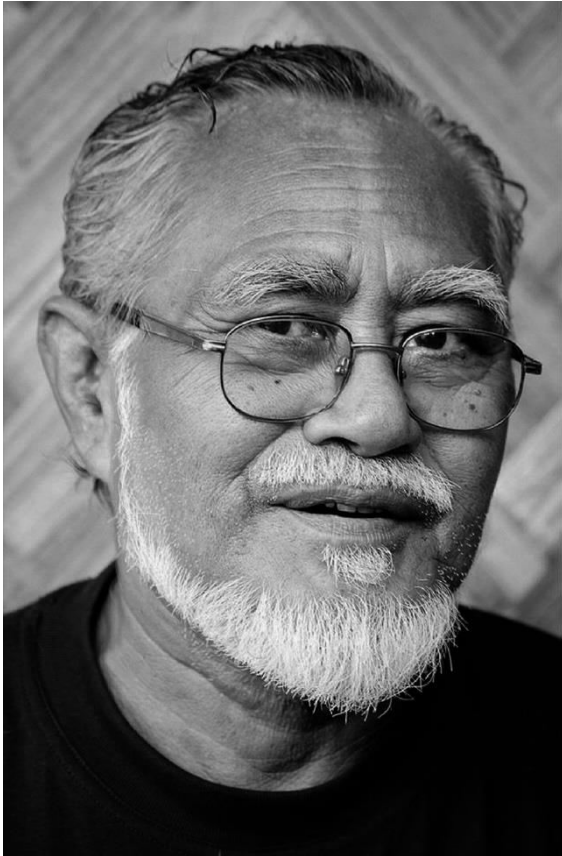


# INTERVIEW

## Theatre of Rituals

### Heishnam Kanhailal interviewed by Satyabrata Raut



Heishnam Kanhailal (1941-2016) is one of the few Indian directors who has developed innovative methods of direction through the process of training. His understanding of the rural culture, native behaviour and inter-cultural milieu resulted in the development of new practicing methods in contemporary theatre. He with the support of his most talented actress wife, Savitri Devi, has established 'Kalakshetra' at the outskirts of Imphal city in Manipur and continued his experimental works till his death in 2016. He has been conferred with SangeetNatakAkademi award, Padmashree and Padma Bhushan award for his outstanding contribution to Indian theatre. The interview below has been taken at his theatre complex at

Imphal prior to his death.

**SR:** *You have developed a new training system by collecting elements from day today rural gestures, which you experiment on urban and semi-urban actors. Please explain your methods.*

**Kanhailal:** In the very beginning of my career I have a very conscious mind. I wanted to leave away with all the dogmas. In my very first experiment I wrote a play and performed it. But I tell you the performance was quite different than the written text. You can't get that much in the text. But when you see a performance it becomes an experience. In the early 70s when Badal Sircar came to Imphal and witnessed my production, he invited me to Calcutta to work with him for a month. There I learnt all his technique and psychophysical exercises, which he had adopted from western theatre. Back to Imphal, I tried out all his

exercises with my actors for 7 to 8 years and tried to develop a kind of theatre at Imphal. But unfortunately, ours were not urban actors. They were from rural background and rural behaviour. They were deeply rooted in the soil. For the city actors it is important to remove the sophistications and deurbanise their body to make that adoptable for a kind of theatre. You know, in every culture human spine behaves differently. In order to make the body of the urban actors' suitable for the flexibility of theatre, these exercises might have been developed. It is a matter of fact that most of the exercises for theatre are derived from our childhood games and human activities. These games and activities are important for a sophisticated urban actors to open up their body and voice. But these exercises are not so important for my actors who born and brought up in the rural background. We have a different body with a different spine, suitable to our environment. We have so much of open and vast space with mountains around. We run and play in the valley, climb the mountains, scream and listen sounds from all the sides in the openness. Finally, I discovered that, it is better to develop exercises from my own surrounding suitable to a Manipuri body culture. We have our own dance forms, rituals and festivals in which our body plays the supreme role. After practicing with all types of Manipuri forms with our actors for 5 years, I derived a series of exercises in 80s, suit to my own culture. It is not an imitation of the culture rather a transformation of culture to modern theatrical forms, keeping the possibilities of actor's body.



A Scene from the play "Draupadi". Directed by Kanhailal. Courtesy: Kalakshetra, Imphal

In 1973, I did a production, 'Tamgnala' - Hunting spirit, the evil black magic practiced in Manipur. The play covered broadly the threatening of the unsocial elements, the goons of the society. Instead of speaking and behaving the daily life nature, we incorporate the exercises, which we created from daily life and made it an extension of life but in a theatrical manner. We tried to channelize the energy of the actor evenly in the production through these exercises. In this play 'Savitri Devi' was playing a poor and helpless widow whose only son became the victim of the goons. In the last part of the play she developed a sound that appeared like groaning, which haunts the audience. The movements are also designed and choreographed to suit to the sound, which is very shuttle and differs the daily life activities. *We never imitate nature rather behave nature*, for imitation and behaving are two different things. Imitation is linked with pretension, which is not our purpose of doing theatre. Another important element of common training process is *impersonation* and *representation*, which made 'Actor-Text-Character'- the convention of Theatre. But, I as a director never believed on this conventional process. I reject the old method of imitation and impersonation. I removed the act of pretending and behaving from my actor's training method. I forced on the term; '*Intending and doing*' in the method of training. Like for example; instead of pretending and behaving like a widow, I insist on the '*intension*' of the widow on which my actor is working. Instead of behaving like a widow, my actor would psychologically think of



the widow while doing the role. My working with the actors is based on this concept.

A Scene from the play "Pebet". Directed by Kanhailal. Courtesy: Kalakshetra, Imphal



In a theatre training institution, one has to learnt various techniques and methods of acting; Naturalistic, realistic, etc. They are universal methods, which ends in *representation* and *impersonation*. In this case the actors are no longer considered as artists because he/she does not have the scope of crossing the limit of the craft. But I with my team try to crack the boundary of the rigid method to go ahead a step further where my actors never imitate a character rather creates it by their personal experiences of life. In the process of creating a character, the '*self of the actor*' leads the character to perform and not the vice versa, as we generally observe in any conventional theatre presentation. One who sees my recent production of '*Dakghar*'- *Post office* written by Rabindranath Tagore, must have marked that, the actress Savitri Devi never tries to imitate the character of a 9-year-old boy '*Amul*' in the play, which she can't do at her age of 70. She, instead of pretending a 16 year boy, allows her '*self*' to play the role of '*Amul*', not physically but spiritually and conceptually. Though the style and method of doing the production is different, In the play *Dakghar*, I never try to deviate from the spirit of the playwright. The thematic value and the content of the play has never been teased.

This was my process of practicing theatre in the 70s. During this time, I have travelled like a nomad in the villages, in the rural vicinity and tribal belt of Manipur. I deeply observed the rituals and social life, the body language of the native people in various situations and developed certain methods for my theatre. During 80's those observations were scientifically adopted into the actors training system to give rise to a series of theatre exercises. These exercises, which are developed out of the socio-cultural limits of the local



life-scape, were tried upon a team of actors, particularly the untrained youths of Manipur whose body marked a sudden change in the decade of 80's due to the exposure to an urban culture- the TV culture.

Actor's Training by Kanhailal

Along with the physical exercises to bring the body instrument into discipline, I developed some vocal exercises to work on the actors' voice resonators. Do you ever observe how the entire body resonates when a child cry? This is natural which is not conditioned by any social factors. In the process of crying the child used all parts of body to express; the naval area, the chest, throat, nose and finally the cerebral region. The sound increases note by note in each step to touch the extreme note like the increasing scale of a harmonium. This natural observation is codified into the actor's voice training through a series of exercises. Another important exercise we developed is the '*breath control*'. , an essential tool to bring meaning to the speech. It was not at all a previous practice with the old school where the actors shout at the top of their voice in extreme situations. But we scientifically created the exercises to control over the air to channelize it evenly to a specific part of the body which needs to react in that particular situation. The role of breathing is immense to creating emotion in the speech. It helps in the formation of the character. Savitri Devi is a master of this art.

There is another important factor of the actor's training is the '*Yoga*'. It has a direct link with the body resonators and breath control. It neutralizes the actors' body and mind, which is essential to create new things. This is de-construction of the body instrument. Sometimes we also depend on *Vipassana yoga* to memorise the whole parts of the body in silence. In this way by collecting elements from various sources, I developed the exercises for my actors.

From the beginning of my career as a director I always opt for a non-textual-presentation, where the text only serves as the skeleton of the production and the not the ultimate authority of the production. The verbal text of a play certainly belongs to literature in which the author is the master. In a text based production, the author always dictates us to create. But as a creative artist, the director has every authority to create his own piece of art through the power of his imagination. In this process of creation, the author's text might be altered, edited and re constructed but without changing the thematic content of the play. While doing '*Draupadi*' and '*Dakghar*', I was very much aware of the content and the concept of the author. While doing Ibsen's '*Enemy of the people*' I never tried to out rightly reject the author's interpretation and impose my own ideas as a fashion going on today's theatre in urban cities. We just mould Ibsen into our localized conditions with the help of our exercises. My idea is not to overpower the text through my production design, rather to create

a harmonious blend between the text and the performance. We create our productions out of the texts without killing the spirit of the authors and this is my belief of *Theatre making*.

**SR:** *How the inner self works where there is no physical movement? How an actor reaches spirituality in the performance?*

**Kanhailal:** Spiritual performance happens generally in silence. It can be achieved through Yoga. It is the union of body, mind and soul. An actor lives two different life simultaneously; the inner and the outer. The inner being of the actor is responsible for this psychological condition. Unfortunately, no exercise is developed to achieve this state of being. Since it is the work of the actor, his union of soul and body becomes responsible to elevate him to that state. In my productions few of the actors achieved it while many could not. To raise the psyche of the performer into the state of awareness, Grotowski has developed some exercises, which he has derived from our classical training system. In our classical training, the performer's body behaves like a pot which reflects the inner truth with purity to reach the audience. Our classical tradition is full of with this discipline, which is called the "*Rigorous discipline of the East*". We can feel the presence of spirituality in the performance cultures of Japan, China and India. But to achieve this discipline, the performer has to pass through a long and painstaking process, which may take 15 to 20 years to master over the discipline. Our Indian dance and music tradition have rigorously followed this discipline for centuries but not the contemporary theatre.

Our Indian classical training system is called '*Gurukul*'. This system is based on three principles:

- i. *Sradha*- Love
- ii. *Sadhana*- Devotion
- iii. *Abvhyas*- Practice

In this training method, one is interlinked with the other. Nothing can be achieved in the absence of any one of it. Western theatre does not have this kind of training method for which they come here to learn regularly. On the contrary Western theatre training is based upon '*Objective analysis*', which we must learn from them. We must learn to codify a new training system for our modern actor based on our traditional principles along with *Objective Analysis*.

The irony of the training system in contemporary Indian theatre lies in its amateurish attitude. On like other performing arts, such as dance and music, we only learn through

productions, mainly in amateur groups. Most of our training is production oriented. We learn while we engage ourselves in productions. But training should not be linked with the production. It must have separate entity. Theatre training must be through the process of 'Riyaz'- practice, and not through any rehearsal of a particular play. After taking complete training for certain years, the actor can start his rehearsal for a play; training must be *'Process orientated, not production oriented'*. This kind of process orientation training system is developed in western countries where they produce professional actors but in India we lost this training, which needs to be revived. At 'Kalakshetra', we have been trying to implement the process oriented training system with our actors since 1997. the 'Kalakshetra' actor takes at least one year training before participating in a production.

**SR:** *What is Theatre of Transition and how you apply it in the training method?*

**Kanhailal:** The meaning of transition is variable, which is not permanent in nature. It joins two states of action and becomes a via media. It's a process of give and take. Whatever I have adopted from this life, I am trying to return back in the form of art. I can't assure, whatever I am giving is final. There is even no final truth since nothing is absolute. Today's actor can reject me tomorrow and find something new and different. Everything is transitory except one, which may remain consistent, i.e. *Theatre is for the humanity*. What we contribute is for the humanity only. Our pain, sufferings, self-tortured exercises, psychological games, and our expressions, all are meant for the social causes. This is theatre of transition where, *'the actor works as a transitory verb in between the audience and life'*. In the production of 'Draupadi', which runs for the last ten years, the scream of the actor is an extension of the human pain and agony that happened in the recent past. The play become a metaphor of human sufferings, particularly of women. By watching 'Draupadi', Sadanand Menon writes, *"Art is inspired by life but sometimes life also is inspired by Art"*.

"It was clear even as one watched the play in the comfort of the theatre space that Savitri's outrage and passion in her ultimate act of resistance, was not merely 'drama'. It was evident that there was a social energy and force behind it. It was evident that even if the Mumbai press didn't get it, the Manipuri women were sure to take the cue. And the results have been electrifying. *After all, it is not often that life imitates art.*"<sup>1</sup> (issues. 60)

Theatre can't survive without sharing the love and cooperation. It is useless to talk and deliver lecture on how to love the medium. You have to live in a group situation. This is a practical medium and you have to do it to achieve. While working in a group one has to

cooperate each other so that the sharing of love can spread. One must inspire others by his activity so that art can flourish in whose absence self-perception can't be developed and the art will be diminished into the level of craft only. There must be a harmony between all the elements of theatre including living actors and non-living objects on stage, like in a music concert where there is a bond between the singer and the instruments and the dancer with her accompanists. This is my ideology, and this is the essence of my existence in theatre.

*SR: You believe on the inner aesthetics. As a result, you rejected the external glamour to achieve the truth.. How and why you keep yourself away from all these external elements and how much political your theatre is?*

**Kanhailal:**I have been inspired by two theatre personalities; Grotowski and Badal Sircar. Before pioneering his own training system, Grotowski undertook a serious study on Stanislavsky method in Russia. Then he came to India to understand and study Indian theatre. Finally, he went back to establish his theatre laboratory at Poland. He conceptualized a theatre based on 'sacrifice', which might have derived from his Christian ideology. But he did not make it obvious. This way he created the concept of 'Holy Actor'. Badal Sircar is also an important actor trainer, but in a different way. He is a great Indian playwright. His presentation of the middle class life of modern India gave rise to a new theatre language. Sircar wanted to connect with the common man of this country to establish a dialogue with them. So, he rejected the formal presentation and went into the market place, street corners and roads, by stripping out all the theatricalities from his presentations to make it viable for the common man. He made theatre flexible and simple and served it as a need for the society.

My theatre practices grew up in poverty. In the early seventies, when I started doing theatre in a small village of Manipur, financial crisis was a big problem for us. We do not have any space to rehearse and perform. Therefore, I started my theatre by collecting money



from the village people with a promise to present a show in their village locality. We were



practicing 'Poor Theatre', not conceptually as Grotowski has envisioned but in a literary sense. Since we did not have money to spend on sets, lights and costumes, we had to depend only on the actors who can only express through a body, mind and voice. I forcefully confined myself to these three essential elements, but my limitation became my strength and I took this as a challenge. I started rejecting the superfluous elements, which seems to me unimportant including the richness of the text. I started looking back to my own traditions and tried to plunder into the richness of my culture, people's behaviour, various sounds and many diversified and invisible images hidden within them. Our rituals became the source of my theatre, in which I felt comfortable, which is a part of our social life and awareness also.

In a ritual the performer and the spectators share a common place, like in a temple, the priest and the devotees. A step ahead to this, even the god, priest and the devotees become one at a particular moment of time and develop an inner dialogue. Spiritually they become one. Here through rituals our senses meet with each other in the spiritual level and we become one. Like in my theatre, a character and the actor are not two; they both are one. Following this concept, I developed my character of the plays, which is an extension of my actor's body, mind and soul. It develops an organic inner dialogue in the sensory level of the spectators. This is the theory behind my *'Ritualistic Theatre'*. The meeting of the actor and spectator in the level of sensory and the establishment of the organic inner dialogue in between them, which leads both to achieve the spiritual experiences, is termed as *'Informed body of the spectator'*, developed by Jerzy Grotowski. In this way the individual soul can be evoked. But our evocation of the spectator's soul takes a different path from Grotowski's method, though the source is the same. He sacrificed all the elements of theatre to bring out the *'holy actor'* from within the performer, but we sacrifice for the sake of the human being and for the cause of the society. Our society is deteriorating day by day. In order to save the humanity, we need to provoke the society by establishing an inner dialogue with the spectators. My kind of theatre is purely for *socio-political context*. My actor becomes the voice of the oppressed those who suffer silently in the society. *"My 'Draupadi' is the eternal voice of revolution of the millions and millions suppressed women of the world, who have been tortured, raped, harassed by the cruel domination of power"*. In this context my theatre is a Political Theatre. My purpose of doing theatre is to rouse the audience to the spirit of human resilience. We have taken the privilege to release the silence of agony of the sufferers of the country, to liberate them from their state of mind.

It is very important to go to the heart of nature to revitalize your senses. In the absence of our senses we can't get cognition. For that it is essential to release our senses through music, dance, paintings, etc. That was the reason why Tagore created an environment for learning at Shantiniketan. Art can't be flourished in a closed chamber. For that openness is essential. Here one can start a dialogue with the spirit of the space.

***Satyabrata Raut is Professor at the Department of Theatre Arts, S N School, University of Hyderabad, India. He is veteran theatre practitioner, researcher & author and a recipient of the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award conferred by the President of India.  
Email: satya00191@yahoo.co.in***

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<sup>i</sup> Menon, Sadanand. *A Life Inspired by Art*. Indian Theatre Forum, Issue no.60, 1<sup>st</sup> January 2013.