

# JATINDER VERMA

## “Braids” and Theatre Practice

Transcript of a talk and discussion at the British Braids conference  
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Braids and I have had a seesaw affair. They were a part of my life when I was growing up in a different world, in Africa. They disappeared from my life when I came here in 1968, and have been reclaimed when I began working in theatre in 1976. Braids gave me my first hint of otherness: watching women, mainly my sisters, sitting for what seemed like hours while their long hair was parted into strands and then braided by my mother under the African sun. It was a journey into an incredibly foreign land. I thought, why didn't *I* have such delicious long hair? Why doesn't someone have to part *my* hair and braid it? For me the most astonishing thing was to go from a moment of extreme ugliness with hair all over the place and gradually, over the course of maybe an hour, this completely unruly hair had been woven together and interweaved, and it was a beautiful pattern in front of me. And I just started to think, why am I denied this? What's wrong with me? You must remember that from my background, being born a Hindu, one of the conditions that boys have to go through is that up to the age of about three or four they have some of the most

delicious hair; then comes this great moment when you have to take your step to manhood—which is that you're shoved into a barber's chair and your entire hair is removed. I could see locks of my hair lying at the base of this barber's chair.

But what struck me about that moment, the otherness, is that there was an incredible sensuality that had been part of the texture of my life, and in 1968 when I came here with my mother and my sisters, there was an act of incredible brutality which was similar to me to the barber's chair. In those days saris were not allowed in factories, in workplaces, and my mother and my sisters had in fact to go and work in factories in order to keep us going. I had never seen the form of my mother and my sisters; and I remember clearly the day, in the evening, when my mother returned from work, and she was dressed in slacks and a blouse. And it was an offence to my system. I found it to be deeply disturbing, that somehow I had a glimpse into a world which was not mine, that somehow something of my world had been reduced, that I had seen a shape from which I would never be able to escape—whereas I had been swaddled in a world of suggestion and I could make up my own mind as to what the shape was. Now, there was a kind of garment which enforced a certain kind of shape, and I realised my mother was fat, and ugly, all sorts of things, or whatever the shapes were.

And for me that was the equivalent of something that happened linguistically, a kind of incident where a certain sense of the world dramatically died, and that's to do with the honorific. Growing up in Africa I was never conscious of when I shifted between English, Hindi, Punjabi, Swahili. You just did it. That was what you grew up with. And so one of the things that I was never conscious of was language itself and its particular kinds of codes. When I first went to school, in England, it was in Manchester. I was asked to talk about Gandhiji. The teacher thought that since this

was a Geography class, I would be the expert on Gandhi, being a kind of Indian. The fact that I had never been to India was immaterial. However, I took up the challenge. I like a challenge. But I thought how do I call him? I'd grown up with the idea of Gandhiji, with the honorific, the kind of suffix attached. And of course if it was in Hindi I would never say "you," I would say "aap" as opposed to "tum." In English, of course, there isn't that kind of equivalent—and then I thought, no, there is. I'll say "thee." I won't say "he." So this speech began, and of course there were giggles all over the place. Very kindly the teacher came up to me and said, drop the thee-s. And I felt terrible.

But another reason why I was mortified is that my father had not come along with us and I had to write to him. The thing that I was stuck with was this. The first line was fine: "Dear Papaji" —not a problem. The second line is a huge problem. The second line was, "How are you?" It's the obvious one. How do I say "you" to him? The moment I say "you" I reduce him to being my equal. He's not my equal; he's my father. He's bigger than me. He commands respect. He *deserves* respect. How do I do it? For six months I didn't write to him. And of course he got more and more worried, and there were all sorts of letters being exchanged: why is he not writing? And I still remember the day when I wrote, "How are you?" —and he died. Because I'd sort of violated something.

If I mention these things, it's because one of the conditions of that movement, the conditions of that migration—and to some extent I would want to argue that one of the conditions of crossing over cultures—is to accept that you will face loss, and to be able to look loss squarely in the eye. And if I go back to my earlier image, it was that there's all this unruly hair. It looks very unruly and it's all terribly untidy, but you have to look it squarely in the face. And it took me a long while, in fact, not until I

started Tara Arts in 1976, to begin to realise that there is a space to somehow reclaim some of this. There is a level to which the loss is beyond, now, it cannot be recovered, it can't be brought back, just as we can't return to our childhood. However, I am involved in an area of work where there might just be the possibilities of some kinds of reclamation. But even there one had to make some major moves.

When we began in 1976 we began with a very simple impulse, which is to give voice to ourselves—and I'll quote the title of a book that was written by Amrit Wilson in 1976 called, *Finding Your Voice*. And I think we were very much part of that process of finding a voice. There *were* no Asians out on the public stage doing what they wanted to do. That was our kind of impulse, to take the public space and to do whatever we wanted, to tell the story that we had to tell. That was a great impulse, and I still hold by it, both for ourselves and for all those who have emerged and who will emerge hereafter. But when we examined our practice after the first few years, we thought to ourselves, actually this is barren theatre: you know, we have tables here, we have chairs—we're doing actually no different from any other theatre that's going on around. What is distinctive about this theatre? And some of the things that we could pinpoint in our own practices were, for example, that we never allowed on the stage other languages, even though all of us who were at that time involved were fluent in at least four languages. But those were private languages. On stage it's English—albeit it's *our* English in the sense that it's infused with our concerns—but no other languages. So that was a kind of start.

The other thing was that in terms of our dramaturgy, our theatre craft, I don't think any one could have made any distinction between our theatre craft and the craft that you could see in any other kind of theatre. It was essentially taking on the conventions of European theatre at the time, and just doing our stuff. The only

difference was the colour of our skin. By 1981 we said to ourselves, this cannot be the definition of a theatre company, even of a company that calls itself, or is known as, an Asian theatre company. The definition cannot be a sociological one; it cannot be a political one. If it is that, then this will die within five years and it will deserve to die. What is its theatrical definition? What is its aesthetic definition? Number one: to expose the honesty of ourselves. Part of ourselves, our existence at that time was that we existed in a multiplicity of languages. Why were we denying ourselves that voice? We would come up with questions like, well, people would not understand. We said, no, that's nonsensical. There are a myriad ways of understanding theatre, not just one way. So these are challenges for us, of how to create the kind of theatre where, even if one doesn't know the language, one can still understand, from what is going on.

On one matter we would accept, and be brazen enough to say, well actually we will not bother to translate because it's untranslatable. Jokes are untranslatable. And if one looks at it even in a microcosm, a joke that is current in Newcastle will be meaningless in London. That's the nature of jokes. They have a particular texture and a particular kind of life. You can get some sense of what the joke is, but you will not enjoy the *flavour* of that joke, what in Indian dramaturgy is called the "rasa" of that joke. Absolutely you will not, because that's not part of your body. And fine: we should have no problems about doing that. And I think that without knowing it what we had hit on was that part of multiculturalism is danger, the danger in confrontation or encountering the other. That danger is about fright: "I don't know what they're saying, I don't know what they're laughing at..." Those are dangers, but they are necessary dangers, because otherwise what we have is a condition of sweetmeat, where everyone can be sweet to each other. It's a bit like the current invention in some of the theatres, the "darling" syndrome: we hate each other but we have to say

“darling” to each other. But the reality of multiculturalism is that my neighbour doesn’t like my smell. That’s the reality. But equally the reality of multiculturalism is that despite not liking, or rather *through* not liking the smell, he or she, and me on my part, have to find a way beyond that smell and find what is the point at which we connect. Each one of us has different ones. That’s the reality of it, that there are those kinds of abrasion. The abrasions are current. They exist in the theatre, the theatre audience, as much as they exist on the street. And part of the function of the theatre should be to allow for that abrasion. We are intelligent, our audiences are intelligent, if only because they’re human, and they will work through those abrasions to see if there is a kind of shared role. And that became a kind of progressive belief on our part that we must not explain away our difference. If anything, we should put it up there, and then see, through those differences, what are our connecting points.

Through that, the kind of route we began to follow was to say, well, are there other dramaturgies, other than the ones we’ve grown up with and see around us? And of course there are. We began to look at dramaturgies coming out of India. We’re not talking about traditional drama. We’re talking about a sophisticated performance tradition, equivalent to any other tradition—which is textual, which is critical, which has a theory behind it. But what’s fundamentally its premise is that theatre is not the realm of realism. And that struck an enormous chord—that realism as a form actually developed in Europe only in the eighteenth, nineteenth centuries, and how instrumental technological progress was in the development of that. Kodak created a kind of realistic frame of mind. But that realism, that way of thinking, had also been absolutely material in the imperial project. One very simple example is the census. The census was first introduced in India in 1801 and was practised there. India, and other colonies, like Ireland, were laboratories to some extent for playing out certain

sorts of ideas: the civil service, famine relief. And that if one looked at something like the census, one of the most interesting things was that where there was a sense of a society in flux, in the ways in which it moved in status and so forth, as soon as a government defined your status on a printed page and could uphold that status through the machinery of law and the army, you were fixed. That's it! That's where you belong! And the enormous power of the word is that the thing begins to become really fixed.

For us these were all connections that we're making, that realism is not a universal. It's not *the way* of doing theatre. It just happens to be a particular moment in theatre, a particular development in theatre. Now if we are the kind of company that we are, to an extent the very form itself is surely antithetical to us. We must find some other kind of way of looking at human reality, and this is what Indian dramaturgy opened up for us. There's a fantastic definition of theatre that a critic wrote in the fourteenth century: "Drama is like a dream. It is not real, but it is real in effect." Fantastic! Beautiful! It opens up a whole realm of poetry. And that's really where we then began to subtitle the name of the group the Theatre of Suggestion. I'd much rather have the power of suggestion, where we're open to saying, well okay, you make up your own mind what is the form, what is the shape, hidden behind that cloth—what is this particular gesture, held at that particular moment in time? So that there is a dialogue between us, so that your imagination is to some extent only *guided* by my imagination. You will have to work to create the text with me. That was an incredible opening up—to realise that in fact this "discovery" of Indian dramaturgy paradoxically connected us up with Brecht: that, in fact, we're part of another kind of world, and that even within European tradition, the one that we are a part of, there are many ways of looking at reality, many ways of doing theatre. And we have to

make a choice, rather like making a choice about which political party you want to join. Are we with the Trevor Nunn and the Richard Eyre or are we with the Peter Brooks? That's a matter of choice. Those are your tastes. That doesn't mean that you don't like Ibsen. No, it's nothing to do with that. Those are fantastic plays. But how *you* approach a theatre has got to be to do with what meaning it has to your own kind of art.

In a way it was through that kind of discovery that we came to see that what defines our theatre is its practice. It's not the particular colour of the skin of the performers, but it is the way in which you *do* the thing—and therefore the eye you have on your theatre. That is our definition of the thing, that's what defines it, as opposed to the much more reductionist way of looking at it, which is that it's a kind of communal thing, signifying a particular community. And through that, is when I really began to realise that in fact every theatre, every moment of creation, all of us—from whichever premise you start from—all we are ever aiming at is, for a brief two hours, to create a condition of home. As Salman [Rushdie] says, it's a kind of booming, hollow word, but we all have a sense of what is home, that kind of unthreatening space, that sort of comfort zone—and that's all we all strive for, that for those brief two hours the myriad differences between the audiences and the performers somehow coalesce, and for that brief moment they form a home. Then like many great and good families they can go away and argue and kill each other. No problem. That's fine; that's life, that's the nature of life. But for that brief two hours one's felt at home.

And so to round it off, I come back to that opening image. It's taken me twenty-five years to realise that the braids of myself are three spaces, Africa, England, and India—and that of the three, one is an entirely imagined space, and ironically

that's India. India exists in my head; sure, I've been there, but it's actually virtual, in my head—and that the home I create is a kind of braiding of these three worlds. And that's where there is a certain kind of pattern in terms of my work, and why it becomes so involved and connected to the idea, the notion, of multiculturalism or cross-culturalism (I can never work out what are the terms) and that is that I can't escape it. That is my existential reality. And if I'm going to be true to myself—and if I'm involved in theatre, that's all I can do, is to be true to myself—then I have to expose those three strands and try and look them in the face as squarely as I can.

I'm going to round it off with one example of a current project. I'm going to start rehearsals next week on a peculiar kind of double bill which I'm calling *2001: A Ramayan Odyssey*. And essentially what we're doing is taking the *Ramayana* from one end and the *Odyssey* from the other end and banging them together. And it's been very, very interesting, and incredibly frightening, going through those two texts. Part of it is that the *Ramayan* is the celebrated text out of India, and the basic difference between the two is that the *Odyssey* is essentially about a human being, pitted against the gods, against nature, against the forces, and so on, while in the case of the *Ramayan* it is a god who comes to earth and takes human form and goes through human foibles. And yet in this text, this great god not once, but twice, exiles his wife, because of what *others* are saying—and we revere this text, it's come down to us for two thousand or more years. That was the first thing that struck me. And what then began to occur to me is that if language is the window of the soul of a people, clearly so is literature. So what does this literature actually reveal about us? What's it saying? I don't know, or rather if I do I'm not going to answer because that's for you to come and see! In a way for me that's the really fascinating thing about these texts. They are kind of icons, hints of two sorts of cultural sensibilities. There are absolutely many

places where they dovetail into each other, where you have no idea which text you're following, and that happens completely naturally. But there clearly are moments when the texts do not dovetail into each other—when Penelope stares head on at Sita and you think, what on earth is going on? How can this person think in this way or act in this way?

That's a little example of the work which is continuing, to effect bridges across the imagination. And that is the project for all theatre in the twenty-first century and particularly in spaces like this: that we have to effect those bridges, if only because the audience around us is so incredibly mixed, in terms of its background.

**Q.** *What sort of audience do you think you are seeking for the theatre of suggestion?*

*A lot of people, I think, don't go to theatre because they think they don't understand what's going on, it's too elaborate, possibly, or obscure. But aren't we already preaching to the converted? The kind of people who go to see your show, they're already sensitive to the multicultural experience. It's not for the average consumer?*

**J. V.** You'd be surprised how even in Spilsby, this little town....Part of our policy is that our tours must go to places which are not multicultural, and if multiculturalism is to be a reality in England it mustn't be confined to the cities, so it must go out to other parts. It's difficult effecting that, because you then are faced with venue managers who say, "Oh well, there are no black people, no Asians, in my city, so what's the point of seeing this?" Then you have to work with ruses. You say, oh, actually I'm bringing the *Odyssey*. "Oh well, that's alright. Come in with the *Odyssey*. No problem. I'll do that." What I find really, really interesting is that I think that our work

has taken on, I would say, more meaning, more relevance, in places like Spilsby than it has in places like London or Birmingham. There is where we have a genuine encounter. One of the most profound experiences I ever had was at the Opera House—the only thing I knew about Buxton was that it was a spa watering place, but it has this opera house in the middle of the Derbyshire Dales—in Buxton. Some venue manager had booked us in. This was when we were doing a play called *Heer Ranja*, a Punjabi story which is the equivalent of Romeo and Juliet. The thing with *Heer Ranja* was that for the first time I'd also decided—because it's a particular story out of the Punjab, originally from the twelfth century, and then it was turned into an epic poem in the eighteenth century—to use the original text as well, so a lot of the speeches, the dialogue, was in Punjabi. So I thought, how is this going to work in Buxton, of all places? We had the space for nine hundred people. About two hundred people turned up—which was fantastic, I realised afterwards, because in fact they normally get fifty people. What was even more extraordinary was that in the first performance I began to notice that the audiences were laughing at the right time, at the right jokes, and I thought, how the hell is that happening? I was wondering what's going on here. And the following night most of them returned. And I thought, well, maybe it's the exotic thing: the difference is so stark that that's one of the reasons that's brought them back. And then eventually we got talking to some of the audience afterwards. The obvious question was, "Did you understand?" And they said, "No, I didn't know what they were saying, but I could tell by the *tone* of an actor, or the gesture—all that kind of combination—that this was a funny moment, and I went with it." That's fantastic, that you have that kind of a condition where it is *so* foreign that you have to exercise your other senses, but that there was also one other thing—which was that that audience was *willing*. Often enough in the cities we've all become too cynical. And part of it is

that kind of fright of saying, “Actually, I don’t really want to know.” Here they were willing to say, “Well actually, I *don’t* know, but I’ll come along with you.” And that made me realise that that’s something that is too precious, and you cannot really engineer it—the gift of an audience that just *gives* you, wants to be with you.

To return to your question, to some extent I do accept the fact that theatre in this country is to an extent an exclusive activity. There are certain types of people who do go to the theatre. Recently for example at the National [Theatre] they’d got a production of the *Ramayana* and they thought, “We’ll do the *Ramayana* and every Asian in the country will turn up.” Well they haven’t, because one thing is that, generally speaking, Asians—and particularly middle-class Asians—haven’t got in the habit of advanced booking, and the National thrives on advance booking, and all the performances were sold out, so of course they turn up and they can’t get in. I’m aware of that sort of tide.

One of the things we’ve been having to do—and we’ve been doing that since we began, but it’s a lot more structured now—is to say, how do we get other classes, those who naturally would not come to the theatre, or who do not think theatre is actually for them, how do we get them involved? And I think it’s not a marketing question, it’s an artistic one—which is that people get involved when they think it’s their own kind of stories, as well: that they can somehow become participants. A project that we’ve been working on since 1997 will be staged next year as a trilogy. It’s called *Journey to the West*. Effectively our source was to capture the stories of people living here—how did they come?—and construct a series of three plays of three different generations’ experiences, and use that as a kind of basic resource.

And then along with other kinds of texts, like the *Ramayana* and the *Odyssey*, to have a kind of poetic sense of that story. What that did for us was that it got people involved, as—to use the language of business—they had made an investment: it's *their* story. One of the journeys that they took, along with ourselves, was to ask how these very private stories, which are really confined to families, translate into a kind of public text which people who may not have had that kind of experience can also share. That was a kind of journey that they took, and that we took with them. Progressively now this process is becoming much more refined, so that the focus becomes much more on how theatre can be a tool for one's own story, and it needn't be reduced in value as a result. If you like, the greatest theatrical texts of today are the texts of people themselves. But we have to be extremely careful that they don't become simply documentary texts. So there's another kind of transformation occurring: how do they become poetic texts? That's just been a way to broaden that class, if you like, that comes to theatre.

Equally we've had to say to ourselves, at times, that the kind of spaces we play conditions a certain kind of poetry. So do not confine yourself only to theatres but go into a school, go into a community centre, but then when you go into a school or a community centre, make damn sure that the value, the production value, is not reduced—so they must experience the same kind of thing: you know, the panache of lights, the seating is good, the catering is good. All that, because they deserve it: so that they can have the kind of magical transformation that occurs in the theatre.

**Q.** *The elements of collectivity and multiple influence, do they also inform the writing or adaptation process?*

**J. V.** I increasingly say that I'm no longer involved in English theatre but in Bilingual theatre. For me that's a kind of cheeky but very accurate term because it opens up the space of other language and other sources, if you like, other texts, and how these fit into each other. For me that's the equivalent of what writers like Salman Rushdie, say, or Ben Okri, are doing in the context of literature—trying to create a kind of language which is distinctive. I think that with the theatre we've got a much more difficult job (and I'm not undervaluing the writers, which I think are fantastic), but with the theatre we're dealing with *all* the senses, and I think there are such complexities—you're dealing with a story that takes place in three-dimensional space—and so the kind of ways of seeing what happens to a member of the audience as they make an encounter with the story, there are so many approaches to it, so many influences that come to bear on that, that it becomes really difficult to create a kind of text that is as refined as, say, the examples I've quoted. To some extent I think that Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a new language. He managed it. He created a new kind of language, a new syntax. I think all we can do is hint at it. And so, for me, Bilingual is to create types of text which are open to as wide a variety of sensibility as I'll ever hope to encounter. And I suppose, for me, why that's important is, I'm sure I'm not the only type of person who's ever had these kinds of experiences.

I remember seeing a production at the National of *Richard II*. It was done in a particular kind of style which I find boring, so I kept my eyes closed, in order to better hear. Fine, fine, fine, fine...then suddenly I wake up because I hear another sound. However, in the midst of all this Standard English what I'd heard was cockney and a kind of Caribbean patois. But who was speaking the cockney and the Caribbean patois?—the two murderers. This is a wonderful way of creating an “open” text—in fact you're closing it off! For me, this has been of great concern. We have to be

extremely careful with our texts, which is partly the voice—what you say—but partly also how you construct the sequence, so that it's open to the variety of sensibilities that are there, that could be there any time, looking at them. And that means that you're forced into a kind of...style, if you like, in the theatre, for want of a better word, which is direct, which is absolutely against the idea of the fourth wall. One of the things I find time and time again in auditions is that the actor will never look at me. I think, well, who are you addressing? But this is something drummed into every drama student, that the audience are actually privileged to have an insight into your life. But the reality is that we *need* them. I need your love, I need your reaction, because that's how my story's going to progress. And so that's been something that we've had to take on board—that we can't work with the concept of the fourth wall. It's detrimental to the idea of an open text, a text which tries to open out to people.

*Q. There was some definition you gave that production was not reality, and I thought stage was reality put on stage. Am I wrong in that concept?*

**J. V.** I do think that stage is the realm of a kind of poetic reality, the reality of the human heart, which is different from the Kodak reality. That's the only point I was trying to make, that there's a kind of Kodak reality which tries to convince us all that actually this is a door, even when we all know that it is not a door, but we say, no, no, it is a door. That's a reduction of the theatre. The theatre is a space of poetry. But both forms are aiming at the same thing, which is the truth of the human heart. That's what they're aiming at, human emotions, but they come at it from such different ways.

**Q.** *This is a simple question but there's an awful political dilemma behind it. I think you're right about Rushdie working towards a new language. It struck me when you said that, that there is a screen version. It's difficult to believe really when you look at the political situation. Have you looked at that as a potential performance you could undertake? It would seem to be virtually impossible to do.*

**J. V.** It's astonishing what he's done with it, in order to sort of translate it. It's great that he himself did it. It's a fantastic piece, and it's certainly something that I had in mind at that stage. But I thought when you said "politics" that you were hinting at something else. I do think that if we're not careful, if we don't guard against it, that the current trend of multiculturalism is actually masking separate development, and that in fact separate cultures are emerging, with different standards of reception, of critique, different areas of consumption, and that's deeply, deeply worrying—whereas the whole point, I think, about multiculturalism is the ways in which we leak into each other, imaginatively, not just from the point of view of consumerism, but are able to deal with each other's texts—and that, for me, there's a real undertow of that possibility occurring here. Obviously it'll be deadly if it happens, but the signs are there. Certainly it's that we haven't moved fast enough and far enough educationally to be able to tackle that, so the more we can do educationally to get other stories, and actually study those, and not just treat them as "badges" of knowing a little bit about each other's cultures, the better it will be.