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(Interviewed by Sri Abhishek Sarkar and Sri Arunava Banerjee)

What were the years in which you passed your BA and MA?

BA 1976 and MA 1978. But those were the official years. These were the post-Naxal times, the entire system had got delayed; therefore actually speaking, I completed my BA in 1977 and only then went on to MA, and my MA degree came a year after that two-year course, in 1980.

What were the institutions concerned?

Presidency College and Calcutta University. To be precise, like many Presidency students in those times, the CU degree was through Presidency College.

When did your first encounter with Shakespeare take place?

That is a very tricky question, as my first encounter with Shakespeare was at home, and would be impossible to date. Baba [Professor P. Lal] taught Shakespeare, and he had Shakespeare all over the house, while I was crawling around. My parents told me that I had a habit of taking out books and scattering them around, and rearranging them in exactly the same order, so I assume that applied to Shakespeare too. I'm joking, but basically the idea is that Shakespeare was in the home very much, and Baba had this phenomenal memory, which I am so unfortunate that I haven't inherited, he could quote from Shakespeare at any time, any play, which was obviously in the air that I imbibed during my growing up.

When did you first come to read a Shakespeare play?

Formally, it would be in Class 9 in St Xavier's School, when we were taught Julius Caesar by a very good teacher who had just joined the school, Mr Godrej Engineer. He in a sense opened our eyes to the study of Shakespeare, and specifically of course Julius Caesar. Subsequently in class 11 (this was the time when school stopped in class 11), one of the Jesuit priests, Father Mairlot, taught us *As You Like It*. Those two plays were on the Cambridge syllabus.



Did you have to read the *Lamb's Tales* version at any point?

No, it had been dropped from the curriculum, at least from our school.

Going onto the college syllabi, which plays were there?

You probably know, they were *AYLI* and *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* was taught by Prof. Arun Dasgupta, and *AYLI* by Prof. Sailen Sen. Both of them treated the texts with very close reading that you are aware was the tradition, and at the same time, they had different approaches. We were absolutely astounded by Arun-babu's scholarship and actually more than that, an awareness of all kinds of extra-literary references, contexts, that he brought into his classes, into his reading of lines and speeches so effortlessly. Perhaps more than the play itself, it was his manner of teaching that impressed me. He was one of those typical Renaissance men whom you don't get too many of nowadays. Painting, sculpture, theory, music, he brought those all in effortlessly, they just came out of the air while he was doing *Macbeth* with us. A lot of the symbolism became beautifully clear to us. With Sailen-babu, it was more of a line by line proceeding through *AYLI*, with such detail that he never finished the play. And it took three years! This he did with other batches too; so it was a different approach in terms of how, even if you don't finish the play, you got enough from a word-by-word reading to be able to fill in the rest of it. But I have to say quite honestly that I do feel there is a certain time limit by which a teacher should complete what he or she is supposed to do, and finishing the text is part of that job.

So it was the second time you were reading *AYLI*?

Yes, by that time I knew the play pretty thoroughly. As it so happens, funnily enough, now I am teaching it after all these years.

What differences were there between the two teachers and their approaches to the text?

I think the only difference was that obviously there is a thing about age, in terms of what age I was in school in Class 11 and then at what age I was in college. Father Mairlot also being a Jesuit priest, stayed away from any of the innuendoes, and we were prescribed the Verity edition, which you know is a kind of late Bowdlerization. So there was a lot there which I wasn't aware of until later on, that was not in the original text which Verity had subtly changed or erased, and which Father of course didn't enter, and generally skipped those areas. Whereas Sailen-babu was much more methodical and thorough, and he brought in all the editors at various times, so we got to know the



process of the Shakespeare texts, how it was itself open to critical questioning and interpreting, so that was what we ... we were older then, we got to learn from Sailendra Kumar Sen.

Do you remember who taught you the Shakespeare sonnets?

Yes, Sukanta-*da*. He was very young at that time, he had just about joined, about a year before we came into Presidency. He was the talk of the town. This young graduate from England, who had become full Professor, this had apparently never happened before, and not just that, and this is completely unrelated to Shakespeare, but at that time in the History department, they had Rajat Ray, and we had Sukanta Chaudhuri, which was a kind of rivalry. The girls of History thought that Rajat-*da* was more handsome, and the girls of English thought that Sukanta-*da* was more handsome, and that annoyed us men no end; besides we were unfortunately perpetually in a state of inferiority as a result of Sukanta-*da*'s accomplishments. Obviously I am talking very lightly, but Sukanta-*da* was also my tutor, and I really enjoyed my tutorials in terms of the liberalism at its best, I guess, the way he opened my eyes to all kinds of texts. But Shakespeare's sonnets, he taught. We had just three sonnets on the syllabus, and that I think is a shame, because as in JU, we should read much more to get to know them better. But because they were sonnets, he could treat them in minute detail, in ways we could not imagine possible. Although we were also being taught Keats by AKDG – Arunbabu, we got in that sense the best approaches to the sonnet as a form from these wonderful teachers. What one could learn from one class, perhaps totally non-Shakespearean, could be applied to Shakespeare in another class and vice versa. Let me tell you another anecdote, because I don't know if anybody else has told you this, Sukanta-*da* in class had this habit of tilting backwards on his chair, and we all, regardless of gender, wondered when it will happen, when is it going to stop defying the law of gravity and topple, but it never did, so apart from all his other accomplishments, Sukanta-*da* knows exactly where his centre of gravity is. Visually it was quite a marvel: while being taught the sonnets, we could see him perched in this very precarious balance, a nice performance, and as you know I am interested in performance in its own right.

He doesn't attempt that too often nowadays.

No. I'm sorry to see that he doesn't do this anymore.

What about the Calcutta University teachers and the syllabus?

Calcutta University was a bit of a let-down. We were taking some of the classes at Presidency, but as far as the Shakespeare texts were concerned, they were King Lear taught by Jyoti Bhattacharya, and Antony and Cleopatra by Sushil Mukherjee. Both of them were quite senior at that time. Jyoti-babu



was a very good teacher, but you know maybe it was the Presidency training that we got, we didn't really get anything additional from the King Lear lectures that we couldn't deduce on our own from our Presidency experience. Antony and Cleopatra was the biggest let-down and it is such a wonderful play, but when the teacher says in class that "Cleopatra একটা জাঁদ্রলে ময়ে", you might have expected more from him.

And he insisted that *All for Love* is a better play.

Oh no, that is R.K. Sen, Sailen-babu's brother. Yes, he insisted that *All for Love* is a better play, and to some extent, now I can understand it, but at that time we laughed it off, and there used to be quite heated debates with the students in class on this subject with RKS, because obviously Shakespeare is this huge big name as opposed to Dryden, but he never let down. He held on to his stand, and at this stage of life I admire him, because he held fast to neoclassicism. You don't get too many people obsessed with neoclassicism now to the extent that they will actually say Dryden improved Shakespeare. RKS did that.

People have raved about Jyoti Bhattacharya's histrionic skills, about how they have been swept off.

I'm aware of that.

So didn't you feel overwhelmed at that?

No.

You are the odd man out!

Yeah, because I didn't think he had the right pronunciation, not all through, but off and on, and it was elocution. It was more than recitation, it was elocution, but it was not theatrical enough. That is my opinion, but yes, I see what you are getting it, nobody else at that time who was teaching Shakespeare treated it as performance. But in terms of his own individual performance I wouldn't say that it was anything great, and that too performance only in terms of elocuting the lines, that's not theatre.

So how do you distinguish between elocution and theatre proper?



Elocution is just reading it aloud for an audience with an ear for the poetry, but theatre takes into account all the other characters who are on stage, and what has now been appropriated by cinema, *mise-en-scène*, which of course was a theatrical term. That entire dimension was really missing, which of course I had become used to because of my own training in theatre during this time. I got involved in college theatre, and outside college with the English-language group The Red Curtain who were just about a few years older and had recruited some of us. They were mainly graduates of St Xavier's and Loreto, the English-medium schools and colleges. There was a bit of a problem there in that the English-medium, and these were the elite schools, had a way of approaching Shakespeare which other schools didn't, and maybe it was that baggage I carried with me. But, again, at home, I had my father speaking or pronouncing English in a certain way, so growing up with that, even now I correct people's English pronunciation which maybe I shouldn't be doing. We are more liberal nowadays, but I already knew what theatre was all about from my first year in Presidency, outside Presidency.

So what was the reaction of your classmates to Jyoti-babu?

Like you said, most of them were... look, as you said, among the CU faculty, he was one of the best teachers. That I think everyone would agree.

And performance-wise?

They would probably agree with what you are saying. But like I am saying, by the last year of my MA, I'd experienced real theatre. I'd already made the decision that English was not what I wanted to study, that my interests were moving towards theatre full-scale, they had moved towards theatre full-scale. English as the syllabus was taught and what it was at that time was really a kind of Raj relic and didn't move beyond Eliot and Yeats in the MA syllabus; this was not for me, I was not interested in this at all.

What kinds of plays were being performed by Red Curtain during the initial years?

All contemporary plays. That is what grabbed me. They did *Hamlet* but I was not involved in that, it was a pretty good *Hamlet* actually, with Jayant Kripalani as Hamlet. They were doing Stoppard, they were doing Ionesco (these are productions with which I was involved) within years of these plays having appeared for the first time abroad. They were doing things which nowadays I often find that contemporary Indian theatre doesn't do, which is keeping abreast of immediately contemporary trends outside India. That is what actually interested me and completely overwhelmed me, and got me thinking of doing my PhD in theatre. My experience with Ionesco was directed by Rustom



Bharucha. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Shakespearean in its own way, Jayant was there and Arjun Chaudhuri who left the theatre and left India too, acted *Ros and Guild*. These were very influential in making me realize what the state of the art in theatre at that time was about. I was ready to do my PhD on Absurdist theatre, thank God I didn't.

Was there any talk of these productions in the classrooms? Did they teachers themselves refer to absurdist theatre?

No, no, no. You mean with reference to Shakespeare?

No, whichever class.

Yes, occasionally Beckett's name would be dropped. Ionesco perhaps, but in relation to other courses, sometimes tragedy. We studied literary genres in the BA but not in the MA. There was a special option in the MA called Modern European Drama, but we never got to the Absurdist because I guess it was still not legitimate to study those texts. My reading of them occurred outside, and also my hands-on experience of actually acting, as Alfred in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, quite an interesting thing. I had to play the young boy Alfred in the group of players, performing as a girl. That got quite some laughs from the audience.

You also mentioned college theatre, what kind of theatre was present in college?

In Presidency itself, because of my own experience outside the college, I brought in some of that while directing for the college at festivals, in what is now called Derozio Hall and also for a festival at JU. These were contemporary, I did a Nissim Ezekiel play, *The Sleepwalkers*. Then I directed one which won the best production award at JU, Schubert's *Last Serenade*.

So the other teachers did not try to enact the scenes in the classroom?

Shakespeare? No. Certainly not AKDG. Certainly not SKS. They tended to ignore the stage altogether, which I felt was wrong.

So they didn't even talk about stage conventions of that time?

Just a little bit. One of the introductory things that SKS did, which in a way was good, he had a test, he told us to read G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare*. That forced us to read it, and as you know Harrison has these pictures so you kind of get to know the stage tradition, but by and large it



was taken for granted that theatre was secondary, an ancillary activity, and the text was all-important, which I soon realized was false.

We have heard that there was a full-fledged paper on Shakespeare at the MA level, of which theatre conventions were a part.

Yes, but that was hardly taught. Not for us at least. Let me be frank, I didn't do all that many classes at the MA level. So, if it was taught, I don't remember. Besides I knew it already, for some of it I had learnt already from books during the Presidency days.

In any case it wouldn't be discussed in very great detail.

No, no, not at all, that attitude was so, so obsolete, and I realized that the minute I went abroad, how totally out of date we were.

Were the teachers very particular about pronunciation and accent?

With respect to Shakespeare or in general? We had a wide range of accents, both in BA and in MA. That says it all, because I don't want to mention names here, but there were teachers who were obviously not speaking Queen's English, though there was nothing wrong in that. It being the early seventies, some of us would probably snigger at such instances, which perhaps we shouldn't have been doing. But what I definitely consider wrong is that in the MA classes, there were people actually teaching in Bengali. There was no sensitivity to the fact that there were a few students who were non-Bengalis, and that after all Calcutta was a metropolitan city, almost a cosmopolitan city, even in the early seventies, and it was shameful that some teachers would lapse into Bengali while teaching in an English department.

Did the teachers talk about the Great Vowel Shift? The changes in pronunciation?

Yes, that we got in BA. Otto Jespersen was very much there and it was taught.

While teaching Shakespeare?

I don't really remember. Again it was a case of application of what we learnt about philology onto Shakespeare, but I don't recall specifically that we were taught about this with reference to Shakespeare.



And expletives and sexual references? Were they omitted at the BA or the MA level?

No, I don't think so, Arun-babu was quite frank. He may not have laboured on them but he took a lot of time on the Porter scene. That was one of the most frequently Bowdlerized scenes, but he took it up.

It was the same for SKS?

In *AYLI* there isn't that much of it, but occasionally. In Presidency we got to know that Verity wasn't the right kind of edition to read Shakespeare. We were told to read the Arden, if not the Variorum. Some actually suggested the Variorum too.

Were these editions of Shakespeare available in the college library?

I must say I was lucky because my father had them all.

Did the teachers themselves specify which edition to go for?

Yes, generally speaking, and yes, they were available in the library, but the problem in the library was that if somebody took it out, it may never have come back. I am one of those very strange Presidentians who actually (and I still have my notes from that period) read every single book on every prescribed author that was available in the Presidency library. Those were my good days. I have left all that behind now! We had a good library, a little old-fashioned, not up to date, there were certain glorious omissions which I later got to know when I went abroad, that these books hadn't made it to us, but that was a time when the rupee was falling, so there were choices being made by the faculty that these books would be bought and not those, and generally it was British books over American books. It was a bit sad, because we definitely needed to know more about recent American scholarship. The British legacy had not left. I would perhaps argue that it still has not left.

So Shakespeare was well represented in the library?

Yes, yes, in fact the valuable things that you could find in there, you can probably still find over there, were amazing. There were acting editions from the 19th century which I went through, because I was more interested in staging. These were printed, you remember the history of 19th-century Shakespeare? The acting editions were published because there were those who had seen the performance, therefore they bought that book as a memento, it was an example of merchandising that could be capitalized on.

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What did Supriya-di [Prof. Supriya Chaudhuri] teach?

Supriya-di taught Marlowe.

Edward II?

Yes.

And none of the poems?

Shakespeare?

No, in general.

Not that I remember. You see, Supriya-di came in when we were in our third year, and you know what it is with the new recruits to a department, they are given the least desirable texts to teach, so there were things that she was given that perhaps did not require more than two or three lectures at most, but she was very good with Marlowe.

She didn't do Ben Jonson?

We didn't have Ben Jonson in the syllabus.

Did she discuss homosexuality while discussing *Edward II*?

Yes, I think we were all aware. I am trying to rack my brains now, because you are making me go back almost 40 years. We already were aware of that while reading it, the lines were very obvious. But she did not stay away from it, that is for sure.

Was sexuality discussed in general?

Certainly not in the way it is now. No. Is there any particular text that you are thinking of?

***AYLI* perhaps. The homoerotic places.**

No no, not in *AYLI* at all. Not that. *Edward II*, yes.

Did the teachers give any impression that Shakespeare was the centre of the canon?



Yes, that was pretty clear-cut to us even during our school days. Here we were, studying two full Shakespeare plays! Moreover, as a young boy, I had grown up during the sixties so the entire quarter-centenary event was in my mind anyway.

The teachers only reinforced that general sentiment?

Oh yes.

Was there any tendency of questioning the position of Shakespeare?

No.

We have heard that at one point of time there was a popular debate whether Marlowe was better than Shakespeare. It was popular in certain quarters.

Not for us. In the classroom? No. Not for us. When was this in reference to?

Mid-sixties.

Oh, so earlier than us. I was not in college then, so I wonder who the teachers were. Do you remember?

Actually someone from CU told us about this.

I would have no idea. My college began in 1973.

What was the status of Shakespeare's contemporaries like? Were they given the same amount of importance?

We had this huge History of Literature paper, so we did learn a lot from that, although most of us tended to think 'Groan!' about names and dates, as all history books tend to make students do. But the faculty shared this enormous paper, so we got some pretty brilliant lectures and some pretty bad lectures, and some areas were left uncovered altogether, but the Renaissance was taught, so we got to know that.

Who covered the Renaissance portion?



That's a good question, I don't really remember, because everybody did share. I do think Sukanta-da taught some of it, but I'm blanking out because of the so many voices, yet in a sense it was good, because you got different perspectives. Supriya-di also taught some history of literature, but I am forgetting what.

They were all unanimous on it, the central position of Shakespeare.

Look, they are not going to be blurring it out, that this is the first name and the last name, but it was evident from lectures in general that he was the highest accomplishment of English literature.

Do you think it was a healthy trend?

Which?

To name Shakespeare as the be-all and end-all of English literature.

If you ask me now, no. Because, you used the word healthy, it has certainly led to an unhealthy emphasis on Shakespeare scholarship and research, which I think could have been better served by attention given to others, had this entire approach not been there. I certainly would say now that we need to look at other Renaissance plays from England more carefully. Even though I myself have directed two Shakespeare plays, actually the same in terms of number as my direction of two Tagore plays, all the other writers I have directed are in single productions, which would quantitatively show you that in the last twenty years we are still doing the same thing. I would encourage students now to just be open, not even necessarily the Renaissance, just look everywhere for plays.

Did the teachers prescribe secondary material?

Oh yes. Very definitely.

What kind of books would be suggested by them?

You have to think that this is the 1970s, so we were typically being told to read everything from Bradley to Wilson Knight.

And no theory at all?



Theory yes, not maybe what you now know as theory, but because we had literary types as part of our syllabus we were taught tragedy, comedy and others, so theoretically that background was there. We were in the middle of the theory boom internationally, but we never received much attention to that boom while we were in college, primarily because those things took place in Europe and America, not in England, and we were still bearing the full brunt of the British legacy.

Was Auerbach mentioned in the class?

Yes, AKDG did.

And Eliot's take on Shakespeare?

Eliot was well known.

And even his heterodox take on Shakespeare?

Yes, yes. It was mentioned in passing perhaps, because I don't think we got any sense that there is this only one great critic or two or three that we should read. Definitely we were told about much, but not about the immediate contemporaries. Eliot after all was already gone for nearly twenty years.

Would the teachers actually subscribe to his iconoclastic views on Shakespeare?

I think you are pressing this issue too much. Eliot? No. It was mentioned in passing, that's all. There were no references that I can recall that were upholding Eliot vis-a-vis Shakespeare.

***Coriolanus* being a better play than *Hamlet* and all that?**

No, because of course those two plays we didn't study. You are actually looking for deviations from the norm of the canon which didn't really happen. Not to any extent that I would be able to remember it.

Did the teachers talk about Sanskrit or Bengali literature?

Not at all.

Not even AKDG?

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If he did, I might have missed out on it. But it was generally taken for granted that what was material for study would be England and, by extrapolation, Europe. And of course classical Europe. But no influence or attempt at connecting with India. Which was again very sad.

Not even Tagore?

Tagore, yes, he did arise occasionally in AKDG. I don't think you can ever escape Tagore in Calcutta.

There wasn't any sort of comparative study?

No, they probably thought that Comparative Literature is JU's field, so you know, we shouldn't intrude on that!

So AKDG would deal with the classical world, probably?

Yes, and the Renaissance. He also taught tragedy as a genre.

What was the examination question pattern like?

Very predictable. I can show you my charts, I still have those somewhere at home, very nice charts, wherein I made ten-year surveys of all the old question papers and I would give my predictions to all my classmates, and continued to do that for four or five years, right through MA. They were so happy and indebted to me! All you needed to do was skip the previous year's questions, a simple process.

Both for the BA and the MA?

Yes, absolutely ridiculous.

Not for the tutorials?

Tutorials were internal evaluations. We were told to write on anything and everything, not at all restricted to the syllabus. Some of them were of course, but that was not the idea. The idea was to force you to do other reading.

So you wouldn't try to stick to the syllabus?

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In the tutorials? No, no.

But those marks didn't count for the final assessment I suppose?

All the final assessments were centralized CU. Since you ask about the tutorials, a lot of my classmates used to see Sukanta-da and me laughing away in the middle of tutorials and wondered why I got it so easy, my tutorials so jolly and apparently frivolous. Actually, Sukanta-da I knew from before. You probably don't know that he was a poet published by Writers Workshop. My father had published his books of poems, so he used to visit our house. We also came from the same school, where he was already a legend. His kind of halo was something we had to contend with pretty early on, but we shared some common history that brought familiarity. That someone like him and a petty student like me would be laughing over tutorials was incredible to a lot of my classmates.

So what was the legend about him in school?

He was this impossible-to-duplicate student who got all these impossibly high marks in the Cambridge exams, which was a fact. He was the blue-eyed boy of school, college, everywhere.

Was there a tradition of drama at St Xavier's?

Yes, but not regular.

Were there elocution classes?

Yes, I am very happy that there were. Because they did inculcate in us two things that I think are so important: one is verbal delivery, and the other is writing, not calligraphy but writing neatly. I believe that is gone in most schools, and I believe that they are real skills that should be taught, because I do wish that many of our students did have those beforehand: how to speak, how to write.

What was the procedure like in the elocution classes?

It was a certain regimentation if you could call it that, because there were tests, we were given marks for it. You had to mug up a passage of your own choice and then elocute it in class and, depending on how well you did it, you were given marks. The same with writing. We had very good teachers for these in school.

And there would be pieces from Shakespeare?



It varied, Browning, but also early twentieth-century poetry. This was school after all, not very serious. Typical would be pieces more kind of school-boyish, like “Lochinvar.”

Did you talk about stage or film productions of Shakespeare?

Actually film had peaked by that time, but it was not referred to in the classroom, it had not yet attained academic respectability, let's face it, in the early seventies.

Did you yourselves go to watch these movies?

Again, my parents took me to watch some of them, but more later on in college and university with my friends. But look at it from today's perspective, they were not that commonly available, they didn't run. I don't know which films you are talking about, because if they were too old they would not be rerun, they would not be screened. There would only be Sunday morning shows at the St Xavier's auditorium, which we would often go to, because the Fathers had this wonderful practice of screening great movies, regardless of what violence or sex was there. That wasn't the point, it was that they had this agenda (as they did with elocution and drama, in the Renaissance, the Jesuits) that they will use the latest idiom if it is good. They would not show other things which may not have been as critically acclaimed.

And you do remember having watched any of the travelling Shakespeare companies?

Yes and no, the companies that used to come were few and far between, generally brought in by British Council, and up till that time, there was a history of variety entertainment, variety programmes, in which very typically you had scenes from Shakespeare. I probably did go to one or two of these as a teenager, and didn't really think that they were particularly great, and as I grew older I realized that this was not the way to perform any play. You don't do scenes from plays. By the time regular full-length productions began to come regularly, I was already on my way out of Calcutta.

So you don't remember having watched Utpal Dutt.

Oh, I thought you were talking about the British Council...

Utpal Dutt as part of Shakespeareana.



That's much, much earlier! I was born during that period! By the time I started watching plays, he had gone into his own Bangla Little Theatre Group and then People's Little Theatre. He had left English and Shakespeare far behind. He did the occasional Jatra *Macbeth* but I didn't see it.

So you didn't catch any of Utpal Dutt's Bangla Shakespeare adaptations?

No, not his Bangla Shakespeare until much later in revivals, after I returned from the US.

These things weren't in any way incorporated into the classroom?

No, they weren't. Like I told you, performance was considered to be if not third-level then at best second-level, no way to be compared to the text, which was placed on a pedestal and worshipped.

Could you tell us something about your classmates who later distinguished themselves as teachers or performers?

Among my generation of three batches in Presidency I can only think of Abhijit Sen, who was with me from school, who has continued to teach performance and Shakespeare and who has directed as well. Other than him, my immediate senior Swapan [Chakravorty] acted in amateur Bengali plays and had a wonderful theatricality, which no doubt influenced his specialization on Middleton. My immediate juniors included Amlan [Dasgupta] and Prodosh [Bhattacharya], but theatre was not their forte.

Were there any actors in your batch?

No. I am thinking of my immediate seniors as well as my immediate juniors, nobody was deeply interested in theatre. My friends in theatre were from other colleges and universities.

Could you name some of them?

Rustom [Bharucha] of course, who was senior to me by a few years. As far as I know, the first Calcuttan to receive a doctorate in theatre – from Yale. I was the second.

He was a student of literature?



He was a student of English in St. Xavier's and then JU. His friends, Jayant Kripalani, Sumit Roy (he has revived the Red Curtain in Kolkata), these were the people I hung out and rehearsed with in the evenings.

Where was Sumit Roy studying?

St Xavier's College.

What was his subject?

I don't remember. All of them were older than me. His wife Katy Lai, also very close to me, was from Loreto College, one of the most brilliant designers I know, a wonderful artist, and now director.

What changes in Shakespeare pedagogy have you noticed over the decades?

But I haven't finished with my student life! I did my PhD for 5 years at the University of Illinois, in the Theatre Department for reasons which I earlier explained. I am so, so lucky that I didn't win either the Rhodes or INLAKS to England, as my attitude to pedagogy would not have changed. My approach to Shakespeare was certainly transformed and a great degree inspired by the two Shakespeare professors I had from the English Department of Illinois – in the American system you can take courses across departments. They were Michael Shapiro and Michael Mullin, from two totally different perspectives. Here is where I learnt exactly what I knew at heart and what I was looking for in an English department, that Shakespeare was a theatre person primarily. In the American system one has to do coursework first, two years for me, during which (I am not talking about my theatre courses here, though my research supervisor Robert Graves was himself a specialist on lighting in Renaissance theatre, with a book on Renaissance lighting methods, so I learnt a lot about Shakespeare from him, too) what I took under Professors Shapiro and Mullin were two of what in America are called graduate seminars. Michael Shapiro's course had a much wider range of Shakespeare plays, which we obviously hadn't studied over here, which proved what was never demonstrated here, about his growth from an apprentice with Titus Andronicus or Comedy of Errors, right up till the last plays. We had grown up in the old CU pattern, some of which rubbed off on JU even until now, where you get fixated on just a few texts, but you are actually ignoring the context. That development we now teach in class, but I got it from Prof. Shapiro, now Emeritus Professor at Loyola, in Chicago. Of late Sukanta-da got to know him pretty well, as he spent a few months at Loyola, and I heard Sukanta-da and Michael used to walk down the lakeside of Lake Michigan having animated intellectual discussions. I wonder what these were!



That was one angle, and Prof. Mullin was a different person altogether. He was instrumental in bringing an entire collection to the University of Illinois library, which is one of the top five research libraries in the US (one of the reasons I went there), of designs from England done by the theatre designers named Motley. I don't know if you have heard of them, one of the premier artistic design units, including of Shakespeare, because they worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company. That entire Motley archive, he negotiated in buying the whole thing, American universities can do that! He hired me as a research assistant, and made me catalogue part of it. The collection included some promptbooks as well. I wrote a term paper reconstructing the *Hamlet* production of Glen Byam Shaw, I don't know if you have heard of him but he was one of the best British directors of Shakespeare, in the 1950s and 60s. I learnt a lot from these: I could physically see the designs and promptbooks for what went on in a performance. From professors in an English department I learnt the craft of how to write a research paper on Shakespearean theatre, how to approach a theatre product as an artwork in its own right. Nobody in India had taught us how to write term papers, which we now teach in JU. I still have my reconstruction of the Glen Byam Shaw production which should be published, but it is too long, 40 or 50 pages, no journal would accept that. Neither is it big enough for a monograph.

We could have it for Sukanta-da's *festschrift*.

It is too big for that, because there would be at least 20 contributors there. Maybe after I retire, maybe I can rework it into some form or the other. These are very interesting things, of how you block, and all these diagrams, *Hamlet* and the other characters moving from one position to another. The production is gone, nobody remembers it except for stray reviews or accounts, but that entire promptbook is there, and this is some of what a theatre scholar does, reconstructing an important production.

Does the promptbook also show the blocking?

Everything, it is like a Shakespearean promptbook, that is what a promptbook is supposed to be, right?

Is it printed or in hand?

All in hand. Different colours for different people coming in, all very meticulously colour coded.

So that is the unique promptbook, I mean the only one.



Yes, for that production. Many other promptbooks were in the collection, but one can only do one thing at one time. Actually there was a time in Illinois when I was, I wouldn't say obsessed, but fascinated by *Hamlet*, as aren't we all at some point or the other, when I was thinking of working on a book or my dissertation perhaps, of various performance approaches to *Hamlet*. I quickly set that aside, it was just too much to handle! Two of these in fact have been published in our *Essays and Studies*: one on Francis Fergusson's views of Hamlet, and another where I looked at productions of Hamlet on the New York stage over a period of ten years. I was building up to possibly one direction I might go, but then I realized that it wouldn't be practically feasible and that I would be biting off much more than I could chew. But those were extremely important experiences for me.

What would be the seminars done under Prof. Shapiro?

One was Shakespeare, for one semester we read and analysed various Shakespeare plays. Mullin also taught Shakespeare, but much more hands-on. He got his students to go into the library, he opened the archives which was itself an achievement (any professor would think twice about letting students in!), but he was okay with that, allowing us to handle these rare things, of course they preserve them very well in American libraries, and each one of us had to take up something to do with that particular collection, as a research project.

What was your seminar topic?

Sorry, for Prof. Shapiro? It was on William Poel. You have heard of him? The antiquarian who revived "authentic Shakespearean staging" in the early twentieth century. I looked at records of his work.

It wouldn't have been possible in Calcutta.

No, of course, the primary materials aren't here. But I was so unhappy in Calcutta, because here I was practising theatre, whereas my teachers of drama were just not interested in the actual profession about which they were teaching. They were not teaching it, they were teaching just the literature.

I remember that you were the only one who mentioned William Poel in the classroom.

That too probably incidentally; Poel is only of historical interest now. I don't know which course it was that you are talking about.



Shakespeare in Performance, I think.

There of course I devote time to many such pioneers like Granville Barker, Poel. Anyway, those two years in Illinois were when I certainly made up my mind: I was good at it, and I wanted to do it, and I realized that any teaching of Shakespeare or any kind of playwright cannot be done without reference to the theatre. Eventually when I came back to Kolkata, while working elsewhere, I started doing just that as a guest lecturer in the late eighties and early nineties. I taught the Shakespeare and performance part of the paper in CU, where Paromita [Chakravarti] was a student of mine. This was before I joined Comparative Literature, JU, as a full-time Lecturer in 1991. I joined the English department as Reader in 1993.

What changes have you noticed in Shakespeare pedagogy?

Now this would be difficult for me as I haven't actually sat in on any class since I began teaching.

No, the difference between you as a teacher and you as a student. What obvious changes in methodology?

Just what I was telling you, obviously because of my academic training in theatre I began to incorporate it in every possible way regardless of whether it was Shakespeare or Derek Walcott or eventually the Drama in Practice course that I now teach, which is entirely theatre practice. Well, not entirely, there is a kind of misconception about that too, that we do not study the text. We do actually study the text at the beginning and then students who have signed up for the course give presentations about aspects of the texts that could be literary, but I encourage them to go into performance aspects, and eventually after about a month or so we hit the rehearsal floor. But that is a practical course. Whenever I teach any drama on other courses I insist that we have to take into account its performance.

What texts did you teach in the Comparative Literature Department?

At Comp Lit it was quite varied, because they did this thing of setting up modules where one text is compared with another, so I taught *Oedipus* with *King Lear*, I taught Tagore, among drama. I also taught poetry and fiction.

Have you noticed any particular change in the reaction of students to Shakespeare?



I think that is more for the students to tell you. I would hope that they understand the logic behind my argument, which by the way I have formally presented in a pedagogical essay published earlier in the Comparative Literature series on genre, now reprinted in the journal of EFLU Hyderabad, on what position theatre should occupy within a literature department, regardless of whether it is English or Comparative Literature or Visva-Bharati's DEOMEL. But I suspect that a lot of students think that I am some kind of weirdo, on his own performance trip. They are quite welcome to think that, because we as students ourselves thought certain teachers were way out of line while others were to our tastes. The sad thing is that unanimously, especially the brighter ones who go for higher studies abroad, when they come back during the holidays or whatever, they tell me, "Sir, now we realize what you were saying." That is okay, I accept it as a compliment perhaps, but I wish it wasn't so, I wish our Indian students realized from the very beginning that this is the way that drama is now accepted and taught in the best institutions across the world. Even now I think that (students can correct me) drama is still taken as a literary text, even in JU. And certainly in CU and other places.

Do you think that Shakespeare is an overrated author?

We have already answered this, haven't we? In a word, yes, because there is this huge big image and industry, let's face it, which has become an engine that is propelling it. Look, he is a great dramatist, there is no question about it, and again for reasons that would have been clear to JUDE people, his plays that I chose to direct prove just this: in *The Merchant of Venice* (1996) and *Measure for Measure* (2004), he is clearly talking to us, there is no question about that. The reason I chose *Merchant of Venice* was the communal riots that had immediately preceded, and our production has been documented by Dennis Bartholomeusz in India's Shakespeare. The book has printed my directorial interpretation and Dennis's own spectatorial reaction and interpretation; from both perspectives it seemed clear that our minority was being discriminated against. *Measure for Measure* is a real riot in the best sense of the word, it is a play that is meant to fall apart, and that is what we found when we were rehearsing it, it disintegrates from the word go, and that is exactly what Shakespeare is out to tell us, that this is the society that we see around us. We did a gender reversal, you remember, all the men's roles were played by women and the female roles were played by men. *Measure for Measure* is about sexuality, and (I always ask my performers later on what they got from the production), one of the things they told me about *Measure for Measure* was that it actually made them understand the other gender better. I'm shortening the answer here, and I am not denying that my own career as a director has proved Shakespeare's greatness as I have done two plays by him and also two plays by Tagore, but yes, too much of Shakespeare is done. You should look elsewhere. Like for instance what I did with *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. It was a riot in a different way, and nobody realizes how timely it is, how it is actually a kind of Bollywood scenario 400 years ago, and there are certain



continuities regardless of culture, which we must alert our students to. So yes, by all means explore others.

Were the teachers at Presidency and CU accommodating enough in terms of suggestions and questions?

Generally the procedure was that you listened to the lecture and you didn't question too much, but when we did ask questions, and we did ask questions, they did answer them. There wasn't any sense that, no, we won't take your questions. I should say that there were professors at both Presidency and CU who just spoke from notes, lectured from notes, and sometimes the not-so-good teachers didn't entertain questions, and to be honest we didn't necessarily want to ask questions. But then I too bring a sheet to class as a reminder of a date or a particular point which I might need to keep handy. In cases like RKS, we used to decide beforehand, let's start discussing in class and let's see how irritated we can get him to become, but he too argued back and forth and therefore in that sense there was no prohibition on asking questions.

Were students encouraged to think independently?

In what way do you mean? Writing? Yes, I think so, but I wonder what kind of student you mean, because the intelligent students would anyway be thinking independently, whereas the average student would realize that they would have to probably regurgitate basic material in order to get marks and that was the main thing. Again, do realize that Presidency was the kind of *crème de la crème* like JU now, and we got the best students, so generally speaking we were more independent to begin with, but even so within that elite group – there were only 16 students in my batch at Presidency – there were people who got first classes and there were people who didn't fare that well, and people in the middle like a close friend of mine who thought independently on his own but for the purpose of the exam, the degree, he would just go through notes and provide what was wanted. You didn't want to in any way upset an unknown examiner who might have a very conservative approach; to some extent even the more intelligent students realized that it was only up to a point but no further. In JU today, we allow students much greater freedom of thought.