, the offices of the Indian People's Theatre Organization in Calcutta, Midnapore and Jalpaiguri were attacked. All their papers were burnt. Of course, this doesn't mean that the IPTA has been wiped out.

Q.J. : *Didn't the police intervene ?*

U.D. : No, they just watched.

Q.J. : *Didn't your intellectuals protest ?*

U.D. : Strangely enough most of our intellectuals think that all this is for the best. The Red Flag and the Congress Flag fly together ! And yet I can tell you of cases where publishers are warned not to display certain books.

Q.J. : *How do you manage to survive ?*

U.D. : We are prepared for the worst. When we began to do *Barricade*, we were quite nervous. We got ready for the onslaught, weapon for weapon. Finally they arrived. They were twelve of them, heavily armed. They wanted to enter the hall without tickets. When the ushers stopped them, they said, "We'll wait". Then the police arrived. We left the theatre pretending that we were more heavily armed than we actually were. That is what's happening to us.

Q.J. : *Suppose a group had staged an anti-Communist play during the United Front's regime ? Would it have been allowed ?*

U.D. : The Theatre Centre did stage a play of this kind. Outrageously anti-China, anti-Soviet Union, anti-Indian Communists. Nobody touched them. They labour under one great disadvantage. They can't find a single really good artist to work for them. Not one. They were quite displeased with Badal Sircar because he did *Spartacus*. They thought they had him in their grip. But he kept slipping out. The latest scandal was their Youth Festival.

Q.J. : *Who organized it ?*

U.D. : Not the Congress, but the CPI. Their leaders came to us and invited us to do *Tiner Talwar*. Then just three days before the Festival they said they wanted us to stage *Barricade*. We knew this was because it would fetch good money. We warned them that other parties were associated with the Festival, and *Barricade* was hardly the right kind of play for the occasion. But they said, "It's about Berlin. Why should anyone mind ?" Then on the day of the performance they came and said, "No, not *Barricade*". Our answer was, "We will stage *Barricade*. That's what was scheduled".

Q.J. : *What did they say to that ?*

U.D. : They said, "You can't". So we went there in the afternoon. People could see that we were there. When we entered, we were encircled by one hundred and fifty volunteers and thrown out. But we made speeches and shouted slogans and registered our opposition. *Nandikar* and Badal Sircar walked out of the Festival as a protest against this action on the part of the organizers. So ultimately the whole show was reduced to a farce. An utter farce!

Q.J. : *What is Nandikar doing now ?*

U.D. : They are doing good work. *Nati Binodini*, for instance.

Q.J. : *It's about the actress Binodini, isn't it? Tripti once spoke to us about Binodini's diaries. The same work?*

U.D. : Yes, but *Nandikar* has produced it. I liked it very much.

Q.J. : *Some other actress must be doing the role then—not Tripti?*

U.D. : Yes. Keya Chakravati produced the play. The whole drama is a fascinating discussion. The actors sit in a semi-circle and two or three of them rise and enact sequences.

Q.J. : *What's the discussion about?*

U.D. : About the problems that actors faced in the nineteenth century. But it's all very relevant even today. The production was very interesting. It's a daring kind of play.

Q.J. : *Is it a success?*

U.D. : Unfortunately, no.

Q.J. : *Why?*

U.D. : People say it's dull.

Q.J. : *Because it hasn't much narrative interest?*

U.D. : They say nothing happens. But I find the whole thing very alive. It's wonderfully done—the mannerisms, the gestures of every actor.

Q.J. : *Any other group doing this kind of work?*

U.D. : There's a group called *Silhouette*. They did a play which can be translated as *The Recurring Decimal*.

Q.J. : *What's it about?*

U.D. : It's just scenes from life in Calcutta. Unconnected.

Q.J. : *Without a plot? Or a story? Without characters, one might say?*

U.D. : The same set of actors enact a playlet. Each playlet has its own plot. But the treatment is quite unique. There are about twenty members in the cast and a tremendous amount of physical action. Very robust. A lot of mime and even ballet. It's written by a young man, Vir Sen. He is only twenty-two. Very promising.

Q.J. : *Any other group?*

U.D. : *Chetana* has done a play *The Story of Maricha*, the golden deer which tempted Seeta.

Q.J. : *Is it a mythological?*

U.D. : No, no. It satirizes our myths. It even brings in the Americans. It castigates those agents of the government who lure revolutionaries away from their chosen path. It's all very skilfully handled.

Q.J. : *Wouldn't you call it a political play then?*

U.D. : It's not my idea of what a political play should be. This play doesn't say anything that's bold. It's full of innuendo.

Q.J. : *Anything else you've seen recently?*

U.D. : A full-length opera *Lamba Karna (Long Ears)* based on a short story by Parshuram. It's a biography of a donkey who comes into the 'civilized' world and demands his rights. Everything is sung. Not a line is spoken.

Q.J. : *It's not directly political. But it's good theatre?*

U.D. : Yes, Maybe people got fed up of the prosiness of our plays.

Q.J. : *But how could they collect a cast where every member sang!*

U.D. : That's the fantastic part of it! They collected actors and actresses who could sing. Some sang really well. Others gave just about adequate support. They are nowhere near the troupe in Jaipur, a troupe

called *Sanket*, which was doing *Jasma Odan*. And they were planning to do *Maina Gurjari* again. Those Jaipur people had gorgeous voices. Our Calcutta group is nothing as good.

Q.J. : *What play are you doing now?*

U.D. : We opened with *Tota* in Calcutta. There's the new play I am trying to write. We show a *Jatra* troupe trying to rehearse a play about Abhimanyu. I'm going to call it *Saptarathi*.

Q.J. : *Why?*

U.D. : There were seven charioteers who joined to kill Abhimanyu.

Q.J. : *You haven't completed it then?*

U.D. : No.

Q.J. : *What are Badal Sircar's recent productions like?*

U.D. : His *Spartacus* was just superb. I also enjoyed his *Abu Husain*. Of course he has every right to satirize Girish Ghosh. But he needn't use tunes from Bombay films to parody his work. That sounds a little cheap. One's attention tends to slacken then. But *Spartacus* is really superb. They stage it in a room about four times the size of this hotel room. The arena is in the centre and the spectators squat on the floor—right round the actors.

Q.J. : *How many characters?*

U.D. : About thirty or more, I should think!

Q.J. : *Is it linked with the traditional folk theatre in any way?*

U.D. : No, no. I see it as a direct descendant of the European intimate theatre. It has nothing in common with any Indian form as such.

Q.J. : *It's written and directed by him?*

U.D. : Yes, adapted from Howard Fast.

Q.J. : *Can you tell us more about the work of smaller groups?*

U.D. : You mean work worth mentioning. I told you about *Rupantari*. They have a play which could be translated as *Prose, Poetry, and Essay*.

Q.J. : *What's it about?*

U.D. : It's about three stages in the life of a gangster. The first part is the prosaic stage when he is just a criminal. In the second part he falls in love and even his crimes appear beautiful. In the third part he becomes a tool in the hands of a political party. He becomes a big man—not exactly very rich. They constantly hold the sword over his head. But they look after his material comforts.

Q.J. : *Who wrote the play?*

U.D. : Jochhan Dastidar, the writer of this play *Amar Vietnam* which was bombed out.

Q.J. : *What about Ajitesh Banerji?*

U.D. : I told you about his production—*Nati Binodini*. He has directed the play and is also acting in it.

Q.J. : *Which is Bahurupi's most recent production?*

U.D. : *Rhinoceros*.

Q.J. : *Who directed it?*

U.D. : Tripti.

Q.J. : *Successful?*

U.D. : Unfortunately some of their recent productions haven't been too successful. But one of their recent efforts was really magnificent. It's Badal Sircar's play, *The Thirtieth Century*, that's what it means.

Science fiction, perhaps. No, no. How stupid of me! It can't be called that. The period is the thirtieth century and people are discussing how barbaric we were in the twentieth. But the play has been withdrawn. I don't know why.

Q.J. : *What will be the future lines of development? Will the content of your drama become more politicalized?*

U.D. : Yes, in West Bengal it will have to be more or less political. But sheer politics without any accomplishment in form will not be acceptable to the audiences—except perhaps street-corner plays.

Q.J. : *Do you have a lot of such plays now?*

U.D. : No, not one. It's too dangerous to produce them. They will be bombed out. Calcutta is just recovering from a spate of terror. So many people have arms!

Q.J. : *But the old type of play is dated, in a sense, isn't it? If you do—say Ibsen or Chekhov, will people find it dull or stereotyped?*

U.D. : No. Calcutta hasn't had enough of Ibsen or Chekhov. Ajitesh has tried hard. And Shambhu Mitra did the Bengali version of *The Doll's House*. Really, we haven't had enough of serious social drama. What now goes in the name of social drama is sheer melodrama. Instead of Elizabethan costumes or the costumes of the *Mahabharata* they wear a *dhoti* and *kurta*. You know Ajitesh's adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard* is still running. It has been performed from time to time for seven years.

Q.J. : *Doing well?*

U.D. : Yes.

Q.J. : *Is it a very free adaptation?*

U.D. : I think it is.

Q.J. : *And Rhinoceros? Does it make sense as a play?*

U.D. : No. Not to me, at least.

Q.J. : *Do audiences flock to see it?*

U.D. : No, they don't.

Q.J. : *Then do they go in great numbers to watch those melodramas—the commercial kind of play?*

U.D. : No. They're throwing that out, too. But there is one play which is quite a hit. A play called *Chowrangi*. Not a social melodrama. It's based on a novel by Shankar. It's about the scandals in a hotel. There are two cabaret numbers, nudes, a rape. Not quite in the social pattern which people were used to. It's ... well ... "slices of life".

Q.J. : *Raw?*

U.D. : Yes. But with its own kind of slick commercialism. That the audiences seemed to have enjoyed very much.

Q.J. : *And your censors? They allowed it?*

U.D. : We don't have a Censor Board. Anyway it didn't run for 1,000 nights. It was taken off after 300 performances. All the other professional plays are flops. Every one of them.

Q.J. : *Then how do those companies manage to pull on?*

U.D. : The owner rents out his theatre to amateurs and collects his money.

Q.J. : *He becomes a contractor?*

U.D. : Yes. The crisis in the professional stage is quite pronounced. And that's a very good thing.

Q.J. : *How will the professional stage survive?*

- U.D.: It'll be taken over by more intelligent men. For instance, the *Star* owner contacted Shambhu Mitra. He even came to us. We refused to have anything to do with him. He wanted to be the boss. We were to be his employees.
- Q.J.: *But how did you manage at the Minerva?*
- U.D.: We took it on lease. We did what we liked.
- Q.J.: *You prefer to perform in one theatre all the time?*
- U.D.: No, we would like to move out occasionally. But one permanent theatre is essential. Four shows a week. A double bill on Sundays and holidays. About twenty shows in a month.
- Q.J.: *How many such theatres are there in Calcutta?*
- U.D.: Let me count ... eight.
- Q.J.: *So in all the professionals do about one hundred and sixty shows in a month. But do the amateurs find audiences for their performances?*
- U.D.: Yes. The amateurs command more prestige than the professionals. I forgot to tell you about *The Theatre Workshop*. They're doing a play called *Fresh Honey Taken from the Hive*. My God! the audiences they get! They go from one theatre to another—thirty performances in one month!
- Q.J.: *Who is the playwright?*
- U.D.: Manoj Mitra. Once upon a time I violently disagreed with him. He's a young playwright. I couldn't even understand the titles of his plays. *The Sun in the Vocal Chord* was one such title. There's the sun's heat, its light. But the vocal chord? Now he's come out with this tremendous play—about the people in the Sunderbans forest who collect honey. It's a hamlet deep in the forest. And these men are snake-charmers, too. Then there's a *jotedar*, a rich peasant who exploits these people. This *jotedar* is dying of a snake-bite and comes to be cured. The snake-charmer has a grudge against him. But he has also his professional pride. He can't ever confess that he can't cure him. The moment the *jotedar* gets up from his deathbed, the first thing he wants to do is to collect the rent. The conflict begins. The snake-charmer's daughter pretends to give the *jotedar* some honey and actually gets the snake to kill him. The play is in verse—modern verse. Very beautiful. The group is even busier than *Nandikar*. They print the month's programme in the newspapers. They're playing every day, somewhere or the other.
- Q.J.: *The cast?*
- U.D.: Five; the theme is based on some legend in the Sunderbans.
- Q.J.: *You were complaining about the titles of his play...*
- U.D.: Yes. Not to speak about the plays themselves, I couldn't even understand the titles.
- Q.J.: *Obscure?*
- U.D.: Yes. I didn't have to do anything. The people taught him how to write better.
- Q.J.: *His previous plays, were they more complex than Badal Sircar's former plays?*
- U.D.: Yes, if that's possible!
- Q.J.: *Do you think that over the years Badal Sircar has simplified his style?*

U.D.: Let us hope so. His *Spartacus* is already more simplified than his previous plays.

Q.J.: *But there he has a ready-made outline.*

U.D.: Howard Fast has already done the work for him.

Q.J.: *Do you think this intimate theatre movement can really compete with the professional theatre?*

U.D.: No.

Q.J.: *It will always remain on the fringe—this intimate theatre?*

U.D.: Yes, like Tagore's. A coterie.

Q.J.: *But does it contribute to the professional theatre, influence it in any way?*

U.D.: You know the professional stage is dominated by people who are dead ... vegetable ...

Q.J.: *But finding themselves in a crisis, won't they try to bring in the amateurs?*

U.D.: I dare say you're right there. But when they did do this, their shows turned out to be major flops. Then they shied away from that too. People laugh at them.

Q.J.: *But if they are commercially-oriented, they'll try out anything. They are not committed to any style.*

U.D.: The owners you mean? Yes. They will drive out the old actors and get in the younger groups. For example, *Nandikar* is occupying *Rangana*. We went to the *Minerva*, under similar circumstances. The owner thought, "These people have a following. We might make some money". This is what happened when the *Star* was offered to us. But then there are the old actors. They will have to go. That's cruel. Just now they are playing rubbish. But still they are getting salaries. Let them do it! Somehow one feels diffident about it when one knows they will be out of job and won't find work so easily.

Q.J.: *But this is the commercial theatre! There's another non-commercial theatre? A non-professional theatre? But at a professional level-like Shambhuda's or yours.*

U.D.: Actually most of the important non-professional groups have a professional core. Otherwise they wouldn't be able to last out.

Q.J.: *What do you mean by a professional core?*

U.D.: We have at least twelve to fifteen members who are good actors, who are paid. We learnt that another group—a good group—pays its members not less than Rs.350 a month by way of conveyance allowance and so on. That's quite something!

Q.J.: *Does the commercial theatre have audiences outside Calcutta?*

U.D.: Oh yes.

Q.J.: *You mean these professional companies do a lot of touring? In Maharashtra our companies seem to be touring all the time.*

U.D.: There it's the reverse. They sit tight. People come from all parts of the State to watch them.

Q.J.: *Our groups are always on the move—in Poona, Sangli, all over the State.*

U.D.: That's such a good thing. When they are on tour, they have far more contact with the people. In Calcutta, they come to the theatre, sit down for their make-up, come on to the stage and go off.

- Q.J. : *But if you have hectic touring, it is difficult to maintain high artistic standards all the time. The actors are worn out. You look tired—what with your shooting schedule!*
- U.D. : Yes, two shifts a day. Two films. One for Subhodh Mukerji Productions. I don't know what it's going to be called. The other is *My Friend*. Naushad, the music director, is producing it. His son Rehman is the director.
- Q.J. : *Do you act in Bengali films?*
- U.D. : Oh, yes. In many of them. They've suddenly realized that I *can* act. It's not that I can't act at all. That's what they've realized.
- Q.J. : *You act in commercial films? Not art films.*
- U.D. : People want to make art films but many of us don't find anything artistic in most of them. Except a new film—a very fine one by Purnendu Patri. *Wife's Letter*—based on a short story by Tagore. It's his second film. The first didn't click. This one is a beautiful film.
- Q.J. : *Does it have any commercial prospects?*
- U.D. : It's a hit in Calcutta. But has flopped in the villages.
- Q.J. : *Do the regional films compete in any way with the professional theatre?*
- U.D. : No. That's what a lot of people had been bothered about. But the two don't overlap. I've seen great film stars come on the stage. The owners booked them hoping to have full houses. The reverse has happened.
- Q.J. : *You were telling us when we came in about the Jatra play you were busy with. What's it about?*
- U.D. : The *Jatra* play I was talking about is called *The Sanyasi's Sword* and deals with the Sanyasi Rebellion in 1776—at the time of Warren Hastings.
- Q.J. : *You're attracted to the form because of its vitality?*
- U.D. : Yes. It took me seven years to get used to the form. Then it came naturally to me.
- Q.J. : *But do you change it in the context of the theme which you're tackling? Add something to it? Mould it?*
- U.D. : What I've tried to do is to restore some of the elements that had been wiped out by the commercial tycoons. Some wonderful elements like the character Vivek (Conscience). He comes in at unusual, dramatic moments and sings.
- Q.J. : *Like a chorus?*
- U.D. : Yes. You know he has a special kind of dress, a yellow robe. And previously when the show lasted a whole night, there used to be sixteen or seventeen songs.
- Q.J. : *And now?*
- U.D. : The *Jatra* troupe does two or sometimes three shows every night. That's what the commercial tycoons demand of them. And the principal audiences are the coal-miners in the coal belt or the workers in tea-plantations. After a hard day's work you can't expect them to sit through an all-night performance. So the *Jatra* play is reduced to a duration of three or four hours. And the first element that is thrown out is the Vivek and his songs. Then they threw out another exciting feature—the *Juri*. The men in the *Juri*, dressed like old-style lawyers with turbans and long, black coats, sat right in the midst of the audience. They suddenly

got up and gave their verdict in song on what was happening on the stage.

Q.J. : *But surely the Juri can't be something from an ancient folk form, can it?*

U.D. : It came in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was first conceived by the villagers themselves. Not thrown in from outside.

Q.J. : *So before the nineteenth century, the Jatra had no Juri?*

U.D. : But it had other elements which are now lost. Like Shiva and his *ganas*. They were also used for comedy; they did a lot of somersaulting and acrobatics. The audience enjoyed a good laugh. Now that's out. But we can introduce the *Juri*. All of a sudden it sits on trial; starts discussing the villain and his misdeeds and pronouncing its verdict. In the great *Jatra* classic *Agnipariksha* the *Juri* intervenes when Sita has to undergo an ordeal by fire. They start a discussion. Has Rama been unjust in condemning her?

Q.J. : *Have you introduced the Juri in your play?*

U.D. : Not yet. But I hope to introduce it in my future *Jatra* plays. But the Vivek has already come in. Two or three songs and not more. The duration of the play is four hours. And it's a hit. A dialogue is on and suddenly it moves into a song.

Q.J. : *What kind of music?*

U.D. : Absolutely based on classical *ragas*. Like *Desh*, *Bihag*, *Bageshri*... Fantastic!

Q.J. : *And the accompaniment?*

U.D. : The usual *Jatra* concert party. All kinds of big drums. Two big harmoniums.

Q.J. : *Like the organs they use in our Marathi musicals?*

U.D. : No. Harmoniums. Huge ones, specially made for *Jatra* plays...

Q.J. : *And the spoken word is heard in spite of such accompaniment?*

U.D. : Oh, yes. The music is loud, the voice is even louder. You've no idea—how loud...

Q.J. : *And carried without a mike?*

U.D. : Always.

Q.J. : *And their themes are usually mythological?*

U.D. : No, they're all kinds. Last season there was a *Jatra* on Vietnam.

Q.J. : *Yours?*

U.D. : No, someone else wrote it. And in the coming season a *Jatra* group is doing a new one on Karl Marx. Shambhu Bag who has always been a *Jatra* writer has written the script. I've read it. He's still working on it. It's a very creditable achievement. He's trying to capture a chapter of Karl Marx's life in London.

Q.J. : *When the child died?*

U.D. : Naturally. That's the part. The news of the setting up of the Paris Commune sustains Marx in the midst of this terrible personal tragedy.

Q.J. : *Any other kind of theme?*

U.D. : *Samajik*. The ordinary middle-class family and all its trial and tribulations with a lot of melodrama.

Q.J. : *Will the Karl Marx Jatra play also be a commercial?*

U.D. : In the sphere of the *Jatra* there's no such a thing as 'amateur'.

Q.J. : *What does the audience demand?*

U.D.: The *Jatra* play always starts with a lot of noise and passion. And the violence and passion is expected to be sustained from scene to scene. But there are instances where the most violent, fiery plays have turned out to be flops. And someone goes and revives an old early nineteenth century classic like *Vidya Sundari* which has a lot of song and dance and it turns out to be a tremendous hit.

Q.J.: *Because of what? They wanted something new?*

U.D.: Yes. The oldest thing became very new.

Q.J.: *When does the season begin?*

U.D.: After the rains.

Q.J.: *And goes on right till the end of summer?*

U.D.: Yes. Till the outbreak of the rains.

Q.J.: *How is a troupe organized? They are paid for each performance?*

U.D.: No, on a monthly basis.

Q.J.: *Who controls the troupe?*

U.D.: It's all controlled by what they call a company. But actually it's just one man who owns the troupe. Previously he always used to be an actor himself—an actor-manager. Now that system is gone. There's what's called the *adhikari*. He sits in his office in Calcutta, and he employs actors.

Q.J.: *Like an impresario, in fact?*

U.D.: Yes. Most of the actors live in the villages. They have to come to Calcutta now to be employed and registered as actors with a troupe. At the end of a season the troupe is broken up. The *adhikari* usually has his eyes open; he is always scouting for new talent. Sometimes when an actor is in demand, he goes and agrees to two or three contracts surreptitiously. Then the trouble begins. There's quite a tussle. And we have the minor actors who have to beg of the *adhikari* to accommodate them in his troupe. Then the troupes are again re-organized. They rehearse right through the rains. In Calcutta the *adhikari* rents a house. The actors stay there day and night.

Q.J.: *He looks after their comforts?*

U.D.: Yes.

Q.J.: *Are the actors protected—adequately?*

U.D.: Yes. One seldom hears of an actor being cheated. There is the story of a wicked *adhikari* who left his troupe stranded in Assam. But the way they keep repeating the story, it appears as though this is the exception rather than the rule.

Q.J.: *But the adhikari may not want to cheat! A particular Jatra might turn out to be a flop. He may get into financial difficulties and not be able to pay his actors. Then what happens?*

U.D.: He will borrow money and pay them.

Q.J.: *But in the commercial theatre this kind of attitude seems quite exceptional, doesn't it?*

U.D.: Yes.

Q.J.: *Do the actors come from families that have traditionally been associated with the theatre? Is it a hereditary profession?*

U.D.: Yes. From father to son. But now new actors are coming in who haven't been trained by their ancestors. And the actresses, for example, are all new. There weren't any actresses formerly.

- Q.J. : *But can they make a living out of this? Can they make it a career?*
- U.D. : Oh, yes. They are paid much more than artists in films or the theatre. A leading *Jatra* actor gets eight thousand a month and a car.
- Q.J. : *What?*
- U.D. : Yes. Someone like Swapan Kumar, say. His father, his grandfather, were all *Jatra* actors. His elder brother was a craze in the thirties. Swapan's terrific when he comes on to the stage.
- Q.J. : *How big is the arena? Its dimensions?*
- U.D. : Not fixed. The *Jatra* troupe doesn't carry its equipment.
- Q.J. : *At a performance I saw in Shivaji Park there was a long kind of corridor at the back leading on to the stage.*
- U.D. : That's from the dressing rooms.
- Q.J. : *But the acting area seems quite small... like the average stage.*
- U.D. : Sometimes even smaller. The local people who organize it build the stage.
- Q.J. : *But the actors, can they adapt their moves to fit into this acting arena?*
- U.D. : Yes. They're tremendously adaptable.
- Q.J. : *And the musicians? Where do they sit?*
- U.D. : Sometimes on a lower platform. Sometimes on the stage, if a platform hasn't been provided for them. There are times when they have to go into the audience. That's another problem. The audience is increasing. In the old days they used to act in a zamindar's courtyard with an audience of three hundred. Nowadays the audiences go up to twenty thousand sometimes. How can the voice reach all of them? It's physically, humanly impossible. But they have to do it.
- Q.J. : *What do they do?*
- U.D. : You watch an experiment with a new kind of significance. They yell and shout and yet pretend to be very real. I'm afraid to believe it—but it's true. They have arrived at a certain kind of balance.
- Q.J. : *They manage without a mike?*
- U.D. : Yes. They're speaking at a huge volume, yet you feel a drawing-room play is on—father, son, wife...
- Q.J. : *It's difficult to believe.*
- U.D. : I'm afraid to believe it myself. An actor who died recently, Punju Sen—he was on the stage for sixty-two years. When he died he was eighty. His last performance was at the age of sixty-nine. Firstly, the voice was naturally massive. And he had mastered a technique, a physical technique where he didn't have to exert, where he managed to look relaxed. It's incredible! But nowadays the *Jatra* actors have to face another kind of exploitation. They have to do two or three performances one after another. After all-night shows, the same morning they pack and travel one hundred and fifty miles to another town. And perform again. Then travel again. Their health is ruined, the voice is damaged. These are the demands of the system.
- Q.J. : *But even so they manage to live up to eighty?*
- U.D. : Yes, but he belonged to the older generation. The new generation can't do it. This hectic life. And there's another vice that's creeping in. Drink. They perform three or four nights at a stretch and then they might have a break. Quite accidentally, just because the manager couldn't arrange a show.

Q.J. : *Then?*

U.D. : They want to sleep... sleep soundly for the few hours they get. So they drink.

Q.J. : *And the actresses, which strata of society do they come from? I suppose middle-class people wouldn't like their girls to act in Jatra plays.*

U.D. : Not a single actress from the middle-class. But there are some who are drawn from the villages—daughters of rich peasants, who are themselves fond of the *Jatra*. They have no prejudice against it. They believe it's an honourable form. Then there are the theatre actresses from Calcutta, daughters of retired actresses, their younger sisters. Professional acting is in the family. There are instances when a girl from the middle-class is fascinated by the *Jatra* and enters the profession. But she can't stand the strain of rehearsals, not to speak of actual performance.

Q.J. : *And the actresses speak their lines using the same volume as the actors?*

U.D. : Girls find it easier. The voice is more high-pitched.

Q.J. : *But is every word audible? Is there the element of clarity?*

U.D. : If a girl doesn't have it, she'll lose her job. The audiences are very critical. They'll shout. The worst thing they can ever say is "Pal chapa de". *Pal* means the tarpaulin over the stage. They'll say, "Take it out and put it on the actors!" And this means the play's flopped.

Q.J. : *Is the audience so involved?*

U.D. : Oh, yes. Their involvement is supreme.

Q.J. : *What do you do with your Jatra plays? Rehearse them the same way with your own troupe?*

U.D. : Oh, no. I wouldn't dare to do a *Jatra* play with my own troupe. I write *Jatra* plays and direct a professional troupe.

Q.J. : *You write and direct? You don't even act in them?*

U.D. : Never. Impossible. I wouldn't be able to do it.

Q.J. : *How many Jatra plays have you written?*

U.D. : Five, four of which I wish to forget. They were consciously done. Politically motivated. Propaganda plays.

Q.J. : *Their names?*

U.D. : *Rifle, Jallianwala Bagh*, and then I wrote a very bad play called *Delhi Chalo*, centering round Subhas Chandra Bose and *Nil Rakta*, which wasn't so bad as a play. Somebody else directed it. It had for its background the Indigo Rebellion.

Q.J. : *Your latest play?*

U.D. : I spoke to you about it. *The Sanyasi's Sword*. It's on now.

Q.J. : *And it had a good response?*

U.D. : What the audiences seemed to have liked very much was the parallel. Although its background is the eighteenth century rebellion against Warren Hastings' rule, actually I tried to draw a parallel and relate it to the destruction of the Naxalite movement in Calcutta. The death—no, the murder of Charu Muzumdar in custody. The parallel was quite obvious to the audiences. They appreciated it. But it wasn't mere propaganda. Both levels were present.

Q.J. : *But in the villages could they see the parallel?*

U.D. : So they say. I've not been with the play all over. Only to a few places.

You see when a play's a real hit, it doesn't have to go deep into the interior. Word spreads somehow. The villagers come to the district towns. The actors don't have to go to the interior. But then the strain becomes unbearable. Two or three performances every night because there are so many people waiting to see it. And in the district towns the political undertones would be clearly intelligible.

Q.J. : *When you write on a historical theme, how far are you authentic?*

U.D. : As far authentic as it is possible to be. Take this specific example—*The Sanyasi's Sword*. I've been collecting material on the subject for the last eleven years. Hoping to do a play one day. I put it in *Jatra* form instead. I referred to certain rare books. For example, *Rennel's Journal* which I had the good fortune to consult in the British Museum Library. Rennel was the captain entrusted with putting down the revolt. He was Warren Hastings' personal officer. Then I consulted the usual history books, the authorities on the subject.

Q.J. : *But when you want to project a theme which is contemporary, say the Naxalite movement, and use a historical incident, do you mould it to an extent?*

U.D. : Yes: To an extent. But if the moulding affects the real incidents of history, somebody or other is bound to catch me by the neck and wring it. Take the case of my play *Barricade*. It's about Berlin, 1933. But it is also about Calcutta, 1971. I daresay nobody has been able to challenge a single incident in the play. All I did was to point out how the Nazis rigged the elections. Somehow the Congressmen in Calcutta think it is a terrible insult to them. They even tried to break up a show of ours. I asked them, "Do you admit then that you rigged the elections?" They said, "Certainly not". I said, "Why are you so furious then? We are only showing how the Nazis rigged the elections." In Berlin the old Judge, Judge Zauritz was killed. In Calcutta the Judge who was investigating the Baraset murders was also killed. In Berlin that old man was assassinated. The next day the Nazis began to scream that the Communists had killed him. He was seventy years old. Not a politician but a philanthropist. Somehow people seemed to be reminded of the murder of Hemanta Bose. Someone killed him and they began to scream that the CPM and the Naxalites had done it, giving the police and the political gangsters more opportunity to burn, kill, and shoot. And, of course, the Reichstag fire, we didn't invent it. It took place.

Q.J. : *Here. What was the parallel? Any incident comparable to the Reichstag fire?*

U.D. : No. We just showed it. No exact parallel as such. Two nights before the elections the Communist Party is banned. Yet the Communist Party has to fight the elections. All democratic and civil rights are suspended by Hitler. But the elections will take place. That brings a big laugh. The Communist Party is banned. Here the Communist Party, as such, is not under a ban. But the people see how they have to hide. The elections take place... We have to be very careful about historical things. Our greatest disappointment was when we took *Tota* to Delhi. The play is about the Delhi Uprising of 1857. Various historical episodes were introduced but we interpreted them in our own way.

- Q.J. : When you interpreted them, maybe you changed something or added a detail?*
- U.D.: Certainly. But not a single critic in Delhi ever discussed what we were doing. They only talked of *how* we were doing it.
- Q.J. : That was not a Jatra play?*
- U.D.: No. Firstly they should have asked why Hira Singh has not been shown as a traitor. We show him as a hero. Where did we find this? Well, we did find it. In 1957 the India Office Library, Leadenhall Street, London, opened its secret archives for people to come and read. A man called Albert Marker has written a huge book in which he quotes documents which conclusively prove that Hira Singh was not a traitor. Hodson's Intelligence Service had sown the rumour in such a beautiful manner that the sepoys and the amirs were taken in by it. In this way the English removed their enemy. In Delhi they should have raised such questions. Everyone knows the man to be a traitor; there's the usual legend that he sold his country for thirty pieces of silver. In Himachal Pradesh they sing songs saying how wicked he was. And nobody asked us why we show him as a hero. Not one question is asked. Fantastic!
- Q.J. : Why?*
- U.D.: Because they themselves don't know it. They haven't read their own history. All that they speak about is whether Mirza Ghalib's verse was sung correctly or ask why this particular song of Bahadur Zafar was chosen and not some other. How stupid! How every stupid!
- Q.J. : You mean the critics, the intellectuals?*
- U.D.: Yes. Anyway in Calcutta somebody is sure to raise a question. Not the critics. They're just as asinine there as anywhere else. Others. Students of history. They'll definitely raise some questions if I transgress limits.
- Q.J. : But if you are true to the spirit of history?*
- U.D.: And I take certain liberties?
- Q.J. : Yes, And if somebody challenges that, what happens?*
- U.D.: I'll say, "Lump it. Take it or leave it" What else is there to say?
-