



Plays, Politics and Cultural Identity Among Indians in Durban

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The paper analyses how the lively tradition of Indian community theatre has reflected and contributed to the formation and contestation of identities among Indians in Durban since the 1960s. Starting from a popular piece of political satire, Mooidevi's Muti, staged in 1998, the recent history of South African Indian theatre is described as the emergence of a canon: two main genres, political satire and the family drama, that since the 1960s have developed within an 'Indian public sphere', and which today seem to constrict the opening of this rich tradition towards other forms of theatrical expression. It is argued that this closure of theatrical forms correlates with the broader tendency towards 'ethnic closure' among Indians in post-apartheid South Africa.

One of the more entertaining events unfolding in Durban in 1998 was the protracted divorce of one of the city's high-profile couples, Amichand Rajbansi, the former chairman of the Ministers Council in the House of Delegates (HoD) in the 1980s, and his wife Ashadevi. The rumours of divorce began to appear in Indian community newspapers in July 1998 but only became big news once it was alleged that Ashadevi had had an affair with a prominent MP from the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). During the following months the divorce proceedings, details of court orders, interviews with the couple, their children and friends, made headline news in the Indian newspapers. Amichand Rajbansi, also nicknamed the 'Bengal Tiger', tried throughout the period to position himself as the good Hindu husband who had been deceived by his unfaithful wife, but was willing to forgive her and take her back to keep together the most precious construction of all, the Indian family, the heart of every claim to the distinctiveness of Indian ethnicity in South Africa. Trying to make as much political capital out of the skirmishes as possible, he alleged again and again that the IFP had lured the naïve, but also weak and greedy, Ashadevi by promising her substantial sums of money.

She, in turn, alleged that he had abused her mentally and physically, that he wanted to control her and deny her freedom of movement, to take away her children who sided with their father, that he had girlfriends among the women in his party, etc. But Ashadevi was up against strong odds. She faced a man whose moral habitus had been questioned and ridiculed throughout his public career. One of his claims to fame is that he is the 'great survivor', having survived in politics despite, or because of, his obvious lack of a consistent moral habitus. She was also facing the entire web of conventions regarding the appropriate ways of a proper Indian wife – modesty, chastity and loyalty.

Through the maze of intimate details being made public and the many letters to the editor it became evident that what fuelled the imagination as well as the indignation of the Indian public was less the fact of the divorce than the style in which it was publicly represented. The debate about the divorce and the countless jokes it gave rise to revolved around two central concerns among Indians in contemporary South Africa: on the one hand,

the public and political representation of ‘the community’, both in a formal political sense and in terms of the larger public image of what ‘Indians’ are like; and, on the other hand, the decline of the ‘Indian family’ and the strong familial ideology that still surrounds it, in the face of loss of the vernacular tongues, upward social mobility, ‘westernization’ and what many older Indians describe as loose morals among younger people.

In this paper I shall approach these issues through the lens of community theatre – the rich tradition of plays, drama, satire and political commentary that have developed among Indians in Durban since the 1960s. These theatre forms were popularized and diversified in the 1980s as new generations of actors and playwrights emerged from the Drama Department at the University of Durban–Westville (the institution designed for Indians in the 1960s). One of these younger writer–directors is Aldrin Naidoo. Since 1992, he has staged a range of farces and more serious plays that have taken up topical issues and dealt with them through jokes and language in tune with contemporary slang of younger people in the Indian areas in Durban like Phoenix and Chatsworth. The divorce of the Rajbansis was the object of his latest successful play, *Mooidevi’s Muti*.

Starting with *Mooidevi’s Muti* I will explore what the continuities and the innovations in themes and form of Indian theatre over the last three decades can tell us about the condition of possibilities for representing ‘the community’ among Indians in Durban. I argue that the Indian ‘community’ not only is faced with a deep crisis of identity in the post-apartheid scenario, but is also caught up in a crisis of representation – a wider South African phenomenon.

Mooidevi’s Muti

The title of the play draws on three languages and cultures and brings forth the central ambiguity of the public figure of Ashadevi Rajbansi – her vanity, vulnerability and her cunning opportunism. *Mooi* means pretty in Afrikaans while *moo* in Tamil means lazy; *devi* refers to the name Ashadevi, but also its Hindi meaning as goddess; while ‘muti’ (Zulu, *umuthi*, traditional medicine) signifies a dimension of African culture that is particularly beset by popular myths and rumours. The play consists of a number of sketches, dialogues and songs woven around a simple narrative that depicts the career of the Rajbansis and their divorce (all facts are presumed to be known by the audience). Amichand (Tajbansi in the play) accuses Ashadevi of using ‘muti’ against him, he claims she is possessed by a ‘tokolosh’ (Zulu, *itikoloshe*, malevolent spirit) and she is then taken to a ‘Father Demon’, a greedy African priest and healer speaking with a thick West African accent. This refers to a Nigerian pastor Famudima of dubious reputation who had some success in posing as a Christian healer in the Indian township of Phoenix. In July 1998, he was literally driven out of the area by a united front of Hindu, Muslim and Christian organizations. In the play this ‘father Demon’ pretends to exorcise the ‘tokolosh’ from Ashadevi against handsome remuneration, and the couple is finally reunited.

In the beginning of the play Ashadevi sings ‘Don’t cry for me Bengal Tiger’ and continues ‘... I know I made you balder’, etc. (referring to Amichand’s well-known baldness, and the fact that he wears a somewhat ill-fitting wig). Then she goes on with *Annie Get Your Gun* and sings ‘I can do everything better than you, except lying’. Now the surprise comes. Suddenly, the real Rajbansi comes on to the stage, characteristically wagging his index finger. When I watched the play he delivered the following few lines in which he precisely, and crudely, portrayed an Indian (Hindu) identity space squeezed between white money and contempt, and an abyss of demonic Zuluness:

Ashadevi, are you prepared to abandon everything, children, husband, grandchildren for the

sake of money? You should do like Sita [the virtuous wife of Lord Ram in the epic Ramayana] who stood by her husband in good and bad times. She never roamed around with Ravana [the black demon-god threatening to destroy Ram's just rule]. Do you know what they call you in the community? Ashazulu!

Tell your financiers – all these prestigious people – that they cannot defeat me, not in a debate in parliament, not in an election. The person is not yet born in this country who can defeat the Bengal Tiger. I will forever remain the great survivor.
(exit Rajbansi, enter Tajbansi, the character)

I watched the show in Chatsworth, which indeed is Rajbansi's hometurf, and the reaction of the large audience was one of exhilaration and a somehow hesitant approval. There was a murmur flowing through the audience and spontaneous applause by some, but no negative reactions. It was as if the audience acknowledged the guts of a man who had been ridiculed so often, now appearing before the crowd in a play that ridiculed him and his public life yet again for the following 90 minutes. His appearance at this and many of the following shows seemed actually to blunt the edge of the satire and to signal that he was an accomplice to it. Had he stayed away we would all have been able to entertain the idea that this satire actually touched him, and hurt him. Instead he tried to reaffirm the image of 'the Tiger' as a proper man, as someone who can take it, who knows that being a public person means that one may have to be ridiculed in public.

The play proceeds with flashbacks to how the couple met, framed as a 'Bollywood' Hindi song/dance routine, and their climb to the top is illustrated by state president P.W. Botha visiting their house, enjoying Ashadevi's samoosas and dancing with the couple. Then the couple starts to drift apart. He speaks to a lady-friend on the phone, with his tongue hanging lasciviously out of his mouth. She is called by her lawyer (Piranha) whom she tells: 'Oh I am abandoned by all, my husband, my children, the media – no story in the *Post* (largest Indian weekly) this week, and even my makeup won't stick to me anymore'.

Referring to a much-reported quarrel over a gun in a bathroom in the Rajbansi's house, we now see the couple fighting behind a curtain in a shower, with the 'gun' positioned in a rather suggestive way. She grabs it and after some fighting it 'shoots', and she screams.

He: 'Why do you need a gun? Isn't my shotgun good enough? (pointing to his fly) Am I not a good Hindu husband?'

She: 'Why can't you be big, black and strong like Buthelezi?'

He: 'What? Big, black and long like Buthelezi's? Remember, I have donated my organs to public service!'

Some in the audience felt embarrassed at this juncture but most had a hearty laugh. The play continued in this style, considered puerile by some, but obviously taken as good, plain entertainment by most audiences except on a few occasions. The audience was almost exclusively Indian and stretched across generation and class: from elderly aunties to teenage girls, from smartly dressed working-class youths heading for the disco after the play, to middle-aged, conservatively dressed couples.

The many references and allusions to sex and community stereotypes that run through the play seemed to be the elements that elicited most laughter (and embarrassment). As when Tajbansi meets the 'SAA Steamy Screamer' (a local Indian beauty queen who was caught having noisy sex with a UK businessman in an airplane toilet) at a relative's house and asks: 'Why did you bring her here? Imagine what she can do to my reputation? Wonders! ... I want you to blow the horns at my convention.' Or when father Demon, greedy for Ashadevi's jewelry, tells Tajbansi: 'Why didn't the 'Lada' (Lord) help you?

Because you give him no jewelry ... Take three pieces of jewelry, apply it to your Minority Front (pointing to his fly) and it will rise up and grow and grow.'

Another element that generated much amusement was the mocking of what are seen as the vices of the Indian community: greed, excessive status consciousness, hypocritical family life, vanity and political opportunism. The play portrays Ashadevi as obsessed with beauty-boxes, money, jewelry and status. When the Tajbansis have a row she mocks his low origins (calling him a 'blackie' a 'chamaar' (untouchable), and his vanity ('we came from humble beginnings. I was the one that bought him his first wig'). He mocks her figure, 'look at those big roti-rolls', and her heavily accented and caricatured South African Indian English, which the audience obviously find hilarious. As a whole Ashadevi and Rajbansi are portrayed as quintessential Indian *parvenus*, the newly rich without cultural capital, obsessed with the outer trappings of wealth. Opportunism and the legendary Indian love for expensive cars is brought out when Tajbansi says: 'I cannot be silenced. In the James Commission [investigating corruption in the House of delegates] they tried to crucify me. ... But look at them today! Look at the F.W.s [de Klerk] and the P.W.s [Botha], now they drive VWs.'

As I was watching this play for the first time, I was amused but also slightly puzzled. Was the novelty of this play that it was so cheeky, so 'explicit' in its public staging of popular jokes and street language, as indicated by the 'Parental Guidance' signs on advertisements and posters announcing the play? Or was it the internalist character of most of its jokes that made it popular, the way in which it presupposed, posited but also reproduced the 'Indian community' through half-embarrassed self-mockery of vices and accents? There was obviously something comforting in this for audiences who recognized elements of their own world in the style of joking, speaking and saucy humour in the play. It allowed for an enjoyment of community and of ethnic closure. As I began to probe further back into the history of Indian theatre in Durban, I realized that most of what I had seen in *Mooidevi's Muti* was a rephrasing of older and well-known forms of joking and slapstick comedy, that apparently had lost none of their charm.

The Birth of a Canon: English Theatre Among South African Indians

Until the 1950s, theatre practices among Indians in Natal, which were mainly in Tamil and Hindi, drew overwhelmingly on mythological narratives from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, or on folk practices such as the South Indian six-foot dance.¹ The political upheavals of the 1940s brought forth a new assertiveness among Indians. The subsequent emergence of a range of tertiary educational institutions open to Indians produced an expanding group of Indians fluent in the English language and culture, including its theatre traditions. As Annamalai has pointed out recently, a tacit alliance evolved between educated Indians and liberal white academics and artists in Durban in the 1950s. A multi-racial theatre tradition began to develop out of this milieu where Indian actors began to perform works by British playwrights for non-white audiences in Durban. Some white liberals promoted a re-invention of eastern classics in the garb of western theatre and encouraged the translation of plays by Kalidasa and Tagore. A range of plays drawing on Mughal history and orientalist fantasies, indulged in elaborate sets and costumes and were widely appreciated by both Indian and white audiences.²

1 S. Annamalai, 'Therukoothu – A Traditional Dance Drama Form as Manifest in Natal Since 1860', MA thesis, University of Durban–Westville, 1992.

2 S. Annamalai, 'The Development of South African Indian Theatre from the 1950s to the 1990's', PhD thesis, University of Durban–Westville, 1999.

Despite good intentions, this theatre environment was dominated by a kind of benevolent paternalism that left little room for South African Indians or other non-whites to reflect on themselves and their own predicaments. The arrival in Durban of the accomplished Indian-trained director Krishna Shah in the early 1960s and his staging of Tagore's famous *King of the Dark Chamber*, as well as workshops conducted by Shah, confronted the Durban milieu with a new level of professionalism and new ideas of what contemporary Indian theatre could be like.

In 1964, Ronnie Govender formed the Shah Theatre Academy in opposition to what he regarded as the bourgeois tendencies of the liberal theatre milieu. In the following decades his work became central in the formation and canonization of a new genre of indigenous English South African Indian theatre that combined social criticism, political satire and the use of local idioms and expressions arising from the experiences and history of Indians in Durban and Natal. In *Beyond Calvary*, originally written as early as 1961, Govender dealt controversially with conflicts arising out of love relations and stereotypes between Hindus and Christians. Another early play like *Swami* bridged both the 'English' and the 'eastern' traditions promoted by the liberal dramatists but added a new element of social criticism. The play was built around the life of a real person, an Indian worker from Mobeni in Durban who transformed his own life and went to India to study and meditate. After his return to South Africa, he set up his own religious institution but was accused of financial irregularities and was shortly after found dead under mysterious circumstances. Govender was accused of sensationalism and of portraying Indians and religious figures in a dubious light. It was, however, one of the few works from Ronnie Govender which received some acclaim from white critics in Durban, probably because it was intelligible within an orientalist frame, dealing with matters of soul and redemption and related matters deemed appropriate for 'Indian art'.³

In 1972, Govender's production took a new decisive turn with the famous play *Lahnee's Pleasure*, which for the first time took popular working-class idioms to the stage. Drawing massive audiences all over the country, this play continues to occupy the centre of the theatrical canon among Indians in South Africa.⁴ It is set in a bar in an Indian community north of Durban and revolves around conversations between the barman, Sunny, the working-class patron, Mothie (both of them speaking in South African Indian 'low' English), and a stranger, a middle-class student type distinguished by his manners and polished English. The dialogue brilliantly portrays the style of storytelling prevailing in the community at the time, and touches on social conservatism regarding women's position, the scourge of alcoholism, the distance between the middle-class world of the stranger and ordinary Indians; the awe of the *lahnee* (the boss) and subservient attitude among some Indians, the rebelliousness of others, and the arrogance of white men. The conflict between whites and Indians was the central axis of the play and Govender was accused of crude political propaganda in the final scene where there is a row between the politically conscious stranger (a less subtle figure than the others) and the white *lahnee*. Compared to other plays at the time, especially those inspired by the Black Consciousness movement such as works by Strini Moodley, Saths Cooper and others working with the Theatre Council of Natal (TECON) that had a distinct and ambitious agenda of creating black

3 Says R. Govender: 'You must remember, this is the last outpost of the empire, there is no limit to the arrogance and ignorance of white society here. ... In Natal an Indian cannot be accepted as a playwright. We have had predominantly white audiences in Jo'burg and Cape Town, and many black intellectuals as well, but never in Durban. We were always dubbed as Indian theatre, no whites ever took us seriously.' Interview, Durban, 10 November 1998.

4 *Lahnee's Pleasure* is one of the few plays by Indian playwrights ever to be published in a booklet. R. Govender, *Lahnee's Pleasure* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, n.d.)

theatre in South Africa, Govender can hardly be said to be propagandistic.⁵ Govender retained a simple storytelling form, whereas most of the TECON productions were rather complex intellectual pieces that catered for students and middle-class audience and sought to 'conscientize' the non-white student population in South Africa.

Another significant playwright emerging from the group around the Shah Theatre Company was Kessie Govender, an accomplished actor and protégé of Ronnie Govender. In plays like *Stablexpanse* (1974) and *Working Class Hero* he depicted Indian working-class life with subtlety and a sharp eye for how racism was articulated in these milieus. *Stablexpanse*, which almost plagiarized Ronnie Govender's earlier work, depicts the transformation of a lowly, subservient and timid Indian garbage collector to an angry and politically conscious man as he recognizes his own humiliation. *Working Class Hero* is set in a construction site and deals with the racism of Indian skilled workers towards their African colleagues, and the cowardice and hollow commitment to interracial solidarity of a young Indian student working at the site during a holiday.

The underlying pedagogical and political agenda of Kessie Govender's work was highly critical of Indian clannishness and racism towards Africans, and he was unsparing in his critique.⁶ In an interview in 1980, Govender said: 'The Indians help prop up the apartheid system. There is a rigid caste system here – no solidarities can be made in Chatsworth. There are Indians who look down upon the whites – never mind the Africans.'⁷

Kessie Govender's *On the Fence* was a critique of snobbery, opportunism and prejudices in an Indian middle-class family. As in *Lahnee's Pleasure*, Govender uses languages to mark the gap between generations and social worlds: the parents speak the South African Indian English, and the younger generation a more standard English. The drama revolves around the reactions of an Indian family when the educated and radicalized daughter (Sita – the name associated with virtuous womanhood) announces that she is going out with a coloured man, and that she intends to marry him. The father says angrily 'Now she doing this things. Not going by one suleman fella; not going by one porridge fella, must going by one bushman fella.' The family mobilizes one of the brother's friends, a successful doctor from a respectable family, who volunteers to marry Sita, believing that he, the stereotyped incarnation of the desire of every Indian mother-in-law and women, can give Sita an offer she cannot refuse. But she does, leaving her parents devastated.

In a similar vein, playwright Muthal Naidoo staged the play *Of No Account* that depicted the conflict between two Indian book-keepers, one loyal and subservient, the other proud and unwilling to bow to the white boss, but both oblivious to the invisible African worker, the real hero and voice of sanity. Other plays of this clearly politicized genre included Strini Moodley's *Prison Walls*, which dealt with the experience of prison (drawing on Moodley's own experience after five years on Robben Island) as the site of new interracial solidarities and levels of understanding between non-whites.

Social Mobility, Embarrassment and Satire

The years of 1983–1984 saw Indian theatre turning away from political problematics of race and struggle, towards comedy, almost exclusively focusing on issues internal to the community. Considering the larger context of the day this appears somewhat paradoxical.

5 Annamalai gives a good account of how the evolution of the Black Consciousness Movement, the affiliated South African Student's Organisation (SASO) and the Black People's Convention (BPC) influenced the agenda of TECON and the productions that took place under its auspices. Annamalai, 'The Development', pp. 153–80.

6 D. Bassa, 'An Edition of Selected Plays of Kessie Govender with a Biographical and Critical Introduction', MA thesis, University of Natal, p. 21.

7 *Daily News*, 20 January 1980.

The early 1980s had seen the revival of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in a series of large, well-co-ordinated campaigns for boycotts of elections for the South African Indian Council and in 1984 the House of Delegates. This continued into the Mass Democratic Movement's launching a series of agitations and mobilizing thousands of Indians around issues like access to the beachfront in Durban, rent-boycotts, the level of rates in Indian areas, etc. According to the official history of the NIC, as one can see it represented in the KwaMuhle Museum in Durban, this was a fine hour for the larger non-racial struggle, and the low participation of Indians in the Tricameral elections was widely taken as a sign of Indian commitment to non-racialism, and disapproval of the apartheid state as such.⁸

At the same time, the 1980s was also the decade when substantial sections of the Indian community began to reap the benefits of longstanding, and often community-based, efforts towards better educational facilities for Indians. Thousands began to adopt middle-class life-styles and the educational and housing facilities offered to Indians as part of P.W. Botha's strategy of incorporation meant that by the end of the 1980s large numbers of Indians were relatively well-educated, middle income earners, home owners with telephones and cars.⁹ The decade also saw unprecedented levels of 'participatory' politics in the House of Delegates and the Local Affairs Committees, and a drive among business people and conservative community leaders to exploit the new opportunities to become recognized as junior partners in the South African social elite.

This was a perplexing situation that produced embarrassment among many Indian intellectuals and activists – embarrassment at the Indian community's unrestrained drive for middle-class respectability and its overall political conservatism, in a situation where the UDF and ANC in the black townships were involved in a brutal conflict with the security forces. This situation called for sarcasm and irony rather than conventional moral condemnation, and the 'political parrots' in the House of Delegates were perfect objects for such satire. Remarkably, the relatively few serious plays staged in the 1980s were either 'cultural' in the orientalist frame so popular in the 1950s, such as *Shakuntala*, a classical Indian play about impossible love staged in 1989;¹⁰ or they were referring to the era of pioneering Indian activism in Natal as in Essop Khan's *The Sacrifice*, about a young girl who died in colonial prison in 1914.

In 1982, Muthal Naidoo staged the comedy *We Three Kings* about how three none-too-bright Indian hobos are being put up as candidates for the Indian Council to sit and deliberate and do nothing. The play derided Indian 'sell-outs' subservient to the white man and accepting the apartheid order. In a hilarious scene the hobos agree with their white benefactor that, 'we should protect our Indian culture ... Hindustanis should speak Hindi, Tamils should speak Tamil ... and for a mother tongue, everybody must learn Afrikaans'. A critic described the play as 'broken-heart surgery – reflecting on the powerlessness of the Indian community by making fun of itself'.¹¹ Although conventional in its set and form, *We Three Kings* inaugurated a new and powerful genre of Indian theatre that in the years to come at times transgressed the ethnicized structure of audiences and attracted limited numbers of whites, though hardly any Africans.

Ronnie Govender invigorated this genre when in 1984 he staged *Offside!*, referring to

8 S. Bhana, *The Natal Indian Congress 1894–1994* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1997), pp. 124–134.

9 B. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders. The Indian Working Class of Durban 1910–1990* (London, James Currey, 1995), pp. 88–91.

10 Glancing through newspaper archives, it is striking that 'white' newspapers primarily reviewed Indian plays when they were seen as properly Indian. *Shakuntala* was reviewed by *Pretoria News*, which in a condescending tone found it a 'useful and educative performance', but as art it was 'too much of a pantomime', *Pretoria News*, 16 January 1989.

11 *Daily News*, 16 October 1982.

Rajbansi's past as a football referee (that is how his index finger developed so well!) and a year later the sequel, *Inside*. Both plays are about the clash between two 'giants', two politicians of the House of Delegates, 'Bun Thrasee' and 'Tit-for-Tat Pookadidum' the so-called 'giants of survival', and their wives (one of them with elaborate hairdos and lots of make-up, obviously Ashadevi). Govender was drawing on the narrative structure of the great Indian myths, where clashes between giants is a commonly used narrative device, and he used the North Indian Muslim tradition of devotional *qawwali* song to great effect to frame the plays and their very popular songs. Govender based the satire on public transcripts of parliamentary debates and many of the jokes one finds in subsequent parodies on Rajbansi were actually conceived here (the parody of P.W. Botha, the vanity of Ashadevi, the use of her samoosas to entice the NP-politicians).¹²

The same persons and the same problematic were at stake in the play *The James Commission* written by the Durban lawyer Charles Pillay, and directed by his wife Saira Essa. The play dealt with the James Commission that had inquired into the financial management and the proceedings of the House of Delegates and had found gross irregularities and fraud. At the conclusion of its investigation, the head of the commission condemned Rajbansi in very strong words, calling him devious and overly ambitious and recommending that he never again be entrusted with any public office. The play was a one-man *tour de force*. Its author was drawing on the narrative tradition of Indian theatre mentioned earlier, but obviously also on the work and performance of Peter Dirk Uys. Uys was influential at the time as an accomplished impersonator and political satirist whose parodies of leading National Party politicians made him a household name among whites, coloureds and Indians in South Africa. Given the political climate of the 1980s, it was also understandable that Uys was accused of making politics laughable and cosy, and thus portrayed the leading figures of the state as more endearing and human than they deserved.

Charles Pillay said at the time: 'I don't know if I wrote the play. When I went through the Commission's report I knew I had a play, it was there in front of me.'¹³ Also here, there was an echo of Uys's almost identical remarks several years earlier when he used the report of the commission investigating the TV and communication scandal in the early 1980s as material for political satire.¹⁴ As it was announced that a play of this nature was being staged, Rajbansi offered to play himself. 'I can do it much better than Charles', he told a newspaper,¹⁵ but Charles Pillay insisted on playing the part. 'I had to turn down the offer', Pillay said, tongue-in-cheek, 'he would not have stuck to the script'.¹⁶

This was one of the only 'non-cultural' Indian plays that ever found mercy in the eyes of white reviewers, probably because it dealt with a real political scandal, however petty in scale, and revealed graft and mismanagement among Indian politicians. *The Mercury* (primary newspaper for the white upper middle class in Durban) went so far as to say that it was a play 'that no longer was Indian'.¹⁷ The play's appeal to white audiences was undoubtedly connected to the fact that it confirmed white prejudices regarding the Indian as the proverbial 'wheeler-and-dealer', the man you cannot trust, who is only

12 The (white) reviewer from *Daily News* found that 'if you know the personalities involved, if you are a regular reader of ... (Indian) newspapers and if you are of a particular political persuasion, it can be very funny indeed. ... However, it is an ephemeral work, pertinent only to its time, unlikely to have much relevance.' *Daily News*, 17 August 1984.

13 *Daily News*, 23 August 1989.

14 I owe this point to participants at a seminar at the Department of English at University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg who drew my attention to the significance of Uys' work for satire in South Africa as such, and to the danger of interpreting Indian theatre only within its own canonical tradition or an exclusively Indian frame.

15 *Daily News*, 12 March 1989.

16 *Daily News*, 23 March 1989.

17 *The Mercury*, 30 March 1989.

interested in money, who is secretive, self-serving and unfit to be entrusted with serious matters such as the affairs of the state.

In 1990, Rajbansi was again at the centre of a new play, Pravesh Hurban's *The Entertainer: A Man and His Wig*. The main novelty in this play was that the language was more crude, but otherwise it dealt with the same themes: Rajbansi as referee, his low origins as a butcher, his ambition and so on. Rajbansi threatened Hurban with a civil suit if the show was offending. However, the show had limited appeal at a time when the political transition in the country at large was absorbing public attention and where squabbles over a politician of the old regime seemed less relevant than before.

Years later, again shortly before an election, Rajbansi dealt with the satire of Aldrin Naidoo in ways that indicated that he knew that critique could hardly damage his political fortunes. I asked Rajbansi why he had chosen to appear on stage evening after evening at Naidoo's show. His response was evasive and yet illuminating: 'You see, being in politics means that exposure means everything. If you want to represent the community and be a leader you must be where people are, you must live with the community, and also laugh with them.'¹⁸

Having followed the work of the Minority Front through 1998 and 1999, it has become clear to me that the *modus operandum* of Rajbansi and his people revolves around sustained public presence and visibility – even under adverse circumstances – at virtually every major event involving substantial numbers of Indians, be they Hindus, Christians or Muslims. In March 1999, he participated in a show staged and organized by Radio Lotus and Aldrin Naidoo, called *The Three Tigers*, playing, well, himself, along with two impersonators.

In the 1990s, Rajbansi has gone through a metamorphosis as he has abandoned his earlier aspirations for recognition as a leader of the Indian community through the attainment of middle-class respectability. These aspirations earned him, the unpolished butcher with a sometimes imperfect use of language, the incarnation of a *charou*,¹⁹ much ridicule from educated Indians and those associated with the NIC. In the 1999 election, Rajbansi effectively styled himself as a *charou*, a leader of the ordinary people from Chatsworth and Phoenix, deriding those seeking success and recognition from 'white' parties such as the New National Party or the Democratic Party as being 'stooges' and 'sell-outs'. These were exactly the accusations Rajbansi has faced throughout his career, and the profound irony was, of course, that Rajbansi's new self-confidence as Indian mass leader stems from a tacit but longstanding alliance with the ANC. His position as an electoral 'subcontractor' delivering the Indian vote to the ANC was made clear and public after the elections in June 1999.²⁰

Ronnie Govender's third political comedy *Backside*, staged in November 1998, again with *qawwali* song, seemed to ignore these new configurations of identity. Instead it went into an almost 'cannibalizing' mode repeating many of the old jokes of the House of Delegates, and imitating politicians in a way that appeared somewhat irrelevant in 1998. The second half of the play praised how the ANC saved the country and Tutu and Mandela were portrayed as nice old men with funny accents. However, the satire was tame and played it safe with a few rather conventional imitations of contemporary politicians such as

18 Interview, Chatsworth, 12 December 1998.

19 Afrikaans slang for Indian, literally 'brown man', now used affectionately among Indians themselves.

20 'All of a sudden Rajbansi has become kosher like anything, and we who fought him all our lives look like fools', a frustrated Indian intellectual said to me after Rajbansi's alliance with ANC was made public. In Rajbansi's own view he is not a turncoat. 'When I was in the House of Delegates, I looked after my people by working within a system we never supported. ... Yes, there were mistakes, but I am the only one of the former members of HoD who have had the guts to face the electorate in our new democracy and ask for their verdict. We have gone from strength to strength. I can walk the streets with my shoulders high.' Interview, Durban, 29 June 1999.

Tony Leon and Martinus van Schalkwyk. Reviews were generally negative and *Backside* never achieved the success of its predecessors.

From Family Drama to Ethnic Farces and Beyond

The family drama explored by Kessie Govender and others in the 1970s continued as a genre into the 1980s, but the lifting of parts of the Immorality Act and the incipient mixing across colour lines challenged the Indian family in new ways. The upwards snobbery in the racial hierarchy made relationships of Indians to whites more central and complex than ever. Muthal Naidoo dealt with a mixed marriage between a white girl and an Indian man in *Outside In* from 1983. As in Govender's *On the Fence*, the set was simple, conventional and defining for this genre: a living room with different family members coming in and out of doors in various scenes, discussing, having rows and confrontations in different combinations.

As the problematics got more provoking and more sensitive, the content of the dialogues of various plays tended to slide towards that of comedy. In 1988, Essop Khan staged the successful comedy *The Jamal Syndrome* dealing with a conservative Muslim family confronting the realities of a new white daughter-in-law and the many absurdities this gives rise to. Shortly afterwards, Essop Khan and his co-writer Mahomed Ali staged a more slapstick sequel, *Jamal 2*, which ran more on internal family quarrels and stereotyped characters of incessant fights between troubled mothers and rebellious, educated daughters and the machinations of the stereotyped cunning grandmothers and evil mothers-in-law well-known from the Indian 'Bollywood' film productions. This play, and the even more popular *My Second Wife* staged a few years later, ran for many months in Indian community halls all over the country. Ali and Khan are well aware of being regarded as producers of lighthearted popular 'low art' and deplore that. But as Muslim actors, they have drawn the substantial Muslim community into theatre halls: 'To many Muslims theatre is *haram* (unclean/forbidden), but we actually got them out, we made them laugh at themselves, their ways, their marriages and families and all that. That is our lasting contribution and we are proud of it.'

In April 1999, the duo staged another play, *Coconut Busters*, in this genre that they have made their trademark. The play presented no innovation in form and although the main theme of the play – how parents and in-laws interfere in the marriages and family life of the younger generation – clearly is topical and full of explosive conflicts, the tone remained cosy and disarmingly exaggerated, full of Indian colloquialisms and exaggerated accents. It was, in other words, good clean family entertainment and intended to be so. Judging from reactions and comments from the audience in the community hall in Merebank, a suburb south of Durban, where I watched the play, it was received as somewhat predictable in an audience that clearly was literate in this genre. 'Oh, but not as good as *My Second Wife*', said one; 'well, too much of the same', said another. 'But I really liked *Jamal 2*' said a third man in a conversation during the intermission. On seeing me, as always the only white person in the audience, some became apologetic and explained to me that the play really was 'very Indian' and 'maybe you don't find it so funny'. When I asked a group of men if they could recognize themselves or families they knew in the play, one man said, 'Oh sure, man, we are worse – but the only problem is that we are not so funny', and they all roared with laughter.²¹

21 The self-therapeutic use of this form of humour was brought home to me a few months earlier when Alli and Khan in one of their occasional engagements with serious productions staged the twenty-years old American play, *The Indian Wants the Bronx*. Here Essop Khan played a gentleman from India who only speaks Hindi and lands

By the early 1990s, the powerful trends towards either political satire or family farces began to reverse somewhat and more subtle and poetic work without explicit political or didactic agendas began to re-emerge. Also here, Ronnie Govender stood out from the rest. His plays *At The Edge*, staged as a one-man *tour de force* by actor Pat Pillay, and *1949 and Other Cato Manor Stories*, took up the fate of the mixed communities of Cato Manor, destroyed by the forced removals in the late 1950s, when the area was declared white. Govender draws on the storytelling form with one man playing many roles, and deals with the experience of his own childhood. By including the riots between Africans and Indians in 1949, a fairly nuanced picture of African–Indian conviviality emerges from these two plays, also published as short stories.²² Govender does not see himself producing Indian theatre as such:

I didn't write this because I wanted to do something on Indians but because it was my life and my world. ... I believe one has to find the universal in the unique experience. That is not ethnic, that is how art is made. Outside this country one appreciates this, but here we are invariably dubbed as Indians, blacks or whites.²³

Another remarkable play of this period was Kriben Pillay's *Looking for Muruga*, set in a bar and centred on the barman Muruga, the proverbial Indian waiter, full of small jokes, wisecracks and stories. The play develops as a dialogue between Muruga and Sherwin, a customer and aspiring playwright and intellectual, on writing, joking, religion, and relations between whites and Indians. There is an African in the play, Danté, but he is marginal to the dialogue, and appears merely at the beginning and the end of the play as he practices the Indian dance he studies at university. The dialogue cleverly spirals in and out of everyday language and literary genres and references, and is kept together by Muruga's vitality as a joker and a storyteller. In some ways, Muruga represents everything that enables human beings to cope with life – irony, laughter, subtle displacements and evasions, reversals of meaning, affection. The play ran for more than a year in Durban and elsewhere in the country, and Kriben Pillay attributed its popularity to the fact that it dealt with a broadly shared experience of social mobility among Indians:

... for many Indian intellectuals today there is this middle-class guilt, this sense of having to deal with something that matters, lives of flesh and blood, because we cannot come to terms with our own essentially boring and predictable lives.²⁴

The play is also a clever commentary on, and re-enactment of, Govender's *Lahnee's Pleasure*. It is also set in a bar, with the well-spoken customer representing the new middle-class idiom and pretentiousness. The white man as the distant figure whose 'absent presence' is so crucial to the dialogue in Govender's play, is, however, replaced here by Danté, the barely visible African, whose presence, sentences in Zulu and jovial conversations with Muruga nonetheless permeate the entire play. The point Pillay seems to make is that Sherwin, the intellectual, has lost not only his immediacy in relation to his own past (which is why Sherwin wants to write about Muruga, the barman, and his jokes), but also the ability to understand and relate effortlessly to an African like Danté.

In 1998, Krijay Govender's one-act play, *Women in Brown*, added new dimensions to

Footnote 21 continued

up in a deserted street at night in the Bronx in New York. The play revolves around how he is humiliated and beaten by two young white toughs. The performance was very raw and the humiliation almost unbearably credible. The reactions from the mainly Indian audience (including many Muslims) ranged from anger ('hey, fight back man' some shouted to Khan, others left the hall cursing and slammed the door) to shock and disgust ('I should never have taken my wife tonight'; 'this is not what I understand as entertainment, it was torture, man'), while others began to laugh nervously.

22 R. Govender, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* (Pretoria, Hibbard, 1996).

23 Interview, Durban, 10 November 1998.

24 Interview, University of Durban–Westville, 9 March 1999.

the family drama by adopting an all-female point of view in her portrayal of three different young women and their different relationships to themselves, to men and to their families. They are Pritha, tortured by her inability to become pregnant and locked in an uneventful life as passive housewife; Mona, the rebellious, independent, cigarette-smoking lawyer who has to endure endless cheap comments about her looks and manners from men who find her style intimidating; and finally Kammy, the student with romantic ideas of marrying a young lad from college, but whose plans are tragically thwarted by her parents' attempt to force her into an arranged marriage. Krijay Govender's play added a fresh contemporary tone to the dialogue and the repeated brief glances into the men's toilet, a bar and other male spaces, peeping into male conversations on women (conducted in 'low' South African Indian English, with the male characters played by the female actors) added rhythm and provoking contrasts to the play. In terms of its problematic, its language and audiences, the play did not, however, break out of the Indian segment of the public sphere.

Ethnicity, Commerce and Comedy

The political battle for recognition of black theatre, and Indian theatre, has been won in many respects. In 1990, Kessie Govender was admitted, as one of two non-white members, into the NAPAC (Natal Performing Arts Council) and Ronnie Govender became director of the Playhouse in the same period. Dozens of plays written by Indians and Africans have been staged since then.

However, the audiences for many plays are still completely racially segmented. The acclaimed play *Mahatma vs. Gandhi* on conflicts between Gandhi and his eldest son ran for mixed, and largely white audiences in Europe and the USA, but was resolutely ethnicized as Indian once it reached Durban. Hardly any of the Indian plays discussed above ever attracted black audiences. The inability to transcend ethnically defined audiences has undoubtedly to do with the way Indian theatre is trapped in the genres and themes I have described above. Some exceptions stand out. Jay Pather's controversial dance-dramas have dealt with transexuality and confronted the ambivalent status of the 'moffie' (gay man) among Indians – but were mainly staged in Cape Town and Johannesburg and never went around the community halls in Durban and Natal as most Indian plays do. Pather's dance group *Siwela Sonke Dance Company* that mixes African and Indian dance with contemporary forms of western choreography has through school programs managed to bring large numbers of young Africans in touch with dance theatre. However, as Jay Pather admits, 'We have only barely begun a process of developing new forms and fused styles. There is so much more to be done ...'²⁵

In 1999, Ronnie Govender staged a new play, *Back to the Faith*, which cleverly combines a critique of fundamentalist Muslim intolerance toward art with negotiations of love across religious and community boundaries. In this drama, based on real events in Durban in recent years, about the relationship between a young aspiring intellectual Hindu man and his girlfriend, a Muslim artist doing erotic paintings and incurring controversy and anger from religious people, Govender manages to comment on current debates on Indian anxieties and on the proper place of Indians in South Africa.

It is clear, however, that the development of new ways of criticizing, and transcending the confines of, the Indian community is only in its early stages, and involves considerable reorientation. Such a reorientation comes up against strong impulses toward ethnic closure among Indians and theatre traditions deeply segmented along racial lines. As Jay Pather

25 Interview, Durban, 28 March 1999.

says, 'I've never felt more Indian than I do today – it is coming at me, I'm trying to ward it off, but frankly, I don't really know how to handle it.'²⁶

The ethnic closure that is a feature of life for – and obviously found intensely enjoyable by – many Indians, was demonstrated by the *Comedy Shop* in April 1999, featuring eight Indian standup comedians. Motivating the show, comedian Yugan Naidoo said: 'We would like to show people that an Indian is not just someone you buy a samoosa from. We can actually be funny, believe or not.'²⁷ The show became a big success but attracted almost exclusively Indian audiences, though more than half of the material delivered on stage (most of it aiming well below the belt) was decidedly 'non-Indian'. However, the jokes that elicited most laughter were clearly those with an 'Indian' content – funny accents, stupid Brahmin priests, gossiping aunties, and even a few Rajbansi jokes.

The racial segmentation of most institutions in the public sphere in South Africa still works against an opening of the registers of culture- or language-specific jokes and narratives to other groups. The *Comedy Shop* was announced via Radio Lotus and the Indian newspapers rather than in so-called 'mainstream' papers. Judging from my conversations with people in the audience, the fact that the show promised Indian humour, i.e. the pleasure of experiencing the security and comfort of knowing all the codes within the ethnic closure, provided a very substantial part of its attraction.

By way of concluding my argument, I should like to suggest that what appears as a rejoicing in travestied jokes and genres within the ethnic closure, can be understood in the light of two broader developments among Indians since 1994. On the one hand, the interstitial position of the community and the opportunistic 'fence-sitting' that prompted the ironic 'culture of embarrassment' of the 1980s is still acutely present – possibly even more so than before. The feeling of non-recognition has turned into strong sentiments of marginalization, most recently around the neglect of Indian languages and opportunities. These anxieties have turned into widespread fear of crime, of being targeted by criminals, of being 'sidelined' in terms of job opportunities, etc. As the election campaign picked up in March and April 1999, the issue of the 'Indian vote' became of interest to most parties. Not least among these was the ANC which, among other things, summoned so-called 'community leaders' for high-profile meetings with Mandela and Mbeki in order to address the perceived grievances among Indians. At one such meeting organized by actor-turned-editor Saths Cooper under the headline 'The Future of South African Indians', Mbeki asked why he only got 'perceptions' and no substantiated examples of marginalization of Indians. He got no answers, probably because the issue at stake was a very elusive sense of Indians being invisible – being unrecognized as individuals and as a group.

Because this recognition is not freely given by what many Indians see as powerful and dangerous others threatening the community, and because the 'community' only seems to exist when it is talked about, or looked upon from the outside, the elusive sense of Indianness has to be tapped from negative stereotypes and from the long tradition of self-deprecation in community theatre. There is, in other words, a latent need for the humour and the irony to deal with these anxieties. Older forms of assertive Indian identity claims, the pathos of the NIC invoking a glorious tradition, the use of anger and indignation as motive forces as in the trade union movement, do not make sense any more as white domination has ceased to be a unifying factor.

The irony and the self-mockery is, however, deeply ambivalent as it negotiates the slippery terrain of current Indian identity. Much of the ironic appropriation of the older 'coolie' stereotypes – funny accents, superstition, snobbery and patriarchal control of

26 Interview, Durban, 28 March 1999.

27 Interview, Durban, 26 June 1999.

women – seems to signify a celebration of the successful social mobility away from working-class life. The accents of the uneducated, the figure of the superstitious auntie and the severe father figure are funny because they have already been left behind. Laughing at lewd jokes, mocking ‘family values’ and political leaders, ways of dealing with anxieties and bewilderment in the face of the actual dissolution of these perceived pillars of the ‘community’. But the use of humour also indicates a certain disarming broadmindedness and signals a capacity for critical self-introspection to the outside gaze. The paradox is of course that in spite of this more subtle quest for recognition informing Indian ‘ethnic farces’, they presuppose and reproduce most of the genres, the jokes and the references that were internal in the first place, and seem in effect to perpetuate the ethnic closure they mock in so many ways.

On the other hand, the last few years has also seen an unprecedented celebration of Indian identity. There has been a growing demand for weekly specials (known as ‘extra’s’) catering for Indians in several of the major newspapers. Smaller commercial newspapers proliferate in Indian neighbourhoods. Tour operators arranging heritage-cum-shopping tours back to India have come into operation. The lifting of India’s cultural boycott has meant easier access to Indian films and music in Durban, and there are frequent visits by dance or music troupes from India presenting classical high culture to middle-class audiences in Durban.

A significant growth in religious activity, and intense efforts by a range of religious entrepreneurs to establish themselves, are crucial part, of this drive towards being ‘Indians without apologies’. There is no doubt, however, that the more visible bids to gain cultural recognition for Indians in contemporary South Africa are intimately connected with commercial strategies. Media and advertising organizations in general have realized that Indians form a valuable and growing market for all kinds of items, not least life-style products, but a market that needs to be addressed in specific ways, within its own public spheres and in specific idioms. It is at this market that the recently launched magazine *Indigo* – ‘a national full-colour magazine that addresses the interests of South African Indians’, as writes Saths Cooper, the editor-in-chief and a former leader of Black Consciousness Movement is aimed. To Cooper, ethnicity and commerce are intimately related. He continues: ‘Although our buying power is 4 billion annually, our custom is taken for granted, our heritage is devalued, our contributions to society (especially our fledgling democracy) tend to be overlooked’.

Elsewhere in the magazine, the editorial team writes, ‘we have been crying out for a voice that doesn’t box us into one homogenous group of *charous*. A group for the rest of the country to ridicule in silly ads’. The objective of the magazine is to depict Indians in their diversity, to be respectful and yet probing, to get beyond stereotyping and self-mockery. In subsequent issues there are plenty of articles on Indian fashion, on Indian marriages and sexuality, Indian food, films, articles on identity. An issue from 1999 carries an article by Benny Bunsee, theatre critic and Black Consciousness activist, on how Indian culture is being commercialized and repackaged for commercial purposes, while Indians themselves are losing their sense of themselves.²⁸

I am not suggesting that what appears as an Indian cultural revival can be reduced to business strategies. But we need to note that, as much as comedy is one of the ways to deal with the anxieties of identity, that of commercial success may be as important. Faced with a paucity of job opportunities in the public sector, the business world and especially the Indian sectors within it seem more attractive options. If socialite-celebrity journalism can be considered a reliable guide to how a community’s icons are made, the culturally

28 *Indigo*, March–April 1999, pp. 20–21.

conscientious Indian businessman, modern, broadminded and yet aware of his roots, seems to be a new dominant role model in the Indian community. The recent celebration of the Diwali festival in Durban was ‘the first ever celebrated in the public spaces of the city’, as one of the promoters put it, referring to the fact that it was celebrated at the once-white beachfront for the first time.²⁹ Diwali has, however, always been celebrated in public spaces in Indian areas. The celebration of Diwali in what is seen as a ‘proper’ public sphere in Durban, was a bid to claim recognition for a sort of ‘syndicated Indianness’, but was, at the same time, driven and organized by private enterprises in a professional fashion rather than by religious organizations. The Indian business world seems now to have assumed critical importance for the very model of Indian ethnicity that is being currently marketed to upward mobile and educated Indians.

In this light it is interesting that Aldrin Naidoo’s *Mooidevi’s Muti* was accused of being a ‘money-making gimmick’. Journalist Yasantha Naidoo suggested that Aldrin Naidoo merely provided cheap escapist entertainment. Mocking Aldrin’s lighthearted style she wrote: ‘My bra, you know it’s the new South Africa and all, so there’s no time to waste remembering the old times. It’s time to chuckle with the new times.’³⁰

Aldrin Naidoo’s work combines commercialism and ironic ways of ‘talking about the community’. Naidoo mocks the news economy, the voyeurism, the gossip and the symbiosis between journalists and politicians, which goes on in the Indian media he himself is a part of. Naidoo’s own position is precarious. He is a journalist and reviewer of theatre and at the same time producer and director of plays which he, in his own words, ‘want to get out of intellectual circles, out among ordinary people, entertain them, provoke them’.³¹ At the same time, Naidoo is recirculating and literally quoting *charou* jokes, humour and stereotypes that have been around for so long that they have become integral parts of Indian identity, integral to the frames and everyday genres of discourse, parts of popular culture. But he does so without challenging any of these frames and he is undoubtedly making the ethnic farce and Indian identity into a viable commercial enterprise.

In this venture he is far from alone. The problem may be that the legacy of irony, the tradition of irreverent mocking of leaders, hypocritical religious figures, self-proclaimed guardians of Indian culture, etc. – a tradition that for decades has made the internal debates in the Indian community in Durban so lively and has contributed to establish strong democratic traditions – may be jeopardized if turned into markers of a commercially marketed ethnicity.

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29 Interview with Ravi Govender, Durban Cultural and Documentation Centre, 8 September 1998.

30 *Tribune Herald*, 18 October 1998.

31 Interview, Durban, 19 October 1998.

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