

[Yogi Playwright Infusing Indian Theatre With More Atma and Altruism](#)

Category : [July 1992](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jul. 02, 1992

Yogi Playwright Infusing Indian Theatre With More Atma and Altruism

Peruman, Ravi

The door opens. With snowy beard and tussled hair, a distinguishingly tall Indian gentleman in a handsome, rustic kurta vest greets me. "Aah, welcome," he booms as if on stage. "Come in, come in. This is my friend Jim's home. Leave your shoes here." I am ushered to a second-floor flat of a quaint San Francisco Victorian home. He bounds up. I climb. Already I know my interview with this great actor, director, playwright, linguist, cartoonist, natya yogi, doctor of philosophy - and other personae - is going to be a play, or lila (divine dance) we would correct me. I'm ready. I love these kind of interviews.

Moments later, we dive into the spirituality of theatre, its potential as a vehicle for the Self-unfoldment of both actor and audience. He points to a TV. "God has given us perfection in better areas than this television. But we don't know our own channel, so we watch other channels all the time." He flutters his eyes in rapid reflex, "Eyes become chewing gum all the time. Their minds are all filled up and the psyche cannot vomit it out." He shows me his cartoon of the "garbage mind." "This cartoon makes you want to vomit out. Then, more empty, you enjoy. That is the purpose of the theater, of yoga, of humor. "As Patanjali is the guru for yoga," he escalates, "so Bharat Muni is the great guru of theater, the one who started all this natya and wrote Natya Shastra." I see in his eyes a reservoir of animated enthusiasm about theater, art and life about to engulf me. "Bharat Muni says dance, drama and music are not different. All mantra yoga. Music is an extension of Aum and that music takes you back toward your Self. So should drama."

"Would you like some tea or coffee?" he interrupts, imploring me to accept his offer with effusive friendliness. I myself desperately want some good, strong Indian tea, but reply. "I'll have what you have" and load a cassette into my tape-recorder. Still standing, we are in a small, sun-lit kitchen. Again I note his bigger-than-life

stage aura - sort of Anthony Quinn/Amitabh Bachchan in centimeters but with a spritely mirth all his own. He engineers the dark brew. He likes standing, the actor's natural pivot point. He continues about Bharat Muni and rasa - that too-big-for-definition word that lurks somewhere between feeling, emotion, passion, sound and color of human life. "When you see through the character into the play's heartbeat, that special rasa comes to you, and it fires up your inner Self. This is what the actor tries to communicate.

His tea-making nears the finale as flecks of ginger root and cardamom debut. I see a curtain bow coming. I was right. "Like I am preparing this beautiful tea for you, Ravi, and you will say, 'Oh Patel, this is so good,' but can you explain why? No. But it will fire something in you, like Orson Wells' Othello fires in you what jealousy is all about, like John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men fires in you about how beautiful, but fragile people are. This is theater, this is rasa, and this is yoga, natya yoga, and basis of my doctoral thesis. Natya Deepa Prakarana: that the lamp of the theater is capable of illuminating the Self." The milk boils after about three-quarters of an hour. My host pours the first cup of his potent potion.

Jayanti Patel was born in 1927 in Ahmedabad, a dusty Gujarat trading metropolis and proud blend of old and new. His father died when he was only two. He was raised by his maternal uncle. By college, the playwright had emerged. Young Patel passionately wrote and staged his own dramas, living more in the moment than master-minding a safe, studious career path. Then, like many young intellectuals of his day, he threw himself at the feet of Gandhi's Independence movement, bringing him face-to-face with the spindly, charismatic hero at Satyagraha Ashram in Ahmedabad. Amidst the privations of semi-monk life, he awoke a spirit of selfless service and embraced ahimsa, non-violence. In fact, this pacifist principle indirectly put a scar the size of a half-dollar in Patel when, during a confrontation, a soldier's bullet tore open his right shin.

Being shot in the leg brought a boon. During the long months of bedridden confinement, his grandfather tutored the wounded freedom fighter in Vaishnava lore. "He read me the Ramayana, Gita, and Srimad Bhagavatam. Celestial chords awoke the actor's sleeping religious nadis. "Like Gandhi, we are Vaishnavites: we also had a temple in our home. It was then that I taught myself cartooning," he adds. Once recovered, the only college to accept Patel - because of his public involvement with Gandhi - was the private S.L.D. Art College where he burrowed back into the books and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts with Honors degree in Sanskrit and Gujarati Literature.

Wed through an arranged marriage to a girl who quickly fell in love with a man "who would fight for freedom," the Patels were soon parents to the first of three children. But the young father was abruptly asked to leave his uncle's home. "Theater was not a welcome career choice," he smiles. Now living in Bombay and a cartoonist of rank, Patel applied to Walt Disney Studios in Hollywood as an animator. "They said, 'We will try you out, but what if we then reject you, who will pay your way back to India?'" So they forgot about me. So I worked for 15 years as a public relations officer for big companies." But theater remained Patel's preoccupation, especially Bhavai, the 600-year-old folk-theater of North Gujarat. Originally a temple ritual mixing dance, drama and music to propitiate Goddess Amba, it evolved into a highly entertaining form of story-telling.

A forceful Patel fought to elevate Bhavai theater to greater recognition. In one bold scheme, he sold annual subscription tickets for 12 plays for four rupees, 32 cents. He staged every one. All were smash hits. With a fancy for the great Western dramatists, he also imported, translated and staged seven Western Pulitzer Prize-winning classics, including *Our Town*, retooling them for Gujarati audiences - e.g. *George Washington Slept Here* became *Gandhi slept Here*. He worked with Bombay's Prava Pravasi, the prestigious Indian national Theater, nurtured his own theater group, Swaroop, won Gold Medals and rave acclaim for his one-man play *My Experiment with Umtruth*, that eventually played in the US.

With support from then Indian Ambassador G.L. Mehta and a U.S. Congressman who liked Patel's staging of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Jayanti Patel won a John F. Kennedy scholarship, and came to the USA in 1967. The USA was a maverick actor's paradise and Patel roamed the country cornering every stage luminary he could - Arthur Miller, Neil Simon, humorist Art Buchwald, comedian Jack Benny and others. He studied theater briefly at Stanford, Yale, and Tulane, and worked with the American Educational Theater Association.

Then suddenly. "I had a 'spiritual emergency.' I was a very good theater person, and thinking, 'Oh, I am great.' Then I got into some business in Chicago with my children, and we lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Then I lost my mother and my wife also."

Anguishing how to proceed, "quite by accident, I was listening to Swami Chinmayananda speak on Vidyananda's Panchadasi and mention natya deepa prakarana, "understanding the inner light of the Self through the lamp of the

theater. In a giant U-turn, I said to myself, 'Oh, this is my subject! I must do a PhD on it.' So I went to the University of Bombay, to Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, to see my guru, Dr. Suresh Upadhyaya. I said, 'Sir, I want to do a PhD on theater as yoga.' He said, 'you do not mix whiskey with milk you know.' "But mix them Patel did. And at 53 - his thesis accepted by a proud guru - actor Patel became Dr. Patel.

Now, at 65, his mellow honesty refreshes: "Samadhi I do not know. But joy, I have achieved this while doing plays. The best moment in theater is near to the best moment in a temple." He bounces between Bombay, San Francisco and New York, nurturing new and old productions with paternal, vanaprasthin pride. In New York he stays at the ashram of his Guruji, Swami Brahamananda, and directs his own energetic Yoga Maya Theater. He is known as Swami Abhinayananda, ("Expression/Bliss Monk) conferred on him in an initiation that bids him wed Hindu spirit to stage as his seva, service and sadhana. He does this triumphantly. My tea has cooled and I ask him one last question - his message for youth? He transforms into a kindly dad: 'Enjoy life while understanding the Self, my boy. It's a little hard. Enjoy this religion I'm teaching you.' But the boy responds, 'Please, I want to go with my friends.' I say, 'OK, go with your friends, but study them. Find out who is Krishna; find out who is Siva. Find out for yourself these things I am teaching.'"

Address: Ananda Ashram, RD 3 Box 141. Monroe, NY, USA. 10950. Tel:
914-782-5575

Natya Yogi

- Bharata created Natyashastra as a fifth Veda. He borrowed recitative text from Rigveda, melody from Samaveda, the concept of acting from Yajurveda, and sentiments from the Atharvaveda. He describes natya as 'the divine process of the creation of dramatic art and its relation to the Vedas.'

- Drama, like all Indian arts, has a religious origin, hence has always been a means of worship. Its ultimate purpose being to bring about welfare and bliss.

- The legendary Rukmini Devi has rightly observed that the dance is a form of

yoga. It needs true bhakti. We have no more temple dancing today, but we can bring the spirit of the temple to the stage. If we do this, our physical bodies will become transmuted and non-physical. Every performance become a means of not only making the dancer [or dramatist] one with the higher but the audience too.

- Martha Graham, the greatest of modern dancers was able to transcend: "I am interested only in the subtle being, the subtle body beneath the gross muscles."

- A yogi sits in a cave, but feels himself all-pervading and eternal. In drama, the limitation of time is dissolved. The experience of an actor and a yogi is the same - to go beyond worldliness and to transcend one's individual self.

Patel Live

Ravi Peruman: Please describe your special "stamp" - "natya, hatha, and hasya yogas," theatre, body, and humor.

Jayanti Patel: These three yogas have one cosmic purpose - to bring joy. Bharat Muni says when the Gods were sad, Brahma gave them life and said, "Now enjoy." But they were not able to enjoy it, so they went to Him asking for a toy. So God said, "Alright, theatre is your toy. Play with it and enjoy yourself." There's nothing like living when you're just enjoying the glory of the moment. That's what I am doing with natya yoga, hatha yoga, and hasya yoga. With those tools, we can fight it out and come back to our *apa*, our Self.

RP: How did you decide to be an actor?

JP: I have the tendency to express myself - if 5 people come around, I will start acting. I don't know why, but I started that way.

RP: Who were your early influences?

My drama professor at S.L.D. Art College in Ahmedabad, Mr. Ramanaryana Pathak. When reciting poetry, he would cry. The first time in my life I ever saw real drama was in his eyes. Then comes Professor Suresh Upadhyaya, head of Bharati Vidya Bhavan. But this yogi (he shows me a photo) was such a unique person. "You can never change my inner Self," he said. He is Akhand Ananda Maharaj, with whom I worked for 7 years. The second guru who helped me is Swami Brahmananda. He loves theatre as well as yoga. I consider him as my Guru now because he taught me the approach toward the Self which is a sure way, no need to haggle about it.

RP: What is the actor's goal?

JP: Identification of the local self into the cosmic Self, and also for the audience. The local self is the instrument, my friend, for sharing the rasa (feeling).

RP: What is the acting process?

JP: (He pauses. Tears well up in his eyes.) Sometimes a moment comes and you cry; as an actor you know you are not crying. But the audience concludes from my movements that "I" am crying.

RP: You say you don't like the meaninglessness of life theme in Western theatre.

JP: Yes, but like Siva, you must also take the poison of life, but you mustn't allow it into your heart. And like Krishna, be playful. He is a man of yogamaya theatre, because the theatre is in your eye. It is not inside the proscenium arch. You have to go beyond this body. Transcendental Self. But, and most importantly, it doesn't mean that life is useless.

RP: Please say more about Gandhi.

JP: That period was something like magic, a dream. The whole thing was an atmosphere. Gandhi's atmosphere was simplicity in life. You don't accumulate things while being a messenger of God and work for other people. I used to go to Gandhi's ashram. Whole families used to live there very simply. Costumes were spun by hand, we had simple food, we'd believe in God all the time, pray to Him. You might not know, Charlie Chaplin and Gandhi met in 1931 and agreed with his "simple is beautiful" totally. He told Gandhi: "In modern times people are just slaves of mechanical society." I am now working with the Gandhi Center, researching and encouraging them to teach using more hasya, humor.

One more thing - to be born in India is a lucky part of life. I am not against USA; don't misunderstand me, but in India the society is still so beautiful; here there is so much thrown out. India is making a xerox of western society. I am doing my small part to change this through my theater, through humor, and through hatha yoga. People are listening. What I really love about the USA is that they have beautiful education about the performing arts. That is why I came here: to learn and to transplant that back into my country, and that is what I am doing."

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.