

# Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* as an Epic Theatre

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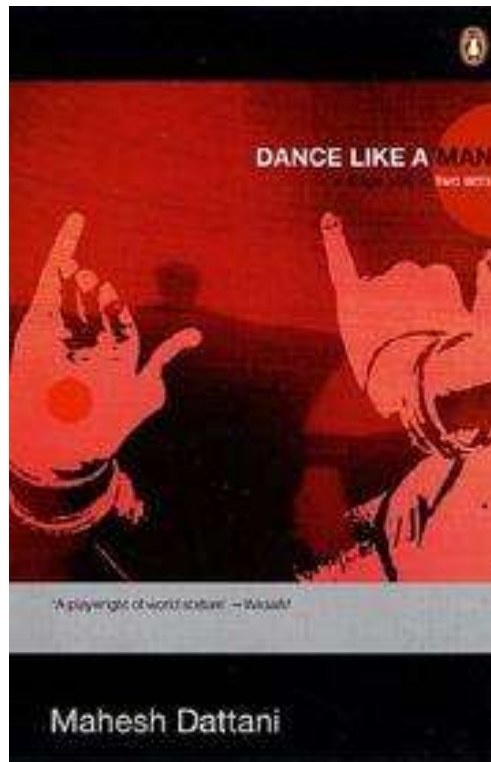
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## A Contemporary Voice

Mahesh Dattani, an authentic contemporary voice, a director, playwright, producer, founder of a theatre group known as 'Playpen' is an intellectually stimulating Sahitya Academy Winner with an excellent awareness of Indian theatre. There is proper blending of Western intellectual consciousness and Indian theatrical techniques in his plays. He himself comments on the relevance of Indian theatre:

There is going to be a good positive development because as we get into the internet age which isolates human beings, the act of communication will be a premium. Theatre is our cultural activity directly related to human beings' communication with each other (Qtd in Chaudhuri 23).

Mahesh Dattani uses his studio at Bangalore as a centre for creative collaboration among playwrights, directors, actors and audience.

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## **Theory of Epic Theatre**

Brecht, the major twentieth century theoretician of drama, evolved a major aesthetic theory, the theory of Epic theatre, fit for a scientific age. He significantly pronounced.

“If art reflects life, it does so with special mirrors” (13)

Brecht’s emphasis is on the need to alienate the audience from any illusion of reality by metatheatrical elements of stage devices like induction, prologue, play-within the play, direct speech, aside addressed to the audience, addressed primary to the mind through devices such as music, dance, plastic art, pantomime, mimicry, gesticulation, lighting, scenery with the help of sub-titles, projections and stills having the documentary effect. Brecht employed ‘complex seeing’ which

‘permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem’ (14)

This complex seeing interrupts the process of emotional identification or empathy on the part of the spectator and creates the proper atmosphere for intellectual stimulation which is non – Aristotelian in approach.

## **Brecht’s Impact on Indian Playwrights**

Brecht attracted much attention and general acclaim through out the world. In India his relevance paved the successful balancing of the traditional forms and western sensibility for a group of contemporary Indian playwrights such as Pratap Sharma, Asif Currimbhay, Girish Karnad, and Mahesh Dattani who faced the situational conflict between the cultural past of the country and attractions of Western modes of thought. By injecting the strategies of Brechtian Epic theatre, these dramatists have communicated both a direct link between the spectator and the spectacle and a kind of distance between the audience and the happenings on the stage.

## **Mahesh Dattani on the Function of Drama**

In his interview, Mahesh Dattani stated,

“The function of drama, in my opinion, is not merely to reflect the

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malfuction of society but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque image of all that passes for normal in our world. It is ugly. It is funny”. (Roy, 15 March 2002)

Dattani dispenses with the notion that the viewer can treat a play like a ‘roller-coaster ride’ which even at its most terrifying moment, one knows that it will rapidly and happily end on safe grounds.

“It is only when you are left hanging in air, you start to question your own personality, perceptions ..... the theatre is a collective experience and the audience have to finish in their own heads what the playwright began”.  
(<http://www.anitanair.net>)

The audience must arrive at their own answers, as also together in terms of a community response, because unlike T.V. or cinema where the viewer does not have to contribute because theatre is a shared experience.

### **A Live Show**

To Mahesh Dattani, theatre is a ‘live show’ which offers scope for a direct person to person communication involving four distinct forms: performers and performers, performers and spectator, spectator and performer and spectator and spectator. An important means of participation is by urging the audience to concentrate intensely on the actions of the play, mainly done in highly imaginative mimes, direct eye contact with the audience. He adapted the spatial, environmental setting of the audience. Techniques like magical sculpting in space, simultaneous action, lack of time space barriers, slow motion, freeze, choreography all appealed to the aesthetic canons of his audience and evoked powerful responses to the various socio-political realities.

### **A Socially Committed Playwright**

Like Brecht who wanted a change in the world, Dattani is a socially committed playwright who, with his sensibility and thinking, raises new vistas in the minds of the audiences through the portrayal of disintegration of social and family relationships in his plays. Dattani dramatizes the socially neglected people. Hijras (eunuchs), gays, lesbians and women are marginalized due to their sexuality. Hijras are the third gender people who are denied all rights and destined to suffer because they are biologically deprived human beings. Gays and lesbians keep their sexuality a secret for fear of ostracism. Women, irrespective

of social status, suffer subjugation one way or other. Dattani is preoccupied with these ‘fringe’ issues which are latent, suppressed and pushed to the periphery. He describes his themes and concerns:

Thematically, I talk about the areas which the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about people who are striving to expand ‘this’ space. They live on the fringe of the society and are not looking for acceptance, but are struggling to grab as much fringe-space for themselves as they can (Dattani, 2000.xiii).

### **Dealing with a Variety of Human Relationships**

Dattani has contributed to the continued growth and renewal of his art both in terms of form and content. He explores a gamut of human relationship in his plays. From *Where There’s a Will*, to the matrix of gender roles in *Dance like a Man* and *Tara to Bravely Fought the Queen* that explores the shams of the upper middle class joint family, to *Final Solutions*, a sensitive play about the Hindu-Muslim conflict, to *Do the Needful*, a comical radio play that talks about alternate sexual choices as do the plays *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Seven Steps to Thirty Days in September* which look at incest and child abuse. His latest film *Mango Souffle* (2002) questions the dominant values that construct social and gender identities.

### **Core Focus: Mechanisms of the Middle Class Family**

The setting for all of Dattani’s plays is embedded within the mechanisms of the middle class Indian family. Dattani admits

“I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background..... in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally” (Dattani, 2000.xiv)

Dattani does not want to present an alien and distant westernized world with which the urban Indian audience could easily identify. He is rather concerned with the apparatus of the family that is entrenched within the middle class milieu, the background which the playwright is a part and would like to ‘connect’ with audience drawn from similar backgrounds.

## **Dattani's characters – Centred around Family and Society**

Dattani's characters situate themselves within the family and the society. For that Dattani chooses the setting within dynamics of a contemporary urban Indian family. He portrays the newer realities piling on the older realities blending the given stereotypes. He makes use of the available stage space to reveal these structures in concrete terms. His characters move and speak in these spaces with voices that echo and reverberate. His issues are deep-rooted in a definite space and time and within a stimulating societal context with no message on social issues. He maintains the stance of a non-judgemental observer and he wants the audience to judge the issues.

The setting coalesces with the themes and Dattani's stage often uses the various levels to create theatrical resonance in a special way. The stage settings are contrived to amalgamate the multiple layers of the societal, the familial, the historical contours of such a location. Dattani's Dance like a Man uses the family home as the setting, the existence of three generations. The play travels back and forth between several generations, Amrit Lal, the imperious father and social reformer who is infuriated by Bharatanatyam which is usually and traditionally performed by women. He passes irreparable harm to his son Jairaj and his wife Ratna who is taught the ancient secret of an art by an old devadasi. The old man makes a pact with Ratna that he will consent to her career in dance only if she helps him pull Jairaj out of his obsession and makes him a 'manly' man. The two can enjoy the security of his riches. They, in their turn, try to transfer their own ambitions to Lata who is a talented dancer but is quite happy to marry Vishwas, the rich mithai wala's son who is ignorant of Bharatanatyam, the passion of the preceding generation. The play presents Ratna and Jairaj, now past their prime, reflect on the past and the way the past affects their present and is to affect the future. Moving effortlessly between the past, the present and the future (as past) synchronically dissolving the different time shifts, Dattani, innovatively uses Lata and Vishwas to play the young Ratna and Jairaj during these shifts and the old Jairaj taking the role of his father Amritlal. Amritlal and the old Jairaj, Vishwas and young Jairaj, Lata and young Ratna are to be played by the same actor. As they put on different characters, the resonating sense of time and change illuminate and give newer meanings.

## **Impact of the Stereotypes**

The minimal use of characters maximizes the staged impact of the stereotypes. This is one of Brechtian techniques – the alienation effect, the actor must help destroy stage illusion by putting himself at a distance, by playing multiroles the actor keeps himself from the character he portrayed and the situation in which he was involved.

Jairaj and Ratna live within the domain of the patriarch Amritlal, Jairaj's father, His antipathy for dance draws the boundary line for their behaviour within his sphere of influence. Dance for him is the prostitute's profession, improper for his daughter-in-law and unmanageable for his son. He cannot tolerate the sounds of the dancing bells that ring through their practice sessions. He is aghast at the long-haired guru with an effeminate walk and cannot stomach the idea of his son-a-man-becoming a professional dancer. His fear is obviously dance would make him 'womanly' – an effeminate man with the subtle implication of homosexuality.

Amritlal, the frustrated patriarch, changes into equally frustrated and abhorrive Jairaj who interviews Vishwas, the prospective groom, the son of a rich mithaiwalla, an alien to the world of dance who is transformed into young Jairaj who is consumed by his love for the art form. Lata, the most pragmatic and level headed character plays the insecure, calculating and scheming young Ratna. She has to survive despite the few choices offered to him. The older Ratna will be haunted by the ghosts of her past and realize her unfulfilled ambitions through Lata, his daughter. Amritlal's house moves through time, changes character along with the owner. The home becomes crucial to the existence of three generations of its occupants, often dictating its own terms to their inhabitants. The meaning of the space alters with each generation. Amritlal carries the baggage of his own times and tries to manipulate the next generation – Jairaj and Ratna – to carry it forward and Jairaj and Ratna in their turn try to pass on their performance to Lata.

### **Crumbling Structure**

In this handing down of cultural context, a number of revelations are made and several hidden stories are told in these spaces and it reveals the cracks that widen enough to crumble the entire structure. The structure that Amritlal passes on conditionally to his son and Ratna is passed to Lata who is a talented dancer quite happy to marry Vishwas who wants nothing to do with their art and whose father owns half the buildings on Commercial street. Dattani explores the human predicament how the general inhibitions of a man towards dance affects the relationship between a husband and a wife.

The tragedy for Jairaj is that he has chosen to pursue a career that is considered 'right' only for women. Amritlal is willing to have Ratna as the dancer and not Jairaj. Like in all battles, a completely innocent individual becomes the victim. Here the victim is the only son of the dancing couple. Dattani refuses to assign the blame on the status of the 'wronged' party to anyone.

“I refuse to have protagonists in a fixed role as victim. If you have a victim, it implies that there is a persecutor and it also implies that you will eventually have a rescuer”.( 416)

Jairaj, is present in the house when the double dose of opium is administered to the baby. Jairaj shares the onus of the blame and Dattani never tries to shift to Ratna. The death of the son binds the two together in shared tragedy. The last lines of the play reverberate:

“We were only human. We lacked the grace we lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like god” (447)

Jairaj and Ratna, though passionately devoted to dance, fail in translating their dreams into reality. Instead their daughter Lata becomes the shining star in the sky of Bharatanatyam.

### **Bharatanatyam and the Play**

Dattani says of this play, “I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatanatyam in my mid-twenties.... A play about a young man wanting to be a dancer growing up in a world that believes dance is for women”. Dattani recaptures the ancient tradition of the classical dance form, Bharatanatyam – the three fold art of music, dance and poetry which cohere into an artistic entity – Dattani who has imbibed Brechtian epic tradition, successfully achieves a heightened effect by employing the technique of art within art. Sumanaspati in the article ‘Leading the Charge’ comments

It is beautifully crafted. The way it moves back and forth in time, its use of one actor to play more than one role which really tests the actor’s talent, marks it as unique, as does the strong characterization and the seamless movements in time (The Hindu, 12 August, 2002).

### **Alienation or Estrangement**

Brecht’s theory of alienation or estrangement induces an inquiry, critical attitude on the part of the spectator towards the events shown. A critical attitude on the part of the spectator is developed, as the

actor does not identify with the character he represents, rather he could choose from any particular point of view regarding the character.

This ‘complex seeing’ leads to levels of multiplicity transcending mere ‘tolerance’ to recognition and empathy.

Mahesh Dattani uses the split stage where the interior movement of the plays collapses with the exterior fragmented locations.

“I am not interested in characters asking existential questions in a limbo. My characters exist in a definite space and time, in a social context that’s what stimulates me. I don’t focus on a message but the context is important”.

(Santhanam, Anitha, 2001. <http://www.maheshdattani.com>) Dance-inspired stylized movements convey shifts or extensions within the text and the sub-texts.

### **A Theatre Person**

The fact that Dattani is basically a theatre-person is evident in the stage mechanism. The multi-level set and multi-level characterization are the fine example of a blending of Western stage craft and the technique of Indian folk theatre. The lowest level that occupies a major portion of the stage represents the house of Amritlal. The play becomes a resonant work on contemporary society combined with personal relevance (Dattani’s career in dance). The play moves back and forth in time, spanning three generations. The important aspect of this play is the emphatic ‘staginess’ that is deliberately worked into the writing. As Michael Walling points out,

“His plays fuse the physical and spatial awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams and Brecht. It is a potent combination which shocks and disturbs through its accuracy and ability to approach a subject from multiple perspectives “(Dattani, 2000:229)



Dattani has meticulously anchored his success in Dance Like a Man by making his audiences listen with such involvement that they even forget that they are watching a play in an ‘alien’ tongue.

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