

“When the cause is good – the means will follow” -

Reflections on Dr. Jamshed Bhabha and the National Centre Performing Arts in Mumbai.

In the last six months we have had reason to be reminded once more of the extraordinary generosity of Dr. Jamshed Bhabha. The bequeathing of his entire estate to the NCPA has resulted in a number of public auctions and Mumbai seems to have been transfixed once more by the trappings left behind by this extraordinary man. When asked to write about the NCPA, but in particular Jamshed Bhabha – I found myself reluctant – for there were so many others whom I felt could have provided a more poignant view of the man that he was. And then I remembered, that - as fate would have it – my first connection with the NCPA in February of 2007 allowed me the honour of meeting him and shaking his hand during the second season of the newly formed Symphony Orchestra of India. And so, I am charged by his motto – “*When the cause is good – the means will follow*”. The physically frail man that I met on that wonderful evening was as ever, sharp as a whip – and somewhere in the aura surrounding him one could determine a life force that was different and somehow larger than most. It is this life force that draws me to his story – and it is this life force that informs the historical record that follows.

The story of the NCPA begins with Dr. Bhabha – because it was his idea. Not only his idea, but his ‘selling of the idea’ - that it was time for India, important for India and necessary for India to have a performing arts platform for the preservation and projection of culture in society. And so, in 1965 with blessings of the Government of Maharashtra – the temporary set up at 89 Bhulabhai Desai Road was incorporated and the search for land suitable for such a project began. Frustrated with unsuitable suggestions and wanting to provide a Civic Centre that was accessible to all – Dr. Bhabha created land where there was none, reclaiming approximately eight acres from the sea and opening up a superb promontory at Nariman Point – now prime real estate under a 99 year lease from the State Government. No doubt, there were like minds to help – and Dr. Bhabha had the indomitable clout of Bombay House (Tata HQ) behind him and an unassailable relationship of mutual respect and friendship with the great J.R.D. (Tata). But no matter the help and the good intent – one needs an iron will, invincible determination to see things through and an inability to tolerate obstacles – all of which Jamshed Bhabha displayed on a daily basis – creating a mystique around his success, paeans of praise from supporters and plenty of displeasure from detractors. It was clear that there was to be only one way – his way!

I may get into trouble for citing these analogies, but in the history of institutions and countries, where democracy has not evolved into a blossoming process, communities and their aspirations have been best served by benevolent dictatorship. In the context of the Performing Arts, this analogy may not give enough credit to the countless volunteer boards and groups that concentrically contribute to great organizations, - like the great group of women who presided over the building of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, or the great groups of women who are the driving force behind the Chicago Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, or the Metropolitan Opera. Mumbai had its great ladies involved in all sorts of philanthropic activity and they got due recognition from the international roster they entertained, but Dr. Bhabha specifically did not want this process for the NCPA. Conciliar rule by committee lost out to a more ‘Papal’ style of governance with strict adherence to the *magisterium*. One may not always agree with this form of governance, but we cannot argue that it provides strategically impregnable results.

It was with this authority that Dr. Bhabha set about making the NCPA a reality. Major patrons were courted, world famous architects and acousticians were hired, and the platform of excellence for which the NCPA is known – came to fruition with the TATA Theatre – inaugurated in October, 1980 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Soon to follow were the ‘Experimental’ Theatre, the ‘Godrej Dance Academy’ and the ‘Piramal’ Gallery. In a very short time, it seemed, the NCPA had risen from the water to become a functional Performing Arts Centre. The indomitable spirit of Dr. Bhabha is perhaps best shown in the building of the Opera House that bears his name, the Jamshed Bhabha Theatre. Nearing total completion – on New Years Eve 1998 the building was gutted by fire caused by an electrical short circuit. The following morning, with the smoldering embers still giving heat – Dr. Bhabha called a meeting – and without laying blame or heady speeches, said “Tomorrow we start reconstruction”. A year later, on 24th November, 1999 the JBT as it’s affectionately known - the crown jewel of the NCPA campus was inaugurated. Today, it serves as a versatile, modern, international theatre and when the acoustic shell is up – as the home of the newly formed Symphony Orchestra of India.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Dr. Bhabha – was to ensure that his legacy would be well supported. This was, of course, not just in financial support – but in the vision for the future when he chose his successor to take on the responsibilities of the NCPA. There is a wonderful story to be told of the close working relationship between Khushroo Suntook and Jamshed Bhabha – which cannot be achieved in the scope of the present article. Suffice it to say, that the exponential expansion of the NCPA’s cultural activities; its global outreach; its educational initiatives and its grand revitalization of many areas, have all taken place in the last five years. Some of these areas include Indian Music, Indian Dance, Indian Theatre, International Theatre and Film, Photography, its great Library collections - its over 500 varied performances a year - and of course the whole fabric that is the Symphony Orchestra of India – none of which would be possible, nor have come thus far without Khushroo Suntook at the helm. I have had the pleasure of witnessing this explosion of artistic and cultural offering first hand. My years in Mumbai thus far, as part of the team at the NCPA, have coincided almost exactly with the Chairmanship of Khushroo Suntook and in my estimation Dr. Bhabha would be delighted with his stewardship.

So what lies ahead? Beyond buildings, theatres, libraries and assets there lies ahead an exciting period of growth as the NCPA, Mumbai finds its global footprint. Our ability to stage internationally acclaimed productions of opera have been tried and tested. In 2008 the NCPA produced Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* – and followed in 2010 with Puccini’s *Tosca*. This February, 2012 we will stage the famous double bill *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*. These giant undertakings would not be possible without the fully professional Symphony Orchestra of India in the pit. Now entering it’s twelfth season – the orchestra provides Mumbaikers with a series of concerts twice a year, which have been a source of pride for the NCPA, the city and the nation. The love and support for Western Classical music in Mumbai is a long standing tradition. Khushroo Suntook recognized that it was long overdue for a local orchestra to play at an international standard – at last providing Mumbai with that orchestral cultural jewel in August 2006. The fact that the Symphony Orchestra of India has not compromised on its standards and is in the process of ‘spreading its wings’ has not gone unnoticed by the international music community. Our alliances in the Asian Pacific region, along with our growing number of friends in Europe and the United

States are testament to this new age of growth. These alliances also point up the need for vigilance and constant reevaluation. The more we interact with our counterparts in Performing Arts Institutions across the globe, the more we learn about good practices that attain good results. We also realize that we face the same problems that face the global artistic community. In this day and age, of immediate gratification, instant war and shallow temperament, those of us who are artistically involved seem to have a hard time convincing the general populous that what we do is vitally important. Societies are judged by the culture they preserve. Cities are judged by the culture they support. Nations prove their global stability and prosperity by projecting cultural excellence. On the banks of the Arabian Sea – where neighbors sometimes lose sight of what might be important in civilized, progressive, democratic society – India has the perfect example of what is possible. Against the odds – and perhaps against modern global trends, the NCPA, Mumbai will continue to provide a platform of excellence for any and all Performing Art. There is a rich Indian cultural heritage that completely occupies the national psyche. There is much reason to enrich this heritage with opportunities to witness and engage in international culture and by doing so strengthen the bonds of global humanity.

What could be more important??? If some might be daunted by the road that lies ahead – it is worth remembering – *“Where the cause is good – the means will follow”*.

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