

Dismiss it as a rehearsal or hail it as alternative theatre, but play-reading is here to stay, reports
Anastasia Guha

"SHUT up or I will read this play exactly like you wrote it," Gerson da Cunha murmurs sardonically on a stage in Pune. Clad in a striped kurta, he doesn't seem terribly concerned about fitting into the milieu envisaged by Kaufman and Hart, whose line he has just mouthed. But inappropriate attire notwithstanding, his reading of *The Man Who Came to Dinner* is an unqualified success, and yet another audience is won over to the genre of play-reading. "Everyone wants to experiment with it," says 20-something Delhi-based playwright/actor Nicholas Kharkongar enthusiastically. He is one of the founders of Actors' Company, a group of people who get together to read English plays at New Delhi's India Habitat Centre every month. Apart from some plays like Feroz Khan's *Tumhari Amrita*, much of the new activity in play-reading is in English, partly because few full-fledged English language plays — with the ex-

Play in Progress

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ever, that play-readings are a novelty in India. As Anuradha Kapoor, a lecturer at the National School of Drama (NSD), points out, "Play-reading has a long, honourable history in the country. People don't realise it but radio plays are nothing if not dramatised readings and those have been around since the introduction of radio."

That the popularity of vocalised drama has not been affected by the decline in radio audiences is evident from the success of Mumbai's Theatre Positive, which has been holding English

Apart from the scope it allows new ideas, the economics of a pared-down production make sense too, say theatrewallahs

at one which can actually become a production," avers Bangalore-based playwright Mahesh Dattani.

While many undeniably use the forum as a rehearsal platform, there are those who reject Dattani's contentions. "Once a play has been read before an audience, fatigue sets in. People are not keen to go back and watch a full-scale version of the play," says Kavita Nagpal, director and critic of Delhi's theatre circuit. It may be a valid argument, considering that theatre audiences in India are minuscule.

But some believe play-readings are an end in themselves. "We've just finished reading a play on schizophrenia," says Kharkongar. "It's a completely selfish undertaking. The Habitat Centre gives us space and an assured audience, so one read scripts that would never be commercially viable as productions. This play, for instance, is experimental and intricate and neither the audience nor the actors would have been able to explore it in any other format."

So, is play-reading the happy hunting ground of budding playwrights? Shiv Subrahmanyam, a Mumbai-based playwright and actor who frequently participates in the dramatised readings at the Theatre Positive sessions, seems to think so. He first read his own script, *Snapshots from an Album*, at the Nehru Centre; the play is currently running successfully in the city. "I think readings provide an essential forum for new plays. Instead of an audience just buying tickets and watching a play, this allows active interaction. This testing of waters

is a necessary part of the process," he argues. "New writers need this platform to build their confidence and encourage them to keep writing."

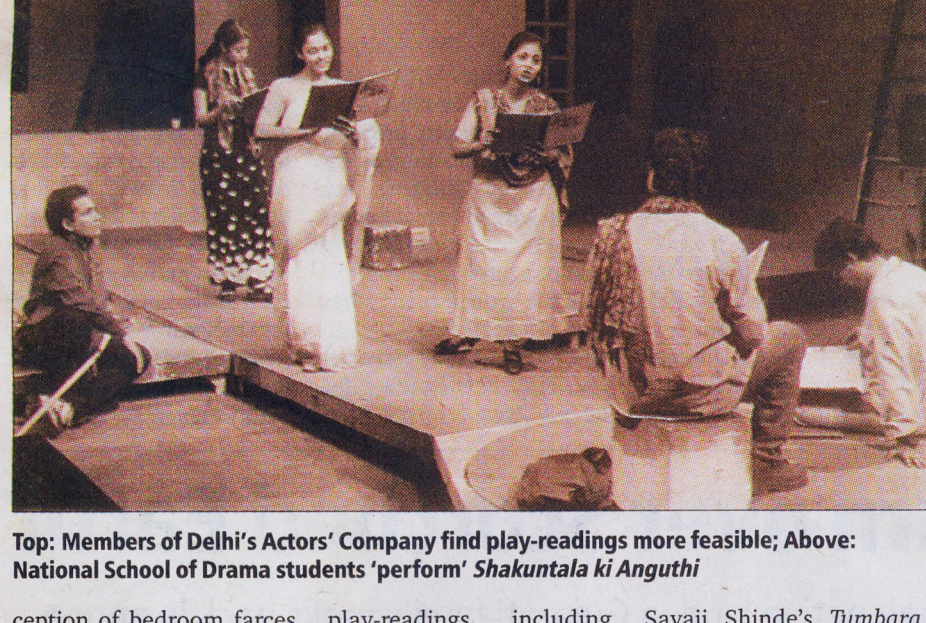
At NSD, playwrights are encouraged to read their own works and, according to Prayag Shukla, editor of the in-house magazine, such sessions have brought talents like Krishna Baldev and Nand Kishore Acharya to the fore.

While novel ideas and a 'new' form are indubitably reason for the rising popularity of play-readings, the economics are a deciding factor. With even a modest stage production costing anywhere between Rs 80,000 and Rs 1 lakh — and only a handful of plays ever making profits — the most culturally conscious sponsors have routine attacks of skittish nerves. Says Arundhati Subramaniam, who has been regularly organising play-readings at the NCPA in Mumbai since 1994, "Play-readings are an important forum for airing scripts especially as we have to think of the economics."

As the theatre fraternity reads voraciously to an increasingly perky-eared audience, often paving the way for future productions, some opportunities remain to be unexplored. Reading groups are yet to use new spaces to perform and have been unable to engage new audiences who could, in the long run, spell profits. So does play-reading herald a new dawn for Indian theatre? Or is it going to fade away like a winter sunset? As in most things, the truth here too probably lies in the middle.

(with Menaka

Jayasankar in Mumbai)



Top: Members of Delhi's Actors' Company find play-readings more feasible; Above: National School of Drama students 'perform' *Shakuntala ki Anguthi*

ception of bedroom farces and 'starring' productions — find commercial success. Play-readings, which cut out all the props of theatre with the exception of the actors and the audience, are an alternative more and more theatre groups are exploring.

That is not to say, how-

play-readings, including translated works, at Prithvi Theatre on the first Monday of every month since 1997. Many of the plays read at its sessions have successfully made their way to the stage, including Premanand Gajvi's *Gandhi-Ambedkar*, G P Deshpande's *Shevtacha Dees*.

Sayaji Shinde's *Tumbara*, Satyadev Dubey's *Inshallah* and Sayaji Shinde's *Tumbara*.

"These readings are like previews. The play is read to an audience, who responds to it. The playwright can take that response and use it to tweak the script to arrive