

An Interview with Theatre Director M.K. Raina

Mitali Bhattacharya

“I believe that theatre is a community art.”

- M.K. Raina

M.K. Raina stands as a distinguished figure in the world of theatre, having a rich career spanning over four decades which is a rare blend of artistic brilliance, cultural activism, and scholarly pursuit, solidifying his legacy as a revered luminary in the world of theatre and beyond. In addition to his roles as a director and filmmaker, Raina has carved a prominent niche as a versatile actor across various platforms, including stage, film, web, and television. Notably, his contributions extend beyond mainstream avenues, as he has actively engaged with both urban and rural communities in South Asia, playing a pivotal role in revitalizing the traditional folk theatre of Kashmir known as *Bhand Pather*.

Raina's illustrious career has been adorned with numerous accolades, including the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Sahitya Kala Parishad Award, Hindi Academy Award, Badal Sircar Award, and the BV Karanth Lifetime Achievement Award. These honours reflect his exceptional talent and significant impact on the cultural landscape of India.

Beyond his artistic endeavors, Raina is also recognized for his contributions to education and academia. He has served as a visiting faculty member at esteemed institutions such as the National School of Drama, Central University of Hyderabad, IIT Hyderabad, IIT Bhilai, and the University of Hawaii. Moreover, Raina's scholarly and theatrical pursuits have been acknowledged with fellowships from Stanford University, USA, and appointments as a scholar-in-residence at Jamia Milia Islamia University.

In the year 2022, the following memorable face-to-face interview took place at the residence of M.K. Raina, located in Sector 26, Noida, Uttar Pradesh. As a budding research scholar and theatre enthusiast, the opportunity to engage with such a stalwart proved to be an enriching and transformative experience for me. During my interaction, Raina Sir passionately delved into fundamental concepts associated with drama and theatre, offering insights both on theoretical principles and practical applications. He emphasized that theatre is inherently a community art form, asserting that its essence lies in collective participation and shared experiences. According to him, theatre cannot exist in isolation; it thrives on collaboration and connection with its audience and performers alike.

Furthermore, Raina Sir discussed the significance of the text in shaping theatrical productions. He emphasized that the text serves as the foundation upon which performances are built,

providing a framework for exploration and interpretation. Importantly, Raina Sir highlighted that the text can be derived from any subject or medium, reflecting the creative vision and perspective of the playwright and director. In discussing the essence of performance, Raina Sir introduced the concept of *abhinaya* as a guiding principle. He explained that *abhinaya* encompasses the entire spectrum of expression, encompassing physical movements, vocal delivery, and emotional resonance. According to Raina Sir, the art of *abhinaya* regulates and enhances every aspect of the performance, imbuing it with depth, authenticity, and impact.

He goes on to explain the four types of *abhinaya* - *Aangik*, *Vachik*, *Aaharya*, and *Satvika*. *Aangik* involves the use of aesthetically pleasing bodily movements to convey characters or ideas. Through precise body language, actors express the myriad thoughts and emotions swirling within their minds. *Vachik* is the art of using speech to convey emotions. Actors modulate their voices to accurately reflect the feelings they are portraying. *Aaharya* comprises the use of decoration and props to convey emotions and enhance storytelling. This can include makeup, costumes, jewelry, set design, and the strategic use of props, all of which contribute to the overall visual and emotional impact of the performance. Finally, *Satvika* refers to the authentic expression of emotions by actors, where they are genuinely moved by the emotions of their characters or their fellow performers. This can manifest in various ways, such as shock, faintness, goosebumps, perspiration, changes in facial color, hyperventilation, tears, or alterations in voice tone. In other words, these four elements—*Aangik*, *Vachik*, *Aaharya*, and *Satvika*—work in harmony to create a rich theatrical experience, allowing actors to fully inhabit their characters and captivate spectators with their performances.

Overall, the interview with M.K. Raina provided invaluable insights into the basic dynamics of drama and theatre, illuminating the power of performance as a medium of artistic expression and communal engagement.

1. How do you define drama, theatre, and performance?

MK Raina: For me, drama, theatre, and performance are intertwined experiences. Theatre, in my view, is a communal endeavor; my existence within it hinges on the presence of community. This community extends both within and beyond the theater space. While drama represents the literary aspect, theatre embodies the collective act. During rehearsals, a play remains in a state of potential; it's only when the final act unfolds on stage that it transforms into a true performance. The presence of spectators across the stage completes this transformation, marking the culmination of dialogues, sound, lights, and spectatorship.

1. How do you understand the concept of text in relation to drama and performance?

MK Raina: The text extends beyond mere words on pages; it encompasses sounds, body movements, and props. Even without verbal communication, one can convey meaning through gestures, effectively creating a form of text. This multi-dimensional aspect of the text highlights its capacity to transcend traditional boundaries and encompass various forms of expression.

2. How do you understand the concept of designing in theatre and drama?

MK Raina: Designing can be seen as a technique shaped by the grammar of an act. To embark on design, one must first select a space. The essence of design lies in the realms of Mother Nature—growth and crisis. I perceive this through the seed principle (*Kathabeej*). When examining a seed, one envisions a plant within it. This plant unfolds in a specific time and space. Similarly, for a plant to bear fruit, it requires time to mature into a tree within a nurturing environment. Playwrights consider the dimensions of time and space when crafting a play. The optimal execution of a play or performance occurs through the harmonious interaction of *angika*, *vachika*, and *aaharya*, resulting in *satvika*. Just as a variety of dishes in a meal collectively satisfy the diner, the overall impact of a stage play emerges from the integration of text, acting, staging, and designing. Food serves as a fitting analogy for executing the temporal and spatial dimensions of a performance.

3. What is your comment on the process of adaptation of a text into a performance?

MK Raina: When it comes to adaptation, the thought of a text is important for playwrights. The thought acts as the base of the dramatic narrative. The thought of the text prompts a playwright to go beyond the text in terms of improvisation, interpretation, and creativity. The journey between the author of the text to the author of the performance is undertaken by the latter by considering the former's ideas. This helps the playwright (author of the adapted text) to think of various possibilities of novelty and action. Multiple rounds of analysis go into the rehearsals of the play with the actors as well.

4. How important is the aspect of storytelling to the author of the performance?

MK Raina: The quality of a storyteller's craft is determined by the art of storytelling itself. This concept can be likened to examining a well-crafted sweater: we often inspect its construction to appreciate the intricacy of its weaving. The effectiveness of the artist is evident in the skill and technique applied in creating the art. Similarly, in storytelling, it is the process by which a story is conveyed that determines its aesthetics and impact. As a director, it is essential to consider how the story unfolds from the author's perspective, and then craft it through time and space using various

performative elements. This approach underscores the paramount importance of narrative presentation and theatrical design in shaping the overall impact of a story.

5. Which is more important- the story itself or the execution of the story?

MK Raina: The execution of a story holds greater significance than the story itself. Take, for instance, the Ramayana, which can be enacted as Ramleela or performed as a ballad. In essence, it's the form of the story that carries weight. For a story writer, the plot takes precedence, followed by the architecture of the characters. However, for a playwright, the process becomes more intricate, as it incorporates the element of performance. This distinction underscores the importance of narrative presentation and theatrical interpretation in shaping the impact of a story.

6. Are the realities of play and performance different or the same? Is one more authentic than the other?

MK Raina: Both the story and its characters possess their distinct realities and destinies, inherently bound to their time and space. When preparing for a performance, both elements hold pivotal roles to play. The story sets the stage, establishing the narrative framework and providing the context within which the characters exist and evolve. Conversely, the characters breathe life into the story, imbuing it with depth, emotion, and relatability. Their actions, motivations, and interactions propel the plot forward, enriching the overall performance. Thus, while the story provides the foundation, the characters infuse it with vitality, ensuring that both elements are indispensable contributors to the theatrical experience.

7. What is your take on your adaptations of written texts? Do you de-dramatise, re-dramatise or dramatise from scratch?

MK Raina: The adaptation process of written texts often requires improvisation, particularly depending on the socio-cultural and geographical context. A prime example of this is my adaptation of William Shakespeare's King Lear into *Badshah Pather*, marking the first-ever **Bhand Pather* rendition by traditional performers residing in a remote region of Kashmir. This creative endeavor emerged from a series of theatre workshops initiated in Jammu and Kashmir in 2001 under the National School of Drama's extension program. The primary objective was to unite young individuals and seasoned theatre artists to revitalize the rich Kashmiri folk theatre tradition, which had suffered due to prolonged unrest in the state. The workshop venue, facilitated by the Department of Tourism, Government of Jammu and Kashmir, in collaboration with the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), provided a conducive space for this artistic exploration. In *Badshah*

Pather, a diverse cast of 30 individuals, including children from families with a heritage of traditional verbal theatre performances, collaborated on the pre-written text of Shakespeare. Throughout this process, the translation of the text was meticulously crafted to align with the informal and accessible style characteristic of *BhandPathers*. The success of this production was a testament to the collective dedication and support of the entire community involved.

**Bhand Pather, a form of farcical theatre, is believed to have entered Kashmir from Persia through the Muslim courts in the 14th century, subsequently spreading through the rest of North India. Typically performed in open-air theaters, it incorporates numerous Sufi elements such as Sufi music. Performers sometimes don masks and engage in lively dances, punctuated with satire and humour.*

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Interviewer's profile

MsMitali Bhattacharya is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in English, focusing on Literature and Humanities at Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, located in New Delhi. Her research interests primarily centre around Drama and Theatre Studies, alongside interests in Postcolonial Studies, Gender Studies, and Literary Theory & Cultural Studies. MsBhattacharya has been presenting her papers at numerous national and international conferences. Her contributions to academia are further evidenced by the publication of her papers in esteemed peer-reviewed journals, including those recognized by UGC-CARE. She can be reached at bhattacharyamitali174@gmail.com

