



Sahitya Akademi

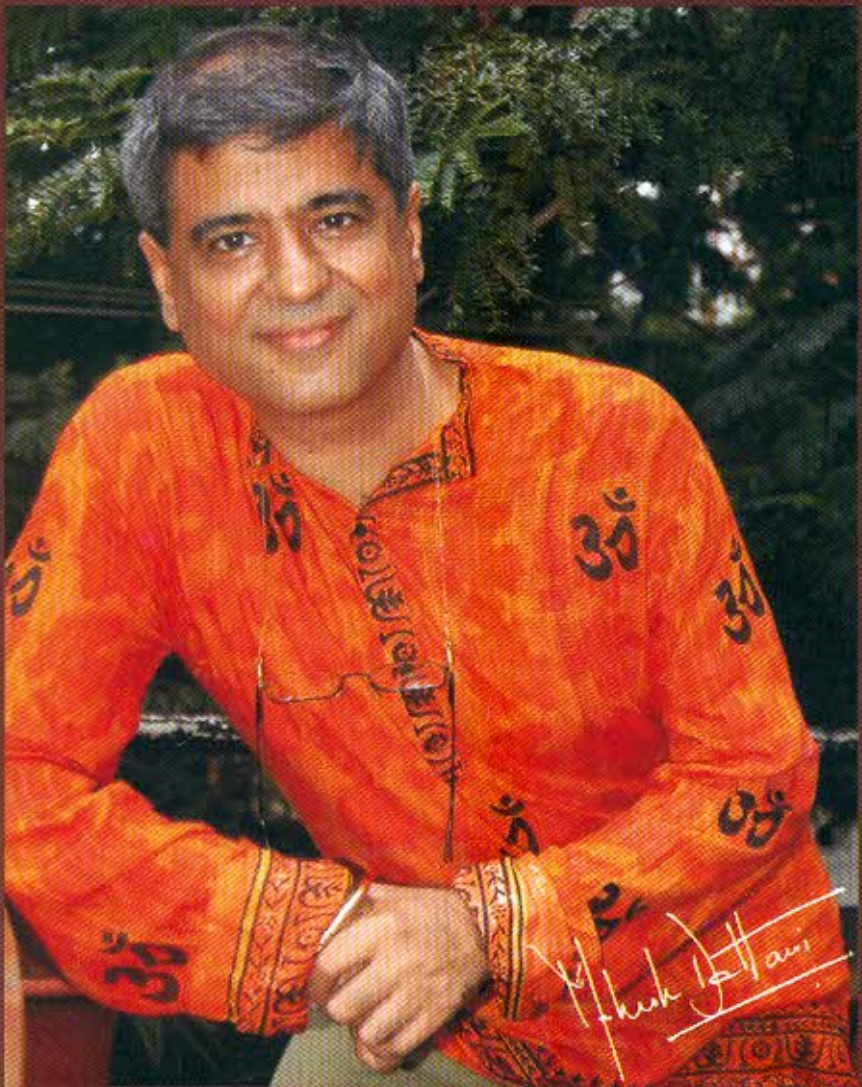


India International Centre

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meet the author

Mahesh Dattani





"Though I've always written in English, my plays are set in India and are about people like us, who read and speak in English."

Mahesh Dattani

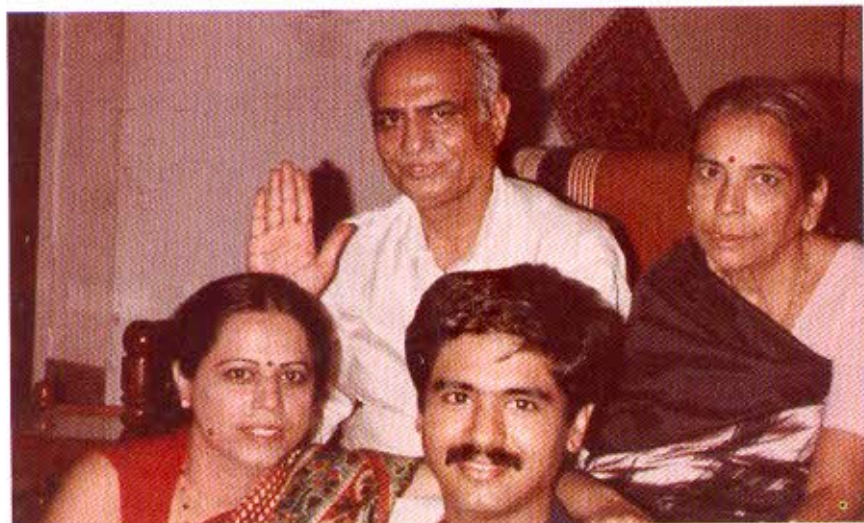
Indian-English theatre, almost fashionably snubbed as 'the theatre of the elite', was badly in need of a timely dose of socially relevant themes and treatment to live down its reputation. Though a good many English-educated Indians would swear by Indian English novels, when it came to theatre, it was another matter altogether. Dubbed as 'metro-centric' theatre which was the preserve of West-watchers, 'true' intellectuals, even those whose mother tongue was English, would prefer regional language theatre! It took a Mahesh Dattani to undo this deep-seated prejudice, and prove that starkly real social issues that stared in the face of the Indian middle classes could be presented through Indian English theatre. Alexandra Viets wrote about Dattani in *International Herald Tribune* as

'one of India's best and most serious contemporary playwrights writing in English'.

Mahesh Dattani was born in 1958 in Bangalore, into a Gujarati business family, and was brought up and educated there. Dattani is a graduate in History, Economics and Political Science and a post-graduate in Marketing and Advertising Management. Initially he worked as a copywriter in an advertisement firm and then joined the family business for some time. From an early age, he had been keenly interested in theatre and had acted in school plays and always wanted to direct plays. He says he began to write plays "by accident and because of a dearth of good scripts," so that he could act in them. He remembers what happened when he had tried to write a one-act play, just for fun, for a local competition—"every single critic took the time to tear it apart." Eventually, Dattani formed his own theatre group, Playpen, in 1984. He became a full-timer in theatre since 1995 and went on to become a filmmaker too. His own theatre studio, opened in 1998, is meant for training and nurturing successive generations in acting, direction and writing for the stage; it is probably the first of its kind in India.

Dattani has also learned Bharata Natyam, the dominant traditional dance of south India, which he later made good use of in his play *Dance Like A Man*. Training in ballet introduced him to western classical music.

Alyque Padamsee, the legend-



"With my parents and Sister Padma in 1985"



"During my sister Padma's wedding ceremony in 1968"

ary theatre director and actor who directed two of Dattani's plays, describes him as a theatre-person who ushers in changes in our country. "Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Dattani is not writing plays that revive old myths and legends. He is one of the few, really the only playwright in English today who writes about modern India and who uses the theatre as a forum for airing social and political issues."

Where There is a Will, written in 1988, is Dattani's first play. Hasmukh Lal Mehta is a self-made Gujarati businessman with a stammering son unfit for normal life, a nagging daughter-in-law, sick but caring, docile wife and a mistress who remains incognito. Hasmukh is a man with a lot of health problems and one day he dies in bed. Then his ghost witnesses the goings on in the household among the various family members—the clash between attitudes, loyalties, ideas and passions. Subir Dhar praises Dattani's plot construction: "This is plotting par excellence...." He also goes on to comment about the 'sparkle' of the dialogues and the texture of their presentation.

Dance Like a Man which followed in 1989, tells the tale of a family of Bharat Natyam dancers, Jairaj and Ratna Parekh and their daughter Lata. The story of the family—depicting the ambitious Ratna who wants to reach the highest in her profession, not being able to spare even a little time for her family, and the tragedy of their infant son dying young because of the ayah's drugging him to keep him quiet in the

absence of the mother, Jayaraj's unfulfilled wish of making the son an accomplished dancer, like Lord Shiva, the Dancer of the Tandava, leading to rifts and clashes of interest in the family—is a complex one. Finally, Jairaj has the realization that only God can dance to perfection and not mere humans. Only those who rise above human frailty can perpetuate great art.

Tara (1990) is about Siamese twins who are physically separated by surgery in which the mother opts for a perfect son, and the daughter is the poorer by a limb and a vital organ, which go to the son. The daughter, Tara, fades out while her brother becomes hale and hearty. The starkness of the situation is simply mind-blowing. Alyque Padamsee has this to say: "In India, in one way we're still old-fashioned, we still live within the extended family, and need to know how things affect one another." Padamsee says the audience praised *Tara* being about "all families."

Bravely Fought the Queen (1991) deals with the lives of two sisters married to two brothers, living in identical bungalows next to each other in a quiet suburb of Bangalore. The women of the house, though always dressed up, never go anywhere; neither do they do anything. Using the symbolism of a bonsai tree, Dattani presents the predicament of the Indian woman in the patriarchal setup, through the character Lalita, who says: "You stunt their growth. You keep trim-



"Once upon I was a Bharatnatyam dancer!"



At Japan Foundation felicitation dinner

ming at their roots, you make sure the roots don't have enough space and then you bind their branches with wire."

Final Solutions (1991), voiced the volatile communal equations that prevailed then all over the country, especially in the metros and big cities. It was so prophetic that when the communal riots erupted in Mumbai in 1992, post Babari Masjid demolition, people had a sense of *déjà vu*. A Hindu family giving refuge to two Muslim boys during a communal riot is an old theme, especially in Partition fiction or drama. But in this play, Dattani brings into the family the whole of India, and analyses the Hindu-Muslim conflict through three generations of the family, trying to narrate the religious, cultural and social history of the country indirectly.

Mahesh Dattani wrote three more full-length plays *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Thirty Days in September* (2001) and *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* (2007) which were also produced successfully.

Dattani's plays have been produced by prestigious theatre companies in the West, especially in UK and USA, to appreciative audiences. 'Mr. Dattani is a canny and facile writer, and there is nothing (in his writing) that is alien to American audiences. Powerful and disturbing,' remarked *The New York Times*.

Dattani has directed two films, *Mango Souffle* (based on *A Muggy Night in Mumbai*) and *Morning Raga*, and worked closely with Pamela Rooks who made a film out of his play *Dance like a Man* which won the Best Picture in English Award in the Indian Panorama Section, in

the International Film Festival of India. A film critic says, "*Morning Raga* is one of the most innovative and fresh films to come out of India in recent years."

Winner of several prestigious awards including the Sahitya Akademi Award, Dattani has also received numerous Fellowships and other recognitions as well.

Mahesh Dattani's plays are all very 'Indian' also in the sense that they are all centred around the institution of the family, and one does not have to look anywhere else for the reason of his astounding success. The complex social, economic, gender situations of our urban milieu are brought out in stunningly realistic details, in his own inimitable style, capturing the imagination of even world audiences. Small wonder then, Mario Relich describes Mahesh Dattani in *Wāsafiri* as 'a playwright of world stature.'



On the deck!

A Select Bibliography

Plays

Final Solutions and Other Plays,
Affiliated East West Press,
Madras, 1994.
Tara, Ravi Dayal, New Delhi,
1996.
Night Queen - Telegraph Literary
supplement, Calcutta, 1996.
Collected Plays - (2 Vols.) Penguin

India, 2000.
*Dance Like a Man: A Stage Play in
Two Acts*, Penguin India, 2006.
Bravely Fought the Queen, Penguin
India, 2006.
Contemporary Indian Theater - Per-
forming Arts Journal, New York.
Published by Johns Hopkins
University Press. Edited by Erin
Mee, 1999. (Essays)

A Chronology

1958 Born in Bangalore,
brought up and educated
there
1984 Founded the theatre
group, Playpen
1984-87 Western ballet training
under Molly Andre at
Alliance Francaise de
Bangalore
1985-92 Acted each year in more
than play, like *Surya
Shikar*, *Five Finger Ex-
ercise*, *Inherit The Wind*,
*One Flew Over the
Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Wit-
ness*, *A Macbeth*,
Hippolytus, *Relatively
Speaking*, *Star Spangled
Girl*, *Self Portrait*, *Where
There's A Will*, *Dance
Like a Man*, *Professor
Vasan (TV Serial)*,
Doongaji House, *Torch
Song Trilogy*, *Broadway
Bound*, *Fate of a Cock-
roach*, *Our Town*
1986-90 Bharata Natyam train-
ing under Chandrabhaga
Devi and Krishna Rao,
Bangalore
1986-92 Directed important plays
like, *God!*, *The Effect Of
Gamma Rays on Man in*

the Moon Marigolds, *In
Camera*, *Where There's
a Will*, *Dance Like a Man*,
Tara, *Torch Song Trilogy*,
Fate of a Cockroach,
*Bravely Fought the
Queen*, *Final Solutions*
1987 Artistic Director,
Founder of Playpen per-
forming arts group, Bang-
alore
1988 Wrote *Where There's A
Will*
1989 Wrote *Dance Like A Man*.
Ranga Pravesh (Dance
debut solo) at Guru
Nanak Bhavan, Banga-
lore. Subsequently per-
formed in temples and
festivals and informal
spaces
1990 Wrote *Tara*
1991 Wrote *Bravely Fought the
Queen*
1992 USIS Visitorship to USA
to study American the-
atre and culture. British
Council grant in aid to
visit UK and meet with
theatre professionals
1992-93 Wrote *Final Solutions*
1994 Acted in *Where There's
A Will*



In discussion with Shabana Azmi on the sets of *Morning Raga*



A scene from the play *Thirty Days in September*

- 1996 British Council grant in aid to visit UK. Wrote *Night Queen* (Short play).
Yoga for the Performer and Indian Cinema at Portland State University, USA. Status: Visiting Professor.
Workshops for playwrights and actors conducted in all the major cities of India
- 1996-98 Directed *Bravely Fought the Queen* (Co-directed with Michael Walling, London); directed *Taru* for Scene Stealers, New Delhi, *Bravely Fought The Queen* (for TAG New Delhi)
- 1997 Charles Wallace Scholarship to visit University of Kent as writer-in-residence.
Wrote *Do The Needful* (Radio play for BBC).
Sahitya Kala Parishad award for best production *Dance Like A Man*
- 1998 Sahitya Kala Parishad award for best production *Bravely Fought The Queen*.
Sahitya Akademi Award for book of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays*.
Founder of Mahesh's Studio - a centre for the performing arts.
Wrote *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai*, wrote *Seven Circles Round The Fire* (Radio play for BBC).
Wrote *Clearing The Rubble* (Radio play for Radio 4 and BBC World).
- Acted in *The Tempest*, *A Perfect Ganesh* (for ART Portland, Oregon)
- 1999 Wrote *Uma and the Fairy Queen* (BBC Radio 4).
Trustee - VOICES a development organization supported by Ford Foundation
- 2000 Sahitya Kala Parishad award for best production *Tara*.
Dramatic structure - weekend class at Haystack, Canon Beach, Oregon, USA.
Wrote *The Swami and Winston* (Radio play for BBC), *Tale of the Mother feeding her child* (radio tale for Radio 3 and 4 BBC)
- 2001 Wrote *Thirty Days in September* (a stage play)
- 2002 Acted in *Henry IV* (by Pirandello - title role).
Directed *Mango Souffle* (Feature film)
- 2003 Directed *Morning Raga* (Feature film)
- 2003 Acted in *The Gloomy Rabbit*
- 2004 Directed *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (stage play).
Chairman - Natya Institute of Kathak and Choreography
- 2005 Directed *Mad about Money*
- 2006 Directed *Double Deal*
- 2007 Directed *Seven Steps around the Fire*.
Wrote *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* for BBC Radio Drama