

# No blocks, here you get it write

Participants of Writers' Bloc 2, a playwriting workshop conducted by Royal Court Theatre, London, share their experiences with Meher Marfatia

**W**hen two celebrated theatre personalities from England guide 11 *desi* dramatists along the rocky course of playwriting, what do you get? Eleven brand-new plays that run the gamut of exciting themes and treatments.

Writers' Bloc 2, the only event to promote original Indian playwriting, launched its second edition in April 2005. Eleven writers, three of them Marathi, were chosen from among 98 aspirants to undergo a two-week workshop conducted by the Royal Court Theatre, London, under the stewardship of Carl Miller and Phyllida Lloyd. The plays will be performed at the Writers' Bloc festival from next week.

"But the real test isn't about doing 50 to 100 shows," believes writer-director Rahul da Cunha of Rage, adding that it's the journey through constant learning catalysed at the workshop, "urging writers to be harsh with themselves to not hurt the play".

Indeed, the experience has left authors visibly vitalised. Says Ajay Krishnan who "discovered the difficult but ultimately exciting craft of playwriting" while writing *Excavators*, a play about an intriguing search that brings motley visitors to where a man is digging a hole in the ground: "We got a feel of the closeness with which you can work on something. Without this exposure it's possible to write badly. Before this, I hadn't given my characters reason enough to be on stage."

It wasn't just characters—Bangalore-based Vijay Nair realised that each line too had to fight for its place in his *Dreamcatcher*, about two dancer sisters caught in a dilemma. "The workshop pushed me to think so much that the final version was almost not the same play anymore," he says. Of the ruthless paring down of dialogue that was a challenge for all the writers, he says, "We had to absorb cultural differences like the spartan British writing in the plays of a Pinter or Shaffer."

Creditably, however, the workshop was less about differences and more a mutually enriching dialogue. An exchange ensued rather than an attempt



SHANTANU DAS

**PLAYING IT BY EAR:** Actors perform a scene from one of the scripts, and below, Rajiv Kapur and Rahul Da Cunha of Rage, the theatre group that organises the Writers' Bloc festival



**Though participants had to absorb cultural differences like spartan British writing, there was no attempt to fight the flow of a regional, more wordy, language like Marathi**

to fight a typical ethos or the flow of a regional language—long-winded Marathi dialogue was accepted, for instance, and there were no demands to cut it down. However, Marathi actress-writer Irawati Karnik did use a workshop exercise called 'Surprise Yourself' to help her avoid the overwriting that marked her two earlier plays. "This time I'm seeing how it works if you don't say it all," she figures. Translating the trio of Marathi plays, she admires the way Miller and Lloyd worked on them: "A few nuances went missing, yet the elements of the atriality were beautifully broken up. Language barely mattered."

*Mazy Vatanicha Khara Khura*, a play by Manasvini Lata Ravindra, had a Maharashtrian context. "But human behaviour is universal," she says. "And I learnt to introduce conflict in drama." *Turel* by Swar Thounoajam, though in English, also had an ethnic context—a Manipur riverbank where an unlikely friendship is forged between two protagonists seeking this

microcosmic refuge from turbulent life beyond. "But Carl and Phyllida know exactly where the play is going even when its context isn't familiarly urban," she declares.

Initial sceptics were won over. Self-admittedly an impulsive writer, filmmaker Sachin Kundalkar had doubts about whether a formal workshop could teach writing, but admits that the feeling left "once I kept an open mind". Watching accomplished actors interpret the scenes written helped. Grappling with words to define the dynamics between a writer and an actress sharing an apartment in *Poornaviram*, Kondalkar saw his cold print galvanise on-stage with refreshing immediacy. Freelance editor Manjima Chatterjee too hacked entire scenes after actors brought alive her thriller *The Edge*.

For banker Rajiv Rajendra from Sri Lanka, whose imaginative *Centre Of Gravity* has Isaac Newton walk in upsetting the characters' equilibrium, it was the group support in in-

stant, no-holds-barred feedback that helped. "Writing is otherwise lonely," he confesses. Copywriter Maia Katrak admits to "unlearning" with *Epi-logue*. "Where's the scope for clever, quick ad lines? This required a rigour that brought integrity to writing," she says, grateful that the discipline helped tide over tough passages of her play about family love set in strange environs—a dead man's world.

Offbeat was the dominant colour, whether in theme or treatment. *The President Is Coming*, Anuvab Pal's high-octane comedy centred in the cut-throat world of reality television, pitches eight young achievers in competition for the US Prez's handshake. Says Pal, "*Macbeth* and TV shows like *Bigg Boss* share similarities—both juxtapose moments of drama with moments of confession like Shakespearean monologues following previous action. Pitting tangled relationships against a physical and metaphorical mountaineering backdrop, Ram Ganesh Kamatham understands he doesn't always need "happy linear stories". So *Crab* has action move back and forth like the crustacean of the title. He sums up: "Meeting other writers proved remarkably energising. Its range of voices has been the workshop's most magical power."

Writers' Bloc shows at Prithvi Theatre, Jan 9-21 & NCPA Experimental Theatre, Jan 23-Feb 4.