

Neelam Mansingh Chowdhury

Theatre Director

'Life doesn't follow a script. You have to make it grow.'

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Neelam Mansingh Chowdhury is a theatre director.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is such a multi-layered word. It is very ambiguous, very abstract. It has a different resonance at different moments of my life. To me, it also means to be conscious of my mortality. Once I know I am mortal, it puts many things in a certain kind of perspective. Something is happening and I can also watch it happen, I can be both the actor and the observer, having a distance with what I am participating in.

I grew up in a family of priests. So spirituality was an integral part of my life from the beginning. When my parents moved from Pakistan to India, they got some compensation for the Gurudwara they had left behind in Rawalpindi, and they set up a huge Gurudwara in Chandigarh.

I remember going to my grand-father's home as a child and live in the Gurudwara, waking up to the sound of the kirtan, going to the kitchen where the women would be cooking.

My grand-father was for me someone deeply spiritual, who never believed in miracles, and never was one of those mumbo-jumbo babas. Being with him meant to feel "a presence" – a presence which gave me a deep sense that all is right with the world, that nothing would go wrong in my life.

I was 19 when he passed away in 1971. It was such a powerful experience. On the day of his cremation, I was watching the last embers die when I saw a flash. It could have been my imagination, but regardless, it gave me a profound sense of peace, and that things would be fine. I somehow had this sense that someone would be walking side by side with me.

This presence would be there to guide you?

To give me a sense that I will be able to manage life with its ups and downs.

What about the role of religion in your life?

It's never been an institutionalized role. Even though my father reinvented himself as a theologian besides being a doctor, religion was always present in a very progressive way.

Is prayer of importance to you?

It is there. Like when I sleep at night, there is always a reverence towards life and the wonderful things that one has experienced and known.

The idea of what some call "god"?

It is an energy or that sense of wonder and curiosity, which can come from so many things. It is also about trying to be in the moment.

That is so difficult in our modern lives, isn't it?

I think I have managed with all my responsibilities – with my work, husband, children, parents – to still the noises and focus completely on what happens in that very moment.

What about theater, how did you come to it?

I was born and brought up in Amritsar, which was a very provincial town in the fifties and sixties. There were books galore but I was not surrounded by much art. Yet I felt inclined towards it. I was not good in studies, academically I was completely at the bottom of the barrel, so I had to find another sense of self.

I met Dr. B. M. Goswami, a great art historian, who lived in the neighborhood. He encouraged me to study art history. Suddenly I realized that art could be a serious area of study, and not only a middle-class wives' activity. It became a complete source of wonderment.

At that stage Ebrahim Alkazi from the National School of Drama brought two plays to Chandigarh. I was blown away by the wonderful productions. But more than that, by the fact that women and men could talk to each other with such ease, whereas those separations were so deeply engrained in the environment I grew up in.

Joining the NSD was like entering a mysterious world where anything could happen.

I was a bit out of that scene though. I had studied for four years in England, and therefore I wasn't carrying a vernacular regional assertion. I could never participate in any production because my Hindi didn't have a sense of the history or the imagery of the language. I couldn't really relate to it. I struggled hugely and had so many failures. Which was so wonderful because there is nothing like failures to challenge you. Those were very important three years. There was no turning back after them. Entering the NSD had been like mindless meandering, but once I got there, I got sucked into the whole system and I couldn't think of another life but the mysterious world of creation, the world of green rooms, the smell of theater, working with texts. And theater is about becoming many people! Each character is being fed by your own world. So it was a wonderful journey into life.

And you knew you had found your way to go through life?

Well, I was so bad at the NSD that I could never find my own niche. It is only much later in Bhopal with Ashok Vajpaye and B. V. Karanth that I found my sense of self in the true theater. And through many trials and errors I recognized my own capacity.

Why then become a director?

There is this wonderful thing called the magical "If". There is one life and one context I live and belong to. But through theater I can be many things. I can live multiple lives. "If" is a starting point. And becoming all those people makes me search for them within myself. So it makes me expand something within myself.

As a director, you can explore through each and every one of the characters instead of just one. In every play, I live and speak in my mind every dialogue, every breath, every silence created on stage. That is why once a show is over, I am far more exhausted than all my actors – I have lived all of their lives, not just one character ! In that way, I lead multiple lives and experiences.

How did you decide to create your own company?

I understood that to be truly contemporary I have to understand my own history and where I am coming from. So the theater I would do had to be regional and vernacular; I would then find within it my way to deal with space, text, performance.

So I set up my own theater group, "The Company", when we moved to Chandigarh. And I decided to have plays in Punjabi, even though it was a tough choice, as it was a language associated with truck drivers and chai wallas. For me it was the language of classical poetry and the Granth Sahib. So I saw it as a journey into this language with sounds, cultural history, imagery, metaphors, impulse, emotions.

When you look at life, do you feel we all have a certain purpose?

We have to create it. We have to create meaning and a reason to live. It is quite an effort to remain positive through life. It is rather easy to collapse.

Life doesn't follow a script. So you have to find your own reasons to be alive. Life is like raw material. You have to chisel it, refine it, make it grow. It requires a constant alertness. It is so easy to allow yourself to collapse. You have to keep yourself alive, and curious, to keep seeing the world as play, as a cosmic dance. You have got to build it up within yourself. It is so easy to become jaded!

You once said you like to stage what lies bellow the surface?

When I pick up a text, I am looking for what was not written, what is not manifest, rather than what is written and obvious. What is not written is also the state of mind of the writer when he or she was writing. It is always the invisible made visible which is much more fascinating than playing with the obvious. Rather than deal with too much of the spoken word, I try to translate it into a metaphor or an image that can have many more meanings.

When you start a new project, what is your objective regarding the audience?

The audience comes in much later. They never seem to enter into my workspace. First it is me and the writer. Then me and the translator. Then me and the actors. I am very interested in work that collaborates rather than one which is an imposition. Can I create a space where the actors and myself have a chance to unravel some of our own deeper silences or something which is lying too barren and deep? Can it be allowed to flower out? For it to happen, it must become a very silent space of trust. Because for the actor to surrender to the deepest recesses of his or her being is such a difficult process. You create that mysterious circle around the two of you and there must be a complete and deep trust. Also, I have learnt to trust the most illogical impulses that would come to my mind. Even in apparent contradiction to the text. Because I found that when you connect with something so deep into yourself, there is a good reason for it. And in the end something happens. The audience might create its own narrative, and it doesn't need to be my story. It can be their story.

Many artists feel they are at times a conduit for something beyond them, do you feel so sometimes?

I don't feel I am a conduit. Rather, I feel that creativity stems from the unknown spaces in your being – experiences, observations accumulated over time. Often you are not conscious where things come from. But they actually come from the archives of your memory.

What about the idea of destiny, of things preordained?

I do in a strange way believe in some kind of a karmic sense. When something happens which really sets back my life, I feel this is the way it was meant to be. It becomes a way to deal with a crisis. Also, I am very conscious of an ethical world, of not wanting to do something which would damage some kind of karmic balance.

But we still have choices. There is a huge freedom within the unfolding graph of life.

At times of huge challenges and crisis, where do you find your anchor?

I try to find it within myself. And it also is self-preservation. I do not want to be self-indulgent and say "why me". Rather I would ask "how should I deal with it". I have had a rich life, my work, a huge household, and the complete charge of my parents in the last fifteen years. I was juggling so many worlds simultaneously and always tried to manage each of them with complete focus and commitment, not shortchanging one for the other.

I have never given myself the luxury to collapse. Food still had to be put on the table, and children sent to school.

When you look at the road ahead, what are the things you would like to do and explore?

This is a difficult phase for me. My children have grown up and created their own lives. My father just passed away. We lead a semi-retired life. How many more plays can I do ? So I am trying to find ways to re-nurture or plant another tree, for another phase. I am at this transition phase where I have to find a new purpose, a new reason. Say I have twenty more years, I cannot allow my self not to be recharged.

If there were one question you could ask God, what would it be?

It is very cliché, but it never stops surprising me, this huge disparity, this huge suffering – why some wonderful people have to deal with so much pain?

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose for the next round?

I would like to believe in reincarnation, because I do love life ! I love everything about living and would definitely want to be born again.

I wouldn't say I would like to be born as myself because there are so many things to explore. So I would like to be born taller, with longer hair, and be in the arts. Perhaps not in theater, since it is such a hard world to be in. Its economics are very faulty, you cannot ever properly pay your actors. I would like to travel much more, meet more people, have more space to connect and bond, have more children, discover a genre of working much earlier as it took me a long time to find the tools of theater ...

What is your idea of happiness?

Sometimes a good night sleep, a good workout, a good moment with yourself can give you such a sense of joy, a good meal, a good conversation, a moment shared, a nice gesture from your child, a sense of belonging to a certain space. It is not something momentous.

Real happiness also comes when I stand in the wings and see my actors move from the wings' darkness into the stage's light, and strike the right note of emotion. I can feel the vibration, the invisible thread they release from the stage and with which they bind the audience into that unique moment and experience. In that moment, I feel as vaporous as a ghost and merge into a non physical space. The three months of work have been released on stage and have bound an audience together. It is a very special sense of centering and of a task accomplished. There is peace in that moment, and in that moment, I erase myself.