

Moments of truth



Ramu Ramanathan's incisive play "Comrade Kumbhakarna", directed by Mohit Takalkar, makes the audience sit up and think. BY PARUL TYAGI

NAVEEN SINGH THAKUR as the older Kumbhakarna in Mohit Takalkar's play.

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The play attempts to shake us out of our own slumber while suggesting that perhaps a true, unabashed sleep is a greater act of peacefulness and **rebellion than a feigned alertness to the world around us.**

The problem is not to make political films but to make films politically.

– Jean-Luc Godard

*In the dark times,
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.*

– Bertolt Brecht

IN these times of dwindling attention spans and a surfeit of video and film, it is surprising that theatre is not already dead. So when one saw a sizable audience turn up for the National School of Drama (NSD) Repertory Company's annual Summer Theatre Festival (from May 19 to June 16), it felt good. Yet, a house-full production, one quickly realised, was sadly no marker of quality.

Theatre coming out of the capital still suffers from a fixation with the old. Plays once considered radical, both for what they said and how they said it, have now become a jaded and lethargic means to evoke a forced, predictable response. Take, for instance, *Jaati Hi Poocho Sadhu Ki* performed at the festival. The play begins as an engaging and entertaining commentary on our social systems plagued by caste politics and academic inflation, but it soon becomes a vapid comedy, something that reinforces crass stereotypes and celebrates a kind of hyper-acting seen on television. The only thing missing, one

feels, is recorded laughter. It would be unreasonable to say that plays like *Jaati* have little relevance to our times or that it is impossible to find modern meaning in them. What they do need is to be looked at with a fresh eye. When first performed in the 1970s, both *Jaati* and *Begum Ka Takia* were lauded as great productions. The repertory company's current versions also have their fine moments: often the characters are believable, the actors have visibly worked hard at their roles, and the texts offer plenty of ethical questions to contemplate. But, sadly, the productions themselves take us further from the beauty and reflective quality that their texts originally had.

Occasionally, directors venture out to look for material. *Blood Wedding*, based on a play by Federico Lorca, was one such production. But, in an attempt to Indianise it, the director ends up treating it on the surface. The production looks like a forced transplantation into a rural Punjab framework, and all efforts seem to have gone into developing the exterior sheen of the story instead of exploring character depth, psychology, ideas, and ethics. Heavily reliant on props, including mud, fire, plastic, wax and rice, the performance does not have the fragrance of the soil as it were but rather an air of artificiality.

One production at the festival that refuted empty experimentalism as well as a wistful attachment to a redundant slapstick style was Ramu Ramanathan's incisive *Comrade Kumbhakarna*. This was Mohit Takalkar's second attempt at directing a play written by Ramu Ramanathan; their first collaboration was for *Kashmir, Kashmir*.

Takalkar was particular about staging a play like *Comrade* in Delhi. He says, "My feeling is that the audience in Delhi is more political than the ones in Mumbai or Pune. In Mumbai or Pune, we are happy to be in our world." It is a compliment to Delhi, perhaps a very generous one. People in Delhi seem to lead the same atomised lives and, like people elsewhere, try to fill their empty lives with the same meaning, which now means movies

and malls for many and alienation for others. When a play like *Comrade* comes along, it provides an opportunity for people to sit up and work hard to decipher and make meaning of the signs and metaphors and symbols unfolding in front of them, and somewhere in this process of questioning and deciphering the play to become the subject of their own reflection. That *Comrade* inspires this exploration is perhaps its greatest achievement.

In the Ramayana, Kumbhakarna may be a slovenly figure, but in this play, arduously executed by the NSD Repertory, he has the potential for all great things: he is a pacifist, he is a visionary and, above all, he is a reviewer of history.

For all its profanity, 'Comrade' is a considered, thoughtful play.

The world of theatre is precarious. *Comrade* underscores this precariousness at the very outset. The play is about a community of folk theatre artists living on the margins. They are extremely poor and struggle incessantly to survive in an apathetic world. The protagonist, named Kumbhakarna by his family so he can sleep instead of asking for food every day, narrates his journey, showing us his encounters with the state and power. His mother, who leads the theatre group, is a bold, traditional and worldly-wise woman. His father, inspired by the rationalist leader E.V. Ramasamy Periyar, is a staunch believer in the Self-Respect Movement; he believes that theatre is "too illuminated, has too much light for their lives". Kumbhakarna also has a twin sister who, we are told, commits suicide. This fact looms over the play like a dark cloud.

In many ways, *Comrade Kumbha-*

karna's story is not one that can be easily told. It is a fast play that lingers on complex questions with a compassionate intensity, but nothing about it is akin to a history lesson. Instead, in an hour and 40 minutes, it packs in a multitude of voices, personal narratives, contexts, and anecdotes with an effortless grace. If the characters themselves are unable to offer a linear, accessible account of themselves and their lives, it is because they do not have a stable ground to speak from. Forever at the mercy of the world, they do not have a piece of earth to call their own, and those in power do not recognise them as humans.

FLEXIBLE FORM

A 'polyphonic' play such as this demands an equally flexible and accommodating form. This Takalkar accomplishes by infusing in the play a seductive speed and an evocative surrealism, blurring the distinction between style and content. For instance, the double-casting of Kumbhakarna brings a crisp efficiency to the play, through which we experience the terror of (fore)seeing the future even as we are in the past. Naveen Singh Thakur, who plays the older Kumbhakarna, does so with a mature restraint, doing away with any victimisation or bitterness one may expect of such a life. The younger Kumbhakarna is performed by Anil Singh Pilawat with vivacity and innocence. The sister is played simultaneously by four actors, a directorial choice that enlarges the play's scope, stretching it from the story of a family to that of a community or a society. As the plot moves back and forth in time and between real and psychic spaces, these four women – wilful, wise and wild – intuit and prophesise Kumbhakarna's fate in ominous echoing breaths. Their unison becomes a potent tool to multiply and heighten all emotion, everything from their community's deepest fears, hopelessness and their eventual indisputable and total loss.

Any play that has a measure of didacticism, especially a Left-leaning one, can easily fall into a dangerous



THE SISTERS IN "Comrade Kumbhakarna". Kumbhakarna's twin is played simultaneously by four actors.

trap of pomposity and sermonising. But *Comrade* does not have the pontifical trappings that street-theatre types of productions sometimes come with. In this, *Comrade* acknowledges the political tradition of a kind of leftist street-theatre – because the group itself is a mobile theatre company made up of the street people as it were – while also subverting it by injecting in it an intellectual rigour and ethical complexity missing in the let's-take-care-of-the-underdog approach.

Takalkar believes the actors bring to the play their own struggle and encounters with brusque reality. He speaks highly of them: "They come from different parts of India and have a rich understanding of their music and dance." He admits that the actors' first response was to play an unhappy poor family, but he did not want such a portrayal. "If you noticed, the family smiles a lot throughout the whole play," he says. As a result, the play shimmers with a humbling truth about being human: that in front of death we are vulnerable, but even at our weakest we are grateful to be alive.

RETELLING THE RAMAYANA

There is a long section in which the community breaks into an exuberant retelling of the Ramayana, the purpose of which is twofold – to dupe the protagonist (Kumbhakarna) into sleeping by bringing him under Brahma's curse and to distract him from hunger since there is no food to be had. Sajida, formidable and moving as Amma, as well as the other actors, perform the Ramayana with a playful seriousness and great exultance. They seem to briefly let us in on a joke, completely upturning the stereotype of the poor, who, in this case, are capable of providing humour as nourishment. It is a telling moment when the boy assumes the identity of Kumbhakarna; the solemnity of hunger morphs into a subversive act.

There is an undeniable stylistic richness to the way the compositions work. The set design is austere and the lighting by Pradeep Vaidya astute, ranging from dingy, damp, misty blue

to a celebratory orange and yellow. The atmosphere is largely constructed by the actors themselves. The play takes as freely from Kathakali as it does from Nautanki. Competent singers and dancers, the actors are suffused with an integrity and camaraderie and give a touching performance. Rakhi Kumar gives a notable performance as the main sister; her expressive eyes are an absolute asset.

Originally written in English, *Comrade* was translated into Hindi by Swantna Nigam. Its pithy wit and self-reflexivity become apparent early on when the narrator declares, "People think actors lie. That's not true. If I wanted to lie, I would have become a writer because writers tell the most beautiful lies." Later Kumbhakarna's father echoes the same sentiment when he burns all the holy books, in effect burning works that were also one-sided lies. In another instance, Hindi is termed a conspiracy of Delhi, and the country declared as having gone to the dogs, a metaphor that comes to life towards the end of the play.

COLLECTIVE LOSS

For all its profanity, *Comrade* is a considered, thoughtful play. When the mother declares that "abduction of women before marrying them [is] an essential Asura tradition", Kumbhakarna acknowledges that "Asuras must reap what they have sown" and that "this tradition now has no place or relevance in the world". This self-awareness rescues the play from a propagandist mission. Kumbhakarna is clear that his plea is not for a simplistic view of history. To understand this decadence in the world as a conflict of West versus East, Aryans versus Dravidians, Nationalists versus Maoists would be to reduce its complexity and oversimplify it. His appeal is to look deeper into those who are not us, the 'other', and to find traces of ourselves in them. He conjectures that history, though reminiscent, is never identical: there is always the reversion to the mean, and in time the powerless and powerful exchange positions. Our

fates are so intertwined that a single community's loss is necessarily a collective loss even if people are unable to see it yet.

There is a moment in the play in which a bureaucrat sits at her meal table wielding a butcher's knife. Her minions, hungry for a promotion, are on their four limbs like dogs, waiting for her order to prosecute Kumbhakarna. We know then that when people have become butchers and dogs, there is no hope for a "human action to cut the relationship between violence and law". Kumbhakarna is charged with sedition and interrogated persistently in an eerily impersonal Public Works Department office, and we watch the law itself inflict violence on Kumbhakarna.

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The somewhat exaggerated acting of the two officers, shown as servile to the bureaucracy, may be perceived as clichéd or weak, but in juxtaposition with the rest of the play – in particular, Kumbhakarna's reflectively layered and richly contextualised performance – their presence is very much a comment on our society. Diversions to a street-style or a Bollywood-style palette in the production only point to the mindless play of authority and self-interest rather than detract from it. Takalkar thinks that the history of political theatre is very young. He says, "Often one sees plays where two characters sit across the table and discuss an issue. Ramu, on the other hand, has juxtaposed modern politics with mythology and through his writing has

allowed me to create something in front of the eyes."

When the play opens, the lighting is dull and the narrator looks insipid. And one thinks: will this be the show? A few moments later, gritty, gory details start pouring out of the narrator, Kumbhakarna, and the light on him brightens. We gaze at his illuminated presence and there is a moment of recognition – this is theatre – light in the dark. We know it is now that the show has begun.

When the play ends, two women, young professionals, leave the auditorium with beaming faces. As they emerge from the auditorium, they are in awe, hit with a realisation that they no doubt have had many times before. They have remembered, again, how power structures at work reduce us all to position-mongers. "It's so important," says one of them earnestly, "to do something creative." It is a tragedy of our times, and especially now of India, that to survive one must move to the city, and once there, should relinquish all their time and self to a job. There is a great need for works of art and for spaces that expand our perception of the world and of ourselves. We need, more than ever before, moments that can remind us of new possibilities within us.

Comrade Kumbhakarna gives us plenty of those moments. Fortunately, it does not give us a history lesson; instead the audience leaves with the curiosity to learn more about the issues raised.

It is a production that should be watched for both its style and content. At the end, the story is passed on from the boy to his twin sister: but the sun has set, the lights are gone, and the village's favourite pastime, she reveals, is sleeping. The play attempts to shake us out of our own slumber while suggesting that perhaps a true, unabashed sleep is a greater act of peacefulness and rebellion than a feigned alertness to the world around us. With its post-modernist elements, it echoes our own confusion: the lack of meaning, the fragmentation of our ideas, and an inability to see a way out of this mess. □