

A Probe into the annals of theatre history to explore and document the productions of Gurcharan Das' play, '9 Jakhoo Hill'

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Abstract: *The playwright and his plays, its themes and characters, have all been discussed, written about and published. But the performance of the plays, its different contexts, script, space, movement, producers, actors, directors, technical crew, audience and its significance have hardly been spoken about. The list dwindles further, when the focus shifts to the performance of Indian plays in English. If history can delineate a country's heritage, theatre history can also disseminate information about the way of life of a particular place and period. It is a rich treasure that awaits to be unearthed. This paper is an attempt to twist the trend by endeavoring to document the theatrical journey of Gurcharan Das' play, '9 Jakhoo Hill', which was selected by the critics as the 'Pick of the Festival' at the 2004 Grahamstown Arts Festival, South Africa.*

Key Words-*Bhaskar Ghose, Documentation, Gurcharan Das, Indian English Plays, 9 Jakhoo Hill, Partition, Performance, Performance research, Sunit Tandon, Theatre, Yatrik, Guwahati, Shimla, Kusum Haidar, Neeta Mohindra.*

I. Introduction

Literary history, largely has detailed and categorically positioned accounts of various play texts by various playwrights. A glimpse into the performance of plays is a neglected saga. It is widely regarded as something that cannot be archived. The presentness of the performance is perceived to be at odds with the archives quest for the permanence, stacking and storing for the future to refer to. Except for a few newspaper reviews, and articles in scholastic journals, theatrical performances of plays have hardly been touched upon. Yet, in spite of the essential ephemerality of performance, the demand for documenting its practices on behalf of performance research and historiography has grown over the years. Michael Mangan States,

“It's not only the play texts but the performance and its interpretations open doors to new ways of understanding ourselves and our culture. The theatre buildings themselves, playing spaces, performers, and conventions of performance, also open up such possibilities. Theatrical conventions after all, reflect ways of seeing the world, and theatres- their buildings and the scenography that they employ- offer pictures of their audiences' ideas about reality.”[1]

Performance research not only widens our knowledge on the theatrical practices, but also on the socio cultural and political make-up of the society the play depicts, and of the different points in time during which it had been performed. Multiple layers of history of different periods can be culled out from performance research for the benefit of the past, present and the future.

In the west, the pioneering archival research of John Genest's '*Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration 1660 to 1830*', published in 1832, has documented the earlier theatrical works and the times. In India, though the documentation of its theatrical performances has received much less attention, in the recent decades, there is a notable surge in the books on Indian Drama, like Manohar Laxman Varadpande 's '*History of Indian Theatre-Volume I and II*', '*History of Indian Theatre: Classical Theatre*', and '*Concise Dictionary of Indian Theatre*', and '*The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*'. But when it tapers to documentations on the English plays in India, the numbers become negligible. Waman Kendre, the Director of NSD, stated that,

“We are a careless society when it comes to documenting and reading our own history...There are few good centers and individuals who have documented research on theatre, but that is all in pockets, but no integrated effort. There is no advanced studies in this stream of academics...Such research and studies are the need of the hour...” [2]

Hence this paper has zeroed in on Gurcharan Das' play, '*9 Jakhoo Hill*' to fill that void. The play is set against the political turmoil and disillusionment in India during the nation's demoralizing war with China. It registers

the Story of two families uprooted from Lahore by partition of India and Pakistan. The play and the period it portrays, is very significant to the History of India. Extensive research has been done to trace the various productions, its intensions and influences, to understand and elicit the nation's wounds and subsequent remedies, culture and varied tradition. The methodology applied to assimilate this research is a tough terrain to ride on, as performance research requires a different framework altogether. Braving all the limitations in pulling together the facts, this research is set to unravel the fine points relating to the crafting of the play, its production and its intricacies.

II. Methodology

Performance research requires restructuring of old methods and adoption of historiography. Historiographical report describes, explains and interprets theatrical events in a sequence. Besides providing *who, what, where and when*, the report covers *how and why* as well. Postlewait asserts,

“All kinds of theatrical activities in the past- no matter what their mode of delivery, may require historical investigation and understanding. This is the case for events that occurred three millennia ago, three centuries ago, or three days ago.”[3]

Historiography is like dramaturgy which views performance as an organic whole, involving everything about a performance-the spoken word, movement, sound, light, space, time, the soul, internal structure, context and audience. It hence becomes a suitable companion along with Patrice Pavis 'Questionnaire', which is a charter for performance analysis.

As this research reports a play that was staged in the past and not a live performance, an all-inclusive methodology is the obvious choice. Evidences were collected on the basis of Pavis Questionnaire. The materials were explored in the way charted out by Postlewait, followed by interpretation and narration with the 'whole' in the mind. Visiting libraries, newspaper archives, photographing documents, analyzing invites and advertisements, correspondences with theatre scholars, actors, directors, production managers, archive directors, and recording commentaries of the associated members of the production unit were part of the methodological procedure employed to identify and locate the materials upon which the research is on.

III. The playwright and the play

Born on 3rd October, 1943, Gurcharan Das, a self-proclaimed libertarian is an Indian author, commentator, and public intellectual. He is the author of international best-sellers, '*India Unbound*', '*Difficulty of being good*' and '*India grows at night*'. His novel '*A fine family*', is partly autobiographical. The play under study, '*9 Jakhoo Hill*' is part of the collection '*Three English Plays*'.

The action happens in the Diwali of 1962 around the family of Amrita, her daughter Ansuya and brother Karan who migrated to Delhi and then to Shimla from Lahore, clinging to the memories of lost glory uprooted by Partition. The changing social order was represented by the family of Chitra and her son Deepak who migrated to Mumbai from Lahore after partition. A series of events in their lives interwoven with the complications by the Indian bureaucracy represented by ICS, Rai Saheb, destroy the calm of 9 Jakhoo Hill. The plot has traces of Gurcharan's life and experiences in Shimla. Individual personality most often fills the work of every professional. So it is natural for Gurcharan to colour his creative writing with his economic and social perspective. He agreed that,

“It is a play which draws upon my experience of having lived in Shimla and people I know in the business world...I think a writer lives with the character for a while before he puts it down on a paper, whether it is conscious or sub-conscious. You invest them with certain qualities, certain values. Sometimes a character overtakes the writer. You cannot realise how far you are going with that character but the character develops likes of their own and they develop their own voices. The writer's voice coming through is bound to happen. Whether it is a conscious effort or not.”[4]

IV. Productions

4.1. Yatrik

Yatrik, founded by educationalist Joy Michael was a travelling theatre group. Rati Bartholomew, Sneih Dass, Sushma Seth, Nigam Prakash, Roshan Seth, and Kusum Haidar became the first members of the group. The group got registered as a repertory in August 1964. It had consistently done socially relevant theatre. It championed wholeheartedly, English plays written by Indian playwrights with Indian context and content, revolving around situations and characters the audience can identify and empathise with. The play '*9 Jakhoo Hill*' was lying with Gurcharan unattended for many years. Fortunately, when Bhaskar Ghose from Yatrik took

it up, it gained its freedom from the printed pages and started hovering with flying colours in many stages, for many years. Sunit Tandon mentioned in his directors note that,

“I am sure that the entire cast and the production team would agree with me when I say that what has excited us about ‘9 Jakhoo Hill’ has been not only its closely observed delineation of characters and a society going through a period of crisis and transformation, but also the opportunity to translate a playwright’s vision into its first living reality on the stage.”

4.1.1 The crafting of the play

Once the play came into the magical hands of Yatrik, they conducted workshops with actors, director and the playwright to preserve the writer’s vision intact. Sunit Tandon affirmed that,

“We discussed together and we had sessions of readings with actors who interacted with Gurcharan and came up with suggestions and ideas and that was a very rewarding experience for us all. Gurcharan was very receptive to our ideas and what started off as a three act play is now a four act play and not necessarily longer... There will be further fine tuning during the rehearsal process. We will have some improvisation. We will have adjustments as we go along and it’s really a wonderful opportunity to be able to do that with Gurcharan.”[5]

Having such workshops at regular intervals with actors, directors and playwrights will certainly make theatre more vibrant and alive. Gurcharan was also pleased by the outcome of the workshop which crafted ‘9 Jakhoo Hill’ to its fineness. He said,

“I think it made the play tighter. We shortened it. The most important contribution of the workshop was to give it a single focus. I re-wrote the ending of the play to bring the focus back to the girls.”[6]

The original play text went into several editions before it was staged. In fact, the printed version was born out of the collaboration between Yatrik and Gurcharan. Originally, Gurcharan had uncle Karan say ‘I love you’ to his niece Ansuya. But during the workshop Kusum commented that Karan, being tormented by the forbidden longing for his own niece would never say so. That modification was immediately incorporated in the script.

The use of English language for an Indian content posed a tremendous challenge to many Indian writers in English. Gurcharan on the other hand, introduced characters who spoke English with their own provincial accents. He created characters who would actually speak English in the normal course of their lives. The script then became more authentic. Different characters spoke different dialects. Rai Saheb, the bureaucrat ICS friend of Amrita used completely British accent. Amrita, Ansuya, Karan and Deepak, spoke upper class convent-educated Indian English. Chitra spoke English like the lower middle class, less educated Punjabis with Punjabi idioms and accent. She used phrases like ‘hello-ji’, and ‘how are you Ji’. Gurcharan Das, affirmed that,

“I must confess that writing in English is getting better. It is no longer an imitative English. It is not the nostalgic English of London fogs and Surrey dews. It is an Indian voice. It is self-confident.”[7]

4.1.2 Script to staging

Casting is half the battle and Sunit Tandon waited patiently for the desired casting. For instance, Sunit wanted Bhaskar Ghose, who was working as the secretary of Information and Broadcasting in the Government, to play the Mamu. But Bhaskar couldn’t join as his retirement was due in 6 to 8 months. Sunit waited until his retirement and the next day he retired, they started their rehearsals. They chose the dream casting of Kusum as Amrita, the gentle lady and Sinia Jain, a Punjabi who had that power and earthiness to do Chitra. Shyama Haldar, a very sincere actress was chosen to do Ansuya. Initially Deepak’s role was performed by Rupin Jayal, but later Sunit took over. Ajay Balam, who worked with Theatre group in Bombay fitted in naturally for the part of the ICS person, Rai Saheb. The cast became complete. It remained the same except for the Delhi revival where Shyama was replaced by Puja Mukherjee.

4.1.3 Action and context

‘9 Jakhoo Hill’ first premiered at Kamani auditorium, Delhi. Rehearsals for the first production happened from 1-05-1996 to 3-6-1996 and on the 4th of June, dress rehearsal happened at Kamani. On 5th June, technical rehearsal happened at Kamani through the show in the night at 7:00pm. The performance lasted for 2 hours and 25 minutes approximately, including an interval for 15 minutes.

As the play opened, actors were roaming on to the stage in ones and twos while the audience were settling down. Like in Greek tragedy, the entire outcome of the play was made clear right at the beginning through the 10 min narration by Karan. Despite the idyllic setting and the well-bred mannerisms, it was obvious, as the action unfolded inside the house which meant so much to the protagonists, that something was smoldering

beneath the surface, and in the tradition of western drama, things came to a head through charged dialogue, verbal revelations rather than overt theatrics. The entire first half of the play moved slowly, but the second half had two very powerful scenes- 'Truth or Dare' game and the scene of argument between Chitra and Deepak.

The game emerged to be a powerful dramatic scene in the play because of the way it was written and handled by the director and the actors "Fig.1". It is important to make the scenes interesting to the audience. Though the characters were initially seated in a circle for the game, there was action. But interestingly, Gurcharan made it internal. As they were playing the game, they were also revealing what they wanted in life.



Figure 1: 'Truth or Dare game' from Yatrik's '9 Jakhoo Hill' (Courtesy Bhaskar Ghose and Sunit Tandon)

"The game moved in intensity from Amrita's (Kusum Haidar) innocent yearning for her home not to be sold, to Deepak's love for Ansuya (Shyama Haldar), to Rai Saheb's vehement denial of accepting a bribe, to Mamu's final crushing admission of his attraction for the niece. The fragile old charm of 9 Jakhoo Hill and the gentility attached to its residents were ripped apart. Rai Saheb (Ajay Balram) acts as the instigator of this occurrence in a piece of verbal swordplay with Mamu (Bhaskar Ghose)." [8]

The other scene between ambitious young Deepak and his conniving shrewd mother Chitra, played from an indiscriminate bored limpiness to a shattering climax "Fig.2".



Figure 2: The scene between Deepak and Chitra and his final surrender from Yatrik's '9 Jakhoo Hill' (Courtesy Bhaskar Ghose and Sunit Tandon)

“Credit goes to both the director and the playwright for that and of course for the two actors. Jain’s crass, crude, yet Machiavellian conniving ends in the comical typicality of Indian mother (Very Manorma like) who loudly beats her breasts, noisily tears her hair, thunderously sheds buckets of tears, but shyly watches for her sons reactions from the corner of her eyes. Jayal on the other hand shook the audience with his sudden burst of self-recrimination and soul cleansing in what is, eventually a pact with the devil.”[9]

Gurcharan operates in a milieu familiar to the upper middle class, English speaking theatre-goers of metropolitan India. He attributed the success of the production through the economic parallels that can be drawn then and now.

“I set the play in the 1950’s when the new middle class was coming up. There was a changing social order, with a rising middle class. I think we are seeing this order now too...In the new India, the middle class is much different, with a lot of drive. It is based on money rather than on education, and goes about its work in an uninhibited manner. What I have shown is, the middle class wins.”[10]

Deepak who represented the new middle class, became the Managing Director of his company, and of course with the tact’s of his mother. Ansuya also took a big leap in her life by converting her home into a successful hotel in the end.

The play also showcased the political scene of the times. War with china destroyed the Nehruvian dream. Whenever, Karan (Bhaskar Ghose) adorned the role of a raconteur or Sutradhar, he talked about the troubled times. Nehru and Krishna Menon, Generals Thaper and B.M. Kaul, Bomdila, and Tawang, Indian defeat and retreat, Chinese advance followed by a unilateral cease-fire and withdrawal, soviet ambivalence and President Kennedy’s offer of military assistance were all common currencies in his address. In the beginning of Act I, as lights faded on Chitra, Deepak and Amrita, the focus shifted to Karan as narrator, where he says,

“I must take you back now to (looks at the newspaper on the table) the 24th of October, 1962, just before Diwali. The Chinese have invaded India and every day the papers are full of sad, humiliating news of Indian defeats, it is breaking Nehru’s heart. The country hasn’t yet realised that it is dangerous to put dreamers in power.” [11]

Whenever Karan had to talk politics, he would either read from the newspaper or narrate a radio news. It aided him in expressing his multiple perspectives simultaneously- as a narrator critiquing the inmates of his house and the narrator who is a political commentator. It is not just the lights and props that helped Bhaskar Ghose to adorn different roles instantaneously as the narrator “Fig.3” and as Mamu’, “Fig.4” but also his exceptional acting ability that took the forefront.

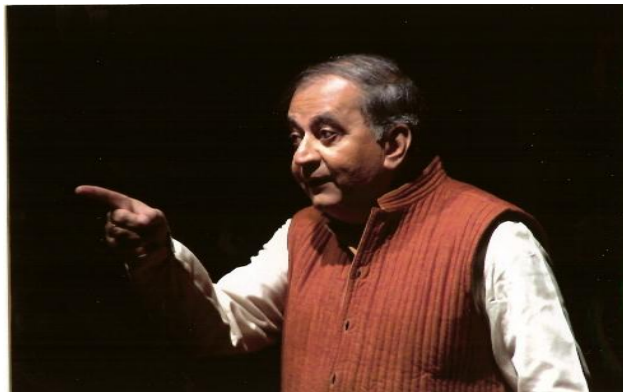


Figure 3: Karan Chand as Narrator (Courtesy Bhaskar Ghose and Sunit Tandon)



Figure 4: Karan Chand as Mamu’ (Courtesy Bhaskar Ghose and Sunit Tandon)

“It is more than likely that Ghose brought more to the role of Mamu, than was written by the playwright. The wonderfully cynical sneer on his face could not have been written in.”[12]

The use of a raconteur enabled the audience to stay abreast of the action and made way for a relaxed viewing.

Costume designed by Sabina Mehta Sood, added authenticity to the play. Amrita was in nice Kanjeevaram, Chitra had the 60’s bouffant kind of hair style and wore brightly coloured synthetic sarees. Karan used kurtha payjama and shawl and Ansuya was given either a salwar kameez or a saree. Formal outfits for Deepak and Rai Saheb suited them right for their role.

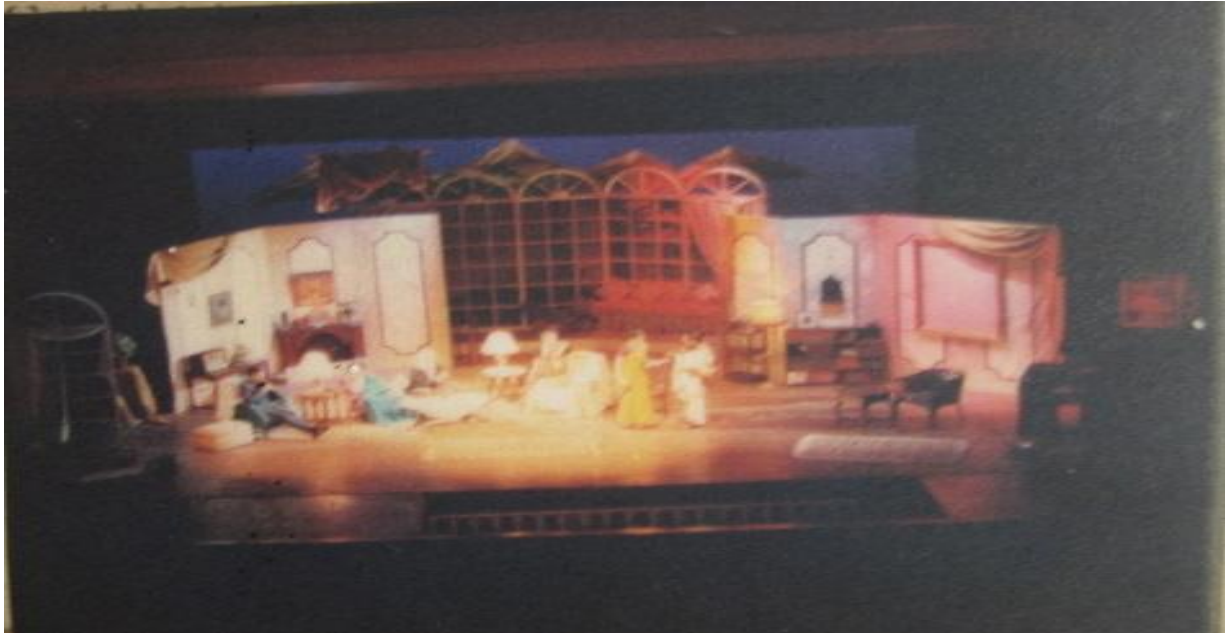


Figure 5: The set design for Yatrik’s ‘9 Jakhoo Hill’ by Anjolie Ela Menon (Courtesy Bhaskar Ghose and Sunit Tandon)

Anjolie Ela Menon brought in an artist’s touch to the stage setting which confined to a single scene, made for fluid movement. The ambiance created by fading drapes, walls stripped of painting, backdrop of mountains, radio stand, fireplace, glass partition that doubles as a bedstead enhanced the mood of the play “Fig.5”.

Lighting by Zuleikha Allana was pleasant and added lot of meaning to the different spaces and scenes.

Sunit Tandon’s sound design, was an intelligent piece of work as he made effective use of old Hindi songs like ‘*na tum hamein jaanona hum tumhe jaane...., jaltehain jiskeliye...and Babuji dheere chalna...*

4.1.4 Audience

In the IIC Delhi Annual report-2004-2005, it was reported that,

“The auditorium was packed with an audience that not only appreciated but responded and related to the messages the play conveyed.”[13]

When people watched the story of family ties and universal emotions, of how human beings cope with adversity, they watched their own predicament. Perhaps that explains why the play has been a hit with a spectrum of audiences in India and other countries. During an interview with Bhaskar Ghose, he recalled a very moving response,

“When we played in Bombay, Malvika Sangvi who writes in the Mumbai mirror, came with her mother and father who had lived through partition. Her mother came after the performance, tears were streaming down her face, and she held out her hand and said, ‘It was as if, I was seeing my world, it was typically my world, my life, my kind of thing I have seen, the deprivation, the things happening, families ripped, some families growing up and some coming down, just the way it happened.’”



Figure 6: Standing ovation by the audience in South Africa for Yatrik's '9 Jakhoo Hill' (Courtesy Bhaskar Ghose and Sunit Tandon)

It was the same reaction from the members of the audience wherever they went, even in South Africa "Fig.6". Owing to its success, Yatrik played it for almost 10 years. Sunit admits that,

"It is difficult for me to name one play as my favorite, but the play '9 Jakhoo Hill' that I acted and directed is very dear to me. We performed it for 10 years..." [14]

4.2 Maayaavan

Mahesh Dattani's wards formed Maayaavan theatre group in Bangalore. To them theatre is a magical art form that pulls deeply from the virtual forest of feelings, experiences and life. They chose '9 Jakhoo Hill' for their first production as they decided to launch with a socially relevant play written by Indian writer for Indian audience, exploring contrasting philosophies of human belief "Fig.7". The production carefully explored human characteristics to reveal two types of beliefs-of those people who hold values dear (Amrita) and of those who believe everything is relative as long as one's goal is met (Chitra).



Figure 7: A scene from Maayaavan's '9 Jakhoo Hill' (<http://www.thehindu.com/mp/2005/02/14/stories/2005021401980400.htm>)

The cast included Abhishek Majumdar, Sheila Govindaraj, Spatica Ramanujam, Suhas Chalke, Trupti Vijay, Sunil Bannur, Naveen Rao and Nishant Bali. It was a highly professional team with experiences in various forms of theatre like play back, street, Kannada and Shakespeare and short films. Original music was composed and performed by Bruce Lee Mani of *'Thermal and a Quarter'*.

Rehearsals happened for nearly two months and it was performed on February, 23, and 24, 2005 at Rangashankara. As Tina Garg reported,

“Motivated by Dattani, Sunil has tried to keep it straight forward, trying to improvise the language to suit contemporary style. The sets however, depict the sixties, even as music, customized costumes and tunes from the sixties’ Hindi films, depict the mood of the times. If you are looking for intense drama, a powerful story, and a blend of old and new, ‘9 Jakhoo Hill’ it is” [15]

4.3 Shikhar Theatre Group

Guwahati has seen plays performed in Assamese. But in the recent decades, English plays by Indian writers have gained prominence. Rabindra Bhawan had staged competent plays like Mahesh Dattani’s *'Where there’s a will'*, and Shanta Gokhale’s *'Avinash'*.



Figure 8: A scene from Shikhar’s ‘9 Jakhoo Hill’ at Guwahati (<https://www.google.co.in/search?q=rabindra+bhawan+guwahati+auditorium>)

Encouraged by the growing audience numbers to watch Indian plays in English, Shikhar decided to produce ‘9 Jakhoo Hill’ under Giasuddin Ahamed’s direction “Fig.8”. He had directed more than 25 plays and tried hard to promote English theatre in the city. Under his direction, *'Avinash'* and *'9 Jakhoo Hill'* were well received. Veteran actor Deba Choudhury played Karan Chand, Amrita was played by Utpala Choudhury, Mrinmoyee Goswami played Ansuya, Tondra Barbora played Chitra, Ranjeev Lal Barua played Deepak and Hiranmoy Dutta played Rai’s character. It was staged at Rabindra Bhawan, Guwahati on April 10 and 11, 2003.

According to Rina Choudhury,

“The introductory soliloquy by veteran Deba Choudhury, effectively set the mood of the audience for this sensitive drama. Giasuddin Ahmed did a fine job in directing the play. Lighting was done by Ram Hazarika, and music by Neetu-Manoj-Diganta. Make-up done by Ellora Dutta was effective. The set designed by Arijit Choudhury and skillfully crafted by Deba Choudhury was superb.”[16]

V. Conclusion

This paper is just a tip of the iceberg. Limitations were unnumbered as the play happened in the distant past. But with the available resources it brought home the point that, the performance of ‘9 Jakhoo Hill’ deserves to be documented for the future to relish. In spite of being an English play, a proscenium type of play, a play that happened mostly in the drawing room, ‘9 Jakhoo Hill’ received loads of accolades from various members of the audience and went through many productions, some reported and some unsung. It made its woman powerful by shying away from conservative domains into the new world of opportunities. It’s commentary on the political turmoil is a wakeup call for the governments around the globe to keep their eyes peeled for any lurking danger. In a nutshell the play was staged to success because the script is relevant even today.

The various productions of the play, Chekhovian in its intimacy and Shavian in its feminism, thus lends itself to endless comparisons and interpretations. This research hopes to instigate further research and archiving of the Indian English plays' theatrical productions, so that the future can understand, endorse and improvise on the theatrical traditions of Indian English plays. The responsibility lies not just in the hands of researchers, but also the play houses, production unit, the government and the educational institutes to promote this as a practice and an indispensable area of study.

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