

**Usha Ganguli is a well-known theatre person, and is Artistic Director of her Kolkatta based theatre company called 'Rangkarmee'. She was invited to the Prithvi Theatre Festival 2006' to present her play KASHINAMA. The following conversation between Atul Tewari and her took place on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2006 as part of the 'Meet the Playwrights' sessions. The conversation has been edited as necessary.**

**Atul Tewari:** Like always, the 'Meet The Playwrights' sessions are one more great initiative that Prithvi has made in order for us to come together and I am not at all depressed by the numbers present here. It seems that when Buddha started his conversations there were only five people with him. We are at least five times more than that! So here we have gathered to talk to Usha Ganguli. But I hope to meet not just the playwright because Usha is not just a playwright. She has many facets to her personality. She is an actor, a director, an activist. She is also an art administrator who is associated with the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the National School of Drama as well as with few of the important institutions in Bengal. She is of course a very well known teacher in Kolkata. She taught Hindi for many years, before she retired last year and then of course she is a playwright and a composer of music. Though she says that she was never trained formally in music, she was trained as a dancer in Bharatnatyam. This evening we will try to touch upon the many different facets of Usha's personality. So welcome Usha Ganguli. One more thing that I would like to say is that as we are talking about Hindi theatre, we will proceed with this conversation in both languages – Hindi and English. I cannot speak Bangla so....

**Usha Ganguli:** I am also not too familiar with Bangla (laughs).

**Atul Tewari:** Another thing that I would like to say is that as Usha's work has mostly dealt with revolts against narrow, parochial and regional biases as well as economic, social and sexual oppression, so I will also start this discussion with a narrow regional and parochial thought. This is something that I discovered today itself. Although I knew that Usha is from Uttar Pradesh, the state to which I too belong, I today came to know that we not only belong to the same state but also to the same village called Nerva. It is coincidental that we should come together like this today. But what is more important here is that the Hindi theatre in Kolkata, which is being nurtured and looked after by people like Dr. Prothiba Agarwal, Vimal Lad, Vinay Sharma, Shakil Sahib, Chetna Tewari and two other people who have now shifted their base to Mumbai, Kulbhushan Kharbanda and our very own Satyadev Dubey, Usha Ganguly is in the league of these people who have played a major role in the existence and nourishment of Hindi theatre in Kolkata. I would like to therefore ask you that when you started of as a student in Kolkata- those were the days of 'Anamika'- so what kind of influence did that have on you when you first did theatre?

**Usha Ganguli:** I never really thought that I would be doing theatre because I was a Bharatnatyam dancer then, but yes I did get letters from 'Anamika' that they needed a theatre actress. Most of the parents then and perhaps even today are apprehensive about their children doing theatre. It is a general presumption that by doing theatre "*sab bana banaya bighad jayega*". So I had never thought that I would be doing theatre. I had appeared for my MA examination and had just started teaching and at that time everyone was in search of Vasantsena, the dancer. This was in 1970. I did my first play called MITTI KI GADI BACHI KATAKAM with an institution called

Sangeet Kalamandir. Many groups like 'Anamika' were doing several plays. Krishna Kumar G was acting in one of the plays by 'Aadhakanch', a group in association with 'Anamika'. But in my case what happened was that though I did do AADHE ADHURE, I was more in link with 'Bawla' Theatre and their people like K.R. Chakravorty and Pritimitra. When I saw Utpal Dutt's MANSI RUDIKARI and AAVDHIPAS by Shobha Mitra, it opened a completely different world for me. Here I was this girl from Uttar Pradesh, studying Hindi literature, so Bangla theatre was a totally new world for me. The Coffee House *wala adda*, those intellectual discussions and the poetry taking place there; all of it influenced me greatly and from there on slowly and steadily I moved towards theatre. Dance had installed in me a discipline right from childhood and it is this discipline that really saved me. During my childhood I reacted a lot, questioned a lot. There was this wall in our village. My mother always told me to stay away from that wall. I always felt like breaking through that wall. So as a child, there were so many questions in my mind. At our house in the village, our *ammijaan* would often come with other relatives. They were given a separate room and food was served to them in a separate vessel. When I asked my mother why they weren't served from the same vessels, she asked me to shut up and not ask such questions. I was born in Jodhpur and then went to Kolkata where I completed my education. From there I slowly and steadily made my way out of the conservative atmosphere of my house and started learning dance, and today it is almost 35 years that I am associated and connected with the theatre. I was pretty clear about what I wanted and was never really confused. I always had it in my mind that I have to do this my way. That's why later I did not do theatre with any other group but instead formed my own group - 'Rangkarmee.' I still remember that we used to meet at Mukta Ram Babu's place. There were around a hundred of us. Anjan Shrivastav was also there. All of us used to fight and discuss about what kind of theatre should we do and by the time the year ended, the number was reduced to just fifteen of us. We went our ways. Then there were intense discussions about the name of the group and ultimately we decided upon 'Rangkarmee' in 1976. My strength is my group. We have around three hundred members and nobody will believe me, but we have sixty female artistes in our group. We are like a family. We are constantly travelling with our productions. We sometimes do around eighteen shows in a month. From Bombay to Jabalpur, the work is increasing. There is a lot of theatre activity. But one's own group helps us have a very strong base. And when one works with like-minded people, the thoughts keep coming and the vision remains clear. Where do we have to go? Whom should we go to? - all of these things become clear.

**Atul Tewari:** Usha you just spoke about the importance of a group, and as some of our friends in Mumbai might not know this but 'Rangkarmee' is one of the biggest theatre companies in India. And another thing is that though her group might have only performed around 25 to 30 plays in the past 30 years, the number of shows has been huge. She has been reaching out with her plays to people. But I am trying to take you back to the very first days of your group, for the people here in Mumbai who are not that familiar with the early days of 'Rangkarmee', of theatre people like Tripti Mitra, Rudra Prasad Sengupta or Vibhash Chakravorty. You have worked with all these directors as an actor before you yourself turned director. I would like you to tell us something about that phase.

**Usha Ganguly:** if you divide the whole history of our theatre group then it is in three phases. In the first phase there was no director. I was not trained. I was just trained as a dancer so we were inviting people from outside like M.K. Anvase. He had written a play called MOTHER for us. Then Tripti Mitra was there. She directed GUDIYAGHAR, which was an adaptation of Ibsen's A DOLL'S HOUSE.

**Atul Tewari:** Which she herself had done in Bengali before.

**Usha Ganguly:** Yes. Her production in Bengali was called Putulkhela. But she is so honest. So like a child. She said in Bengali that "Whatever has been done, has been done. I won't do more than that" and I was stunned. Such an honest person. She said "I will repeat the same thing". But eventually the style and every thing about it was so different, including the whole design of her direction. And you know how particular she was about the intricate details of acting. Later however we moved on. We decided not to repeat plays. We never compromised on this issue, right from the selection of play. Within six months we had our script bank. We read a lot- stories and plays. We discuss, we fight and then we choose one play. KASHINAMA in its original form was a two-page story. I said please don't tell me to do a play on this. Maybe we will do a street theatre kind of thing with it. Then I started reading, re-reading and the whole thing evolved into a full-length script.

**Atul tewari:** One thing that Usha just mentioned is that we don't repeat plays and the same thing she has also said in an interview with 'India Today'- that the day I have to repeat plays I will stop doing theatre. So this is Usha Ganguly for you friends and now let's move on to Usha Ganguly- the director. Since the time Usha Ganguly decided not to be dependant on established people from outside the group or external sources, a new phase of 'Rangkarmee' began with her taking over as the director. During that phase some important plays were made like MAHABHOJ, based on Mandu Bhandari's *upanyas*, LOKKATHA by Ratnakar Matkari, COURT MARSHAL Sudesh Deepak, then there was an adaptation of Brecht's MOTHER COURAGE. These were some of the plays which were well directed. And as every one knows ANDHAYUG is a play which has been performed a number of times but it is mainly remembered for its productions by people like Satyadev Dubey and Ebrahim Alkazi. Similarly, COURT MARSHAL made by Usha Ganguly is remembered. So I would like to talk to you about this phase when you made such gems.

**Usha Ganguly:** One other important thing that I would like to say. It was commonly believed then, that girls can only be used as actors. They cannot do anything else. Yes, there were a few - the Vijaya sisters and some other seniors but apart from them, girls were just considered for acting. But if you observe, in the past ten years, B. Jayshree, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhary, Kirti Jain and others have worked as directors. You know while playing carom when the queen is potted into the pocket, people tend to say she was potted by fluke. In case of MAHABHOJ the same thing happened. People said the script was good, so therefore the production was a success. Before me the play had been done by Amal. But he had made a huge, grand play. I made a simple one. We travelled a lot with the play and did 86 shows in all. But even today I feel that somewhere at the depth certain things were missing though externally it appeared good. Today if someone asks me what do I like the most, I would say I really love to direct. I love to design my own plays. Whenever I do a play they just get written in the making. Colours, images, blockings, simple sets, minimum use of property, use of sounds, sounds of routine life, are things that appeal to me. I get involved. And if I have to act in any of these plays then I have a lot of problems. Sometimes I have to replace my actors and that is difficult. While directing I like to keep things simple. I use each and every corner of the open space without using sets. How I hated those box sets. I reacted like anything. Give me vacant space and some minimum props and that's enough for me. This space can then become a powerful space that combines performance and language. Since I was a dancer I loved to create images on the stage, like photographs. Some people

have said that my plays are like films, scene after scene. But I say no because I don't write screenplays. As far as theatre is concerned, I am very clear about what I am doing. And then moving along, meeting different people, spending time with them- all this gives me hope and inspiration. I always tend to give a subtle touch of realism, though none of my plays are too realistic. I don't know whether it is realism or naturalism. I don't know. But in all my plays, even in RUDALI, two *matkis* are there and one cot. You have seen it. So in this way we were continuously performing plays one after the other. We performed MAHABHOJ, LOKKATHA and then HOLI happened. HOLI was a really exciting experience. There used to be a huge line at our college and there used to be a lot of chaos. And my principal came with that bag of his and then he asked me whether we had presented a character like him in the play? And I said, don't ask me, ask Mahesh Elkunchwar. And Mahesh is so sweet. It was a one-act play and he said you can do anything with my play. So I made a two act play out of it . It was written, re-written and redesigned. And from there we shifted. I started feeling that as far as work was concerned, we were facing hurdles. So we tried to get out of this block and then came BETI AAI, MATADEEN, CHAND PAR, MAYYAT, GIRGIT and other such small plays. We performed these plays in approximately 22 colleges. College principals refused permission but then we somehow tried to convince them. We never did all this for money. And so we moved away from all those political themes during the election times to social themes. With me directing , designing the plays , its very difficult to explain my process. May be my actors sitting here may be able to explain it.

**Atul Tewari:** Usha as you were speaking about images and all that, and I recalled that two people have always supported you. One of them is from Mumbai- Tappasen *sahib*, who was known to be one of the best light designers of our country and the other person is Khalid Choudhary. Khalid Choudhary's name is not as familiar to the people of Mumbai but he was another great designer. So what did you learn from him?

**Usha Ganguly:** My association with Khalid Choudhary was not about learning in any one sense of the word. Khalid Choudhary designed two plays, based on Manto's stories for me. The set designs were beautiful. People like Tappasen and Khaled Chowdhary too have been uncompromising as far as desired standards go and I learnt the same from them. Both of them somewhere inspired us from within. There was a time when 20 shows were performed at a stretch. It was getting too much for me but Khalid Choudhary egged me to go on. So we got to learn a lot from them. And these two were such great personalities that , inspite of me being such a young director they said that we will do what ever you say. They showed a lot of confidence in me. They always said that the play comes first and then the designs. Generally one would not say so to young directors. One would want their designs to overpower the play. If you have seen DO SAPNE, the lighting was magical. People like Triptidi, Chakravorty... all of them gave us a lot of strength.

**Atul Tewari:** You decided not to repeat or perform the already written plays but you started using literary texts and made plays from these texts. May it be RUDALI by Mahashweta Devi or MUKTI or ANTARYATRA, which spoke of the journey within and the journey without a woman. It was a beautiful play that you made using the images of women. Then there were three of Manto`s stories and then KASHINAMA. Then when did this break, this transformation from Usha Ganguli the director of well written plays to Usha Ganguly the playwright come about?

**Usha Ganguli:** When I directed my first play-MAHABHOJ, although the script was powerful, I felt many a times that it could have been written differently. When I did SHOBHAYATRA, Shafat told me that I could make changes in his script and so did Elkunchwar for his HOLI but to change things within a specific structure is quite problematic. Further I also dream about Masood writing a play for me but then I want him to write it the way I want. (laughs). Later I started getting very scared . I will direct the play, design it, do the music and then apart from all these things, also write it! At Sahitya Akademi, people were shouting and telling me to direct the plays written by them. I told them that they could send their scripts but they will only be read. They won't be performed. So one of the problems that playwrights encounter is that if a playwright does not try to understand the language of theatre, then writing a play will become very difficult for him. As far as this matter is concerned I got to learn a lot from Mrinal Sen. She taught me how to put forward my point, using very few words. I worked with her for some days on around thirteen stories. So an individual keeps learning from everywhere. So we always wanted to do the plays by different playwrights but if we cannot say, cannot portray what we want to portray then we could not do those plays. Like we did change the script of LOKKATHA. Once while travelling, Masood gave the script to me but when a definite structure has already been written for a play it becomes very difficult to change it. If you see COURT MARSHAL, the production is completely different from what has been written but Deepak, the playwright was quite happy with the production. What I did was I started using the stories of the plays that were written and made changes. It all started with RUDALI. But we commit mistakes. We keep feeling that we are understanding the society , the people but that may not happen. When we read Rudali, we were very excited. We went to Punjab, we visited the villages of Patiala and Chandigarh and we returned, we made a complete fool of ourselves. We always had a couple of writers who would sit and discuss. And when someone has to direct then everything is continuously going on in his/her brain like what would be the start, the end and all that. So then slowly and steadily I started writing RUDALI. I have also written an original play called KHOJ. In group theatre it is always said that the show must go on and then there is something else that goes on within the group. So the plot of KHOJ was based on this duality of class. How the director of a group leaves the group and goes away. So that was also very interesting. But I faced many problems while writing an original play. I cannot write an original play. Now if I have a subject, and I am thinking a lot about that subject and I know everything about that subject but I do face some problems while writing an original play. If I am given a written text then I am able to twist and turn it and make it the way I want it. In Mahashweta Devi's, the story was such that after partition a young girl was sent to work at Ranaghat and then she slogs like a servant in every house and there she meets another young girl and a beautiful relationship is showed between the two. The other young girl gives her a lot of courage. Then this old women meets her lover of the past and then returns to him. She had written this play in the late 50`s. So I asked many people, including my *bhabhi* whether the old women should return to her lover. She said that the lover will take all the money from her and throw her out. So Mahashweta Devi's play ended with the woman going back to her lover whereas in our play the woman says no. Ketaki Dutt, a great actress played the part and she says no. It was very exciting because initially we were very scared. When I read Kashinath G's script of Kashinama, I knew what I wanted to do with the story, what I wanted it to convey. For me the question was how can people be discriminated on the basis of their *dharma*? Right from childhood I felt this and then when people came out in the streets protesting against this then I started feeling that I should also point my point forward. In this way KASHINAMA was created .

**Atul Tewari:** Another play that you did which I suppose was a very important one was ANTARYATRA. Again a text which is written by you.

**Usha Ganguly:** Yes, ANTARYATRA is an original text. I would like to perform it here in Prithvi. This play is a journey. It is about how an individual slowly and steadily progresses. Those people who are helping us at our homes, those in the theatre. Where does Nora take you? How do you become Nora? It's not for feminism but I will fight for the rights of women. I will keep on doing it. I won't use my fists to do it but I will do it through theatre, with my pen. Whenever I went to the courtroom, I saw girls with their heads pointing downwards and hearts filled with fear standing in the witness boxes and they were asked to speak loudly. So they used to get very scared. So all of it is included in that. Many people asked me that it was not my age to start writing then. Why did I write ANTARYATRA. So I told people that sometimes an individual tends to arrive at a standstill, then looks back and then again starts walking. ANTARYATRA was somewhat like that.

**Atul Tewari:** This is a very challenging script for women to perform. So what Usha was talking about sometime back, that during those times there were very few female artists in theatre. Today there is Sanjana Kapoor, Nadira Babbar in Mumbai, Arundhati Nag in Bangalore, Rashtriya Natya Vidyalaya's principal is also a woman. So today there are many women in Indian theatre. Some in the media say that you are the Margaret Thatcher of Kolkata. The iron lady.

**Usha Ganguly:** This comment is from Delhi, not from Kolkata (laughs). In Delhi they also say that she is the lady Hitler, not in Mumbai, not in Kolkata, not at the places where theatre happens often.

**Audience:** Many people are facing problems in Mumbai as far as Hindi Theatre is concerned. They feel it won't exist for too long. So what is your take on Hindi Theatre in Kolkata?

**Usha Ganguly:** Well my problem is completely the opposite. I had designed most of my plays for a Hindi audience but 99% of the audience is Bengali whereas hardly 20% of the audience is Hindi speaking. So we have never had a language barrier. There is a little difference between theatre in Mumbai and Bengal. There we do not need to popularize anything. We are not forced to compete with films or TV serials. There is nothing such as a Saturday or a Sunday. The shows keep happening all the time.

**Atul Tewari:** It is not that she has just won a specific award for a Hindi play. In fact, she has won the over all awards for the best play of the year a number of times.

**Audience:** Which plays have won this award?

**Usha Ganguly:** MAHABHOJ, KASHINAMA, LOKKATHA and so on. So over there, there is no discrimination between a Hindi and a Bengali play. For instance, people go mad after Bismillah. They love Habib Tanveer. Even Dr. Lagoo's plays. They will hardly understand anything but they love it. So basically they love plays, irrespective of the language. The audience of Bengal has a deep thirst for plays. Otherwise we would have faced a tough time saving Hindi theatre. So what is happening is now a days there are hardly any groups doing Hindi theatre. Even 'Anamika' is not doing plays. We should be concerned about the entire northern belt and not just about Maharashtra or Bengal. There are no auditoriums in Patna. The condition is very poor

in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan . They need training, space and other resources. If you meet those people, you will realize that they are anxious to perform. There needs to be regular theatre activity around these places, otherwise it won't exist. There are so many auditoriums in Bengal. If the rent for one is 25,000 then the rent for another is Rs. 5000. Thus we can perform so many shows. Also the state government has to support theatre. Otherwise its very difficult. Hindi theatre needs to go beyond Maharashtra and Bengal.

**Audience:** Have you used any folk form like the *jatra* for your plays?

**Usha Ganguli:** *Jatra* has now completely deteriorated. It doesn't seem to be like the original *jatra* any more. I am writing a new play. I met this woman who doesn't stay in the city and carries this bag and sells toys. So I am writing a play on this woman called Zohara Begum. So I am going to use all the folk forms in this play. When she came to 'Rangkarmee', she said that she wanted to play the role. She is a wonderful lady. She asked whether she was going to be paid... I told her that she would get the amount that was decided.. She is an astonishing character.

**Atul Tewari:** You have raised a voice against all kinds of oppresions in the theatre, whether it is the oppression of class, caste or sex. People also say that Usha Ganguli is too serious a person because she has not done a comic play.

**Usha Ganguli:** No one has offered me a comic role to date and one also needs a good script. We always keep on doing some small kind of comedy in our plays.

**Atul Tewari:** Like in MATA DIN.

**Usha Ganguli:** We loved doing MATA DIN and Tewariji played Mata Din.

**Atul Tewari:** I remember your 2 concerts, one of which was a Request Concert with Rustom Bharucha and then was 'Ghar Bar' with Anuradhaji and both are acknowledged as directors in their own league.

**Usha Ganguli:** The Request concert was directed by two directors. Manuel Longos with the help of a German designer had planned to stage it in 13 different Asian countries, including Japan. It was to be performed by 13 different actress so they started with Calcutta and I did the first one. The second one was done by Shulabhaji Deshpande, the third by Chandralekhaji and there were others, including a naga actress. The whole play was without a single word. It is about about a working woman and in the end she commits suicide. She returns to her home, listens to the songs on the radio and trys to match her voice with it and then she eats and goes to sleep but she can't sleep, so she gets up takes the tablet and sleeps again. I would like to share a small incident with you where once I was performing in a small room in Bengal with the women audience sitting very close in front of me and I was performing the last scene where I first take out one tablet then the other and the women with strong faces were watching me. Then when I ate the first tablet I suddenly felt that the strong faces of the women were staring at me with strength and I dont know what happened but I suddently threw away the tablet and drank the orange juice and that was the greatest moment of my life .....I mean no body could do it without the director's permission but I just felt the strength to do so because these women were staring at me and at that time I felt that this is our country and this is woman power and yes this was one Usha Ganguly performance

without a dead body. I feel that women have more energy, more resolution in them than men do. Also a man may feel fine till the woman walks shoulder to shoulder with him. But the problem arises when she moves ahead. These inequalities even exist today. Coming back to the Request concert- it was a difficult process. Your body language , your style of eating, your style of walking through which you have to portray yourself as an actress in front of the audience. So I used to watch women in buses, women going to offices, women going to buy vegetables and these are the places where you get to know the mechanical life of a working women and of the loneliness that may come to grip her.

**Atul Tewari:** Let me ask you about a profound Hindi writer by the name of Kashinath Singh who was the head of the department in the Kashi Hindu Vishwa Vidyalaya and he wrote a book "kashi ke assi" which took the whole hindu community by storm because of the description of Kashi in the book and of a place in 'assi' where Tulsidas went heavenwards after completing the Ramayana and this place was called Benaras, due to his description of Benaras in his book. In this book there is one story 'kaane kaun kumati laagi' from which you prepared your full length play KASHINAMA. What inspired you to make the play?

**Usha Ganguli:** First of all the religious practices were troubling me a lot and then the incidences in Ayodhya and Godhra were also troubling me a lot and I was confused about what to do. And the time when everybody was shouting 'trishul nikalo' 'trishul nikalo' 'trishul nikalo' and at that time I thought "ok now... we will show them what we have in us." I wanted KASHINAMA to be an allegory for this period. Today you cannot stand up and make somebody a 'nayak' or a 'khalnayak'. The situation is such that values are being crushed and I have tried showing the real reason behind this. I was thinking about what will I do after KASHINAMA. I had done everything by doing KASHINAMA. I remember the last six months before the play was to be staged. It was the most difficult time for me. I gave it my full energy but now Manto has reappeared in my life. There is something different about Manto's thought process. We should learn from him.

**Atul Tewari:** Manto has pretty much been rediscovered recently. i think even Naseer is doing it over here and even I did it with different colleges in Bombay....

**Usha Ganguli :**It's a good thing you brought Manto to Bombay. I did it first in Calcutta.

**Atul Tewari:** According to the information I have, you picked up your pen for KASHINAMA and went and stayed at Assi Ghat and interacted with people. You even used to walk bare foot. I would like you to share that wonderful experience with us.

**Usha Ganguli:** There was a *dharamshala* over there and there were many wonderful sounds that captured my attention. At one place students were reciting the sanskrit *shlokas* and at the other side there was the churning of buttermilk. So there is this glorification over there about the river Ganges and India as a nation of cows and buffaloes. I experienced it all- the dhobighat, the mud and the actual feeling of pure ganga and Kashi by walking barefoot. I also noticed another thing. The language of the people of Kashi had changed. And i feel proud when people come and say that they felt like they were actually sitting in Kashi while watching the play. And they even say that there is something in the play and I feel that this 'something' is very difficult to explain. Music has a very important part to play in the production.



Kashinathji has decided that the 100th show of this play will be performed in Kashi. It will be our first performance there.

**Atul Tewari:** One more interesting thing is that you have performed this play in Germany .Can you share some experience of yours?

**Usha Ganguli:** It was pretty interesting performing in Germany because tht was the first time we were doing the play with subtitles and the person who did the subtitles did an excellent job and we got the same reactions from the play as we were getting in India. Four of our shows had full houses and we used to have a one and a half hour long discussion after each performance.