

## **Vikram Iyengar**

....an absent dance audience. One of the basic things that we came to grips with as a group very early on, we are not very old as a company, was the difficulty, the very practical difficulty of getting people into a hall to watch a show. If you do a show in one of the smaller halls in Calcutta, which is about 390 people, we face great difficulty in getting even 50% for a show, filling 50% of the hall for a show with very nominal ticket prices. I mean people in Bombay couldn't imagine what our ticket prices are at the higher end. So then we, it's obviously a case of - is there an audience at all, for what we do? It is a classical, we come from a classical dance background. So the first question to address was - is there space? Is there relevance? Is there necessity at all, for a form like kathak that we do, to exist today? Is there an audience? If not, then why are we doing it? And that takes me to, just to give you a brief idea of some pre-conceptions, some responses that are sort of built in to audiences or prospective audiences. And here I am talking about young audiences that we want in the theatre to come and see our work, because otherwise where will I be ten years from now. The responses that they have very often is 'Oh classical dance, I don't understand it, it's too obscure, it has nothing to do with me today.' And these are responses and ideas and notions which is not restricted to a particular age bracket or people from particular educational background or I have heard this even from unfortunately people in the theatre, who really don't know why classical dance should be trying to deal with certain issues or even from contemporary dancers. Classical dance has its time and space and it's very pretty, but do what it is supposed to do. My question is what is it supposed to do? And if the times are changing then definitely what we are supposed to be doing has also got to change. And one of the things that needs to change is how we approach and ask an audience to come and view our work. During my guru's time it was very much, you had an audience, you had the push of a newly independent India saying oh these are our classical forms come and see it. It was marketed in that way. That doesn't exist for us any more. We don't have those platforms. We don't have that support, at least you have it on paper but it doesn't necessarily translate into action. That's one side of it.

The other side of it is as I was saying how does one get an audience in and how does one get an audience to believe and trust that classical dance is something that actually can be enjoyed. So one of the, I am just going to sort of take you through a few things that we are doing regularly over the past two, two and a half years and the kind of very small but encouraging results that have come out of it. One is our sort of partnership, well sort of informal partnership with the department of comparative literature in Jadavpur University which has been very supportive of our work. We began going to them with ideas like - ok we are doing this show, we want to come and talk to your students about it. So in designing curtain raisers for new productions. We did this for a couple and then I found myself getting invited to one-off seminars to talk about literature and the other arts and to talk about a dance component. How does one address a certain issue through dance or how does one address text through dance? So we started making these connections with this particular group of students, of course three batches of them. This is not a regular exercise. I don't teach on their faculty or anything like that. But because we did

go to them saying that ok here is a performance and we want to do a curtain raiser we want to sort of try and get your students interested to at least come and taste one performance. And then they don't like it, fine you can leave, but at least you have a reason not to like it now, rather than just say oh I cant, I don't think I am going to understand it. And it has now developed into, at times papers have been, from the faculty have been sent on our productions. Oh Ranan is doing Chitra at so and so place on so and so date and this you have to go and review it or you have to go and look at it through this angle which is in your syllabus. And that at the beginning began to, of course because they were forced to they have to write a paper so they have to go and see it, brought us a student audience from Jadhavpur. But that then began to translate into if ten people had come because of that reason then ok for the next show three people come and they bring their friends. And that's how a small network of audiences built up and now its come to a situation where if we walk into Jadhavpur University we know the students there, at least of that particular department and we have very informal and non-planned discussions when we meet each other in Café Coffee Day or whatever. Because they have now found a way to approach classical dance and approach the experiments that we do with classical dance and drama and they don't find it as obscure or as frightening or as whatever, inaccessible as they would have, say two years ago.

The other thing that the kind of support that JU has now started giving us very readily is almost administrative support in the sense that if we are doing something which does not involve the university. But in the simple thing I call up whoever is doing publicity calls up and says ok we are going to come and leave five posters in your office, will you please get them put up on campus. The faculty takes care of it and I think two and half years ago this was unthinkable that you go into, go to the head of the department leave posters on his table with a note and the next day the posters are up all over Jadhavpur campus. That's something that you know we have managed to achieve to do with that.

The second thing, the second instance I would like to talk about is one particular production which unfortunately has seen only three shows. We did Girish Karnad's Nagmandala about three years ago now and using dance and drama. And Calcutta doesn't have a very large bank of actors who work in the English language. So we were forced, because of the situation to work a lot with people who were in college. And what we found was, because they were in college, during the shows we got a completely new kind of audience coming in. We got their batch mates, we got their friends, their families who would never have come to see classical dance, to come to see this show of Nagamandala. Many of them had no idea that they were actually watching classical dance, because it was sort of woven into the text. But ok, one can expect that from Nagamandala because of course the friends and family of the cast is going to come. What was encouraging for us is the next production that we did was this very classically oriented dance pure kathak piece called *Ranginiya* which looked at ghazals and thumris and khayal music and all that sort of stuff in a very, very classical mode. And even to that, people who had come to see Nagamandala, came to see this. And whether they liked it or not, whether they will come back and see another performance of *Ranginiya*, I don't know. But the fact that they will

now, if our company advertises something we now have another audience that is willing to try us out, is a step forward I think.

This sort of takes me to, as dancers the responsibility we have, and I don't know how much this translates into theatre, but also as dancers as performers the responsibility we have in how we put our work out there. You know this idea that classical dance is inaccessible and obscure can't have come out of nothing. Dancers are responsible for creating that aura around ourselves that oh we are an elevated lot and we have gone through twenty five years of training and we know the shastras backwards and we sort of exist on a spiritual plane and all that. I really don't exist on a spiritual plane at all. And its up to us if we want the art to survive, to de-mystify it and by de-mystifying it I do not at all mean that we dilute it. But to de-mystify it so that people find ways of enjoying it, find ways of accessing it, which may not be technical, which may not have to do with an understanding of rhythm or music in a classical sense, but just purely the visual joy of watching a piece of dance to start with. And one of the things we have done is, we have created a dance film using a piece of music by Taufiq Qureshi which is very rhythmic. Many of you might have heard it. It's from the album *Rhydhun*, the title track. And that film wherever we have shown it, could be an audience of students, it could be an audience of dancers, academics, theatre people whatever, its garnered a huge response because there it is, first of all you have the element of cinema, you have the element of other things happening before the dance actually starts. There is rhythm, there is movement, there is light. So it makes it a tasty morsel in a sense, which allows you an entry into maybe a deeper understanding of the dance if you would like to take it that far. Also we make it a point when we do live presentation to try and capture that same spirit.

The last thing I would like to talk about is a programme that we run with the Max Mueller Bhavan Calcutta every two months approximately. It's called *Proximities*. We started this with an institution called 'Padatik'. Many of you might know it. And then shifted it to Max Mueller Bhavan after a year, there are reasons for that but I wont go into that. *Proximities* is basically again rising out of this need to connect with a larger milieu which is not only performers and to find ways of addressing things which effect the larger society around us and performance. And to find ways of getting people who are interested in the makings, the creative processes that go into making a piece of work, to talking about those in a very informal way. So basically the structure is that we have one presenter or two presenters and a topic and they talk about it or present something about it and you have an informal chat session built around it. And the Max Mueller came on board with us just with space last year. And tried us out for two sessions and one of our major victories now is that they have actually come on board to the project. They how help programme it, they help raise the funds for it, they help pay for it. And the second thing that has come out of *Proximities* is, it has taken us two and a half years to actually get here, is we have always maintained that for *Proximities* you have an adda in this room but that's not the point, which is also what the forum is trying to do, that you carry it on outside in smaller groups. The last couple of sessions of *Proximities* when we have been leaving, when the organizers have been leaving have always found lots of people sitting in the Max Mueller Café carrying that discussion on in their own ways. And that I feel is

you know is our evidence that we are finding that we are actually maybe on one of the many roads we can travel towards creating or re-creating a performance, a culture of performance and a culture of thought and a culture of exchange. Thank you.