

performing in the dark

They have never seen theatre and have no way of knowing how their expressions will translate on stage. Yet, getting into character is a way of therapy for the Anyadesh performers, who must feel what they cannot see. By **Mridu Khullar**

Photographer Fredrik Renander

She moves her hands over the contours of my face, through the length of my hair, over the curves of my shoulders. I let her feel the shape of my eyebrows, explore the texture of my skin....

"You're beautiful," she says.

"Beautiful with a big nose," I laugh.

"Small and pretty," she replies. "I can tell."

I close my eyes and take her hand in mine. I try to wipe the image of her face from my mind and imagine the kind of person she is. Her hand feels warm. Her fingers are rough, her nails short. Is she naive and trusting or is she cynical about life, I attempt to determine. Does she get excited about little things like dancing in the rain? Is she a dog person or a cat person?

I can't tell. I'm too dependent on my eyes to give me the first impression.

But without eyesight to guide her, Marzeena Khatun, 28, has only her instincts to rely on to get her through life.

Khatun is one of the blind actors in a troupe called Anyadesh that has just performed a play in



Performer by instinct: Marzeena Khatun

Machlandapur, a small village on the outskirts of Kolkata. Before the play ended, one of the other actors, Subhash Dey, 35, asked the audience members to come up on stage and touch them. "We can't see the size of the audience," he said, "so we'd like to get a sense of how many people are present here."

One by one, people walked over to the performance area (a small rectangular patch under the shade of a coconut tree), many of them glad to get a chance to interact with this talented group. Some hugged them, others gave them light pecks on the cheek, a few offered them sweets.

One man, however, didn't get up along with the others. As people walked towards the stage, he sat quietly on his chair. Seconds later, he wiped his eye with the back of a hand, looked around to check no one saw it, and then walked over to the actors.



Audience meets actors



An unusual act

theatre as therapy

Anyadesh, which translates to 'another world', was formed in January 2006 by Subhasis Gangopadhyay, 45, with the aim of spreading the message that blindness may be a physical handicap, but it needn't be a mental or emotional one. It stemmed from The Blind Opera, a group that had originated in 1996 in Kolkata, and performed mostly in high-profile theatres.

Anyadesh, however, consists of unemployed job seekers, hawkers and people who've been told they have no prospects in life. Earning little more than Rs 100 per show, they perform in West Bengal's villages, small theatres, local parks, and even on roadsides.

A common curiosity among audiences is what prompts the troupe to have blind and sighted members perform together. "It's an interactive process," says Gangopadhyay. "By getting them to act together, we help them develop a comfort level so that they can understand each other better. Those who are blind shouldn't have to live life communicating only with other blind people. This helps them come out into the world."

The visually impaired are at a severe disadvantage because of the physical handicap that comes with living a sightless life. In India, however, this physical disadvantage is coupled with several mental handicaps, brought on by intense discrimination, lack of opportunities and a struggle for even the basic amenities in life.

The numbers are substantial. One out of every three blind persons in the world lives in India – that's an estimated 13 million blind people, out of which two million are children. Sadly, only around five per cent of them ever receive any kind of education.

The Anyadesh act is unique in many ways. The play that was just performed is loosely based on *Chandalika* by Rabindranath Tagore and focuses on the problems faced by visually-impaired people. Some performers sing to the beats of the tabla, played live along with a flute and harmonium. But it's the actors who draw the most attention, with their movements perfectly coordinated, their dramatically-delivered dialogues



Setting the stage

impressive. And it's only the ropes placed strategically around the stage to demarcate the boundaries that give them away, that make the audience look closer and realise that almost all the performers are blind.

For these actors who've never actually 'seen' good acting, only experienced it, the emotion truly does have to come from within. They have no way of knowing what their facial expressions will translate into, and therefore, it's essential that they not only intimately know their characters, but feel their emotions, too. They have to master the art form at a much deeper level. But although the preparation is different – with the use of ropes and musical cues – the act is no different from any other play by sighted performers. Instinct is what makes the performances so tangible. Not everyone is acting. Sometimes, the tears, the screams, and the frustrations are all too real.

"It's a means of expressing their pain," explains Gangopadhyay. "What we call drama therapy." Through theatre, through the process of identifying and learning from their characters, through acting, Marzeena Khatun and others like her are able to share their pain with the world, and with themselves.

Many of these individuals have spent their lives in denial. When a blind child is born to a poor family, sometimes the choices do not revolve around upbringing and education, but between whether it's wiser to dump the baby in the orphanage or the garbage can. A lot of these children then, start their lives knowing that they've been rejected by their own families and communities. They live with the knowledge that they're unwanted. They always see themselves as nobodies, as outsiders.

"Theatre makes them insiders," says Gangopadhyay. "It says you're part of a group. You're all in this together."

But most of all, theatre gives them the one thing that has been missing all their lives: Communication. Theatre gives them dialogue.



Theatre for life: Mandira Bera



Leading the way:
Subhasis Gangopadhyay,
founder of Anyadesh

finding the way

As far as struggles go, life's already tough enough. She's a woman. She lives in intense poverty. She's blind. And now she has the audacity to have fallen in love with the arts.

A nervous smile flitters around Mandira Bera's lips. Closing in on 29, she can't even imagine going back to being the girl she was a decade ago. Theatre has changed her. Then, she was shy and timid. Now, she's confident and self-assured. Then, she was uncertain about what the future held for her. Now, she has learned to take each day as it comes. Then, the stage made her nervous. Now, it keeps her sane.

"I'd very much want theatre to continue being a part of my life," Bera says. "The question is, will theatre want me?"

When Bera had first joined The Blind Opera (and subsequently Anyadesh) 10 years ago, she was an apprehensive young girl who walked in holding her mother's hand. Every day, her mother would accompany her to practice, wait for her to finish and then guide her back home. The other members of the troupe constantly teased her. "Leave your mother at home," they'd say. "How long will she support you? Look at us. We come alone. We have no mothers holding our hands."

Slowly and surely, Mandira let go of her support system. Now she commutes alone, and the only time she holds a hand is to offer a newbie the same comfort.

Raju, 25, sells incense sticks all day in buses, on the street and at traffic lights. In the evening, he packs his belongings, drops them off at home and walks the few blocks to the theatre class.

His family does not like this.

"What is this obsession with acting?" they ask him. "Who do you think you'll become? Amitabh Bachchan?"

The time Raju spends reciting poetry could easily be spent selling more incense sticks and earning a few extra rupees for the family. "Does the quality of life always have to be measured by how many rupees I've made in a day? Money's not everything, is it?" he asks. It's a rhetorical question. Raju has absolutely no doubt about his priorities: The extra money can wait. He has lines to learn.

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His parents can no longer expect him to back out. But Raju admits that it gets very frustrating when, every time he walks out the door, he's told not to waste his life. "I try to be patient, I try to explain. But if I haven't been able to convince them in the last six years, I doubt there's any chance of doing it now."

Despite the many problems theatre brings, Raju says he could not have survived without it. He smokes less. He laughs more. And he doesn't mind the drudgery of being a hawker every day, when he knows he has the evenings to look forward to.

Several of the troupe members say they've found a sense of community here that doesn't exist elsewhere. In fact, there are many who have met, fallen in love, and married through the theatre.

They've also found respect.

"In the morning, when I leave and hawk my goods in Shyam Bazaar [in Kolkata], everyone either insults me or pretends I don't exist," says Bappa, 29. "But sometimes, our names or photographs appear in a local paper, and when people see that we do something more than selling goods on the street, we are treated very differently."

what lies ahead

"Where to from here?" is a question Gangopadhyay often asks himself and the troupe. They've come far in the 10 years of their existence (since The Blind Opera was formed), but in the future, says Gangopadhyay, it will be important that Anyadesh becomes a self-sustaining entity and is able to carry on the legacy even after the initial founders are no longer involved.

A near-future plan includes a school that will be a theatre academy for the oppressed. "The lower-income groups and the physically and mentally challenged have tremendous potential, but it lies unexplored," Gangopadhyay says. "We're willing to give them a chance to embrace the arts and culture and go where they can with it."

The school building is ready. The reins have been passed on. Several members of the troupe have, over the years, stretched themselves much beyond their original roles and become involved in scriptwriting, implementing and planning activities.

They've discovered that in drama, and in life, they're each given a part. And sometimes, the part is much bigger than the one they thought they were meant to play. □

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