

Unrehearsed Exit

It was chilly winter morning on a terrace of a dilapidated Victorian building in *Calcutta*...

We were savouring a lethal combination of a *Bengali-Marwadi* breakfast...

A passionate debate on a play we had witnessed on the previous night had started turning towards a heated argument. Amongst all that noise, a deep, baritone voice with a compelling presence filtered in, "*Arre Yaar...*". I noticed a skinny, short man with a rough face... I was surprised with his demeanour, incongruent with that aggressive commanding voice, as he introduced himself while touching my feet, "*Om Puri, I'm from NSD!*" Through our further chat, he mentioned *Naseeruddin Shah, Ratna Pathak, Jayadev & Rohini Hattangadi* as his contemporaries. After a while I said, "*Aglee baar addaa jamaayenge, I have to catch a flight now! Milna zaroor*". He smiled shyly and said, "*Arre Sir ji, aapke bare mein Dubey ji aur Alkazi Sir se itna suna hai, it will be my privilege!*" He again tried to touch my feet. I stopped him. We shook hands. Again, I was surprised to find a soft hand.

This was during a ten days festival-workshop in 1970s organized by the leading theatre group, *Anamika*. Our days begun rubbing shoulders with inspiring thespians. Passionate exchanging of 'out-of-the-box' ideas with my contemporaries, under the sweltering sun, was stimulating. As the evening shadows started lengthening, we used to glide into the hallowed darkness of the proscenium space and watched new productions by various groups from all corners of India. And finally, to get into intense arguments till late night within the world known as the 'fourth act' of the performing arts, was never a drab routine. It was sheer magic! Of course, at that time a greenhorn like me didn't realize how those ten days would influence my artistic growth.

I remember working with *Om* on the sets of *Shyam Benegal's 'Bhumika'*. Although his was a mere one scene appearance in the film, no one could ignore his enormous vocal presence. We used to bump into each other

regularly at some theatre performance at *Chhabildas* (hub of the parallel theatre movement) or at *Walchand Terrace* (another *mecca* of the theatre practitioners as well as buffs) in *Mumbai*. I also remember a long chat with him in the party to celebrate the success of my film '*Gharaunda*'. After a couple of drinks, he said with a rueful smile, "*Yaar, mera struggle kuch lambaa hee chal raha hai!*" The vulnerable notes in that commanding voice were equally genuine and compelling. Soon he emerged as a great actor and led the screen space at an escalating scale.

Almost after three decades, *Om* came over to my home in Pune in connection with his memoirs. He had put on many kilos. I did reprimand him warmly for ignoring his health. His warmth was just the same. As we refilled our scotch glasses, I shared my admiration for some of his outstanding performances, and how he fully deserved the Order of British Empire. With a glint of nostalgia in his eyes, he simply said, "*Amol, it was you as an artiste and your success in Bollywood on your own terms that opened up the doors for actors like me and Naseer! Varnaa...Darwaaze pe khade nahee karte thhe hum jaiso ko yeh...*" And when I tried to interrupt him from the tirade of choicest *Punjabi gaalis*, he raised his glass with a broad smile, "*Cheers, Sir ji!*" We continued till late hours to reminiscent about the parallel cinema as well as the theatre movement of the 70s and 80s! He also shared his ups and downs in his personal life.

In 2008, I worked with *Om* in my children's film '*Dumkata*' (a tale of a tail). He played the lead role of a sensitive, soft grandfather with élan. While enjoying the 'magic hour' after the strenuous shoots, I had noticed that his hands had started shaking. When I tried to broach the topic, he, for the first time said curtly, "*Chhadd de!*" Very often one would hear about him in some controversial context. In between I kept hearing about his alcoholism and abusive behaviour. I chose to be distant from him considering his discomfort to address those issues.

I called both the women in his life after his untimely demise. I was deeply sad to hear about his loss of control over life in many aspects. It was hard

for me to reconcile with this facet of his being. I am still cherishing his aura and imagining him reciting *Rumi's* following lines in his valiant voice -

I died as a mineral and became a plant

I died as a plant and became an animal

I died as an animal and became a man

Why should I fear?

When was I less by dying?

Remember my friend *Om*, whenever I will meet you, I will complain about your unrehearsed exit.