

RELECTIONS ON THE PRANAB MUKHERJEE DRAMA WORKSHOP **(4/09/12 - 7/9/12)**

Pranab Mukherjee – An aspirational dramatist who stained our hearts with so many astounding memories. The workshop was definitely worth taking and anyone who didn't missed out on some real and significant learning. And it wasn't just acting, it was theatre, something so vast and spread-about. His knowledge had something that was so profound. It wasn't just typical or superficial. From the first day to the fourth, it was learning, and more learning, for life and not just drama.

It being the first time I ever did 'such a workshop' I can't make comparisons to how others might be. In the first half of the day, we introduced ourselves to each other in the absence of Mr. Pranab. In a circle, we would say our name and then do an action, after which everyone else would repeat it. Then, divided into smaller groups, we were told to make structures using each other and ourselves. Not as easy as it sounds. For example, we made cycles, elephants and castles out of ourselves. For instance- the elephant, a person would be the trunk, another would be the giant legs of the elephant etc. We also did certain mouth exercises and facial expressions in order to warm up. In the next activity, we were sculpted into positions, by the sculptor of our group.



With the help of every ones position we had to make a scenario in relation to sports. An example could be- in the midst of a penalty kick in football or maybe a tense moment, which could be portrayed to the audience only with the use of your position, facial expression and how everybody's position was associated with each other. That was the hard part- conveying the meaning to the audience without the use of any actions. This was an exercise that proved to us the indispensability of expressions. In our group, the scenario was of someone winning a trophy, with the inclusion of spectators and a cameraman in the scene. I was sculpted as someone in favor of the person winning the trophy, thus shouting with zeal and felicity. Now, for instance, this had to be shown through such immense power of expression for the audience to explicate the emotion, connect it to the situation and also coherently visualize it. This could be done by

perhaps having an open mouth (in excitement) or a smiling face, hands in the air, eyes closed due to intense joy.

Other exercises included standing in a circle and walking to a person who would then walk to another person and take his/her place; one by one. Later, however it would be 4-5 people at once. From what I inferred from this activity was learning to be conscious of the audience watching you while you perform because they can see even the most minute of actions.

Afterwards when Mr. Pranab came in, we were introduced to him and as everyone began to form their first impressions, I just couldn't tell. I couldn't tell of the person he was. Well, now I do definitely know of the amazing and awe-inspiring man he is and how different his opinions are. The fact that he is open to everything still manages to amaze and surprise me and I bet, everyone else.

His attitude is so contradictory to the vast majorities. Unorthodox views. I cannot express in words, how much I've learnt from him, even if it means something out of the 'dramatical context'. When Mr. Eugene said that he would change our grades from B's to A*'s, I couldn't help but not believe in it. And now here I am, saying not only that he has helped us improve, he has seemingly sparked something much more in all of us and made us believe in the hidden talent embedded in all of us. We aren't who we were. Not anymore.

The causality, informality and closeness in his speeches or talks to us made us share a personal relation with him, not the formal kind. He has absolutely left deep footprint in our hearts and made us so much more globally aware, sparking divergent ideas everyday. He isn't just someone, whom one could call different or unique, but someone who was and will always be a source of afflatus, at least in my opinion.



After a long and interesting discussion with him, we were given our topics and divided into three groups. Each group with a different topic and a different prop.



GROUP 1-
Topic: Exclusion
(as a political
issue)
Prop: Two hollow
staircases placed
right beside each
other



GROUP 2
Topic:
Claustrophobia
Prop: 'Lost and
found' shelf



GROUP 3
Topic: Ghettos
Prop: A bed and
black boots

I was in the first
group. We divided
ourselves into the

oppressed, depressed and wealthy class people. Before beginning to think of the ideas that went into our story, we were made to lie down on top of each other, one by one. And then the one on the bottom had to move and get under the hollows with everyone else's load on her back. Painful, but not as much as the reality. The ugly reality. It was a difficult task to perform, but to show the pain, we all had to experience at least a modicum of it, didn't we, for on the other side of the world, there are others going through MUCH MORE. And to emphasize on this, we also watched some video clips specially based on the topics given to all the three groups. The videos conveyed immense emotions and hinted on reality. Some points include:

- Pity
- Guilt
- Poignancy
- Respect and appreciation for the things we have
- Symbol of death
- Melancholy
- Reality and how the rest of the world is oblivious to it

WHAT I PERSONALLY FELT-

Death has now become such a weak symbol in the modern world. It's just another story one reads in the newspaper or sees on the television everyday or the other. It might just another form of inquiring knowledge and know about the world without any emotion flowing through. Being common and inevitable doesn't give a coherent reason why it should ensue ENORMOUS amounts of internal pain. Until you actually experience it, you cannot understand it/feel it. The videos had a veritably strong impact on me and made me aware of the other side of the world. Two of them were associated with music.

Other than the videos, he asked all the new faces he saw, where they lived and then discussed on the critical aspects of that place. It surprised me that he knew so much, even of the littlest of towns and villages. After more interesting and informative and powerful discussions, the day 1 of the workshop came to an end. The next day I wasn't present and I did miss out the whole day and the opportunity to be learning from such an amazing man. I did have remorse deep inside me for being absent and heard of the heart-breaking videos they watched and what they learnt. They also practiced the acts in their specific groups.

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The next day. Already. The days went so fast. I was introduced to the new elements they added in the act. We would start our act by playing hide-and-seek, after which we would play some hand game. And meanwhile, the upper class would come and separate the untouchables from the other, higher class. With the use of a stick and violent movements, the untouchables would be jugged and forced into the shallows. Restricted movements(for the oppressed people) expressed the depressed emotions and expressions. The pain. It would all come together, well portrayed only and only if we believed. Well, the reality would obviously be much harsher and 'real' and painful, not something we would even be close to showing if we didn't believe. The truth is, the depressed and the oppressed are the same in thoughts, in everything they do, just not in the minds of people. Its all about the way you think it, interpret it, believe it. If one wasn't told that someone was an untouchable, they might have acted the same way as

they as they would with someone in a higher class and absolutely differently if they knew. It's all the mind- what controls us. It's so disturbing to know that people are separated by class. And the lower class is no worse in 'anyway' than the higher class. At least they work hard, toil, sweat for what they deserve. I just cannot express how much Mr. Pranab has helped me in life, generally. Completely different views. In our performance, we would have quotes by Tagore to be said by everyone. Be it about trees or the stars, we repeated them one after the other.



What was so magical was how he guessed everyone's personality in a matter of 3 days. And it was all TRUE. Literally. I was amazed. Shocked. Startled. He was such an observant man, noticing the littlest of details in us, such as body language. He made me believe that the sky is not the limit. We had myriad numbers of private conversations with him, which is the reason he was so close to us, not just a stereotypical professional giving us notes and guiding us in drama. He made us realize that drama has no co-relation with appearance in reality. Theatre was theatre and everyone was capable of it.

In class, we had to pair up with someone and do exercises (3). One was to take the others head from a side to another. The others were related to movements involving pain. Individually. In our pieces, we later added these exercises and used them to give a harsher effect and increase the immensity of brutality.



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It was the day, all our practice and efforts would be revealed to the audience. Our endeavor to subtly convey our message to the audience was to finally be fulfilled. At 4:00 pm. We practiced something called "the train". In the small auditorium, all the three groups would get up on the handles of the seats and walk step by step, holding each others hands. A symbol of trust. I don't know why, but the notion of the fact that we would be performing in the seats and the audience sitting on the stage made me ecstatic. Conceivably because it was a different idea, not anything like I had imagined or would ever imagine. The significance of the train was more than just a train. Thinking deeper, it portrayed slavery. The fact that we held hands, used the support of each other to overcome difficulties, were closely-linked together. Teamwork, balancing, the background music- they all hinted towards slavery.

Before the actual performance that day, we had an effective rehearsal. It surely gave us an idea of how it would happen and also the possibilities and situations we might face when doing it. We started with all the groups near the walls of the auditorium. The music then played. Drumbeat rolled. We would get down and come closer to the stage (where the audience would be seated). And stand in the train formation. Some steps closer to the audience, in the train. With the 2nd drum beat, we would take a few steps forward before slowly going down, near the seats. Videos would be played for the audience to watch. With the end of that, we'd go one after the other and stand on the steps (our prop). That is when we say the first Tagore quote. All the members of the group reiterate it, individually, the purpose of which might be emphasis. The third Tagore quote is said at the end. The vexatious or perhaps challenging part is staying glued to the positions after a group is done with its act until all the other groups ended. No movements equaled to going numb. But that is what it was all about- enduring the pain, and attempting to be oblivious to it. After all the groups would be done, we would repeat the chorus twice after someone.

THE PERFORMANCE

Most of the audience seemed startled to find out that they had to sit on the stage. It was interesting to see the dubious glances they approached us with, clearly doubtful about where they had to sit. They would incessantly conform whether they have to sit on the stage or not. With the 1st drum roll and music, started our performance. I wondered if the audience would understand. Understand everything we did and the importance of it. We had been told to believe in what we do for the audience to believe in it too. BELIEVE. BELIEVE. BELIEVE. The sole monumental element that had the power to strengthen our acts – BELIEF.

Personally, I found our groups actions conveying the message too directly to the audience in comparison to the other groups. This, I can also tell from the fact that at the end, the audience questions were majorly related to the 2nd group. Our group had no questions to be answered at all. I could also perceive this as perhaps they interpreted the meaning conveyed clearly and coherently, but that would be too unreal a thought. The other groups had actually affected the audiences' minds for them to have questioned them, the presence of curiosity was clearly visible.

The darkness, the drumroll, the music, the train were all tiny elements adding to the atmosphere. The power of the music, its words were unbelievably strong. The words contained so much thought in them. It was truly something veritably deep.

The main risk we encountered was that of falling of the seats while walking on them. If one fell, so would the rest. Mr. Pranab was dubious of that idea, but at the end we did risk it. And didn't it turn out to be successful? And it was all about that, all about taking the risks and it was of course worth it. The audience seemed to be disturbed by the end of the show, which is a good thing. That was our aim. To make them aware. To make them involved. To make them perturbed. To communicate to them of what the real difficulties/pain/problems faced by many others in the world and not be oblivious to it.

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