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Vishwanath Bite in Conversation with Abhishek Majumdar

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Abhishek Majumdar is a playwright, theater director, teacher, and actor based out of Bangalore. He writes in English, Hindim and Bangla. He is currently the artistic director of the Indian Ensemble. His first play was Pratiwandhi, an adaptation of Sunil Gangopadhyay's Bangla novella, followed by Niharika, and Lucknow 76, which were original works. His other plays include Harlesden High Street (Winner of the Hindu Metroplus Playwright's award), An Arrangement of Shoes (Winner of the TFA writer's award), A Small Small World, The Djinns Of Eidgah (Royal Court International Playwright's residency 2011), Rizwaan, Waterlines, Gasha (written by Irawaiti Karnik, devised at Indian Ensemble, conceptualized and directed by Majumdar), Kaumudi, Afterlife of Birds, and Thook (written by Sandeep Shikar and Irawati Karnik, devised at Indian Ensemble, conceptualized, designed and directed by Majumdar). Abhishek is a member of the Young Vic Director's Network, London and the Lincoln Center Director's Lab 2012, New York. Abhishek has received various scholarships and grants in the field of theater, including the Charles Wallace Scholarship and has been awarded the Inlaks Scholarship in Theatre for year 2008-2009. He is a graduate from LISPA (London International School of Performing Arts) and has also trained at Yatrik, Mahesh Dattani's Studio and at AdiShakti Theatre Lab.



Will you tell us something about yourself (place of birth, school and anything in between)

I was born and raised in Delhi. My parents worked at the Jawaharlal Nehru University , and so in many ways I had this idyllic childhood in the midst of sports , music and academia. I went to the Tagore International School in Delhi, which is run by the Tagore Education Society and so clearly even in those days , without any label, it was not the usual competitive school. Children had a lot of space to think, create things, daydream and loiter. At least I remember , having such moments in plenty .

Then I went to Delhi University to study Physics and Mathematics, and then to Xavier’s Institute of Management in Bhubaneswar to study Rural Development (which I did not complete) , followed by a master’s program at National Institute of Technology in Tiruchirapalli and finally a masters level theatre course at the London International School of Performing Arts.

Which books did you find yourself reading whilst growing up and which are you currently reading?

I read nothing while growing up. For the longest time I used to detest reading but the credit for keeping me close to literature goes to my elder sister. She read out stories to me through my childhood. She studied English literature in Delhi University and also was into Bangla literature. So she read out Odyssey, Macbeth, Tagore , Sukumar Ray , Dickens and Russian Writers to me while I was growing up .

At the moment, I am reading ‘ Eastern Religions and Western Thought ‘ by S Radhakrishnan, Stories of Budhadeb Guhain Bangla and in Hindi stories of Kamleshwar. I always read something parallely in these three languages.

Who are some of your favorite authors that you feel were influential in your work? What impact have they had on your writing?

NaguibMahfoz, Salman Rushdie, Nabarun Bhattacharya , William Shakespeare, Mohan Rakesh, GirishKarnad, Chandrashekhar Kambar, Rabindranath Tagore, Borges, Thomas Jefferson, James Joyce, V S Naipaul, Marquez, Samuel Beckett, Mario Vargas Llosa, Zizek, Kanwal Bharti, Kabir, Anindita Sengupta, Orhan Pamuk, U R Anantmurthy , Vijay Tendulkar, Pankaj Mishra, Satyajit Ray , Tony Kushner , Vikram Seth and Jose Saramago.

Its still a partial list. I am a compulsive reader.

I don’t know how these authors have consciously inspired me but I know all of them have. They have made me aware of what good writing can be capable of and how much one must strive for it.

What do you do when you are not writing?

Many things really . Read, Run, Play, Travel, Cook , Spend time with Family , watch theatre, direct plays and teach. I don't write very often. As in put pen on paper. But am writing in my head all the time.

What advice do you have for aspiring writers? Especially Playwrights.

Read a lot. And don't write unless you cant live without it. Enjoy the act of being a writer. It is the best job in the world if you love it for the sake of loving it. If there is anything else , then it can be very tedious.

Can you describe the time when you first realised that creating was something you absolutely had to do?

I cant because it was perhaps there in my house all the time. My sister is very creative. My mother used to play the Piano and sing , most of my cousins draw very well , so everyone was always creating something. In fact I did not do anything for a long long time. But I had a lot of time growing up so I made things. Games really. Imaginary situations and adventures and stories. One day that became a profession. But I consciously did not think of it as a moment when I absolutely had to do it. It was just there and I loved it.

Do the Internet and social media contribute to the well-being of Literature?

They could I suppose. The internet definitely because one can read so much online , although I find it very difficult to. But online book stores are wonderful since the availability is huge. I am not sure about social media. I think its like the college canteen. It can help to bring people together but ultimately those people need to be in another discerning space to intellectually gain from each other. Each table has its own intellectual scale and so does each interaction on the social media. Its very non standardized.

Which aspects of your writing reader in general and Research scholars in particular must discover and explore?

I am not sure. Most people who used to approach me earlier were interested in the politics of my plays. Now there are new classifications like Islamic writing and South Asian writing that my work tends to fall in.

I imagine research to be an imaginative act, and hence scholars who begin somewhere and then discover some other place by the end are interesting.

How would you describe uniqueness of each of your Plays?

I cannot. I am too close to them. I can do so for other people's plays but for my plays someone else would need to do this exercise.

How to you see the role of Translations in Modern Indian Theatre?

We need many more translations. Good translations can make all the difference in our playwriting scenario. At the moment we have access to all the writing of the world except that of other languages in our own backyard.

Modern Indian Theatre, can only be modern and Indian if it is not imitative and for that its very important for us to have access to each other's work in the vernaculars.

Are there any new Indian Playwrights that have grasped your interest?

Many. Neel Chaudhuri is absolutely brilliant. I think he is one of the best playwrights in English at the moment in the world. His grasp over the language takes one's breath away.

In Hindi there are Manav Kaul and Sandeep Shikhar. Irawati Karnik writes in many languages and is very powerful with her work. She has extraordinary versatility and can work with many different kinds of material. I have had the opportunity to work with most of these people.

Out of the people I have not worked with, I think Parvathy Ravindran , a new playwright is very promising and of course Maharashtra has always had and continues to have a strong playwriting tradition. Dharmakirti Sumanth is very good. Ramneek Singh has great depth in his politics and in general I think there is a wonderful surge in playwriting nationwide which is very promising.

**How do you feel about ebooks vs. print books and alternative vs. conventional publishing?
What do you think is the future of reading/writing?**

I personally like physical books but I like reading reference books on a kindle because its easier to keep notes on it.

The future I think is in all these media.

I don't think the future is so much about the technology as it is about content. The threat is from poor content, consciously being paraded in the market in the guise of some kind of social service that supposedly publishers are engaging in , in order to bring new readers.

Publishers need to understand that everything between two covers is not a book. A book has to have some ideas that change ones world either in a delightful or critical way. It can be

entertaining like Alice in Wonderland or as dense as Subaltern Studies Readers or more, they can be graphic novels or comic books, but they need to be books. This whole business of publishing rubbish unambitious writing, consciously is criminal. I think its unethical to propagate bad taste in the name of populism.

How do you see the Literary Scene in India? Is it progressing or retrogressing?

I don't think Literary Scenes Progress or Retrogress. At all points in history, good writing has been much less than bad writing. Our greatest fear today should be that of marketing departments making publishing decisions. I imagine in earlier times it was a different kind of fascism.

The new phenomenon of attacking writers and painters by right wing Hindutva groups is retrogressive not for literature but for society in general. More so for law and order because most people realize that these are political motivations rather than people really being hurt. Our civic society is too smart to be manipulated this easily unless in certain cases when the manipulation helps a particular section of society.

So the literary Scene I think is what it is. People will continue to respond through words. They might get published or not , their books might get burnt or not, but that is not a measure of the scene. We have created our greatest epics outside of literacy. Our civilization is a storytelling civilization and an argumentative one. I am hopeful about the literary scene. I am skeptical about our society's ability to stand up for it and demand good literature, which is really our collective responsibility.

How will you judge the body of Contemporary Indian Writing in English?

There is a lot that I have not read. I have stopped reading Diaspora writing long ago , about how much people in San Francisco are missing Calcutta and such. I am much more interested in writers who have something genuine to talk about like Rushdie and the new wonderful writers like Rana Dasgupta , Mohsin Hamid (Counting Pakistan in this conversation) , Neel Chaudhuri and Anindita Sengupta. Then of course we have all this Chetan Bhagat school of writing and the off springs of that school , writing so called books which are ruining potential future readers by telling them that what they are doing now is called 'reading'.

So it's a mixed bag I think. Literature that has some rigour is great. Literature which is essentially rudimentary, banal writing is terrible in any language at any point of time. Its counter productive and though it accuses others of snobbery, its main problem is its lack of rigour and the whole reverse snobbery about being accessible. Its disrespectful to readers because it thinks readers are not intelligent or nuanced.

What is the role of the Central Sahitya Akademi in popularizing the Indian English Literature?

Being the only large body who can do this work, I imagine they can do a great job. However, they do not seem to be very active most of the time. I am a regular subscriber to the Indian Literature magazine, and some of the things they publish are not up to the mark. Some of the other work is really good and its not a matter of taste. It's a matter of discretion. Anyone can say this looking at a volume.

I hope they work more in this area. I truly believe in all forms of literature there are good writers in English in India and also there is a lot of room to translate many vernacular works to English. It can be a massive project and a very important one. I hope they are at it and I am unaware of it rather than them being truly as absent as they seem to be .

What projects are you working on at the present? And what do your plans for future projects include?

I am working at the moment on two plays.

One is an English play about Our relationship to Nature and inability to look beyond our narrow national interests when it comes to preserving nature or philosophically positioning ourselves as active participants versus users of ecology.

The Second play is in Hindi and is about various facets of Hinduism versus the various facets of Hindutva.