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***Vishvamanavi: Umashankar Joshi: An Experiment in Gujarati  
Drama***

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What Umashankar Joshi in his editorial 'Sanskriti Takes Your Leave' ('Sankruti' Viday Mange che') addressing the readers in the last issue of *Sankruti*: October-December, 1984, which he edited continuously for thirty-eight years envisaged that comes true in the age of technology where e-books and e-journals are in the palmtops and notepads. A visionary born in the times and local that relied on oral tradition by the end of his life had come to visualize the new advancements as:

We are on the threshold of a new age. Before ages literature was presented in the oral form. After the revolutionary invention of script, paper and printing press the publication of periodicals is possible today. Now it is possible that we might accept the poet reciting with the help of electronic media, a dramatic piece being performed, and likewise journals published in video form (the young readers of these words probably might envisage that in their lifetime) after being used to it. (Tran. mine)

The same is realized by *Vishvamanavi: Umashankar Joshi* an unpublished Gujarati two act play, presented by Nem Arts: Rajkot and Manish Parekh Production's venture/ adventure, written and directed by Manish Parekh with the premier show in March, 2011 in the inaugural of NCP, Mumbai, keeping with centenary calibrations of Umashankar Joshi followed by ten more performance during the last year.

The play is a well-researched production of the writer, director, actor and above all a researcher to draw his sources from the biography and literary Magnus of the poet. Manish Parekh's *Vishvamanavi: Umashankar Joshi* is a recent experimentation of staging a life of a Gujarati literary legend who shaped the creative, critical and academic circles during 1930-80. A challenge that lies in projecting and presenting, the versatile and multifaceted personality of a writer who experimented with varied modern western literary forms and criticism (literary as well as social), through stage experimentations is taken up in *Vishvamanavi: Umashankar Joshi*. The play documents these multiphased of Umashankar Joshi's which by no mean is a documentary drama but comes alive with performance by going close to poor theatre of Polish Director **Jerzy Cosotoruske**, in the recent times and from the Indian/ Gujarat folk tradition of *Bhavai* and *Akhiyan*

To begin with it would not be out of place to speak of the vulnerability of such an experiment that is rightly drawn to by Kenneth Pickering in his Concepts note on '**documentary drama**' wherein he ends his concept note as:



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‘...however the most effective documentary drama has not only documented events, and thereby become a valid document in itself, but has often been based on careful research using the documentary sources such as diaries, letters , contemporary accounts, court records and transcripts .The debate arises when this ceases to be a drama and becomes mere imitation.(134)

Secondly the play can also in some sense be termed as **predictable theatre** as the Gujarati audience would be familiar with the life and works of Umashankar Joshi for whom the events stated would be expected. But to draw from Mark Woolgar as,

The whole point of predictable theatre is that audiences attend and see and enjoy how the production operates as a familiar re-telling. rather than what the work may have to say that might be new or challenging. it is the execution of the work that holds the fascination.(Pikering and Woolgar 82)

The challenge that such a production faces is to sustain it professionally as modern demands a lavish setting and high levels of spectacles , as the contemporary spectators have not just been evolving from audience to spectator through cinema and television screens but are visitors on virtual sites as Google’s, Facebook’s and Utube as against the imaginative folk audience or readers.

The ‘execution’ of Umashankar’s literary works and non-literary achievements are ‘documents’ that *Vishwamanvi: Umashankar Joshi* comes with us to meet these challenges. The best example is the opening that employs the folk and modern conventions of song and visual display on screen to set the stage for the display of a great personality that is quite forgotten, distanced to the new generation and yet can be a meeting ground as a part of culture and human aspirations.

The play opens before the curtain rises with Umashankar Joshi’s song ‘Ame Gashu Geet Gaganana’ (we will sing) to set the tone to sing of the sky and earth.....technically the recorded song is (not sung live) presented with a group of female dancers in the traditional Gujarati dress who emerge from the audience and take the stage by the end of the song. It is an attempt to set the stage for the musical play for the spectator and merge the border between the stage and the spectator. This is a usual convention in folk performance, where a prayer or song is sung; mostly as a part of ritual, to set the atmosphere and tone where in the audience is a direct participant in the prayer and the ritual of lighting the lamp and the lamp circulated in the public for ‘dhoop’.



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To incorporate the folk conventions of bhavai or akhyan that permit the multiple forms of performance as ritual, music, songs, dance, role-plays, narration, action ect. has also been the source of influence on the western theater as is the case of Recharad Wagner with the idea of 'one total art form of future', the *Gesamptkunstwerk* or the **total theatre** to integrate all theatrical elements.

The contemporary modern theatre as **poor theatre** has experimented with the techniques of using space where the possibilities that we have is **promenade** where studio theatre is regarded as ideal a space/situation for production to 'create a level of audience participation of event', or theatre in-the-round which is going back to folk or ancient practice, transverse stage as in fashion show 'Cat-walk' situation, the open stage etc. the evolution in using space been seen as by the Italian director Eugenio Barbra Keeping as ; 'a fusion of art and culture create a unique form' to in a way evolving and progressing towards the recent concept where the audience centrality is accepted, rather than the actor and the play, after the emergence of communication studies.

The curtain opens as the dancers slowly climb the stage to project the white screen where the Google search page with search in progress is in view in centre back of the stage and the visuals change in accordance with the commentator mediating between the past and the present. The juxtaposition of pre-independence rustic times of travelling on foot and carts with technologically advanced twenty-first century with search engines. The very opening commentary with the screening the miracle of search engines to reach the audience to Himalayas or Ganges with a click is a marker of engulfing the audience from the virtual to the real life. The commentary needs to be quoted extendedly here to realize the artistic element of the play:

Today it has become very easy for anyone if one wants to see any place or find anything from the depth of the earth with the help of search engine. Type 'Himalaya' and the scene of real Himalaya is before you. Type 'Ganga' and the mighty flowing holy Ganga appears on your computer screen with a click of the mouse. *But* there was a person who before years had seen the world with his eyes without any search engine. Without a guide.(trans/ emphasis mine.)(Parekh 1)

The dramatic opening takes the contemporary audience to the wilderness that the writer is projected to fathom the mountains on foot through the clipping on the screen. It is the epic theatre innovative setting and techniques employed to give a swift sweep to the audience with a romantic strain of Umashankar Joshi's poem 'Bhomia Vina to' logging out of virtual world of internet to at once shift/connect to the times of the



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script of the poem along with character Umashankar Joshi projected on the screen to live an imprint of the much celebrated song and its writer.

The play the literary genius and public life (personal life is least projected) of a writer very naturally lands to episodic scenes which too is characteristic of epic theatre to document the select episode. The writer plots keeping with the chronology but uses flash back to introduce the aged writer as a narrator to take us to the childhood days spoken as a 'Gold mine' for a writer. Poem 'Chachar Anne' to introduce the lively child Umashankar Joshi giving a comic relief and glimpse of the rustic upbringing incorporating the popular myth based poem 'vrishabh Avatar' (enacted) that is part of the memory of the audience connects them to the play with the children rhymes audio playing in background that merge in the scene. Childhood comic scene fade out with the light to give way to spot young Umashankar Joshi to self-introduce the school days to college and from the freedom struggle in 1929 the first attempt at poetry that is close to monodrama. The making and shaping of the poet and the man responding to his times is again presented the poem 'Vishvashanti' (World peace) 'unaware of brutal reality of atomic bomb the poet sings of world peace under the Gandhian influence. The recitation along with the screen projection, of the barbarity of the World War and the real scenes with the headlines of those days and the freedom moment, connect the audience to the times and the work simultaneously.

The experimentation with forms by the writer, Umashankar Joshi, also gives a scope to the playwright to employ varied experimentation as play-within-the-play. It's the way a glimpse of Umashankar Joshi the playwright is presented through actually staging of his one act play *Saapna Bhara* in Act-I and *Udancharkaidi* act II. Actual staging of the plays is so well integrated that it does not come as imposed presentation but one more form experimented by the writer. At the end of performance of *Saapna Bhara* the dialogue transports audience back from the realistic issue based performance to his poetic works as 'Geet meto gotyu' with performance. The play-within-the play is well used to bring alive the aspects and reformist/feminist concerns of the playwright so comprehensively and also take up the challenge of plays of writer which are fossilized to be part of archives in Gujarati theatre. Umashankar in his 'Statement for First Edition' states with reference to his collected one-act play :



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The outer form of the writings is of drama. But the experts of the field would only know how stage able they are the keeping with the theatre today.... And I should accept that while writing the experience (of theatre) that I had was as good as of a common Gujarati youth.(Joshi 18)

This speaks of the challenge that the playwright must have faced to stage a play that the original writer was suspicious about and comments in the same statement that he had infect read the play before the audience with the concerns of local specific language he employed but in case of *Vishvamanavi: UmashankarJoshi* it has been presented with all the artistic knowhow of the director on left centre stage with minimum properties and the fore ground mud house entrance give authentic set and superb direction.

The multifaceted personality of Umashankar Joshi who pronounced in his speech while accepting the SahityaAkademy in 1985, Fellowship 'Must confess that it would not have been possible for me to be a writer in the absence of my getting intimately involved in public affair now and again-almost in spite of myself'

The glimpses through well researched personal, literary, and public life administrator is well in quick fade in and fade outs that can be seen as employing the nuance that are from the predictable theatre where the subject may be very familiar to the audience and their interest is in how the production operates rather than what it conveys. Thus the writer as well as director (here one) intends to make the presentation that is familiar as spectacular through innovative experience as possible.

Staging these episodes, engagements and achievements so swiftly is made possible by employing the stage craft of setting where the space on the stage is divided in to tree parts where in the centre left is the symbolic set for the writing desk of writer which is elevated a step with its back that is a pen in the symbol. The writing recited by the character of the writer is usually from that set with a writing table and a chair. While centre right is the realistic set of a mud house in a rural area to stage the plays of the writer. The centre stage is with the action and songs performances and screen projection to keep the pace up for series of episodes.

All the forms of literature from poetry (recorded or recited by the actor along with relevant poetry), drama (staged), letters (read), speeches (enacted and read in original, even if it is in English), select episodes of life (enacted by sweeping reference to life achievements and thoughts (screen) interview (enacted and edited as monologues). If we study the interesting presentation of a single aspect as presenting Umashankar Joshi as a poet and we have recorded versions, recitation ,script projection on screen, songs accompanied by music



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and dance , also the enactment. (eg. Vansaliwala and then children poetry, translation ('Pahranan Geet' and the original 'the song of the shirt') thus this play which is predictable doesn't remain a documentary due to the director writer at work.

To add to the challenge is the presenting Umashankar Joshi as the editor of 'Sanskriti'. It is once again not reduce to monodrama but in the most dramatic way presented through the scene where Umashankar Joshi released the first issue of *Sanskriti* on stage along with the distribution of the replica of the first issue of *sanskriti* in the audience become the part takers or part and partial of the informal release of *Sanskriti* - among the closer circle of the writer. (as was the case in real life) Once again the poor or epic theatre is at work to blur the divide between the performance and the audience. The above episode of release of *Sanskriti* is followed by a dance-song to end act I.

Similarly Act II again is full with experimentations and use of conventions of monodrama, play within the play, dance, songs, speeches (Gyanpith Award presented in English as originally delivered) radio interview and finally the last scene to speak of the magazine 'Sanskriti' being closed after 35 years of publication seeking permission to end the toil, a farewell. Both the acts end with 'sanskriti' in the second last scene to give a structure to the play. The last scene of the play is again in continuity with first screen projection where the wanderer goes ahead to merge with infinite. Avoiding the birth and death scenes, It is symbolic representation in the circularity of the play, unending quest for peace and humanity with individuals great and common in general and Umashankar Joshi the Vishwamanav in particular.

Parekh as an artist has made several alterations in his consequent presentations where his script has evolved and is not yet a final one to be published. This probably speaks of the endless possibilities that lie in the form and challenge for the true artist as stated by Satyajit Ray in his Bengali film criticism: 'The artist must come before art. Where there is no artist no art can be created...' (as quoted in Ray vii).



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